

## **Practice Makes Perfect: More than Practice, Change**

By Jari Watson

### **Summary**

Practice Makes Perfect (PMP) was founded by Karim Abouelnaga in 2010. PMP is a non-profit, education organization which serves K-12 students in the inner-city of New York City. The organization seeks to provide Summer enrichment programs to eliminate the summer learning gap that develops for lower-class youth. Research has shown that approximately two-thirds of the ninth-grade achievement gap between low and high-income youth can be partly explained by the summer learning loss. Students from low-income areas lose between 2.5 and 3.5 months of academic learning each summer, which equates to half of the academic year. Teachers spend four to six weeks of the new school year reviewing old material. With the help of its partner schools, high potential, low- performance students are selected to enroll in the program. In the program, students are matched and paired with older, high achieving mentor peers from the same neighborhood. In exchange for peer mentorship, high academically achieving older students are supported with leadership development, career training, and college prep (if applicable). The program is also supported by college interns and certified teachers who supervise the peer relationships.

In 2017, Practice Makes Perfect is a successful organization. However, as it continues to grow and obtain more partners, its resources are becoming scarce as more is begged of the start-up sized team. With the plan to eventually expand outside of New York and ensure sustainability, is Practice Makes Perfect able to grow as a non-profit?

### **The Beginning**

Karim Abouelnaga is the son of Egyptian immigrants. At the age of 13, his father passed away and he continued to be raised by his mother. As a youth growing up in Queens, NY, Karim was entrepreneurially driven and was inspired by being a resource to others. When he was young, he sold candy on school-nights and weekends with his brothers to keep him and his family off the streets.

Like many kids in low income communities, his education was hindered by his social-economic status. Within these inner-cities, resources are scarce, and often in this system many children fall victim to inaccessibility, forcing many to forfeit or limit their dreams. Karim, experienced similar difficulty but was afforded a different path. His high school had a 55% graduation rate and only 20% of those students were college ready.

Karim was fortunate enough to have access to non-profits, which sought to provide new opportunities to underprivileged youth. Some of the non-profits he had access to as a child where New York Needs You and Rewarding Achievement. These non-profits gave him the opportunity to work with college graduates and utilize them as mentors and role models. Moreover, he would secure over \$300,000 in scholarships and awards to make his college education possible. Ultimately, these were the experiences that would be the catalyst for Karim's later success.

Once at Cornell University, Karim began to learn more about the achievement gap in education as a Presidential Research Scholar. The achievement gap is the disparity in academic achievement between poor, minority students and their affluent counterparts. Until 2010, he was ignorant to all the sociological influences that play a role in a student's obtainment and retention of a sufficient curriculum. Although, it took him until college to articulate the problem, he had experienced the effects of the issue for many years.

Not only has it affected his childhood, but it has plagued the childhoods of his peers growing up and continues to plague his community, and many others.

In 2009, McKinsey & Company estimated that the achievement gap was costing the economy \$310-\$525 billion in GDP each year, which would be equivalent to a national recession. There was a report by the United States Census that forecasted more than 50 percent of the school-aged population will be affected by the achievement gap by 2023.

To address this problem, in 2011 Karim brought together a group of friends at Cornell: Andre Perez, Zach West, Amy Mitchell, Brennan Spreitzer, and Nicolas Savvides. The intent was to go beyond just talking about the issue, but understanding ways to combat it. Although it began as a student organization, Practice Makes Perfect was born.

### **The Realization**

"We are never going to fix poverty in America until we fix education."- Joel Klein

John Hopkins found that 2/3 of the disparity in educational achievement can be directly attributed to unequal summer opportunities between 4th and 9th grade. While some may view the summer as the potential to lose some skills from the school year, for others it is a road that leads to poverty, fewer jobs, and less resources. Karim was aware of this case, especially its relevance to his own community.

Because of its status as a student organization, Practice Makes Perfect originally received support from several Cornell University resources, like Entrepreneurship@Cornell, the Cornell Public Service Center and other individuals. In its first year, PMP launched its pilot program in Long Island City, Queens. Eventually, the operating expenses of the program grew unexpectedly, causing the group to operate for a period on almost one-fifth the original cost. Three of the five founders graduated from struggling NYC public schools and went on to attain an ivy-league education. Their first-hand experiences coupled with evidenced-based research laid the foundation for PMP's model. Before testing their beliefs, they were not aware of the impact PMP could make. After eliminating a 25% learning loss and making gains of 4% in reading and 10% in math based on mock New York State Assessment Exams, it was apparent that PMP has the potential to transform hundreds, if not thousands of inner-city classrooms worldwide.

As an assistant to Dean and research scholar, Karim continued to research the effects and disadvantages of education for youth in underprivileged communities. He also continued to sample the program in different communities in New York.

Karim, who attended the School of Hotel Administration, graduated in the top ten percent of his class. Upon graduation, he was offered a position in Blackstone one that would afford him the opportunity to support his family easily. Instead, he decided to continue working with Practice Makes Perfect, believing in its potential to effect educational reform.

