

CATCHING BUTTERFLIES

BY BROOKE HAYCOCK

"In the garden there was nothing which was not quite like themselves — nothing which did not understand the wonderfulness of what was happening to them."

— *The Secret Garden*

INTRODUCTION

Each year, in alarming numbers, and with alarming predictability, they leave. Some, swept out in a cloud of dust and suspension records. Some, fall out through the loose weave of the safety nets educators hoped would hold them. Others exit on their own, seeing more opportunities outside the school walls than within.

And in their wake, schools try to make sense of all the reasons they are gone. Too often, these explanations gloss over the powerful roles educators play in connecting students to school and instead fall squarely on the shoulders of the students themselves. *They just didn't do what they were supposed to. They just wouldn't follow the rules. They just didn't take responsibility and ask for help. They just had too much going on outside school — too much trauma, too much drama, and too little outside support. And perhaps the most devastating explanation: They just didn't care.*

But, as was clear in the story of Cornelius, featured in the last edition of *Echoes From the Gap*, student pathways to disengagement are paved with moments ripe for educator and school intervention. And where the previous installation of the series highlighted these missed opportunities, this edition seeks to surface lessons from re-engaged students and from schools and educators working to organize themselves in ways to draw students into school — and to get them on a path to success.

Like Cornelius, the young people you are about to meet — identified by pseudonyms they chose for themselves — are not the kinds of students generally looked to for answers

on how to improve schools. Too often, they are cast as the very problems. The data points that drag schools down, the disciplinary actions, the truancy numbers, the failure rates, the call-outs, the walk-outs, the kick-outs.

These students are telling us in every way they know how that our schools are not working for them. And they are exactly the young people from whom we need to be seeking advice about how to draw them back in.

Similarly, the schools I met them in, which also remain unidentified to protect student privacy, are not the kinds that districts and traditional schools generally look to for exemplar practices. These are the schools of second chance: an alternative school, a comprehensive GED program, and a high school in a secure juvenile detention facility.

Their achievement and attainment data, while on the rise, are not topping the charts. But they are evolving, responding, and organizing themselves in ways that are re-engaging concentrations of struggling students, accelerating learning, and growing students' notions of who and what they can be in ways that many traditional schools have failed to do with far fewer struggling students.

Lessons emerging from students and educators in schools like these have much to contribute to the conversation about how to support and meaningfully engage students, and to provide students — particularly those struggling in our current schools — what they need to take flight.

Welcome to the Butterfly Gardens ...

THE PLACES THEY LEFT AND THE DISTANCES THEY TRAVELLED

Each year like clockwork they leave. Spreading wet wings to wind and fleeing harsh climates for warmer environments. They arrive from long journeys, weary and weather-beaten. Settling on dew-dropped flowers and milkweed tended with care, they are greeted on their arrival.

"We've been expecting you," the Butterfly Gardeners smiled...

A self-possessed young man, **Lebron** had been out of school for a year before he found his way to the alternative school in his district. The 19-year-old described a gradual disengagement from his previous school. Academic struggle left to fester until any belief he had in his ability to succeed oozed out of the classroom, down the hallway, and into the stairwell, where it pooled around his feet in dice games. Eventually, and with no objection from staff, his father pulled him out of school.

"He said he was gonna get me into Job Corps but he never took the time. So I missed a whole year of school. I was looking for programs but I couldn't get into any by myself 'cause I wasn't 18. Then my sister told me about this school she heard about. I thought it was too good to be true. 'For real? — They take people my age who dropped out?' So when I turned 18, I enrolled myself. I came in with 7 credits. From three years."

Kamari entered the same alternative school a single mother with a 2-year-old daughter, a choir voice like an angel, and a reputation for fighting. "At my regular high school, I was getting suspended every other week. I was hanging with the wrong crowd, running the halls. And I got kicked out." They sent her to the night school. "At the night program, I really wasn't learning anything because the teachers were never there, and they'd just have work that they would leave for us. They'd let us sign in and then leave."

She had been on the diploma track, but staff in the night program were encouraging her to get her GED. "They were trying to talk me into it, but I was at the rec center one day and was reading this article where they said that you can't get a good job with a GED. So I was like, maybe this is a wake-up call to go back to school and get my diploma." She found the school on a list of alternative placements the night program



provided. Hers was one of the few stories, among students I talked with, where a school had actually connected her, as opposed to leaving her to figure it out on her own.

