

Introduction

On a winter night in 2002, Christopher Yanov sat with a handful of eighth and ninth graders and college-student tutors in the Iglesia Presbiteriana Hispaña (Hispanic Presbyterian Church). The one-story cinderblock building in Golden Hill, near San Diego's downtown, looked more like a fortress than a church. Iron grillwork protected the windows; the door was a slab of hardened steel.

Yanov and the tutors and students sat on folding chairs around two tables in a room that faced the street. The kids settled into doing their homework, and the room was quiet, punctuated with occasional murmured consultations.

Reality Changers was eight months old and had a census of twelve, six boys and six girls Yanov had recruited at Ray A. Kroc Middle School, where he worked as a substitute teacher. Students were expected to come every week, but attendance was spotty. Tonight just six showed up. He wasn't sure the program was going to fly.

A rock clattered against the bars. Heads snapped up from books. Another rock crashed on the bars, so hard the glass rattled. A direct hit would shatter the pane. Salvo after salvo of pebbles followed, clanging against steel and glass.

Then the shouts.

“Kiss-ass schoolboys! Little pussies!

“How come we’re out here and not in there!”

“Hey, Chris! You forgotten your friends?”

A brown face pushed between the bars and pressed against the glass.
“Chris! You only talking to the smart kids now?”

The tutors looked at Yanov, eyes wide. They were freshmen from University of California, San Diego, worlds away from the iglesia; they hadn’t bargained for this. The younger kids shot sidelong looks at each other and tried to look cool. One of them, Perla Garcia, knew the guys outside; she wished they’d go home. Jorge Narvaez kept his head down and pretended to read. He hoped they’d be gone by the time he had to walk to the bus stop.

“Just ignore it and keep on working,” Yanov told them. “They’ll get bored and quit.”

“Losers! Wait’ll you get out here. We’ll fix you, pussies!”

The rocks kept clattering. The shouts got louder. Kids stopped even pretending to study.

Yanov rolled his eyes and exhaled with exasperation, stood up, and walked out the front door in his shirtsleeves. The night was cold; in the light from the street lamp he could see his breath. He stood a shade under six feet, shoulders squared, chin high, dark hair and beard cropped close.

A dozen eighth and ninth graders stood under the street lamp. All of them lived in the neighborhood and most went to Kroc. Their heads were shaved, and they wore the cholo uniform of baggy jeans that dragged on the sidewalk and oversize black nylon jackets. He’d invited every one of them to join Reality Changers.

They’d have to bring their grades up to a 3.0 grade point average in order to join. Come to meetings every week, for tutoring and work on study skills, and hear lessons on values and life skills. Instead of being in a gang, they’d be part of a group where everyone was aiming for college, and where kids helped each other. If they stayed with the program through high school, he guaranteed, they’d get into college and they’d have the scholarships they needed.

He’d worked especially hard on Jonny Villafuerte. Jonny lived across the street from Yanov, a few blocks east of the iglesia. He was a sweet, soft-looking boy with a shy smile and lush, dark hair that fell over his forehead.

His notebooks overflowed with drawings of cars and characters from video games and words in bulging, kinetic letters. Yanov knew him from honors algebra, but lately he'd seen him at the coral tree in the courtyard at Kroc, where the guys who were on the way to joining a gang hung out. The Lomas26 gang ran the streets in Golden Hill, and they were leaning on Jonny to join. Last fall, he'd shaved his head and started dressing like them. Yanov hoped that he hadn't made up his mind. If he didn't get to Jonny soon, Lomas26 would.

Now, here was Jonny, throwing rocks. "Hey, Chris, no fair," he yelled. "You didn't let us in!"

"You guys know you're invited," he said. "You just got to get your grades up."

"Aw-w, man."

"Kids inside did."

"We know you better. You're our guy. You should just let us in."

"When you get your 3.0, we'll be glad to have you. Tonight's not a 'no,' it's a 'not yet.' See you around." He waved and walked back into the church.

Rocks rang the bars like chimes. The kids and tutors were rattled, and not much homework got done that night. The tutors chalked up the meeting as a loss.

Yanov couldn't stop grinning. Those guys wanted in. He knew he had something.