### **Operations**

PMP operates on the four pillars of near peer, academic intensive, cultural learning, and community based. Every program site has a minimum of two classrooms, each consisting of twenty students, five mentors, one teaching fellow and a joint teaching coach (See Appendix 1).

Students are in grades K-8, need academic support, are assigned cohorts of four, and are assigned a mentor for the summer. Mentors are students that have completed grades 4-12 and have achieved academic proficiency. Mentors receive a curriculum as well. Mentors receive small stipends for their work and receive test prep support in The Specialized High Schools Admissions Test (SHSAT), The Preliminary SAT (PSAT), and Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) and support in high school and college readiness. Also, there is support in goal setting, pursuing college scholarship opportunities, and leadership development.

Teaching fellows are students that recently completed their junior or senior year in college or are attending graduate school. Prior to their placement in the program, they are given professional development and training. Lastly, teaching coaches are certified NYC Department of Education teachers and are given responsibility over two classes during the summer and are responsible for conducting evaluations.

Karim and his team spends the school year traveling and seeking to make deals with local schools as a non-profit organization. The organization, while it is non-profit, asks for financial support by the school by it investing money not only into the organization but securing the location and obtaining the necessary materials for an enriching educational environment. After a school selects students that they would like to participate in the program, they must sign and confirm with PMP by April. Schools pay a fixed amount for each of their students to be enrolled in the program. The PMP program begins a week after the last day of classes, often not enough time for most teachers to prepare themselves.

The PMP program operates in school buildings where students will experience curriculum in math, English, and writing. PMP also offers enrichment activities such as music, dance, and drama. The program days are like regular eight-hour school days, occurring over a period of five to six weeks. PMP partners with the NYC School Food Program to provide breakfast and lunch to students who do not bring their own meals.

Outside of the classroom, students are kept busy as well. Throughout the summer, students participate in spelling bees, math bees, and word days. Students and other participants also engage in local community service projects to help rebuild their neighborhoods, like cleaning up parks or organizing food drives. Additionally, students attend trips to museums, art exhibitions, zoos, gardens, and corporate offices.

### **Outcomes**

PMP has served over 4,000 low-income children, trained over 300 inspiring teachers, has created over 1,000 seasonal jobs across some of NYC's most disadvantaged neighborhoods, and has impacted many others through their community service. In many cases, after experiencing the program, the students end up asking to become mentors, building empathy between older and younger members of the program. Roughly 85% of kids show up to the program on a regular basis, compared to 65% in regular summer school. Only 5% of kids stop showing up entirely (See Appendix 2).

Furthermore, evaluations show that PMP kids have eliminated the summer learning loss, have made growth of one month in math and two months in reading. So, instead of returning to school three months behind, students return four months ahead in math and five months ahead in reading.

### **Recognition**

For his work with PMP, Karim has been featured in the New York Times, has been recognized as a TED Fellow, and has been awarded several distinctions, including the Robinson Appel Humanitarian Award, Newman Civic Fellowship, Pearson Prize National Fellowship, Cornell Distinguished Leadership Award, the Cornell Class of 1964 John F. Kennedy Memorial Award, and was named to Forbes' 30 Under 30 in

Education in 2015. In 2017, Karim was ranked in the top five most powerful young entrepreneurs under 25 in the world by Richtopia.

In 2013, Practice Makes Perfect participated in the Points of Light Civic Accelerator and was recognized at the Clinton Global Initiative University Conference. In December 2013, PMP was awarded \$100,000 by the Pershing Square Foundation, to grow to support more students, staff members, and improved curriculum and programs. PMP has received support from Ernst & Young, Ann & Andrew Tisch, Alan Hassenfeld, Stanley O'Neal, Echoing Green, The Heckscher Foundation for Children, The A.L. Mailman Family Foundation, The Johnson Family Foundation, The Banfi Vintners Foundation, and Estee Lauder Companies. In 2015 PMP was adopted by Phi Sigma Sigma as a national philanthropic partner.

### **Dilemma**

"In 2003, education officials conceded that the city's summer school program was no longer a top priority and regarded it as a failure. Having schools pay for our model on a per student basis is an integral part that will make or break the future of our organization. However, this is not unlike any start-up company offering a new product. The status quo, being summer school, runs at \$800+ per child and is not sustainable. Our goal is to provide schools with a better way of summer school. We plan to charge \$500/\$600 per student, which is less than what they are paying. Similar to National Geographic, we will hire sales representatives to meet with schools and networks to enlist our model." -Karim Abouelnaga (See Appendix 3)

Practice Makes Perfect is a 501© (3) nonprofit. With a growing number of non-profit competitors and growing pool of potential partners, Karim Abouelnaga and his team are trying to decide if a for-profit PMP is more sustainable. Should they continue the non-profit status or explore their possibilities as a for-profit organization?