A previously high-achieving student, **John James** slid from the honors class to the alternative school in the course of two short years. With a 3.5 GPA midway through his freshman year, John had the grades to leave his neighborhood school for one of the higher performing schools in the district. But despite near permanent residence on the honor roll in his previous schools, he struggled with the level of challenge in his new school. And the school, designed for higher achieving students from mostly higher achieving feeder schools, simply did not have robust, fail-safe supports in place for students who were not prepared for the level of rigor.

"They were really focused on the students who had the grades. They were awarded, they were praised. For the ones like me, who was considered like a trouble child — it was like we were floating in school. No help." In his last semester, John James tried to make changes, studying even harder and seeking more help. "I found my own ambition. I had to." He brought his grades from D's to B's. At the end of the year, when his dean pulled him in to tell him he would be held back again, the dean said nothing about the improvements John had made. "I was giving it my all. But they didn't even notice." The 17-year-old left for the alternative school with 13 credits and a 1.5 GPA.

Seventeen years old, **Goldie** had, to her count, attended 11 different schools over her educational career before she enrolled in the comprehensive GED program. An educational nomad, she drifted in and out of classrooms and schools. Her middling grades elicited neither praise nor concern, and her behavior, neither suspension nor commendation. And so she essentially went unnoticed as she fell off one

school's rolls and onto the next. Then she started slipping. "Something fell off. I felt like school was unnecessary. There was just all this class time wasted. And I started not caring. I started not coming to school. I started not doing any work when I was in school." No one intervened. Until she got in a fight with another female student and a five-day suspension turned into an expulsion. And Goldie was out.

Unlike the other students profiled here, **Noah** arrived at his new school not by choice, but in handcuffs and court-issued plastic flip-flops. For Noah, bright and beyond his years, this trip started just like the last two: through chain-link fencing and a series of metal detectors and buzzing doors that led into a juvenile detention center. Before getting locked up, Noah remembered, his school offered little to keep him in class. "I'd just go to class, do the warm up, do my work, and then I'd just leave and walk the hallways." This is where he met trouble.

"I've been locked up for two years now," shared the teenager, looking out the glass that ran from floor to ceiling inside the school, flooding the space with sunlight. "First they sent me to Tennessee for residential, and then they moved me to Pennsylvania." The schools he described in those facilities — like in too many others — could barely be described as such. One or two teachers serving students in multiple grades with work packets and maybe a computer program. If his previous school offered too little challenge to keep him engaged, these programs certainly fell short. With two years still to serve, Noah arrived at the new facility expecting more of the same.

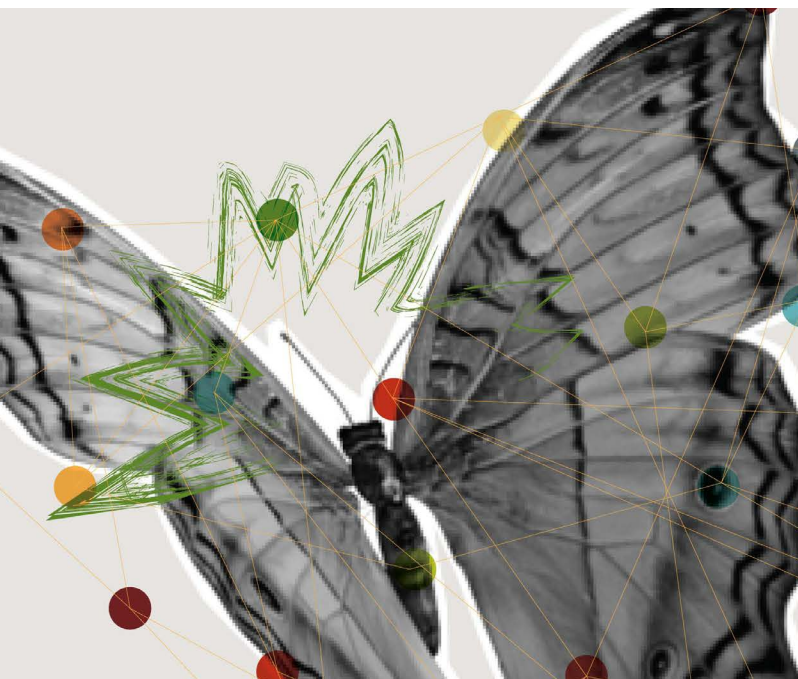
But that's not what he — or any of these students — found when they arrived.

THE PLACES THEY LANDED

Educators in these settings know that the paths students travel to their doors are paved with struggle. So they don't wait for entering students to stumble before they put supports into place.