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Christopher Yanov heads an innovative college-readiness program called Reality Changers that, over the course of the last fifteen years, has altered the possibilities for disadvantaged youth in San Diego. Its students come from the city's poorest, most violent neighborhoods. Some are citizens; some are undocumented. They aren't cherry-picked high achievers: many enter the program as academic underperformers or chronic truants or as gang affiliated. Yanov looks for what he calls "outsize personalities," students who have the capacity to lead, are good communicators, and are highly motivated. Reality Changers not only provides academic tutoring but also helps students cultivate resilience, curiosity, the ability to collaborate, and perseverance.

Students maintain at least a 3.0 grade point average and 90 percent attendance to stay in the program. Reality Changers' constitution, written by its first students, prescribes that members have no involvement with alcohol, drugs, gangs, or sex. They must participate in at least one school activity or club or play a sport; practice public speaking and compete in in-house speech tournaments; and contribute fifty hours to community service each year.

Driven and charismatic, Yanov is himself an outsize personality. Even as a college freshman he was looking for a grand quest. At nineteen, he moved out of his dorm room at UC San Diego and into an apartment in Golden Hill to start his own gang-diversion program at the Iglesia Presbiteriana. He went to law school to become an advocate for the cholos he worked with, but flunked out because he spent more time running with them than studying. Two quests, not much success.

While substitute-teaching in a tough urban middle school where gangs ruled the courtyard, he saw that many of his students had as much innate ability and determination as the middle-class kids he'd grown up with. What they lacked were aspects of family and social support that middle-class students take for granted: an ambitious vision of what they could accomplish, the experience of being held to high standards, and a milieu of peers and adults who validated their ambitions and helped them reach their goals. If he could build that kind of scaffolding around his students, they'd stay in school, work harder, and aim for college. He was sure of it. This would be his quest.

At twenty-two, Yanov started a program to provide the scaffolding that would help students like his get to college. He'd never studied adolescent development, never taken a course in education or social work or psychology, never worked for an organization that served disadvantaged youth. But his tool kit included some important skills: He was fluently bilingual and had an impressive ability to connect with high-risk adolescents. From years of hanging with gang kids and then substitute-teaching, he'd built a deep understanding of what they needed, what worked with them, and what didn't. He started with three hundred dollars and the use of a room at the Iglesia Presbiteriana. On *Wheel of Fortune*, he won enough money to support himself and his fledgling program for two years. When that

money ran out, he kept Reality Changers afloat by sheer determination, charisma, and seven-day work weeks.

Reality Changers now serves more than five hundred students a year and is the leading provider of scholarships among mentorship organizations in California. Its alumni go on to study at Berkeley, UCLA, UC San Diego, and all the other University of California undergraduate campuses, at twelve California state universities, at Dartmouth and Duke, at Northwestern and Columbia and Harvard. Yanov still lives in Golden Hill in the apartment he moved into when he was nineteen. He draws a modest salary and drives an eleven-year-old pickup truck. Reality Changers is his quest and his life.

I spent a year studying Reality Changers close up—hanging with the students, probing Yanov’s sensibility, and interviewing staff, volunteers, and family members. I wanted to understand how the program works and how it makes a difference for its students. I also wanted to learn whether this program devised by a twenty-two-year-old could become a model for the rest of the country. I found that Reality Changers works because it demands more of its students, academically and behaviorally, than they believe they can achieve, and it provides the scaffolding that helps them do it.

The elements of its scaffolding are an ambitious vision of what students can attain, intensive academic tutoring, and equally intensive teaching of the values and behaviors that are essential for personal and academic success. The scaffolding provides a strong sense of family and a long-term commitment to students, from eighth grade through high school and beyond. From the day they join, students see their own aspirations reflected in the wall of photos of all program graduates, wearing their college sweatshirts. They see juniors and seniors taking Advanced Placement courses, seniors writing college applications, and program alumni who have gone on to college returning to talk to them. They’re surrounded by living proof that kids just like them can do big things. The message from other students is: *Yeah, it’s hard, but we’re doing it, and you can, too.*

Behaviors and attitudes like self-control, resilience, curiosity, perseverance, and helping each other—what psychologists call noncognitive traits—are taught every week and cultivated in community service work

and other program activities. Students eat together at the weekly meeting, and parents provide dinner. Tutoring takes place in groups of six to eight, with a volunteer tutor for every two students, and students stay in the same group all year. They feel held in the program's embrace, and they invariably say that the feeling of family is what they like best about the program. Like family, Reality Changers commits for the long haul: students can start in eighth grade and continue through high school graduation. The program charges no fees.