### **Discussion Questions**

- Should Practice Makes Perfect focus on expanding throughout the US or other countries?
- How might Practice Makes Perfect infiltrate the regular education season?
- Currently Practice Makes Perfect only has only 10 full time employees, other employees are hired during the end of the regular school season. Should Practice Makes Perfect focus on growing their business from inside?

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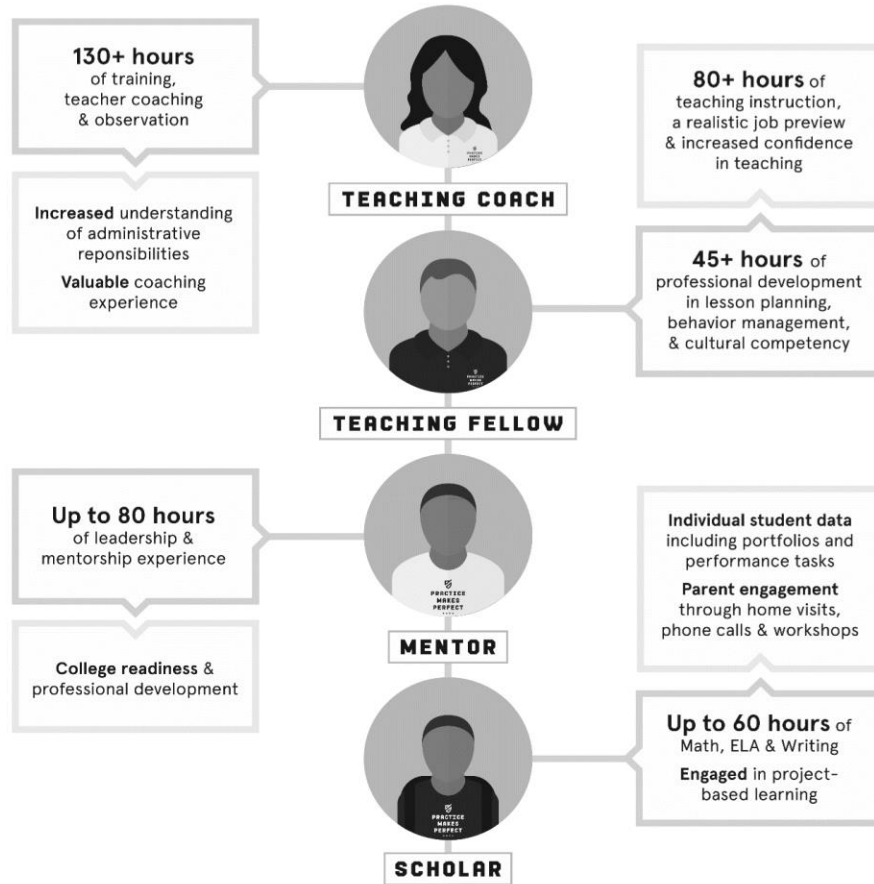
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Appendix 1:

## Everyone Wins: Near-Peer Mentoring Model



-Courtesy of Peter Daskalov, Business Development at Practice Makes Perfect

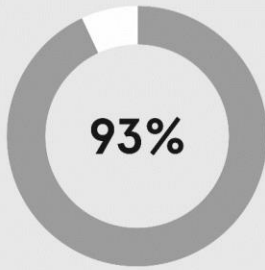
## Summer 2017 Report Card



**1160**  
Students Served



**89%**  
Attendance



In 2017, 93% of our scholars' parents felt their child is more prepared for the upcoming school year.



**20.84%**  
Scholar Growth in ELA

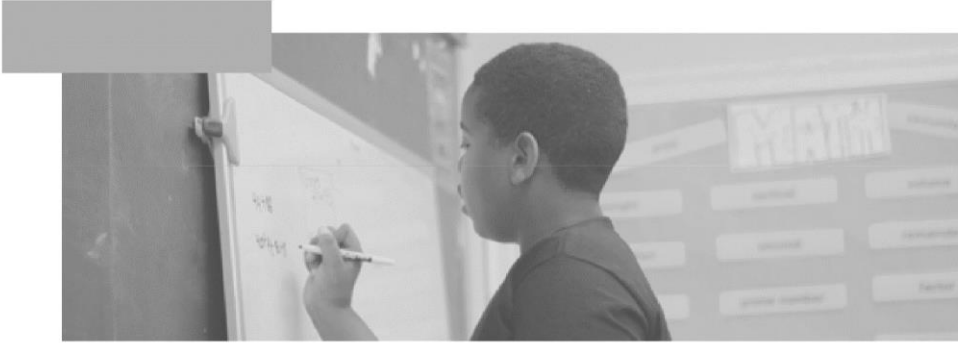


**18.20%**  
Scholar Growth in Math



**PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT**  
★★★★

# FINANCES



 **\$1,816,402**  
Revenue