The principal at the secure facility and his team work to have supports in place day one. "The first thing we do when their packets arrive is we hold a planning meeting. So if you're coming in, I know that you have some significant behavioral challenges or academic needs, and we have a plan in place. And everyone knows how to interact with and support that student."

And once students enter, educators work to engage them in educational planning and goal-setting.



"One of the first things we do with students is we ask for their transcript and we do an audit," the principal of the alternative school shared. "Because, unless I can say, 'Based on what I see, this is what we can do for you, and this is how long it will take,' we're not going to get their attention, and they're not going to buy in."

During intake, staff also engage students in conversations about their goals beyond school, things that have worked and not worked for them, barriers to learning or attendance they might face that need to be addressed, and what supports they need.

When she entered the GED program, Goldie remembered, the counselor took her into her office. "She was giving an orientation and asking me questions. Like how I'd been doing in school, how I could be better, what I wanted, things

like that. I just liked the way she spoke to me and how she handled certain things."

"They're surprised there's no stigma — no labels," shared the principal in the secure facility.

"I thought I was gonna come in here [the alternative school] and it was gonna be teachers trying to make examples out of people," remembered Lebron. "But when I got here, I saw it was different. They were just chill. They know why you're here. They know your past. They know most of the people here wasn't good in regular school. But they don't treat you like that."

Because instead of using students' histories as a mold to pour them into, they use them to put the supports in place so they can remove the mold and allow students to try something different.

GUIDANCE, PATIENCE, AND LOVE: THE CONDITIONS FOR CHANGE

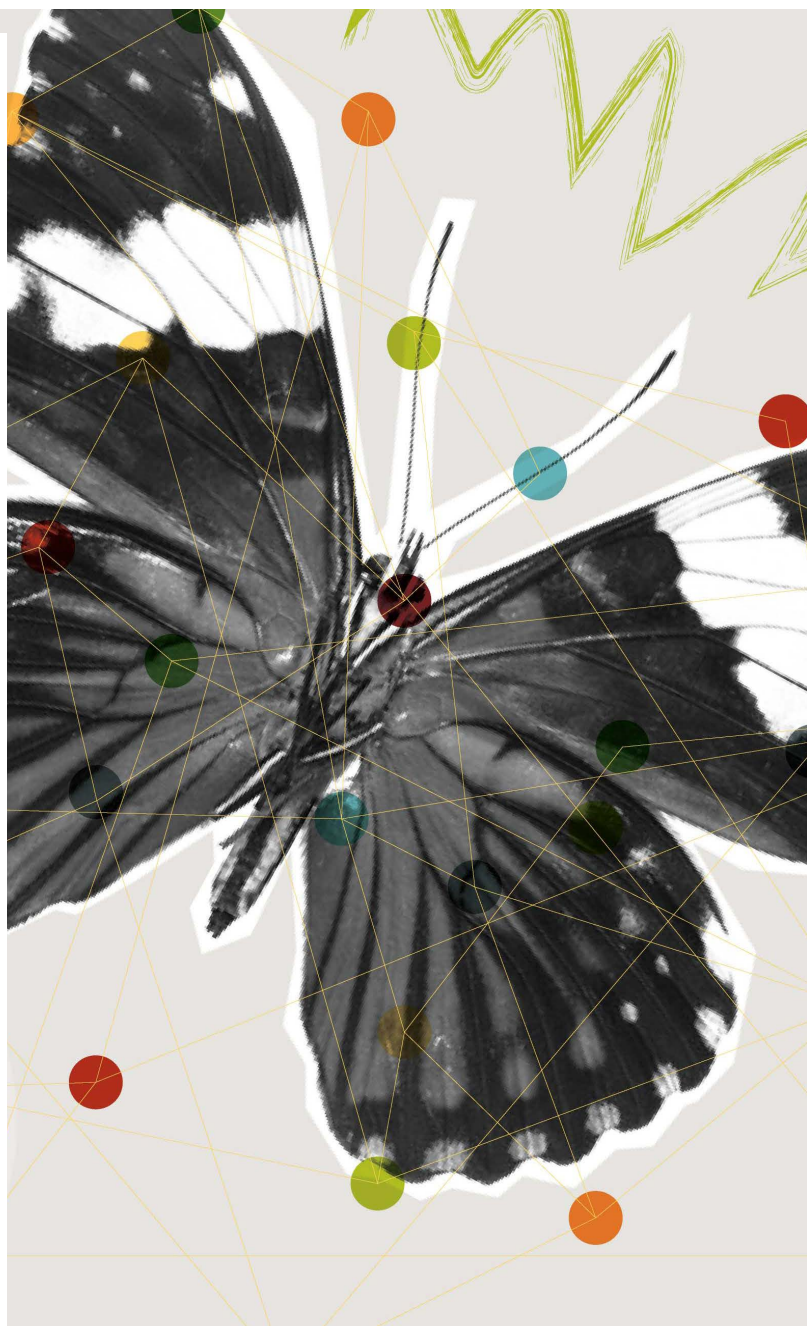
Educators in these schools recognize that what they do during these early stages with students is critical. "This is where you can grasp them — or you can really lose them," leveled the lead counselor at the GED program. "So we really try to feed their confidence. Because, for a lot of them, coming back to school is such a big step. We want them to see the value in what they're doing."