Hanging out at Reality Changers, I brought my perspectives as a psychotherapist and a parent. I trained first as a clinical social worker and then at the Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis, where I studied child and adolescent psychotherapy. I worked for more than twenty years with adolescents and their families, first in the Midwest and then in San Diego. In my work and in helping my own daughters through their teens, I developed a particular interest in launching, the developmental era when adolescents navigate from the smaller arenas of their families and high school to make their own place in the adult world. Launching is a critical period, because the capacities and deficits that adolescents bring to this passage, how high they aim, the roads they take and those not taken will shape the rest of their lives. The work unfolds over a number of years, and the tasks change with time. The journey is the adolescent's own, but how each individual meets its demands is determined both by her own capabilities and deficits and by how well the scaffolding supports her.

Launching is hard developmental work for all adolescents; it's significantly harder for students who start from a place of severe social and economic disadvantage. For undocumented youth, the work of launching is even more complicated, because their efforts to assume adult roles and privileges—working, driving, voting—are blocked by laws that prohibit them from taking steps that their native-born peers take for granted. Immigration scholar Roberto Gonzales observes that “for undocumented youth, coming of age is itself a turning point: it begins the *transition to illegality*. Laws aimed at narrowing the rights of those unlawfully in the United States prevent these youths from participating in key adult rites of passage. The result is a stalling, detouring, and derailling of the life-course trajectories of thousands of young adults every year” (emphasis in the original).¹

As disparities in income and opportunity between haves and have-nots become increasingly stark, I've grown concerned about how they affect youth growing up on the have-not side of the gap. I was looking for a way to explore the subject of adolescent launching and inequality when I found Reality Changers. I wanted to find out how much difference a strong program could make. How effective was its scaffolding in helping students launch themselves? How well could the program make up for lifetimes of economic and social disadvantage? Which realities in students' lives could Reality Changers help them change, and which ones remained stubbornly unchanged? These were among the questions I brought to my conversations with students.

Those conversations quickly got specific: What it's like to shift from selling dope at school one semester to taking Advanced Placement classes the next. How to keep yourself motivated when your parents don't understand what you do, or don't care. If you're used to making yourself invisible because you're undocumented, and then you get admitted to a college on the East Coast, do you travel by plane and risk being arrested at the airport?

In the chapters that follow, I will take you into the lives of some of San Diego's most disadvantaged and most determined students as they work against prejudice, cultural deprivation, and poverty. The year I spent with Reality Changers was a year of drama, of painful failure and surprising triumphs, and of growth toward students' goals in unpredictable ways. My aim is to show the lives they lived and the realities of launching from a place of significant disadvantage.

Around the country, a host of programs aim to help disadvantaged youth get to college, and as I followed Reality Changers I compared it to some of the most successful ones. The largest is the Harlem Children's Zone, which serves twelve thousand children in a historically African American section of New York. With an annual budget of \$85 million, it operates its own preschools, charter schools, and health clinics and runs wraparound parenting and job-readiness services for parents of young children. Its vision is nothing less than to change the expectations of a generation of parents and children, so that school achievement and going to college become the norm.²

Many highly effective programs maintain a narrower focus, often within school systems, working with the schools' credentialed teachers.

OneGoal identifies excellent teachers in seventy public high schools serving large percentages of low-income students in Chicago, Houston, and New York. OneGoal trains its selected teachers to work with a cohort of disadvantaged students from sophomore year to high school graduation, with the goal that each one will get into college, succeed, and graduate. Like the Harlem Children's Zone, OneGoal seeks to change a culture: through teachers' advocacy and the example of students' success, OneGoal aims to make host high schools more supportive of students' efforts to get into college, as well as to spread that culture throughout the community.

The Barrio Logan College Institute in Barrio Logan, a historically Mexican neighborhood of San Diego, starts third graders in its after-school tutoring program. Its program begins with the assumption that its students' success is directly tied to parents' conviction that college is attainable and to parents' active involvement in promoting that success. Children and parents apply to the institute together, and parents must commit to helping the program for thirty hours each year. Staff are all first-generation college graduates, all bilingual. Barrio Logan College Institute works with students through middle school and high school, and keeps in close touch with its graduates through their freshman year of college. The program is small—its largest graduating class was fourteen seniors—but it boasts a record of 100 percent college enrollment.

