

A Charter School Principal's Story

A View from the Inside

Barbara Smith

SensePublishers

A Charter School Principal's Story

A Charter School Principal's Story

A View from the Inside

Barbara Smith

University of Toronto, Canada



SENSE PUBLISHERS
ROTTERDAM/BOSTON/TAIPEI

A C.I.P. record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: 978-94-6351-216-9 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-94-6351-217-6 (hardback)

ISBN: 978-94-6351-218-3 (e-book)

Published by: Sense Publishers,
P.O. Box 21858,
3001 AW Rotterdam,
The Netherlands
<https://www.sensepublishers.com/>

Printed on acid-free paper

All Rights Reserved © 2017 Sense Publishers

No part of this work may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, microfilming, recording or otherwise, without written permission from the Publisher, with the exception of any material supplied specifically for the purpose of being entered and executed on a computer system, for exclusive use by the purchaser of the work.

ADVANCE PRAISE
A CHARTER SCHOOL PRINCIPAL'S STORY

“Dr. Barbara Smith is a true and authentic educator for this complex time in developing schools and curriculum that really matter for our children. In her roles as teacher, consultant, leader, principal and author, she understands schooling from the inside out. From the many forces that whirl around classrooms, to the needs and wants of her staff and students, Barbara maintains a clear vision, backed by her knowledge and research of how schools could and should work for the benefit of the young people they hope to reach. Her narrative of her times in public charter schools offers all of us insights into the struggle to create schools of high academic quality and compassionate care, worthy of her educational mandate and mission.”

– **David Booth, Professor Emeritus, The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto**

“I was fortunate to have Dr. Smith join our founding team for the Jalen Rose Leadership Academy in my hometown of Detroit. Our team worked tirelessly to provide unique opportunities and a quality education in a public charter school setting. Without her lifelong dedication to education and our scholars’ success, we wouldn’t be where we are today. She’s inspired me to be an advocate for education and her work will inspire you as well!”

– **Jalen Rose, Chair of Board of Directors, Jalen Rose Leadership Academy, Detroit, Michigan, ESPN Commentator**

“A Charter School Principal’s Story: A View from the Inside is a remarkable book written by the most creative, progressive and professional educator in the business of educating youth ... Dr. Barbara Smith. This inside look provides an opportunity for innovation in a field that has held to aging standards for far too long!”

– **Diane C. Manica, Founding Team Member, Jalen Rose Leadership Academy, Retired Educator, Detroit Public Schools, Former Director, Leadership and Accreditation, University of Detroit Mercy**

“There is no gain without struggle.”
– Martin Luther King Jr.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword <i>Leonard A. Upson</i>	xi
Acknowledgements	xiii
List of Figures	xv
Introduction	xvii
Chapter 1: Beginning Sketches	1
Chapter 2: Trust	9
Chapter 3: Day 1	11
Chapter 4: Ten Days of Preparations	19
Chapter 5: The First Reach – WEDJ Parents	23
Chapter 6: First Week of School	27
Chapter 7: Parent Communications	29
Chapter 8: Connecting with Staff	31
Chapter 9: Initial Board of Trustees Communications	33
Chapter 10: Arts to the Core	37
Chapter 11: Learning That Sticks	41
Chapter 12: Building Relationships	47
Chapter 13: Safety, Supervision, and Discipline	51
Chapter 14: Bodies in Their Seats	55
Chapter 15: Student and Staff Performance Reviews	61
Chapter 16: Learning Communities for Staff and Parents	67
Chapter 17: November 2012 Qualitative Site Review	73
Chapter 18: Investing Time to Recognize Others	77

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 19: Welcomed Visitors	81
Chapter 20: Tears in Heaven	85
Chapter 21: Arts on Fire	89
Chapter 22: Other People’s Money	91
Chapter 23: Never-Ending Talent Search	99
Chapter 24: The DCCAS Experience	105
Chapter 25: Middle States Candidacy	111
Chapter 26: First Spring Rising	113
Chapter 27: Summer Highs and Lows	119
Chapter 28: Year 2 – Welcome Back Wolves	123
Chapter 29: The Sting of the 2013 Qualitative Site Review	125
Chapter 30: Response to the Charter Board Qualitative Site Review	137
Chapter 31: Board Retreat	143
Chapter 32: WEDJ through the Eyes of TenSquare	147
Chapter 33: Dismantling Leadership	153
Chapter 34: Catching Fire	163
Chapter 35: The Chill of January	169
Chapter 36: The Ambush... “And So It Begins”	175
Chapter 37: Valentine Bundle – February 14	177
Chapter 38: Leadership Performance Review	179
Chapter 39: Cracks in the Foundation	185
Chapter 40: Apology Accepted; Opportunity Denied	197
Chapter 41: Built to Last	199
Annotated Toolbox	207
References	213

FOREWORD

The charter school can be a space where students thrive in academic excellence and creativity. At the center of a transformative education is the school leader. I witnessed firsthand how a charter school can demonstrate best practice with the kind of actions that fuel a culture of deep thinkers and confident learners, both students and staff alike. This inside view of a charter school, from the principal's perspective, captures the detailing of the day-to-day ups and downs of being a school leader in a challenging, yet inspiring inner city charter school context. Through the eyes of a former principal and current Director of the Leadership Development at the Capstone Institute at Howard University, I read with interest Smith's account of her time at the William E; Doar, Jr., Public Charter School for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC. Her desire to promote science, technology, engineering and mathematics, beyond the niche of the arts school, is what first caught my attention. On the one hand, I was fascinated to hear more about the progressive approaches Smith was using to promote teacher empowerment and student engagement, and on the other hand, I was moved to support someone willing to make a difference in DC charter schools. In spite, of inheriting a school that was recovering from significant staff turnover, Smith was passionate about building a positive and fulfilling landscape for learning.

Rather than follow a prescribed path for charter school principals, Smith grounded her work in educational research. She did not assume everything would work in the context of this new school, but as this story reveals, she gave what works well in most schools a fighting chance. In other words, Smith gave the staff and students an opportunity to understand more about what teachers and students in ideal schools do, and by making the workings of best practices known, WEDJ could build its own model school reputation. Her story unwraps what a curriculum and teacher development specialist can bring to the role of school leader, and how necessary it is to be courageous in the face of a culture narrowly defined by short term test scores gains.

How long does it take for a school to 'turn-around'? After reading Smith's account, it seems clear that significant change can happen immediately, especially when you focus on culture. It didn't take long for my visits to WEDJ to turn into an informal mentoring role for the new school leader. As this book reveals, Smith did not leave many stones unturned, when it came to supporting positive action amongst the students and community. She was committed to developing others, and in doing so, generated a reorganization fiercely focused on building a school crawling with teacher leaders. Rather than investing in her own professional growth, she expanded the school's professional development so a dozen of her inner-city teachers could take part for a week in the summer at Harvard's Project Zero in Boston. Other

FOREWORD

administrators were sent to Harvard's leadership program and non-instructional staff were sent to the Disney institute for business training. One biology teacher went to Carnegie Mellon to learn about robotics to give the arts students additional 'hands on' and practical science experiences. Rather than have a team of staff coaches, who worked only with teachers, Smith set up reduced teaching time schedules so seasoned and skilled teachers could continue to teach students, but have time to mentor and support less experienced teachers.

Closing achievement gaps requires much more than having students practice and generate high scores on multiple-choice tests. It's not enough for students to squeak in a score of 21 on an ACT, when many of their classmates at college have applied with solid scores of 30 or more.

Smith's outlook was both short and long term. The emphasis on a curriculum beyond the testing was about building confidence and capacity for college and life. While her brief time at WEDJ did provide ample evidence of improvement in test scores, particularly in mathematics (nearly 10%), her work was not understood or appreciated by her supervising Trustees, and unfortunately, her time cut short. Unravelling the barriers to her progress are a necessary piece of this puzzle. Nevertheless, *A Charter School Principal's Story: A View from the Inside* is a personal audit that tells of compelling initiatives that should inform the charter school community and hopefully guide decision-makers to give time for sustainable change to take hold. Smith often repeated: 'how can anyone expect change by doing the same thing over and over, again?' I believe this real account of an *inside story* can give more students in charter schools, a chance to experience schooling in more engaging and fulfilling ways.

Leonard A. Upson
Capstone Institute, Howard University
Washington, DC

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing my DC charter school principal story was one of the most difficult pieces of text I have ever committed to print. If it wasn't for a number of people encouraging me to put my WEDJ experience out there, I'm not sure this project would ever have come to fruition.

My husband, Simon Smith, has to top the list of inspiring supporters. His words: "Tell the human-interest story" helped me keep my charter school experience real, by limiting educational jargon (the fencing language that can keep educators separate at times from the world we want to service). Simon's encouragement forced me to be courageous, when I was resistant to put it all down.

I have brick loads of thanks to the committed staff members at WEDJ, who shared in the making of so many powerful memories. The vast list of names as featured in shout outs throughout the book could wallpaper this acknowledgement page. In alpha order here are some of the names of many inspirational colleagues: Ms. Alberta, Ms. Almonte, Ms. Alford, Mr. Bell, Ms. Belton, Ms. Bose, Ms. Bradshaw, Ms. Brown, Ms. Burrill, Ms. Cadag, Mr. Carter, Ms. Cherry, Ms. Cummings, Mr. Dickens, Ms. Evans, Dr. Ginsburg, Mr. Gregorio, Ms. Hamilton, Mr. Harris, Ms. Hilay, Mr. Howard, Ms. Johnson, Mr. Johnson, Ms. Kensler, Ms. Lawson, Ms. LeVault, Ms. Lucas, Mr. McKeiver, Ms. Moore, Ms. Morgan, Ms. Miles (Cordova), Ms. Narrow, Ms. Nugent, Ms. O'Boyle, Ms. Palmer, Ms. Polk, Mr. Powell, Ms. Rave, Ms. Robbins, Ms. Robinson, Mr. Sessoms, Ms. Vernaiz, Ms. Wheeler, Ms. Williams, and Dr. Zirkle.

I have to thank David Booth, my mentor, and life-long inspiration. An educator with a sense of humor and respect for young people, is truly a gift. David came to WEDJ and was so generous with his time to support our staff. I am so honored that an expert with such a teeming following, was always there for me throughout my diverse journeys in education. David insisted that I stay the course, plough through the publication rejections – to make sure this work would be available for people to read.

Tony Upson became my DC mentor and continues to be a trusted colleague. I was thrilled to be able to meet and share professional conversations with someone so full of energy and passion for DC schools and students. I relied often on Tony's rich understanding that math and science could pave the way for urban students to excel in college. Tony's work with the Capstone Institute at Howard University harvested a rich bank of quality human and material resources that contributed to enhancing DC schools today.

I am forever grateful for the time and inspiration shared by Jalen Rose and Michael Thompson who donated their time to be with the students and staff at WEDJ. I am also forever grateful to Mike Carter, who as a co-founder of the Jalen

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Rose Leadership Academy, dedicated years of his life to an incredible cause. It was Mike who inspired me to be a part of the charter school community.

In closing, I must give thanks to the Paterson family. My father, George Gordon, inspired me to love sports and the outdoors. He passed away when I was 16, leaving my mom, June Murray Paterson, to model for me how women can be strong, formidable and make a powerful volunteer contribution in a community. My mom remained the matriarch of our family, until her passing at the age of 91. She listened to me read aloud every version of my PhD thesis and reminded me often how finding peace mattered in our busy world.

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.	WEDJ teaching roster (11/7/12)	14
Figure 2.	WEDJ mission statement and commitment	16
Figure 3.	2012 Arts to the core conference program	20
Figure 4.	PrincipalPoint parent newsletter December 2012	30
Figure 5.	WEDJ Grade 3 ELA portion of progress report card	62
Figure 6.	WEDJ out-sourced arts providers (2012–2014)	95
Figure 7.	WEDJ metrics from 2011 to 2014	108
Figure 8.	Chart of effective practices	133
Figure 9.	Ms. Nugent’s red carpet performance review (planning and curriculum)	157
Figure 10.	Ms. Nugent’s red carpet performance review (Dean of Teacher Development)	158
Figure 11.	Ms. Nugent’s red carpet performance review (Professionalism)	160
Figure 12.	Ms. Nugent’s dean of teacher development – Final evaluation for 2012–2013	161
Figure 13.	Ms. Nugent’s teaching observation (Fall, 2013)	172
Figure 14.	DCCAS WEDJ reading and math results (2012–2014)	192

INTRODUCTION

I entered the school through the exit door of a tired warehouse, void of windows on the ground floor. Inside, to my pleasant surprise, was the sound of buzzing warm voices amidst a collage of cheerful young faces. I would soon discover upon my return to the William E. Doar, Jr. Public Charter School for the Performing Arts (WEDJ) that I was about to enter a culture ripe for improvement and eager for reform. As it turned out my WEDJ experience provided much more than a physical setting for what turned out to be an enormous challenge, one that tested and strengthened my resolve as an educator, fiercely focused on building a model school for young people in Washington, DC's northeast corridor. This story takes the reader inside the day-to-day complexities of working in a school, in this case, a charter school, from the perspective of a school leader. This book features a number of bold efforts with dedicated examples of rich practice and bright lights against the dim backdrop of DC's test preparation charter culture.

When I first arrived on the scene as WEDJ's principal in July of 2012, I was committed to sharing best practices at the same time as being a dedicated co-learner. I knew there was much a Caucasian educator had to learn in the context of a school with 96% African American families. I wanted to inspire both the staff and the students and realized the road to improvement would require all of us to be learners and teacher-leaders at the same time. I learned early on that in order to shift the achievement trends in DC charters, we needed to chip away at the testing tarmac that shaded schools, like WEDJ, from implementing more enlightened and exceptional ways of teaching and learning. I was ready to become immersed in a space where educators could dream and build an ideal foundation for a model school. Expecting we would be serving over 400 students, their families, and a staff of more than 60 people, I was well aware that such an ambitious goal could not be attained on my own.

Each piece of a charter school puzzle is strengthened or weakened by the quality and capacity of the systems that hold the structure in place. In a perfect world, such systems would allow for the uniqueness of what each staff member can bring to the table. The notion of a "one size fits all" school can limit how a distinct mix of collective talent can fuel better schools. I believe that for a school to move from *good to great*, it needs much more than 60 strong individual employees; a staff must behave as a team committed to building the capacities of others – and each other. The role of teachers typically is to develop their students; however, the notion of colleagues professionally developing each other is becoming much more mainstream in progressive schools. In much the same way, school systems can be designed to support one other, recognizing and reinforcing distinctness, not 'sameness' while sharing public resources and assets. A ranking process of schools over-simplifies

INTRODUCTION

what is defined as a great school. In the case of the Performance Management Framework (PMF) in DC, such a measure assumes that what is quantifiable is of most worth. The tighter the ranking and points system, the more education is defined by a single way of doing school. From my experience, such a narrow approach, limits growth and school improvement. Ideal systems of education will promote links with university research, reward innovation and recognize that school is much more than a calculated score.

At WEDJ I had to operate at both the micro level (inside my school) and the macro level (as a player inside the charter school system). When I first addressed my staff at WEDJ, I initiated some subtle changes at the micro level. I removed the term ‘faculty’ from the Employee Handbook and noted that I would refer to staff as either instructional or non-instructional. Teachers would no longer be elevated by the status of ‘faculty’; if we were to operate as a team, we would work together as “staff” members. I gently let go of the ‘faculty’ designation, as a subtle start toward building the WEDJ team. Language sets a tone, and just as Disney calls their employees, “cast members”, I wanted to remove a hierarchy that didn’t seem to serve much of a purpose.

Beyond the staff are a host of significant people who matter in charter schools. These include parents, the local and state education authorities, and the trustees for both the school and the community. Together, with the staff, I considered this collective group as guardians, ideally committing sweat equity to the mix, so we could provide that solid foundation for our students to excel in school, in college and in life.

Finally, the term stakeholder is often used to capture all who have stake in the learning. Students, clearly have the most to gain or lose in an operation that expropriates over seven hours of their day, five days a week, for over a dozen years. All guardians have a stake in ensuring that what the students are taking part in, is a quality education. While a school is much more than a structure, I have come to understand that stakeholders who behave as partners, rather than separate pieces on a game board, have much more to offer young people in schools today.

Over the course of my thirty-five years as an educator, I’ve been fortunate to be a part of many different school installations. While the blueprints for public, charter, independent, international and college schools are distinct, they do share some universal ideals about what supports exceptional teaching and learning.

- There must be opportunities for all partners to learn beyond the scope of their membership.
- A collective growth mindset supports mastery and renewed ways of teaching so that all students have the opportunity to learn.
- Ideas for continuous improvement can come from within, as well as from sources outside the school.
- Increasing the critical mass of exceptional learners, teachers and students alike, takes time, more than the hours in a conventional school year.

I tried to write the draft of this book soon after my experience so I would be able to provide a comprehensive description of one of the most intense and enriching parts of my educational career, one given safe conditions, I would willingly return to and embrace on a given notice. My hope is that these pages that follow can serve a number of different partners in different ways, to inform, to engage in action and to understand the possibilities of what can happen when we all commit to learning and growing a model school.

I would be thrilled if high school or college students would read this book for a range of purposes: as a piece of work to compare with their own learning histories; as a text to critique leadership styles; as a resource to support peer teaching or tutoring; as a snapshot of various careers; and, perhaps, as a stimulus for recommending ideas or initiating action in schools where student input into improvement is welcomed by responsible guardians.

I hope this book will encourage families to take an active interest in their local schools by finding meaningful ways to make contributions. By gaining some insight into school operations, it is possible to de-mystify misconceptions and help volunteers be more prepared and assured about playing more direct roles in schools. How school happens need not be reserved for insiders. Alas, it is not an easy challenge for schools to be completely open to the public given the critical need to ensure safety and limit learning distractions. This snapshot, however, can reveal a fair bit about learning and working in a charter school. I trust this account can speak to what happens to children after they walk through the school doors and what happens between staff before and after the final bell. While I suspect that each charter school story is unique, there are common challenges that all schools face. Mind you, I would be remiss to paint WEDJ as a typical school in any case.

I would hope teachers would say they'd want to be a part of a team committed to much more than achieving high test scores. I think teachers would welcome the opportunity to be in a system that was transparent about expectations and fair in their performance reviews. I believe teachers would like to know that professional development can be broader than the confines of one roof; that schools can invest significantly in teacher growth. I sense teachers appreciate being shown the way by mentors and teacher-leaders, with the opportunity to co-plan and co-teach in classrooms with students. I also think teachers like to know that fun can be deliberately planned, at the same time as being held accountable with other partners to a positive code of commitment.

I hope principals, new and seasoned, will think about how this story compares with their own experiences, and how adapting to change, or challenging the status quo or even choosing inaction, can lead to different kinds of consequences. I think school leaders would like to know more about stories where courage can lead the way, and how shared responsibility can help achieve the plentiful tasks that populate a principal's job description. I hope this narrative reveals some thought-provoking options for re-structuring to support the making of a school 'crawling with teacher-leaders.' After all, increasing the critical mass

INTRODUCTION

of exceptional teachers in all schools is a worthy goal, one that requires much thought and hard work.

I wish that Board members representing schools and school districts will be motivated to become life-long learners, demonstrating a solid capacity to distinguish between rigorous peer-reviewed practices, that align with a school's mission, and the self-published recipe books that narrowly focus on test scores as evidence of greatness. I hope Trustees will come to understand that change takes time and that in order to expect commitment, they, as well, must demonstrate it, too. In essence, I believe a school needs at least three years in order to document sustainable and significant improvement. I hope Boards will see the strength in diversity and ensure that they are representative of the people they serve.

Finally, I hope that the public will take notice of how they can be advocates for a free and quality education, noting that we entrust all schools with funding that should be transparent and responsibly managed to support and enhance student growth.

No question, the charter school is a complex organism. In my quest to dream a school – with devoted WEDJ *cast members*, I learned much about the forces that serve more progressive schooling. I also discovered that it is possible for poor practices to seep in; I suspect many charter schools, that have been open to innovation, have also had to deal with the collateral fall out of accountability that uses test scores as limited metrics of success.

I am proud of what the students and staff at WEDJ were able to accomplish in a short time with the aid of many helpers along the way. We took a risk and moved out of the shadows and embraced enlightened ideas in a charter world that could and should recognize how innovation can inspire and shift the course of learning in any school.

CHAPTER 1

BEGINNING SKETCHES

Doing something the same way and expecting different results is a common phrase used often in the dialogue about 21st century schools. Yet, many actions, deemed as distinct for moving forward, tend to be limited by the policies and habits of the existing school system.

Without a way of viewing the ‘fringes’ or ‘outliers’, schooling can simply be a reinvention of what is possible within the confines of the current budget and entrenched framework. New people with new experience can bring a new perspective with new possibilities, but their capacity to implement new ideas will depend on whether such individuals can influence the masses and shift the boundaries of budgets and assumptions about what great schooling can be. When a school or business hires a leader from within, everyone has a good idea of what that individual brings to the mix, and if they have a track record of being courageous and improving the landscape, they can indeed be a solid choice for success. In the case at WEDJ, I was new and no one could predict whether my leadership DNA, shaped from a variety of educational experiences, would make a positive difference.

No question, my background was diverse compared to most members of my new community. While I grew up as a Canadian, I did manage to understand American culture as I lived close to the US border in Sarnia, Ontario, a bridge away from Port Huron, Michigan. I was afforded the opportunity to discover ABC, CBS and NBC, long before many Canadians, who grew up viewing one television network, the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation). I remember vividly JFK’s shooting on four channels and I witnessed the horrific flames and riots in Detroit in the late sixties. I spent nearly 19 years in Sarnia, so I was quite familiar with the news coming from the United States. By unwrapping the origins of my early leadership roles, I have come to understand what trigger experiences helped develop my teaching attitudes and behaviours. I remember volunteering as an instructor at the YMYWCA as a gymnastics and swim instructor. I knew early on, by Grade 8, that education would be my profession. I was inspired and felt a tremendous sense of accomplishment when the kids in my classes learned something new! Such initial episodes led to leadership roles in our city Parks and Recreation programming and camp counseling at Camp Kenny and Camp Tanamakoon. I remember working on a team at Sarnia’s Adventure Playground that was much like the ‘Maker Spaces’, poised as innovative education spaces today. While we had our share of foot injuries from rusty nails and other preventable workplace-type accidents, young people loved building forts and

CHAPTER 1

artifacts with hammers, saws and whatever materials we could gather from the local scrap yards.

I was also fortunate to go to one of the first semester high schools in Canada. I was thrilled to only focus on three 90-minute classes at a time. Not stretched by the gauntlet of studying for 6 to 8 classes at one time, I could be enriched by the band, take part in science fairs and read *International Gymnast*, at will. I loved sports and athletics and represented my school at the Ontario Athletic Leadership Camp in the summer of Grade 11. My math teacher, Mr. Strang, and my music teacher, Mr. Timmermans, were incredible educators. Our band travelled often; we played at an international band festival in Belgium and many of us played locally in the school citizen band with community members. I was also thrilled to be selected as one of the first female trumpet players in our school's stage band! My education included Grade 13, so I did not have to take many courses; rather I could concentrate on learning a few at a time. While I took traditional college bound subjects, I regret, however, not having the opportunity to learn more practical trades, such as how to build or fix a car, how to put up dry wall or survey a plot of land. Like many high 'schoolers', my perception of worth was caught up in report card scores, as such achievement held the key to further education and choice in the job market. At the University of Toronto, I enjoyed the smaller anatomy classes where we learned about muscles and bone insertions through 'hands-on' work with cadavers, but I must admit, I rarely attended the classes with over 1000 students, choosing to buy the textbook and teach myself enough to pass these courses. With such numbers, it was difficult for many university undergraduate professors to mentor, connect or therefore, inspire students. My practical leadership experience was nurtured by opportunities generated through the Department of Athletics. Sharon Bradley coordinated the extensive intramural program, and it here where I found a space to create schedules and promote activity for thousands of participants in recreational and more competitive settings. Sharon played a significant role in my leadership development and I will always remain grateful for the opportunities she made available to me, and many others she mentored at U. of T. While I believe the range of opportunities helped expand my creativity, it was the early leadership experiences of moving people to action that probably built up my confidence and channeled me into the world of teaching.

After completing my Bachelor's of Education degree, I recall how difficult it was to find a job. I sent my resume in to every school board in Ontario and I was interviewed in London and Kitchener, Ontario. I kept every rejection letter, enough to wallpaper a room. I was able to land two interviews. I remember meeting Wayne Somerville from the Waterloo County Board of Education; he asked me the question: "Where do you see yourself in five years?" I told Wayne and his team of consultants, that I wanted to be sitting in their chairs, as a consultant. I was relieved when they all chuckled, and when offered the position, they noted they were impressed with my enthusiastic ambition. When many of my classmates had to settle at first for substitute teaching positions, I was fortunate to be able to enter the workforce as a

middle school teacher of English, Mathematics, Science, and Physical and Health Education. I recall the support from the Waterloo Board central office was incredible. We met once a month for professional development sessions on Monday evenings; we were given ample opportunities to write curriculum; we had committed mentors, who inspired and supported us on an ongoing basis. I was part of a vibrant and passionate education community.

Looking back on these times I believe my students turned out to be incredible teachers. By paying attention to how they responded to my teaching, I was able to tweak lessons and develop materials to suite their individual needs. I learned to adjust and put in late hours when planning for teaching 30 to 35 students at one time. After four years, I began my Masters of Education at the Institute of Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto. Part way through the program, my husband was transferred to Saskatoon, so I completed my degree at the University of Saskatchewan (U. of S.). Here, additional research and a thesis component was required, which shifted my interest toward further graduate programming. My professors were extraordinary. Reg Fleming, Alan Ryan, Jack Hope, Sam Robinson and Trevor Gambell, in particular, left a significant mark on my thinking and desire to read and learn more about the complex context of schools and education. U. of S. offered small classes with professors who modeled great teaching. We didn't just read articles and discuss them. In this graduate program, teachers created engaging slide shows, used custom-made teaching materials and games, and often set up simulations or enactments to demonstrate sound instructional practices. It mattered to the professors that the graduate students would be able to grow beyond their work. I also taught undergraduate education courses for U. of S. Probably one of my most enriching experiences was teaching in the indigenous education programs. My students organized an impressive Health Fair; they contacted local community agencies to set up booths and demonstrations filling the main college gymnasium. This integrated experience provided an opportunity for future indigenous educators to write letters, as well as meet, greet and introduce the visitors, who came loaded with materials to share with students and staff at the university campus.

Just as I finished my dissertation at U. of S., my husband was relocated to Montreal, Quebec, where I taught more courses at McGill University in teacher education, namely, curriculum theory and teaching and instructional design courses, in addition to gymnastics for students focusing on teaching physical education. At this time, I also went to night school and took a course in French as a Second Language. Just as I was about to enroll in McGill's PhD program, my husband was transferred back to Toronto. At this point, I was missing the classroom, so I accepted a position in Mississauga, Ontario with the Peel Board of Education, teaching Grade 1, in addition to music, special education, and physical education for grades 4, 5, and 6. I remember developing a student leadership program where students organized games rooms, intramurals and special events. My husband, Simon, and I were also eager to start a family and during my second year we had our first child, Sarah.

CHAPTER 1

At this time, I was eager to return to the academic community and so applied and was accepted into OISE's PhD program where I spent four years taking courses, completed comprehensive exams, submitted a proposal and completed my dissertation on an inquiry into the linguistics of peer teaching interactions. My research involved working in a K-8 school, with 15 students in grade 4 who opted into a program of peer teaching. In addition to being exposed to a teacher education program, students in grade 4, worked in pairs to plan sixty-minute classes for students in K to grade 3. Students took part in weekly professional development about multiple intelligences and lesson design. As well, the peer teachers examined videotapes of their classes and recorded weekly journal entries about what they would do differently in subsequent lessons. The students exceeded my expectations and the findings contributed to the body of research supporting the benefits of peer teaching. Students not only learned the various subject matter in a deeper way, they also learned the language of teaching, that when applied in this authentic context, made the learning more powerful and memorable for all the participants.

I also taught a variety of health and physical education courses at the Faculty of Education when Michael Fullan was our Dean. In the midst of studying and teaching at OISE-U of T, I had my second child, Martin. My graduate classes at OISE led me to delve deeper into Vygotsky's works and the notion of constructivism, holistic learning and measurement and assessment in education. My advisor, Gordon Wells, taught us much about action and participatory research, something I would continue to use throughout my career. Jack Miller validated the significance of social and emotional intelligence and David Booth remains a constant source of inspiration. His warm sense of humor helped me and many others embrace a love for the arts, and teaching literacy in purposeful and meaningful ways. I was able to complete my Ontario Principal Part I and II courses for my administrator credentials at the same time as completing my PhD in 1996, just in time to receive notice of our next expatriate assignment in Paris, France.

Unable to work in Paris, I took French classes and volunteered as a parent at Marymount School, where I became the Treasurer of the Parent-Teacher Association and coached my kids' basketball and soccer teams. In our third year, I was asked to work on writing a book on the school's 75th anniversary history. This was a fascinating project examining a host of documents and coordinating surveys of former students and staff who shared their perceptions of a school that survived and thrived before and following the Second World War. The nuns had protected many Parisian Jews by hiding them from the Nazis in the basement of their Neuilly school. A scan of the yearbooks revealed a range of educational trends, most notably the progressive practices of the seventies. Their musicals were a highlight, providing an ideal space for students to showcase their applied arts and English skills. At Marymount, I was able to meet and work with many supportive parents, people I remain close friends with today. Just as I was ready to return to the workforce, my husband was reassigned to Belgium where I taught English and became the Curriculum Coordinator for the Middle School at the International School of Brussels (ISB). I worked with more

incredible educators who were adept at, and applied with ease, research-based best practices. I recall Michael Crowley's Journalism class, where students rigorously attended to writing passionate work through research and relentless peer review. His room was abuzz, emulating the context of a modern-day newsroom. He did not need to be present; the students knew exactly what to do and how to do it. It felt like I was observing a teaching and learning masterpiece. My mentor, Angela Purcell, was a brilliant and passionate educator who demonstrated a wonderful openness to new ideas and acted as a devoted support for her fellow teachers. Rather than send teachers to Harvard's Project Zero (PZ), we brought a PZ team to ISB. I had been working with students on establishing a peer teaching elective course, so I presented with my middle school students this proposal at the PZ conference, that ISB hosted for a dozen or more European international schools.

We landed back in Toronto after Simon was transferred back home to Canada in 2001. I interviewed for a Curriculum Coordinator position at Havergal College in Toronto which included teaching a grade 4 math and language arts class. I enjoyed teaching at this girls' school, but the opportunity to establish customized and innovative curriculum was limited, so after a year I applied to the Sterling Hall School for boys where I worked for over five years with Ian Robinson and a team of passionate educators eager to make a difference in the lives of young boys. I remember how much I enjoyed learning from and with Luke Coles, Dorota Trnik, and James Hay, some of the most creative, fun and positive people I've met in education, teachers who truly resonated with our students. I also appreciated the insight and 'can do' spirit of the finance director, Dave Stevenson. I was very fortunate to work for a principal who was open to developing an elective program, the SHARK inquiry program (Sterling Has Action Research Kids), the Stewardship (character education) Program and The Sterling Institute, that brought together teachers from many schools to discuss issues of social and emotional development. At this time, I was also excited about establishing an action research network with Mary Gauthier at Upper Canada College for local schools in Toronto. We worked on hosting conferences where teachers displayed and defended their research. As well, we co-edited a book filled with teachers' research projects called: *'Ask Me About My Action Research.'* I was truly fortunate to work at Sterling and be supported to participate and present at international conferences in Washington, San Francisco, Boston, and Johannesburg, South Africa. During my time at Sterling, I was asked to take part in several Canadian Education Standards Institute (CESI) accreditation teams. where I had an opportunity to work with several inspiring educators. We would read a self-study of a school in advance of our visitations and then write an external review based on our observations of what we viewed and what recommendations we had for further improvement. I later worked with Jackie Copp, an experienced educator and consultant from Manitoba, on a project that involved reviewing over 30 self and external school reports, to publish examples of innovative and engaging teaching in independent schools in Canada in the resource: *Mining for Gems: A Casebook of Exceptional Practices in Teaching and Learning.*

CHAPTER 1

At the time this book went to print, I was approached to help establish a new charter school in Detroit, Michigan. I was eager to learn about charters and even more delighted to work with Diane Manica, from the University of Detroit Mercy, Michael Carter from Nashville, Michelle Ruscitti-Miller from Chicago and Jalen Rose. Rose grew up near the school, graduated from the University of Michigan, played professional basketball and was working as an ESPN sportscaster at the time. His passion for making a difference in Detroit and learning about education was genuine. This enthusiastic and passionate planning team approached this work with a ‘go big or go home’ attitude. It took nearly two years to complete the curriculum, hire the teachers and provide professional development for staff at the Jalen Rose Leadership Academy (JRLA), but these efforts were worth it. I devoted almost every waking moment to building this dream high school. From the beginning, I had reservations about starting a school in grade 9, recognizing the more ideal scenario of growing a school K-12. An aligned curriculum from kindergarten to twelfth grade would have increased the chances of student academic success many-fold. Funding, however, was earmarked only for high school, so Jalen’s dream, etched on the back of a napkin, for having a K-12 campus, was adapted to take the form of a four-year college preparation high school.

At JRLA, we developed a signature leadership course that would be taught by a staff advisor, who was supposed to follow the students each year and keep in contact with them when they went on to college. This idea was built on an experience shared by co-founder, Michael Carter, who after the riots in 1967, was selected to be part of the inaugural group of inner-city high school graduates admitted to the University of Detroit, as part of *Project 100*. I recall Michael speaking often about Dr. Davis-Penn, his counselor, who called him every night during his first college semester to talk about his classes, homework and college professors. The idea of a ‘guardian angel’ to help students keep their ‘eyes on the prize’ was a part of Mike’s education; he was eager to see this experience replicated in some way at JRLA. I thought it was an excellent idea and I was very pleased to see that Mike, and his wife Pam, have since established a scholarship in Davis-Penn’s honor, to serve as a model for others to ‘pay it forward.’ Fittingly, the University of Detroit Mercy awarded Mike the Spirit of UDM Honor.

In 1968, University of Detroit created Project 100, a program designed to admit and support inner-city public and parochial high school graduates with high academic potential to the University. Michael A. Carter was in the inaugural class of that groundbreaking program...He is a member of The 100 Black Men of Middle Tennessee and many other civic organizations...Carter attributes his success at UDM, and in his life’s work, to his Project 100 counselor, Dr. Delores A. Davis-Penn. Dr. Davis-Penn provided unwavering support and guidance, particularly during Carter’s freshman year. Mindful of the support needed and dedicated to helping students succeed, Carter and his wife Pamela L. Carter ’71 established a scholarship fund in honor of Dr. Delores A. Davis-Penn, which

provides generous financial assistance to qualified graduates of the Jalen Rose Leadership Academy. (<https://www.udmercy.edu/stay-connected/news-events/newsletters/clae/2015/01/alumni-achievement/index.htm>)

The Carters' generosity was truly significant at JRLA. In addition to being there in person to mentor and support the students and the school on the planning team, Pam and Mike went above and beyond the call of duty to support the school financially. It didn't just take a community to build a school, it took a self-less community, and it was a privilege to be among them. I am so proud to say that four years after the inaugural class, my husband and I attended the first graduation in the spring of 2015. JRLA exceeded their graduation goals by having close to 100% of their students accepted at college.

My husband's final expatriate assignment took us to the DC area. When I arrived on August 22, 2011, it was just in time to experience an earthquake that registered 5.8 on the Richter scale. While I was somewhat shaken up, this did not stop my fierce commitment to finding a job in the teaching field. Triggered by the opportunity to help build and play a key role in opening the Jalen Rose Leadership Academy (JRLA), I was fascinated by the potential for charter schools to be a space for implementing best practices in teaching and learning. I established a *Linked'in* presence and began browsing the local sites to see what kinds of principal roles were turning up. Given school had already started, the options for school leadership positions, did not open up until the next school year. I spent most of my time reading about US charter schools while searching for a space eager to become an ideal school.

The experiences I've had along the way with brave, thoughtful and inspiring people, have all contributed to the educator I am today. As much as my experience was shaped with my staff at WEDJ, I was aware they had important stories and experiences to bring to the table, as well. How well we could merge our passions and ideas was all about bringing the 'outlier' ideas into the fold, mine and the existing members of my new school community. My story of dreaming a school at WEDJ was rooted in cultivating a learning environment where all students and staff members could learn and become anything. While it is rare for things to turn out as planned, this leadership experience at WEDJ proved to be one of the most compelling, invigorating and challenging chapters in my educator life. This story of rebuilding a foundation in a school is about perseverance, celebration and resolve. I have come to understand that three key ingredients are necessary for building a dream school: talented teachers, engaged students and an expert-driven education system. It is hopeful that by sharing my principal story, future school leaders can be aware of constructive actions that can contribute to sustaining engaging learning conditions, at the same time as making provisions for adapting to limitations that can short change the goal of cultivating an ideal school culture.

CHAPTER 2

TRUST

In the spring of 2012, Katie Herman from the TenSquare consulting group contacted me, via a series of telephone interviews, about my candidacy for the principal position at the William E. Doar, Jr. Public Charter School for the Performing Arts (WEDJ). I was impressed with the questions posed, specifically by Alexandra Pardo, Executive Director of a local charter high school in the community. Her questions seemed to reveal a solid understanding of what it takes to lead a quality school. Realizing I needed to learn much more about the DC charter system, I recall asking her: *“If I am offered this position, would you be my mentor?”* At the time, I did not realize that Ms. Pardo was also the recipient of the Charter Board Association’s Administrator of the Year award, and was highly regarded in the DC charter system. In May 2012, after a few months of phone interviews, I participated in a face-to-face interview at WEDJ with John Goldman, the Acting Executive Director.

Locating the school for my interview in Northeast DC, proved to be an interesting challenge for my cabbie. I recall turning around a few times on Edgewood before finally discovering the opening to the school at the end of an unmarked street. I entered the building through the ground floor door, not realizing that the driveway to the right lead to the front entrance off the top floor tarmac. There was a delivery happening. So the door was open. It was easy to ask a student: *“How do I find the front office?”* I was pointed to the stairs where I made my way up to the upper floor. I can’t help but remember the happy faces of the primary students, especially the little ones, moving in their lines through the windy halls. If Pharrell Williams’ song had been written in the summer of 2012, I could honestly say that I felt like clapping along as if I was in a room *“without a roof.”* Such lyrics might best describe my first impressions of WEDJ. It was easy to feel a positive energy right away.

I arrived early, but this gave me time to observe the natural ‘comings and goings’ in the school. When I reached the office, Tiffany Evans greeted me with a giant smile and warmth beyond words. I waited while she informed the Executive Director, John Goldman, that I had arrived. A tall bearded man with a suit jacket and jeans appeared and we entered a conference room in a back school office for the interview.

I was initially impressed with Goldman’s desire to turn WEDJ around. The interview moved from questions to a conversation style that made it easy to share my concerns that doing things the same old way would rarely yield different results. He did not mince words when he described his school. He admitted knowing little about academics, but wanted to bring someone in who could improve the school academically. Goldman spoke mainly about the school’s operations. In his words, he

CHAPTER 2

inherited a ‘shit show’, but he had been very successful at making vast improvements by creating systems to ensure that audits would meet integrity standards. Goldman, through the help of the TenSquare consulting group, had just released many weak staff members and rehired what they considered the stronger teachers within the staff. In the interview, Mr. Goldman made it very clear WEDJ was not an employment agency. He relied on TenSquare to recruit many new teachers to complete the staffing of the school. If hired, I would not be the only new face on this block.

I sensed that if I did take this job that the remaining staff (less than 50%) might be afraid of who might be fired next or perhaps angry that colleagues, they considered ‘good teachers’, were let go. In addition to releasing nearly half of the staff, Goldman had forged three relationships with arts agencies in the community: the National Philharmonic, the Shakespeare Theatre Company, and the Kirov Ballet. In his view these groups would bring more credibility and notoriety to a performing arts school, contributing to an increase in student enrollment. He explained that he had hired a strong Chief Operating Officer who would handle ‘everything operations’, leaving the principal responsible for instructional leadership. Toward the end of my interview Goldman asked if I thought I could work for him. I trusted we were on the same page, that he wanted WEDJ to make a difference in the lives of its students. I responded, “*I think I can work for you,*” and so begins my journey as a charter school principal.

When I was offered the job as Principal at WEDJ in mid-July, I recall my head was chock-block full of ideas. I put them on hold, realizing that I had to learn about the landscape and discover the wealth of natural resources embedded within. Like most charter schools, the challenge was to find a way to build a school where all students could have equal opportunities to succeed in college, work and beyond. I knew I would be inheriting a culture that had weathered some troubling storms. How would I inspire a community that had lost 50% of its staff? What could I bring to the table? At the time, I believed I could fashion school improvements using three key tools:

- A capacity to identify and develop talent
- An aptitude for thinking ahead, and finally
- Competence in implementing exceptional and creative teaching and learning experiences

I was committed to transforming WEDJ into a model school, a space where students and staff were inspired to design and implement an innovative school, shielded from the elements of a traditional passive and boring experience. I was eager to build upon an incredible footprint that had been set by many passionate educators and former school leaders. This twenty-month slice of my WEDJ principal story features a host of memories of what a great school can be, in spite of it becoming a dream interrupted. By telling this story, it is hopeful that other schools may someday built their own dream school from lessons learned and talent lost at William E. Doar, Jr. Public Charter School for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC.

CHAPTER 3

DAY 1

When I arrived on July 17, 2012, summer school was already in full bloom. One six-year old bolted from her line, wrapped her arms around my knees and gave me a wonderful warm welcome shouting out “*Who are you lady?*” I responded, “*I’m Dr. Smith. I’m your new principal!*”

I could see from the sparkle in these kids’ eyes that this was not a “shit show.” I could hear dancers in the multipurpose room preparing for a summer production; I could see stars built into the floor tiles; I could see a grand piano, now empty, that I imagined once chimed students to classes. I saw more than a spreadsheet of disappointing test scores.

It was clear to me, from the beginning, that this school was built on a foundation of hard work, and an unrelenting love for the arts and urban kids. I spent the day greeting people. I had a brief meeting with my boss, John Goldman and co-leader, John Manahan. After Mr. Goldman left, Manahan took me on a tour around the school to touch base with the summer school team of teachers, many who were returning the next year. The school was housed on two floors of an industrial building. There was one set of steps and an elevator, difficult for newcomers to find. There were dozens of small offices in amongst the small classrooms. I could see the physical plant was tired; mops, garbage pails and buckets looked as if they routinely belonged in the hallways.

I do recall it was the kids who made the rooms vibrant during this summer camp. I appreciated the warm welcome offered by the office and building staff. Mr. Johnson, Ms. Evans, Ms. Belton, Ms. Lawson and Ms. Morgan – all bursting with a willingness to help me transition into my new leadership role. Other rooms, not occupied with students, were full of boxes and sometimes binders, books and teaching materials, spewed like trash all over the floors. It seemed like those who left did not leave their campsite cleaner than they found it. When I was in one room, I picked up a small purple pamphlet that housed the only print material I could find about William E. Doar, Jr.

The absence of the historical significance of the school’s namesake on the website or promotional materials, was a surprise. In a tribute to her father, co-founder Julie S. Doar-Sinkfield wrote: “William E. Doar, Jr. lived a life of commitment to social and civic activism. Concerned about equality in employment, education and civil rights, he spent years working to integrate hospitals, schools, sports leagues and utility companies.” Julie indicated that he served in a number of capacities and memberships, including volunteer leadership positions with the National Youth Administration, the President’s Committee on Government Contracts, Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, NAACP, American Red Cross, The National Urban League and the YMCA. She noted that William E. Doar, Jr. was a family man, an athlete, writer

CHAPTER 3

and editor, arts supporter, Boy Scout and church vestryman: “Survived by his wife, five children, their spouses and nine grandchildren, he left behind a legacy of excellence.” William E. Doar, Jr. had accomplished much in his 72 years.

I read how the school first opened with 125 students on September 8, 2004, in a one room warehouse in Washington, DC. The school was the inspiration of co founders Mary C. Robbins, Julie Doar and Nadia Casseus, in addition to a Board of Directors that included Gerald Smith, who was a close personal friend of the school’s namesake, William E. Doar, Jr. The co-founding team worked tirelessly to open the doors of the first elementary integrated arts-based charter school in Washington, DC. The intention was to develop a model for arts education that could be replicated in other communities. The first senior class graduated in June of 2010.

My office was a generous-sized room with a fine desk and chair; the shelves were completely empty. When I asked about materials shared by the former principal, I was told that the room was cleared and that binders might be on the floor in one of the classes. I was assured that everything I needed was on the laptop populated by Mr. Goldman and that the former principal would be having a brief meeting with me at some point in the next few days. On my tour I met Mr. Carter, who turns out to be, hands down, one of the most important figures in the school. At the time, I could see that the staff and students not only respected this key school leader, but they adored him. He was a strong choice for Dean of Students, and I just knew he would be a valuable asset moving forward.

I kept a journal that quickly turned into a series of ‘To Do’ books that etched out things I could do to support the staff, students and families at WEDJ. In my first entry, I shared:

There are so many schools out there trying everything they can to engage students, to make them happy about learning, but at WEDJ, this is already in place. I so want to inspire the students, the staff and the families. Is it best to have a white female as the leader of a 96% African American school? No. In my mind, I was temporary. These young people needed to see an African American in the lead role, but I’m here now, and I’m going to do everything I can to help this school. I’m not sure what’s the source of the kids’ happiness – I suspect it’s the combination of the arts, the staff, the families and Mr. Carter. I imagine with some hope, hard work and creativity we can do wonders together.

In the days that followed, my ‘To Do’ book became filled with pages and pages of things to do and things to learn in order to prepare for three weeks of professional development, and an engaging school year. I distinctly remember opening the boxes of DC-CAS test scores that arrived on mass to fill the empty tables in my office; it was plain to see that all was not good on the standardized testing front. The trend for students demonstrating proficiency in the DCCAS scores had been declining for several years. The results for the 2011–2012 school year indicated that approximately 42% of the WEDJ school population was proficient in reading and math. The math results were specifically, deficient.

- 51% of the school was proficient at reading.
- 36.1% was proficient at math.

It didn't make sense that an arts school would attain such poor test results. I had not met the full staff yet, but did notice numerous textbook series lining the walls of the storage room. I was aware that the school had purchased hundreds of thousands of dollars-worth of new commercial materials for the coming year. I was concerned that such materials might not be the answer. Quality teachers needed to be involved in the development of resources, if there was any hope of transforming the WEDJ scores on these local tests.

I set my sights firmly on teacher development and the deliberate design of locally customized curriculum as the path towards improvement, targeting much more than improved test scores. I also knew that with just over half of the students returning, that such a reform would need time to turn the testing results around. I anticipated it would take at least two years to build a critical mass of returning students to consolidate the continuity of culture necessary for building a community of achievement and confidence, needed for college and success in life.

I read the 'charter' from start to finish and realized that the *America's Choice* curriculum, that had been followed since the opening of the school in 2004, was not going to be enough to drive the change needed to turn around the bleak test results. In my view, the materials were saturated with disjointed and dense text with little relevance to the WEDJ community. The *America's Choice* materials had not improved the scores in the past, so we could not afford to count on this program in the future. Rather than repeat the patterns of the past, we put a full stop to using America's Choice as the curriculum and decided to teach fewer more rigorous skills, well. Our plan was to build a curriculum that would stick with the students.

The word commitment summed up my first impressions of WEDJ. During my first week, there were many ups and downs that carved a picture of various shades of commitment. Key players offered insight into how committed the school had been in the past, but it appeared that the constant thrust of change on the school had taken its toll on many staff, students and community members. With just over half of the families returning, it was clear there was more work to be done to build the trust in the WEDJ community.

The year before I took on this position, Mr. Henry had been the principal at the Northeast campus and Mr. Barnes was the leader at the Northwest campus. Within seconds after the 2011 earthquake struck, just a few days into the school year, the NW campus was merged into the NE. Mr. Henry maintained his role as principal while Mr. Barnes, and many other teachers, were declared redundant. The school basically had to re-invent itself, share resources, space and locate dozens of students who never returned. The school had already weathered many storms that involved school leadership turnover, including the three founding leaders. The pattern of dismissing leaders was well established at this school, so I was acutely aware that this could be my destiny, too.