After students go through formal intake in the GED program, they're placed into a two-week foundations course. "It's essentially a life-skills class, to bring them back to the classroom and help them transition back to an academic atmosphere," explained the lead counselor.

And because these schools take a less rigid approach to structure, they know that they have to support students to adapt and regulate themselves.

"We're not as structured as traditional schools, where, if you wear the wrong color socks, it's a problem," laughed the alternative school principal. "So they have to get used to that level of freedom. But we offer that level of freedom because we realize that our students are young adults. We need to focus on the character-building and gaining knowledge and not forcing them or controlling them."

It's not that these schools are bastions of adolescent chaos, but adults in these schools offer guidance before reprimand. Whether it's being gently teased back on task or asked why they're not on task, students in all these



schools talk about being redirected with a respect they said was missing at their previous schools.

“One of my teachers, sometimes in his class I would be slacking,” admitted Lebron. “And he’d come over and he’d be like, ‘What’s up man? What’s wrong? You need some help?’ But he wouldn’t do it in a way to try to embarrass you, like, ‘Oh, you failing my class!’”

Students also talk about encountering educators who don’t give up on them — or let them give up on themselves — even when they struggle to make the changes they talk about.

“I actually got in trouble my first day. Because I got smart with my teacher,” Kamari remembered. She knew she needed a change, but wasn’t ready to embrace it. “I started to act up, getting in trouble, coming late. Getting high and stuff.”

“Lots of kids can talk about the things they want to do differently before they can actually do them,” explained the principal of the alternative school. “We allow kids to sit in the positive trajectory they’re on. And,” she added, “we allow them to sit in the discomfort of failure. I think they’ve been allowed to jump ship. Or drop out. Or carry on and storm

out when they aren’t doing well. We say, ‘No. We’re going to sit here and we’re going to deal with this and you’re going to keep coming back until we turn it around.’”

Goldie had grown accustomed to being kicked out and rejected by educators when she acted out. So this approach of pulling her closer really affected her. “When they sat me down, I felt embarrassed, ‘cause I knew that I was better than that. But I just chose to do it anyway.”

“Many behaviors occur because a need is not being met,” shared the principal in the secure facility. “So the question is why. We stop and ask why. It’s OK to not be OK sometimes if you’re dealing with difficult circumstances. Our job is to help give them strategies to deal with difficult situations.”

“Even when I know they wanted to put me out numerous times — I know they were tired of me — they supported me,” Kamari smiled in disbelief. “It’s a blessing to have people in school who actually care for you, showing you confidence and encouraging you to stay on the right path. It made me feel good, like somebody’s really there for me. I felt loved. When I was going through it at home, having problems at home — I felt loved here.”

