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Straight Up Conversation: Build UP Founder Mark Martin

By [Rick Hess](#) on February 6, 2018 9:00 AM



Mark Martin recently launched Build Urban Prosperity in Birmingham, Alabama. Build UP is a workforce development model. It seeks to provide low-income youth with career-ready skills through paid apprenticeships coupled with appropriate academic coursework. Mark has spent more than 15 years as an educator, co-founding New Orleans' Langston Hughes Academy charter school and working with Teach for America, Atlanta Public Schools, Jobs for the Future, and the Alabama State Department of Education. I recently had the chance to chat with Mark about Build UP and the challenges and opportunities of the apprenticeship model. Here's what he had to say.

Rick Hess: So, what exactly is Build UP?

Mark Martin: Build UP stands for Build Urban Prosperity, a comprehensive, multi-sector solution to issues affecting the economically disadvantaged, such as poverty and urban blight. We seek to combine all the tools that help youth enter adulthood prepared to succeed: education, workforce development, soft-skills training, character and leadership development, and financial literacy.

RH: There's a lot there: For starters, is there one element, in particular, that makes Build UP distinctive?

MM: The single aspect that makes Build UP stand out is *equity*. We toss around that word in education, but we typically mean it in the sense of "fairness." In Build UP's case, equity also means *ownership*. Our youth take ownership of their education and their community, quite literally. At the end of the six-year program, not only do they come away with a high school diploma, an associate's degree in a chosen field, and career-ready credentials, but they also take over the deeds to like-new duplexes that they've collectively renovated, allowing them to begin establishing wealth by building equity while also receiving passive income and leading long-term revitalization efforts in their communities.

RH: How does this work? Do Build UP students stay enrolled in their current school, do they go off-campus, are there specific schools that partner with Build UP . . . ?

MM: After leaving eighth grade, youth come directly to us for Build UP's full-time comprehensive workforce development program. We offer high-school curricula, early postsecondary coursework through a community college partnership, and significant apprenticeship learning. We work with local high schools in the sense that we want the kids they'd likely struggle with—those students who are disengaged, bored, and falling behind. Our youth and families are making a *huge* commitment, but we have the added leverage of paying our students for their apprenticeship work. And graduates earn a house.

Our academic instruction is led by a combination of certified teachers, tutors, peers, and computers, although much of it is also integrated into workplace learning led by industry experts at our renovation sites. Our academic facility will have a 6,000-square-foot workshop where apprentices learn geometry by framing out a wall with two-by-fours, then that afternoon they would apply that learning in one of their future homes. Because all learning is competency-based and student-centered, Build UP apprentices will have individualized instruction plans that map the academic standards they need to learn in any given day and week, which then dictates the apprenticeship hours they can spend in worksites. Those who are further behind will have the added motivation of larger paychecks for getting caught up, allowing them more time on work sites rather than the academic space.

RH: In your [program video](#), you explain, "Our graduates take over the deeds to the properties, in one fell swoop becoming both homeowners and landlords. Zero interest payments; one hundred percent of each payment contributes to principal and equity, while also earning passive income through their rental properties." On its face, this sounds too good to be true. Can you say more about how this actually works?

MM: Before I get into the "how," I think it's critical to understand the "why." If you've ever purchased a home on a traditional mortgage, you know the bank really owns the home. Not you. For more than half the life of the loan, your mortgage payment is primarily going to the bank in the form of interest, at a time when, if you're young and have a big dream, you need extra capital to make an investment or launch an enterprise. If you grow up with access to capital in the form of investments, inheritance, or mom and dad, then you can often afford down payments. Access to capital is everything. So in this case we wanted to create a shortcut to capital—a system where our young-adult graduates would be working hard, earning money, making mortgage payments, and essentially paying themselves in the form of equity, so that when they decide to leave that high-wage job to launch their own small business and create jobs in the neighborhood, they can. We've already established two nonprofits to pull off the programming and housing pieces, but the mortgages will come from a separate Community Development Financial Institution that takes in large sums from banks and the government and restructures them in the form of interest-free loans.

RH: You're just getting started, right? What's the plan in terms of building out the program—five years from now, how big would you hope to bet?

MM: We're currently running a small pilot with a Birmingham high school, but we'll be opening the full-time program in the fall to our first cohort of twenty youth. It's small, but the goal is to be everywhere. After six years, the plan is for each site to max out at 120 students, but we aim to have multiple sites in each city we enter. Five years from now, our plans call for us to have six sites serving 280 youth. Those 280 youth represent 560 housing units, each generating wealth through equity and rental income. Because this is real property, Build UP's approach has a permanence that many other efforts just don't have. Wealth and talent emerge from within the community, and they stay there to uplift it.

RH: What led you to launch Build UP, and why do it now?

MM: In one sense, my entire life's experiences led to Build UP—my train-conductor dad who invested in real estate in his spare time; high school boredom that led to two years of tech school to work on my '83 Camaro; buying a duplex as my first house that eventually led me into real-estate investment on the side. More directly, for the last fifteen years, I've worked within the lonely walls of K-12 public education trying to teach hungry stomachs and asthmatics living in moldy Section 8 housing. Their parents were mis-educated by the same schools we're trying to

fix, and the best tools we've had at our disposal are new curriculum, interim assessments, data protocols, and 22 year olds willing to sacrifice themselves 70-plus hours a week to address issues they're ill-equipped for. It's a Sisyphean task at best. Because of all of this, Build UP just made sense.

I saw too many great educators burn out and finally decided it's not that we are simply executing poorly. Rather, we're operating a completely broken and dysfunctional institution. Current models of the mass education delivery system—traditional public, public charter, independent—just look and feel too much like they always have, when most everything else in modern society has progressed.