CHAPTER 3

Prior to my arrival, Goldman let go the full staff and hired back less than half of the team deemed ‘the best’, as determined by a consulting group he brought in to manage school improvement. My hope was that the new faces would add value in terms of their expertise in teaching and learning. Unfortunately, the TenSquare Group recruiters were unable to find enough quality teachers to fill all the spaces at the end of the season. I did understand that there would be confusion when many staff members were let go, but I was surprised to be handed an Excel document containing a tattered and incomplete staff list:

	Section1	Section 2	Section 3	OPEN	FILLED	# of TA's
PK 3	Christian	OPEN	OPEN	2	1	3
PK ¾	Brown	Palmer	Hamilton	0	3	3
K	Kensler	Huddleton	OPEN	1	2	3
1	Exum	Howard	OPEN	1	2	
2	Drew	Powell		0	2	
3	Corcoran	Bowman		0	2	
4	Robinson	Bradshaw		0	2	
5	Nugent	OPEN		1	1	
MS ELA	OPEN			1	0	
MS Math	Moore			0	1	
MS Science	Sessoms			0	1	
MS SS	Rave			0	1	
Total				6	18	

Figure 1. WEDJ teaching roster (11/7/12)

In just over a month before the first day of school, we had 17/33 teachers confirmed, no idea who teacher “Bowman” was, and none of the ten Teaching Assistants had been confirmed. During our professional development week, I was still looking for a middle school English teacher, a PK teacher, a grade 4 teacher, a special education teacher, and three teaching assistants. Staffing became an immediate priority.

When I interviewed the candidates shared by the TenSquare Consulting Group, most had jobs and did not live close to Washington, DC. I scoured websites, files and had a tab added to the website indicating the list of jobs still open. I worked non-stop conducting phone interviews and bringing in as many people as I could to try and find ways to fill all the positions before the first day of school. Unfortunately, we started school with two substitute teachers in a Pre-Kindergarten and third grade class. In addition to these priorities, the grade 1 ‘new hire’ never showed up the first day of professional development and two staff members, who lived over two hours away were involved in a car accident, which led to their resignation prior to the start of school.

Adding to this challenge was the awkward first conversations I had when several staff members asked me the question: “*Am I working here this coming school year?*” I pulled up the spotty-looking staff plan and discovered two of the names were on the list, Ms. Robinson and Mr. McKeiver, but Ms. Polk’s name was not there. John Manahan checked with Goldman to see if she should be on the list.

I discovered Ms. Polk’s son, who was headed to college, had been killed in a car accident at the end of school year just prior to his graduation. I couldn’t imagine she would not be returning, if no one had informed her she had been let go a month into teaching summer school.

I spoke with Mr. Goldman and he agreed to keep her on; An hour later Mr. Manahan sent an update indicating we needed to add her to the roster. After the confusion was sorted out, I notified Ms. Polk that her position was secure. While many of the teachers from summer school were relieved to know that they had jobs, it was unfortunate this communication was sloppy. This became more apparent when the fine arts teacher, who had an incredible reputation with the WEDJ community, resigned.

I had not met Mr. Lee; I tried for days to get him to reconsider. Khanh mentioned that he had not received any offer from the school, and felt that working at another school would give him more security. This was a tremendous loss. I sensed the school could be more fully committed to better communications and reducing its over-reliance on an outside group to staff the school. When time was so precious to get the school up and running, I was disappointed and could not rely on what felt like our consultant team’s ‘wild goose chases.’ Even though the TenSquare recruiters charged us \$200 per hour, they were unable to secure a strong team ready to begin the school year on Day 1. I realized we had to be more self-reliant at building our team.

In between the recruiting and interviewing, I was driven to get to know my staff. Completing the roster, greeting our teachers and understanding how best to motivate and encourage them to believe in the school, were my prime objectives in the next four weeks prior to the first day of school. The research is loud and clear; students with committed teachers succeed and I wanted to do everything I could to entrench teacher commitment in the school.

In spite of the muddled staffing, I felt that the returning staff had a tremendous sense of loyalty and love for the school. I recall a meeting with Mr. Harris, whose love for his students and dance was compelling. I interviewed a teacher who had been released, but still wanted to return to the school as a teaching assistant. I recall meeting another strong character, Ms. Deanna Kensler. She was extremely troubled by the recent turnover and asked me bluntly if I planned to stay for the long haul. She was concerned that the community needed people who would not abandon them. I promised her I had no plans to leave; I was committed to WEDJ. I must admit at the time that I made this commitment, I had no idea how profound that promise would turn out to be.

As that first week progressed, I was introduced to many key players in the school, and outside the school. Jeanette Staton, President of the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), and parent representative on the WEDJ Board, dropped in to say hello. She mentioned to me that Mr. Goldman had convinced her to stay on as the President

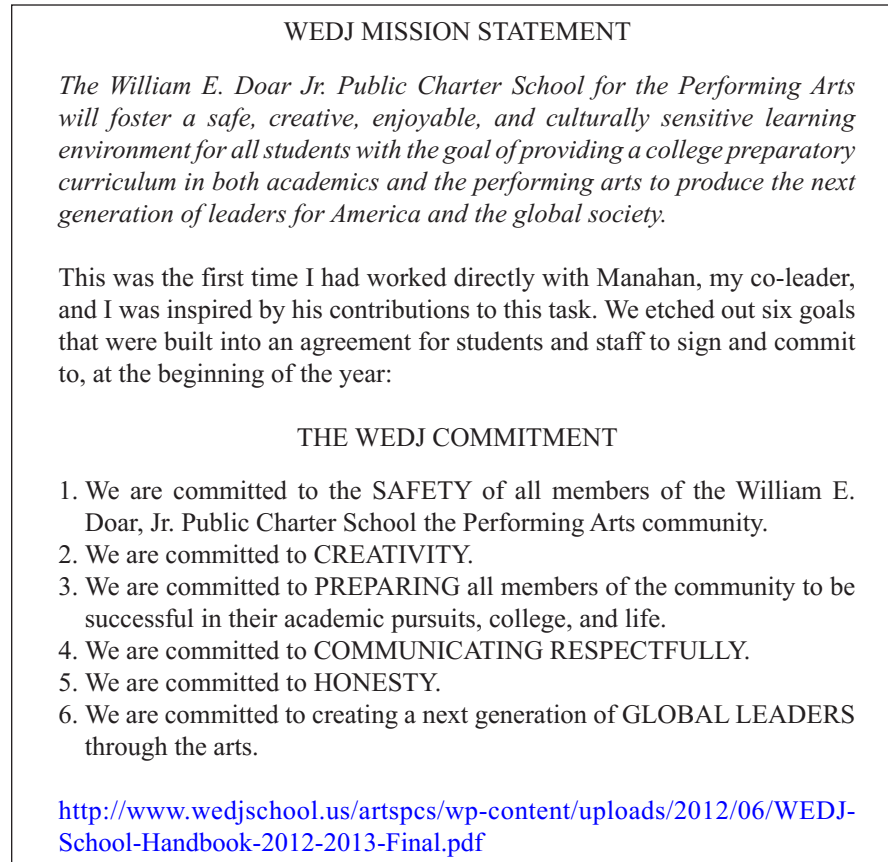


Figure 2. WEDJ mission statement and commitment

during the transition. I also met the representative from *America's Choice* who presented us with a bill for over \$25,000, for curriculum materials and services rendered, but not paid from the prior school year.

That first week I also attended a workshop about ANET (Achievement Network), a commercial testing company. John Goldman had hired this outside group to provide ongoing ELA and Mathematics testing for students in grades 2 through 8 to prepare for the DC-CAS, a critical district-wide test. I went to the workshop with Ms. Couch, WEDJ's Academic Director. She introduced me to other principals and academic charter school leaders as Ms. White, an awkward faux pas, I'm sure she regretted.

At this meeting, we were asked what curriculum we used; everyone around the room stated the names of various textbook series. I will admit I was shocked that so many academic leaders in DC schools assumed curriculum was a commercial product. These representatives did not realize that a quality curriculum should be a

customized plan that embraces the needs of students, while using a variety of digital and print materials as references and support resources. I left this meeting surprised that textbook companies had so much influence on DC charter schools.

When I returned to school the next day, I spent a productive afternoon with John Manahan. We had a rich discussion about the mission and how it would need to be broken out into core values or principles to guide decisions about the school's direction. The WEDJ mission was notably dense, incorporating the values within the statement itself:

We also decided to create the PAL (Promoting Arts and Leadership) Program for each grade to support the WEDJ Commitment and Common Core social and emotional development and health education expectations. This curriculum was revised and customized by Mr. Rivera, our School Counselor, Mr. Carter, our Dean of Students and Ms. Miles, our Special Education Coordinator. We had over 400 copies printed for the students and Mr. Rivera presented a PowerPoint to introduce the student booklets and new signature course of study to staff during professional development. The first year everyone would use it mainly for the character and health education material. The plan was to add in a more concentrated focus on the arts with more concrete and authentic service learning experiences. After working through the development of the 'Commitment' and coordination of PAL curriculum, I looked forward to working collaboratively with Manahan on more projects to help WEDJ become an incredible school.

The WEDJ Commitment was a tall order, one that required a critical mass of committed community members to uphold and value. We inherited a strong staff, people who cared deeply about the school, so I was confident that we would be able to build a culture around the commitment, because we all believed that making things better for our kids was at the heart of all we should do. I recall one of the first orders of business was to reduce student and staff tardiness. This took over a year to address in a concrete way, but students and staff who demonstrated tardy habits were presented with their Commitment agreements and held accountable for their actions.

I had several surprise visits that first week. The most embarrassing appointment was with Rashida Kennedy, a DC Public Charter School Board (DCPCSB) representative, who arrived to review six sets of pre-kindergarten standardized assessments that were conducted during the 2011–2012 school year. I was unaware of the appointment, and so asked Ms. Couch, the Academic leader, to find the materials and respond to questions about the quality of the school's early childhood program. Apparently, the school had set targets that were not reached, and what complicated matters further, was that there was missing data from at least two of the six PK classrooms. These teachers had been let go, but no one had gathered this data prior to their departure. Ms. Couch could not find the data; the representative from the DC Charter Board went home empty handed and we were subsequently sent a note stating we needed to find the data and submit it immediately. A note to Goldman and Manahan, from Scott Pearson, Executive Director of the DC Charter Board, echoed Rashida's disastrous attempt to gather data.

CHAPTER 3

I eventually met the Executive Director of the DC Public Charter School Board, in passing when John Manahan gave him a tour of WEDJ in the fall. Manahan had mentioned he was a friend of Pearson's, but I never had an opportunity to meet the Director formally. Given our newness to the school and the system, we would have welcomed the support by DCPCSB in our bid to turn things around. We were, however, issued a 0/4 score on their new Early Childhood Performance Management Framework – not a great start!

As a school, we needed to be committed to tracking student data better, and having it accessible to influence improvements in teaching and learning. Soon after the visit from Kennedy, Ms. Couch went on a medical leave in mid-July and then retired in early September. There was much to do and without the aid of the school's academic leader, I reached out to three incredible teachers who helped me prepare for the upcoming extensive professional development (PD) prior to the first day of school. Ms. Bradshaw, Ms. Nugent, Ms. Corcoran, and I spent a day etching out English and Math targets to help our students become critical and confident thinkers ready for college, their careers and life.

CHAPTER 4

TEN DAYS OF PREPARATIONS

I was fortunate to work with the team of Bradshaw, Corcoran, and Nugent on the August 2012 WEDJ PD program for the mix of returning and new staff. After brainstorming what we needed to kick off a great school year, I also asked them to take on different teacher-leader roles. Ms. Corcoran accepted the role of PD Coordinator while Ms. Bradshaw agreed to take the lead on Language Arts/English and Ms. Nugent the coordination of Mathematics PK-8.

The goals for staff development included team building and bringing clarity to academic and operational expectations. We decided to organize the PD days in a ‘conference’ format, mixing elements of fun, safety and academic planning. We placed everyone in one of six Broadway play teams to set the tone for some low-key competitive activities, integrated within the program. The team from Chorus Line did manage to squeak through a win when we totaled the points at the end of the week. The schedule presented in [Figure 3](#) was etched out as our initial plans for the 2012 ‘*Arts to the Core*’ Conference.

In a perfect world, everything listed would have been followed minute by minute, however, we did have to add and combine some of the activities to provide as much time as we could for the teachers to prepare their rooms for Day 1. The painters and cleaners were everywhere trying to get spaces ready after summer camp. They worked the week before PD, but there were still many rooms to be serviced – so most of our sessions happened in the multipurpose room. After most staff members went home at 4pm on the first PD day, the office team of Belton, Evans, Lawson and Morgan turned up the heat to fill dozens of milk crates with supplies bound for each classroom and office space. I joined in for a short time and discovered the joy and genuine care this important team put into our school. We dropped rulers, staplers, pens, erasers, index cards, and what seemed like a lifetime supply of paper clips, into each crate. Not only was the office staff willing to go the ‘extra mile,’ they brought it with robust laughter and ‘TLC’ (tender loving care). WEDJ was in good hands.

When the staff arrived on day 2 they were thrilled to see the halls lined with classroom ‘supply kits.’ What else stood out for me, apart from distributing and responding to questions about the schedules, was the very pregnant, Ms. Miles, presenting a highly interactive workshop on differentiation. She had everyone up on our feet in a large circle, and with her warm, animated and confident commands, she was able to keep our group tuning in to dozens of ways we can teach kids. Everyone enjoyed her simulation workshop. Miles had been an exceptional classroom teacher before she began adding multiple master’s degrees to her vitae. I could see that

CHAPTER 4

<p>DAY 1 8:30 Registration 9:00 Mission/Respect Agreement (The Commitment) 9:30 Picture of Professionalism activity 10:15 Break 10:30 HR/Employee Handbook 12:00 Lunch 1:00 Establishing Professional Norms 3:00 Classroom Preparations</p>	<p>DAY 5 8:30 Dancing with the Stars (ice breaker) 9:00 Reporting to Parents 10:00 Parent/Teacher Interviews 10:30 Teacher Performance Reviews 12:00 Lunch 1:00 Classroom Preparations</p>
<p>DAY 2 8:30 Distribute classroom supply kits 9:00 Debrief/Merry-Go-Round ice breaker 9:30 Schedule Rationale/Intent/Leadership support 10:00 Scheduling Breakout 11:00 Lunch 12:00 Differentiation (Ms. Miles) 2:00 Model Classrooms Scavenger Hunt</p>	<p>DAY 6 9:00 Multiple Intelligences 9:45 Special Education process/program</p>
<p>DAY 3 Classroom Preparations</p>	<p>DAY 7 8:30 Teacher Learning Styles (4 corners) 9:00 Safety/Supervision/Procedures 12:00 Lunch 1:00 Discipline and Classroom Management 3:30 Peer Teaching</p>
<p>DAY 4 8:30 Common Core: Arts to the Core Presentation 9:30 ANET (Grades 2-8 interim testing) 11:00 Pacing Guides 12:00 Lunch w/materials table 1:00 Arts Program and Leadership 2:00 Meet guest Arts teachers 3:00 Classroom Preparations</p>	<p>DAY 8 Learning Environment 3:00 Visit classrooms and post positive comments</p>
	<p>DAY 9 8:30 How to Evaluate Students/Teachers 9:00 Assessment for Learning 9:30 Pair work (grade/subject partners) 10:30 Classroom preparations 12:00 Lunch 1:00 CPR</p>
	<p>DAY 10 8:30 Pie Plates Compliments 9:00 Classrooms Preparations 2:30pm WEDJ Academy Awards</p>

Figure 3. 2012 Arts to the core conference program

she would be a teaching asset beyond the conventional shadowing or small group/individual ‘pull outs’ so common in special education operations today.

Initially, we tried to set up model primary, elementary and middle school classrooms, so staff would have some new ideas when creating their own learning environments. Ms. Corcoran had volunteered to organize her grade 3 classroom, in advance, but I recall how frustrating it was for her to clean up what was a terrible mess left behind, by what seemed like years of neglect. The cupboards were the worst I had ever seen in my lifetime. I stayed one night and worked for hours, scraping tiles, removing evidence of rodent-made habitats amongst scrap paper, rags and paint. Working in such conditions would make anyone second-guess his or her commitment to this charter school.

Early on in the PD planning stages Ms. Bradshaw and Ms. Nugent indicated their dissatisfaction with the cookie cutter classroom expectations set forth in the *America’s Choice* (AC) curriculum. They noted that everyone’s bulletin boards had to be the same in each room and when AC officials came to monitor the implementation of the program, they used measuring tapes to make sure they were equal distant from the floor, and that tables and chairs were arranged in designated formations. Given WEDJ was a school with a mission steeped in creativity, we decided that we would

no longer be guided by such a commercial program, that coincidentally did not appear to contribute to improving test scores either.

On the fourth PD day, the staff was introduced to ANET (the standardized testing practice program) that would test chunks of materials at four different times in the school year, prior to the DC-CAS test. Their chunking choices basically pre-determined the pacing guides, without input from teachers. The intent of using ANET was to provide outside testing to see how our student achievement compared with other schools on the eastern seaboard, using the same items. Initially, I was supportive of the ANET process, so the data could inform our decisions about curriculum and revision of teacher's planning for learning. Given the school had invested over \$25,000 in this resource, I was committed to using the data for school improvement.

The same day, we planned to formally greet our arts 'guest teachers' from the Kirov Ballet, the National Philharmonic and the Shakespeare Theatre Company. Most of the guest instructors could not come to our professional development days, but we had hoped the team of 12 would be on hand to connect with the staff and be oriented to the school. Three team members from the National Philharmonic joined in some of our sessions and worked hard to coordinate their rooms during the designated PD time. Mr. Harris did a great job of welcoming the arts group members into the fold during the PD conference and throughout the fall. The next day Harris opened our PD with a fun icebreaker – the 'Dancing with the Stars' activity. It seemed like everyone was getting into the swing of things! The discussions and workshops that followed, focused on student and staff performance. We discussed the important role of parents, and the '*sunshine call*' expectation, where homeroom teachers were to contact parents by phone once a month.

We also spent a considerable amount of time outlining the staff performance process. I informed the instructional staff that I would use this tool, and so would their mentors. Teachers would also have a chance to assess themselves. Teachers were observed three times throughout the school year with a final performance review that took into consideration their capacity to prepare students for future college success, to develop quality curriculum and instructional experiences, to form positive and professional relationships with students, staff and families, and to integrate and support the arts.

Ms. Miles returned to the spotlight on Day 6 to clarify the role and duties of the special education team and on Day 7, Mr. Carter set the tone for safety, supervision, and discipline at WEDJ. He shared practical advice about classroom management. When Mr. Carter spoke, you could hear a pin drop. I made it clear to everyone that I couldn't be more pleased with such a capable and committed 'second in command.'

Probably one of my clearest memories of our first professional development conference was the CPR training. The instructors, Ms. Lawson brought in, were phenomenal. They used our Broadway musical teams to create a fun competitive atmosphere. The cheering and the sound of laughter coming through the walls to my

CHAPTER 4

office, still resonate for me today. In all my years of coordinating PD, I have never heard such enthusiasm about CPR!

After a few weeks of getting to know the team, our final icebreaker, the 'Pie Plate Compliment Task' proved to be a highly moving and meaningful activity. Everyone was instructed to tape a pie plate to each other's backs. Then we had 15 minutes to write compliments on as many pie plates as possible. I still have mine today. I keep it posted in my office as a reminder of my time at WEDJ.

To close out our PD 'Arts to the Core Conference,' I pulled the entire staff together for a fun 'academy awards-type' ceremony. I distributed over 65 banana and zucchini awards, revealing something I'd discovered about each staff member in the past three weeks. The preparation for such a mini celebration was quite humorous. After I cleared out the banana stand at Trader Joes, I turned my sights to the zucchini section. Thank goodness, they were packed in small pickle-like packets of 6. It was certainly amusing at the check-out counter! I was sure this was something the staff had not experienced before, but I wanted to let them know I wasn't afraid of taking risks and that I did appreciate their cooperation and support to make the conference a success. They received their awards like good sports, but more importantly cheered on their teammates.

It was disappointing that John Goldman, in his Executive Director role, was unable to attend the professional development sessions to welcome the staff, especially the new teachers to the school. The WEDJ team would have appreciated some words of encouragement from the school leader. As well, the team could have been recognized and supported by members of the Board of Trustees, but they were not present to reinforce the importance of getting off to a great start. In spite of making preparations for school, in isolation of key school leaders, and despite the fact that not all of our teaching positions were filled three days before the start of classes, there was a genuine sense of enthusiasm amongst the staff that prevailed through to Day 1 and beyond.

THE FIRST REACH – WEDJ PARENTS

In my initial interview with Goldman, I was asked, “*What do you think will be the biggest challenge if you were selected to be the principal at the William E. Doar, Jr. School for the Performing Arts?*” I immediately thought about my two summers of course work at the University of Toronto, where I received my principal credentials. One presenter told us to look around the room and describe the demographics of the people sitting in the lecture hall. We were seated in a sea of seasoned Caucasian females. We were informed that we were a minority in Toronto, a city weighing in at well over 2 million people. How could we possibly represent all the children in this mixed urban community? I knew that my time as a leader in a DC urban school would be temporary, however, as long as my Visa would let me make a contribution, I would do my best in the time I had. I told Goldman that my biggest challenge would be that I was not from the community. While this is something I could not control, it nevertheless did not deter me from wanting to influence positive change, but in doing so, mentor future school leaders.

I remember writing and re-writing my first parent communication; I wanted to reach out and meet everyone. With three parent orientations scheduled for so many new students joining us, this would be a great place to begin.

Dear WEDJ community members,

I am delighted to join the WEDJ community. As a former trumpet player, dancer and gymnast, I understand what it's like to work hard, make sacrifices and be committed to excellence. I have been fortunate to work with educators worldwide, but I have to say in the past two weeks, I have met some of the most passionate educators on the continent. I have no doubt you will feel the energy of this impressive talent pool. As we approach the 2012–2013 school year, there are some things you can do to pave the road for school success...I hope you will find something to respond to so we can begin our conversations and build strong relationships! (<http://www.wedjschool.us/performing-arts/august-message-from-the-principal>)

I also informed families about the new arts programming as well as the new PAL (Promoting Arts and Leadership) homeroom class. The PAL course focused on a different character focus each year: caring, sharing, honesty, friendship, manners, being good citizens, sports and team players). Students also learned study and life skills, such as being thorough and precise on tests, how to achieve top grades on assignments and how being healthy can contribute to learning. Without character

CHAPTER 5

and health, an artist's reach is limited. We wanted WEDJ artists to be amazing role models – so we planned to teach about the whole child and how to be successful in college and life. Every student had their own PAL booklet to read and do activities in school and at home.

The orientations were well attended. On average, we had over 50 people at each one. We were eager to communicate how we were distinct from other schools, so families new to WEDJ, would be assured that the school they registered for, was right for them. I was informed that some families shopped around at the beginning of the year before the official 'count day' to see which charter would be the best fit for their child. We were well aware when planning that if we didn't make a good first impression, we might need to reorganize, and this usually would mean downsizing staff. While I was confident with the energy and the talent of the staff, I needed to get to know my families to make sure they would be pleased with our new plans for the school. We started off on the first day of school with 325 students registered, and by the October 5th Count Day, we had 422 students in attendance. We were pleased that word had spread about the school and that the message attracted more families.

We also burned the midnight oil to complete the revision of the WEDJ School Handbook for families, teachers and students in a timely manner. I worked closely with the office staff and Mr. Carter to update the messages and prepare a resource that would not only be informative, but promote the uniqueness of the school. If creativity was a key focus, how could we enhance our handbook beyond a simple series of procedural memos? Having a common source of information was vitally important. It required an enormous amount of work to have this resource ready for electronic distribution. From a legal standpoint, the handbook was an important communication tool. Families needed to be informed, particularly of the discipline procedures. The school lawyer was paid a substantial fee to ensure that the former resource had been reviewed and legal terms were laid out to detail the specifics of the consequences related to suspensions and expulsions. The School Handbook was yet another opportunity to write a welcome communication on behalf of the school leadership team. I wrote the introductory letter for Mr. Manahan and I, to welcome families to WEDJ:

Dear families,

July 2012

We are truly honored to lead the William E. Doar, Jr. Public Charter School and thank you in advance for your time and support. WEDJ PCS is a co-educational day school that provides a college-preparatory, standards-based curriculum in both academics and the performing arts. All students engage in a rigorous academic program that includes instruction from professional artists from the Kirov Ballet, the National Philharmonic, and the Shakespeare Theatre Company.

We want to emphasize that every minute at school matters for young people and we promise to make our school a safe, inspiring and secure environment. Our priorities for the next few months are twofold:

1. All students need to master specific basics in math and language and staff need to communicate progress on a monthly basis.

2. We also know that helping students learn the habits of scientists, artists, and technologists will improve their chances of thinking creatively. Creative student work will be featured on our web site, in our halls and in our newsletter.

Throughout the school year, we want students to know and be confident about what they know, and we also want students to learn how to become leaders in the arts. To this end we have established the PAL (Promoters of Arts and Leadership) course in each grade at the beginning of the day to focus attention on how leaders behave and make a difference in the lives of others. We take learning seriously but we cannot educate alone. We respect that parents are the first teachers in a child's life, and we are committed to this partnership. Be warned we will ask you to fill in surveys and take part in many school activities so you will continue to play a key role in your child's education. We believe in the school's mission:

“The William E. Doar Jr. Public Charter School for the Performing Arts will foster a safe, creative, enjoyable and culturally sensitive learning environment for all students with the goal of providing a college preparatory curriculum in both academics and the performing arts to produce the next generation of leaders for America and the global society.”

We want our students to be taught by teachers who are recognized as leaders in and out of the school. Please feel free to visit, email or call. We can promise to serve your family well, but cannot promise that you will be left alone!

Proudly serving you and your family,

Dr. Barbara Smith, Principal & Mr. John Manahan, Chief Operating Officer
(<http://www.wedjschool.us/artspcs/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/WEDJ-Handbook-2012-13.pdf>)

CHAPTER 6

FIRST WEEK OF SCHOOL

Lights, camera, action! August 27, 2012, the first day of school, was filled with a series of memorable events. Students arrived early, many by car, to fill the classrooms. There was excitement in the air when some greeted their favorite teachers and staff members from the prior year. Everyone was in uniform, for the most part. A few young folks sported some running shoe alternative 'bling', but Mr. Carter was quick to point out to them what would be accepted and what would need to be adjusted for the next day. We had six classes of Pre-Kindergarten with close to sixty students entering school for the first time. Surprisingly, there were few tears! Parents of Pre-Kindergarten students were welcome to bring in their kids, meet the teacher and be assured that their little ones were in good hands. Ms. Palmer led the PK team of teachers with her positive, confident and warm manner. I remember feeling a sense of relief that she was there to guide and support the students and teachers in what added up to nearly a quarter of our school population.

Within the first half hour, students had found their homerooms. I had a chance to say a quick hello to 23 classes and then returned to see if folks needed help in the office with new registrations. Manahan had worked hard with the members of the operations team to prepare for Day 1. They had anticipated where numerous snags might have slowed things down, and remedied them in advance. The team should have been proud of their smooth operations that day! New families were ushered into the multipurpose room to purchase purple wear for uniforms, as well as gather numbers to complete their registration. Everything moved like clockwork until a parent came into the office upset about the school not providing bus transportation on the first day. Manahan had made the decision to delay the start of the busing. He was not available to speak with this parent, so I quickly ushered him into the office to ease the disruption in the foyer. This parent was furious, shouting foul language in front of his four-year-old child, without any sense of remorse. He ranted about waiting at the bus stop for a bus that never came. Mr. Carter joined in the conversation and while he did manage to calm the parent down a bit, by telling him he shouldn't use curse language at school, especially in the presence of his young child, he left in an angry rage. Mr. Carter indicated that this parent posed a safety risk to WEDJ, so it was good in some way that the family did not return. In hindsight, I should have been more forthright in insisting that bus arrangements be ready for Day 1. If our website indicated we had bus service, then we needed to make it available on the first day of school, for all our students.

Apart from this situation, the first week ran smoothly. Our former WEDJ teachers worked seamlessly and productively with the new staff to help them settle into the

CHAPTER 6

day-to-day operations. The energy from our professional development conference continued and comments from returning staff indicated that we were moving in a positive and inspiring direction. Jeanette Staton and Tanya Hales, our parent Board representatives, were present throughout the first week to see the positive start, but our direct supervisor, John Goldman, was absent; I suspected at the time, this was due to his new additional Executive Director position at another school in the city.

I was determined to get to know our students as soon as possible. I started with the grade 8's. In the mornings or at lunch I tried to pop in often to teach them how to play euchre. Those who passed on the art of playing euchre to more classmates were rewarded with their own deck of playing cards! I looked forward to these times when we could talk about the 'odds' and 'probability' within the cloak of a fun card game.

I also taught my own grade 7 Peer Teaching class and visited classrooms regularly in a team teaching capacity to help teachers implement innovative ideas and classroom management strategies. Being in the halls during classroom transitions also gave me a wonderful opportunity to be a part of the student experience at WEDJ. I was so impressed with the students who owned the *To-By-For* Assemblies ('to the students, for the students, by the students'), where they showcased their talents and taught each other about character and school values.

Every child needs to know someone knows their name, cares about them and believes in them. The more students in one school, the higher the probability that students can '*fall through the cracks.*' I had conversations often with my co-leader, John Manahan, about deliberately reducing the student numbers at WEDJ, in order to increase our sense of community to improve both engagement and academic achievement, but he didn't think the DC Charter Board would support such action. It is unfortunate that more people were not aware of the benefits of smaller schools. Many funding formulas for grants are influenced by the greatest possible impact as measured by a large student population. The DC Charter Board's report card on schools, the 'PMF' (Performance Management Framework) punishes schools with fewer enrollments. Even though businesses often exercise flexibility by downsizing, in an effort to improve re-structuring, to move in different directions, a drop in student numbers did not fit with the demands of the Charter Board's PMF compliance expectations. Even though a school may benefit from reducing enrollment for purposes of quality control to protect or enrich its brand, this was not an option in the DC charter school system. A reduction in school size is seen as a flaw and effects the Tier 1, 2 or 3 (lowest) status afforded when the charter board measures and publicly ranks the schools it serves in the DC area. At one time WEDJ was housed on two campuses, giving it the benefit of being two small schools, but after the earthquake on the summer of 2011, when one physical plant was condemned, the advantage of an intimate community was lost. I believe fewer students could be given more attention, and it would be much easier to populate a smaller school with exceptional teachers, if the oversight culture embraced more the value of small schools.

CHAPTER 7

PARENT COMMUNICATIONS

On Friday, of the first week of school, I sent home the first PrincipalPOINT, to introduce families to what would become my regular monthly communications. I sent home a newsletter to remind families of upcoming important events, inform them about current research in education and deliver ‘shout outs’ for all who volunteered or shared exceptional talent.

Prior to the start school, Mr. Goldman introduced me to Betsy Rosso, who was responsible for marketing and coordinating our school website. Betsy had an excellent copy editing background. In addition to writing e-newsletters for WEDJ, Betsy had been contracted in the past to edit handbooks and other school related documents. Much of the content in my monthly PrincipalPoint newsletter was used by Rosso to populate the material for her e-newsletters. Goldman noted that we could reduce costs in the future if I was comfortable taking over the writing of e-newsletters. Ideally, the PrincipalPoint newsletters would be viewed electronically, but Mr. Carter highly advised me to send paper home. Even if many updates wound up crumpled at the bottom of a backpack, there was an increased likelihood more families would have had a chance to read the monthly school news, if it was delivered in a paper format. Following this good advice, I sent home the monthly 2-page newsletter in paper form, as well as had them posted electronically on the website. Rosso continued to write separate e-newsletters aligning with much of the content from the PrincipalPoint material.

We tried many strategies to build the parent culture. We set up a volunteer leadership structure for parents who wanted to tackle specific projects. I invited interested volunteers in the fall of 2012 (see [Figure 4](#)) to a luncheon, where we established the list of parent leadership roles including classroom representatives. The December 2012 newsletter highlighted a message thanking volunteers.

CHAPTER 7

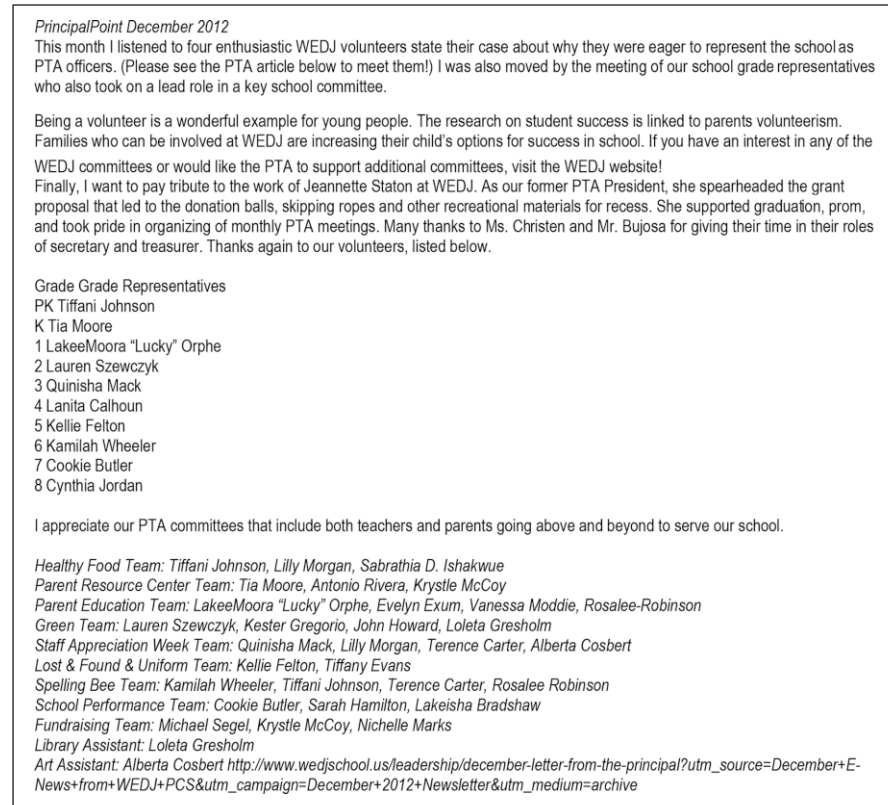


Figure 4. PrincipalPoint parent newsletter December 2012

I was eager to see parent volunteers link directly to the Parent Teacher Association (PTA). Many parents were generous with their time, but these groups wound up reporting to the school, more so, than the PTA. Perhaps we tried to mobilize too much at one time. At first, some parent activities fell short of goals of assembling large-scale participation. Later on, in the year, we tried bringing folks together by coordinating a 'Family Week.' In April 2013, parents were invited to view the premiere of *Brooklyn Castle*, play or learn how to play chess, and participate in yoga led by Mr. Harris. Mr. Carter also set up a Knowledge Day with workshops and seminars on writing resumes and career-building skills. I also tried to piggyback off of Ms. Kensler's 'Muffins for Moms' and 'Donuts for Dads' activity, to kick off a 'Principal's Breakfast' idea, but few parents stuck around for conversation. We were committed to looking for as many ways as possible to engage parents in our school.

CHAPTER 8

CONNECTING WITH STAFF

I wanted staff to be aware that my door was an open one. Staff members did not need to make appointments, and while meetings were scheduled, it was rare for folks to have to wait to speak with me. While I wanted staff to feel I was approachable, I didn't wait for folks to come to me. I was in classrooms visiting every day. Connecting with staff mattered.

Each week I gathered evidence of great teaching from my daily rounds. It was standard practice to visit all classrooms daily so I could physically view students and teachers in action. I recorded observations in three notebooks I carried with me – and shared summaries of these findings weekly in an e-mail news report called 'Barb's Bundles.' The format varied, but they usually involved a sharing of strengths (catching a teacher being great) or being very explicit about what needed to be changed on a school-wide or classroom level. In the first bundle, I spoke about challenges, the first PTA meeting, the making of home library kits, and the main problem of moving students between classes in our narrow hallways.

When asked about the 'bundles', two years later, Mr. Carter noted: "Bundles were excellent and they kept the administration team informed" (E-mail March 13, 2016). Ms. Cordova added:

I personally loved the bundles. The school where I am now sends out weekly bulletins and it tends to be full of information...that just isn't informative. I liked how you named it "Barb's Bundles" instead of weekly newsletters or something similar. You had a way of personalizing everything which I thought was very effective in making the small school feel like a community. I will admit that I did NOT like having to create my own bundle. You are a tough act to follow so I found trying to be witty and informative simultaneously challenging for me. (E-mail March 14, 2016)

Ms. Nugent noted: "THE BUNDLE—The function of the bundle is to teach one to think intensively. It provides a positive perspective that will build creativity, confidence and teamwork among talented staff and artistic students" (E-mail March 13, 2016). And Grade 3 Math teacher, Ms. LeVault, shared: "Bundles impacted the strength of the communication in our school. Expectations, schedules, development and morale were made congruous. And as a teacher, the centralized configuration of information was an appreciated time saver" (E-mail March 13, 2016).

CHAPTER 8

Looking back on my time at WEDJ, 'Barb's Bundles' functioned like a diary carving the highlights of weekly events. These bundles served as a platform for sharing teaching tips and research on best practice; as well, they provided a regular streaming of 'shout outs' – deliberate kudos, highlighting ways WEDJ staff went the 'extra mile.'

CHAPTER 9

INITIAL BOARD OF TRUSTEES COMMUNICATIONS

When I first arrived, there were 7 Board members listed on the web site.

- Andrew Rivers, Board Chair, Chief of Staff, Howard University.
- Tanya Hales, Secretary, Parent.
- Eric Key, Director University of Maryland University College Arts Program.
- Marco McMillan, Executive Director, Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc.
- Samantha Smith, Community Member.
- Jeanette M. Staton Parent.
- Sandra Wallace, Community Member.

The first meeting (September 9, 2012), I attended was led by John Goldman, the acting Executive Director. The two parent representatives, Jeanette Staton and Tanya Hales, were present. John Manahan, Rita Lawson and I were also there with Marco McMillan present on a conference call line. At the meeting, Goldman indicated that several Board members would not be attending. At the start of the meeting I recall Marco welcoming Manahan and I to the fold and after about twenty minutes, he could no longer take part in the conference call. Manahan shared his COO report that consisted of outlining the cash flow situation and discussion about enrollment numbers. Part of Manahan's report had been prepared by EdOps, a company hired by Goldman to manage school finances. In addition to speaking about the operational side of the school, he also spoke about the Early Childhood Education score of 0/4, following the surprise visit by a representative from the DC Charter Board. Manahan discussed the ANET standardized testing process and shared initial concerns about classroom management challenges faced by many of the new arts guest teachers.

I then shared the Academic Plan for improvement after initial observation and examination of strengths and limitations that were affecting the quality of teaching and learning at WEDJ. In the meeting, I detailed the strengths of the program: the quality of the teaching staff, the passion and commitment of the support staff, the Arts partnerships and updates on the School Support Team (Special Education, English Language Learning, Counseling).

I shared a detailed analysis of the academic challenges with solutions and goals for moving forward. The Academic Plan outlined the following poor performance factors and planned changes for school improvement:

CHAPTER 9

1. *Lack of Curriculum Alignment and Specific Academic Direction*

Solution: Replacing *America's Choice* program with more updated curriculum resources, textbooks and developing in-house learning materials. No longer can a single program be relied on or assumed to be all that students need to succeed.

2. *Lack of Re-teaching and Differentiated Practice to Ensure Mastery*

Solution: The focus has to shift from what is taught to what is learned. Students learn in different ways and at different paces. What is critically important is that they learn. Rather than teach 150 lessons of which a small portion of students would master, it is best to teach fewer more difficult units of study to ensure that concepts stick. In this way there is time for re-teaching and more importantly teaching to the learning style of each student, so they all can master the concept and feel confident about moving forward...

3. *Lack of Instructional Time for Teaching English Language Arts and Math*

Solution: The amount of time for math has been increased by 30–60 minutes per day in the Grades 2 to 8 schedule and we added an additional 30 minutes for language arts. (90 minutes per day)

4. *Lack of Meaningful Benchmark Data*

Solution: WEDJ has invested in ANET. Their turn around time for providing testing results is ideal (48 hours). They support teachers to learn how to examine data and act on it. In this way re-teaching can be very targeted to students' individual needs...

5. *Need for a Coordinated System for Accessing, Sharing and Acting on Data*

Solution: Establishing a systematic way for collecting and backing up data and providing mastery profiles for accessing all student data.

6. *Lack of Regular Teacher Observation, Feedback and Support*

Solution: The criteria that ground the assessment tools (Charlotte Danielson's work) are sound, but the implementation needs to be more strategic, systematic and accountable. Teachers will be assessed three times a year. I met with each teacher in August 2012 and gathered specific goals for the course of the 2012–2013 school year.

(http://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/publication/attachments/FFY.2013.Con_App_Program.Evaluation_WEDJ.PCS_09-14-13.pdf)

I was not able to find much evidence that the WEDJ Board or administration had been working on a formalized School Improvement Plan, Strategic Plan or efforts to gather survey data from parents, students or teachers. I was not left with any files from the former administration with respect to formal staff performance reviews. In my report to the Board, I also shared information about new signature programming (character and health education curriculum, a research and technology course, a peer teaching course, chess instruction, and everyday violin classes for grades K-2), as well as the following additional initiatives to improve academic achievement:

INITIAL BOARD OF TRUSTEES COMMUNICATIONS

1. Initiation of WEDJ Commitment – an agreement for how we (students, staff and parents) operate in a positive and supportive manner. Minimizing discipline problems will increase time on task.
2. Establishment of the WEDJ ‘Essential Skills and Understandings’ that target rigorous and progressive Common Core standards in English (ELA) and Math for each grade
3. Students taught by specialists in science and social studies from grades 3 to 8
4. Team Teaching programs where master teachers in math and English (ELA) support the Kindergarten, grade 1 and 2 programming (with weekly planning time for weekly teaching time together)
5. A culture of professionalism (encouraging teachers to do graduate programming, apply for National Board certification, present/organize conference)
6. Specific PD and assessment process for TA’s and substitute teachers
7. Parent Education Workshops in consultation with the PTA

After presenting this comprehensive list of actions and solutions, I was surprised that no one on the Board of Trustees posed questions or added commentary. While I was looking forward to connecting with each Board member, I never met Mr. Rivers, Mr. Key, Ms. Smith or Ms. Wallace. Mr. Goldman informed me after the meeting that these Board members were in the process of resigning. I simply summarized my report so the remaining Board members could finish their meeting on time. Goldman was quite insistent that we complete Board meeting, within the sixty-minute allotted time frame.

By the end of September, I had one meeting with my direct supervisor, John Goldman, who in addition to being in the Executive Director role at WEDJ, had also taken on the responsibility as the Executive Director of IDEA, a local DC charter high school. At this meeting, he indicated that the WEDJ staff had shared with him how much they enjoyed the professional development weeks and were inspired by the new leadership at the school. I was informed at this time that my colleague, John Manahan, would be taking over as the Executive Director, once Goldman had officially retired from WEDJ. He did mention that he wanted to continue to be involved in the role as Board Chair at WEDJ. I recall that Ms. Hales expressed reservation about Goldman becoming Chair of the Board, however, it made sense to me, as he seemed to know the history and rationale for all the school changes better than anyone else. I rarely had face-to-face contact with Mr. Goldman; I communicated mostly through e-mail and assumed that he was satisfied with the progress the school was making at the start. There was much work that went into setting the table for school improvement at the William E. Doar, Jr., Public Charter School for the Performing Arts. I assumed the ‘hands off’ approach by Mr. Goldman was his way of letting us learn and lead – without interfering in the operations of the school. We did, however, have ambitious initiatives that would require more collaboration, patience, flexibility and as it turns out, time to shift the academic culture.

CHAPTER 10

ARTS TO THE CORE

I was drawn to WEDJ right from the beginning because of the school's commitment to the performing arts. We used the phrase 'Arts to the Core' to celebrate how our curriculum linked to the Common Core and the Arts. We did not want a separation between arts and academics. I considered arts education at WEDJ a serious academic subject.

At first, arts instruction at WEDJ was an expensive balancing act. The school had acquired services that cost over half a million dollars for the National Philharmonic to teach the music program, the Shakespeare Theatre Company to teach drama, and the Kirov Ballet Company to teach the ballet portion of the dance program. In addition to these costs, I had to hire a new visual arts teacher and additional dance teachers. None of these groups had met together, only signed contracts to provide services. The arts programming needed coordination and no one had come forward with a plan. After I met with all the players, I asked Mr. Harris, the returning dance teacher, to act initially as the Arts Coordinator. We needed someone to reach out and provide in-house support for the full time and visiting staff. Apart from the endless interviews to find the right candidate to fill the giant shoes left from the former visual arts teacher, Mr. Lee, I felt a constant rush of discontent from students about many of our visiting arts instructors.

Before the first week of school ended, my guidance counselor had reported details of a conversation he had with a seventh-grade student. The student indicated that she was upset because the ballet teacher had verbally abused her and physically moved her in the classroom. Mr. Carter and I investigated the allegation immediately. Many individual students in the class confirmed that the teacher was upset, yelled often and blurted out a comment that was inappropriate. After leaving multiple messages with the dance teacher to return my calls, I made contact with her direct supervisor to see if he could help in the matter. Technically, the visiting teacher worked for a different organization that made my oversight of the complete arts program somewhat complicated, especially when students and families were becoming increasingly frustrated with many of the new faces on our fine arts team. The Kirov Ballet's instructor frequently kicked kids out of her classroom and complained often that they were not serious enough to work for extended periods of time on basics and warm-up. I knew Mr. Harris, our in-house dance teacher, had ways to keep students motivated, at the same time as bring out excellent modern technique. I asked the guest teacher to observe his classes and do some team teaching with Harris, and while she dropped in one day, she stopped

going. It wasn't long before she began to come late and call at the last minute to say she had an emergency and could not come in. Mr. Carter was beginning to fill in for her dance classes too often. While we were very impressed with her obvious skill as a stellar Russian ballerina, most students, staff and parents were not pleased with her level of commitment and her negative disposition. We asked the representative from the Kirov Ballet to replace her when she didn't show up one day and didn't call in, to let us know she would not be there. We were thrilled when the Kirov Ballet sent us a new African American teacher, who was very popular at first. It didn't take long, however, for the complaints to arise again from our ballet majors. The new teacher promised to build positive relationships with the students and families, but his enthusiasm did not last. I had asked him not to wear jeans on several occasions, but this request seemed to fall on deaf ears. It was disappointing to see the new teacher give up on our kids. Within a few weeks, he had resorted to yelling at students, and then he eventually quit. The Kirov Ballet did not have the teaching staff in their bullpen to give the students the warmth they needed from a trusted instructor. In January, we asked Stephanie Burrill, a former WEDJ ballet teacher and current Teaching Assistant, to take over this class when we parted company with the Kirov Ballet.

The complaints about many guest arts teachers mounted throughout the fall. By October 2012, I had a two-inch binder filled with student and family concerns about one of the visiting music teachers, the ballet teachers and three of the five theatre teachers. Our students were tough on these teachers; many guest instructors kept Mr. Carter, the Dean of Students, on speed dial. The more they called for back up, the more the students could read that these teachers were not in control. What complicated matters might have been the background of the arts staff; at first, all twelve of our guest teachers were Caucasian. I was surprised that expertise could not be found that might have been more representative of our 96% African American student population.

On the 15th of September, after the first three weeks of school, I sent all members of the arts team a special 'bundle' outlining the importance of communicating directly with families, believing in kids and letting Mr. Harris be an important mentor. In this bundle, I also let everyone know that arts and academics were not two separate tracks. I also wanted the guest arts teachers to know I would work hard to support connections between the WEDJ staff and our guest teachers so everyone would feel a solid sense of belonging. I invited them to join in on staff meetings, as well as school and social events.