LEARNING, FREEDOM, AND OPPORTUNITY TO GROW

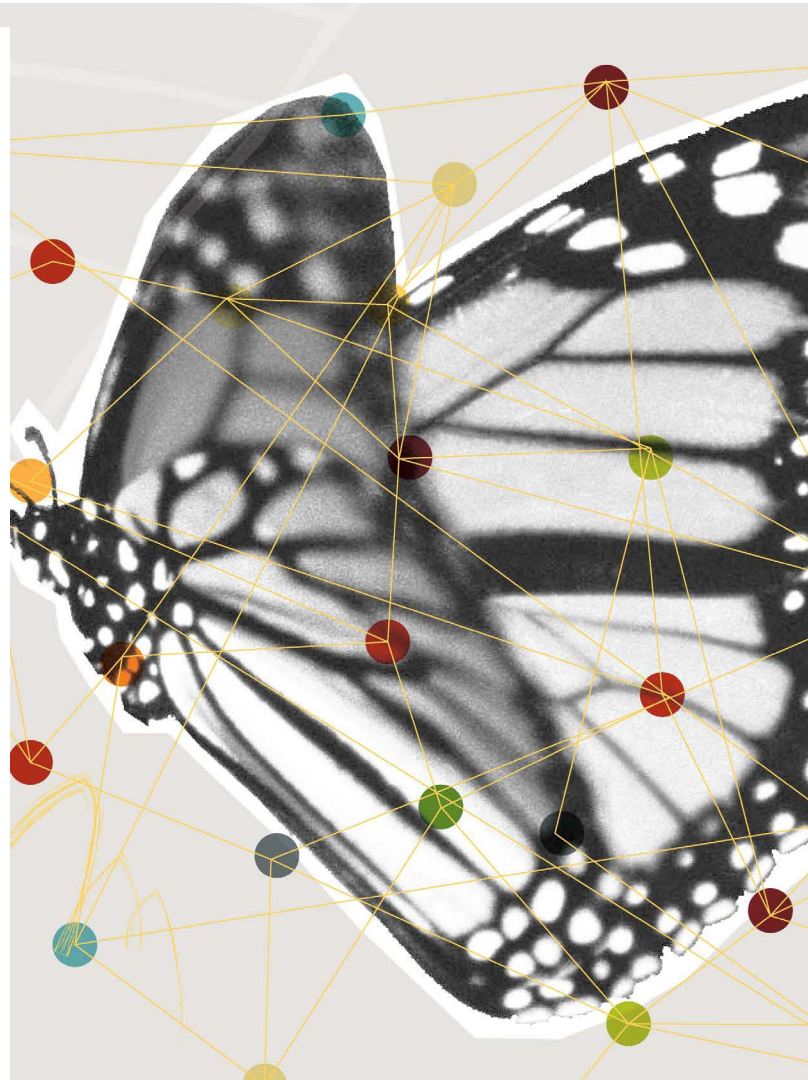
ACADEMIC SUPPORT AND ACCELERATION

While educators are working to ensure that students are stabilized and feeling cared for, heard, and known, they are simultaneously focused on accelerating academic growth.

“A lot of how we are structured,” explained the principal in the secure facility, “is to accelerate learning. So what might be accepted as regular teaching in other schools is going to be mediocre for us. Because we have a shorter time. It doesn’t matter how long they’re here with us. We’re going to push them to grow. We’ve got to push as much as we can to get these kids to realize that they can achieve.”

“For me, it’s challenging,” shared Noah, who was being confronted with gaps in his skills he didn’t know were there. “But I know my abilities. Like, for instance, I do probability and statistics. So it’s off and on — some things I’ll get, some I won’t. But once it’s explained, I’ll get it.”

“A lot of times I see issues with, like, math computation — but they’ve got the application part of it down,” shared the math teacher in the GED program. “They can do



word problems and geometry and higher function and stuff, yet they can't do simple fractions or decimals or percents. So we have to bridge those things."

"Here," John James said of the alternative school, "they have teachers that help you. Like, if they're showing a lesson for math, and you don't get it, they'll stop, come over and help you. Or they'll keep going, and there's more than one teacher in a classroom so they'll pull you to the side and help you. So it's not just like, 'oh, you don't get it, well, we're just gonna move on. Hopefully, you'll get it.' They'll stop and make sure you're getting it."

GROWING INDEPENDENCE: LEADERSHIP AND CHOICE

While educators work to grow students' academic skills and knowledge, they also deliberately work to grow students' leadership skills and independence. This starts day one, even if just with little things. "Every student has a job," shared the principal of the secure facility. "Giving out pencils, collecting the binders — everyone has a task." And these opportunities progressively grow. "'Ok, you're going to be the lab tech today.' 'You're going to lead the conversation.'"

"I'm a facilitator," explained one of the GED teachers. "This is not my class; this is our class. I give them the reins to take control of their own education."

"I like the style of the learning environment here," shared Goldie. "It's not like the teacher's up there talking for a

whole hour and you're stuck listening then they ask you dumb questions you don't feel you want to be bothered with. It's different here."

"I give them assignments, but assignments with choice," explained the teacher. "It's not, 'oh, here, go do something on a basketball essay or go read something of interest.' It's got to be relevant to their ultimate goal. I want to put it in a context that is fun and interesting — and challenging — to them. They gotta feel that this is their learning."