Among the most successful programs, I found many of the same elements that Yanov built into Reality Changers: support from mentors, a positive peer culture, high expectations for students, and a commitment to teach grit, resilience, and self-discipline along with academic skills. What distinguishes Reality Changers in the college-readiness landscape are Yanov's intuitive approach to program development, the strong sense of the program as family, and the idiosyncratic tone and tenor of its meetings.

College-readiness organizations are generally run by educators and researchers who develop their programs from the top down, designing interventions based on research in child development and cognitive psychology. Yanov designed his program from the streets up. He'd never read the research. What he knew was the lived realities of the gang kids he worked with in Golden Hill and of the students he taught in crowded, aging city schools. He drew on his deep experience of adolescents and neighborhoods, of what kids needed, how to connect with them, and what

worked. The model he built was lean enough to work with the austere budget of his start-up years, straightforward enough to be implemented by volunteers, and focused on the single goal of helping students get to college. The program he built from his own experience uses methods and practices that are strikingly consistent with what other programs have derived from research.

Yanov's substantive innovation was to make Reality Changers a family whose members share common goals and help each other achieve them. The program's students need this family. For many, excelling in school isolated them from their peers and cost them friendships. Setting a goal of college meant taking different, harder classes, studying more, and having less time to hang out with friends. Reality Changers' expectation that participants would avoid alcohol, drugs, and gangs further widened the distance between them and many of their peers. Students described friends who'd known them since grade school accusing them of being too good to hang out with them. One student was pressured to join a gang; and when he refused, gang members beat him up and stole his shoes. Doing what it took to get into college pulled Reality Changers' students away from the peer groups where they'd belonged during adolescence, the time in their lives when children want desperately to belong. Yanov designed Reality Changers as a place to belong, where students could find peers who shared their culture, their goals, and as in a good family, caring adults to support and mentor them.

To grow students' experience of belonging, he introduced Congress, his name for a simple, surprisingly powerful ritual that starts every small-group study session at every weekly meeting. The student who is that night's leader approaches each group member in turn, shakes her hand, and asks her to state her week's high and low and her prayer request of the group. At the beginning of the year, students' responses were glib ("I went shopping on Saturday," "I have an algebra quiz tomorrow"), but over time their responses revealed much about their lives. They spoke of a car broken down, a father's injury on the job, a grandmother's illness. In less than ten minutes a week, Congress builds connection and caring among students and between students and tutors. Yanov tells new tutors, "Congress is the thing that makes Reality Changers different from all other tutoring programs. We aren't here just to raise our grades. We're a family."

His stylistic innovation is the tone and tempo of meetings. Yanov has a lifelong fascination with game shows, and he modeled Reality Changers' weekly meeting on game shows' upbeat format, with himself as the smooth-talking, audience-revving emcee. A difficult vocabulary lesson, an announcement of next week's community service opportunity, praise for a student who has answered a question—all are presented with hyperbolic enthusiasm and exhortations to applaud. Meetings got boisterous and sometimes felt hokey, but Yanov knew that he needed to keep things lively and keep his young audience engaged. Let them stomp and cheer and have some fun and they were more likely to tolerate the hard parts.

I report the story that I tell in this book from more than two hundred interviews with Reality Changers' students and their parents, program alumni, staff, and volunteers, conducted over a span of six years. For a full year I came to the Tuesday night meeting in City Heights every week, six to nine o'clock. I ate dinner with students, volunteer tutors, and staff, and I sat in on every component of the program, including the Senior Academy, Congress, study sessions, and the lessons. In these I was, for the most part, a silent observer sitting in the back, watching, taking notes. Yanov has always invited visitors to meetings, and students were accustomed to their proceedings being watched. I took part in some activities, like conversation over dinner or participating in Congress, when I was asked to, situations in which declining to participate would have seemed awkward to students. Conforming to group conventions felt more important to the project than maintaining a conventional reportorial reserve.