I encouraged the guest teachers to think about supporting each other. For instance, when there was a music assembly, that would cancel a drama, dance, or visual arts class, I expected the guest teachers to show up and support their fellow colleagues, rather than leave early or stay in their rooms.

The arts team decided to meet with me every Friday after school to trouble shoot situations and talk about how the school could further support arts programming. The teaching staff and Mr. Carter did everything they could to support the guest arts

teachers. I commended teachers for making generous efforts to provide additional support of the ‘classroom management kind’ for our guest fine arts instructors.

In spite of the proactive measures we put in place, there continued to be many ‘arts-related’ challenges throughout the year. Many families had expected that the new guest arts teachers would inspire their children. The addition of daily violin lessons for K, first and second grade students, was a welcome addition to the music program and we did receive rave reviews about Dr. Zirkle from the National Philharmonic (NP). I can still hear the students reciting their fun syllable-type prompts for violin positions, named after barbecue condiments: “ketchup, mustard...” Unfortunately, two other music teachers from the National Philharmonic (NP) resigned, and Mr. Bell was hired to teach the instrumental music classes, leaving Dr. Zirkle to teach the full strings program.

Prior to out-sourcing much of the music instruction to guest teachers, students at WEDJ spent the year working towards a musical production that integrated all the arts. Rather than continue with this tradition, Goldman announced the school would feature low-key ‘open house’ recitals. Many families had signed up so their kids would have the big production experience, so his decision turned out to be an ongoing source of discontent for some parents. One Board member, in particular, was very concerned about the decision to stop the school-wide arts performances. However, the hiring of independent musical and theatrical arts teachers made it impossible to coordinate an integrated production. As well, the contracts with the guest teachers did not address volunteer time for practice that would be required to put on such a large-scale event. I was aware early on that some parents felt strongly about the school not having such events, but the decision to move away from the production was made before my arrival on the scene. Had students and parents been surveyed in advance of the new changes, perhaps the school might have considered the idea of having the arts teachers work together on integrated production projects, for younger and older age groups of students, keeping some of the former program strengths intact.

LEARNING THAT STICKS

When students at WEDJ were committed to daily arts, we had to ensure that the other academic experiences were also engaging and led to solid understanding of the subject matter. In other words, the instructional choices had to make learning stick. Throughout the month of September, I visited classrooms, recognized impressive teaching practices and wrote numerous messages about shifting the focus from teaching to learning.

From my daily rounds, I could see that some of my novice teachers might benefit from planning and team teaching support. I focused my attention on grades 3 and 4 language arts, specifically on developing writing tools. I also welcomed the opportunity to get to know more students. Initially, I asked Ms. Almonte and Mr. Powell if I could pilot an approach to teaching writing that had been very successful when I worked with boys of a similar age at a former school in Toronto. I adapted the approach to include the drawing and labeling of a poster, to brainstorm and outline visibly with images and words that would guide the student writing. The following week, the students were given lined paper to begin their first draft. Students who typically echoed: “*I don’t know what to write*” had their clue words from the labels. I recall, two boys in particular, who carved out a paragraph by building sentences around their detailed labels. I was pleased this pre-writing activity had so successfully prompted the crafting of a first draft. For many students, this was their first detailed and painless paragraph they ever wrote.

After the draft, we made significant gains in teaching students how to edit their work. Our goal was to try and help students become more self-reliant, to help them know exactly what they could do to improve their first draft. Initially, most of the student writers thought editing was about correcting spelling. During this editing process, students had to self-assess if their draft had an assortment of assets, such as different sentence types and descriptive adjectives, at the same time as removing repetitive words and run-on sentences. We wanted to try and help students emulate what writers think about when they craft and re-craft their work. In Ms. Almonte’s words she noted:

Dr. Smith actively came into my third and fourth grade classroom weekly and demonstrated a unit in which students were to develop their ideas for their ideal school. She helped the students to visualize their ideal school by asking the appropriate questions, then had them work in pairs to draw their ideas as a prewriting process. Due to this process, the essays were elaborate and descriptive.

I worked with teachers to help them improve existing methods and resources. Through team teaching situations, and planning I was able to support educators to become teacher leaders. By collaboratively designing curriculum and reflecting on its' implementation, coaching became much more than helping educators choose a good textbook.

It was also important to promote literacy on a school-wide level. When I first arrived at WEDJ, I did view remnants of conventional forms of school-wide reading campaigns. The charts beside the teacher's doors were partly filled in by staff modeling how many pages or books they had read. As well, there were opened and unopened boxes full of novels and other print resources, but even with abundant materials, it was not apparent that our students had grasped a fundamental love of reading.

Grade 1 teacher, Mr. Howard, approached me early on in the year to ask about coordinating a day of community service for the members of his college alma mater. We decided that the books that filled our storeroom, beyond the capacity of our school and classroom libraries, could help build personal libraries in student homes. Grade 1 teacher, Ms. Exum, volunteered to coordinate the campaign. Fifteen volunteers showed up on a Saturday to fill over 200 milk crates full of books that lined the halls and foyers of WEDJ. It was a wonderful addition to *Back to School Night*. I was thrilled to see so many families sifting through the crates, and packing their trunks full of reading material. Populating our community's 'home libraries' became so popular, we extended the school-wide initiative for a month so that students would have a chance to sift through and choose books they really wanted. Our literacy campaign helped us put thousands of unused books, cluttering up the storeroom, in the hands of kids. The school newsletter shared an interview with Ms. Exum:

When Dr. Smith became principal at WEDJ and looked around, she discovered closets and storage rooms crammed with books that teachers weren't using. When she started talking with parents, she realized many families didn't have a lot of books at home. As WEDJ prepared to ramp up its emphasis on reading and literacy this year, the home library initiative was born. First grade teacher Evelyn Exum is coordinating the effort. More than 50 volunteers from Bowdoin College organized more than 300 crates of books that had been gathering dust. The books included materials from previous curricula, some books from the high school that was previously part of WEDJ, easy readers, novels for adults, and everything in between. "The books ran the gamut across all genres," Ms. Exum explained. "So we encouraged parents to take a variety of books." For Ms. Exum, the home library initiative is also a useful way for her to conduct an investigation for a graduate education class she was taking. She was working to answer these questions: "Does having immediate access to books increase time that parents read on their own, that students read, and the time they spend reading together? Does this encourage parents to read on their own, and read and discuss books with children? Are children more enthusiastic about reading?"

Parents were invited to pick up crates of books and take them home on Back to School Night in September. A few weeks later, Ms. Exum launched a survey for parents to see whether the home libraries were having an impact. "So far people are saying they're reading their books, and kids are enthusiastic," Ms. Exum said. "Some people are saying they want to choose their own books next time. Response has been positive so far." There are still more books to give away, and the next distribution is planned for December. (<http://www.wedjschool.us/students/home-library-project-fills-families-homes-with-books>)

The next year, Ms. Williams, our Special Education Teaching Assistant, followed up the 'Personal Home Library Campaign' with the 'WEDJ School Library Card Drive.' We wanted to promote our student use of community libraries in their neighborhoods. We copied every student and staff members' library cards and posted them in the foyer as a concrete tribute to an important community space that honored reading. I also used this opportunity to promote parent education about the importance of reading. In the November 2013 newsletter, we highlighted details about the campaign:

Reading Everywhere (Even in the Bathroom)

To increase the opportunities that all WEDJ students have to read, write, and improve their literacy skills, we have been working hard to help students get library cards for the DC Public Library system. The Woodridge branch of the library is just over a mile from WEDJ, but with a library card you can always check out and return books at any library branch. Thanks to the resourceful Ms. Williams, WEDJ has applications for library cards for our teachers and students! All we need from parents is their signatures and we will send the information in so our students can have their very own library cards. I am offering a reward for the grades where 100% of the students have library cards. Once you have a library card, it is not about the number of books or pages or words that a student reads. It is what we do with what we read that matters. We know that reading strikes a chord when students talk about and write about what they read. The talking and writing that happens before, during or after reading is exercise for the mind. I used to have home libraries in my bathroom when my kids were growing up. All types of books, all levels – so they could reach for something that captured their interest. Like adults, they would pick some up and finish them, or read a few paragraphs and return them. The bathroom was also our "time out center" (bedrooms have too many fun things to do in them), but if they became lost in a book during a time-out I was okay with that. Wherever you're reading, find something you love, and talk about it! (http://www.wedjschool.us/dr-smith/message-from-the-principal-library-cards-open-doors-for-students?utm_source=November+E-News+from+WEDJ+PCS&utm_campaign=November+2012+Newsletter&utm_medium=archive)

I often see reading campaigns in schools where students are encouraged to read as many books or words as they can. I have yet to discover the research that supports the notion that school or classroom-wide initiatives lead to more engaged reading and thinking. I have witnessed, however, that such artificial incentives can have an opposite effect for many students. The avid readers tend to win the prizes, while the others tend to clap courteously. Obviously, I am not an avid supporter of this conventional type of reading campaign, but I did encourage research and reading for a purpose. It was important that students had access to print. Establishing home libraries and encouraging the use of the community library represented an authentic way to promote reading.

We also purchased novels for students to expand their personal libraries. We wanted to encourage students to ‘read like college students’ that is, circle words, and write notes such as “courage”, “simile”, “humor”, “yes!”... in the margins. We wanted our students to make direct connections inside the various literary and informational texts they were reading. I also worked closely with teachers to build customized project-based integrated units. Students would no longer be issued the conventional novel study that listed a series of questions at the end of each chapter. Student voices, for decades, have told us that such traditional approaches to teaching novels were a ‘turn off’ to reading. In a reference to teaching reading, Ms. Almonte noted:

Barbara also worked closely with teachers to develop a strategic set of novels that closely touched the lives of our student body. Books included Holes, The Watsons go to Birmingham, and more. In addition, she ensured each student was provided their own copy of these books so that they were able to mark it as they read along. The teachers and Dr. Smith worked hand in hand to develop project-based curriculum packets that helped the students comprehend and analyze the novels in an exciting and authentic manner.

Within the first few months we had a team from the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) visit to provide an audit for the remainder of our *Race to the Top Program Grant*. The lead auditor was so impressed with the curriculum that she suggested the school look into becoming a *Blue Ribbon School*, as she felt we were well on our way to meeting such exceptional standards.

The determination of ‘what’ and ‘how’ to teach at WEDJ was influenced by many forces. We accepted the Common Core State Standard direction for language arts and math, and continued to link programing for other subjects such as science, social studies, the arts and physical and health education to the established DC Public School guidelines. We did not opt into a specific textbook, using the breadth of already available resources at our fingertips. Keeping in mind our long-term ‘college success’ goals, we added a Research and Technology course for our middle grade students, as well as a Peer Teaching course for grades 7 and 8. The Research and Technology course synthesized the Common Core ‘inquiry-based’ expectations that were prominent in many subject areas. Students took part in deliberate lessons

about research design, technology, and data management. In grade 6 they became an expert in a global history topic, in grade 7 an environmental science topic and in grade 8, they researched the best college choices for them. They read informational text from books, websites and primary sources, and they contacted real experts with survey questions. This type of inquiry-based programming, usually reserved for private school and/or International Baccalaureate students, was now available for inner city youth in DC.

Driven by findings from my graduate thesis, I initiated a two-year Peer Teaching course for WEDJ students, one hour per week starting in grade 7. During that first month students took part in activities to help deepen their understanding of how people learn. Students were informed at the onset, that learning through teaching can help them learn. The rationale for peer teaching, was outlined in their student workbook:

We learn:

10% of what we read.

20% of what we hear.

30% of what we see.

50% of what we see and hear.

70% of what is discussed with others.

80% of what is experienced personally.

95% of what we teach to someone else.

(William Glasser, <http://principalcowart.blogspot.ca/2009/02/how-we-learn-william-glasser.html>)

This is why we need to make sure students talk about what they are learning. This is why we offer peer teaching as a course at the William E. Doar, Jr. School for the Performing Arts! (Grade 7 Peer Teaching Course Book)

I was so pleased to see the students take pride in their teaching roles. They read stories to students, helped them with math, and provided an extra set of hands for teachers in the grades PK to grade 5 classes. I often wrote in my journal how much I looked forward to teaching this class. Building in an opportunity to teach was rewarding for me in so many ways. Having a chance to talk to my own class on a regular basis helped me establish, beyond my rounds, my own pulse on classroom culture. It also demonstrated to staff that I was willing to plan, implement best practices and be vulnerable to admit when I needed to make changes and improvements in my own teaching, based on student responses. By picking up these classes, it also provided additional relief and planning time for teachers.

We also piloted a number of new curriculum initiatives, specifically focused on Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics – STEM. In addition to the weekly chess program put in place to enhance spatial understandings in math, we created ‘Wonder Workshops’ for the PK-grade 2 students in January. Ms. Almonte had a science background, so she was eager to coordinate mini science lessons each

CHAPTER 11

week for the younger students to incite curiosity and a sense of wonder about the mysteries of science. I wanted to see our Arts school evolve to seriously address STEM. Ashley created a Wonder Cart and wore a lab jacket that her student lab assistants signed their names on, in brightly colored magic markers. Ashley's initiative was well received by students and staff and continued throughout the next school year.

I recall listening to President Obama's *State of the Union Address* where he spoke about schools needing to do much more than teach kids how to fill in 'bubbles' on standardized tests. His message promoted me to invite him to WEDJ and while he was unable to visit, he did respond reinforcing his progressive views on education that supported the establishment of the STEM Master Teacher Corps. We were convinced at WEDJ that the arts can provide a rich context for inquiry. Not only did we want to ensure a solid program offering in all areas of the curriculum, we believed that a focus on the ARTS could play a tremendous role in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math). Imagine a school with their own film and television production company, a 'Community Can Press Publication' business, a team of teachers and students working with NASA scientists, a team of students composing a new musical or dance piece with professional artists, composers and choreographers? Kids are going to the Internet for this kind of stimulation – but schools, with an exceptional staff, can make these (and more) experiences happen. All it takes is a willingness to not *'paint the school house red.'*

We achieved much in our first year of operation. While the staff, parents and students were inspired by these ideas, I believe WEDJ was seriously hampered by the 'disconnect' between the school and our Board of Trustees. While I shared the curriculum directions and list of accomplishments in my School Reports at Board meetings, there was little discussion that arose with respect to STEM or innovative programming. By the end of the school year, only a couple of WEDJ Board members attended any school events. The passion of the WEDJ Board seemed to be absent from this mix. I did try to sit down with John Goldman on many occasions to co-plan for the future, but his typical response was something like, I don't care how you do it, just get the scores up. In our conversations, he often admitted knowing little about education, but I wish he had taken more interest in learning more about the field, so he could determine which advice might be in the better interest of the community he was serving.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

The mascot at the William E. Doar, Jr., School for the Performing Arts was the wolf. By the end of our first month, I shared the following message about the importance of forging strong social bonds in the September 2012 PrincipalPOINT newsletter:

Lessons from the Wolf

I've thought quite a bit about our mascot the wolf – and how we, as a team, model their behaviors. (According to <https://www.defenders.org/gray-wolf/basic-facts>)

Wolves live, travel and hunt in packs of 4–7 animals on average. Packs include the alphas, their pups... The alpha female and male are the pack leaders that track and hunt prey, choose den sites and establish the pack's territory. Wolves develop close relationships and strong social bonds. They often demonstrate deep affection for their family and may even sacrifice themselves to protect the family unit. Wolves have complex communication systems, ranging from barks and whines to growls and howls.

I've been fortunate to see wolves in the wild in Canada. I've always admired these majestic animals, particularly their capacity to forge such strong interpersonal bonds. Some of our young wolves at WEDJ are on a hunt for a college degree, while others are not so sure about their future. Both parents and staff, as leaders of our pack, need to help steer our 'pups' toward that goal. How do we do that? We all howl in our own way – but our direction to make a difference is clear. Mr. McKeiver's howl, this week, was breathtaking. The new mural outside our front office promoting arts and leadership, that he and his family created, – adds so much to our 'den.' The words 'Thank you' cannot begin to express my appreciation for this self-less act. Some of the best ways to build strong bonds, like wolves, is to help others and ask for help. The support people give to one another under our roof is second to none. (<http://archive.constantcontact.com/fs091/1110378510852/archive/1111117486606.html>)

At WEDJ we experienced the full scale of emotion. From the sad news of Ms. Johnson losing her brother and staff pitching in to help with the funeral, to the joy of births (Ms. Miles and Ms. Lucas) and Mr. Dickens's wedding, we relied on Mr. Carter to keep us all in the loop. We were sincere about caring for one another.

While people did share incredible acts of generosity and support, there were some small cracks in the walls that were difficult to mend, especially when some folks did

not go to the source with their concerns. I initially addressed these negative seeds by modeling positive behavior and speaking with staff about direct ways to solve problems. I also highlighted the positive work of various team members and shared tales of the importance of team. In my weekly bundle, I encouraged staff to dial direct by praising in public and criticizing in private, and be generous with ‘shout outs’ to one another for *going the extra mile*. I spoke about a metaphor of tacks on the floor, how different people respond when they see something left behind by others. Some folks might tell someone else to pick them up, others might ignore them, some might have a meeting to prepare a plan to prevent tacks from falling on the floor, some people might commission a study about tacks on the floor, and some folks will simply pick up the tacks. WEDJ was full of staff who leaned over and picked up the tacks.

Probably the first sign of a crack in the foundation came to my attention when some staff interpreted timing for transitions between classrooms, in different ways. Even though our classes were to end 5 minutes before the start of the next class, there were still many teachers keeping their students longer. I could see that there was a growing disconnect between staff, who valued the set timing for transitions, and those who lost track of time. Certain classes were sometimes 5 to 10 minute late for their next class. When students arrived on time, or possibly early, they had down time in the hall, creating additional opportunities to disrupt others. In addition to speaking to people directly, I addressed this concern in several ‘bundles; and insisted that everyone respect time.

In an arts meeting, the school and guest teachers discussed techniques, tools and strategies for improving their classes. They asked the school administration to work with teachers to make sure they delivered students to the arts classes on time. The school schedule was organized for the most part to have classes start on the hour or half hour. Establishing such times should have made it easier for teachers to follow the schedule, but the increasing number of late dismissals was contributing to the mounting tension in the school community. The lack of a consistent approach to timing of transitions also had a negative effect on school culture. We needed to address student discipline, as a response to our inability to execute transitions in a timely and effective manner.

During my initial rounds, I felt the excitement of a fresh start, but gradually I began to overhear some raised voices by both students and teachers. As the school year progressed, tensions mounted as we began the hard work of making improvements. I recall one teacher, who truly cared about each of her students, was so frustrated she tossed a backpack out the door. I had to duck as it just missed me. I waited to make sure things in that classroom quieted right down. I did not have to intervene, however, after the class, I made a point of visiting with the teacher to find out more about what was going on. She had calmed down and admitted she had lost her cool. This teacher had made enormous contributions to school spirit at our school and I was confident that giving her a second chance, so long as she kept her temper in check, was a good decision.

In the next bundle following the barreling backpack incident, I reinforced the importance of professional behavior. I explained that we could not afford to put off situations where we lose our cool to being a ‘bad day.’ I noted that students watch us and can mimic our every move, so modeling calmness in the face of adversity is the only option. Staff expectations were clearly laid out in our employee performance review documents:

- Staff must demonstrate a sense of humor, humility and emotional control.
- Staff must develop positive relationships with teachers and support staff.

There were only a few instances of teachers losing their cool. In the fall of the next school year, several staff members gave me the heads up that a teacher had told a student to ‘*f—off*,’ after the student made a mean comment about her. Within seconds of being informed of the incident, this teacher came right to me and apologized. She felt terrible, and when I asked her to go home for the afternoon, calm down and “don’t let it happen again,” she understood and respectfully followed through.

In response to staff concerns about discipline, we set up a committee to explore how to fine-tune the student discipline process. We wanted to be sure there would be mass staff buy-in – given the fact that each teacher would be responsible for implementation. In one bundle, I added the proverb: ‘Do not remove a fly from your friend’s forehead with a hatchet.’ That made Carter laugh, as he was someone who had to deal with student and staff emotion on a regular basis.

Most staff members were willing to help each other out with classroom management. Collaboration is never easy in any organization; it takes longer than a ‘do-it-yourself decision’ and it is hard work – plain and simple. It was invigorating for staff to have a say. Participants who entered into negotiating ideas with an open mindset resisted the temptation to judge input, and were willing to accept ideas generated by others around the table.

I wanted our staff and families to know that supporting one another is an important value. I could see that collaboration was critical for all school improvement, and building relationships would be central to the school’s success. My reports to the WEDJ Board of Trustees did include items related to school culture, and while I would have welcomed the opportunity to engage in focused discussions about the significance of building relationships, this was not a topic that garnered much attention.

SAFETY, SUPERVISION, AND DISCIPLINE

Safety at WEDJ was taken seriously. We were committed to being thorough about ensuring the safety of over 500 people present daily on our premises. The responsibility for safety, supervision and discipline was split, at first, between Mr. Manahan, on the operations side, and me in terms of daily classroom management and student discipline.

When I first arrived at WEDJ, Mr. Carter and I discussed at length the extent of disciplinary consequences. I was not comfortable with the five-strike rule in place, sensing it was too complicated and possibly contributed to disciplinary problems reoccurring in the past. We agreed to a two-strike rule that would lead to a suspension for most infractions. We also removed items such as “not wearing all pieces of the official school uniform,” from the list of infractions. Breaking the rules had to be about potential harm to self or others. In our first year, the number of suspensions was more than cut in half. I believe clarity of consequences partly contributed to this transformation.

It was unfortunate when we had to recommend expulsion of an eighth-grade student to the Board. After a series of suspensions related to behavior, we had to consider recommending expulsion of this student, that we were unable to help. Even after his mother came and spent the day shadowing him in school, he was unable to make the transition to be a part of keeping WEDJ a safe and secure environment for all community members. The last straw came when he threatened a teacher and told a security staff member that he would beat him up. We made time to deliberate about the individual case, even though the policy read ‘after three suspensions a student would be recommended for expulsion.’ Sam’s mother (alias name) agreed that they would transfer him to another school, and we offered to do everything we could to help Sam assimilate into the new school culture. There were not enough Board members at this time to deliberate about the expulsion recommendation, so this transfer solution turned out to be in the best interest of Sam, and the community.

While we worked hard to anticipate problems, our record was not spotless. At the beginning of the school year Mr. Carter shared his ideas and experiences about how WEDJ could operate as a safe and secure school. Mr. Brooks, our facilities and security expert, also provided valuable guidance. We also were provided with a school nurse, contracted by the DC Department at Health. She took her lunch breaks from 1–2pm and when she was frequently absent, her superiors attempted to provide coverage. Unfortunately, it was rare for anyone to show up to provide nurse coverage, so Mr. Carter had to provide care for health-related issues on a regular

basis. I recall when Carter gave up a Friday night and all day Saturday, along with office staff members, Ms. Evans, and Ms. Morgan, to gain certification, in order to distribute authorized medicine to students. While I could rely on many people being generous with their time, WEDJ was so fortunate to have Mr. Carter leading the way. Whether Mr. Carter was covering classes, putting out fires, or being our *'nurse'* on call, he proved over and over again, what an asset he was to the school.

With two floors and over 400 students we needed to ensure we had a dedicated security plan. Mr. Sessoms, who had formerly acted as a Dean of Students in another school, stepped up to work with Mr. Carter to oversee how the facilities and security staff could enhance the current systems. Mr. Brooks and Mr. Sessoms had attended 'Active Shooter Training' sessions, and discovered among many findings, that we needed to be engaging as many adults as possible to help make our school safe.

There were two serious situations at WEDJ during our first year that were causes of considerable concern. During one recess a primary student fell and chipped his tooth. The teacher on duty did not observe the accident, so we were liable for the repair and future orthodontic surgery. I was disappointed that both teachers on duty simply didn't see the fall. This incident brought to our attention that staff members needed more playground supervision training. I asked the teachers involved to set up a committee to review and revise playground safety rules immediately, so they could communicate recommendations to all staff members at our next staff meeting. We also updated the Staff Handbook to ensure that there would be no gaps moving forward.

The second incident occurred when the same student was left on board the school bus at the end of the day. I recall earlier that same week Mr. Manahan had been speaking about increasing the number of busses, to increase enrollment and have a larger reach into the DC community. I shared my reservations about bussing at his operational meeting at that time. I explained that while the bus extends the school environment, it also expands the limits of our liability. While we had a qualified bus driver and a Teaching Assistant (TA) on hand to supervise the students, I was uneasy that a bus could be a prime location for problems of the bullying kind. Buses can be spaces where negative sub-cultures can exist, especially without trained adult supervision. When the bus driver's hands and eyes are on the road (where they should be), the bus must have another adult on board to ensure the safety of all students. While we had a trusted and respected staff member on board, that one evening, neither adult checked to see that all students had been dropped off at their designated locations. A grade 1 boy had fallen asleep and when the driver and the TA did not do a sweep of the bus at the end of the day, he was not discovered. It wasn't until his mother went to pick him up at the community center, where he was supposed to be dropped off, did we discover we had a missing child. When the mom came to the school, she discovered her boy still on the school bus. Mr. Manahan immediately removed the bus driver and TA from busing responsibilities, pending an investigation. Manahan, Carter and I met with the bus driver and the TA separately. We considered letting both employees go, but decided to let both remain at WEDJ.

The bus driver no longer was permitted to drive the bus, but continued in his role on the facilities and security team; the TA, who had been an incredible contributor to the school, no longer would be in a supervisory role on the bus. The TA recovered from this lapse of judgment and continued to make a tremendous contribution to the school. Later, the bus driver, following a series of altercations with his supervisor, chose to leave the school. As a result of this busing incident, the school had to out-source busing for additional costs and had to settle with the family out of court for upwards of \$25,000 for emotional damages. In addition to this settlement, the school had to pay premiums for legal advice. At this point we seriously discussed whether we would continue to offer busing services in the future. I was also concerned that staff members, who worked in the mornings on the bus or after school until 6 pm, did not receive adequate training or monitoring for the work they were doing with or without children present.

I was committed to making sure our students at WEDJ were safe. In my second year, Mr. Carter and Mr. Sessoms, with the help of technology coordinator, Mr. Gregorio, created a video to capture the attention of the staff, and communicate the seriousness of lockdown procedures. This was a good process for all to experience as we underwent an official lockdown in September 2013. After many DC schools were informed that the 'Navy Yard shooter' had not been arrested and might be loose in the Washington area. WEDJ was located in one of the city's highest crime areas. From January to August 2013, there were 34 crimes documented at the Rhode Island Metro, where many of our students and staff travelled daily. In my first year, I took the subway home every night and made sure I left in the daylight as the 15-minute walk to the Metro, involved walking through poorly lit areas and the back of a strip mall, where police had shared information about various arrests.

Life at WEDJ was not without its challenges, particularly when the school, in less than two years, experienced one tornado warning, two electrical brownouts, several flood warnings, multiple snow days, the lockdown precipitated from the Navy Yard shooting, in addition to DC's regular tormenting and disrupting spring storms. Trying to land an airplane at Reagan or Dulles in the spring pretty much sums up the uncertainty that needed to be factored in, when planning and operating outdoor events in any Washington, DC school. In addition to these real events, schools were required to conduct fire drills once a month, as well as practice lockdown and evacuation procedures. These events in the 180 days of schooling, in addition to numerous holidays, made it even more challenging to plan for a smooth succession of teaching. 'Learning interrupted' was the operative word when it came to piecing together an academic experience, peppered with a host of natural and man-made barriers.

We wanted to be prepared for the expected and unexpected, while clarifying and following through on consequences, so the safety of others would not be compromised. A safe school environment played a contributing role in ensuring that we had our bodies in our seats, safely ready for learning.

BODIES IN THEIR SEATS

The year before I arrived, the Earthquake complicated the calculation of the body count at WEDJ. When two campuses merged into one, and students simply did not return that first week of school, the school had to re-organize pretty much everything. It was amazing that they adapted a new schedule, at the same time as updating staff responsibilities and class lists. It was no surprise that many families did not return the following year. After the aftermath of that challenging year, my goal was to increase stability, so we could manage our program and budget effectively.

Count Day, in charter schools, is what sets the finances for the entire year. Depending on the state, funds are consolidated based on the number of students in attendance on these designated ‘Count Days.’ Leading up to October 5th, Manahan kept track of the school’s daily attendance rate. He thought about planning something special to entice students to come to school that day, but as it turned out, it wasn’t necessary. Our attendance had been strong since the start of school, and while we didn’t have 100% of our bodies in their seats that day, we did have most of our numbers in tact within the window of days that followed. Count Day was a success. I was well aware from my work in Detroit, the critical importance of a Count Day. The most significant funding for the school was tied up in these numbers. Administrators, who had reductions in enrollment after the first month of school, would typically be faced with a lay-off situation. A balanced budget meant there would be cash flow to pay salaries and ongoing expenses. The coordination of Count Days served as an accountability metric to ensure that schools work hard to keep their students throughout the school year. It is critical for the financial health of the school to build family trust – for budget stability, but more so, for building a consistent academic community where student learning can build from one year to the next.

WEDJ attendance, since the start of the school year, moved between a daily low count of 91% and a high count of nearly 95%. In order to improve our daily attendance rate, we took time to ask students what they liked about WEDJ in a survey in November 2012. Students in Grades 4 through 8 responded to this open-ended question within six qualitative categories:

- Teachers Care
- I learn
- Loving the Arts
- Like Tech at WEDJ
- Free to be ME
- It’s Fun

CHAPTER 14

As part of the technology class, students were asked to respond to questions posted on *Survey Monkey*. Students had the option of not answering questions. The student comments validated why we had students in our seats. There were many repeated comments. Some of the unique responses that support the designation of each category are as follows:

Teacher's Care (27 comments):

- Teachers will not give up on me because they know I can do my best
- They love me too much
- Will always be there for me when I need something
- Wedj is great because they give us chances so we can improve our work
- Teachers care about us and treat us like there own
- Teachers have school pride

I learn (22):

- I think wedj is great because we learn a lot of things and they are very serious about the work and sometimes they are fun
- We are a pack of wolves that know music, science, writing, theatre, art, dance, and how to read; positive role models and leaders we have
- Because they care about our learning and care about me
- It helps me learn more than any other schools
- I talk about great things

Loving the Arts (29)

- We are learning new things on how to be creative in so many ways; Get to show are talents to the school
- Because it is a performing art school and I love to sing
- I like being in dance and when he tells me go girl! We can show our arts
- It has more Arts
- we have the great teachers that care, we also get to do a lot of stuff then most dc schools, we get dance, play music, do Art and act I found my interest at wedj when I first took dance at the school my teachers called me intelligent, pretty smart and a wonderful dancer heard all these nice things about me was so unbelievable all my old schools called me wonderful things to but not from their heart like WEDJ!

Like Tech at WEDJ (6)

- Wedj is great because I like iPads
- They have new learning technology like iPads and laptops

Free to Be Me (8)

- Might be the first woman president of the united states
- Wedj is great because you can be yourself and express who you are and you can be who you want to be

- We do lots of activities and have the chance to prove to people that we can do it and we can make a difference
- It could help me learn so I can go to college
- Wedj is fun because we get to do our dreams

It's Fun (21):

- I like wedj because it's fun and nobody lets me slide which makes me work harder
- We get to wear all colors shoes
- we also get to play football on the breeze way
- Teachers have fun and enjoy the class period
- They make learning fun because the teacher care about the students and we care about them too
- I like it because I have more fun then I had at my other schools

Other interesting comments included: "We help people," "Because it has changed a lot" and "It is shifting to be a better school." The survey also shared areas where the students wanted to see improvements. These included four themes:

The start and end time of school (9)

- Start school at a later time
- I think school should be ended at 3.48
- I just want 5 days of school please, but make the 7:00AM time go away
- Different times certain students can arrive because they live farther away and need eight hours or more for sleep

Getting to School and Being on Time (3)

- Teachers call home after two days of tardiness
- A school bus that just doesn't go to the north west campus
- Make sure all staff arrive on time

The School Work (3)

- Have easy work
- Teachers give kids too much work
- Okay I think that when we are do some thing in reading it not all way fun

Concern about other students (2)

- People keep on distracting me
- People messing with me

Other interesting comments included: "Have art elective all day," "My teachers don't really care about you, They just care about their work and teaching"; and "Too many problems (hungry)."

112 students out of approximately 145 students in grades 4 through 8 volunteered positive comments about a range of things they liked about WEDJ, and only 20

comments were shared about how WEDJ could improve learning conditions. Based on these responses we modified the start time the following year, in addition to establishing our first student council, so students could share ideas about how they wanted WEDJ to improve on a more regular basis. This survey, while validating the hard work of the staff, did give students a chance to tell us why they were in their seats and what conditions made it difficult for them to be on time for school. At WEDJ, we knew we had to build memories, good ones, so that our students would see how school could be a positive space in their lives.

Looking back on the volume of changes introduced in the first year, some might say such an ambitious design was too much to do at one time. I would argue, however, that each initiative set the stage for more initiatives planned for the 2013–2015 school years, namely:

- Developing *Fab Labs for Grades 3 to 5* students that include STEM activities (*Lego Mindstorm* robotic development linking movement and mechanics; design of musical instruments, and the creation of *Rube Goldberg machines*)
- Expanding 21st century future arts opportunities to include film and television production, radio and stage production, arts & athleticism, journalism, broadcasting, museum studies, costume design, and make-up design...
- Developing second language course for students in grades 6–8
- Creating an Arts History and Theory unit for all grades to be Integrated into the daily Promoting Arts and Leadership Program
- Supporting staff to present initiatives at conferences (not just go as delegates)

Had we been given more time, I believe we would have been closer to being that model ‘arts’ and ‘STEAM’ (science, technology, engineering, arts and athletics and mathematics) school, worthy of attention and anticipation about what we would do next. We assumed that such initiatives would not only keep students in our seats, but attract more students and families at the same time.

Other charter schools in DC boasted greater than 95% attendance on a regular basis. My hunch was if we could engage students more in the classroom, we could improve the attendance rate for the school. In concert with the judicial system, several DC charter schools were known to use elaborate punitive strategies to enforce student attendance. If families could not produce documentation from a physician to explain more than three absences, then families could be reported to Child and Family Services, to investigate possible neglect. In one local school students, who were absent more than 17 days, would have to leave the school. After 25 absent days, the laws did not permit students to pass the academic year, even if they could demonstrate a solid understanding of the grade level expectations. Taxpayers frequently foot the bill at charter schools for full time attendance monitors, to ensure that the school is documenting all attendance-related data and consequences, in order to meet the highly-regulated compliance expectations. While research supports a positive relationship between attendance and academic achievement, I knew we needed to do more than launch the kind of attendance campaigns that posted signs

for students to hit the 100% daily targets. We wanted to be sure we were doing what we could do to give students something to come to school for. By the new year, I sensed students in the PK-2 classes were still excited about school but there was a mixed response from the Grades 3 to 8 classes.

Manahan and I inherited a weak score on the re-enrollment criteria of the PMF, as soon as we hit the pavement at WEDJ. On Goldman's watch, in his Executive Director role, the school recorded the lowest return rates in a DC charter school in 2012. According to WEDJ's Qualitative Site Review report (11/29/12), the family return rate was 45%, the lowest of all charter schools. This re-enrollment rate was well below expectations. This QSR noted: "The school may or may not be meeting its goals in parent/guardian satisfaction, according to parent/guardian surveys, or has a re-enrollment rate that does not equal 75%." Based on our attendance rates throughout the 2012–2013 school year, we anticipated that our retention rate would be much higher; and proudly, our prediction would turn out to true. WEDJ raised its' re-enrollment rate for our first year by over 30%. 87% of our families returned for the 2013–2014 school year. We were building trust.

STUDENT AND STAFF PERFORMANCE REVIEWS

At WEDJ, we were committed to performance reviews of our students and staff. Every contact with parents mattered. All homeroom teachers were expected to call each family once a month. I asked staff members to send a record of these calls to me. The families of those teachers who made these contacts were very pleased, however, there were parents who did not receive their regular calls. Unfortunately, this became more problematic when I discovered that several senior teachers on my leadership team were not completing the task. How could the rest of the teachers be asked to make such calls when their role models did not comply with the task? I realized that I needed to spend more time explaining the purpose behind such a directive, so the staff could make more informed decisions about the merits of such practice. While there was mixed buy-in to these ‘Sunshine Calls’ as we called them, there was 100% acknowledgement of the importance of the progress reports and parent-teacher conferences.

The new performance-based report cards were well received by our parents. Many families had shared their discontent with the 1–2–3–4 rating reports used in the past. Most admitted they didn’t understand the number rating system. The new WEDJ Progress Reports gave all families an opportunity to view, for the first time, where students scored A’s and B’s in parts of their course work, rather than an average of scores that can bury specific strengths and weaknesses. Parents could see much more than an overall math or social studies grade, and therefore, could celebrate what’s known, and also be in a better position to provide more precise help. A novice teacher shared the following about her perception of the new report card:

Rather than a broad report card with a letter grade for the core subjects, this report card broke down the subjects and provided a detailed report on what skills each student had mastered and which ones they were still working on. This method provided everyone with a better idea of the child’s academic and social emotional development.

Students and parents would come to know what was learned and what still needed more work. The detailing on the report card served to not only educate the students, but clarify for parents the expectations in each course of study. For the most part, the new comprehensive report card was well received, as it made the evidence of achievement transparent. I established a similar performance-based report card for the Jalen Rose Leadership Academy in Detroit in its first year. I still recall how motivated students were to share their results with Jalen. They were genuinely proud of their achievement. By making a “B” (or 80% standard) the passing grade, students

CHAPTER 15

were forced to go back and learn or improve upon their first efforts. In the workforce, a secretary is not docked pay if a spelling mistake is found in a document. Rather, the page is returned and the correction made. Learning from mistakes may be a common phrase used in many schools, but unfortunately, the message that mistakes equal failure is much more pronounced. For instance, the SAT college entry test subtracts wrong answers from right answers, in order to deviate its scores. We wanted our report card to demonstrate what students had learned, not what they didn't know.

The role of re-assessment is under-rated when it comes to motivating young people. At WEDJ, I would say more students were successful when teachers did not accept mediocre levels of achievement. The expectation was for classroom assessment to happen often, that teachers would keep track of when students achieved at an "A" rate (90%+) a "B" rate (80–89% mastery) or "I" (incomplete mastery). The following is part of the ELA portion of the report for Grade 3:

<i>Grade 3 ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS PROGRESS REPORT</i>			
<i>*By the end of the Grade 3 Program we aim to have all students master the following BOLDED ELA skills: (Note the greyed in tasks are what students aim to do by the end of Grade 4)</i>	<i>Nov.</i>	<i>March</i>	<i>June</i>
<i>Explain with evidence different qualities of a main character (Foundation)</i>			
<i>Compare different settings in at least 2 stories</i>			
<i>Explain what makes a story humorous with specific examples (Extension)</i>			
<i>Describe beginning, middle, end of story (Foundation)</i>			
<i>Discuss words in stories that paint images</i>			
<i>Develop and present an oral story (Extension)</i>			
<i>Ask "who" "what", "when", "where", "how" and "why" questions about stories (Foundation)</i>			
<i>Ask and responds to "how" and "why" questions</i>			
<i>Form and ask comparative questions (Extension)</i>			
<i>Read and print Grade 2 sight words; simple compound, phonetic, and curriculum words, synonyms, with an emphasis on proper and common nouns. (Foundation)</i>			
<i>Define and spell Grade 3 words (uses root words, prefixes, and suffixes)</i>			
<i>Define and spell Grade 4 words in dictations and everyday use (Extension)</i>			
<i>Discuss extent to which one identifies (or not) with the hero in a story (Foundation)</i>			
<i>Recognize self through story</i>			
<i>Compare characters in humorous story to self (Extension)</i>			

Figure 5. WEDJ Grade 3 ELA portion of progress report card

Students in grades 3 through 8 had an option to add comments about the new report card from the student electronic survey we conducted in November 2012. For the most part parents were very pleased with the change. 95% of families indicated they liked the new report cards. The following represent a sampling of comments about the new report shared by students:

STUDENT AND STAFF PERFORMANCE REVIEWS

- I like wedj report cards because it tells you that you can work at the next grade level
- it let me know what classes I am doing good in and telling me the not so good grade I need to do better in...
- It is a great way to show grades to my parents.
- I like it because it shows all our assignments and what our grade was on them.
- It says "I" instad of "F."
- I love the report cards because I can see my good grades that I earned.
- I love the report cards because they help me learn from mistakes
- They show how well I'm doing

Immediately following the distribution of the new student progress reports, all homeroom teachers took part in Parent Teacher Conferences. The report card served as a guide for setting goals, at the same time as opening a window into the world of education. The mysterious grade books, where teachers keep track of student scores on tests, projects and classroom contributions, would no longer be for teachers' eyes only. The WEDJ performance-based report was a welcomed communication tool, clarifying the specifics about what was mastered in each subject area. The school calendar was revised early on to ensure that *parent-teacher conferences* happened immediately following the distribution of the progress reports. The family participation in these events varied. 56% of our parents came to the first day (October 22, 2012). While parent participation never reached 100% parent involvement, it did improve (73%) when we later tried to offer PT Conferences at the same time as violin and dance performances. At the end of the year, we also organized an impressive science fair with an arts exhibit, so parents could see evidence of learning during the conferences.

In the back of my mind I wanted to try and see if a Saturday might bring out more families, for working parents to have more opportunities to connect with their child's teachers. I know we hosted our first parent-teacher conference at JRLA on a Saturday, and we were thrilled with the 93% turn-out, and given most of those students stayed through the four years of high school and graduated to post-secondary programs, in a challenging urban setting, the giving up of Saturdays by staff to feature these connections with parents seems to have been a worthwhile investment. I regret we did not have a chance to explore Saturday conferencing more at WEDJ. The point of bringing teachers, parents and ideally students together, should be more than about explaining results. More time for each conference would have enabled all stakeholders to co-plan for improvement. Ms. Rave volunteered to search out and present ideas to staff about research-based 'student-led conferencing,' but with so much going on, this initiative wound up on our 'bucket list' for future consideration.

The new progress report was poised to bring some positive attention to WEDJ; this was part of the plan to support and encourage student learning. We understood, at the school level, the value of implementing a new reporting system, and while we were eager to share highlights of the new report card with the WEDJ Board, they

did not appear interested in discussing the new initiative, nor our parent, teacher and student response to it.

Just as students should be assessed using rigorous qualitative protocols, I would argue that the staff, within the school, should be afforded the same due process. The poor practice of evaluating teachers, based on student scores, appeared to be rampant in many charter schools. I did not conform to the idea that teaching performance and student test were interchangeable. While it was commonplace in DC to attach a significant portion of a teacher's performance review to student test scores, I did not buy into such a limited and simplistic view. At WEDJ, our performance reviews were professional and grounded in current educational research. While we addressed, through observation and feedback, the interactions between the teacher and the student, the determination of whether an educator was "developing" or "exceptional", was not based on student test scores. Students can test well in a weak teacher's classroom, and students can test well in an exceptional teacher's classroom. It is irresponsible to evaluate teachers based on the results of standardized tests. To build a team of exceptional educators takes time and hard work.

By October in our first year, I conducted performance reviews of the teacher leadership team (Bradshaw, Carter, Corcoran, Harris, Nugent, Palmer, and Sessoms). I wanted to model for them how to conduct observations using the customized research-based tool, we called 'Red Carpets.' The term serve as a tribute and connection to the school's arts focus. We adapted the criteria for teacher observations from Charlotte Danielson's *Framework for Teacher Effectiveness*, a widely respected and research-based work. When I wrote the book, *Mining for Gems: Exceptional Practices in Teaching and Learning*, with Jackie Copp, we asked Charlotte to write our 'forward.' I continued to correspond with Charlotte throughout my career, and when we adapted the WEDJ Red Carpet assessments for self, mentor and supervisor performance reviews, I sent her a copy of the tool; she was very supportive of our progressive way of implementing many of her ideas.

After a discussion about each observation, I sent each leader a follow through email detailing recommendations for improvement and validation of teaching strengths. After experiencing the process, I asked each teacher-leader to work with three to six people to complete the first round of performance reviews by November 2012. By May 2013, I had also completed at least one observation of each teacher in the school. Final evaluations for all teaching personnel took into account an analysis of 107 teaching assets/strengths that addressed their instruction, professionalism, planning, parent relationships and student performance. We discussed individual goals that included student performance. At this point each teacher was informed of his or her overall classification for the year. In my first year, I identified two teachers (10%) at the 'developing' level and as such informed them that they had a year to make the transition to the 'proficient' or 'exceptional' standard. Twenty teachers (64%) met the 'proficient' standard and approximately seven teachers (21%) demonstrated work at the 'exceptional' level. In my second year, the two 'developing' teachers were improving and many proficient teachers were on their way to demonstrating

‘exceptional’ status. Over 1.5 years, the staff talent pool had improved the critical mass of exceptional teachers by 25%.

Staff members, who demonstrated what I referred to as ‘damaging’ actions, received immediate attention. Over the course of two years, I had to place five teachers on Performance Improvement Plans (PIP’s). They were usually given one month to turn things around. We had an English teacher who did not submit effective long-term or short-term plans and basically ‘winged it’ for most classes; a visual art teacher who did not plan and oversubscribed to handing out pages from coloring books; a PK teacher who lost kids on a field trip at the Horizon Center and did not see the seriousness of the situation, another art teacher who lost his cool often with the kids, and a Kindergarten teacher who was habitually late. I also had to let a security staff member go immediately when he threatened another staff member.

Based on my own and the reviews of our seasoned teacher leaders, I continued to push for improved lesson planning that promoted a decrease in teacher talk, an increase in on-task student talk and an abundance of ‘hands on’ activities. We also focused attention on communicating to parents what students might be missing out on, even if they were absent for one day of school. It was time to make learning visible, so families could understand more fully why they needed to be just as inspired by school as their children. After all, with such a large population of young people, dependent on the adults in their lives to wake them up and transport them to school, we needed to be sure we paid serious attention to communications.

I was surprised to discover early on that when some teachers were away, they had not prepared emergency lesson plans, so when their substitute teachers arrived, they had little direction to guide them. I spoke to one of our key offenders, and gave him the responsibility of drafting and collecting the staff’s emergency substitute plans. Having a highly-qualified staff meant that every teacher had plans ready for themselves or a substitute teacher to implement.

On another professional level, I was troubled by the need to monitor the data from the daily staff sign-in registry; something I never imagined would be necessary. There were some staff members who roared into the parking lot at, or after, the start of school. For a quality program to happen, the teacher has to be in the classroom well in advance of the students to prepare for that day. I was also concerned about a few staff who left at the stroke of 4:00pm or exited and entered with the students, especially when many of their fellow colleagues were in their classrooms until 5pm and arriving at 7am. One parent had already said to me: “Why should we bring our kids on time, when some members of your staff are late for school?” No question, this mom had a valid point. I asked Mr. Sessoms to track the data and then I brought in the teachers with the largest number of ‘tardies’ and explained why arriving early was a requirement. Most of the teachers, except for one, made the necessary changes in the morning schedule to arrive in time for school.

It turned out to be an extremely awkward situation, however, when my co-leader’s arrival times became more and more inconsistent. There were many days when Mr. Manahan arrived after 10:30am, and it was rare he ever stayed passed

5:30 pm, yet his direct reports ran early morning and after school programs, without any direct supervision. I truly felt that with the challenge we had before us, there was no room for anyone to work from home. I was eager to collaborate with Manahan on new directions, but with the limited amount of time he was spending at school, the co-leading turned out to be in name only. I spoke with Manahan about my concerns, and while he did put in a few 7 am starts, it didn't last. When I learned that more and more of his job was out-sourced, I grew frustrated and texted Goldman one day and asked him: *'When you were Executive Director, how much time did you put in to the school each day.'* When Goldman replied '24-7', and asked 'why?' I let him know about the limited hours Manahan had been putting in. Goldman, however, probably should have been more aware that Manahan was not there much. Realizing that Manahan was not going to change his level of commitment, I let Goldman know that I could not work under Manahan's remote leadership approach, nor would I continue the next year with him in a co-leader role.