"What I can remember of school before," shared Noah, "it just seemed more boring. Like, social studies — I hated social studies. But in here, social studies feels like a whole different thing. It's one of my favorites. Different material, different way of teaching it. Making you use your mind."

"Here, the school is about yourself," shared Goldie. "If I need help, I can ask the teacher for help but, basically, I get to do it on my own. And I don't have to wait on other people. It's more independent. It's better."

"I feel like all high schools should be like this school, to be honest. I bet more people would start coming to school. More students would do better, for real."

And, for these students, that was precisely what was happening.

WATCHING FOR THEM TO EMERGE

"How does one become a butterfly?" Pooh asked pensively.

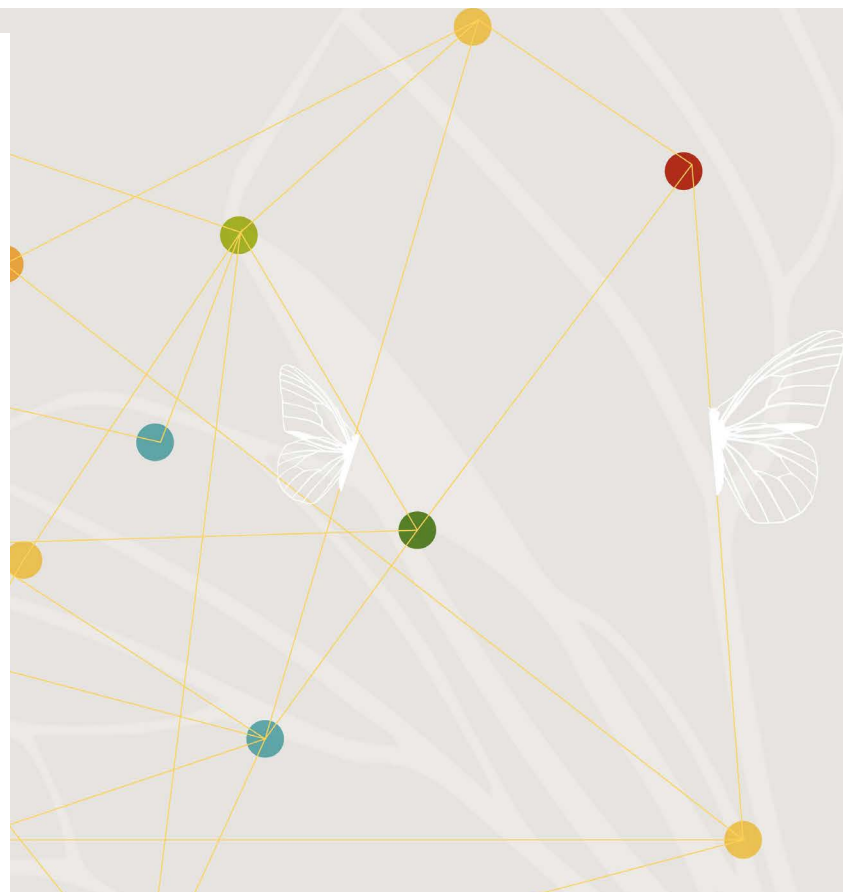
"You must want to fly so much that you are willing to give up being a caterpillar," Piglet replied.

— A.A. Milne

"The important thing," the alternative school principal leaned in, "is that we recognize when it is happening. When the light bulb is flickering on. So that they know we are seeing them. And that we are paying attention."

John James beamed as he talked about how he felt his efforts were recognized by his teachers at the alternative school. "Every teacher that I had, they saw I wanted something. I was always the first kid in. I never missed school. Through the sleet, snow, rain — I was always here. I was showing them everything."

"I've never skipped in this school," shared LeBron. "I never even thought about it; I don't need to. But, if I was to try, my teacher would find me and say, 'Hey



man, what you doing? Why you falling behind in my class?' They make sure you're on task. They make sure you're not falling behind. They don't want you to fail. Because you already — I already wasted time. I'm 19. I already wasted time. So, they make sure you don't waste no more time."