As I identified the students that I wanted to follow, I talked with each one about my intention to write about Reality Changers and asked whether they would be willing to talk with me about their experiences. I assured them that they were free to refuse, and if they agreed to be interviewed they were free to decline to answer any of my questions. I promised that I would show them what I'd written and they could request changes or deletions. In most reporting situations, subjects are not offered the opportunity to edit what's been written about them. Adolescents are a different story: they speak with less self-censorship than adults, and often without an appreciation for how their words might be used. As Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Madeleine Blais puts it, "When you are dealing with children it is different from dealing with adults and it is that simple."³

With students, I left the choice of where to meet up to them. We met at Reality Changers' offices, in their homes, and, as they grew more independent, in coffee shops and shopping malls. My questions were open-ended, designed to help me get to know the students and gain an understanding of their goals and hopes, the challenges they faced, and how they met them. I asked questions like: "How did you get connected with Reality Changers?" and "What difference has the program made in your life?" and let the interview flow where it might. Since the initial year, I've stayed in touch with students and staff, interviewed them further, and followed their progress.

I've also benefited from the work of writers and researchers who've studied the barriers that disadvantaged youth face and how they make their way. Three writers' works have been particularly useful. In *How Children Succeed*, Paul Tough reviews current research about noncognitive traits such as resilience, curiosity, tenacity, self-discipline, and cooperation, and their influence on children's academic and social success. He provides a good review of research by the psychologist Angela Duckworth on grit and self-control. She and her colleagues found these traits are critical: they determine, more than intelligence, how students fare in school as well as in work and relationships. Yanov built explicit lessons about these traits into Reality Changers programming, and as the seniors navigate their route to college, the most successful ones are those who've worked to cultivate these traits. Tough lays out the research. The stories of Reality Changers' students offer vivid portraits of how these behaviors make a difference in their lives.

Roberto Gonzales, of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, calls the situation of undocumented youth "the most poignant civil rights issue of our times."⁴ His paper "Wasted Talent and Broken Dreams: The Lost Potential of Undocumented Students" is a powerful indictment of federal immigration policy. His review of the legal barriers and the contradictions within immigration policy alerted me to their ruinous consequences for undocumented students and helped me make sense of my own observations. His new book, *Lives in Limbo*, documents in painful detail the ways that being undocumented derails youths' efforts to move into productive adulthood. In telling the undocumented students' stories, I've used his perspective to examine the overt and the insidious ways their immigration status undermined their efforts to launch and throttled their dreams.

Miles Corwin's *And Still We Rise* is part of the rich narrative literature about disadvantaged youth and the adults who work with them. Corwin, a reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*, followed a class of gifted and talented African America seniors at an inner-city Los Angeles high school and charted their personal disasters and their efforts to get to college. He wrote during a period when affirmative action in college admissions was threatened, and he made a strong case for its ability, if not to level, then at least to improve, the profoundly uneven playing field on which disadvantaged youth compete. Affirmative action was no longer a consideration in California admissions when I came to Reality Changers, and for the program's seniors the college admissions playing-field remained severely uneven. Undocumented students faced even more forbidding obstacles. I've written about those obstacles and the doors that close to these students when they leave high school.

Although each of these writers implicitly recognizes launching as the developmental work of adolescence, in *Grit and Hope* I've made its importance explicit. I've used launching as a framework to explore how both students and the program met the demands of the year, and how their successes and their shortfalls shaped them. Both the students and Yanov were working intensely in preparation for launching: the students intended to launch themselves toward college and a world of wider possibilities; Yanov, toward transforming Reality Changers from his personal quest to a sustainable organization with national visibility. The developmental perspective enriched my understanding of what I saw and helped me tell both aspects of Reality Changers' story with greater clarity. Conceptualizing the program as developmental scaffold and launchpad enabled me to examine how well it supported its students in their efforts to build a better future for themselves.

Organizations, like people, go through developmental stages; and like people, they face imperatives to launch. The structures and practices that serve an organization well in its earliest years may, as it grows, become less useful, even stumbling blocks. Communicating plans and expectations and hearing everyone's concerns become a different task as an organization expands and more staff come aboard. Seeing Yanov's and the program's difficulties during the year as part of the task of launching into the next stage made much of what happened more intelligible.

The story I tell in this book opens in late August as the new seniors recommit to the high-stakes gamble that has defined their lives since they joined Reality Changers. They're betting that their years-long, flat-out effort with Reality Changers will pay off, that they will get into college and have the scholarships to pay for it. They feel that their lives are at stake. They're right. How they launch themselves this year—not just where they're admitted to college but also how they take on the work of getting there—will resonate throughout the rest of their lives.