As it turned out, Manahan resigned in May 2013, at which time my role shifted to include the oversight of the non-instructional staff. At this moment in time, I discovered that performance reviews for operational staff had not taken place that year. I gathered details of the operation staff job descriptions and developed customized performance review tools for our facilities, maintenance, security, food services, admissions, data and business coordinator roles. I asked Ms. Lawson and Mr. Sessoms to carry out these initial assessments for non-instructional employees.

There was extensive investment of time put into the development of the 'red carpet' performance assessment tools for all staff at WEDJ. I also worked with Ms. Miles (Cordova) and Mr. Carter to establish specific carpets for our special education staff, and teaching assistants. While these elaborate tools served to clarify expectations, guide discussions and support goal setting for individual improvement, I had not been informed by Goldman, as ED or Board Chair of any process for my own performance review.

LEARNING COMMUNITIES FOR STAFF AND PARENTS

WEDJ offered a full array of professional and parent development opportunities for our community members. Apart from the ten days of preparation in the first summer, the staff took part in numerous professional growth experiences throughout the year. Teacher participation in PD (Professional Development) was consistently at or near 100%. We aimed to keep the momentum of the summer PD going throughout staff meetings, PD days and at PTA meetings. We built learning communities for staff by bringing in education experts, took part in PD activities at other schools, and sent staff to conferences. In October 2012, we brought in David Booth, a world expert on arts and literacy. In addition to authoring the highly-acclaimed *Impressions* Language Arts Series, and more recently: *Literary Techniques*, *Caught in the Middle*, *It's Critical*, *Exploding the Reading*, *Guiding the Reading Process*, and *The Arts Go to School*, Dr. Booth spent two days with staff in their classrooms, meeting with novice teachers and participating on an education panel following a PTA meeting. We only had a dozen parents turn up for the meeting and presentation, but there were two teachers from Two Rivers Charter School who joined us. In a letter following David's visit, he shared his observations about the positive spirit of the community and the quality of 'arts' instruction:

Dear Barb,

It is now a week since I visited your school, and the memories of this significant experience are resonating in my teacher's mind. It is still wondrous for me after these many years to spend time with excited students, powerful teachers and helpful support staff, alongside such a knowledgeable administrative team. As I visited classrooms, chatted with teachers and students, joined in mentoring conversations with new faculty, and engaged in extensive conversations with you and your colleagues, I found myself immersed inside your school's culture, and recognized this as a place filled with commitment and promise, centering around a focus of caring and responsibility, where everything about education matters.

Perhaps the highlight was the panel and the ensuing discussion: the student's insightful words began a spirited conversation about such significant educational issues, and the comments from the audience reflected the professional inquiry that we need as fuel for our own growth as teachers. We

should have taped it for parents to demonstrate their school at its shining best, but we never seem to capture those magic events.

As you as a school continue to explore your philosophy and practice, to hone your curriculum, to build relevant resources, to modify spaces and engage with the community, your students will benefit from being among educators who truly believe in their mandate of professional excellence. As you move forward with technology, become involved with inquiries, develop further print resources, integrate community arts groups, find a space for physical education, continue to deepen and intensify the curriculum, while maintaining your passionate yet rigorous approach to supporting your students, this school will be a place where everyone will have a voice and yet want to listen to others. The children will grow and flourish as they become an educated citizenry, and if my son and his family decide to move to Washington, I know just the school for my grandchildren.

Gratefully,

David

David Booth, Professor Emeritus

Department: Curriculum, Teaching and Learning, OISE, University of Toronto

The joy of learning is what David Booth shared in his musings. It was clear to him that we had a strong team of wonderful professionals under one roof. I noted to staff:

I was really pleased with the quality of the questions and respect shared for such a legend in our midst on Monday. Thanks to all for being such wonderful and welcoming hosts.

We deliberately coordinated some professional development activities so our parents and staff could engage in learning together. I was thrilled when the school and the PTA joined forces to bring in Michael Thompson, a featured guest on *Oprah Winfrey*, *60 Minutes*, *20/20* and multiple morning television programs. Dr. Thompson volunteered his time in April 2013 for a full day visiting classrooms and meeting with the WEDJ staff. In addition to writing the best seller, *Raising Cain*, Michael Thompson had written many books including: *Speaking of Boys*; *The Pressured Child*; and *Mom They're Teasing Me*. We chartered a bus on the PD day when Michael visited and joined the staff at IDEA Charter School, where Goldman, now WEDJ Board Chair, was on staff as the Executive Director. The intent of the collaborative professional development (PD) was to listen to Michael's message and then mix with teachers from the other school to discuss issues about boys and learning. The lecture hall type seating arrangement did not permit for interaction. We simply participated in a Q and A format after Michael's afternoon presentation. There were only a few teachers from IDEA who opted in to the session and while I

was hoping our Board Chair might have joined us, he returned to his office to attend to business.

I remember the day clearly as it was the same day as the Boston Marathon bombing. When Mr. Carter and I took Michael out for lunch, he began receiving dozens of messages on his cell phone. Given his home and practice was in the Boston area, he was especially shocked by the information streaming in. He shared that this incident triggered his memory of 911. He had been on a flight from Boston to New York to speak on the *Today Show*. He explained how his flight was re-routed and had to rent a car and drive 14 hours to his destination. In spite of all the chaos of the day in his hometown, Dr. Thompson didn't skip a beat. His messages and insights shared with the WEDJ community were inspiring and his generosity was deeply appreciated.

That evening Michael presented *'Eight Things You Cannot Do For Children'* to staff and families at WEDJ. We also invited educators from other charter schools; several staff members joined us from Two Rivers, again. The presentation was free and was introduced by the *Sons of Freedom* dance troop, led by Mr. Harris. Mr. Carter also volunteered to cook for a family barbecue that night. While I was pleased to see that most of the staff turned out for this event, we unfortunately only had a dozen parents there to hear a powerful message about how boys learn differently. Even when parents were informed through multiple avenues about the opportunity, they were underrepresented in the group. I was, however, thrilled to see our staff embrace lifelong learning that evening long after their workday had ended. As part of their professional development I also purchased enough personal copies of Michael's bestseller for each teacher's personal professional library. Most staff members lined up after his presentation to have him autograph their individual copies of *Raising Cain*.

I was delighted when treasures like Dr. Thompson and Dr. Booth donated their time to come to WEDJ, and while there was no Board presence during their visits, I did write letters on behalf of WEDJ thanking our guests for their generosity. No Board member contacted these experts to thank them directly for their time.

As a follow-up to Dr. Thompson's presentation, we looked into the piloting of a single-gender class, but before moving in this direction, we researched existing programs and took a team of 4 staff members to visit DeMatha Catholic High School. We shared our findings and recommendations with families at four focus groups set up in May. The team was eager to pilot single gender classes in grade 3, providing we had the support from families. The presentation highlighted the following reasons for introducing a single gender class:

- To see if single-gender classes improve student achievement
- To reduce suspension rates
- To see if males might be more willing to dance and participate in other arts
- To promote a sense of brotherhood or sisterhood with fewer distractions from the opposite sex
- To promote greater confidence/self-awareness
- To help girls build more positive relationships with each other

Ms. Palmer also shared what a positive experience it had been for her sons in a single gender school. The few charter schools offering single gender programs indicated they had enormous wait lists, giving us the sense that many families, outside of WEDJ, were interested in the single-gender offer. Not many parents, however, attended the focus group sessions, so we decided to wait a year before moving forward with this initiative, to give the masses more time to reflect on the possibility.

At monthly staff meetings and in-house PD events, I asked everyone to bring their PD binders, so that all the professional development materials could be housed in one place for future reference. Everyone who brought a binder could enter into a raffle for a gift card. We began our meetings with this ritual to encourage prompt starts and ending times. I was aware that time was precious and we did not want to waste anyone's energy! The next year when Ms. Palmer took on the role of Dean of Staff Development, she added more magic to the mix. During the summer PD preparation days, we coordinated a 'Cinema Time at WEDJ' theme, and everyone had tickets, popcorn and front row seats to view a series of fun film clips to reflect on how we were re-building our school.

In terms of professional development, we also worked hard to develop talent within our ranks. We approached teachers to see if they would give up a week of their summer break to go to Boston to learn more about teaching and learning through Harvard's *Project Zero* courses. We supported a dozen staff members to the tune of over \$35,000 that covered travel, accommodation and course expenses. We were serious about professional development and serious about developing solid teachers and strong teacher leaders. We asked all staff, who were generously supported by WEDJ, to sign an agreement stating they would not transfer to another school the next year. We felt this money was an investment in the students of WEDJ. Of the 12 teachers who went to Boston, one teacher did not return to WEDJ in September, and one teacher left in December. Such changes of hearts, however, did not dampen the spirit of the remaining staff who did return with a wonderful sense of confidence, initiative and drive. While this was a risk to send so many staff members, it is one I would take over again, given the transforming returns gained by the staff, who stayed and added talent depth to our school.

We also sent three staff members to the CODE (Council of Ontario Drama and Dance Educators) Conference in Canada. Ms. Lawson stayed up late to find inexpensive flights; we arranged with David Booth to pick up the WEDJ team and transport them to the event three hours north of Toronto. The team was made up of Ms. Palmer, and two teaching assistants, Ms. Burrill and Mr. McKeiver, who also taught dance classes at WEDJ. How often does a school send teaching assistants to conferences in another country? The next year Ms. Palmer took on the drama specialty course and contributed significantly as did Ms. Burrill and Mr. McKeiver to improving the quality of our art programming and school productions.

As a result of securing a substantial SOAR (Scholarships for Opportunity and Results) grant from OSSE (Office of the State Superintendent of Education), we

funded an expansion of our science programming. We were able to hire an additional science teacher and send Ms. Cummings to Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh for a week of robotics training in the summer of 2013. When she returned, she built up impressive robotics units by bringing *Mindstorms* to WEDJ. The students loved the program that helped us in our quest to enrich the arts through a STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, ARTS and Mathematics) focus.

We also had staff members submit to present at the National Charter School Conference in DC that summer. The leadership team was also invited to present at the NAESP (National Association of Elementary School Principals). Mr. Harris and Mr. Sessoms attended Harvard's '*New and Aspiring Leaders*' Program, offered by *The Principals' Center*. They returned inspired and full of rich ideas for moving forward with our plans for continuous improvement. I joined Ms. Lawson and Ms. Palmer at the *Disney Institute* in Florida to learn first-hand about the management, vision making and innovative side of the Disney operation. We wanted to make sure that the academic and operations side of the school could be influenced by some of the best examples in the business. The plan was to bring Disney facilitators to the school, after the 2014 DC-CAS tests, to help us co-design an innovative direction for the school – one that elevated the link between the arts and STEM. After my return, I shared with staff how we could learn from model organizations like Disney. The magic of Walt's work was all about creating something that was not just another amusement park; Likewise, we were committed at WEDJ to being much more than a typical arts school.

Locally many staff members took part in the *Washington International School Summer Institute for Teachers* (WISSIT) a group of professionals committed to connecting DC educators with Harvard *Project Zero* ideas. We also attended the 'Grapple' workshops at Two Rivers Charter School, as well as visited others schools to gain insight into other practices.

Apart from David Booth and Michael Thompson, we were able to attract the attention and support of Tony Upson from Howard University. Tony encouraged WEDJ to get involved in the *Capstone Project* – a grant that supported the development of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) in urban DC schools. Already committed to STEAM, with the large A for Arts, I was more than willing to bring WEDJ into the Capstone fold, that also added a \$2000 grant to the revenue side of our budget. Tony visited the school regularly and I was delighted to have an opportunity to talk with such a seasoned expert about education in DC. Tony had been an administrator in DC schools at the elementary and high schools level, in both public and charter schools, and was awarded a fellowship at Harvard School of Education. He met with me often, and offered mentorship support that was both affirming and wise. With his tremendous breadth of education experience in DC, I was able to tap into an exceptional resource. We were also fortunate to be invited to Howard's monthly *Brown Bag Lunches*, seminars that featured exceptional educators and experts from local school districts, the US Department of Education and university researchers. Ms. Bradshaw and Ms. Nugent

CHAPTER 16

joined me at two of these events. The presenters and professional conversations that followed each seminar were some of the best professional growth experiences I had experienced in the DC area.

The Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) was eager to provide opportunities for parents to learn more about education as well. Their meetings, on average, attracted between 10 and 50 participants. The WEDJ Board had two members of the PTA to ensure that family voices were represented. At my first PTA meeting we had over a dozen teachers attend the afterschool event. I was proud to see folks step up and be part of this important organization.

I recall that at most meetings many parents brought their toddlers or had children playing in the background. At times, it was very difficult to hear anyone speak at the meetings. Not budgeting for childcare probably deterred participation, but with over 400 students, it would be difficult to find the funds and the people to supervise children on a monthly basis. The President also brought in food and interesting guest speakers (fitness, nutrition, and local farmer's market experts) to try and boost attendance, but the turnouts for most meetings was relatively low. The one time we boasted over 75 people was when the PTA combined the meeting with a Family Valentine Party. Food and fun was a trigger!

Probably one of my deepest regrets was not being able to find a way to bring more families to the school for PTA meetings or parent education programs. In order to help families to support learning in their homes, we needed to be able to make authentic connections between the school and home. We tried the conventional strategies of offering parent education nights linking them to PTA (Parent Teacher Association) functions, but the turnouts were low in comparison to events that featured our students participating in the performing arts. Despite the limited participation, there seemed to be overwhelming trust in the school. If there was criticism from families, it was rarely about academics; it tended to be about how we implemented the arts programming. Nevertheless, I was committed to trying to find a way to bring parents in as partners in learning, beyond the arts.

NOVEMBER 2012 QUALITATIVE SITE REVIEW

WEDJ received performance input in a variety of ways. After our first few months of establishing a renewed culture, we welcomed feedback on areas for improvement from the members of the DC Charter Board's Qualitative Site Review (QSR) team. The review team was made up of one PCSB employee and consultants contracted to use a common rubric template to classify observations in terms of four quality classifications: Limited, Satisfactory, Proficient and Exemplary. The review consisted of one-day of observations followed by a ½ day unscheduled site visit. A team member was also to attend a WEDJ Board of Trustees Meeting and a PTA Meeting.

It took over a month to compile the review. We were content that the QSR report acknowledged some of our strengths and some areas for improvement. Initially, I was eager to gain some insight from outside the walls of our schools, to not only validate our ambitious efforts, but also to clarify specific directions and targets for improvement. While the DC Charter Board was aware that the school was operating under 'turn-around' conditions, the site review was conducted without consideration of the significant changes in leadership, shift in families (43% new students), as well as a majority of new staff. The QSR Report paid particular attention to how well the school aligned with the goals in its charter. Realizing that the goals of the charter, written in 2004, would not suffice in 2012, we had been working to revise the charter to fit the needs of our current students. While a new direction for the charter was shared with Mr. Goldman, the WEDJ Board did not move to request a modification to the charter, so the QSR report measured our success against outdated norms. Nevertheless, we paid serious attention to this first report issued on November 29, 2012.

I agreed with many findings in this first report. The feedback about the lack of student feedback (daily classroom assessment) and teachers' limited questioning techniques had also been revealed during the first set of internal performance reviews that began in October. We began introducing more research-based teaching methods, but these were challenging at first, not only for the new teachers, but also for teachers who were dependent on using textbooks. To change this culture, we needed time, and more classroom assessment resources. When the QSR team came in October to conduct their visits, we were beginning to implement many of these new approaches, first with our teacher-leaders, who later modeled them, using a team teaching strategy in their mentee's classrooms.

There were also some comments about bullying on the QSR report and we took these concerns seriously. The development of the PALS (Promoting Arts and

Leadership) course that integrated anti-bullying behavior, was not only scheduled daily for all students, it was also the first set of grades listed on the new WEDJ report card.

The QSR team representative did not attend a Board meeting, but they mentioned in their report that a quorum had not been met at our first meeting. They also indicated that a partnership with Charter Board Partners to find more Board members, would help us gain stability.

I was pleased to see that the QSR team recognized some strengths of the school. While we inherited poor re-enrollment, resulting in a 'limited' rating in this area, the review team did take notice that the number of students present in their seats was impressive. The reviewers also had good things to share with respect to school climate and culture:

- Warmth of classroom interactions between students
- Student respect for cultural and developmental differences
- Good classroom control with clearly defined standards of behavior
- New teachers appreciated the help from designated 'mentors'
- Extensive investment in professional development
- Positive school climate influenced by new PALS program

There were several comments, however, about classroom management and engagement that indicated that some classrooms were not as strong as others. While only a few students were questioned, they indicated that they felt the school was safer. The report also mentioned that the staff appreciated the support from the new leadership and the new program directions, and that they had noticed an improvement in school climate.

I disagreed with the statement in the report that referred to a lack of support for students with special needs. Our Special Education Coordinator, Stevonna Miles, was highly regarded as a conscientious and caring expert in the field. Mr. Evan Murray, Program Manager from the DCPS Special Education Department office, was a solid supporter of her work. Her team managed caseloads by adhering precisely to legal time supports individually, in small groups and through inclusion team teaching with teachers. With less than a 5% Spanish-speaking population, we did not have students who qualified for 1:1 ELL support, yet the report indicates that we had fallen short in meeting these student needs. The ELL teacher was aware that our Spanish-speaking students were more than adept at speaking English, and having someone on staff full time, who also provided additional support for identified special needs students, was much more ELL support than what was required by local policy.

There was also one new member of the special education team of six who shared some misinformation about the lack of small class teaching options for students with special needs. Ms. Miles was away the day when the QSR team reviewed special education, and when she returned the next day, and made time to meet with the representatives, they did not speak with her. I believe the 'limited' rating for special education programming was not justified. The small class sizes and common

mentor teaching practices may not have been observed, but they were happening and teachers were eager to have the support of the special education team in their rooms on a regular basis. As part of their caseloads, several special education teachers worked with grades 6, 7, and 8 students in small group supervisory roles, adding in direct teaching of research and technology skills as part of their proactive approach to supporting students with special needs. This course, which was not observed, also provided all students with additional supports in English Language Arts and data management in mathematics. Having a chance to do project-based learning in small groups was an additional plan to deliberately support student learning. This innovative course was collaboratively taught by the history, science, special education, ELL and library teachers. Students were highly engaged in this course.

Overall, the quality of the site review was well balanced, providing examples of what we were doing well, at the same time listing opportunities for improvement. We did not spend much time addressing this QSR report at the WEDJ Board of Trustees meetings. In hindsight, such discussions might have enabled the WEDJ Board members to learn much more about the school, its culture and our plans on the ground for school improvement.

INVESTING TIME TO RECOGNIZE OTHERS

The phrase, ‘it takes a community, is used often in a general sense, but doing the work to recognize the members of the community well, is nothing short of hard work. When we coordinated efforts to clean up our storage space, we discovered some legacy plaques and trophies amongst the wreckage. In the main hall, there were a few scattered trophies with few updated in years. There was also a certificate from *America’s Choice Schools* on a cheesy frame stuck up in the narrow back office – out of public view. The lack of images and artifacts for recognition was something I wanted to change and felt that an award dedicated to the commitment of students, staff and parents to WEDJ school would be a good place to start. Eager to bring the Board Chair into the fold on efforts to revive a positive school culture, I recommended we name the award the ‘*John Goldman WEDJ Commitment Award.*’ When I asked Goldman to come to the assembly to announce this new honor, I was pleased he could attend. Information about the new award was shared in the PrincipalPoint WEDJ newsletter:

In tribute to the service of John Goldman, who served as executive director of WEDJ from 2010 through 2012, WEDJ has created the John Goldman Award. The award will be given at the end of each school year to one student, one parent, and one staff member from WEDJ who best exemplifies the WEDJ Commitment, below.

At WEDJ, we are committed to

- 1. The safety of all members of the William E. Doar Jr., Public Charter School for the Performing Arts community.*
- 2. Creativity.*
- 3. Preparing all members of the community to be successful in their academic pursuits, college, and life.*
- 4. Communicating respectfully.*
- 5. Honesty.*
- 6. Creating a next generation of global leaders through the arts.*

Each winner will be honored at an assembly and will receive a book, endowed by Mr. Goldman. A committee of WEDJ staff and parents will select the winners. To learn more about the award, contact WEDJ Principal Dr. Barbara Smith. (<http://www.wedjschool.us/students/announcing-the-john-goldman-award>)

The first year the winners of the award included our first Student Council President, Parent (and Teaching Assistant), Ms. Kamilah Wheeler, and Mr. Terence Carter, our Dean of Students, who scored a land-slide victory when the staff voted on the recipient!

We addressed recognition in a number of ways at WEDJ. In the new year (2013), to encourage further recognition, I invited all teacher leaders to a weekend meeting to discuss the possibility of developing more specific leadership roles at WEDJ. Mr. Carter and Mr. Sessoms joined us, but Mr. Manahan could not make it. At this brainstorming session, we created three ‘Dean’ roles (Dean of Special Education; Dean of Fine Arts; and Dean of Teacher Development). We also added three Vice Principal roles (VP, Student Culture; VP, Academics; and VP, School Management.) (<http://www.wedjschool.us/leadership/new-teacher-and-staff-leadership-roles-at-wedj>) Mr. Manahan continued in his role as the Chief Operations Officer and named Rita Lawson as his Deputy Head to oversee non-instructional office staff. Later, when Manahan resigned, Ms. Lawson moved into the VP, School Business position. When the Board asked me to add the ED position to my principal responsibilities, I decided to take a pay cut of \$8000 in order to subsidize the pay of the new administrators in the school. I also felt the wage would be more in alignment with other charters to ensure that more public funds could go back into the school. By the end of the first year, the lead team had expanded to eight people:

- Ms. Bradshaw (VP of Academics)
- Mr. Carter (VP, School Culture)
- Mr. Harris (Dean of Fine Arts)
- Ms. Lawson (VP, Business)
- Ms. Miles (Dean of Special Education)
- Ms. Nugent (Dean of Teacher Development)
- Mr. Sessoms (VP, School Management)
- Dr. Smith (Principal and Acting Executive Director)

We called the group of eight, Team Odyssey, as a tribute to the leadership journey we were taking together. When the idea of restructuring was first presented to Mr. Goldman, he said he thought the idea was brilliant. These were some of the only words of encouragement, I can recall in my 21 months of work at WEDJ. While we had not budgeted for increased salaries for the remainder of the 2012–2013 school year, I felt that staff might appreciate recognition for their efforts to work collaboratively on improving our school.

As a result of this mid-year reorganization, we were able to reduce some overlap by designating within the office staff specific Data Coordinator, Food Services Coordinator and Admissions Coordinator positions. Ms. Lawson would have four direct reports, including Mr. Gregorio (Technology Coordinator), rather than eight, giving her more time to conduct performance reviews and monitor a smaller team. Previously, Ms. Lawson also coordinated the afterschool programming, so technically her hours for oversight would have been from 6:30 am to 6 pm. When Mr. Sessoms agreed to

oversee the cleaning and security staff, Ms. Lawson would have more reasonable hours, and given she managed payroll and the office staff, it made sense to spread out her responsibilities. While this shift recognized the efforts of Ms. Lawson, it was difficult for the members of the security and maintenance team to accept a new supervisor.

The new restructuring kept Mr. Carter as ‘second in command’ in the VP, School Culture role, where he was freed up to focus on positive school behaviors and work with Mr. Sessoms on discipline-related matters. I wanted Mr. Sessoms to oversee the management of security and facilities. Sessoms set high standards and the school physical plant improved considerably. He worked during winter and summer breaks to provide oversight for cleaning, painting, and bulletin board construction as well as setting up security monitoring systems (including a new intercom) throughout the school. Unfortunately, when I appointed Mr. Sessoms to this position of responsibility, there was backlash from a number of staff members who were not pleased with this decision. There was considerable turnover in his staff and when I spoke with several of his direct reports, they suggested his tone was condescending. When I first arrived, the non-instructional staff did not have clearly defined job responsibilities, so not only did they have to adjust to set expectations and more oversight, the security and maintenance group had to report to someone who was serious about being exceptional. Mr. Goldman had received several calls from members of Sessoms’ disgruntled team and asked me to let him go. I was transparent with Sessoms about these concerns, and while I tried to give him advice on different ways to approach his group, I’m not sure these challenges were going to be easy to sort through. I did, however, believe that given the right team, Sessoms would have been able to grow to be that leader people would want to work with, rather than work for. I did not shy away from removing weak team members, but for me, this was about giving people an opportunity to turn things around. While I could have made the popular decision to remove Sessoms, I could not ignore his keen sense of loyalty to the school, how much the students and parents loved him and the obvious change in the cleanliness of the physical plant that he influenced in such a positive way.

Overall, I was very impressed with the way the leadership team stepped up to their responsibilities. In our first year, everyone took on these added responsibilities with only a slight reduction in teaching. The idea that teacher leaders can model teaching while mentoring is not only an affordable way to increase leadership opportunities in schools, but it can also increase credibility when those being mentored can see first-hand that their mentors have similar challenges that they can overcome with best practices. I was so pleased with everyone’s commitment, that I nominated four members of the lead team for the *Washington Post* ‘Teacher of the Year’ Award. I also built in the expectation of nominating educators for awards into each job description, so our lead team would have experience writing nominations, and appreciating the merits of what we all contributed together. Realizing that there would be only one winner, I provided Bradshaw, Harris, Nugent and Sessoms with their own copy of their nomination for their professional portfolios. While no one from WEDJ was selected for this teacher honor that spring, everyone seemed to appreciate the time taken to recognize their strengths.

I also nominated Mr. Carter for the Charter School Hall of Fame Award.

Mr. Carter had an amazing track record as a Dean of Students and now VP, School Culture, at the William E. Doar, Jr. Charter School for the Performing Arts. He didn't just talk about being a family, his efforts to support the students, families and staff were selfless, generous and purposeful. By January, Mr. Carter had every phone number of our families in his cell phone and many were memorized! Families trusted Mr. Carter and his presence at the school makes a difference at WEDJ. As a twenty-year veteran, Mr. Carter was that rock who made home visits, who helped parents and students make good choices and gave administration sound advice. We were proud of so many initiatives he brought to the table. Mr. Carter created a leadership course for our grade 8 students where they used Covey's text: "7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens"... Mr. Carter also taught small groups of males in specialized math support groups...Carter continued to share a love for his students and our school. I can honestly say he was the glue that held us together. Everyone needs a Mr. Carter and I, for one, believe he is one of the most outstanding educators I have met in my 30 plus career as a teacher and school leader.

That spring, the DC Association of Charter Schools STARS Tribute asked for schools to share nominations for outstanding teachers, students, parents and administrators. We submitted Bradshaw, Harris, Nugent and Sessoms as our four teacher nominations, as well as our President of the Parent-Teacher Association, Cynthia Jordan, and a grade 7 popular peer teacher, <student A>. We also nominated Student B, who was a finalist for the Hope Award. The DC Charter School Association, that sponsored the event, also featured the *Son's of Freedom Dance Troop*, led by Mr. Harris, so I was delighted to observe their talent and hear other educators and families sing their praises. I was also pleased that Mr. Sessoms came to cheer on our nominees at the event held at the CAPS Charter School. We sat with Student B's family and were thrilled when they announced that Cynthia Jordan and Student A were selected as the Outstanding Parent and Student for DC Charter Schools.

Whenever there was room to recognize our exceptional talent, I made time to support our students and staff. In addition to nominating selected individuals, we also took National Teacher Appreciation Week seriously at WEDJ. We brought in a massage therapist to give free 15-minute shoulder and neck rubs for each staff member. We also sponsored a popular bowling night social and Ms. Lawson set up a fun Caribbean style tiki dance and dinner party at the end of our staff appreciation week in May 2013.

One of the most thankless positions in a school was the Teaching Assistant (TA) role. At WEDJ we were fortunate to have ten talented folks who worked hard for low wages. I was happy to create the 'TA Tuesday' ritual where I'd bring in treats every Tuesday for our TA's, who were always willing to go the extra mile! I tried to use the bundles on an ongoing basis, to thank staff members who worked hard for WEDJ. I recall many report card nights where we stayed late to make sure over 400 documents were ready for distribution in a timely manner.

WELCOMED VISITORS

By November in our first year we had several visitors come to WEDJ. Dr. Campbell, who I had interviewed with, for a position at American University, toured the school and discussed with me at length the importance of involving parents in charter schools. Dr. Campbell, who was also a Board member from the Park Charter School, spoke highly about what we were doing and remained a trusted supporter during my time at WEDJ. We discussed the possibilities of setting up collaborative partnerships for grant applications in the future.

Probably one of our most famous visitors was Jalen Rose, the former NBA star, and current ESPN commentator. Jalen was going to be at Georgetown for the *March Madness* basketball series and was eager to visit WEDJ. The students and staff were thrilled when Jalen dropped into every classroom and spent time talking to people about our school. While I had worked with Jalen for close to two years in Detroit, to get the Jalen Rose Leadership Academy up and running between 2009 and 2011, and kept up an on-going email conversation with him about exceptional practices in education, I was pleased that he made time to share much more than a celebrity minute with our students and staff. I took a call that morning from Tony Upson at Howard University, who dropped everything and drove over to the school just to get a picture with Jalen. I never doubted Jalen's desire to be a part of the movement to improve education. He was on the Board of Michelle Rhee's *Student's First Campaign* and had sound instincts about what happens in great schools. Had he known about the depths of Tony's contributions to education in DC, I am sure he would have dropped everything for a photo with Tony. Jalen's humility and sincerity is part of what keeps his brand so sustainable, in not only his field of communication, but in his more recent passion, education.

Jalen was impressed when he discovered that the grade 8 students were learning how to debate. Jalen observed volunteer, Paul Kanellopoulos, teaching the arts and science of debating. Paul's visit was also highlighted in the March 2013 newsletter:

Paul Kanellopoulos Teaches WEDJ Eighth-Graders the Art of Debate

Last Thursday and Friday, GWU law student and Harvard University debate coach Paul Kanellopoulos treated WEDJ eighth-graders to a four hour workshop on the fundamentals of debating. The students viewed the debate on the question: Should College Football Be Banned? Students examined four positions shared by:

- H. G. "Buzz" Bissinger, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, is the author of *Friday Night Lights*, and writer for *The New York Times Magazine* and *Sports Illustrated*.

- Malcolm Gladwell, *a staff writer for The New Yorker, and formerly, The Washington Post. He also authored the best-sellers The Tipping Point, Blink, and Outliers.*
- Tim Green, former Atlanta Falcons defensive end *and author of more than 26 books. He has served as an NFL analyst for Fox Sports and a commentator for NPR and Good Morning America. While at Syracuse University, he was an NCAA Top Six Scholar and a finalist for the Rhodes Scholarship.*
- Jason Whitlock *is a national columnist for FOXSports.com and was an All-State offensive lineman in high school in Indianapolis and played college football at Ball State University.*

Students then proceeded to apply debate technique to address such issues as working age, nutritional lunches, and increasing the age for driver's licenses. (<http://www.wedjschool.us/debate/paul-kanellopoulos-teaches-wedj-eighth-graders-the-art-of-debate>)

Our guest teacher was fascinated by the brilliance of one student, in particular, who in Paul's words, "almost had me" in his mock class debate. This student had been a behavior challenge for many teachers, but he was clearly inspired by Paul and the opportunity to learn how to formally debate. I instinctively knew this student was gifted intelligently, so I tried to help him apply to Georgetown Prep for high school, but we could not get someone to drive him to the Admission's test. I regret to this day that I didn't go over to his apartment and take him myself.

We also established a strong relationship with the US Chess Center, who provided chess instructors for us once a week. David Mehler and Gavin Francis were instrumental in supporting our program. Our students were thrilled to work with Mr. Teachy, whose warmth and patience helped many of our young people learn how to play chess. I wanted all grades 3 through 8 students to learn how to play chess for several reasons. First off, there was much research that linked chess to improved understandings in math; it was also a fun game for lifelong recreational pursuits! Many independent schools in Toronto had integrated chess into their math programs with impressive results so I saw first-hand that chess did not have to just be an afterschool club for a few students; everyone could learn the game if schools took the time to build it into the regular curriculum. Robert McLellan, producer of the movie, *Brooklyn Castle*, was so thrilled WEDJ gave the game so much status, he arranged to bring Rochelle Ballantyne, national youth chess champion, to WEDJ to meet and play games with our students. She was featured in the film, so we invited families to see it during our 'Family Week' in the spring. While few parents could make it during the school day, our grade 3 through 8 students were glued to the screen, eager to cheer on their new role model. I recall how excited the kids were to meet her; I must have taken over a dozen photos of Rochelle with individuals in our grade 8 class. The following segments were highlighted from an article featured on the *Teen Vogue* website:

Teen Chess Champion Rochelle Ballantyne on Starring in ‘Brooklyn Castle’
By Sierra Tishgart

At the I.S. 318 middle school in Brooklyn, 65 percent of students live below the federal poverty level. Yet despite the odds, the school has the highest ranked junior high chess team in the country and holds almost 30 national championships—more than any other school in the nation. A new documentary takes a close look at how a few select students, including Rochelle Ballantyne, excelled at the game. Rochelle’s the only girl featured in Brooklyn Castle, and she has her sights set on becoming the first African-American female master in the history of chess. It’s been four years since filming of this documentary commenced—Rochelle is now a high school senior—but her name is still at the top of I.S. 318’s list of best players. We spoke to her about competing against mostly male players and making plans for college...

What’s driving you to become the first African-American female master in the history of chess? – *“My grandmother. When I first started playing, she introduced to me the idea of being the first African-American female chess master. I didn’t think about it much because for me it seemed like an impossible feat, and I didn’t think it could happen. I wasn’t as focused and dedicated as I am now. I didn’t think I was a good chess player—people told me I was, but it wasn’t my mentality at that moment. But then after she died, that really affected me, because she was the one person that always had confidence in me. She never pushed me, and she always respected me for who I was. I have to reach that goal for her.” ...*

How does it feel to have your story broadcasted to the public through the release of this documentary? *“I’m really happy that my story is being told because it’s inspirational. I don’t want to sound over-confident, but we’re really awesome kids and I hope that people see the film and follow suit. The biggest message is that you can achieve anything you want to achieve if you work hard for it. We’re living proof of that.” don’t want to reach the mark of becoming the first female African-American chess master for other people; I want to reach it for my grandmother and me.” ...*

How does playing chess impact your academic life? *“Chess makes me think. It helps me in school, and it can really help in the college applications. It motivates me and makes me push myself harder.”*

What about your personal life? *“Chess is emotionally burdening, but when I win, it makes me feel a whole lot better about myself. I feel like I can accomplish so much more, and so that’s helped me through the years.” ...*

One of the issues raised in this documentary is that I.S. 318 is facing budget cuts, and the chess program is in jeopardy.

CHAPTER 19

What do you want audiences to know? *“Kids have achieved so much because of the chess program at I.S. 318, and now because of budget cuts, that program might not be there anymore, and that’s really horrible. It’s so sad that you can take out money from schools because education is what allows you to succeed in life. My brother goes to I.S. 318 now, and the chess team might not be able to go to nationals. When people watch the movie, I want them to see how important the school is to all of us, and how it molded our lives. We have to pave the way so that other kids can achieve what we’ve achieved.”* (<http://www.teenvogue.com/story/rochelle-ballantyne-chess-brooklyn-castle>)

When Rochelle was at WEDJ, she had just been informed that she was accepted at Stanford University in California. She was truly an inspiration for our students and we were grateful that the US Chess Center made WEDJ a stop on her DC tour. While WEDJ Board members were informed about Mr. Rose, Mr. Kannelopoulos, and Ms. Ballantyne’s visits, they did not make an appearance or make efforts to thank them for coming to WEDJ.

TEARS IN HEAVEN

There were no words to express how our community responded to the news of the Newtown school massacre. My ‘bundle’ to staff that week, was brief. I recall saying something like ‘words cannot express such deep sadness.’ The response to families, co-written with Mr. Carter and Mr. Manahan was also shared with staff:

Dear Parents and Guardians,

WEDJ faculty and staff join the nation in expressing our sorrow to the Sandy Hook Elementary School community and families in Connecticut. We offer our condolences, thoughts, and prayers to all affected by this tragedy.

As members of this community, school staff and faculty have met to review all safety-related aspects of our school and to consider if additional ones need to be put in place. We want to reassure you that safety and security are a priority in all of our schools and we are dedicated to providing a safe and secure learning environment each and every day for our students and staff. We have a plan in place to handle emergency situations. We routinely test security measures at school, provide safety training for staff, and conduct proactive safety drills with students. While no amount of planning or training can guarantee that a tragedy such as this will not occur, we work together and we are doing all we can to keep students and staff safe while at school.

These tragic shootings can also have a psychological impact on children. Our school counselor and support staff are in place and are available for students who may have difficulty understanding or coping with the violence and loss of life. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) offers the following tips for parents to help children with the aftermath of last Friday’s school shooting:

- Provide a clear and straightforward explanation of the event.*
- Return to a normal routine to the best extent possible while maintaining flexibility.*
- Let children know it’s okay to feel upset or angry.*
- Be a good listener and observer.*
- Provide various ways for children to express emotion, either through journaling, writing letters, talking, making a collage, or music.*
- Avoid exposing children to repeated media reports of the event.*

There is nothing more important to us than providing a safe and secure learning environment in our school. We ask you to work with us as we promote a culture

CHAPTER 20

where everyone works to be vigilant and focused on safety. Please talk with your children about the importance of sharing information that could be considered threatening to our school. If you would like more information about our safety procedures, review the handbook or see one of the administrators in the building.

Sincerely,

Dr. Barbara Smith, Principal

Terence Carter, Vice Principal of School Culture

John Manahan, Chief Operating Officer

<http://www.wedjschool.us/students/a-letter-from-our-leaders>

The next week, I recall how somber the mood was amongst the staff. I remember Cynthia (PTA President), just hugged me with no words spoken, just a quiet understanding.

I spoke to Ms. Tia Moore (McKeiver), our substitute art teacher, about doing something to honour the victims with teardrops. I couldn't get the Eric Clapton (and Will Jennings) song, 'Tears in Heaven', out of my head. Tia collaborated with her students to create a wonderful quilt with student messages written on teardrops. The quote on the blanket read... "if tears could build a stairway or lane, we'd walk up to heaven and bring them home again." She played the song for the students so they could hear the lyrics originally written to mourn Clapton's son, who had fallen from a 53-story high rise in New York City. We posted this work in the main foyer to promote further reflection, before we sent it to the Newtown community. At this horrendous time, our students were inspired by these lyrics:

<i>"Tears In Heaven" (Eric Clapton and Will Jennings)</i>	
Would you know my name If I saw you in heaven? Would it be the same If I saw you in heaven?	Time can bring you down, Time can bend your knees. Time can break your heart, Have you begging please, begging please.
I must be strong And carry on, 'Cause I know I don't belong Here in heaven	Beyond the door, There's peace I'm sure, And I know there'll be no more Tears in heaven.
Would you hold my hand If I saw you in heaven? Would you help me stand If I saw you in heaven?	Would you know my name If I saw you in heaven? Would it be the same If I saw you in heaven?
I'll find my way Through night and day, 'Cause I know I just can't stay Here in heaven.	I must be strong And carry on, 'Cause I know I don't belong Here in heaven.

TEARS IN HEAVEN

In my next bundle, I recall writing about the importance of compassion and a caring community. I spent hours crafting a message about nurturing a culture that embraces random acts of kindness, forgiveness and positive communication. It was an opportunity to address how adults in a school building are significant role models, and with so many daylight hours in front of students, we can all pull together in the shadow of such sadness. I also encouraged staff to wear green to support the nation's response and support for the community of Newtown.

ARTS ON FIRE

By the new year, the arts programming was really taking shape. The Arts were ‘on fire’ and Mr. Harris was front and center in supporting them at WEDJ! Under the leadership of Ms. Palmer, the PK Nation hosted a sell-out crowd for their fashion show extravaganza on January 30th in the multipurpose room. In addition to ballet and modern dance, Suzuki violin and a visual arts class demonstration was featured in the front foyer during the parent-teacher conference day in February. Students in grades 3–8 were also treated to an assembly from the *Afghan Youth Ensemble* and master classes after school led by members of the National Philharmonic. Probably one of the most memorable experiences, for me, was the production of ‘*On this Island*’, an inspiring salute to Black History Month coordinated by Mr. Harris, Mr. McKeiver and Ms. Nugent on February 28th. In the February PrincipalPoint I shared the following:

I’ve watched with our friends at the Washington Post, how the seeds of hope are planted and nourished to produce what I know is a wonderful salute to Black History Month... To recap some highlights of March, all students were treated to the dance and visual arts production of “On this Island” – on Friday, March 1st. The performances were breathtaking. Mr. McKeiver and the student’s passionate portrayal of inspirational quotes made for a wonderful display of artistic talent! (<http://www.wedjschool.us/dr-smith/principal-point-february-message-from-dr-smith>)

Each performer wore their t-shirts proudly. On the back, it read: “*To watch us dance is to hear our hearts speak, because we are Irie!*” According to Wikipedia: *Irie* (I-rie | ‘-ree) is a word in Jamaican Patois that can mean:

1. powerful and pleasing
2. excellent, highest
3. the state of feeling great.

Ms. Nugent was born in Jamaica and clearly was able to share her spirit and love for dance. The sold-out performance and depth of story woven with movement felt like I was viewing a production of ‘*So You Think You Can Dance*.’ I often spoke with Mr. Harris about perfection as an unrealistic expectation, and by removing the pressure for all to be on the same page at the same time, the students were able to present a very real and joyful integration of dance and story.

The energy of the arts continued to expand throughout the year. The guest arts teachers from the National Philharmonic (NP) organized a spring concert as an

afternoon assembly that was attended by family members and a few NP Board members. It was impressive to view the growth of the violin students over the course of the year. The classic tone of this presentation was well received and the behind the scenes support from Dr. Zirkle, Ms. Teachout and Mr. Harris helped make this event a success.

April featured the *Walls Arts Performance Group* at a special National Philharmonic sponsored assembly. Students were welcomed back after their week break with a wonderfully playful way of sharing dramatic story, music and dance. At the conclusion of *Family Week*, the PK Nation hosted a special dress-up ‘Black Tie’ event on the Friday evening. The food, dancing and décor was top notch. Ms. Palmer and her terrific team of supporters left everyone with truly positive memories!

In the spring, the music teachers hosted a music ‘*Infor-mance*’, an open house to view music classes. Mr. Ginsburg also took grade 6,7 and 8 student art pieces to the *Frieze Art Week Exhibition* in New York City. And in May, Mr. McKeiver and Mr. Harris combined their forces once again to create a stunning WEDJ rendition of *The Wiz* for dance students in grades 1 and 2. The productions of the WEDJ WIZ and *Kindergarten Goes to Broadway* were standing room only. The costumes, make-up and integrated stories were incredible. In my monthly newsletter I noted,

On Friday, May 24th, the grade 6–8 theater majors performed Macbeth to families and staff members. The students worked hard to memorize their lines and get into character. It was wonderful to see how far this group had progressed in a year.

At the beginning of the school year, we had some serious reservations about how the guest teachers would influence the quality of arts performances at WEDJ. Through collaboration, the school was able to satisfy most families by showcasing a combination of mini-productions and recitals that placed more students of all ages ‘performing’ in the limelight.

The heart of the arts continued to shine during the 2013–2014 school year, as well. The talented fine arts team coordinated *Kindergarten Goes to Hollywood*, an *Arts Alive* lecture demonstration for Grades 1 and 2 and a *Winter Solstice* production at CAPS (Community Academy Public School), featuring the grades 3–8 arts majors. Mr. Harris worked overtime to find a larger space to host this event. Ms. Elcock’s art students also shared and presented their impressive artwork that evening, in addition to musical pieces from Mr. Bell and Dr. Zirkle’s classes.

Mr. Harris also made some wonderful connections with the National Gallery of Art. In December 2013, Mr. Jon Frederick donated a 3D piece of art to the school and in February came to WEDJ to share a PowerPoint presentation and dialogue with parents about visual arts. Mr. Harris also coordinated a *Salute to the Arts Week*, that featured an adopted script written by Ms. Palmer from Debbie Allen’s ‘*Brothers and Sisters of the Knight*.’ I was so impressed with Ms. Palmer’s work leading up to the production and extremely proud of the young people who had transformed into actors under her tutelage!

OTHER PEOPLE'S MONEY

I've always treated my school budgets with the upmost regard, recognizing that every dollar saved can be reinvested in improved programs for the kids. I respect public funds and believe that restructuring how capital is distributed in schools, can have much more of a far-reaching impact on learning and future success, if we consciously look for better ways to conduct our fiscal operations.

When I first arrived at WEDJ, there was a room full of new mathematics, language arts and science resources. I could see, however, right away that the money for textbooks and canned curriculum programs might be better spent elsewhere. The spending of public funds on what was marketed as the newest, research-based and *Common Core* linked resources, was alive and well at William E. Doar, Jr., Public Charter School for the Performing Arts. A trip through the storeroom was like travelling through the 'holy grail' time machine, filled with '*ghosts of textbooks past*.' The question remains – if each series did not work before, why continue to purchase more? I sent back most of the materials for the year and planned to use the funds to hire more staff to provide for more individual student attention.

Knowing that most funds in a human-based organization are dedicated to salaries, it was important for me to look closely at how people at WEDJ were hired and contributed to the overall success of the school. While I was cautiously optimistic at first about the addition of so many guest arts teachers, I was surprised by the need for so many non-instructional staff. Some of my first discussions with John Goldman centered around how he had restored fiscal integrity to the school, so I initially trusted that the investment in the arts experts, the extensive support service employees and the excessive consultant fees were justified in moving the school forward.

Goldman had out-sourced the tracking and management of the school budget to *EdOps*, a firm who provided, in my opinion, exceptional financial and business management services to the school. Dan Theisen was a regular support throughout my time at WEDJ and I had complete trust in his work. We eventually contracted *EdOps* as our provider of HR support for our staff. We also were fortunate to work with Kijana Mayfield who helped train our staff on the centralized *PowerSchool* system for recording attendance data. As well, Kijana helped us with the software design of a new more comprehensive, differentiated and standards-based report card, one she mentioned could be a break through tool for all charter schools, eager to align their reporting systems with the *Common Core*. *EdOps* did not seem to gouge the charter schools. For what we were getting, I felt their pricing was reasonable. It was difficult to argue that a charter school would need to have so many additional

non-instructional positions dedicated to managing the finances of the school, when such out-sourcing was so cost-effective. When I first arrived, in addition to the school paying for two, six figure salaries for the Executive Director and a COO (Chief Operations Officer), the school had a Business Manager, with a salary over \$80,000, who also had two office staff reports, who together added over \$60,000 in salaries, in addition to an Admissions Manager, who was paid upwards of \$60,000 each year. We also out-sourced a payroll company to coordinate the staff pay to a tune of \$17,000. To add to these salaried positions, the school outsourced payment for enrollment software and marketing. While I was pleased with marketing agent Rosso's enthusiasm about promoting our school during our first year, I felt such a fee that totaled close to \$27,000 was a luxury a charter school could not afford. With so many administrators capable of writing communications and at least three staff members with technology qualifications, who could manage a website, I believed this is where we could have found more savings for the school. Early on in my discussions with Goldman, he admitted that we could probably handle the communications internally. When I informed his friend that we were reducing the amount of work we needed from Rosso for our website, she contacted Goldman. At this point, I was ordered to leave it alone. The Board Chair intervened and Rosso's services continued.

When I took on the principal and interim Executive Director role, and combined the salaries at a significantly lower cost, I was establishing a leaner model that would enable us to put more funds back into the school, to directly support student learning. I remember when I first met Goldman, he mentioned that WEDJ was not an employment agency. I would say that his efficiency model had room for improvement when a charter school, with just over 400 students, needed 12 non-instructional full time staff. In essence, we dedicated more than 20% of the total budget to non-teaching staff on the payroll, with additional outside guest arts teachers costing over half a million dollars.

In our first school year Manahan and I inherited the budget developed by Goldman in his Executive Director role. I understood we paid the TenSquare consulting company a considerable amount in 2011–2012 to help populate the school with new educators, in addition to ongoing payments for recruitment searchers throughout the 2012–2013 year. The total amount issued to the TenSquare Group between 2011 and 2014 is not easy for the public to view, as the annual reports appear to have buried such costs with 'other' costs in line items listed under labels such as "Direct Student Expense" (over \$750,000), or "Office Expenses" (over \$340,000) or "General Expenses" (just under \$500,000).