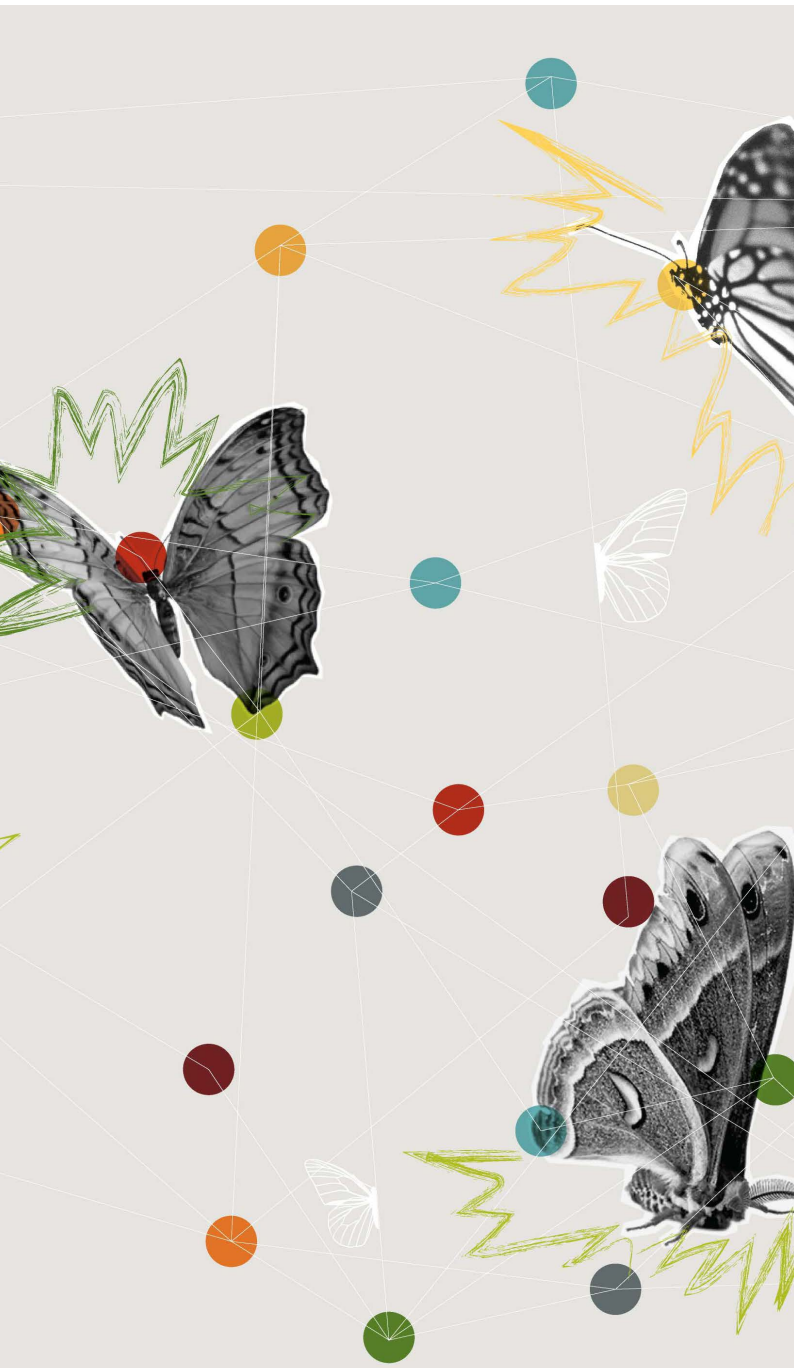
"My English teacher was telling me she thinks I'm real smart," smiled John James, "like I could go to college. Maybe I could go to college. I feel good, like, for real."

"It's a mindset," the principal at the secure facility reflected about helping students reimagine themselves. "We have to change that mindset. And the only way we do it is by exposing them, offering them new experiences and insight into who they can become. And we've seen our young men turn around in very major ways."

"My mindset is different," reflected Noah. "I see a change in me, from when I first got locked up 'til now. Different things are important. Like school."

For Noah, a visit from former students who had been locked up came at just the right time.

"The moment I realized I could do something better," shared Noah, "is when the principal brought kids back to talk to us who had been here before and left and they're in college now. They were from some of the same neighborhoods as us but now they're off in college. A different environment; different people they meet. It's not just like they're around the same people — and that's something I wanted. I just want something better. Something different."



PREPARING WINGS TO FLY

"We delight in the beauty of the butterfly, but rarely admit the changes it has gone through to achieve that beauty."

— Maya Angelou

It's late spring and Kamari is at the school with her daughter filling out graduation forms.

"It just feels really good. It's one of my biggest accomplishments. It makes me feel like I'm responsible. Because not only did I do this for myself, I pressed my way for my daughter as well. It made me feel like, if I can achieve this, I can encourage another youth to achieve. No matter your trials or obstacles or tribulations. No matter what you went through. Everybody got a story to tell. It's never too late."