The story unfolds through the school year, in chapters that follow five seniors and four of Reality Changers' original students. Three of the seniors are citizens; two are undocumented. They labor long past midnight on their application essays in work sessions with Yanov that are a Reality Changers ordeal and tradition. They struggle to keep focused on their goals in the face of family upheavals and family indifference; one struggles simply to get enough to eat. Through the winter and spring, as college acceptances and rejections roll in, they scramble to find scholarships; and they learn that, for all that the year has demanded of them, it's only their first step. Launching's a long game.

The four original members, including two who were studying in the Iglesia Presbiteriana Hispaña the night the boys outside threw rocks, are also launching this year, as they prepare to graduate from college. One student's plans have been complicated since he fathered a child in high school. For another, two quarters short of graduation, the sequelae of childhood deprivation and trauma derail her. A third graduates from college, yet already sees doors closing because he's undocumented. A fourth succeeds beyond her wildest imaginings. Their stories reveal how much a good program can help students change their reality and how the intractable realities of private trauma and public policy undermine their efforts.

Another skein of stories, interwoven with the students', reveals Yanov's and Reality Changers' evolution throughout a year that he's called the most difficult in the program's history. As he attempts to transform Reality Changers from a project he's run from two file cabinets in his apartment into a model with national standing, he's forced to look at the program through his employees' eyes and face problems that threaten to derail all that he's built.

The school year ends fifty feet above the ground on a June night at the Scholarship Banquet. On the roof of a parking garage, where sweeping views range west to San Diego Harbor and east to the mountains, Reality Changers celebrates students' accomplishments. Seniors' parents, city council members, and program donors are all honored guests, but for Yanov the most important audience is the younger brothers and sisters and cousins who look on wide-eyed. They are Reality Changers' extended family and the program's future.

An epilogue follows up with the seniors and the founding members as they're finishing college and launching into their adult lives. Students call their experience in Reality Changers life-changing. They say it raised their own expectations of what they could do and opened opportunities that, without the program, they would not have known existed. Reality Changers gave these students the tools they needed and the confidence that they could succeed—resources that their families often could not, and their schools often did not, provide them.

Most disadvantaged students are not so fortunate: across the country, public schools, especially in large urban districts, fail to provide scaffolding for the students who need it the most—the high expectations, mentoring, and support services. The country has grown substantially more diverse over the last three decades, and no institution has felt the impact of that diversity more than urban school districts. In some districts, more than one hundred languages are spoken at home. These students, who are immigrants and the children of immigrants, come to school with a burning desire to improve their lives. Their parents may be highly motivated to help them succeed, yet many lack the education to provide the scaffolding their sons and daughters need: while about 8 percent of children of U.S.-born parents have parents who have not graduated from high school, about 26 percent of children of immigrants do. For children of Mexican immigrants the number rises to nearly 50 percent.⁵

These parents care just as deeply about their children's futures, but less education and the lack of familiarity with academic expectations leave them seriously disadvantaged in helping their children with school. In *The Long Shadow*, a longitudinal study that followed a cohort of urban youth and their families from first grade to age twenty-eight, Karl Alexander and colleagues show how significantly families' socioeconomic status (SES)

influenced their children's ability to make use of school. "Higher-SES parents are good role models and effective advocates of their children's interests. They seek out safe neighborhoods, good schools, and favorable program placements within those schools. No one of these acts is itself determinant, but together they help move higher-SES children along the path to success. By contrast, lower-SES children labor under the burden of cumulative disadvantage imposed by their location in the SES hierarchy. Their parents want them to succeed in school and after, but most lack the means to help them do so."⁶

American public schools' historic mandate has been to help bridge this gap, to use teaching, academic counseling, social modeling, and social integration to help immigrants assimilate and step onto the escalator of social mobility. The increasing diversity of incoming students makes this task ever more complex. Schools are seeing more students with more diverse backgrounds struggling with all the challenges that bedevil new immigrants. The task is a challenge even for the most robust and well-funded schools.

Robust and well-funded schools are not the ones most immigrant students attend. Because public schools are largely funded by each school district's property tax base, students' educational opportunities are determined by their zip codes. Immigrant students in the poorest neighborhoods need the most skilled teachers, the lowest student-teacher ratios, and the richest array of supports. And yet their schools generally receive the least of these essential resources, a historic trend that the country's recent long recession has only exacerbated.