During the 2012–2013 school year, our responsibility was to ensure we operated within the means of the Board approved budget. EdOps was outsourced to track our cash flow and provide financial updates for each Board Meeting. I did speak with Manahan often about budgeting for the 2013–2014 school year. On the operational side of the school, I examined where funds could be shifted to support more direct student instruction. From my analysis, I believe we had duplication of cleaning services, school promotion, money managers, oversight and 'other jobs':

Cleaning, Maintenance and Security

- 4–5 full time staff (approximately \$120,000–\$150,000)
- contract for outside janitorial services (approximately \$7000/month)

School Promotion

- Full time Admissions Coordinator (approximately \$65,000)
- Full time Technology specialist (approximately \$65,000)
- On-line enrollment system (approximately \$7000)
- Student Recruiting (approximately \$10,000)
- Betsy Rosso e-newsletter writer and editor (approximately \$20,000)
- Website Consultant (approximately \$7000)

Note – WEDJ had three staff members with Masters in Education Technology, with capacity to manage website.

Money Managers

- Executive Director (unknown)
- Chief Executive Officer (approximately \$115,000)
- Business Manager (approximately \$85,000)
- Payroll Company (approximately 17,000)
- Ed Ops – Accounting services (approximately 75,000)
- Development/Advancement Fundraising Coordinator (unknown)
- Financial Auditing services (approximately 25,000)
- Office supplies – (approximately \$75/student; 8800 postage/shipping; office furnishing \$5000; other office expenses -\$33,000; printing 25/student)

Note: Board members could possibly donate time and skills

Oversight

- DC Charter Board (.5% approximately \$35,000)
- Middle States Accreditation (approximately \$5000)
- TenSquare Consulting Group (approximately over \$200,000 in one year)

Other Jobs

- HR/Personnel Manager (approximately \$63,000)
- Recruiting Services (approximately \$200/hour – TenSquare)
- Data Manager (approximately \$45,000 – shared support with several other schools)
- Board Consultants (approximately \$5000 – Charter Board Partners)
- Food Services (approximately \$400,000)
- Student Information System (approximately \$16,000)
- Legal Services (approximately \$50,000)
- Contracted Special Education services (approximately \$60,000)

While I was impressed by the work that went into the coordination of the contracts with the *National Philharmonic*, the *Shakespeare Theatre Company* and the *Kirov Ballet*, I had difficulty getting my head around the cost of these ‘partnerships.’ Referring to vendors as partners seemed like a stretch, but their notoriety in the community did give the school a fresh face as an elementary school performing arts destination. Initially, we retained one dance teacher and one visual arts teacher position while out-sourcing the ballet, drama and music instruction. Three separate contracts were drawn up for the guest arts teachers. We reduced our arts costs significantly, in 2013–2014, by changing the number of hours required for guest teachers. During the 2012–2013 school year, just over \$650,000 was spent on the arts, approximately \$550,000 was contracted to guest teachers. The next year the cost of the arts was budgeted at just over \$450,000, with approximately \$300,000 earmarked for guest teachers and *artists-in-residence*. An advantage of using in-house arts experts was that these staff members could also do additional supervision within the school. A disadvantage of the *Shakespeare Theatre Company* staff was that we needed to double up on staff. While their teachers tried to manage the classes in the first year, it became apparent that certified teachers needed to be present to provide discipline support. This turned out to be quite expensive, and given that we had two full-time teachers with extensive theatre background, it made sense to have these experts more involved with our drama program. For savings and quality control purposes, I worked with Mr. Harris to draw up recommendations for visiting artists, that included semester contracts, participation in staff meetings and professional development, use of the common report card, and performance assessments conducted by the Dean of Fine Arts.

The approximate changes to the services provided were outlined in [Figure 6](#).

What did we plan for with the additional funds saved from outsourcing of our art instruction? As the chart reveals, we did not end our partnerships, rather we revised the conditions based on our experience and needs moving forward. Some of the funds went to supporting Ms. Palmer’s salary for taking on the role as the teacher for the Theatre majors in grades 6,7 and 8. The additional funds also enabled us to give \$5000 stipends for additional funds for certain qualified TA’s to teach dance, visual arts, and drama. In the 2013–2014 budget, we also planned for \$5000 as seed money to develop a film and television pilot program.

Funds for staffing beyond the arts included the outsourcing of the chess instructional program for students in grades 3 through 8, for approximately \$14,000. I also added an Inquiry position using funds from an OSSE SOAR grant to cover the staffing and further development of our Research and Technology program. We hired Tracey Yorke, who held a Masters of Instructional Technology; she also had as a strong dance instructional background and this proved to be an asset we appreciated as she was able to help us reduce the amount of teaching Mr. Harris, our Dean of Fine Arts, had on his plate.

Arts	Services Provided in 2012-2013 (approximated totals)	Changes to Services and Arts costs in 2013-2014 (approximately totals)
Dance	\$90,000	\$5000
	Kirov Ballet (\$5400 – ballet attire for 60 students; \$7678 – admin overhead; 15% of instructional salaries) - 12 classes/week (\$75/hr); 8 lecture series (800 each) = \$6400	Stipend for TA and in-house ballet instructor
Music	\$53,000	\$10,000
	PK to grade 5 WEDJ staff - dance instructor	Different dance artists in residence
	National Philharmonic	Dean of Fine Arts and K-5 dance instructor
Drama/ Theatre	\$370,000	\$5000
	\$94,800	\$230,000
	Shakespeare Theatre Company Includes: 7000 – planning and materials fees \$1000 – 2 dress rehearsals \$300 – 60 tickets for STC production	Reduction in number of music classes per week
		Part time in-house Grade 6-8 theatre teacher
Visual Arts	\$50,000	\$5000
	WEDJ Staff - PK to Grade 8 Visual Art	Stipend for TA and in-house Gr. 1 & 2 drama teacher
		STC visiting artists in PK and grades 3 to 8
		\$50,000
		\$5000
		K to Grade 8 Visual Arts
		Stipend for TA and in-house PK instructor

Figure 6. WEDJ out-sourced arts providers (2012–2014)

We also continued to out-source interim testing services through ANET and MClass to the tune of approximately \$65,000. In addition to this investment in testing, we gave staff members, who were teaching in high risk testing grades, a \$3000 bonus. I made sure a letter was placed in each teacher's file confirming the school's intention to pay out the additional funds for each teacher for the 2013–2014 school year.

Other money was directed and re-directed towards the school's physical plant. Parts of WEDJ's interior needed a makeover. Without many windows situated in a former warehouse, we needed to find ways to make the learning spaces more inspirational. When I arrived, the library, was split between two classrooms that made supervision a challenge for our librarian. I looked into the possibility of moving the library into a renovated space in the middle of the building. I met with Jim Hutson, who represented the landlords, to see if they would support this venture. The classroom spaces, that were occupied by the library were needed for instructional classes. Having these spaces freed up for classrooms would allow the school to increase enrollment. Jim was very thorough about my proposal. He set up an additional meeting with more of the building owners. I believe they were impressed with our ideas, so much so that they helped us find D.R. Hartman Construction, Co., our contractors, who did a remarkable renovation, in record time, for under \$25,000. This work was not initially in the budget, so the only way we could manage this project was to keep the costs low. Jim was very sensitive to our needs and I truly appreciated his support for helping us build our new library, we named, the Imagination Center. I had seen projects of this magnitude cost upwards of \$150,000, but we were able to keep costs within a manageable amount.

We also saved money on the PK playground. WEDJ had a playground that suited Kindergarten to grade 2-aged students on its tarmac, but after it was installed, Goldman discovered it was too large for PK-sized students. I was concerned that the PK's had to watch the older students play, and given we had 120 students in PK (over 25% of our population), they needed a PK-friendly playground of their own. We applied for a playground grant that reduced our costs significantly. The school wound up paying \$10,000, my husband and I donated \$15,000 and the grant took care of the rest. The playground was installed and ready for the PK's for the 2013–2014 school year. In addition to demonstrating fiscal responsibility, we were able to secure the following revenue, at the same time as donating over \$1500 to St. Jude's Hospital, based on student participation in the MathAthon:

- Technology Competitive Grant (Promethian Boards, IPAD Labs and carts)
- D'Addario Music Foundation (arts grant) (\$2000)
- SOAR Grant – Special Populations (\$50,000)
- SOAR Grant – Academic Quality (\$100,000)
- Big Lots donation (\$2000)
- Exxon-Mobil Spousal Donation Support (\$1200 split up quarterly)
- Barbara and Simon Smith (\$6000) – sent 3 students to National Leadership Camp

OTHER PEOPLE'S MONEY

- Barbara and Simon Smith (\$15,000) – donation towards PK Playground that cost \$24,500
- Barbara and Simon Smith (paid for accommodation for Double Dutch team to compete in California)
- PTA – Game On Grant (\$2000)

As well as being fiscally accountable, I wanted the budget to be transparent. While the actual salaries would not be displayed in the budget, such information, without naming names, could be accessible via a publicized 'pay grid.' I felt all other budget expenses and revenues should be listed as line items indicating the actual costs from various vendors and the amounts from specific donations and grants. I felt the investment in TenSquare and other outside groups should also be in clear view, rather than buried within various general expenses. The public, school authorizers and accreditors would then be able to examine more fully the fiscal investment and health of the school on an ongoing basis.

There was no reason why community members could not see how much was being spent on events such as the Back to School Barbecue, Spirit Week, Family Week, Graduation, and awards ceremonies. The PTA had asked on many occasions if babysitting services could be provided during their monthly meetings, but we did not have a budget provision to cover such an expense. I added this in as a line item for the proposed 2014–2015 school budget, so we could increase parent involvement. Mr. Carter and I also spoke about hosting a DC-wide Student Council Conference. We felt this would be a great way to connect students from other charter schools to develop leadership skills. To make such innovation happen, I needed to make sure the budget could provide for such expenses and potential revenues if we charged other schools for bringing their students for a day-long event.

I also wanted to further promote our growing STEAM focus at WEDJ by supporting a graduation trip to the NASA Space Camp in Huntsville, Alabama for three days in June 2014. Our science teachers, Mr. Sessoms and Ms. Cummings, coordinated the planning for the trip and were eager to attend in a supervisory capacity. We needed additional funds to support many students who could not afford to go. We managed to find funds to cover transportation in the school budget; my husband and I were committed to paying for students who needed additional support. I had informed Ms. Lawson that I would pick up these expenses, but the trip was cancelled. To reduce the need for dependence on outside support for such extensive field trips, I added an item line of \$500 per student (\$10,000) to the future proposed budget, so that the school would provide some funding for a special trip as a tribute to the graduating students each year.

I believe the budget had too many 'general areas' with too much built in padding. I realized later that such large amounts listed in line items for 'general' and 'miscellaneous' expenses can make it easier to disburse larger payments for outside consultants. Making the budget more transparent could help build more trust among families and the school authorizers, who ultimately are responsible for ensuring

CHAPTER 22

that each charter school act in the best interest of the school community. It makes sense that the DC Charter Board would provide some direction about ensuring such transparency, yet these sections of the budget, especially the expenses afforded to outside agencies and consultants, was never questioned during my time at WEDJ.

A school budget outlines a school's priorities, and given we were fiercely focused on school improvement, it made sense that the budget would need to adjust for new programming and innovation. The increase in the number of budget items did not mean we were intending on spending more money. This was not the case. In fact, by listing specific limits for more specific line items, we were able to draft a budget with reduced expenses. I found it strange that at one point, the Board Chair accused me of not spending enough money. By hiring staff with multiple talents and being more efficient with the scheduling and clarifying of job roles, I was able to find many ways to reduce costs so we could afford to move in more progressive directions, to increase student achievement and preparation for success in college and life. The chapter title 'Other People's Money' highlights both the excess expense of guest arts teachers and more specifically, the excessive funds dedicated from WEDJ to the TenSquare Consulting Company. It seemed like it was too easy for our school to spend other people's money.

NEVER-ENDING TALENT SEARCH

The never-ending talent search pretty much describes our persistence and dedication to building a strong team. The goal of an ongoing talent search was to improve the critical mass of exceptional teachers. Throughout the year, we built an active file with a list of strong potential candidates. We invested time in this proactive strategy in order to establish a pool of talent, to improve upon what TenSquare could provide, as well as ensure we had a solid reserve in place, in case a staff member had to leave the school. When we added the career tab to the website, such a move elicited hundreds of applications. While some would argue that sifting through each resume to build a strong pool is not what a school principal/executive director should be doing, I will argue that enlisting quality staff is the most important task for improving a school landscape.

Not only was I committed to bringing in incredible teachers, I was committed to helping our current team be outstanding teachers. The challenge was to move developing teachers to exhibit more proficient and exceptional qualities and move proficient teachers to embrace more exceptional practices. At the same time, we wanted to continue to inspire our exceptional teachers to sustain their ideal performance and support others to reach, emulate and exhibit such exemplary teaching.

I recall the frank conversations I had with two ‘developing’ teachers as tough, especially when both individuals were positive contributors to the school culture. I explained to them that we would do everything we could to help them improve in the coming year, but if they could not make the needed changes in our school environment, then they would need to find a setting where this could happen, recognizing that WEDJ might not be the best development space for everyone. At the root of their weak performance was a lack of understanding of the effort required to prepare for classes. They seemed overwhelmed by the responsibility and had difficulty making time for solid planning and tracking student learning. Their classes felt like they were going through the motions, ‘getting by’, and ‘winging it.’ The classroom management was spotty and the walls lacked creativity. Posters hung sloppily on their walls. Student work was rarely posted inside or outside the classroom. While such expectations were explicitly laid out, these teachers rarely made time after school or on weekends to transform their classroom into more inspirational learning spaces. It was tough but I asked them if they would want their own children to be in their classes, or rather, a colleague’s class?

Our comprehensive professional development programming enabled us to be proactive, to reduce the number of Performance Improvement Plans (PIP’s) and promote performance improvement. We invested a substantial amount of time in

professional development to support our current staff. The research on best practices internationally did inform some of our decisions. When making decisions about teacher development, we did not ignore, for instance, what Ravitch acknowledged:

Any Finnish educator will say that Finland improved its public education system not by privatizing its schools or constantly testing its students, but by investing in the preparation, support, and retention of excellent teachers. It achieved its present eminence not by systematically firing 5–10 percent of its teachers, but by patiently building for the future. (<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2010/11/11/myth-charter-schools/>)

The detailing of quality teaching expectations listed on what we coined, our ‘red carpets’, gave teachers some benchmarks for understanding expectations. In the past, teachers were simply not asked back or removed from the roster based on poor student test scores.

In an ‘at will’ employment situation, staff can be dismissed without cause, or as an administrator, I could wait until the end of the school year, and not invite weaker members of the staff back. I chose, however, in the case of weaker performers, to be explicit about what was missing in, and dedicate time to support their improvement.

In the first year, I tried to make sure the invitations for all returning teachers were completed before the end of the school year, so they had time to apply for other postings. The DC CAS test scores would not be a factor in determining who would return that first year. We had a good idea from our performance reviews and the student scores on the regular ANET testing throughout the year, which teachers were making an impact on student learning and which teachers might be better suited for different grades. In addition to ongoing professional development throughout the year, we also invested in the further development of teacher leadership, by sending fourteen staff members to Harvard University, three arts staff to an international drama and dance conference and three staff members to the Disney Institute. Normally such experiences would be perks for administrator’s only, but collaborating and sharing leadership were key to increasing the critical mass of an exceptional team, fiercely focused on building an ideal model school.

This process was a significant change from the previous year when the Executive Director, under the consultation of the TenSquare Consulting group, put together a short list of staff who would be invited back, allowing TenSquare to profit from finding new staff and a new school leader. As mentioned, we did not begin 2012 with a full roster, and of the substantial number of people TenSquare were contracted to find for the school, only four remained for the start of the next school year, and two of the four remaining were rated as ‘developing.’ Unfortunately, during my first school year, two of the strongest teachers recruited by TenSquare, took positions at other schools, one in December 2012, and one at the end of the school year. I was very disappointed about losing such talent, but we were able to attract from our website many brilliant educators to build our passionate team: Ms. Cherry (grade 3 English teacher), Ms. Almonte (PK teacher), Ms. Cummings (science teacher)

Ms. Hilay (grade 1 and PK teacher), Ms. LeVault (grade 3 and 4 math teacher), Ms. O'Boyle (TA and Grade 2 teacher), Ms. Vernaiz (grade 1 and 2 teacher), Ms. Elcock (Art teacher) and Ms. Yorke, our IT and Inquiry teacher. In most cases, we made the hiring process more rigorous than a conventional interview. We asked candidates to teach a class to see if they could find the magic that was a fit for both the school and each individual. I asked teacher leaders to be involved in the hiring process as well.

In my first year, I was fortunate to have many exceptional employees who had been at WEDJ for years: Ms. Bradshaw, teacher and VP, Academics; Mr. Carter, VP, School Culture; Mr. Gregorio, Technology Coordinator; Mr. Harris, dance teacher, Dean of Fine Arts; Ms. Kensler, Kindergarten teacher; Mr. McKeiver, Teaching Assistant; Stevonna Miles, Dean of Special Education; Tanisha Nugent, Math teacher and Dean of Teacher Development; Ms. Palmer, PK and Theatre teacher; Ms. Robinson, Kindergarten teacher, and Mr. Sessoms, science teacher, and VP, School Management. I often wondered if talent was lost when the staff was purged prior to my arrival. What TenSquare offered in terms of new staff did not seem to compare with the strength of the returning staff. By instituting a transparent and regular system of feedback, as well as increasing the number of leadership roles, I was hopeful that the hardworking members of our staff would feel more confident, assured and appreciated for their extensive efforts directed at improving our school.

It was a challenge finding and keeping talent for over 400 students in our urban school in DC. Quality control of staff depended on many factors including the training from teacher education institutions, the affordability of housing in a healthy proximity to the school, and a substantial budget to pay teachers competitive wages. I also worked on developing a more equitable pay scale for staff. In the past, there had been instances where some staff would make demands or enter the hiring process as a contract negotiation. Some phenomenal teachers, who didn't complain, were paid far less than their colleagues with the same qualifications. It seemed as if 'squeaky wheels' were able to gain more wage increases than others. There did not seem to be any consistent process for paying staff. It was a challenge to develop a pay scale, given the randomness of the salaried culture, but I was able to draft a salary grid that served primarily as a guide for new hires.

Initially, in February, I spoke with John Manahan about such discrepancies. I also consulted with Dan Theisen, from *EdOps*, for his ideas with respect to teacher pay and he shared salary band ideas, based on what he could find from salary scales from DCPS, Fairfax County Public Schools and Montgomery County Public Schools.

We had many staff members who had taken on leadership roles midway through the 2012–2013 school year. They understood there would be no salary change until the new budget, so I wanted this grid in place to ensure that we would be within the scope of the budget, at the same time as build in more equitable pay conditions at WEDJ. Rather than having an assistant head and principal with much higher salaries, the plan was to spread out the excess among many people, allowing for focused improvement in specific areas. There were several staff members who

were already above the scale, so their pay was not affected. While I would not consider lowering wages, several staff members did enjoy a pay increase based on the new scale.

In addition to the salaries posted, many staff members received a bonus for exceptional and/or additional work. Initially, I put \$20,000 aside to be distributed amongst those who graciously dedicated additional time to WEDJ. For instance, I remember meeting with Ms. Johnson, thanking her for her extraordinary math tutoring and Ms. Cavenough for taking on the teaching of PK visual arts, in addition to her TA role. The staff members, who were granted a bonus for ‘going the extra mile,’ appreciated the recognition. Some staff members received a bonus of \$500 to \$3000 depending on the depth of their hard work. I began to think that we might need to increase the funds for such merit pay in the future, especially if the plan was to populate the school with a critical mass of high achieving teachers and support staff. The Board never discussed a bonus system for my role, however, I was pleased that I was able to make room within our budget to acknowledge exceptional commitment in our midst. I was the only staff member who took a voluntary pay cut in 2013–2014. I was asked to take on the role of Acting Executive Director and Principal. The school was able to save a significant amount of money by combining positions. I did not ask for an increase in pay, as I wanted these savings to be re-routed into direct supports for the students.

When I arrived, we had three strong teachers who were on H1B1 Visas: our librarian, Ms. Cadag was from the Philippines. Our Grade 2 teacher, Ms. Robinson, and Ms. Nugent, our grade 5 math specialist were both from Jamaica. We also hired three more incredible teachers from the Philippines: primary teachers, Ms. Vernaiz and Ms. Hilay, and Ms. Bose, who proved to be a tremendous asset to the Special Education program. After a year, my husband retired, so my L2 Visa status would not suffice. I approached John Manahan with concerns that our status, as well as the other teachers on visas, were at risk. He found a lawyer who did not submit the paperwork for my H1B1 request, nor the renewals of the others, in time for the April 1st deadline. Manahan indicated that the immigration lawyer mentioned these documents could be submitted the following week. On April 2, I read in the *Wall Street Journal* that the H1B1 visa applications were filled within the first two hours on the deadline date. As the Board Chair, Goldman was technically responsible for securing my sponsorship. Unfortunately, he removed himself from the process, informing me that I should take care of it, or tell my husband not to retire. At this point, I contacted my mentor, Alexandra Pardo, to pick her brain about my next steps. She highly recommended I contact *Fragomen*, an expert legal group who specialized in immigration law. The representative told me that my only chance would be to apply for an O-1 visa, which might be a very difficult and lengthy process. I had to submit everything I’d ever written, as well as ask a dozen references to write letters on my behalf. Our VISA teachers were informed by Manahan that there was not much anyone could do after their VISA’s ran out. At this point I was very concerned because many of these teachers were phenomenal and our students needed them.

NEVER-ENDING TALENT SEARCH

The school hired a new immigration lawyer at that time to help with Ms. Nugent's green card application and the extension of the remaining H1B1 renewals. As it turned out, I was fortunate to receive my O-1 Visa with an expiry date of 2016 just in time to begin my second year at WEDJ.

Based on my experience at WEDJ and many other schools, I am convinced that the school leaders must play a key role in critical decisions about who stays, who leaves and who is brought into the fold. The team will trust a leader who is supportive and takes time to strengthen them, as well as make the tough decisions when it comes to letting people go. Finding the best educators and support staff is not about paying people more, and trusting a company to make decisions for you. Transparency, fairness, recognition, and opportunities for further growth, build trust and I believe contribute significantly to enhancing staff performance in schools. It took an enormous amount of hard work to enhance WEDJ's never-ending talent search, but the long hours and thorough vetting of candidates paid off.

THE DCCAS EXPERIENCE

Preparing for and implementing the state achievement test was a stressful and time-consuming experience. The students completed four sets of ANET preparation tests throughout the year, before sitting down to the DCCAS standardized test. Even though our scores on the first ANET test in October were among the top scores in the city, I could see that the content on the reading tests, in particular, was boring and it seemed there was little of relevance that connected to African American culture. Yet, such tests are commonplace in schools. Many grants expect schools to pay for elaborate standardized practice testing packages throughout the year to gauge the learning, ignoring the classroom tools developed by classroom teachers, who are trained to assess student growth in their lessons and units of study. I am convinced that the combination of the classroom testing of material taught by the teacher using internal measures, with the additional commercial standardized practice testing, functioned as a constant interruption to learning at WEDJ. Such a constant emphasis on testing, I suspect contributes to low scores in many urban areas throughout the United States. I was concerned about the necessity for testing students four times in a year, prior to the major district testing. The research on ‘test fatigue’ seemed to be overlooked by the ANET consultants. If I had a choice, I would have limited this testing to once in the fall, and once in the winter. If only more university research could discern whether the additional standardized testing packages were value-added. My sense was that such interruptions were reducing the amount of quality instruction and curriculum. How could constant testing, with little time dedicated to better teaching approaches, lead to improved test scores?

With each subsequent practice test series at WEDJ, I was convinced such tests were not in the best interest of improving student achievement. The five tests took several days to complete, followed by re-testing for each test, regardless of whether students had mastered the test the first time around. With so many school holidays, and the constant peppering of tests, and retests, time for teaching and learning was much more limited. The ANET testing served to basically ‘high-jack’ the curriculum.

Discussion about these test results also seemed to paralyze our monthly Board meetings. I tried to explain that other developing nations, who performed much better than the United States on the PISA test (Programme for International Student Assessment), did not expose their students to such a gauntlet of testing. Many other nations had more success on international tests without any annual testing (ie. Finland), or at the end of high school, in the case of the International Baccalaureate standardized examinations. An American study has challenged the volume of testing

and secured some significant research findings about the value of such tests. The Council of the Great City School in Washington provided key evidence that students are being over-tested. In their 2015 study, they found:

- Students in the 66 districts took 401 unique tests last year.
- There is no correlation between time spent testing and improved math and reading scores.
- Students in the 66 systems sat for tests more than 6,570 times last year.
- While testing for pre-K pupils was less common, even they were not exempt.
- Thirty-nine percent of districts waited two to four months to receive state test results.
- Tests were used for purposes for which they were not designed, such as evaluating school staff. (<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2015/10/28/students-take-too-many-redundant-tests-study.html>)

Given such findings, how can so many standardized tests be justified, in so many DC charter schools today?

Fees for such standardized tests vary and while some might argue that the ANET practice tests were better because they yielded results sooner, while providing on-line and face-face resource support, I did not find the splintering of the curriculum helpful for WEDJ staff and students. I sense these funds might have been spent more wisely. Hiring more teachers to reduce the teacher student ratio, for instance, without the testing disruption, might have generated better results on the annual tests. The time devoted to the teaching of the test, using the ANET program throughout the year, took away precious time from teaching.

We quickly discovered that if our students were to perform well on the ANET tests, we had to teach them how to tolerate the disengaging ‘how to take tests’ curriculum, making them, in my opinion, less capable of success in college. I would argue that this culture of testing was not helping students achieve the goal of getting into college; it could I sense, make them more and more impotent if or when they got there. By focusing so much time on ‘multiple-choice’ questions and answers, rather than how to build a solid argument in an essay or debate, the narrow testing movement has probably done more harm than good. The cheers of getting 100% of a graduating class to college echoes in many urban charter schools, however, they can be muted by the reality that so many of these young people drop out before college graduation. Speaking about the depth of Finnish curriculum, Ravitch noted: “Finland has a national curriculum, which is not restricted to the basic skills of reading and math, but includes the arts, sciences, history, foreign languages, and other subjects that are essential to a good, rounded education” (2010). A curriculum focused on short bursts of disconnected testing, on the other hand, is not only narrow by design, but it is not aligned with current research on teaching and learning. How could a quality school or system ignore what experts, bound by rigorous standards, have contributed to the field of education? Why should urban students not reap the benefits of best practices, too? Why should they be subjected to the limited practice of *teach to a test*?

In the months leading to the DC CAS, the staff at WEDJ worked hard to prepare our students for this critical test. I was confident if we could provide research-based teaching and learning experiences that our students should perform well on the tests. In an ideal world, the teachers would have focused on sound teaching from August until March and then afforded a few weeks to reading and writing multiple choice tests. I anticipated that with a new approach to curriculum, and even with over 50% new staff and students, we could still make solid gains in our Math and Reading test scores. Given the low scores in mathematics, we felt an additional focus on STEM programming would be worthwhile.

In October 2012, our ANET scores were among the highest in the ANET schools, but by December the scores dropped. In response, we decided to create small tutoring groups of 5-10 students in Mathematics and ELA to teach the ANET test-focused curriculum directly. Ms. Bradshaw and Mr. Sessoms were instrumental in setting up resources for the tutoring staff that included regular analysis of ANET data for students in each group. I shared the following note with families in the February PrincipalPoint newsletter as part of a 50-day countdown to the spring DC-CAS test:

Students, parents and our staff have taught me so much. Learning is as much about learning as it is about having all the right answers. With DC CAS just over 50 days away, we will find out soon enough if the changes we are making are indeed making a difference. The definition of insanity... is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.
(<http://www.wedjschool.us/dr-smith/principal-point-february-message-from-dr-smith>)

As we discussed ideas for putting in place some 'teach to the test' approaches, there was talk about freezing the teaching of everything but math and ELA. I chose to keep a balanced curriculum focus, allowing the science, research & technology, chess and the arts courses to stay on the roster because such experiences help our young people think creatively. We were able to add 10 extra hours of tutoring instruction each week, without eliminating and collapsing the entire academic program.

The small tutoring groups built into the schedule worked well. They doubled the time for focusing on math to two hours a day and extended the 90 minutes of English time to 2 hours a day. There was a buzz in the building. You could witness groups in the halls, in classrooms, spread out in the lunchroom, all preparing with intensity for the DC CAS test. We offered Saturday classes for 10 weeks, but only a few students turned up. Ms. Nugent and Ms. Bradshaw also offered additional tutoring sessions for their grade 5 classes several mornings a week. In my bundles leading up to the DC-CAS test, I recall highlighting how staff members stepped up to help out.

Many charter schools make time to set up elaborate celebrations in preparation for their standardized tests. At WEDJ, Ms. Moore organized a popular pep rally to get the students pumped for the testing experience. While the aim was to generate student excitement about the test, my perception was that these rituals, were more

WEDJ Metrics	2011–2012 Earthquake first week combines 2 schools	2012–2013 most staff and leadership new to school	2013–2014
Overall DC CAS Math	35.1	44.1	55.98
Overall DC CAS Reading	50	47.2	46.65
Overall DCCAS	43	46	51
Re-Enrollment	57% (actual for this year)	*57% (data from previous year used by DC Charter Board) 87% (actual re-enrollment rate for September 2013)	87% (listed incorrectly as 74% in DC Charter Board data)
PMF	38.4	36.5	47.6

Figure 7. WEDJ metrics from 2011 to 2014

about students having a time-out to have fun. I saw the pep rally as a celebration of the school, a school spirit event where we honored the teachers and students at once.

The testing team worked hard to ensure that the students were taking the tests under the prescribed conditions laid out in the training. As required, all testing rooms were transformed into cold, wordless and images-less environments. Nowhere could there be anchor charts and/or objects that could provide a hint of a correct answer. Not only were the classrooms full to the brim with students filling in boring bubbles for hours at a time, they were decorated with the drudgery of blank poster paper covering what used to be an engaging learning space. The new antiseptic spaces were symbols of how testing had corrupted a once vibrant learning culture.

Students were instructed not to rub out answers, to do their thinking on rough paper and be sure when they filled in one bubble per question on the standardized answer forms. We tried everything we could think of to keep the troops motivated. Students had built in breaks and had a chance to watch a movie at the end of some testing days to wind down. Many students had their arts classes later in the afternoon, and these functioned to help them escape the monotony of the lengthy testing.

In July 2013, we discovered that the school improved overall by 3.1%. While we lost ground in reading by moving from 50% student proficiency to 47.2%, we did increase by 9% overall in math, increasing the number of proficient students from 35.1% to 44.1% proficiency in one year. When Goldman was made aware of the results, he was not happy. The detailed grade-by-grade DC-CAS data from 2012–2014 as listed in [Figure 7](#) did not indicate the school was failing, but the reduction in reading, is what Goldman seemed fixated on. As a result of the scores after our first year, the DC-CAS indicated that WEDJ was a “rising” school, meaning student results indicated we were moving in a positive direction.

MIDDLE STATES CANDIDACY

All charter schools in DC are required to be accredited by an approved agency outside the school and local authorizer. When WEDJ's charter was approved in 2004, the authorizer (DC Charter Board) accepted the *American Academy for Liberal Education* (AALE) as the initial choice for accreditation. In 2012, we had the option of continuing with the contract with AALE or consider alternative accreditation pathways. While we considered keeping our affiliation with AALE, we decided to apply for *Middle States* accreditation, what we felt was a more rigorous and well-known agency.

In the fall of 2012, I made contact with Ken Rigby, our liaison for the *Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools Accreditation*. Mr. Rigby's visit to WEDJ was affirming in many ways. Having thoroughly reviewed the process and expectations as outlined on the website manual, we were ready to work with Middle States for establishing our school improvement plan, as part of the overall accreditation process. All decisions we made throughout the school year linked directly to the high standards of excellence that would be audited by an independent team of experts, ideally beginning in the spring of 2014. It was rare for a school to have an initial visit and be granted 'ready' to begin the self-study process in preparation for a formal audit in such a short period of time. Rigby indicated that a school can take upwards of 12–18 months just to complete the preparations for the initial visit. After that, the school usually needs more time to make the adjustments before a team can come in to make their deliberations about the school in action. I had shared with Ken that I had been an accreditor with CESI (the Canadian Education Standards Institute) and that I thought we were prepared for our initial visit much earlier than the typical timeline for a new school. Rigby agreed to visit in the spring of 2013 and we were delighted that he was eager to move the process forward. Rigby was very impressed with the school and made a point of sharing his observation that it was rare to see so many teachers in the halls at the end of the day taking responsibility for the kids. I was pleased that WEDJ was getting involved with Middle States and that their ideas for improvement would be grounded in research and a breadth of experience in quality schools. Ken had requested a meeting with Mr. Goldman, and while he and other Board members were informed about the visit from MSA, no one was available. After Mr. Rigby's visit from the Middle States accreditation agency, we felt we were on the right track. It was refreshing to speak with someone who was steeped in research-based understandings of teaching and learning, and how ideal schools work. His observation summary and findings confirmed that we were ready to enter the process ahead of schedule.

Rigby made a number of validating observations. In order to be granted the go-ahead to begin this process, Rigby observed the school in action for a day, viewed a number of documents and interviewed some key members of the school community. As a result of his initial visit to WEDJ in April 2015, Mr. Rigby indicated that WEDJ met the indicators for candidacy. Specifically, WEDJ had met the standards for the following indicators: Philosophy/Mission; Governance and Leadership; Planning for Growth and Improvement; Finances; Facilities; School Climate and Organization; Health and Safety; Educational Program; Student Services; Student Life and Student Activities; and, Information Resources and Technology. I recall the report was explicit with respect to key exemplars noted. Rigby acknowledged the value of the PAL Program, and the customized resources for each student in each grade, as well as the ‘Commitment’, as a progressive application of a school code of conduct. He also mentioned that the school had adequately addressed safety, security and cleanliness needs. He viewed student pick up with rigorous attention to photo identification and made note that all staff had received CPR training. Rigby was impressed with future plans for building a theatre in the storage space and did suggest that the school look into updating its physical plant. On the academic front, he supported the school’s focus on the arts, mathematics, language arts and project-based learning. He was impressed that teachers were going to Harvard Project Zero and used a variety of resources, particularly digital tools, to enhance engaging instruction and the learning of technological skills. He made reference to the School Support Team and specific special education services. The nationally ranked Double Dutch team, cheerleading, as well as the specialized music, dance and arts programming were also mentioned. Rigby noted that WEDJ was using ANET as a practice test and that our target of increased test scores by 25% was ambitious.

I was confident we could meet the rigorous MSA standards after completing the 94-page application for WEDJ’s self-report. I looked forward to having professional conversations and recommendations that would be shared by the Middle States visiting teams.

FIRST SPRING RISING

By spring, we were aware that we had many families indicating they wanted to return to WEDJ the following year. With over 700 new applications, this was a huge improvement from the 57% return rate we inherited the year before. I wanted to reassure families and inform them of how WEDJ was distinct from other schools. It was not the individual initiatives, but the accumulation of so many enriching experiences in one place, that we felt made WEDJ a rare option:

- A critical mass of dedicated and committed staff
- Arts programming taught by passionate and talented artists
- Student artists perform in the community
- Suzuki violin for all students in K to grade 2
- PAL Program (Promoting Arts and Leadership) – character, leadership and health education curriculum during homeroom time
- Monthly phone calls home from PAL teacher
- A curriculum dedicated to small group learning (Peer teachers, Research & Technology, and intervention classes)
- A report card that is specific about what students know and need to learn
- Enrichment for all students at the Grades 6 to 8 level (Research & Technology)
- Wonder Workshops for the love of science (PK to grade 2)
- Promethian (digital white boards) Boards in every PK and K class
- All students learn chess in grades 4 through 8
- All students in grades 6,7 and 8 write a novel over three years
- National Double-Dutch Champions
- Cheerleading for all ages
- Administrators who teach

In the late spring, I also asked each member of the leadership team to write a bundle. I was pleased that my lead team was willing to take part in this experience. For instance, Ms. Cordova shared the following significant insight:

...When we take on leadership roles, it is tricky because so much of what we do depends on the actions/responses of others, but when something doesn't happen as planned, then I need to figure out a better way to support the change that may be needed... We have signed on to grow a school in a great direction, and I am passionate about that goal...I know there have been times this school year where at least one or all of us have said or thought, "I can do it by myself, I don't need any help." Somewhere the wiring got all mixed up and

we have been under the misguided notion that we don't need help; we can do it all by ourselves. Our mission statement speaks to community. There are no individuals in a community...instead of playing the blame game, why don't we just go to work and solve the problem?"...We all know there are small fires in and around WEDJ. Let's not only rely on the administration to extinguish them. We can start by simply not indulging in finger pointing....To sum it all up, this bundle is suggesting that you don't sweat the small stuff because you can't control every aspect of your daily life. Having viable relationships with others allows for you to lean on them in your time of need. (Warm regards, 06/02/13 (Ms. Cordova, Dean of Special Education))

Ms. Bradshaw prepared a wonderful PowerPoint featuring each staff member and Ms. Nugent emphasized hard work in her humorous message about being a teacher:

As we come to a close of the school year, let's reflect on the hard work that was done through this long and hard journey...

How do I know I am a teacher?

- 1. You hear 25 voices behind you and you know exactly which one belongs to the child out of line.*
- 2. You walk into a store and hear the words Mr./Mrs. and know that you have been spotted.*
- 3. You have twenty-five people accidentally calling you mom or dad at one time or another.*
- 4. You can eat a multi-course meal in less than twenty minutes.*
- 5. You have trained yourself to go to the bathroom at two distinct times of the day: lunch and planning period.*
- 6. You want to slap the next person who says "Must be nice to work 8 to 4 and have the summers off"*
- 7. You feel the urge to talk to strange children and correct their behavior when you are out in public.*
- 8. You spend more money on school stuff than you do on your own needs.*
- 9. You are secretly addicted to hand sanitizer...*

*The purpose of life is not to win. The purpose of life is to grow and share. When you come to look back on all that you have done in your life, you will get more satisfaction from the pleasure you have brought into other people's lives...
– Rabbi Harold Kushner (Ms. Nugent, Dean of Teacher Development, 6/17/13)*

Mr. Carter spoke about teamwork and "Things that make you go "WOW":

Effective teamwork in schools has a domino effect. If there is good teamwork among the administrators, then there will be good teamwork between the staff, which then affects the school climate positively in terms of teamwork. Teams have increased morale when everyone is friendly and have an

encouraging influence on others. It is also possible that students who work in teams to encourage each other are likely to experience higher success in their academics...This school year we have been working on developing a positive school climate through a whole school approach that supports student achievement and well-being. A positive school climate is the key to promoting student achievement...It is also a crucial component of bullying prevention. Ladies and Gentlemen the WEDJ staff is promoting a positive climate. Mr. Carter's Evidence:

- *Less referrals*
- *Transition is getting better during dismissals*
- *Teachers are on post and making themselves visible to maintain safety*
- *Less parental complaints*
- *Parents attending focus meetings on Saturday and After-School*
- *The building looks great with all of the Art-work (thanks staff)*
- *8th Graders are excited about upcoming events*
- *Enrollment is up*
- *The facilities is looking good, thanks to the cleaning*
- *Teachers have a smile on their faces daily.*

THINGS THAT MAKE YOU GO WOW!!!!

- *Shakespeare performance was excellent*
- *Parent participation at the focus group*
- *The Wiz was awesome*
- *Office staff working on enrollment*
- *Facility Team working hard*
- *Double Dutch Team heading to California*
- *My trip to Chicago-town*
- *Staff Appreciation pictures*
- *Student election*
- *Pep Rally excellent (Mr. Carter, VP, School Culture)*

We were committed to finishing the year on a strong note. After the DC-CAS test, we engaged in an abundance of activity. We hosted the first WEDJ Chess Championship at the end of May. Spring was also a time for field trips. The PK Nation went to the fire station and Mr. Sessoms took our middle students on several cultural tours of DC including a stop at the Cheesecake Factory. Ms. Palmer had also arranged for a local animal farm to bring over a petting zoo, so our little ones who were studying animal babies could learn more about spring babies of the farmyard kind!

We also had each seventh-grade student write a speech to run for our first Student Council President for the following school year. The authentic task of a real election was quite appealing for an English class activity. Students had to create an outline of their speech, a draft, and then make revisions to their draft, before presenting

it to their classmates, who voted on the top three candidates. The writing (and reading of their own writing), plus speaking, made for a powerful language learning experience. The finalists then presented their speeches to the grades 3 to 8 students at an assembly before students voted in <Student A> to fill this key role.

At the final parent-teacher conferences, Ms. Almonte arranged to have all the Grades 3–8 students exhibit their projects for the Science and Inquiry Fair that day as well. We had hoped that more families could have viewed the tremendous work of the students. Before long, we had moved on to the Grade 8 graduation ceremony, the Kindergarten ‘Moving Up Celebration’, and the Student Awards Assembly. Ms. Huddleston played a key role in organizing the kindergarten program, and Ms. Robinson was instrumental in leading the school awards assembly. The grade 8 graduation ceremony was a memorable event. The students were dressed up and most parents came to see their kids receive their WEDJ graduation diploma. Ms. Moore, Mr. Sessoms and Mr. Carter delivered some of the most genuine and emotional speeches I have ever heard. It was touching to see how much the community cared for one another. I knew the kids would return to WEDJ in the future, because we did make a difference in their lives.

In our final newsletter, distributed on June 20, 2013, we shared the winners of the first John Goldman Award and announced the new ‘dorms’ format for collecting points towards the Wolf Cup – the ‘house’ spirit award. Our parent winner was Ms. Kamilah Wheeler, our staff winner, Mr. Carter and our new student council president was voted in as the student winner.

I also shared details in the newsletter about our new school and family ‘dorms.’ Every student, parent and staff member in the school was inducted in a college ‘dorm’, so groups would compete each year for the new prized ‘Wolf Cup’, awarded to the team with the highest extra-curricular participation points total for the year. Parents, who joined school activities, would collect points for their PTA Loyalty Cards, as well as score points for your dorm! Students, who wore ‘dorm’ colors on the final day of school, were awarded extra points for the Cheer off! According to the on-line newsletter:

In an effort to build a spirit of teamwork among students and emphasize a college-going culture, WEDJ has created several ‘dorms’ this year at school. Each dorm is named after a local college or university, and led by a WEDJ faculty member. Students have already participated in dorm-based activities, such as field day during the first week of school. We will use dorms throughout the year and invite family participation in many dorm activities. Our dorms include

- *American University*
- *Bowie State University*
- *George Mason University*
- *Howard University*
- *Johns Hopkins University*

- *Morgan State University*
- *Old Dominion University*
- *Randolph-Macon College*
- *St. Mary's College*
- *The George Washington University*
- *The University of the District of Columbia*
- *Towson University*
- *University of Maryland*
- *University of Virginia*
- *Virginia Polytechnic University*

Make sure you know what dorm your students is in and find out what the dorm colors are so students can dress with team spirit when dorm activities call for it. (<http://www.wedjschool.us/college/dorm-life-for-wedj-students-brings-future-college-possibilities-into-focus>)

My final message to staff before Camp Imagination (summer school) took center stage reflected on what I had learned as well as the many things I was thankful for at WEDJ. I encouraged staff to think about the glass as half full, to use words that help, be thankful, be forgiving and continue to be joyful.

Looking back on this time, I was very pleased that our roster for the start of the following year was complete and that we were well on our way to increasing the critical mass of exceptional teachers for our students. I went back to Canada leaving summer school in the hands of co-principals, Carter and Bradshaw. While my immigration status had yet to be confirmed, I was eager to begin year 2. No question, I loved being at WEDJ.

SUMMER HIGHS AND LOWS

The summer ‘highs’ kept the low points in check. The enthusiastic kids and staff of WEDJ summer school, the revitalization of the school’s physical plant and Ms. Palmer’s hard work at leading the ten staff professional development days continued to keep WEDJ moving in a positive direction. I did, however, notice an increase in the number of closed session meetings at the WEDJ Board level.

Mr. Carter took a lead role in coordinating the activity program for summer school that was open to any student in the DC area. Ms. Bradshaw was responsible for the academic program and Ms. Lawson took care of the business of summer school. I can still hear the joyful clatter of the happy dancing feet in the multipurpose room! I used this time to formally plan for the upcoming year and build in two weeks of holidays. WEDJ work didn’t actually stop for me; I just took my laptop and cell phone to Canada and worked in virtual space.

I was very excited about the progress being made in our new school library and the PK playground. It was energizing to see the school transform before our eyes. The maintenance and security teams worked hard to add walls and walls of ceiling tiles to increase the amount of space for posting student work outside of each classroom. At first, it seemed strange to glue ceiling tiles on the walls, but they painted up nicely, and saved teachers so much time, as staples simply lifted off easily, allowing for more frequent changing of themes and sharing of student learning. Mr. Johnson, our senior member of the maintenance team, was especially proud of installing these tiles and I was very appreciative of the tender loving care he put into this work. Students needed to see their work honored and by showcasing their work frequently, the school would have more opportunities to demonstrate what great schools do.

In addition to the sparkling makeover of the school, Mr. McKeiver created a brilliant mural showcasing the school’s character education focus for PAL (Promoting Arts and Leadership) Program. With Mr. Johnson’s guidance, I painted between each step of our stairway, our school color, purple, so Ms. Nugent could add her special math touch to the stairs, listing ‘multiples’ to help students learn their math facts.

It was exciting to see the plans turn into reality as the walls came tumbling down in the former office areas on the lower floor. We were nervous with the amount of drywall carnage piling up, but the team from D.R. Hartman Construction took care of everything from the removal of walls to the installation of new walls and rugs in our new spacious library. They also worked closely with our own maintenance team to coordinate a professional clean up, just in time for the start of school! Ms. Cadag had to be commended for all her hard work, the transporting and rearranging of

books and materials to furnish the new library space. It was not easy, but with her attractive decorating and management of additional technology stations, Grace was able to help make the Imagination Centre a new reality at WEDJ. The amount of space generated by removing so many small offices was truly a fine addition to the school.

During the summer, the PK playground was installed before the first day of school! We were thrilled with the grant support offered through Playground Structures, Inc., and pleased to add this feature to our physical plant. After all, we had over 100 PK's who were delighted to have this play option when they returned for school after the summer.

That summer, our Admissions Coordinator, Ms. Morgan had emergency brain surgery and had to go on medical leave until January 2014. The staff and families truly missed her warmth and positive spirit. We responded by hiring a former school leader, Mary Robbins, to take on the task of coordinating admissions, marketing and analysis of enrollment and re-enrollment data. Mary, who also was very familiar with the school's database, *PowerSchool*, proved to be a valuable asset until Ms. Morgan's return.

I experienced a low point in the summer when I had to leave school on July 17th for emergency dental surgery. What I hoped would have been a 15-minute solution, turned into a 2.5-hour bone grafting event with three added days of bed rest, nurturing an extracted tooth and serious infection. Ms. Evans had to bring me papers to sign; I'm sure she was shocked to see the gruesome me, swollen with ice packs and painkillers. In all my days at WEDJ, this was the only time I could not read, write or dream about the school. When I left for the appointment, I had every intention of returning for the Board meeting that evening, but this health matter was much more serious than I thought. I knew there would be questions about the draft budget and I was so disappointed that I was unable to address them in person. Ms. Lawson sent my regrets, but apparently, Goldman was quite upset that I hadn't called him directly to let him know I would not be attending the meeting.

While I had communicated the specifics of the school's accomplishments within each school report at Board meetings, I was surprised that the Board did not recognize or address the school's growth at meetings. Our roster for the coming year was complete with 76% staff returning, up 23% from the previous year; 87% of our families were returning, up 30% from the former year. The new library renovation and PK playground improved the indoor and outdoor physical plant. We had 700 students on a wait list. Overall, our DC-CAS scores improved, and we made significant gains in mathematics. The loss of a few percentage points in reading was a drop many charters experienced that year in the DC-CAS testing, but it was not an indicator, in any way, that the school was in trouble.