"I feel highly engaged." There was not a note of hesitation in Goldie's voice. "Because I have a goal I need to reach. Honestly, I have a fear of failure. I can't be a nothing. I can't see myself outside asking people for change to go back and forth to places I don't even need to be going. I should be able to do for myself. I need to do what I gotta do. To do better. When I'm done with the program, I'm gonna get into the fire science program and I'm gonna become a firefighter. I'm gonna do it."

Nearing the end of his sentence and taking senior classes, Noah has his sights on college. He reflects on the changes he's made and how he feels about his education. "Before I got locked up, I was going to school, but I wasn't engaged; I wasn't motivated. I just wanted the credit so I could say I had a high school diploma. But, here, I found there's more that I can do than just getting a diploma. I could get a trade, I could go to a two-year or I could go to a four-year college. It's more important. It just makes me

motivated to do something better than just my high school diploma.”

Lebron will graduate next winter, and he too is looking toward college, a place he once thought he had no chance of reaching. “I’m probably going to graduate in January. I only got to take three more classes. I’m excited. I wish it was this year, but it’s alright. I’m gonna get into IT, computer security or something like that. I want to go to Maryland, because they’re the best in the nation.”

Ready to graduate, John James beams when he talks about all he’s accomplished. “Each year, I found my own ambition. I think even all the doubts in my family motivated me. But, like, every teacher I had, they knew I wanted to graduate. Once I did all that — well, I’m here now, so ... June 16th.” Smiling, his voice trails off and he looks at the college acceptance letter in his hand.

RELEASING BUTTERFLIES

In one moment, one setting, they were the data points that dragged their schools down, the disciplinary actions that distracted from learning, the fights in the cafeteria, the smoke in the bathroom, the truancy numbers, the failure rates, the call-outs, the walk-outs, the kick-outs.

And in another, they were forever changed.

John James stepped up to the podium, in cap and gown. Magnificent and tall under the auditorium lights. The sea of cheering students in front of him, proud teachers and families. With a swelled heart and big dreams. He adjusted the microphone. Said a prayer to calm his nerves. Cleared his throat. Head high. Opened his mouth. And a thousand brilliant butterflies fluttered out — and took to the sky.

CATCHING BUTTERFLIES

DISCUSSION GUIDE

We hope “Catching Butterflies” can be a resource for leaders to spark conversations in schools and districts about interventions and supports for struggling students. Below are some guiding questions you can tailor to help drive those conversations.

What were some of the themes you heard from students on what helped them reconnect to school, to educators, and to their futures?

What were the adult philosophies about *students* that governed their approach and practices? What were adult philosophies about their role in re-engaging students and accelerating learning?

What adult philosophies govern the approach and practices with struggling students in your school? Are those philosophies shared or do they vary across the school? How would you compare those with what you read in “Catching Butterflies”?

In your school, how are struggling students identified and supported? When does your school intervene and how? Are those practices consistent across the school, or are they isolated in classrooms? What practices seem to be working, and which might need to be re-examined and strengthened — and how do you know?

What opportunities exist in your school to hear from struggling students about barriers they’re experiencing and what they think would help them? Are there ways to further capitalize on those opportunities and respond to student feedback? And how can hearing from students translate into adult action?

What are the communication and collaboration channels in your district between comprehensive schools and alternative schools or programs? To what degree are educators in these different settings sharing practices and strategies? To what degree are schools working together to support students as they go back and forth across settings?

FROM ED TRUST:

As always, we are grateful for any feedback from you. We’d like to know how useful you find the series, how you’ve used it, and how we can make it more useful. Email Brooke at bhaycock@edtrust.org. If you’re in search of more student stories, check out Brooke’s *Between the Echoes* blog series on *The Equity Line*. And if you’re interested in student stories live and off the page, learn about Ed Trust docudramas, based entirely on interviews with students and educators.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

Written by playwright-researcher Brooke Haycock, this Ed Trust series, *Echoes From the Gap*, puts front and center the stories of students. These are the young people behind the numbers we look at in our districts, offices, and states, those whose lives are deeply affected by — even determined by — their educational experiences.

We share their stories with respect for their privacy, by changing names and omitting details of place when appropriate. And, with respect for their words, whenever possible, we let those words speak for themselves. We do, though, attempt to zoom out from individual student experience to students generally, integrating existing national data to draw larger connections to key issues educators and advocates grapple with as they work to improve schools.