The size of school counselors' caseloads is a troubling case in point. In middle school and high school, much of counselors' work involves helping students learn, individually and in group sessions, about educational and career possibilities; choose the courses they need; and evaluate colleges and other post-high-school opportunities. They model how to navigate the system, stay on top of deadlines, investigate opportunities, and deal with unresponsive bureaucracies. More intangibly, their engagement with and expectations for students provide young people with the confidence that they can succeed and that their dreams can be achieved. Strong counseling can provide a crucial piece of scaffolding, especially for students whose parents are unable to do so.

Students are most likely to feel their counselors are helpful when they have a personal relationship with and easy access to them. The American School Counseling Association's recommended caseload for middle and high school counselors is 250 students. The national average school-counseling caseload is 477. In California, the average caseload now exceeds 940, the highest in the country. A counselor with 940 assigned students cannot be available to them in a timely way and may not even know students by name or face. The kind of interactions that students need with their counselors simply do not happen. A few students in these schools will find their way to programs like Reality Changers, which can provide what they need: informational and supportive services, high standards and expectations, and long-term nurturing relationships with adults. The rest will find no help, and much of their potential will be wasted, at grievous cost to themselves and their country.

The underfunding and underresourcing of urban schools is one of the most troublesome issues facing the nation. Its consequences are profound and far reaching: how well or poorly we educate our newest Americans, and how we support or fail to support their launching into productive adulthood, will mark our economy and our society for years to come. Rubén Rumbaut, a leading scholar of immigration, notes that almost 30 percent of the 68 million young adults age eighteen to thirty-four in the United States today are either foreign born or of foreign parentage. He adds, "A key to the future of California and to that of a nation being transformed by immigration will be how the rapidly expanding generation of young adults of immigrant origin is incorporated into its economy, polity, and society."⁷ The task starts in public schools: the country, and especially its urban school districts, must find the resources and the methods to meet this challenge.

Some of the most promising solutions are coming from innovative nonprofits like Reality Changers, and education leaders are taking note. Former U.S. secretary of education Arne Duncan has visited Reality Changers twice, and he's called it "absolutely a model, not for the city, not for the state, but for the country." Yanov is already engaged in scaling up the model, expanding the core Reality Changer's program (now called College Town) to serve a larger number of students. In addition, he and his staff have developed a college-readiness program for students in their

junior and senior years, called College Apps Academy. This program, derived from Reality Changers' long experience in helping seniors choose colleges, write their applications, and search for scholarships, provides support for any student who needs it during this crucial year.

Yanov is also expanding the reach of his organization through an ambitious partnership with San Diego Unified School District. Under their agreement, the district, the largest in California after Los Angeles Unified, will provide Reality Changers with a building in City Heights, San Diego's largest immigrant community. Reality Changers will use this facility to offer College Town, the core four-to-five-year program, to one thousand students from schools all over the county. Both Yanov and San Diego's superintendent of schools, Cindy Marten, acknowledge that even this scaled-up program will reach only a small fraction of San Diego Unified's students who need such services. But both see the project as an important incremental step toward addressing the inequality that pervades American education. It will create a large enough cohort of students that their outcomes can be studied within the district, around the state, and very likely across the country. Its results will show what can be done, challenging the district and other school systems to rethink what is possible and work toward even better solutions.

In his typical visionary fashion, Yanov describes the impact he hopes to create with College Town: first an influx of one thousand enthusiastic, high-achieving students—many from immigrant families, many of them poor—into the city's largest immigrant neighborhood. And these students, inspired by Reality Changers' high standards and ambitious vision, will then flow from City Heights back to their own schools and communities bearing new hope for their futures and extending those powerful currents to their own families and neighborhoods. Yanov's vision is nothing short of a wholesale change in culture and expectations. He envisions students and parents across San Diego expecting more from themselves and from their schools. Ultimately, he hopes, disadvantaged students graduating from high school and going on to college will no longer be an unusual event but will become the new norm—in City Heights, in Golden Hill, and in every underserved neighborhood of the city.

Helping the newest Americans launch into productive adulthood is at once a national imperative and, for every student working to launch, an

urgent personal task. The stories of Reality Changers' students show that our least-advantaged youth can succeed when we both ask more of them and provide the essential scaffolding to help them meet these expectations. Reality Changers has shown that it can help individual students succeed. Its partnership with San Diego Unified can show the way for urban schools to help all their students.