I could sense from a read of the Board meeting minutes that the tide for my support was waning. What was happening at the grassroots level was affirming, but at the Board level, there seemed to be a gap, in terms of valuing all the significant changes

SUMMER HIGHS AND LOWS

brought about by many hard working, committed and supportive staff members. The number of closed session Board meetings continued into the fall and new year. No minutes of these sessions were published, and I was never informed of the contents of these parts of the Board meetings. While I hoped for renewed transparency and the opportunity to work collaboratively with the Board of Trustees, I knew I would have to wait for their invitation. In the meantime, my students, staff and families needed my energy and support.

YEAR 2 – WELCOME BACK WOLVES

August of 2013 was chock full of learning for the staff, well in advance of the first day of school. Ms. Palmer was very enthusiastic about pulling together a ‘Cinema Time at WEDJ’ conference program to inspire her colleagues. We met often in advance of the three weeks of professional development to plan the ‘movie’ – themed experience. She was eager to have staff talk about and reflect on important themes: collaboration, teamwork, safety, and instruction. She asked Mr. Carter and Mr. Sessoms to make a movie about safety and security practices, and worked with Ms. Lawson to make sure all staff received CPR training. Palmer also pre-recorded and shared clips from popular movies about learning, leadership and cooperation. These two-minute interludes served as a wonderful way to start off the morning or afternoon activities. The new teachers were invited to come early for a special orientation, that included connecting with mentor teachers who took them on a blind folded tour of the school. We also built in a teambuilding day to go to Terrapin Adventures where staff worked to solve physical and mental challenges together in the outdoors. I can still hear the screams coming from Ms. Drew on the giant swing! Our goal was to build trust that day and most staff members left appreciating what the school had arranged for them.

On August 26, 2013, we welcomed back our students in style. I recall the students being so happy to see their former teachers. Students were also very excited to see the new library and the new PK playground! We jam packed the week with activities for students and families. We held our ‘Meet the Teacher’ and ‘Curriculum Night’ on the first day of school. We were thrilled at the turnout. Every table was filled with families happy to be back and new families confident in the school selection. Mr. Carter served up a delicious offer from the barbecue that had many folks returning for seconds! We asked the new Student Council President, <Student A>, and the PTA President, to come to events to welcome new families into the fold. We added a Field Day to the week as the students missed it the spring before (2013), due to an overabundance of DC storms. We created ‘dorm’ teams, highlighting various colleges in the DC area. Ms. Wheeler worked overtime distributing over 400 students and 70 staff on 15 teams. Student, parent and teacher leaders were named. Probably the most memorable dorm activity was the ‘cheer off.’ The Bowie State Bulldog dorm, led by Mr. Dickens and Mr. Carter, were the winners, but every dorm was well represented. It was wonderful witnessing such enthusiasm for our school! Students competed in either the Kinder Games or the Senior Games with many parents volunteering to help out at stations. We ended the day with an assembly handing out team awards and special sportsmanship trophies. It wasn’t the most

CHAPTER 28

organized event, but students did have fun! The following message in the August PrincipalPoint newsletter announced:

Let's shout out a WARM WELCOME to our new families and staff at WEDJ and let's say WELCOME BACK to our loyal returning families! Curriculum Night on August 22nd and the 'Back to School Meet the Teacher Barbeque' on August 26th turned out to be standing room only events. Many thanks to Mr. Carter for donating his marathon barbequing time to get a great start on our culture building this year! <Student A>, our new Student Council President, helped present awards for the FALL Field Day, and we were thrilled to have many parent volunteers help supervise events. (<http://www.wedjschool.us/artspcs/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/AUGUST-PRINCIPALPOINT.pdf>)

We were poised to take WEDJ to the next level. We boasted a sell-out crowd for our barbecue and parents were signing up in droves to help out with events. One parent took over three days to create an Excel spreadsheet full of volunteers. Everything felt like it was moving in the right direction.

THE STING OF THE 2013 QUALITATIVE SITE REVIEW

In sharp contrast to the community building experiences in Week 1, the sting of the Qualitative Site Review (that began on September 9th, 2013) was, in hindsight, the beginning of what seemed like a well-choreographed ‘ambush.’ With little time to have student worked posted, the DCPCSB Qualitative Site Review (QSR) team began collecting their data from 1.5 days of observations. While the staff was reminded in advance that observation teams would arrive for announced and unannounced visits, as part of the school’s Ten Year Review, I was eager to further develop and promote qualities of exceptional teaching by piggybacking off the idea that ‘every day is mystery shopper day.’ I indicated to staff that every night before shutting off the lights, that rooms need to be in pristine order with lessons plans open and ready for the next day.

This QSR was clearly a turning point for our school. We were told there would be two PCSB staff members, in addition to three consultants, coming to the school to assess the quality of classroom management and instructional delivery. They planned to visit 30 classrooms in a mixture of morning and afternoon visits. While we were not made aware of any visitation schedule, our records indicated we had two outside consultants and one PCSB staff member sign in to the school to conduct observations, but according to staff, 30 classrooms were not observed. When asked, most staff members indicated that they were not aware observers were in the building. Two of the reviewers, who had been retired principals contracted to conduct observations for DCPCSB, introduced themselves, while the third observer, who worked for the Charter Board, did not speak with me and spent less than a day in the school.

A few weeks later I received a phone call from Naomi DeVeaux, Deputy Director of the DCPCSB, giving me the heads up that the results of the qualitative review were not good. She did acknowledge, that because they did not use reviewers who had observed WEDJ in the past, that the observations could not address possible changes or transformations in the school. I was disappointed to hear that the observers could not compare their findings from one year to the next. I recall that she did mention there was evidence of a positive school culture and the PAL program was a plus, but she wanted me to know that her report would indicate that 50% of our teachers were struggling. She did not mention anything about arts programming or the new science, technology, research, leadership or peer teaching courses. All I could do was wait to read the final report to see more fully the depths of concerns raised by these

findings. I contacted John Goldman right away to let him know that we were about to receive a poor review. In addition to meeting with each member of the leadership team, I called a special staff meeting after school. I sent a communication, outlining key concerns shared from DeVeaux's call, so everyone would have a chance to read and be ready to discuss at the meeting.

At the staff meeting I shared with everyone how every minute mattered, that we must continue to strive for 100% exceptional teaching. The closer the school could get to this goal, the higher the likelihood that we would achieve higher scores and be worthy of more funding investments. Meeting such a goal would enable WEDJ to attract more exceptional teachers and families, and with a highly-engaged student population, our discipline issues should continue to decline. I also reinforced that we must be gracious and inviting hosts, as visitors in the school would continue throughout the school year. I urged teachers to ask for help, and mentors to be vigorous in providing the support, especially to our new teachers. I was passionate and confident that, as a community, we could turn this perception around and paint the landscape of our canvas, so others could easily recognize we were doing great things for kids at WEDJ.

When the QSR report arrived a month later (November 6, 2013), I asked our Academic VP, Ms. Joseph, to prepare a slide show summarizing the key points, that we presented to staff that same day. The report focused on evidence gathered, or not, with respect to meeting our charter goals (as indicated in 2004) as well as an in-depth look at teaching effectiveness.

The report did not mention that a request to revise our charter goals had been submitted in the previous school year, nor did it acknowledge that we had informed our WEDJ Board and representatives from the DCPCSB often, that our goals were outdated. Even though it was known that we chose not to follow the *America's Choice* curriculum, we were held accountable for not meeting this 2004 charter goal. To accept a goal that lists a commercial product as a curriculum did not make any sense at all? The Charter Board, aware of the impracticable nature of many of WEDJ's inherited goals, did not offer support to the new administrative team at any time in order to make the changes to be ready for the Ten-Year Review. The QSR report did not address the 16-page document that I had submitted in January 2013 that spoke directly to updating and revising the WEDJ charter goals.

Most notable recommendations for changes included the removal of references to WEDJ's high school programming, names of outdated standardized tests, *America's Choice* curriculum, and the commitment to ensuring all students would score a minimum of 'proficient' in reading and mathematics on the DCCAS standardized test. Holding any school to such an absolute level of 100% proficiency was simply not realistic. I would argue that such an idealistic goal should have been vetted by the Charter Board when the school first submitted its' application, back in 2004. How this group could evaluate our school using this metric was indeed a shock to me.

The 'Notification of Curriculum Change' document I prepared, removed reference to any commercial programs and reinforced the school's commitment to the *Common Core State Standards*. The Charter was written before the Common State Standards were in effect. I was clear that WEDJ was moving away from *America's Choice* curriculum, as it was necessary to improve overall academic achievement. Being handcuffed to ineffective resources in order to be compliant with the DC Charter Board timelines for making changes to charters, would not be acting in the best interest of students. Changes in curriculum for any charter school had to go through a process that involved Charter Board approval, but in our first year, we rarely had official Board meetings or quorums. I had submitted the 'Notification of Curriculum Change' document to at least inform our authorizers of our intent moving forward.

When I began on July 17, 2012, with the first day of school just over a month later, I felt it was urgent to shift the curriculum emphasis to the Common Core State Standards. I did communicate this direction with my Executive Director (John Goldman) and later in writing. When I realized that the quality of the *America's Choice* curriculum was probably hindering our success, we went ahead with a new curriculum direction. Manahan, Goldman, the WEDJ Board, nor the DC Charter Board, helped us complete these updates in a timely manner. According to DC Charter Board policy, schools are not permitted to make charter changes a year in advance of the Ten-Year Review.

Given the school had weathered the storms of an earthquake that poured two schools into one, an upheaval of staff and community of upwards of 50% change, and the significant loss of stable Board members in the past three years, I was hoping that the DCPCSB would be relieved to support the revised and 'do-able' goals. Instead, I received a one sentence electronic response from PCSB indicating the school could not submit amendment during the ten-year renewal. I met with Sarah Medway at the DCPCSB to talk about amending our goals, and while I sensed she was empathetic, she said she would need to speak to someone 'higher' up in the organization for consideration. No one responded to our concerns. The Charter Board was well aware, more than a year in advance of the Ten-Year Review, that we were operating under a more progressive set of goals, but they did not offer support to help us be in compliance. It didn't make sense that rigorous oversight would hold us accountable to outdated metrics. While I tried many times to get Board members and my superiors, including the DC Charter Board, to listen to our plans for moving WEDJ forward, well in advance of the year time frame, we remained attached to the 2004 goals from the perspective of the QSR writer. WEDJ, thus, was viewed as not meeting the initial conditions of the charter.

Apart from the fact that the QSR measured WEDJ against outdated charter goals, I questioned many statements about the reported volume of struggling teachers. Given the observers had 1.5 days to enter 30 out of 39 classrooms, I was surprised the report was packed with so many generalizations, without follow-up evidence, to back up such claims.

While I was pleased that the reviewers acknowledged the PAL (Promoting Arts and Leadership) course, I was surprised that there was no mention of the new robotics programming, Fab Labs; the Research and Technology course; the Peer Teaching experiences or Chess instruction, especially since these programs were geared at college preparation. Did no one view these innovative directions that excited our students?

It was also surprising that in a qualitative site review that the observers neglected to acknowledge the arts in an arts school. The following sample of Ms. Palmer's performance reveals a powerful image of the kinds of teaching and learning experiences happening within her theatre class:

Dear Ms. Palmer:

This teaching assessment began with a class of chilly students huddled around a teacher in ski jackets in true "the show must go on" form. Right from the start, the language of theatre was profuse through literal and non-literal ways. Not only do you emulate the genre of theatrical voice in your carefully selected choice of words, there was vast evidence that the students had appropriated the culture. They were indeed thinking, behaving, and speaking as true actors. This was a wonderful contrast to former programs I have viewed with other teachers where the battle for control diminished and disrupted the flow and context of the lesson to one of behavior management. How did you transform an art form with a wobbly reputation into a reputable and highly popular experience for our students? It's clear from the deep-rooted respect in the class that several factors were at play:

- 1. You established strong relationships with all your students. They felt trust because you loved each student unconditionally. When you asked for silence, you did not have to repeat the request. At one point, the discussion of what was classic fueled an instantaneous and lively debate about whether the movie, 'Twilight', might be perceived as a classic one day, but when you said "bring it back," it was like magic; everyone had their fun, but it was re-directed back to the task at hand within seconds. It appeared that each student did not want to interrupt or speak over you. The class respect continued throughout – so students received and contributed to over sixty minutes of uninterrupted authentic theatre talk and action. It felt like I was in the Actor's Studio, on the edge of my seat, awaiting James Lipton's next question!*
- 2. You have done an amazing job of transforming a classroom into a theatre. What is striking is the posting of student work – their masks on the wall. The outside of each mask conveying the words that show how they think their peers see them, and then intimately, on the inside of each mask, words were selected about what others do not know about each participant. So much*

thought ,and care went into creating these masks – but more importantly, you could see they were part of a deliberate plan to establish a positive and trusting culture.

3. *Your program is rooted in developing real authentic and transferrable skills. It was clear that your drama program clearly augments the speaking expectations in ELA. The students who selected Theatre seem to have a solid advantage over their other classmates in terms of being capable of articulating what they need to know and learn in any subject here at WEDJ, in high school and beyond.*
4. *The students were sincere when they introduced their individual work and interpretations to the rest of the class. They owned their presentations, as evidenced by their deep dives and reflective tones. Whether it was a monologue, poem or abridged version of a story going on within, each of the four students who presented revealed much about the quality of their experiences.*
5. *Through the course of the class, constructive feedback was shared by you and the students, and it was remarkable how well each student accepted ideas from their peers – evidence again of trust and a sound indicator of the mature culture you have been able to cultivate in four months. Students were self aware of their own areas for improvement. One student noted: “I used my hands too much – therefore causing a distraction from my message.” Other comments included: “use the whole stage more,” “pronounce words better,” “make more eye contact with the audience”...*

We see many videos about how to control kids and content in classrooms, but it is rare to have a chance to view what I had the privilege of seeing (when I appeared unannounced) on a day when the whole class was wearing winter jackets. Most teachers would have pleaded for me to come another day, but this was one of those moments where I watched the show go on. Sometimes it is a struggle to find the right words to describe my observations, but you gave me great material to work with. The words flowed with ease. You have truly transformed the senior theatre program from weak to exceptional in four months. That’s what I call doing your bit to contribute to our school’s success.

Thank you for being an exceptional teaching model.

Barbara Smith, Principal, William E. Doar, Jr. School for the Performing Arts

Had observers spent more time in the classes, and in the arts classes, integration and arts infusion, should have been more apparent.

There was also no mention that the timing of the review was at the start of the school year, when all teachers were establishing routines and classroom cultures.

No one mentioned the impressive improvements in staff and student retention. In 2012, the school retained 43% of our families and 53% of staff, but after a year in

2013, we had improved our staff retention rate to 76%, while keeping 87% of our families.

In essence, the QSR report assessed the school on the same level as all successful charter schools, even though WEDJ experienced incredible challenges, not resembling at all the minimal changes endured by a typical Tier 1 DC charter school.

I recall the use of absolutes (ie. all, none) was widespread in this report. The damaging conclusions, based on inferences about the totality of each class, were clearly a limitation of this review. The writer of the report noted:

- The teachers observed at WEDJ PCS struggled in Using Questioning and Discussion Techniques, with *none* of the teachers scoring exemplary in this domain; The majority of teachers, however, did not use questioning or discussion *at all* to support student comprehension of content.
- The questions posed, *if any*, required a single correct answer or repeat back. Teachers posed *no questions* high cognitive engagement or that required students to develop their answers.
- The QSR team observed *ineffective use of instructional materials*, particularly SmartBoards and projectors, which teachers did not consistently know how to use. In one particular case, instruction stopped for several minutes for technical difficulties with the Smartboards. (<http://www.livebinders.com/play/play?id=1174998>)

Did the writer really believe that there were no teachers who demonstrated exemplary questioning and discussion techniques? Did the writer really believe that it was rare for teachers to pose higher order questions? Did the writer want to imply that the full staff was not adept at using technology?

What made the review even more puzzling was the fact that the two retired principals, who were contracted to conduct observations for DCPCSB, indicated to me that they were very impressed with the school and that we had established a positive culture for learning. They also mentioned that they were not supposed to share their individual notes, as they were to be compiled for a report written by an individual at the charter board office. I did explain to Goldman that the report did not match what the contracted reviewers had said to me, but this message seemed to fall on deaf ears.

We had ample evidence that much of what was implied in the QSR report was not an accurate picture of the teaching and learning happening at WEDJ. I was aware that the Charter Board had developed their rubric system for assessing quality instruction, based on Charlotte Danielson's comprehensive *Framework for Teaching*: "The Framework for Teaching is a research-based set of components of instruction...grounded in a constructivist view of learning and teaching. The complex activity of teaching is divided into 22 components (and 76 smaller elements) clustered into four domains of teaching responsibilities" (<https://danielsongroup.org/framework/>).

Given we had also adapted our Red Carpet performance review tools directly from the same source, I thought our school and the Charter Board would share similar understandings of what constituted best practice. While I was not aware of how the observers and the in-house DCPCSB staff were trained to use Danielson's tool, I was confident that at WEDJ, we were using the framework as Danielson had intended. It was admirable that the DC Public Charter School Board had adapted Danielson's research-based system for observing effective teaching practices, however, it was never Danielson's intention to use the items as a quantitative measure of a teacher's or a school's worth. Rather, the tool was intended to help teachers and schools chart a path towards growth and improvement.

In terms of areas for improvement, I did want to see teachers conducting more regular classroom assessment beyond teacher observation, within each lesson. The report stated: "It was unclear how students would be assessed on their assignments. Teachers did not assess student learning throughout the lesson or after each lesson's completion." (<http://www.livebinders.com/play/play?id=1174998>). While I agreed that our staff needed to build in more regular daily assessment, I knew many teachers were improving in this area, as this was a major focus in the weekly mentor meetings. The absolute statement that "*teachers did not assess student learning...*" (<http://www.livebinders.com/play/play?id=1174998>) did not reflect the work teachers were doing in this area and inferred this neglect was widespread in every classroom.

While we recognized that some teachers needed more support in questioning techniques, at no time, did we use absolute terms, assuming that every day was a good day, or every day they demonstrated poor practice. Even more perplexing was the fact that a qualitative site review would quantify assumptions? How could anyone assign percentages or tally fractions of qualitative observations, particularly when lessons were not viewed in their entirety? As stated in the review:

- *40% of classrooms had no or ineffective classroom procedures in place.*
- *59% of classrooms received a rating of proficient or exemplary for the Classroom Environment Domain.*
- *The lowest rated element of the rubric was 'Using Questioning and Discussion' techniques: less than one-third of WEDJ PCS's teachers were rated as proficient in this element of Instructional Delivery.*
- *The highest rated elements...were 'Creating an Environment of Respect and Rapport' and 'Managing Student Behavior,' which. rated 66% and 65% as proficient or exemplary..The QSR team noted that two-thirds of observed classrooms were characterized by well-behaved, respectful students and warm, caring teachers who praised positive behavior and efficiently responded to misbehavior. (<http://www.livebinders.com/play/play?id=1174998>)*

I am certain that Charlotte Danielson never intended for her tool to be extrapolated to build in assumptions that would give a teacher and a school a quantitative score on performance. How can such poor implementation of school auditing practices

be part of the everyday existence of a charter school in DC? My only thoughts are that such a process can exist because there is only one authorizer in town, and with a monopoly, there is minimal accountability when the element of comparison or competition does not exist.

Our performance assessment criteria at WEDJ mirrored much of Danielson's extensive lists of best practices. Teachers received informal feedback weekly from their mentors, plus three formal assessments (of their whole class). Prior to the start of the year, all teachers were required to complete a self-evaluation that ultimately clarified over 100 distinguished practices verifying their understanding of expected actions to help teachers set goals for improvement. Many of our distinguished or 'exceptional' teachers were mentoring their colleagues and we had documented proof of growth.

While we expected all staff to be at least proficient, we had evidence from our extensive performance reviews that the quality of teaching overall, demonstrated incredible growth. While the QSR team indicated that half our staff was deficient, I believe extreme subjectivity and lack of training was at play. Without having the DC Charter Board report writer taking part in training from the Danielson group, it is doubtful if this individual could have been skilled or consistent at deviating between a 'satisfactory' rating and a 'proficient' rating, as there were fine lines separating the descriptions of each measure.

In addition to gathering input using criteria from Danielson's framework of effective practices, each observation at WEDJ was written up in a 'reference letter' type format that relayed the full review of a lesson for teachers' professional portfolios. The intent of such a comprehensive process was to ensure that each formal performance review included the breadth of the context, in addition to specific recommendations for improvement.

The performance reviews of the instructional delivery of most teachers at WEDJ indicated their lessons included most of the effective practices in [Figure 8](#).

Such practices were commonplace at WEDJ. We were not blind, however, to the fact that in our first few weeks of school, some students were subject to some weak teaching and learning practices. Our weaker teachers were observed by two different teacher-leaders, so they were able to gain some good ideas from a wealth of experiences. They were eager to improve and accept ideas from the administration and teacher leaders.

One staff member, who was qualified to teach English and English as a second language, was initially hired to teach grade 6 English, in addition to her English Language Learner (ELL) caseload. As it turned out, she was much more effective working in small groups with our ELL students. Her positive personality was not enough to keep her grade 6 students engaged in English. Within that first month, I had met with concerned parents and I was well aware a change was in order; it turned out to be too much of a challenge for this teacher to work in a full class of students, who had benefited from a very strong English teacher the year before in grade 5. Mr. Carter, Ms. Palmer and I tried to help her with planning and classroom

<p>Evidence of Effective Practices...The teacher</p> <p>manages classroom so all students are productively engaged</p> <p>uses technology effectively for motivational and learning purposes</p> <p>transitions efficiently with little loss of instructional time</p> <p>provides experiences that lead to skill mastery and habit formation</p> <p>requires students to edit and revise their original work</p> <p>uses paired instruction to increase engagement and opportunity for deliberate dialogue and decision-making</p> <p>uses reciprocal teaching methods to reinforce understanding</p> <p>uses and finds instructional materials to support learning</p> <p>organizes classroom space to optimize learning</p> <p>uses group instruction in ways that promote engagement for all</p> <p>provides self-directed instruction methods so students can exercise individual thinking and decision-making</p> <p>provides students with opportunities to build learning portfolios</p> <p>gives students an opportunity to express how they could improve the lesson or material</p> <p>presents lessons in a clear and logical manner</p> <p>provides excellent and weak examples</p> <p>gives students chances to upgrade their work</p> <p>uses tools that require students to self-assess their work and work habits</p> <p>provides meaningful and immediate feedback</p> <p>uses assessment tools that lead to increased achievement</p> <p>gives students wait time or "soak time" to master understanding</p> <p>uses assessment criteria with a balance of basic and challenging expectations</p>

Figure 8. Chart of effective practices

management, but after a trial period, we hired a new teacher to teach this class for the remainder of the school year. While she had to give up a full-time position, I was pleased she agreed to continue in a half time position supporting our English language learners. While we were not privy to the classrooms the Qualitative Site Review team visited, I suspect if her English class was viewed, she would be considered struggling, but such an example was not at all representative of the entire staff.

I also hired a third-grade English teacher, who had been an enthusiastic music teacher. Students were so engaged in his music classes the year before: I trusted he would do the hard work needed to take on an additional classroom role. When he began teaching in the fall of 2013, I realized that his limited summer preparations would not suffice to meet the needs of the Grade 3 English students. Early in the school year, I decided to ask Ms. Bradshaw to give up her PK class to take over his classroom. At the time, I could not risk bringing in a new staff member, and given the grade 3 test results weighted heavily on the school ranking, I asked our former academic leader and highly regarded teacher, to step in. I completely understood that she would be hesitant to make the move at the start of the school year, but I appreciated her willingness to help us fill this gap. Within days of her arrival in the third grade, most parents were thrilled at how she was reshaping things in the English program. Ms. Bradshaw worked hard and the students responded to her intense and focused lessons. In any event, by the school responded in a timely way to weak performance. By the time the QSR report was read, we had already taken swift action to address weaker performances in staff reviews, as we were deeply committed to the well-being and enriching the learning capacity of all our students.

WEDJ's 'Red Carpet Performance Reviews revealed that most observations of staff found 'rich evidence' of best practices. The WEDJ teachers had established classroom cultures where higher-level thinking, questioning, student engagement, and use of technology to demonstrate understanding were commonplace. We tabulated over 108 hours of observations, notwithstanding the time to meet, discuss and write up the formal performance reviews. Such rigorous attention to teacher evaluation was not mentioned in the QSR report. Clearly, the assessments of WEDJ teachers did not reveal the same kind of data that had been gathered by representatives of the DCPCSB. While the results of the Qualitative Site Review confirmed some early evidence that two of our teachers were having a very difficult start to the school year, in no way was the report accurate about the volume of struggling teachers. To suggest that half of the staff was struggling was an exaggeration. When I read through the QSR, I could not help but ask the question: Apart from conducting the QSR observations in the first few days of school, how could the Qualitative Site Review be so far apart from WEDJ's internal observations?

There were several features of the QSR account and analysis that could be called into question. Rather than spend additional time identifying strengths, the writer of the report focused on assumptions that what was observed in a portion of the class represented the whole lesson. It was odd that there were so few positive

observations, especially given the internal evidence gathered from three formal internal observations conducted for each teacher in 2012–2013. I was looking forward to the Middle States Accreditation in the spring, as these observations would confirm or deny our internal feedback or the concerns raised by the DCPCSB. Middle States had no bias one way or the other, but the Charter Board did have a stake in finding evidence to substantiate lower DC-CAS scores.

When the reviewers had a choice of making a determination of whether a teacher was ‘satisfactory’ or ‘proficient’, they tended to weigh in on a ‘glass as half empty’ claim. Without training from the Danielson Group, it is possible that the observation of what is deemed ‘satisfactory’ (or ‘basic’), rather than ‘proficient’ can be subjective. If the writer of the report is looking to verify test scores that are higher, then a higher percentage of ‘proficient’ measures might be selected. Conversely, if observers are looking to verify lower scores, then it is possible that selections trend to more ‘basic’ designations. The report did make reference to WEDJ’s DC-CAS scores: “The elementary program is noticeably weaker than the upper grades, as evidenced by the school’s DC CAS scores.” (<http://www.livebinders.com/play/play?id=1174998>) Strangely enough, the scores were actually weaker in Grades 6, 7 and 8, so such a statement was inaccurate. Danielson’s *Framework for Effective Teaching* was never meant to be a weapon to close down schools with the lowest scores. It did make me wonder if certain members of the observation team were looking to verify, in qualitative terms, some weaker scores in reading. Assuming that poor standardized test results must be correlated with poor teaching practices, the DC Charter Board’s QSR could be considered a ‘self-fulfilling prophesy.’ It is possible that standardized scores, subliminally or not, could have influenced the bottom line QSR results.

On a similar note, the DC Charter Board, armed with a commitment to demonstrate more rigorous schooling in charters than its public counterpart, needed to have cases of schools they challenged each year. The Performance Management Framework (PMF) seemingly provided an objective tool for designating which schools land in Tier 1, 2 or 3, depending on their own analysis of attendance, re-enrollment and testing data. It is clearly an advantage to keep schools open with higher PMF scores, while closing down schools with lower scores, in order to widen the academic achievement gap between charters and the DC public schools. Returning students from the bottom of Tier 2 and 3 schools to DC Public Schools, in effect, keeps the DC Charter Schools looking like the most effective option. The more recent aggressive pattern of closing DC charter schools is evident with four closures in 2014 and three in 2015. As well, the poor QSR forces a Board of Trustees of schools to intervene, and provide evidence that they are taking action. The WEDJ Board of Trustees reached out to the TenSquare Consulting Group as a means of demonstrating what they probably understood as appropriate due diligence. Unfortunately, TenSquare did not bring sound education practices to help with improvement, nor could they be considered ‘at arms-length’ from the DC Charter system. In a sense, poor Qualitative Site Reviews can provide a continuous stream of potential customers for TenSquare, at the public’s expense.

Clearly the most important path to school improvement is teacher development. At WEDJ, we recognized the full range of each teacher's talents in these observation reports. We were quite aware that outside groups needed to verify our internal performance reviews, and this is why I was confident that the Middle States Accreditation teams, scheduled for the spring, would have been able to conduct a much more thorough job, in terms of classroom observations. The Board of Trustees, however, did not question the differences between the internal measures of staff competencies and the perceptions shared in the DCPCSB site review.

The reality of being in a charter system is that the school must pay attention to how the authorizer judges the worth of the school. When the 2013 PMF score was first announced, I did not sign off on it, because the 2011–2012 growth scores were affected by the combined scores that included test results from the former chaotic school year and lasting effects of the Earthquake. Such scores would taint the growth scores until such time as they were no longer averaged into the overall growth measures. I went to the Charter Board to explain our unique situation, but there was no change in the 0/20 part of the PMF overall growth score. Even though Goldman, TenSquare and the Charter Board were aware of the limitations of WEDJ's PMF score results, I was directed by Goldman to accept the PMF rating of 36.5/100, keeping us firmly at the bottom of the Tier 2 schools on the DCPCSB rating scale. QSR and TenSquare observers, who had not witnessed the school's transformation, helped to set the table for the TenSquare Consulting Group to come in and conduct what I sense was a well-choreographed ambush.

RESPONSE TO THE CHARTER BOARD QUALITATIVE SITE REVIEW

Regardless of the inadequacy of the Qualitative Site Review, we took the allegations seriously. We responded to the concerns raised by the Charter Board on several fronts. We modified the schedule, adjusted teaching positions, and developed a Saturday School for new teachers. We also visited and analyzed other school programs, supported the further development of our teacher-leader and mentorship experiences, promoted a culture that celebrated the strength of others, added more focus on ‘Count Day’, supported the staff talent show to boost morale, and over-communicated the importance of moving forward to improve scores on the 2014 DC-CAS standardized test in the spring.

I believed many of our new teachers would benefit from additional support outside their mentors, so I offered a *Saturday School for Teachers*. Each weekend, I worked directly with a different new teacher for a day to redesign each classroom for optimal learning. It was a good opportunity to lend some ‘hands-on’ support, shifting furniture, creating anchor charts and cleaning out dusty corners. In between the renovating and reinvention, we went back and forth fine-tuning deliberate planning ideas. I recall one awesome lunch, when Ms. LeVault, was kind enough to prepare a classroom picnic for both of us!

Not only did we work at making sure we had the right people in the right places on the bus, and provide additional support in the form of Saturday School for our new teachers, our staff continued to visit other schools to see what else we might consider to help make improvements to WEDJ. Justin Rydstrom, former DC Prep Dean of Students and current WEDJ Board Academic Committee Chair, encouraged me to meet with administrators at DC Prep, to find out more about how their school, just yards apart from WEDJ, had built such a legacy of student achievement. After visiting DC-Prep, I discovered that this highly respected school had taken years to develop their customized program, but it did pay positive dividends for their students, who were accepted into many colleges of their choice. This meeting was truly inspiring; I walked away feeling a tremendous sense of encouragement, believing that we were on the right track to making a difference in the lives of WEDJ’s students. While I recognized that the populations of the two schools were predominantly African American, not all children from the same race are the same; we did not have the same students under our roof. We were striving to meet the needs of all of our students, with nearly 30 students requiring support for a variety of special needs.

Any assumption that our students were the same, and should automatically generate the same standardized test scores, made no sense at all.

I recall DC Prep's Assistant Principal was very impressed with our math scores and wanted to know more about how we were able to make such gains in a short period of time. Overall, I had mixed feelings about the insistence on silence in DC Prep halls, but the opportunity to observe our high scoring neighborhood school in action, proved to be illuminating.

In addition to my visit at DCPrep in the fall, many of our teachers were able to connect with staff from the Two Rivers School, the Sidwell Friends School and The Washington International School. Our teachers appreciated the opportunity to attend local DC Project Zero events that were coordinated by Jim Reese, from the Washington International School. When I asked our staff participants to share their responses with Jim, it was clear they were appropriating the language of experts, and based on classrooms observations, I was pleased they were internally adapting what they were learning to improve their practice. I thanked the teachers for their powerful reflections and asked Jim Reese if we could get a discount on the book *'Making Thinking Visible'* to help our staff further build their professional libraries.

The more our staff was reading and involved in professional development (PD) with other teachers, at other schools that embraced research-based practices, the more they were making WEDJ 'visible.' Unfortunately, the opportunity for staff to engage with other teachers about *Project Zero*, was short-lived. Had WEDJ been able to sustain such connections, I am confident we would have been closer to achieving our goal of becoming a model urban school.

I also asked the staff to share kudos about their teacher-leaders. Ms. LeVault shared the following kudos about her mentor, Ms. Nugent:

Ms. Nugent has been helpful with the following:

She showed me a review activity she did with the sixth grade; it inspired a challenging and exciting review for my students. We recently completed a professional development together; we have now been talking about some of the ideas and how they have worked in our classrooms. And she shows me she values my input and ideas, by asking me questions and for my opinion. When we review my lesson plans, she has good questions to add and sometimes a lower or higher differentiation idea.

Thank you Ms. Nugent! Ms. LeVault

In response to the qualitative site review, we increased attention on attendance. By October, our attendance was strong, with an increase on average from 91%+ students in attendance daily to just over 93%. We wanted to sustain this momentum and ensure we had maximum participation on Count Day, so we coordinated a 'Jersey Day' promotion, followed by a popsicle party for each class with 100% participation.

RESPONSE TO THE CHARTER BOARD QUALITATIVE SITE REVIEW

Dear Parent/Guardian(s),

Our annual enrollment audit, or 'Count Day', for the 2013–2014 school year will take place on Tuesday, October 15, 2013. We are asking all families to bring your child to school at 8:00AM so that our students will be sitting in their seat ready to start the "count" so we can get back quickly to the business of teaching and learning. To make Count Day even more exciting we have a number of incentives available for our students that day....

Tuesday, October 15th will be JERSEY DAY!

All students may wear a sports jersey representing one of their favorite sports teams! AND...

Every homeroom that has 100% ON-TIME ATTENDANCE

will have a POPSICLE PARTY Tuesday afternoon.

We aim for 100% attendance each and every day but we do understand that circumstances occur that may cause a student to be absent from school. If your student will be absent on that day for any reason, please submit a note to Ms. Evans in the main office by Friday, October 11, 2013.

Thank you! Dr. Barbara Smith. Principal

<http://www.wedjschool.us/dr-smith/important-news-about-count-day-on-october-15>

We also responded to the QSR by keeping morale up through our planned Spirit Week at the end of October. The school, in partnership with the PTA, put on five special days including a Primary Fashion Show, a Can and Food Drive, a Founder's Day Birthday Party, a walk for the Homeless and a 'Staff Cabaret' talent night to support Breast Cancer. In spite of the disappointing news from the Qualitative Site Review report, the staff pulled together some great acts including an enthusiastic rap from our PTA President, Cynthia Jordan. Ms. Palmer was hands down the most enthusiastic MC. Ms. Evans demonstrated her skills at flag and ribbon work. Ms. Hamilton acted out an incredible Little Miss Riding Hood monologue. Mr. Dickens rocked on with an intense rap, and I was able to belt out 'Let it Be' on the trumpet, while everyone sang along. The leadership team pulled together to perform a skit called, "If I were not a WEDJ leader, I would rather be..." that added more laughs to the mix. I'm not sure which outfit strutted the most hilarious fashion: Ms. Joseph as an ice cream maker, Ms. Lawson as a bubble gum machine or Mr. Harris as a chicken? The highlight of the night was our amazing Ms. Johnson, whose voice brought down the house, commanding a standing ovation and call for more! The finale ended with Mr. Harris leading the staff in a fun version of the 'wobble' and announcing that the event had raised over \$200 for breast cancer research. The Board was invited to come, and while Cindy Gertz attended, she left early.

The professional development messages continued throughout the fall. Staff were reminded about the importance of differentiating instruction and tracking progress. I called upon teachers to behave like researchers, so students could have the benefit of learning in both their comfort zones – as well as learning how to learn and adapt outside their comfort zones. I urged our teachers, in individual and group meetings, to teach and be willing to teach outside their own comfort zones, so they could meet our kids where they were at.

We needed to address what research is most effective if we wanted our young people to become innovators of tomorrow. I explained that the staff, selected to go to *Project Zero* at Harvard, could have made the experience a selfish one – simply attend to update an impressive addition to their resume, but they chose to step up and help one another. While there was no guarantee that these teachers would have given back to the school, most did choose to share their excitement about learning with a truly professional presentation during our summer PD. In addition to working with new teachers on re-vitalizing their classrooms, I continued to support actions to boost morale throughout the fall.

Apart from responding to the QSR, and taking their concerns seriously, we worked hard to maintain our relationship with existing outside organizations: The National Philharmonic, The Shakespeare Theatre Company, The National Art Gallery, the Capstone Institute at Howard University and the US Chess Center. By December 2013, WEDJ had also struck up new links with The Dance Place, ACT (DC Acquiring Competencies in Technology and Science), and we began some initial talks with Arena Stage about piloting some new theatre programming. I had also met with Mr. Gerald Smith, from Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, to discuss their plans for making a significant donation to the school. The predominantly African American fraternity was celebrating its' 100th anniversary and they were very interested in securing ties with WEDJ. Dr. Willis and I attended their annual Gala where they spoke highly of our school's namesake, William E. Doar, Jr., as well as their firm commitment to our school. I had also met with a million-dollar potential donor who wished to remain anonymous, until he felt convinced of the stability of the Board and the school.

While we worked hard to keep spirits high and make proactive changes in response to the Qualitative Site Review, Goldman directed me to bring in the TenSquare Consulting group to provide additional help. He wanted them to provide the same kind of guidance and training services they had provided for the Idea School, so WEDJ would be successful during the upcoming DCPCSB's Ten Year Review. I sense he was worried that our DC-CAS scores, combined with a poor Qualitative Site Review, might put WEDJ on a potential watch list for closing. At the end of September 2013, Goldman had arranged for a team from TenSquare to come into the school to conduct an additional audit. I assumed the group was contacted after I spoke with Mr. Goldman about the poor QSR message. I later discovered the Board had hired TenSquare on September 5th, 2013, before any QSR observations incurred. I was surprised at the timing of this initial contract, but assumed the TenSquare group would be able to identify not only the areas for improvement, but be excited

RESPONSE TO THE CHARTER BOARD QUALITATIVE SITE REVIEW

about collaborating and building on the strengths of the changes that were already taking place.

I was informed that the TenSquare audit would entail a series of interviews, observations and analysis of school documents. I initially trusted the team, did not give any prior notice or attempt to influence my staff, and took the weekend to compile and forward the requested documentation for their review. Dr. Ethan Mitnick was assigned to lead the TenSquare team. TenSquare's initial audit, at a cost of over \$20,000, involved interviews with 5 teachers, key school leaders, an in-depth interview with the Principal (60–75 minutes), unannounced 'snapshot' classroom and common area observations, a 'cursory' audit of critical documents, such as procedures for collecting attendance, current attendance rates and an analysis of the Performance Management Framework (PMF) breakdown.

The DC Charter Board developed the PMF as a report card to rank schools as Tier 1, Tier 2 or Tier 3. Given WEDJ was at the bottom of Tier 2 for two years in a row, and about to embark upon the charter's Ten Year Review, this score was significant as it combined measures of daily attendance, re-enrollment, DC-CAS scores from one year, in addition to giving additional weighting to Grade 3 reading scores and grade 8 mathematics scores over two years in order to integrate an indicator of growth into the overall design.

The documents were forwarded to Dr. Mitnick in a timely manner. I had faith TenSquare would provide additional support and be able to witness first-hand the strengths of the school that the Qualitative Site Review team was unable to see. During my interview, however, it became clear to me that Mitnick did not have the education background I expected. He indicated that *Project Zero* was a character education program, which tipped me off to the fact that he did not have a vast understanding or current expertise in curriculum. On the way home, Goldman contacted me to ask me what I thought about my interview with Mitnick. I was frank about my reservations. Goldman assured me that TenSquare was there to help me, and the school, and they were eager to collaborate to make a difference to further improve teaching and learning at WEDJ. I trusted Goldman and focused my attention on the upcoming Board retreat. As it turns out, TenSquare came in with an agenda that did not, in my opinion, have much to do with best practice, whatsoever.

BOARD RETREAT

I was naïve to think that once the WEDJ Board was armed with knowledge of the limitations of the Qualitative Site Review, and an understanding that substantial change takes time – that they would naturally rally in support for my leadership. This was not the case.

Initially, I was very encouraged to see that the WEDJ Board of Trustees had decided to hold a retreat to work on establishing a school vision with clear goals for moving forward. It was also an opportunity for team building, as we had three new Board members: Tammy Daub, Jeri Epstein and Cindy Gertz, who hosted the retreat at her home. Idea School principal, Justin Rydstrom, and our single parent representative, Lauren Szewczyk, also attended the daylong meeting led by Mr. Goldman. Mr. Carnes, a friend of Goldman's, was unable to attend the retreat, and while I had only met him twice, I felt his knowledge of technology could have been a tremendous asset on the Board team. While Mr. Carter and I had recommended names for the second parent representative (Tony Broomfield and Mohammed Kamara), we were still short this representative at the retreat.

When we were down to three Board members in 2013, I recommended to Goldman that we ask Tony Upson from Howard University to consider being on the WEDJ Board. I asked Tony if he might be interested; he was delighted at the prospect and submitted his resume to the nominations committee. Tony was a highly respected African American leader in the DC urban schools network, had worked at Harvard and was named as the 2014 Legacy Award winner and inducted to the Washington DC Hall of Fame. One parent member on our Board knew of Tony from her previous school; she indicated at the time that she would be very supportive of his nomination to the WEDJ Board. Goldman, however, did not move on the nomination, and preceded to hire *Charter Board Partners (CBP)*, who added three new Caucasian members to the Trustee team with one remaining African American parent representative, Jeanette Staton, who left the school and resigned the day before Count Day in October 2013. My co-leader, John Manahan, had recommended CBP to help the school vet Board candidates. He was concerned that for months we did not have enough Board members. When some representatives from CBPs came to the first Board meeting, I remember having a conversation about needing a broad range of skill sets to help us move forward. While the consultant group was warm to the idea of ensuring we had a lawyer, a real estate expert and people who could fund raise, they seemed reluctant to consider the possibility of university candidates. The idea of not having experts in education as part of the Board troubled me, but I continued to promote Tony's

application. I recall contacting my mentor, Alexandra Pardo, about the make-up of the Board. I had mentioned to her and frequently to John Goldman how much I wanted Tony to be part of this leadership group. To this day no one from the Board has been in touch with Tony Upson to thank him for his interest in WEDJ, and either accept, nor officially deny his request to be part of the Board.

Apart from having little influence on Board membership, I was very enthusiastic about the retreat as I was confident to take a lead role in defining the vision with the Board. I was eager to set the agenda with John Goldman. I offered to meet in advance to plan the day out, but he said he was too busy. I felt the retreat should address the data gathered in the TenSquare audit, but each time I asked if their report was ready for reading, Goldman told me it would not be available in advance of the retreat. I was sent the agenda, and could see in advance that my voice would be delegated to a Q & A session. I had prepared a comprehensive PowerPoint presentation to share during my School Report on the agenda, but time was not afforded for me to address the group. I gave Goldman copies to distribute to the Board, but I did not receive any responses. Goldman had filled in the plan for the day with a DCPCSB representative who explained details about how the Performance Management Framework (PMF) rankings worked.

Goldman also asked Charter Board Partners (CBP) to lead the vision and goal setting session. I remember being asked about my leadership goals. While we were all responsible for specific goals for the school as outlined in the charter, I felt my main focus was to improve the critical mass of exceptional teaching staff. By doing so, we would be more effective at improving learning conditions for our students, that would ultimately lead to increased standardized test scores (DC-CAS), attendance, and re-enrollment. As a school leader, I also told my Board that I was committed to life-long learning. There was no secret formula for great charters. By indicating I that I was committed to lifelong learning, I was open to improvement and change to make a better school. Goldman disagreed with me publicly and indicated his goal was to “win.” Thoughts of Charlie Sheen’s rants filled my head, but I respectfully listened. At this point the mood was awkward. Everyone, including the facilitator, lingered in what seemed like an endless pause. In the end, Goldman controlled the final list of goals. Coming off a scare from his own school being threatened with closure, the Board was fueled with his concerns that WEDJ was in trouble and may be at risk, too.

Ensuring that the school was prepared for the Ten-Year Review represented the most urgent goal for the Board and the school. The poor Qualitative Site Review echoed how the school was not meeting the mandate of its’ outdated charter would prove to be problematic for WEDJ. For instance, it did not make sense having an unrealistic goal of 100% proficiency on the annual testing, when the actual results ranged between 43% to 51% proficiency between 2012 and 2014. Not only was Goldman at the helm, as Executive Director, when lower scores prevailed, he later, in his Chairman of the Board role, failed to recognize the important need to revisit these original goals to update them. It is doubtful if any schools in Tier 1 would be held to absolute standards that indicated “all” students would be proficient in reading

and mathematics. The standards, when first written, listed idealistic targets, but such outdated options should have been tagged much earlier by the DCPCSB in terms of oversight, and when urged to make these changes in a timely manner, the Board governance, in my opinion, let the school down in a significant way. This should have been an important discussion during our retreat. Given the Ten-Year Review was on our critical path, we needed to do something to address the fact that the QSR and Ten Year Review team members would be looking for evidence that was not there.

No one addressed the updating of the WEDJ charter and goals during the retreat. It would have been necessary to revise the charter in order to meet this goal and two of the other goals that the Charter Board Partners facilitator helped the group identify, namely, that the school complete the Ten Year Review and secure renewal of our charter and, that the overall school performance on the PMF to 40 or higher as recommended by the Public Charter School Board. To this list of goals, the Board also agreed to set the bar low in my opinion, for fundraising targets indicating they would aim for \$15,000.

Cindy Gertz, the Chair of the Finance Committee, was interested in hiring a grant writer and professional fundraiser. When Szewczyk volunteered to write grants, or fundraise at an earlier Board meeting, I recall Goldman directing her away from 'hands-on' work. He believed the school should hire 'development' or fundraising personnel, contributing to the extensive numbers of operational, non-teaching staff. At no time during the retreat did Gertz come up with any other strategy other than out-sourcing the fundraising tasks. In addition to accessing the work of volunteer grant writers from the community (Board, staff, and local experts), I felt that given the sensitivity of using public funds, that we might consider hiring a fundraiser with a percentage cap built into a commission, rather than investing in a salary and benefits without any guarantees. During my time at WEDJ, the Board never approached the community or families formally to raise funds for the school. We did secure a grant for \$150,000 for improved science and arts programming, as well as a grant for the PK playground (\$25,000). Even when my family donated \$15,000 toward the playground, in addition to close to \$8000 to support student leadership development, there was no response from the WEDJ Board of Trustees for such good will.

At one point in the retreat, I was asked to leave the room when the Board went into a closed session. I waited in the kitchen where I could see a hard copy of the TenSquare report on the table. I assumed this was Cindy's copy, as it was her home. I did not read the report, assuming I would be emailed the document for review. When I was permitted to return to the meeting, I discovered that Jeri Epstein had left the retreat early. Jeri later informed me that the closed session was focused on questioning my leadership. Jeri resigned from the Board a few days later. She informed me that she did not want to be part of a Board that was not supporting the school leader. This was a significant loss to the school as Jeri had extensive experience in education, fundraising, and was willing to volunteer her time to help the school improve. In hindsight, it was becoming clearer that this might be the beginning of the end for me at WEDJ.

WEDJ THROUGH THE EYES OF TENSQUARE

Retreats are supposed to be places where teams come together, make directional progress and feel a sense of rejuvenation. The weekend meeting might have achieved the target of pulling the Board together in a common push to question my leadership, but I did not leave with any sense of community or support.

In the meantime, WEDJ's Performance Management Framework score was announced, keeping the school ranked on the bottom of the Tier 2 in the Charter Board's three-tiered ladder. While WEDJ's score had not changed much at all, it was by no means the weakest school in the system. Had all the other schools been making the same kind of progress as we were, I do not know? I do know that the ranking system did not reveal the growth made in the course of a year.