RH: What are some of the challenges you've encountered in doing this?

MM: I've presented the Build UP model to over a thousand people, and I've yet to have anyone disagree with the concept. The enthusiasm behind this has been overwhelming, but converting that to funding and partnerships is a whole different beast. One of the primary reasons I wanted to pursue Build UP is because it's never been done before. Unfortunately, many people are fearful of the unknowns involved in that sort of undertaking.

The reason we've never come close to cracking poverty is because we've never acted boldly enough. I don't shy away from this mission because I actually believe we can do it. But not by doing the same old thing and operating in single-sector siloes. Build UP is engaging multiple partners—public and private sector, white and blue collar—and this takes a lot of communication, planning, teamwork, and leadership. This stuff isn't easy, and if you haphazardly roll out a program with this many moving pieces, it's going to fall flat and set us back for decades. We've seen it in certain charters and virtual schools already. We can't give naysayers a reason to go back to the status quo—a very mediocre national educational delivery system.

RH: How much does all this cost per pupil? How do you make those numbers work, and where is support currently coming from?

MM: If you looked at this as a private school, the cost would make it the most expensive school in Alabama, at approximately \$25,000 per pupil a year. That said, any kid can afford it because of Alabama's \$10,000 tax-credit scholarship program for low-income students zoned for failing schools. The pay they earn at their apprenticeship also contributes, with half going directly towards their tuition and half going to their pockets as take-home pay. Completed property rent and refinancing also enable us to cash out of finished projects until our graduates are able to purchase them outright.

We're sustainable by the end of year three, but I'm currently supported by the Drexel Fund and in the process of raising a million dollars to help get this thing going. We need all the help we can get from anyone willing to give it. It's complicated, but the numbers work.

RH: You've mentioned previously that this all comes out of the Swiss dual-education model. Can you explain what that is and how you decided that was the way to go?

MM: In Switzerland, youth end compulsory education around age 15. Approximately 70 percent then enter full-time apprenticeships for three to four years, typically working four days a week and attending an industry-aligned school one day a week. They get paid a stipend, learn from experts in the field, take on real-world work and responsibility, and are ushered through by coaches at the job site who ensure they meet national industry standards. I visited both a banking school and a masonry school, and kids were thriving in both—and all enter adulthood debt-free.

With unemployment numbers as low as they are in the U.S., finding qualified talent is a real struggle for some companies. The Swiss solve that themselves with a talent-feedback loop. Their employment system closely resembles traditional courtship, while the U.S. is stuck with Tinder—a resume and 30-minute interview.

RH: Has talk in Washington under the Trump and Obama administrations had any impact on your efforts?

MM: I think the positive attention from both administrations is breaking down some negative stigmas that have held career-focused education and apprenticeships under wraps in our country the past several decades. The 20th-century "vocational education" movement pushed children of color and special-needs students to go work with their hands, and really vilified workplace learning and apprenticeships. It made a lot of people question anything that involved technical skills. It stigmatized what we now realize can be very effective in helping youth transition into successful careers.

I've grown frustrated with the amount of time, energy, and resources we spend arguing over ideas that divide us rather than focusing on solutions that could unite us. Since spending a year with Jobs For the Future traveling the country and researching workplace learning, career pathways, and apprenticeships, I've found that even folks who strive to find the glass half empty tend to be on board with programs that promote rigorous academic education coupled with career-ready skills that can open doors to a bright future.

RH: As you've noted, Build UP is so new that, so far, no students have completed the program. What makes you confident this will work, and how are you planning to measure success?

MM: Every single aspect of Build UP is based on some model proof point. It's just that no one has ever put them all together. Therein lies the problem. The lackluster results we're getting are because we have dozens of nonprofits each tackling a piece of this massive puzzle, but they're not communicating or collaborating with one another. We're tying them together at Build UP. We have numerous short-term metrics including academic-gap-closing growth, soft-skills development, housing production, and dual-enrollment credits that we can measure ourselves. We also plan to work with a research lab to ensure program fidelity and measure wider-scale economic impact on the community.

RH: Over time, how do you plan to decide which additional communities to enter?

MM: We're currently where I grew up, in Alabama. There's no greater need nor stage for Build UP than in the Deep South, which has been too often neglected by national funders and "reformers." More specifically, we're in Birmingham's Ensley neighborhood, which has spiraled downward for the past half century. Ensley was once a world leader in steel production, home to over 40,000 working-class residents, both black and white. Over the last 40-plus years, however, job loss, white flight, and urban blight have driven the population down some 80 percent—there are abandoned houses everywhere.

Though Ensley isn't without its share of challenges, it's also full of dignity, integrity, pride, and potential. Once the Build UP model is proven successful in one of the most depressed communities in one of the most depressed states, we're confident we can have similar success elsewhere and hope to impact as many other communities nationally that welcome us.

RH: Last question, big picture. What's the one thing that you think champions of career and technical education get most right . . . and what's the one thing that you think they tend to get wrong?

MM: I think most career-tech folks now recognize that all kids benefit from career-focused education, not just low-SES, special-needs, or black and brown kids. That said, AP teachers often miss this, and I think we're really doing a disservice to kids from more privileged backgrounds by not exposing them to the world of work at an earlier age.

Without a doubt, we struggle the most with employer engagement. Employers rarely engage at a level that goes beyond having an engineer Skype into a STEM classroom or show up at career day. Authentic, game-changing engagement happens when educators and employers sit at the same table and backwards map the desired outcomes for our country's future workforce. That's how kids, families, and entire communities win.