Nevertheless, I returned from the retreat and followed the directive of the Board to tender for consulting services and asked Ms. Lawson to advertise in at least three different media sources. It was a very short timeline for the tender process, and as I recall, allowed only two weeks for responses. Not surprisingly, we received only two replies: one from TenSquare, which could be argued, was not at arms-length, and one from a company with limited experience in charter school systems. I sense it was a façade to hire TenSquare at significant costs to the school and the taxpayers without a real competitive bid.

After the Board Retreat, Goldman sent me a copy of the TenSquare audit. While I was shocked at the contents of the report, which in my opinion bordered on slander, I now had a better idea of the discussion behind closed doors at the Board retreat and why Jeri Epstein had resigned.

When I read the report, there was no question in my mind that it was in TenSquare's best interest to stretch the truth, exaggerate the evidence of poor practice and ignore the strengths of the staff. The analysis of the school through TenSquare's eyes, not only mirrored the Qualitative Site Review, but it was seeped in innuendo and rumor. What was more disheartening was the fact that the TenSquare reviewers convinced the WEDJ Board that the school was in trouble, and with their help, they could turn things around.

The TenSquare Group failed to make reference to the leadership implicated in the 2011–2012 PMF score, as this score was averaged as part of our growth score for the 2012–2013 school year. The 0/20 result on this part of the PMF can be linked directly to the poor performance prior to my arrival. Furthermore, the TenSquare report misled the Trustees into thinking that the PMF had been in existence for 9 years when in fact, the tool was designed in 2011. The report also did not clarify

for the reader that the actual re-enrollment rate of 87% would have given WEDJ an additional 9%, rather than the 0% for 57% student retention that was directly attributed to the school under Goldman's leadership.

Like any new resource, the PMF had flaws, but the TenSquare report did not relay the limitations of this ranking tool. Given its' newness and yet to be proven merit, its use as a metric for closing down schools and ranking them, was cause for question. In reality, WEDJ did have a spotty record in the past, but the fluctuating scores on the annual DC-CAS standardized tests, had more to do with the lack of stability and sustainability of the student, staff and Board member population. One of the most interesting elements of this report is that it pointed to long term systematic instability of the school, yet makes no reference to the players involved beyond the 2012–2013 school year. Goldman's systematic firing of principals and staff was not questioned in the report, nor his responsibility for being part of WEDJ's history, was conspicuous in its absence.

It should take at least two years to stabilize a population enough for staff and students to have a positive impact on test scores, yet TenSquare did not pause to think about the quality of the PMF and impulsively concluded that the school was in jeopardy of dropping to Tier 3. At the time of issuing this alarming report to the WEDJ Board, the TenSquare consultants were very aware that there was a strong possibility that the 36.5 score would increase by close to 10 points, based on re-enrollment alone. The school inherited a score of 0/10 on re-enrolment from Goldman's '2011–2012 school year,' because the DCPCSB does not factor in the actual re-enrollment data for the year they were assigning a PMF score to. In essence, the 2012–2013 school year could not be credited for its 87% re-enrollment, and had a false measure of 57%, making it appear as if the school was in a decline – when we were actually in a position of solid improvement – technically moving before school started to at least 46 – a 10-point gain. As predicted, the score by the end of 2014 was 47.6%. Goldman, TenSquare and the DCPCSB understood this more realistic calculation, but allowed the data to deceive the WEDJ Board of Trustees.

In addition to measuring daily attendance and re-enrollment, the PMF charter school report card included a rating of current and previous standardized test scores. They had to have known we made significant progress and in reality, we were more in the middle of the pack of Tier 2 schools, and more in synch with how the DC-CAS rated us in 2012–2013 – that is, as a 'rising' school.

Why would the TenSquare Consulting Group not reveal in their report that the growth data and the re-enrollment data was linked directly to the former school leader? Furthermore, the report suggested that the school did not place a priority on attendance and re-enrollment. This was not the case. The re-enrollment measure related directly to the school when John Goldman was in the lead role as Executive Director. To be precise Mr. Manahan and I worked closely in 2012–2013 when the enrollment increased by over 30%, evidence to the contrary – WEDJ did pay serious attention to re-enrollment.

We also explained why the daily attendance was inaccurate – another area where WEDJ should have scored more PMF points. In the spring of 2013, we discovered our attendance data (averaging 91% each day) did not make sense when we rarely had empty seats. When interviewed, I informed Dr. Mitnick that teachers had not been updating their Powerschool data when students arrived late, making it appear that WEDJ had an attendance problem when in fact, we didn't. We revised our system and implemented a new in-depth procedure, as well as developed an attendance coordinator position. As a result, when we were able to solve this discrepancy, the daily attendance rate rose to between 93% and 95%. This information, like the detailing of who was responsible for influencing what scores on the PMF, seemed to be absent from the TenSquare report.

After reading the report, I shared my concerns in a phone conversation with Goldman and also submitted a 6-page retort (November 20, 2013) to TenSquare and the Board. I received no response. I shared feedback about TenSquare's report in terms of relaying actions we had already taken to support attendance, re-enrollment, data based instruction, scheduling, curriculum, quality resources, staffing, and staff development.

In my response, I explained that our additional eyes on attendance had helped teachers see the urgency of having students in our seats. I shared that we had introduced a teacher incentive program that included a semester raffle for teachers who had 100% attendance without any 'tardies' each day.

I also shared a copy of the 2013–2014 WEDJ Re-enrollment Plan that included a comprehensive marketing plan featuring participation in school fairs, the DC Charter School Showcase, coordination of open houses and school tours. In my response, I also mentioned that we paid "strategic attention to the digital application for returning families," agreed to take part in the Charter Board's Common Lottery, in addition to compiling a host of communication materials, ready for distribution in newsletters and captivating marketing promotions. Based on the extensive re-enrollment plans and actions, I was stunned that Dr. Mitnick indicated we did not have a plan to increase enrollment or a system for gathering data from families who withdrew from the school. At no time did I state our plans did not exist. I had documentation from the few families who had left the school; most indicated they had moved out of the region, which I shared during my interview with him. We made every attempt to bring in families for exit interviews to document how we could improve our school. While the Tensquare report did not see the need to improve family participation at WEDJ, I still believe this would have, in addition to our comprehensive plan, been an important consideration for future improvement.

Contrary to what TenSquare was eluding to in their audit, the WEDJ administration was seriously focused on using data to make informed decisions and action. In my response to the audit, I asserted: "WEDJ takes all data seriously. Achievement data for PreK to Grade 8 is tracked at the beginning of the Year through ANET and MClass/MCIrcle digital testing. The data is used to guide planning and teaching."

In response to TenSquare recommending a reduction in the total amount of time for math and ELA (120 minutes to 90 minutes), I noted that we had cooperated with Dr. Mitnick and implemented a new schedule that began the second week of December.

There was also no basis for his claim that our curriculum was not aligned with the Common Core. In response to such claims, I informed the WEDJ Board of how the school internally monitored our Common Core-based curriculum with the following summary:

The WEDJ Essential Skills Curriculum in ELA and Mathematics are directly linked to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Teachers use the Math Curriculum that is supported by the Singapore Math Program materials, in addition to other 'manipulatives' from former math textbooks. The Math Coordinator has recently set up a weekly after school math planning support meeting where the expectations for piloting the Singapore Math is directly linked to lesson planning and the coordination of exit tickets. A revised lesson plan structure has been implemented based on the input from the Qualitative Site Review. All staff members submit the plans on Thursday for the following week. The VP, Academics, provides feedback and returns recommendations and commentary each Friday. These plans include the listing of the lesson objectives, Common Core State Standards, materials, references, mini lessons outline, checking for understanding, technology application, differentiated options, and exit tickets.

How could TenSquare make such assertions that WEDJ's curriculum was not in alignment with the Common Core State Standards? Dr. Alan Ginsburg, key writer of the Common Core State Standards for Mathematics and the *Singapore Math* series, had been very pleased with the work we were doing in math, so much so that he worked with our mathematics coordinator, Tanisha Nugent, to submit a *Spencer Foundation Grant* to demonstrate how we were improving upon existing mathematics resources. Alan had a request from a mathematics professor at San Diego State California to come and visit WEDJ to observe our math program. How would an expert like Tony Upson at Howard University be a clear supporter of our growing STEAM focus? How could international curriculum experts like David Booth and accreditation experts like Ken Rigby, have such different views of what constitutes quality curriculum? And, in terms of resource support, I added the following:

The Administration, namely the VP, Academics, is open to reviewing resource recommendations from TenSquare consultants that enhance the CCSS expectations and serve to increase student achievement on standardized tests, namely the DC-CAS...Anchor curriculum does exist and currently a team of curriculum resource writers are working on 12 resources for grades 3 to 8, in addition to the 18 ELA student booklets developed and revised from the 2012–2013 school year.

I was surprised to read TenSquare's conclusion that our hiring, salary scale and professional development process was flawed and unfocused, especially given the work that went into the establishment of a transparent salary grid. I shared details of the hiring, professional development and performance review process in my response:

A Staffing Plan exists that focuses on increasing the critical mass of talent (see complete WEDJ Staffing Plan). The plan includes details of the recruitment and retention process. The goal is to retain and recruit the very best educators. The school invested in twelve teachers, for instance, at Harvard Project Zero during the summer of 2013...The hiring process involves review of resumes, phone interviews, face-to-face interviews, demonstration lessons and follow up phone interviews and background checks...

Given that TenSquare had left us needing staff at the start of 2012–2013 school year, and I had to find better candidates to complete the roster, they were hardly in a position to comment on our hiring practices. I explained to the Board that our plan for staffing was sound, and that it was fueled by a commitment to attract exceptional educators. In my mind, TenSquare stood to potentially benefit from exaggerating deficiencies in our hiring practices.

In terms of professional development and performance review, my response to the audit raised the following information for Board consideration:

The school principal has arranged individual New Teacher Full Day weekend planning sessions whereby rooms are re-arranged, and plans with tracking tools are revised to facilitate quality preparation for more effective practices. The two teachers who achieved the highest scores in 2013–2014 have been placed strategically in grades 3 (ELA) and will be team teaching in grade 8 (Math) with a key writer of the CCSS for Mathematics and Singapore Mathematics. These individuals also take on mentoring roles in the school. The Administration will use ANET scores throughout the year to make decisions about targeted professional development and staffing.

Based on advice from the TenSquare team, I noted that we had introduced, in addition to my daily rounds and weekly sharing of teaching tips in Barb's Bundles, daily walkthroughs conducted by the VP, Academics and the VP, School Culture. I also mentioned that our teachers engaged in three formal observations a year, as well as gathered informal feedback 2 hours/week during the teacher mentorship program, that included team planning and team teaching.

I also informed the Board in this response of other actions being taken to support school improvement. I communicated the following ambitious goals in my response to TenSquare's audit:

CHAPTER 32

Bottom Line Goals

- Be successful in the school's 10 Year Renewal.
- Increase PMF to a minimum of 50.
- Keep seat-in attendance rates at 95% overall for the 2013–2014 school year.
- Target aggressive Re-enrollment Plan for over 90% re-enrollment for the 2014–2015 school year.
- Increase DC-CAS Scores in Math and ELA to a minimum of 60% proficiency in grades 3 through 8.

By:

- Increasing staff urgency by ensuring that WEDJ community has a clear understanding of the importance and urgency for significantly improving the PMF score (to 50).
- Changing perceptions from 40% proficient teachers to 80%.
- Increasing student engagement from perceived 50–100%.
- Increasing uninterrupted time for ELA and Mathematics to 90 minutes or more in grades 3 to 8

There was no response from the WEDJ Board to my submission. They did, however, support TenSquare's recommendation that included the provision of bringing in their consultants for over \$200,000 to fix the problem, real or rather exaggerated, that they were able to establish via independent, or not so independent, discussions about our school.

DISMANTLING LEADERSHIP

It did not take long to discover that the Tensquare team was not on site to support the school's leadership. When Ethan Mitnick interviewed me for their initial audit, I expressed deep concerns about the weakness of the 'uncommon schools' approach emphasized in Lemov's self-published book, *Teach Like a Champion*. I was convinced that such schools promoted a 'teach to the test' curriculum, not devoted to more progressive learning environments such as inquiry-based STEM activity. In spite of the reservations I shared about the limits of Lemov's ideas, Mitnick had the school leadership team read a chapter from Bambrick-Santoyo's 2012 book, *Leveraging Leadership* that supported Lemov's perspective. It made a number of surprising claims such as, "By receiving weekly observations and feedback, a teacher develops as much in one year as most teachers do over twenty" (p. 61). I was not surprised that there was no footnote to reference any study that would substantiate such a claim. I went to Lemov's website, and I could see immediately that a culture of compliance and imitation was alive and well in these New York City charters. Had the WEDJ Board of Trustees actually viewed these videos? Would they want their own children to be in a school where students didn't question and think for themselves?

I would soon discover that such a disengaging approach to teaching children would explain how Mitnick's TenSquare 'coaching' team justified their condescending approach to teacher development, notably actions – not grounded in best practices. The new coaches at WEDJ enforced the teaching of fact memorization in a context of multiple-choice practice tests, flanked in quiet obedience. Such a focus runs counter to our belief that for students to be confident in college and make a difference in their community, they must be engaged and talking about what they are learning. How could consultants think students could learn how to think and generate ideas in such a teacher-directed environment? Did these advisors not know about John Dewey, Lev Vygotsky, Douglas Barnes, John Holt, Nel Noddings, Carol Dweck, or Ken Robinson...? Did they not read or know about learning mindsets, teaching for understanding, backward design, project-based learning, co-construction, or Jay Lemke's *Talking Science*? Could they not see that the 'hands on' approach to STEM might be a way to help urban students read and do math for a purpose? Did they just skip the research in the past 40 years?

It became painfully clear that our consultants had a limited understanding of the research into best practices of teaching and learning, when they blindly followed Lemov's ideals. When Ethan met with my lead team, we politely listened to his enthusiastic dogma, but I could feel the knocking of knees and looks of utter disbelief

around the table. It seemed like everyone on the lead team instantly knew that the Board had put someone in charge of changing the school that knew less about education than they did. At this moment, I realized that our work with TenSquare was going to require patience moving forward. I did hold out hope that if Mitnick and his team could see how well our teachers were engaging students, then perhaps their views on education might evolve, but this was not the case.

Mitnick indicated his team, and trained inside coaches, would be going into classrooms, unannounced, twice a week for 15 minutes at a time to make observations that would be emailed to teachers immediately that day. In some cases, these coaches arranged to meet with some teachers, but this was rare. The teachers would be expected to make the recommended adjustments. Mitnick disbanded the weekly mentorship planning and team teaching we had in place in order to implement his coaching model.

Our math and English teachers did not respond well to losing their WEDJ mentors; many were also overwhelmed with having to completely change their style to fit the TenSquare box. They asked if TenSquare's consultants, Rebekah Jabobs and Andrew Touchette, could model by teaching the prescribed 90 minutes break down, so teachers could have a sample of how these classes flowed and worked for our students. Dr. Mitnick said he would look into it, but after consultation with his team, they said they would only demonstrate for 15 minutes. We also asked at a WEDJ Board meeting scheduled on 12/18/13 if TenSquare could provide some demonstration lessons. Our WEDJ mentors frequently shared such lessons with novice teachers, so our staff was well versed in such practice. No one, to my knowledge, from the consulting team ever followed through with any demonstration teaching, 15 minutes, more or less. The TenSquare consultant role was clear: to record where teachers made errors, email this information to them immediately, and on occasion, catch something good along the way. The sharing of positive messages from the TenSquare consulting team was an exception to the rule.

In the midst of everyone trying to adapt to multiple leaders in the school, namely the administration and the TenSquare consultants, Mitnick witnessed a key mentor and former school leader becoming distant from many staff members. She would sit by herself at our staff meetings, and frequently pass by colleagues in the hall without acknowledging them. By November, I could no longer ignore this teacher's unhappy demeanor, so I asked her to come in for a frank conversation. I told her that I needed her to be more of a positive support beyond her classroom. I needed someone with her talent to be much more than a paycheck. We needed her skills and experience to inspire others. I could see I had insulted her when she began to clench her fists. I was disappointed by her response and concluded that my transparency would not lead to the change I was hopeful she would make. Instead, she contacted John Goldman to share her concern. Then Goldman made a rare trip to the school to confirm if I had made the 'paycheck' comment. I still remember him sitting in my office telling me that even if it was the right thing to say, I should not have

irritated her. I completely disagree. She did not need a pretend conversation. While my relationship with this staff member seemed beyond repair, she needed me to be honest. It would not help her grow into a respected teacher leader, if I turned a blind eye to how she was contributing to a negative work environment. Goldman asked me to retract my statement, but the damage was done. This teacher barely spoke to me for weeks, and when she submitted notice, that she would not be returning in January, I was sad for her, the school and the kids she was leaving. TenSquare's Mitnick did not see her as the positive influence that Goldman did, and he was pleased when she left. I understood the loss because I knew she was a strong teacher, someone who was once an inspiration for us all, but at this point in time, she could not seem to find happiness at WEDJ. I was hopeful she, would find the joy of teaching at least in another setting of her choosing. It was a busy December interviewing candidates to replace a strong teacher mid-year, but we were delighted when Ms. Cherry applied and accepted the position. We were so fortunate to find someone with extensive qualifications mid-way through the school year. I recall spending many weekends opening the school so Ms. Cherry could come in during off hours to prepare for her class. She put her students first and turned out to be a rare talent.

Part of Mitnick's role also involved 'leadership' development. When we met, he handed me a set of 'norms' that we would both use in our work together. I thought this was rather peculiar, as I understood 'norms' were accepted practices developed collaboratively. I sense Dr. Mitnick expected me to rubber-stamp his crafted list, but I added the phrase "so long as it is not damaging to the students and staff at WEDJ." Once the behavioral 'norms' were settled, Mitnick shared what he designed as my leadership goals. Once again, I was surprised I had no input into the content of these goals, nor what would constitute evidence of meeting his stated targets. While Mitnick did not admit that he was issuing a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP), this experience turned out to have the look and feel of one. Absent, in any of these discussions was my Board Chair, whom I reported to directly. At first, I understood Mitnick was working for us, but it was becoming apparent, that if I didn't do what he told me to do, that I would not be at WEDJ very long. I could not see how Mitnick was leveraging any leadership; rather, the process seemed fiercely focused on dismantling leadership.

There was much in the TenSquare report that did not make sense. What was a surprise to me was the notion that we needed to reduce responsibilities for our 8-member administrative team. Rather than work with the traditional model of a principal and an assistant principal, we developed a shared and more clearly defined set of responsibilities that allowed leaders to focus in each of the following areas:

- School culture
- Academics
- Special Education
- Arts

- Management of safety, facilities and maintenance
- Business
- Staff Development

I had explained to Mitnick, in my audit interview, that typically there is a principal and an assistant principal in a school managing all these areas, and as such, they wind up working in a crisis management mode, in an effort to keep on top of so many diverse responsibilities. At WEDJ, we had established an innovative structure where each school leader had their own customized ‘carpet’ with in job-embedded goals. I sense Mitnick preferred the conventional leadership structure found in most schools. As well, the idea that a principal or teacher leader might teach a class seemed foreign to him. We did, however, capture the interest of the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) when they selected our lead team to present this innovative leadership approach as a model for future consideration at their annual conference. TenSquare could not see the merit in our approach, nor took the time to analyze the assessment criteria we used for each administrator. I was not a pre-packaged principal; rather, I was informed by the works of Fullan, Hargreaves and Leithwood. I could not put the ideas of such international experts on the back burner to please a team of consultants who could frankly, with the help of a broken system, serve up some of the most backward advice I’ve ever seen. Ravitch, in a critique of the documentary, *Waiting for Superman*, noted:

The best way to ensure that there are no bad or ineffective teachers in our public schools is to insist that we have principals and supervisors who are knowledgeable and experienced educators. Yet there is currently a vogue to recruit and train principals who have little or no education experience. (p. 28)

All administrators were expected to make enormous contributions to improving WEDJ’s score on the Charter Board’s PMF school rating scale, but we were equally committed to improving the reputation of our school. In addition to a detailed examination of their teaching (except for Business VP, Lawson), each member of the lead team was assessed on their professionalism. We discussed what was agreed upon, and we also examined where we saw differences in addition to specific plans for improvement. Following these intensive reviews, I wrote a lengthy commentary to accompany all three specialized checklists. Somehow Mitnick either ignored or glossed over the extensive feedback process and documentation that was provided to each administrative team member. It is rare for schools to provide such a comprehensive system for performance reviews, especially for teacher leaders.

The (Figure 9) red carpets followed by the commentary in a reference letter style format, reveal the rigor associated with feedback provided to the Dean of Teacher Development, with permission from Ms. Nugent:

DISMANTLING LEADERSHIP

WEDJ Red Carpet TEACHING & LEARNING ASSESSMENT Teacher: Tanisha Nugent
 Administrator/Mentor: Dr. Smith Date: October 4, 2012

Self			RED CARPET 1: Planning a Curriculum	Administrator or Mentor		
			? – Did not view evidence; S – some evidence viewed; R – rich evidence			
?	S	R	As the teacher I/you...	?	S	R
	X		understand current knowledge about curriculum design			X
	X		demonstrate knowledge of content and pedagogy			X
		X	demonstrate knowledge of students			X
		X	organize learning experiences in sequence so that each experience builds on previous learning and provides a basis for a subsequent one			X
	X		organize meaningful sequences of learning activities within a well-defined structure (long-term plans, unit plans, thematic activities, lesson plans...).			X
		X	organize unit plans for school year that follows a scope and sequence of content determined by school in alignment with government expectations			X
		X	set instructional outcomes			X
		X	demonstrate knowledge of the value of different resources			X
		X	choose materials and strategies that reflect current and relevant research			X
		X	link content between different subject areas			X
	X		plan for differentiation to accommodate different learning styles			X
		X	organize variety of materials to enhance learning (software, websites, audio-visuals...)			X
	X		show evidence of short and long term goals in planning			X
	X		link teaching with field trips or excursions outside school		X	
		X	design assessment tools at the beginning of units			X
	X		expose students to skills and ideas that are relevant for life-long learning			X
	X		address practical connections to career-related professions		X	
	X		engage students in multi-age peer teaching experiences		X	
		X	use a range of techniques and resources to develop and extend students' ability to understand concepts and master skills			X
		X	use lower level thinking assessment (Retelling – memorizing, filling in blanks, true and false, calculating, decoding) to gather information to use for deeper thinking purposes			X
		X	employ medium level (Relating) thinking assessment (mix and match, multiple choice, essay, sequencing of ideas/movement, critiquing, determining pros and cons, calculating with formulas, brainstorming, active listening, classifying, categorizing, comparing and writing)			X
		X	employ high level thinking (Reflecting/Theorizing) assessment			X
		X	emphasize the habits and roles of researchers			X
	X		link to green, global, or current world issues		X	
		X	use diagnostic, formative and summative assessments			X

Figure 9. Ms. Nugent's red carpet performance review (planning and curriculum)

Teacher leaders, however, were held to a higher standard in that they were assessed on their teaching carpet, their professionalism carpet and their specific administrative role carpet.

All staff received a summary reference letter at the end of the year for their portfolio and school performance review records. Ms. Nugent's letter is included in Figure 12.

I had hoped the WEDJ Board would have taken time to read how the job descriptions for each leadership role were directly aligned with their performance

William E. Doar, Jr. Public Charter School for the Performing Arts Performance

Review – Teacher-Leader: Tanisha Nugent

Administrator/Mentor: Dr. Smith

Date: May 22, 2013

Self			Dean of Teacher Development Red Carpet Expectations ? – Did not view evidence; S – Some evidence viewed; R – Rich evidence	Administrator		
?	S	R	As a teacher leader I/you...	?	S	R
		X	model the expectations of the WEDJ Commitment			X
		X	model exceptional teaching in own classroom			X
		X	demonstrate commitment to current research and national trends in order to meet and enhance individual professional development needs			X
	X		establish long term (3 year) staff development plans		X	
		X	provide deliberate support for new staff members			X
	X		coordinate summer PD		X	
	X		plan and coordinate monthly staff meetings		X	
		X	coordinate PD days through the year			X
	X		work with the VP, School Culture to integrate team building activities (raffles, competitions, themes) into PD experiences		X	
	X		contribute questions about professional development to two staff surveys each year		X	
X			oversee an equitable distribution of the staff development budget		X	
	X		recommend professional development opportunities to support staff member learning and improvement			X
		X	establish dynamic professional learning community that embraces accountability and outstanding student results			X
		X	recommend and arrange for purchase of professional reading that links directly to school priorities			X
		X	mentor, supervise and evaluate designated staff through informal classroom visits, regular classroom observations, pre and post observation conferences			X
		X	design, implement and evaluate research-based professional development that fosters improved student achievement, developmentally appropriate instructional approaches, and the use data to strengthen student performance			X

Figure 10. Ms. Nugent's red carpet performance review (Dean of Teacher Development)

Self			Dean of Teacher Development Red Carpet Expectations ? – Did not view evidence; S – Some evidence viewed; R – Rich evidence	Administrator		
?	S	R	As a teacher leader I/you...	?	S	R
X			coordinate workshops for staff leaders involved in action research for improving schooling practices	X		
		X	ensure that direct reports maintain a personal appearance that models cleanliness, modesty, good taste and support of school policy			X
		X	ensure direct reports demonstrate flexibility in a fast-paced dynamic environment			X
		X	ensure direct reports represent school in a favorable and professional way			X
	X		ensure direct reports participate in school staff meetings			X
	X		ensure direct reports attend at least three PTA meetings a year			X
	X		oversee direct reports team members use technology appropriately and organizes a variety of support materials to enhance learning (software, websites, audio-visuals...)		X	
	X		ensure that direct reports address connections to career-related professions		X	
		X	perform work as assigned			X

Figure 10. (Continued)

review, or recognized the rigorous time dedicated to providing feedback. The depth and breadth of the expectations served not only to provide a performance review at a given point in time, they also served as a development tool, to help our teacher leaders shape goals and plan for improvement. It would be rare for many school leaders to adapt and develop such extensive tools, let alone implement them on a wide scale basis for seven direct reports, each year. A sustained focus on teacher development was at the heart of our school improvement plan for WEDJ. After what was shaping up to be a disappointing fall term, I began to question if I should remain. During my break over the holidays, I seriously considered resigning from the school and went as far as drafting my resignation letter. Upon reflection, however, I could not remove from my mind that promise I made to Ms. Kensler – that I would not give up on these kids. As a result, I decided to return in January and hold off on this submission.

William E. Doar, Jr. Public Charter School for the Performing Performance Review

Teacher-Leader: Tanisha Nugent

Administrator/Mentor: Dr. Smith

Date: May 22, 2013

Self			RED CARPET 6: Contributing to a Culture of Professionalism ? – Did not view evidence; S – some evidence viewed; R – rich evidence	Administrator or Mentor		
?	S	R	As a teacher, I/you	?	S	R
		X	take courses to upgrade qualifications		X	X
		X	embrace professional development opportunities in school			X
		X	embrace professional development opportunities outside of school			X
		X	participate in a leadership role in professional organizations	X		
	X		engage in action research to improve practice		X	
	X		read professional journals			X
	X		create innovative and customized curriculum			X
	X		contribute ideas to school improvement planning meetings			X
	X		take part in school mentorship programs			X
		X	seek leadership positions			X
	X		serve as a positive ambassador for WEDJ			X
		X	accept criticism and moves forward to make changes			X
		X	demonstrate courtesy and integrity with others			X
	X		maintain accurate and timely records		X	
		X	develop positive relationships with students			X
		X	develop positive relationships with parents			X
		X	develop positive relationships with teachers and support staff			X
		X	demonstrate quality written and speaking skills			X
		X	demonstrate a sense of humor, humility and emotional control			X
		X	act in a confidential, ethical and legal manner			X
		X	model exceptional work habits (punctuality, dependability, attendance, meeting deadlines)			X
		X	communicate with families monthly		X	
		X	complete all job requirements to meet high standards as outlined in the WEDJ Employee Handbook and in your job description.			X

Figure 11. Ms. Nugent's red carpet performance review (Professionalism)

May 22, 2013
 Dear Ms. Nugent,

As we near the end of my first year at WEDJ, there are a few individuals who stand out and you are one of them. As a professional you are keenly aware of your strengths and what would be next steps in educational leadership. Your purposeful and passionate desire to grasp how young people learn, particularly in the area of mathematics is so rare. This taking time to become a teaching and learning expert will make you a sought after school leader in the future. Having a chance to focus on math next year – will give you a focused opportunity to make significant changes in how all educators in the building approach math. No longer will you be one of the teachers who simply brings scores up; you will be that educator that shines because you will be able to be proud of moving others to such action! This year your presence on Team Odyssey <leadership team> has been a positive one. The job of professional development for the full staff, is not easy for anyone. I look forward to seeing what will happen at the Portfolio Fair, technically our final PD of the year!

As a professional you strive to learn more. That drive to enter a doctoral program is wonderful and I am happy to support you with letters of support in whatever direction you choose. I know you are eager to be at Harvard this summer and I appreciate how you see the value of Team WEDJ...The ten folks going will have a unique opportunity to put the spotlight on what we doing, and a big piece of that is collegiality, so thank you for understanding and being prepared to step up and support all team members on this road trip!

The work you have done this year with ANET and the DC-CAS – has been stellar. Thank you for having that spirit of excellence to ensure that how we do something is with a full force of meeting and exceeding expectations. You are dependable and as a mentor you inspire others to do their best. As a professional you have demonstrated the kind of flexibility, rarely seen in a young leader. Your understanding of schedule changes and mentor changes, for instance, was met with poise and productivity.

As a professional you read professional journals, and I love that when I have to track down a book, I know it's in good hands. What a wonderful reading role model you are! You are a sound listener and what is truly a gift is that you use your filter in our Odyssey meeting. You do not have to talk and think at the same time. This allows you to be able to connect ideas and when you do make a contribution, the team knows it has been well thought out in such a way that it would be respectful of others. Your careful attention to this kind of detail is also a huge credit to your potential for leading a school some day. You are clearly an awesome ambassador for WEDJ in so many ways.

This year the Odyssey team <leadership team> took on these roles to apprentice, at first, into leadership. We may talk about how to lead, mentor, support and serve in our weekly meetings, but it is how we respond in the trenches to what gets thrown at us, is what the stuff of courage, character and growth is about. All the great leaders made mistakes (Lincoln, MLK, Gandhi...) and what made them great was accepting them and learning from them. I will aim to be a great leader all my life, and being human gives me the permission to evolve – but without risk, I cannot grow. Thank you for stepping into the calm and sometimes rough waters to help us create an inspiring place for our students and staff!...

Barb Smith, PhD, Principal, The William E. Doar, Jr., Public Charter School for the Performing Arts

Figure 12. Ms. Nugent's dean of teacher development – Final evaluation for 2012–2013

CATCHING FIRE

Piggy-backing off the popular Hunger Games movie, we decided to use the theme: ‘Catching Fire’ to promote a focused campaign aimed at inspiring our students to prepare for the extensive DC-CAS testing in the spring. We created bulletin boards, ordered two expensive banners and integrated TenSquare’s ideas, in an effort to boost staff morale. I wanted our hard-working staff to not lose hope in spite of the negative feedback being targeted at them from the TenSquare coaches.

With all that was happening, it was surprising that the WEDJ Board, TenSquare or the Charter Board, did not take into account WEDJ parent or student voices. To the best of my knowledge, WEDJ had not conducted student or parent interviews in the past. We decided to make surveying parents a regular practice to find out what they liked and what we needed to do, to make things better at WEDJ, to bring parents into the fold as ‘fire starters.’ In our first year, we encouraged parents to complete surveys on-line:

PARENT SURVEY Research says that completing surveys matters – it matters for improving the school, but more importantly, it is evidence that you are eager to play a role in your child’s learning. PLEASE give us 10 minutes of your time, so we can help! It is easy; just click on the school website! (<http://www.wedjschool.us/dr-smith/january-2013-message-from-the-principal>)

A response to the electronic surveys were lower than expected, so we decided to ask families to fill them out when they came for parent-teacher interviews. I shared my lesson learned in a Principal Point newsletter:

I’ve learned that when I want parent feedback, it’s much better to co-design the survey with Mr. Carter. I tried everything to get more than 26 parents to do it digitally on our website – but I listened to you and learned that we need to make direct contact in order to ask for your input... I am persistent about hearing all voices. A huge thanks to Ms. Tiffani Johnson from the PTA, who is currently compiling them, and will share the results at our next PTA meeting!! (<http://www.wedjschool.us/dr-smith/principal-point-february-message-from-dr-smith>)

Tiffany Johnson did a great job of compiling the responses. Overall, we were able to collect close to 60 completed surveys. The following list of findings proved to be quite informative. Respondents indicated that they...

- like the positive spirit in the school. (100%)
- would like the school to offer second language instruction. (97%)

CHAPTER 34

- would like the school to offer daily physical education. (93%)
- like how school supports field trips to New York City to see the arts or Huntsville, Alabama to take part in space camp. (93%)
- like that WEDJ administrators teach some classes. (93%)
- like how students in PK through grade 8 have performances and displays (arts and science displays; dance, drama and music performances). (93%)
- understood that getting their child to school on time can lead to present and future academic success. (92%)
- expect the school to hire exceptional teachers that bring about proficient results on the DC-CAS. (92%)
- appreciated monthly phone calls home. (92%)
- like that students in K through grade 8 can learn Suzuki violin, learn to play the piano and other musical instruments. (90%)
- like the option of learning the arts (dance, music, drama or visual arts) from the school's arts teachers. (90%)
- plan to re-register for the 2014–2015 school year. (83%)
- like the new WEDJ report cards. (88%)
- like how student work can be upgraded to 80% or more. (88%)
- like that grades 3 through 8 students use laptop computers regularly. (82%)
- like that students in grades 3 through 8 learn how to play chess. (71%)
- like that students learn about robotics in grade 3. (67%)

We were very pleased with these survey responses that validated our work to date. We paid attention to the parent feedback and shared the results with the WEDJ community.

Plans for offering second language instruction and daily physical education, to address these curriculum gaps, for instance, were well on their way to becoming a reality.

In addition to listening to our families, we also informed them about how WEDJ was distinct from other schools. We wanted to encourage re-enrollment and communicate the hard work that had been going on. My mentor had often encouraged me to write about WEDJ, but it wasn't until we created this list, did I realize that this school achieved much in a short period of time. We let parents know about the changes and possibilities for what could be next, and let our record stand for families to decide if they wanted to give up their spot at WEDJ – or not.

Keeping the same population of students also increased our chances of improving our test scores. The history of families coming and going had taken its toll on the overall standardized testing scores, and WEDJ was now poised to make substantial improvements. To communicate our current accomplishments as well as some future directions, I shared with families my response to the question, “Why is WEDJ your best choice?” The WEDJ team:

- ... is eager to learn how to become teacher leaders;
- ... like to laugh and compete and speak passionately about their students.

- ...<includes> 12 teachers at Harvard's Project Zero's summer 2013 program.
- ...<includes> one teacher (Ms. Nugent) selected to return to Harvard as a "fellow" with a full ride scholarship
- ...<hires> teachers committed to becoming EXCEPTIONAL

In terms of our innovative offer we listed:

- New programs in 6,7, and 8th grade to keep students excited about settling in – not moving on to a different school
- Research and Technology course (where students work to become an expert in an area)
- Formal debate instruction for all grade 8's (taught by the Harvard debate team's coach)
- Portfolio development for all arts majors
- Chess instruction replaced one hour of math per week for all students in grades 3 through 8. (chess improves math)
- Peer teaching added (learn best when you teach others)
- The hiring of *additional specialists* to develop *Fab Labs* (Gr. 3 robotics); *Wonder Workshops* (PK to Gr. 2 students)
- *Customized materials and resources*
- *Daily physical activity programs* for younger students
- *Technology* support for teachers and students to increase technology use (150 new laptops are here!)

I also let families know that each member of the leadership team was expected to teach at least one hour per day. This leadership structure was a one-of-kind experience that enabled multiple members of an administrative team to share leadership and energy in order to provide focused ways of serving our school community.

I also commented on possibilities for 'what's next?' I felt the community needed to be directly involved in generating WEDJ's future. Separate from the notion of what we could accomplish in our current industrial footprint in Washington's northeast, I also spoke with Goldman about how long the school was committed to our rental agreement. Paying for too many significant upgrades to a building could be lost, if the Board decided to rent or purchase property somewhere else. I felt that being in the northeast, servicing the area we were in, made good sense. While an arts school might have been welcomed in every part of DC, I was fine with the location. Having more natural light would be something the school had to address if a capital campaign could have ever been established to purchase the site. We were locked in to over 7-figure rental payments until 2019, which was a significant drain on the budget. This was a serious question the Board of Trustees needed to address, but even when I tried to get the topic on the agenda, the topic rarely surfaced in anything but a superficial way.

Apart from what families, students and staff shared in face-to-face meetings, casual conversations and surveys, I felt it was important to share ideas out of the

ordinary that might not have been on the minds of community members as well. Not everything has to be a fixed idea that is, how the red brick schoolhouse looks and how it operates. Before cementing in a predictable list of strategic goals, a school should give students, staff and families an opportunity to think about ideas for “what’s next?”, beyond the borders of what is. A ‘Vision Quest’ type activity or retreat, where stakeholders could learn more about exceptional schools around the world, would have been a tremendous way to find out more about and consider the possibility of engaging ‘outlier’ experiences. In our leadership team meetings, we often discussed ‘blue sky’ ideas. I shared these ideas with parents and staff about “what’s next?” I tried to whet their appetite by imagining how WEDJ might:

- Develop a film/video production studio (As a leader in the arts, we need to move our arts program into the 21st century, by building and integrating technology into everything we do!)
- Build a “*Community Can Press*” business in partnership with existing businesses or, on our own, where parents, teachers and students write, publish, illustrate and promote on-line and print books.
- Create an *adult education program* with college credits to provide career-based training
- Build a *teacher education “lab school” program* (so WEDJ could be where the most current research in education is carried out...WEDJ staff would be taught how to be presenters and conference organizers, no longer just observers of other’s <and as such>*Attract and keep 100% exceptional teachers*, all capable of providing expert examples of what works in urban education.

I shared with families that there should be no limits to the kinds of changes we could address moving forward. These pictures of hope take more than one year to develop and it takes a huge leap of faith to take education beyond what can be seen now. For such lofty goals to take shape, students, staff, parents and the Board of Trustees, needed to catch the ‘fire’ and be moved to plan and own the next direction. In order to commit to improvement, they would need to take a part in it. A group of 3–5 people sitting on a Board of Trustees cannot determine where to point the compass alone. It requires all community members (staff, students, families, and responsible others) to have the courage and the will to learn and play a part in making WEDJ their best choice. As the school leader, my vision was about building a school where innovation builds on innovation, in spite of successful failures. The success of Walt Disney was all about making a path for the brave – and I believe the young people of WEDJ should have had the right to be schooled through a vision of hope. If charter schools can dream, they can provide the kind of lasting hope that moves young people, way beyond graduating in college. I often spoke of WEDJ as a great choice for families. We were committed to choosing a path for children to LEAD, rather than follow a road that leads to nowhere.

There should be no limits to a school that has a main thrust of creativity. Where there is a will, there is a way. People and resources can line up behind ideas; rarely

will generous funding come from thin goals that simple state – we will do better on tests.

The lyrics to the school song, pretty much sum up the idea that WEDJ, as a arts school, can and should be “more than” a conventional school:

I am WEDJ (WEDJ School Song)
I am *more than* I can imagine.
I am *more than* I've ever heard.
More than what some can believe.
More than what's expected.
More than what's assumed of me.
I am more. I am more. I am WEDJ.
Through knowledge and expression, I can do anything.
Outstanding. Amazing. I will be *more than* these.
I am *more than* I can imagine.
I am *more than* I've ever heard.
More than what some can believe.
More than what's expected.
More than what's assumed of me.
I am more. I am more. I am WEDJ.
– written by J. Lockhart

WEDJ was poised to catch the kind of fire that engages students, staff and the community.

Unfortunately, the WEDJ Board of Trustees, ultimately responsible for sanctioning change, did not catch fire or imagine much beyond the parochial perspectives of those who only worshipped improved test scores.

THE CHILL OF JANUARY

After a few days back in January, I was off to the Disney Institute to participate in the professional development course, *'Disney's Approach to Innovation and Creativity.'* While this had been planned for months, I had no idea how much harm could emerge from taking part in this professional development experience. Ms. Lawson had already attended a Disney course in the fall; I went with Ms. Palmer, in order to prepare staff for bringing the community together to contribute to determining next steps at WEDJ. I was ready for the whole school community to be involved in a school improvement plan, that would be formalized after the Middle States Accreditation visit in the spring of 2014. While the Board had identified short-term goals at their retreat, a long-term strategic plan, that linked to school improvement goals, had not been identified.

The first chill in January started when I was away. There was confusion over the submission for the next *DC Scholars for Opportunity and Results (SOAR) Act Grant*. I had prepared drafts for the submission and thought Op-Ed would represent WEDJ at a special meeting called when I was away, for schools interested in moving forward with the grant process. I was aware that representatives from Op-Ed would be at the meeting, but was unaware they could not represent us. As it turns out, while I was able to secure the grant the previous year, I was unable to submit the grant even though weeks of work had gone into its' preparation. We did, however, have the internal funds to develop new innovative projects to support the arts, digital film and STEM, without the grant money. By staffing the school more efficiently, our budget was becoming much more self-reliant and not dependent on outside funding for sustainability. While I regretted not ensuring that we had appropriate representation at the SOAR Grant meeting, Mr. Goldman was angry at this missed opportunity.

Like January, the chill in the air at WEDJ was hard to miss. I wish I could say that the presence of TenSquare brought us a breath of fresh air, but their influence left a cold mark on the school culture. While it was a challenge to work with such fixed mindsets, we did our best to keep the fires burning with regular shout outs and continued bundles promoting great teaching. The Catching Fire theme was ramped up so staff, students and families would be clear about our immediate direction. Mitnick and his team had already inserted their 'coaching' approach and routines into lesson plans, as a result of regular observations and feedback. The schedule had been changed and PMF goals added to each agenda, to keep the target of improving this score in the forefront of all we do. We purchased test-practice materials for students to add to the vast collections of test samples we already had from Virginia, Maryland,

Florida, Texas, and California. We were aiming for 60% proficiency scores in grades 3 to 8 on the DC CAS standardized tests in the spring and 100% mastery of academic benchmark testing in PK to grade 2; we were targeting a 90% re-enrollment rate and 95% average attendance. TenSquare's solution was built around their mantra that highlighted four key immediate goals: teamwork, intentional teaching, urgency and engagement. They used the word 'fire' to promote this emphasis:

- F = Fellowship (TEAMWORK)
- I = Intense (INTENTIONAL TEACHING)
- R = Rush (URGENCY)
- E = Empower (ENGAGEMENT)

They wanted staff and students to increase urgency and engagement through the use of intentional teaching and teamwork, as a way for WEDJ to catch fire. I cannot say that they modeled any sense of fellowship throughout their visit. It seemed that teamwork was more about 'doing what they told us to do.' It seemed like there was little, if any acknowledgement, that the staff had ideas that were worthy of consideration.

I was beginning to see the spark in the student's eyes dim, as the teachers were forced to change their instructional patterns. TenSquare insisted on lengthy teacher lectures at the front end of most classes, leaving students anxious and restless. The precision-timing for each classroom did not lead to engagement. Rather, I sense the collateral damage of boredom promoted more discipline problems in most classrooms. Rather than 'catching fire' about learning, Mr. Carter and Ms. Narrow, our social worker, had many more fires to put out.

Ethan, with the help of our Academic VP, decided to implement an incentive program to help promote habits of teamwork, intentional teaching, urgency, and engagement. Whenever coaches and members of the administrative team spotted exemplary examples in classrooms, we were to tape up flames beside each classroom door. The idea would be that teachers and students would compete to have the most number of flames, which illustrated which staff members were better at one or more of the four habits. As part of the Achievement Culture Team, I let staff know we were awarding classrooms with one of four flames; at the end of each week we offered prizes for all who demonstrate: URGENCY, INTENTIONAL TEACHING, STUDENT ENGAGEMENT and TEAMWORK. The staff needed encouragement to support the adaptation of TenSquare's new culture. It wasn't easy keeping morale up. I wanted staff to keep their spark alive, not just for visitors, but for their students.

In a bundle, I shared movie reviews linking some of our staff to various characters in four new movies at the time. In *The Long Walk to Freedom*, I noted that I was drawn to four themes: doing the right thing, teamwork, collaboration, and love for home. I made some fine connections to several of our WEDJ cast members. I acknowledged Dr. Zirkle for opting to teach a small tutoring group. I thanked Mr. Carter for embracing his math roots. I also recognized student work being posted inside and outside the classrooms. In *American Hustle*, I was impressed by

the themes of persistence and loyalty, with a taste for the element of surprise.” I thanked Mr. Powell for an awesome week, that featured his class achieving 100% daily attendance, evidence he was making those monthly parent calls. *The Wolf on Wall Street* featured a fierce, fun and focused character, who I connected with Mr. Dickens teaching his kids a math rap, to help them master math language and rules! Finally, I was moved by *The Dallas Buyer’s Club*, a movie featuring a down and out character who survived by using creativity, tenacity, a never say die spirit and a thirst for finding a better way.

I knew that sticking flames on the outside of doors would not be enough to help the staff and students catch fire. I also needed to rekindle my flame and part of what helped me, and I hope model for others, was sharing how much I enjoyed tutoring my group of boys in Ms. Cherry’s class. While TenSquare did not see the merit in my teaching, I felt it was important for me to be a part of the solution, and volunteering to teach students, helped keep the tutoring numbers low, reducing the number of confused kids typically hiding in the sea of classroom faces.

Even though the bundles provided a warm stream of recognition, it was difficult to cut through the chill in the January air. For some reason, even when I urged the consulting team to focus on English language arts, as math had already increased scores by nearly 10%, Dr. Mitnick and his team seemed relentless about changing the way the school was teaching math. As the math coordinator, Ms. Nugent had been doing an incredible job, mentoring and supporting the math teachers in our school. My observation of Ms. Nugent’s grade 6 class (Figure 13), illustrates the strength of this teacher, yet the TenSquare team seemed relentless about making her adjust her style.

I did conclude by suggesting that Ms. Nugent make time for tracking learning, but clearly she walked her talk as a mentor and the teachers respected her for it. Nugent often had teachers coming in to view her teaching and given her humble attitude, she emerged as a remarkable teacher-leader. I am sure that experts from the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) would concur that her lesson demonstrated exceptional teaching. In addition to this typical daily lesson, Ms. Nugent’s class scores in math were the top in the school for two years in a row, ensuring that over 65% of her students scored at least ‘proficient’ when she taught grade 5. I was torn when I was copied on the notes the consultants wrote to her each week. Telling her how to time each part of her lesson made no sense when she had choreographed her timing brilliantly, in my opinion. It felt like some kind of power play was happening, trying to put her in her place. In addition to mentoring 11 math teachers, Nugent also team taught the Grade 8 class with Mr. Ginsburg. We were very concerned about the confidence these students would have in high school math, because in grade 7, only 40% met the ‘proficient’ standard the year before on the 2013 DC-CAS standardized test. I trusted Ms. Nugent’s judgment about breaking up the class into three groups, where she would concentrate on the direct teaching of the middle group (12 students), while overseeing the planning for the upper (5) and weaker (5) students. Dr. Mitnick, however, insisted that Ms. Nugent not mentor

Ms. Nugent's Teaching Observation:
 The class started with a student putting a question from their Singapore Math book on the board. It had multiple layers to it, and then you erased a chunk of it so that the class could focus on one part of the question. You then asked "What do think about this question?" Kids immediately called out comparative responses:

- *They are mixed numbers*
- *They have unlike denominators*

Then they suggested that the class needed to "find the LCM." Then you asked them if they understood what the word "magnitude" meant. Kids comfortably used words like "big", "power" and "earthquake" to try and draw connections. Then to focus on the "re-teaching" of "absolute value", you asked them to see if they could draw a connection between absolute value and magnitude. Everyone was then asked to pair and share and talk using the words. All students were engaged taking risks with using these words in sentences. The goal for the class was now established. The search was on to find these links. The discussion landed on the subject of science, and then before long everyone was viewing a football field to think about negative and positive values in terms of absolute values. Prior to the viewing of the video clips – was a fun and lively 'cheer off' for the Redskins versus the Cowboys!

...you led the class through a deep investigation of mastery and a needed review of "absolute value", at the same time as pushing forward on capturing the essence of magnitude. At first, you could see the students were rusty about 'absolute value.' One student noted, "I think it means always positive." At this point you stated: "Let me draw the football field. I'm a visual person." In the background a student shouted "Just make a number line!" There was no shortage of images to help students understand how numbers move between integers, positive and negative (ie. football, elevators, temperature...).

After the mini lesson that lasted about ten minutes, students were handed an activity where they had to put clue words under either a "negative" or "positive" category. You used your giant timer and gave everyone a minute to complete the task. I was amazed to see how fast everyone was on task and completed recording five or six bullets of words under each category. Students had to think about real world words like "deposit" and "withdrawal" – a brilliant way to break down language that can get in the way of understanding future math problems...You then gave everyone a hint that they were going shopping the next day – further igniting their interest in getting to school to find out what this would be all about!

Next, students were handed colored paper to write an "Instagram" explaining the definition of magnitude...You gathered two samples and shared them using the Elmo technology – so students had a chance to learn by reading and viewing each other's work. To add to this you asked folks to choral read each other's definitions. These activities serve to really get this new vocabulary in their heads.

Then...students were spread out on four white boards throughout the room with dry eraser pens recording their interpretations of "absolute value." Students were permitted to talk with their partners while you took time within class to help some folks individually who needed more direct support. At this point I wrote in my notes: "You must be so pumped to be a teacher." Seeing how well the students respond to learning must be a huge incentive and payout for all the energy you put into planning your lessons. One of the most powerful pieces of this class came at the end when everyone took ten minutes to think about completing three sentence starters. *I learned...I like...I wonder...* It was amazing to listen to what the kids say about what they really liked: "I liked how we discovered that absolute value was not complex" Everyone wanted to share. When you said "last one to share", there was resounding "NO!!!" I would like to see this kind of exit ticket be considered as a school-wide process.

To say the walls in your room speak volumes in an understatement. The anchor charts demonstrate care and deep purpose. The wall with math 'Spoken Words' include 'reciprocals', 'quadrants' and a host of words targeted at removing the language barrier in math. Student work was posted, making visible the varied processes of learning. Evidence of your Harvard Project Zero experience oozes in your room...Harvard will be honored to have you this summer as a "fellow" and we are truly proud to have you represent WEDJ...

Figure 13. Ms. Nugent's teaching observation (Fall, 2013)

any teachers and teach the grade 6 and 8 class as a full class. I tried to get him to consider her suggestion, but he was stubborn about her teaching all the students at one time in a teacher-directed style. Not only had Ms. Nugent been trained at *Harvard Project Zero*, she was asked to return as a Fellow the next year in Boston, as well as lead a local Harvard PZ conference in DC. I had nominated Ms. Nugent for the Charter School Teacher of Year in the fall, but with all that was going on at WEDJ, I had completely forgotten about it. I do recall Ms. Nugent sending me a text message telling me the news that she was selected as the 2014 winner later that spring. She was thrilled and I was so proud that her talent was recognized. She asked me to attend the 'Stars' event that honored both the winners and the nominees.

She was furious with TenSquare and the WEDJ Board and was adamant that no one from WEDJ be told about it. I was unable to attend, but respected her wishes to keep this experience her own. At the end of the school year, after her grade 8 student scores increased by 27%, it was TenSquare who would take the credit for all her hard work that went into improving the math program. In my opinion TenSquare had much to learn from Ms. Nugent, but their arrogance and narrow worshipping of an ‘uncommon schools’ model was blind to the incredible range of possibilities and paths available for school improvement.

In spite of the varied attempts to keep spirits high, the staff was frustrated with the constant negative critiquing of their teaching. It was rare to read about anything good going on in their classes, and despite TenSquare’s 45-minute after school PD sessions, the staff was having difficulty believing their advice. I reached out to Justin Rydstrom on the WEDJ Board, my mentor, Alexandra Pardo and Dr. Campbell at American University, three people I trusted and hoped might have had an influence on TenSquare.

When I spoke with Justin Rydstrom, the Principal at Goldman’s school, and WEDJ Board member responsible for overseeing the academic committee, he admitted to me often that it was difficult to work with John Goldman and that it was his teachers, not TenSquare, who turned around his school. I think he wanted me to succeed, but his boss did not seem to want TenSquare’s image tarnished in any way. Justin had lived through the carnage TenSquare had left at his school. I wished Rydstrom could have intervened to provide support, but there wasn’t much he could do.

I then reached out to Alexandra Pardo, my mentor, to see if she could offer further guidance. I told her that I was concerned about the approach of TenSquare, and the number of closed door sessions at Board meetings. Alexandra called me and came to the school for a brief meeting. When she was at WEDJ, I asked her to view the school and confirm that changes had taken place. While she spoke to me in my office, she would not take a tour of the school and see for herself the progress that had been made. While she was a good listener, she did let me down when I needed her the most. Alexandra had been on Tensquare’s initial team that audited the school in 2011–2012, so I knew she would be able to see the extent of improvements made within a short period of time. The critical mass of exceptional staff had improved, the remaining staff were stronger, the weaker performers were much better and the new hires, beyond TenSquare, were leaving an impressive mark on the school. The school was more secure, the physical plant was cleaner, the operational staff had specific responsibilities, and the student work posted on the walls was much more than photocopied worksheets. Unfortunately, Ms. Pardo did not turn out to be the mentor I had hoped she would be. I trusted Alexandra and assumed others like her would be coming to provide credible school improvement feedback. While Goldman knew about the improvements, he did not acknowledge them. The only other person who could have recognized the depth of change that had taken place in a year was Pardo. Later, I would learn that in 2015 she left her role at Thurgood Marshall to work full time for TenSquare. I understand now, why she had no interest in challenging whatever TenSquare was recommending for WEDJ.

Finally, I reached out to a former education professor at a local university who had visited the school early on, and had been someone I kept abreast of happenings at WEDJ. He was no longer in DC, choosing to take on a school leadership position on the west coast, so we emailed and spoke on the phone. His advice helped me see the wide reach that TenSquare had in the DC charter school community.

Barb, If your board has retained the services of TenSquare (Josh Kern) and want the school to move in a particular direction, then I'd suggest speaking frankly with the board leadership to determine whether there's a way to blend the Uncommon School model with some fidelity to the performing arts. I do know that Josh has the ear of the DC charter school community – at least a number of the key players i.e. school leaders, council members, charter school board, etc...Ultimately, I think you'll need to determine whether you want to remain the school leader. If so, make your cause. Otherwise, you'll take another path.

If you want to chat, please call me.

It was becoming clear that if I pushed for better practices, my leadership would be at stake.

On a more positive note, there was some good news in January. Ms. Morgan, our Admission's Coordinator returned from her medical leave. Ms. Hamilton took me to a 'Capitals' versus 'Leafs' hockey game, and Tracee York prepared an incredible video memorial for Nelson Mandela that played on our TV in the entranceway for several weeks.

To boost staff morale and keep that spark in staff eyes, we also decided to bring in the Omelet Chef, as a mid-year celebration. We invited our Board members to join us for a breakfast, as many had not been introduced to the staff. Unfortunately, none of the WEDJ Board members, who said they could make it, were able to attend. Nevertheless, the staff truly appreciated the special breakfast in their honor. It wasn't easy sporting a cheery disposition in the face of the turmoil being served up by the TenSquare consultants. The overall chill in January, however, was about to foreshadow more cloudy days ahead.

THE AMBUSH... “AND SO IT BEGINS”

I recall getting an e-mail message from academic lead, Lindsey Joseph, one day in early February, and all it said was “and so it begins” with a forwarded message to her from Dr. Mitnick. I could see that Ethan had taken the final step to leave me out of his plans for the school. Ms. Joseph was letting me know that TenSquare was now officially side-stepping my authority by making deliberate changes to the staffing.

The ambush of TenSquare was swift and reckless. The conversation with John Goldman about bringing in TenSquare to help us was a short one. As the Executive Director, I was responsible for supporting the Board’s decision to bring in a team to help us make improvements. According to Goldman, by investing in an outside group, it would help assure the DC Public Charter School Board team that we were being proactive in making changes. Goldman credited TenSquare for the improvement in scores at the Idea School where he had also contracted TenSquare to conduct consulting services. At the time, it wasn’t clear to me that TenSquare’s ‘school turnaround’ experiences were limited to three schools in the DC area. In hindsight, my trust in my Board Chair was a costly mistake, not simply for the staff, but for the STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, ARTS, and Mathematics) culture we were developing at WEDJ, so prevalent in progressive schools in the 21st century.

I was instructed to adopt and implement everything TenSquare recommended. Rather than meet with me to discuss TenSquare’s allegation, that I was not carrying out their recommendations, Mr. Goldman sent me a Board directive ordering me to comply with all TenSquare suggestions. I responded by letting Goldman know that I had already implemented many of TenSquare’s recommendations. There was no response to my follow-up note to Goldman. As difficult as it was to accept the poor practices the TenSquare consultants were promoting, I did follow the directive of the Board and at no time did I interfere with their recommendations. Questions or attempts at trying to help Dr. Mitnick view things in any other light than the ‘levering leadership’ perspective, fell upon deaf ears. If the staff members were resistant to TenSquare’s recommended changes, it was because they knew from experience that the teacher-directed approach did not lead to engaged students or learning that would last. Nevertheless, I did not stand in TenSquare’s way as we implemented a new schedule and tolerated the ongoing negative observations and coaching tips. At no time did Dr. Mitnick approach me to say that I was not cooperating with him.

Given the unfolding events and the contents of TenSquare’s original audit, that in my view may have bordered on defamation of character, I decided to contact John Cook, an employment lawyer. I met with Cook and after reviewing the facts,

CHAPTER 36

he indicated that TenSquare had the right to form their own opinions, valid or not. After reviewing the facts of the situation and the advice of Mr. Cook, I did not in all likelihood, at this time, have a case against neither the Board, nor TenSquare, but he thought it would make a good book. He suggested we remain in touch as events unfolded over the coming weeks.

VALENTINE BUNDLE – FEBRUARY 14

The Valentine's Day bundle was shaped by ideas for enhancing teaching skills. Through each bundle, I tried to remind teachers about what exceptional teaching looked like and how it was, in stark contrast to the model where teachers do most of the talking to the students. Like all bundles, the advice I shared was grounded in current and peer-reviewed research.

I recommended that each lesson in an hour should be filled with different kinds of engagement such as combinations of teacher and student-directed activity, building in opportunities for students to talk about the subject matter, coordinating hands-on experiences, using technology to ignite curiosity, and documenting learning each day. I also mentioned that classrooms, that demonstrated all or most of the qualities verses some, are what would separate a proficient from an exceptional teacher.

I concluded this bundle with:

I'm sure you are all working hard right now at Being Exceptional. If everyone has the WILL and the promise to become exceptional – nothing can stop us! Every minute matters in our challenge of moving students forward academically...Thank your teammates for their hard work!...Here's a message you have heard before but I cannot say it enough. THANK YOU. The heart of this community is a giving one, and kids see amazing role models every day giving 100% of themselves to our school...What a team!!! Keep dancing like it's your last dance. Many of you have truly left nothing on the court when it comes to giving your all to teaching this semester, so please enjoy your well-deserved break! It truly is an honor to serve you, Barb

Ironically, but perhaps fittingly, my thank you to the staff for all of their hard work, would turn out to be my last official staff communication.

LEADERSHIP PERFORMANCE REVIEW

On Tuesday, February 18, 2014, I received a call from John Goldman indicating that he was coming to the school. Within the hour, Justin Rydstrom, Board member and employee at the IDEA School, appeared. He hardly said a word, just shook his head, and mumbled something like, ‘I’m sorry.’ I knew something was up, but didn’t know what was about to happen until John Goldman appeared and handed me the following letter, that he read aloud:

BY HAND

Principal

William E. Doar, Jr. Public Charter School For the Performing Arts

705 Edgewood Street, N.E.

Washington, D.C. 20017

Re: Administrative Leave

Dear Dr. Smith:

This will confirm our conversation today advising you that the Board of Trustees (“Board”) of the William E. Doar, Jr. Public Charter School For the Performing Arts (“WEDJ”) has decided to put you on a paid administrative leave for the next 30–45 days while the Board undertakes a review of your performance. The Board’s decision is effective immediately. The Board is taking this action because of concerns relating to your job performance. These concerns include the following: (i) taking actions that conflict with the instructions of TenSquare, an education consulting firm hired by the Board to help WEDJ improve its academic performance. We have been advised by TenSquare that this includes giving directions to teachers on instructional strategies and making staffing decisions that are contrary to the instructions given by TenSquare; (ii) the D.C. Public Charter School Board’s (“PCSB”) negative findings in its Quality Site Review, dated November 6, 2013, including WEDJ’s failure to consistently implement a strong college preparatory academic program across all grade levels; and (iii) missing critical deadlines and funding opportunities including failing to timely apply for a DC Scholars for Opportunity and Results (SOAR) Act Grant resulting in substantial financial loss to the school.

The Board feels it is necessary to take action because we are at a critical time in the life of the school, specifically, the PCSB’s ten-year review of WEDJ’s performance and upcoming DC CAS testing (March 31-April 11, 2014). As you know, the PCSB is required to perform a high-stakes review of a charter

school's performance every five years to determine whether its charter should be revoked because it failed to meet the goals and student academic achievement expectations set forth in its charter; committed a violation of law or a material violation of its charter, or for fiscal mismanagement. The PCSB is currently conducting its ten-year review of WEDJ's performance. WEDJ's performance on the DC CAS will form an important component of the PCSB's whether to continue WEDJ's charter. TenSquare was specifically hired by the Board to guide WEDJ through the ten-year review process and to help improve WEDJ's performance on the DC CAS. You were advised of this fact and have been advised of the directions given by TenSquare to improve WEDJ's academic performance.

The Board will, over the next 30–45 days, conduct a review of your performance. At the conclusion of its review, one or more Board members will meet with you to provide the results of the Board's review and advise you of the Board's decision relating to your future employment at WEDJ. I will advise faculty, staff, students and parents today that you are on a temporary administrative leave. The Board will not disclose why you are on administrative leave. The Board will also not discuss what will happen at the conclusion of your administrative leave. The Board has also decided that during your paid administrative leave, you are not to come to the WEDJ campus or have any contact with any faculty, staff or parents. If you feel it is important to communicate any information relating to WEDJ, you should direct your communication to me.

Please let me know if you have any questions about this letter.

*Sincerely,
John Goldman
Chair, Board of Trustees*

I read through this letter, paused and let Mr. Goldman know he was making a mistake. Few words were spoken as I packed up my things, and handed him my keys. This action by the Board of Trustees, who rarely set foot in the school, felt at first like a low blow. I will admit this was an emotional time, but I held back the tears in that room. When I was safely on my way home, the shock and sadness set in. That evening, I received dozens of emails, returning none. I honored the agreement, thinking naively at the time, that the Board would be able to discover, upon thorough investigation, that I was indeed an asset to WEDJ.

The next day I examined my 'administrative leave' notice more carefully. I pulled my thoughts together and sent the following key points in a response, to which Mr. Goldman, nor any Board members, replied:

I am writing as a follow up to our meeting of yesterday where you informed me of the Board's recent decision to put me on a paid administrative leave for 30 to 45 days while evaluating my performance. First of all, it is unclear to me how

the Board can effectively evaluate my performance having spent so little time observing my leadership in action at the school. I would also point out that I have never received a formal performance evaluation since my arrival at the school.

Let me start by addressing each of the concerns you raised in your note to me.

First of all, we have cooperated with TenSquare and implemented two new schedules, participated as 'coaches' and moved the curriculum to a more test-focused approach.

With respect to the grade 8 staffing decision, in my experience, it is best not to impose decisions on staff unilaterally, but rather engage them in the final solution. In the end we found a solution with Ms. Nugent's involvement, while it took additional time, we came to a better outcome in my view. Perhaps the Board is not aware that Ms. Nugent is not qualified to teach grade 8...

I acknowledge it was disappointing that we missed the application deadline for the SOAR Grant. I am especially disappointed that your note fails to acknowledge the situation I inherited when I arrived in July 2012, however since then I was able to:

- *Write and receive the 2013 \$150,000 SOAR grant*
- *Establish a relationship and free instruction from artists from the National Art Gallery*
- *Promote the selection of a staff member as a full scholarship 'fellow' at Harvard's Project Zero*
- *Negotiate to upgrade the school's library with the landlord to significantly reduce costs for library renovation.*
- *Find material private donations.*

There is no acknowledgement of significant improvements including:

- *basic cleanliness*
- *student safety*
- *clearer job descriptions*
- *development of new CCSS report card*
- *innovative programming (robotics, fab lab, chess, research & technology, Playbill Study booklets; PAL Program)*
- *PK playground*
- *improved attendance and decreased truancy*
- *reduction in staff 'tardies'*
- *<significant >re-enrollment for Grades 3 to 8*
- *current re-enrollment in INFOSNAP is 79% for 2014–2015 school year*

I am extremely proud of what our team has accomplished over the last year and a half and I firmly believe that William E. Doar, Jr. School for the Performing Arts provides a valuable niche for students with an interest in the arts...

If, at the end of this period of administrative leave, the Board decides to terminate my employment, I would be prepared to work with the new leadership in any way you deem appropriate. I fully expect that this letter be shared with all board members.

Barbara J. Smith February 19, 2014

Despite the fact that Goldman indicated the purpose of my Administrative Leave was to assess my performance, I received no communication from neither him nor the Board until April 24, 2014 (thirty-five days later), when he emailed me a self-evaluation form to be completed ahead of a meeting scheduled the next day.

Dr. Smith:

*Attached is a self evaluation if you would like to complete it.
If you don't feel as though this was sufficient time prior to the meeting tomorrow, please advise and we can reschedule.
Thank you, John 4/24/14*

I indicated that I did not have enough time to complete the evaluation. I also noted that the Board had neglected to provide me with a form for my principal role – as I had agreed to do both roles for a reduced salary:

There is insufficient time to respond to this request. I would also like to complete a self evaluation for the principal role as well. Please forward. I am available on Sunday or Tuesday Thank you, Barbara Smith. (e-mail dated 4/24/14)

Goldman simply replied with:

There is no evaluation for Principal role. The position was "Interim Executive Director." Tuesday is fine with me 10 AM at IDEA work for you? Thanks. (email dated 4/24/14)

To this I responded with:

*Dear Mr. Goldman:
Tuesday at 10 am. Confirmed.
For the record, I disagree about the "position."
You asked me to do both.
Barbara Smith*

Goldman never responded to this note or made any effort to clarify or explain why he was not evaluating my complete performance.

I prepared an extensive self-assessment for the members of the WEDJ Board of Trustees, that included the following commentary on April 29, 2014:

- *For the record, I have some serious concerns about the process the Board has engaged in with respect to my performance review. The Middle States*

Accreditation (MSA) team that was scheduled to be at WEDJ this spring, is made up of highly qualified educators, authentic experts in the field. ...At the William E. Doar, Jr. PCS for the Performing Arts, an audit should have been conducted that addressed the growth of the school.

- *In a school that desperately needed stability, the constant changing of the guards, leaves the school without a compass. A strong Board in a needy urban school must do more than replace people. I learned that when 2/3 of the staff had been fired prior to my arrival, there remained a very real challenge of developing the new people who came on board.*
- *The cycle of spending public funds to bring in consultants – who then are hired with more public funds to dismantle an organization – who are then hired again to find new people to replace another stream of people fired – seems to be a reckless cycle that cannot possibly be for the best interest of the students, staff of families.*
- *A Board must trust their leader – and give the school leader the time s/he needs to communicate a vision/plan and be willing to work with the school leader to revise the plan so the Board and School Leader work as a team. The students lose when the impulse is to throw out best practices and replace them with untested and draconian formulas for success. I urge the Board to read broadly about education and attend conferences to gain a deeper understanding and insight into the full range of choices there are for our young people. (April 29, 2014)*

I also noted that I had not received any performance review since my start date, 21 months prior. I also noted that I had thoroughly enjoyed my experience with the students, staff and families at WEDJ and that: “There is much left I want to do at WEDJ but to move the school to the exceptional place this community deserves and requires more time and Board support.” I noted that thorough documentation of my duo-role, as WEDJ principal and Interim Executive Director, should be transparent with the entirety of my job description reviewed for the record.

When I arrived at the meeting on the Tuesday, Board member, Cindy Gertz was also present. I provided a copy of my self-assessment for both positions, but they had already prepared the final performance review, in absence of the self-assessment. It seemed that Goldman did not intend to consider my input into this performance assessment, which in hindsight, was not much of a surprise. In a credible organization, administrator input is customary, and given this was an opportunity to educate the Board members about the vast changes and improvements that were being made, I was disappointed that I did not receive any responses from Board members.

My 9-page self-assessment was submitted to the two representatives from the Board. At the same time, they handed me their report that had already been compiled. They did not read or include the self-evaluation material that I had prepared in their performance review. The other Board members did not view my response before making their determination.

When I viewed the evaluation tools, I could see that three board members and two staff members filled in a template with mostly ‘not satisfied’ ratings. Mr. Goldman and Ms. Gertz shared the overall summary (a tabulation of five charts) – a 2.35 score out of 4, compiled by these five people. The origin of the survey tool was unknown. The supposedly confidential survey left room for comments, but only 2/5 people submitted any. Most participants just placed a check in a column – without having to qualify their responses in a comment box. My responses, on the other hand, were prepared to help enlighten the Board about the depths of my commitment and capacity.

There was no opportunity to speak about my self-assessment at this meeting. Goldman indicated that as a result of their performance review, they wanted me to resign. At this meeting, I was told that the school would pay me until the end of the year, if I signed an agreement stating I would not speak poorly of my experience at WEDJ. Goldman and Gertz looked shocked when I refused to sign the agreement, in other words, take the payout. Resonating in my mind, at this point in the meeting, was the conversation I had with Ms. Kensler in September 2012, when I promised her that I would not abandon the kids. I would not go back on my word. Like many charter schools, WEDJ suffered from a continuous turnover in leadership and I did not want Ms. Kensler, or any other community member, to think I was just another short-term leader that would give up on the school quickly. I absolutely refused to voluntarily give up on the students. Goldman and Gertz mentioned that taking the offer to resign, with the additional money paid out until the end of the school year, would be in my best interest. From my perspective, I believe my resignation would be more in the best interest of WEDJ’s Board of Trustees. Goldman and the Board preferred that I resign, remained quiet for the balance of the school year, allowing for maximization of student and family retention, which would be easier done if they could tell the community that leaving was my decision. He then asked whether I was considering legal action. I paused and recalled Cook’s advice about staying in touch ‘as events unfolded.’ I responded to Goldman by stating that I was not sure if I would be pursuing legal action at this time. Then Goldman ended the meeting indicating the Board would need to re-group and that he would back in touch with me.

I heard nothing from Goldman until May 6, 2014 when I received an e-mail indicating:

This will confirm our conversation yesterday in which I advised you that the Board of Trustees (“Board”) of the William E. Doar, Jr. Public Charter School For the Performing Arts (“WEDJ”) has decided to terminate your employment effective immediately.

Goldman did not phone or meet me in person to inform me of their final decision.

CRACKS IN THE FOUNDATION

We can continue to build charter schools in a lockdown fashion, muffling fresh ideas with an approach to schooling that's 'good enough', or we can strive for excellence grounded in expertise well beyond the simplistic metric of test scores. Charter schools were supposed to be much more than data rooms; originally, they were spaces where schools could meet the needs of learners by doing things differently, a place where families could be more involved in their schools. The cracks in the foundation at WEDJ were more about the influences from outside the school than from within. The WEDJ Board of Trustees should not have been outsiders, yet their absence, propensity to worship test scores and in some cases, their influence on helping friends profit from constant turnovers, placed this governing body squarely at odds with the hard work happening within the core of the school.

We were developing a culture where the staff, students and parents on the front lines were building a solid foundation for growth, but I would argue that this school was vulnerable to several forces outside the school walls that chose to ignore or widen the cracks, rather than work as a team to patch them up. How many schools must be closed down before people put in the hard work needed to help them thrive?

I recall a message with families in a Principal Point, I shared in February 2013, in my first year at WEDJ:

Trust Hard Work. Our staff cares deeply about our kids and our kids care about our school. There are moments when things do not go as planned. We all learn from these situations, but in my regular walks through the school and in the classes, I'm seeing happy kids, and the one thing I've learned is that we need to be sure that all students and staff are happy and productive. Change adds lumps to the batter; it just does. We are persistent, however, about getting the right recipe for making our kids soar, in school, in college in life. (<http://www.wedjschool.us/dr-smith/principal-point-february-message-from-dr-smith>)

The families, students and staff were committed to hard work, and while I needed to convince my Board, the DC Charter Board, and our consultants, that we were moving in a productive direction, there was a lack of interest on the part of these political guardians to engage in the hard work needed to make a good school great. As it turned out these power players succeeded at suppressing what could have been an incredible contribution to urban education. At the heart of the problem were the systematic controls, loosely connected triggers, that worked hard in a corrosive direction, that is, to bring down our WEDJ dream. Imagine what could happen if

each player joined in to support the building of an ideal school together? I believe many corrosive forces let WEDJ down in the many ways.

It may be that there were many agendas at play during my time at WEDJ. In this book, I tried to share how a story of commitment and innovation collided with a series of triggers that ultimately prevented a school from achieving its' dream. While most students, staff and parents would agree we were on our way to making a difference, we were clearly lacking the support from the WEDJ Board of Trustees, The DC Charter Board, Ten Square Consultants and Charter Board Partners.

The WEDJ Board of Trustees

I believe the weakest link in the system was the WEDJ Board of Trustees. In addition to not backing the school leader, I sense most members of the WEDJ team of trustees demonstrated a limited commitment to the school, a disinterest and attention to WEDJ Board membership and a lack of fiduciary fortitude. Their narrow focus on test scores limited their capacity to understand the depth of the changes that took place under the leadership of the WEDJ administration. It would be difficult for the WEDJ Board, who rarely attended school events, to determine whether the increased scores by April 2014 could be attributed to TenSquare's influence or the hard-working staff. Furthermore, how was it that they could confidently remove the school leader when they did not view the principal/executive director in action? Perhaps my notion that a Board would support its' school leader was naïve, but this was a learning experience.

I was concerned that the WEDJ Board of Trustees did not seem to be thorough about Board membership. According to the WEDJ governance by-laws, created by the Board, 2/3 of the members had to vote a member off. The team, all basically vetted and appointed by Goldman, was not accountable to anyone, unless the DC Charter Board decided to intervene. It was surprising that the DC Charter Board did not issue a letter of warning or concern to a school for operating for many months without a full Board. For much of 2013–2014, the school only had one parent representative on the WEDJ Board, putting the school technically out of compliance. When provided with names to consider, the Board members did not act in a timely manner to replace the parent representative, Ms. Staton, who had resigned in the first week of October 2013. Lauren Szewczyk was the single parent Board member who did attend most of the school events. While I respected Justin Rydstrom as a principal, it was not appropriate that he be an employee of the Board Chair.

Goldman had a history of purging staff at WEDJ and at Rydstrom's current school. Could Rydstrom really be impartial on the WEDJ Board?

I also believe that things might have turned out differently if Tony Upson, Tony Broomfield, Jack Schreibman, Jeri Epstein and a second parent representative, who did come on board much later, Mohammed Kamara, had been a part of the WEDJ Board of Trustees, especially when key decisions about the school's direction were influenced so much by the TenSquare group. What seemed important to John Goldman was having a Board he could control, and not people who might question

his authority. Jeri provided a voice of independent thought on the Board, something every Board should strive for, and good governance demands. It is shocking to me that so much has been written and action taken on ensuring appropriate board governance in publicly traded corporations in North America, yet an archaic system of self-appointed directors can be allowed to manage scarce public funds, intended to deliver a quality education for our children. John Goldman was basically able to collect two Executive Director salaries from two schools for several months, and then recommended himself to the Board Chair position, where he advocated for the TenSquare Consulting Group, and then after I left WEDJ, he returned again collecting another salary in a school improvement role. Such opportunities seem to test the waters of conflict of interest that run counter to sound governance. Contrary to the WEDJ bylaws, where the Board members appoint each other, I believe charter board trustees should be elected by the parents, people who have ‘skin in the game’; that is, children attending the school. Trustees should never be employees of the school and remain independent of the day-to-day operation. Furthermore, individual Board members should remain at arms-length with each other. Finally, each board member, including the Chair, should have to stand for re-election at a pre-determined interval, certainly no longer than three years. In a democratic society, it makes sense that parents should have the ability, based on some kind of majority vote, to dismiss a Board if they are not in agreement with their policies, choices and actions.

From a fiscal perspective, I wonder how the WEDJ Board, entrusted with fiduciary responsibility, could condone so much money being directed away from the children. It was ironic that after building a surplus and trimming wasted expenses to provide funding for decreased teacher-student ratios, that the funds wound up lining the pockets of the TenSquare Consulting Group. I was also perplexed that Goldman supported so many non-instructional positions at the school. Does a school really need a development coordinator, an admissions coordinator, an attendance coordinator, a food services coordinator, a data coordinator, a business manager, a security team, and a maintenance team, in addition to a Chief Operations Officer and an Executive Director, while outsourcing different consultants to manage payroll, enrollment, financials, the web page, marketing, data programming, staffing and performance management? Unfortunately, it felt like a feeding frenzy at the public trough, with not many African Americans benefitting from the distribution of precious public funds. How many employees does a great school need?

It could be argued that the Board, mostly new members, did not have the time or the appropriate information to be making important decisions about hiring consultants, recommended by Goldman, or for that matter, removing a school leader. Yet, they went ahead and made these serious calls. While being a Board Trustee is a volunteer position, there must be a way to build in more accountability, beyond the group itself. Whether the WEDJ Trustees were manipulated, or not, by the Board Chair, their primary duty was to the school and the kids. Nevertheless, it appears that the WEDJ Board did not work in isolation to make this ambush a reality. They had help.

DC Public Charter School Board

The DC Mayor, with the advice and consent of Council, is technically responsible for appointing the DC Public Charter School Board, who selects the Executive Director, who employs a team of bureaucrats to provide oversight for charter schools, all at the taxpayers' expense. During my time at WEDJ, the Chair of the DC Charter Board, Darren Woodruff, had a PhD in education from Howard University, a solid local institution. Under Woodruff's leadership, this charter board met regularly to review reports filed by Scott Pearson, who was selected to lead the DC Charter Board. Pearson employed 33 full time people with fewer than 20% having teaching experience, and upon a closer review of their bios on the DCPCSB web site, most of these individuals had less than five years of experience in schools. This extensive team, responsible for authorizing charter schools in DC, had limited backgrounds, considering their positions significantly influenced whether schools stayed open or would be closed down. Absent from the credentials was anyone who held a graduate degree in curriculum or instruction. Furthermore, it seemed that the leader and employees of the DC Public Charter Board, did not appear to be accountable to anyone except those appointed officials who selected him. It is difficult to imagine how a public institution can use public funds to unilaterally make decisions that lack the oversight and rigor of educational expertise.

The DCPCSB Executive Director, Scott Pearson, had an MBA from Harvard Business School, with previous work experience at AOL, and some experience at the US Department of Education. Someone, who has never taught a class, never studied education, nor enrolled his own children in DC charter schools, was at the top of the charter school food chain monopoly. In Pearson's bio, he indicates that DC is a national model for charter school authorizing. With no open competition, and no partnerships with experts in education at universities, how can this monopoly be a model system for charters? There are approximately 110 public charter schools operating in DC, of which upwards of 60 of them are non-profit organizations. The mission of the DCPCSB is:

To provide quality public school options for DC students, families, and communities through:

- *A comprehensive application review process*
- *Effective oversight*
- *Meaningful support*
- *Active engagement of its stakeholders* (<http://www.dcpsb.org/about-us>)

From my perspective, the DCPCSB failed on this mandate, and as such, should not be viewed as a leader in the "transformation of public education in DC," or "serve as a national role model for charter school authorizing and accountability," as articulated in their vision.

Between 2010 and 2015, the DC Charter Board managed to shift policies so that they could have more control over individual charters. For instance, they gave

themselves more power to close schools when they generated the following policy on May 1, 2012:

A school becomes a candidate for closure if it is rated Tier 3 under PMF for three out of five consecutive years rather than three consecutive years. This addresses schools that are chronically low-performing, and are unable to be closed down under the current PMF guidelines because they move back and forth between Tier 3 and Tier 2 within a three-year consecutive period. (<http://www.dcpsb.org/policy/revisions-performance-management-framework-guidelines-policy>)

A school like WEDJ, potentially teetering between Tier 2 and 3 status, would be more likely to risk closure and therefore require more monitoring by the Charter Board's in-house teams of 'quality' control agents. In preparation for our Ten-Year Review, DCPCSB's Naomi DeVeaux mentioned to me that she was pleased we were bringing in TenSquare, to help us improve our PMF score. She had to have known our PMF score should have been at least 46, rather than the reported 35. If she was one of the few experienced educators on the DCPCSB staff, she had to have been aware that TenSquare, initially a real estate consulting group, was not a national leader in recruitment or school improvement. DeVeaux's support for TenSquare indirectly endorsed the mantra of Doug Lemov's 'uncommon schools', and his 'leveraging leadership' model that frankly counters current educational research, with a ceiling well below excellence. It would be difficult for any school under the guidance of the DCPCSB to be innovative, if they supported such narrow lenses of success. The DCPCSB created jobs for their own employees to monitor and document Qualitative Site Reviews for all charter schools. This was puzzling to me because such an expensive and redundant practice was not needed, when it was already stipulated in each charter, that schools must participate in a formal accreditation process (ie. Middle States) conducted by independent experts, separate from school authorizers. It makes sense to rely on the audits of impartial experts. In this way, no one could question whether internal QSR's can be detached from the Charter Board's home groan PMF school-rating tool. In DC, the faith in the value of PMF could possibly taint QSR results. The tool would not be viewed as credible if its scores did not align with the QSR descriptions. For instance, a high PMF score with a low QSR or conversely, a low school report rating on the PMF with a high QSR report, serves to diminish the value of either the PMF or the QSR. It was not in the best interest of a low PMF, for WEDJ to be the recipient of an affirming QSR. I would go as far as to say that in the case at WEDJ, I believe that the writers of the QSR report demonstrated a bias, realized or not.

While the DCPCSB hails its Performance Management Framework (PMF) as innovative and a model for all American charters, the academic origin or grounding has not been made clear in any white paper or public documentation for that matter. As long as no one questions its validity, the DCPCSB will not need to face the rigor of expert peer review. I have serious doubts if any reputable university would

endorse the use of this tool as a credible diagnostic for measuring the assets and limitations of a school – especially for purposes of determining school closures. I do think it's important to monitor test scores, attendance and re-enrollment, but to use the re-enrollment from the year before – as well as mix test scores as some indicator of growth, is something that makes little sense. I remain surprised to this day, that no one has questioned the authenticity of the PMF. How can individual school charter boards and administrators let their school be ranked with such an unproven metric?

The DC Public Charter School Board seems to define a school, for the most part, by its test scores. Rather than putting in the hard work to help schools with weaker scores, DCPCSB sends out letters of concern and warnings that threaten closure, unless a school conforms to their standards. Closing schools down sends a message that the Charter Board is serious about academic achievement. The art and science of determining which doors to close or which new charter schools can enter the market, sets the table for generous public employment. If a goal is to demonstrate that charter schools do better than their counterparts in the DC Public Schools, then this is easy when the system can shut down the poor scoring schools, and by doing so, send many students with their weaker scores back into the conventional public sector schools. Based on my experience, I am not convinced that DCPCSB is closing down poor performing schools. The pressure for students to perform well on standardized tests, be present and re-enroll in a charter school can lead schools to either buy into outside help (i.e., TenSquare) or risk having their doors closed. When one door closes, opportunities for new charters or charter management firms, promising to do better, can open. The dismantling of schools, with the upside of accepting new charters into the fold, is somewhat similar to the notion of 'active management,' where the constant turnover of stocks in portfolios, justifies ongoing brokerage fees. In the case of charter schools, the turnovers can rationalize an extensive bureaucracy, with one part of the operation dedicated to ranking, polling and identifying weaker schools, while another section of the organization is focused on examining new options, and future clients. At what point do the current schools experience service, beyond general lobbying for charters and ranking them? Just as it is possible to recycle poor teachers, without dedicating support for improvement, it seems likely that poor schools can be recycled, too, without some kind of intervention. As authorizers, the DC Charter Board, seems to operate under a fixed mindset; the charter schools in the bottom of the ranking lists are responsible for fixing their problem. Imagine what it might be like if schools, that pay over \$35,000 for authorizing services, were provided with support for school improvement? Such an accountable growth mindset might actually be more economical, with the added bonus of putting more funding back into the hands of the students, who need it the most. The more an organization aligns with a punitive set of goals, the more people, paperwork and legal departments are necessary to carry out the day-to-day operations. Charter Schools are required to pay reasonable fees to be 'accredited' by experts outside the school and the authorizing agency. Why is it necessary for the DC Charter Board to replicate this process by conducting less-rigorous qualitative

site reviews? At least in the case of accreditation, by respected groups such as the Middle States Association or Advanced Ed, they provide clear and research-based recommendations for improvement. On the one hand, there are good reasons that some schools may need to fold, but the threat of being closed is not enough to turn schools around. The system, itself, should also be accountable for helping schools improve. The DC Charter Board, in effect, defines the vulnerable school territories, where questionable ‘turn-around’ agencies can feed. As a bystander, the DC Charter Board can simply go about the business of closing and opening charter schools.

After the 2013 qualitative site review, PMF ranking and the lack of consideration for an appeal of the PMF score, I realized that the DCPCSB could not see the limitations of their PMF tool. The DC Public Charter School Board had to have been aware that a school could not be populated with a critical mass of high scoring students overnight. While it might have been a strategy to allow weaker students, who could not keep up with the pace of learning and testing, to exit the school on technically their own accord, I would not be privy to encouraging students to take such actions. At WEDJ, all the scores contributed to the data, the good and the not so good. With time and support, I believe we would have continued to make substantial progress, through sound policy and integral action. We didn’t discourage any students.

While many guardians in the DC Charter world may employ a fixed mindset to basically define each school by a score, at WEDJ, we were committed to a growth mindset, using data to inform and guide school improvement. Data alone should never define a school. When it comes to quality control, I define ‘integrity’ as doing what we say we do, well. Our goal was not to get to the top and stay there; our goal was to continuously improve and not see the ‘top’ of anything, as the time to stop growing. I recall early on in my charter school career how accountability was built in via authorizers and/or accreditation teams. At JRLA, in Michigan, the school had four authorizing options. They chose Central Michigan University as their key authorizer, a credible group that demonstrated a solid understanding of teaching and learning. After all, they were an institution that graduated teachers, and therefore were linked to peer-reviewed research and understandings of best practice. Given there was competition, these representatives worked hard to service the charters that opted for their brand of oversight. In DC, however, there were no options. All charter schools had to pay the DC Charter School Board a small percentage of their budget for services rendered; regrettably, my experience of their oversight was more a ‘reign of terror’ that lacked the professionalism and integrity of CMU.

The TenSquare Consulting Group

The TenSquare consultants positioned themselves as experts in how to increase school ratings on the DCPCSB’s PMF rating scale. Upon close review, I felt their analysis of the trends in achievement and growth scores was underwhelming. How could an education consulting company, branding such expertise, look at the following metrics and report that WEDJ was not moving in the right direction?

DC CAS WEDJ Reading and Math Results (2012–2014)						
2012 Reading	2013 Reading	2014 Reading	2012 Math	2013 Math	2014 Math	
	34.5 (Gr. 2)	41 (Gr. 3)		26.5 (Gr. 2)	36 (Gr. 3)	
	35.9 (Gr. 3)	46 (Gr. 4)		23.1 (Gr. 3)	68 (Gr. 4)	
27.5% (Gr. 3)	40 (Gr. 4)	38 (Gr. 5)	2.5% (Gr. 3)	40 (Gr. 4)	53 (Gr. 5)	
55.56% (Gr. 4)	72 (Gr. 5)	41 (Gr. 6)	44.44% (Gr. 4)	72 (Gr. 5)	59 (Gr. 6)	
67.65% (Gr. 5)	65.4 (Gr. 6)	65 (Gr. 7)	55.88% (Gr. 5)	50 (Gr. 6)	62 (Gr. 7)	
46.15% (Gr. 6)	40 (Gr. 7)	48 (Gr. 8)	23.08% (Gr. 6)	40 (Gr. 7)	67 (Gr. 8)	
45% (Gr. 7)	33 (Gr. 8)		50% (Gr. 7)	52 (Gr. 8)		
40% (Gr. 8)			40% (Gr. 8)			
50% (overall)	47.2% (overall)	46.65% (overall)	35.1% (overall)	44.1% (overall)	55.98% (overall)	

Figure 14. DCCAS WEDJ reading and math results (2012–2014)

I initially trusted that TenSquare would be sending us experts, but I soon realized that the consultants seemed fixated on hurting, rather than helping, our school. On the one hand, I was shocked at the negative emails they sent staff on a regular basis. I was equally concerned about their promotion of poor practices on a wide scale. Nevertheless, I was powerless to stop the ‘disconnect’ between research, and the seemingly Gestapo techniques, being recommended. As a result of the deployment of disengaging approaches, and bubble-filling classroom experiences, discipline problems emerged and staff morale dwindled. The rise of teacher-directed practice, passive students and silence in the halls, prevailed for students who had once been enlightened by teachers, who embraced student thought, talk and creativity in an arts school. The TenSquare methods ran counter to WEDJ’s mission of building innovative arts leaders. Silently, at times, I felt that the push to teach urban students to be so compliant, bordered on a subtle racism of training African American youth to be better prepared and ready for a life in an orange jump suit. I had to question how the school’s enormous investment in TenSquare was helping our school.

It seemed like no one questioned how TenSquare appeared on the scene as a charter school expert. How does a real estate business become a school turn-around consulting firm overnight? The former Executive Director of the DC Public Charter School Board became the CEO of TenSquare, and with the help of John Goldman, TenSquare was able to secure two school contracts that gave them a generous head start in this industry. During a conversation regarding the competencies of TenSquare, Goldman did reveal to me that he owed Joshua Kern, inferring that Kern supported Goldman to get his job. Goldman also mentioned that he had done some consulting work for TenSquare in the past. The charter school field was ripe for making money, especially when schools categorized as Tier 3, or close to it, like WEDJ, would be presumed to be in need of consultant support. The TenSquare group hoisted a six-figure invoice, with a substantial bonus, if they were able to help a school make significant improvement on their PMF score, an improvement we were well on our way to making. We already knew we had close to 10 more points on the PMF report card, just for re-enrollment alone. Based on the hard work of the WEDJ staff, in 2012–2013, the re-enrollment figures had already shifted from 57% to 87%. This improvement happened well in advance of TenSquare’s appearance on the scene, yet it basically gifted this consulting group their bonus. Payments to TenSquare and John Goldman, over the course of three to four years, reveal significant public funds rendered for various services, in a seemingly cyclical manner:

- 2011–2012 – TenSquare conducts an audit of school identifying weak teachers and school leader
- 2012 – TenSquare recommends letting most of staff go – and is contracted to find a new principal and new staff members (charging \$200/hour to read resumes and make recommendations). It is not known if this included a finder’s fee for the school leader.

- Fall of 2012 – Goldman is paid an Executive Director salary at WEDJ at the same time as drawing an Executive Director salary at Idea Public Charter School.
- 2013–2014 – TenSquare conducts audit of school (approximately \$22,000)– recommends consulting team intervenes (approximately \$230,000) from December 2013 to June 2014; receive bonus payment (approximately \$35,000) when PMF score increased
- 2014 – TenSquare paid to recruit new school leader
- 2014–2015 – Goldman is hired by Board as School Improvement Director

Such money, that exchanged hands, was for public schooling. Prior to his lead role at the Charter School Board, Joshua Kern, had also been the founding CEO of Thurgood Marshall Charter School, a school with a strong record of getting their graduating class into college. In 2012, he left the Charter Board to start up the TenSquare Consulting group. My mentor, Alexandra Pardo, was the Executive Director at Thurgood Marshall; she mentioned she could not officially work for TenSquare, yet she was contracted by them to interview me on the phone, prior to my accepting the position at WEDJ.

It wasn't until after our September 2013 Qualitative Site Review, did I begin to be concerned about the possible ties between the DCPCSB team, TenSquare, John Goldman and my mentor, Alexandra Pardo. In my view, it seemed like too many key players in DC charter schools might have been too closely connected to each other, especially when public funds, were being dispersed. I believe these key players contributed to the establishment of a cycle of instability at WEDJ that was not in the best interest of the staff, students, or community. There was, however, an obscene amount of money to be had, by a consulting firm, whose accountability was negligible. In my experience, TenSquare was not the 'superman' charter schools might be waiting for, nor was this group humble enough to let educational research influence their worldview on schooling.

Charter Board Partners

WEDJ was one of Charter Board Partners (CBP) first clients. By paying this group approximately \$5000, they would complete searches for potential trustees for local charter schools. To complicate matters, the newly formed group, who were housed in the same building as the DC Charter School Board, recommended three Caucasians as candidates for WEDJ's Board of Trustees, people who were not representative of the school community. At this time, WEDJ already had a 100% Caucasian Board in place. How could a consulting firm not recommend at least one African American? What is even more ironic is that Charter Board Partners brands itself on their website as committed to finding representative Board candidates for charter schools:

We have a special focus on increasing the diversity of charter school boards; in the past year, 50 percent of CBP board recruits who joined charter school boards in Washington, DC are people of color. We strongly believe that diverse

board leadership is critical to effective governance; we can work with you to develop a robust pipeline of board candidates that represents the students and families in your schools and can lead to a stronger overall approach to diversity within the school. (<https://charterboards.org/>)

While this may be a commitment in print, CBP did not propose any people of color when we contracted their services in 2013. In addition to this group not delivering on this mandate, Naomi DeVeaux, the Deputy Director of the DCPCSB publicly commends this group their website:

We always know if the board we are meeting with is a CBP board. They ask thoughtful questions, bring a sense of professionalism to the table, and are focused on student outcomes. CBP boards understand their responsibility, as stewards of tax-payer dollars, for ensuring that the students at their schools are getting a high-quality education. We can spot a CBP board a mile away, and it's a sign of an increasingly accountable and responsible charter school sector. (Naomi Rubin DeVeaux, Deputy Director, DC Public Charter School Board) (<https://charterboards.org/>)

Such an endorsement begs the question, how does the Charter Board feel about trustees in schools that were not vetted by Charter School Partners? In any event, such a commendation, in the infancy of their organization, seems somewhat reckless in the base case.

If Charter Board Partners was so experienced in governance matters, how is it they did not flag the connection between the Board Chair and a Trustee who was his subordinate? Why would someone from Charter Board Partners discourage the Board from considering candidates with backgrounds in education and universities? When free thinkers like Tony Upson, Tony Broomfield and Jack Schreiber were ignored (and not even responded to) as possible candidates for the WEDJ Board, it makes one question the integrity of not only the Board leader, but Charter School Partners. When I recommended Tony Upson for consideration, they did not follow through to consider him for their active files at WEDJ or any other school. It seemed that this recruiting group was of the mindset that schools were better off with Board members who had a limited knowledge of education. Such a Board would not know if Charter Board Partners was doing an effective job at recruiting or not. In my experience, Charter Board Partners assumed the role as expert in charter board governance, without rigor, research or accountability. On their website, Charter Board Partners makes the following questionable claim: “CBP is leading the nation on innovations and knowledge building around strategic recruiting and governance support to board. We are available for speaking engagements at conferences and convenings nationwide” (<https://charterboards.org/services>). If there is one thing I’ve learned in my DC experience is that anyone can claim to be a national leader in education, especially when there are few who question such assertions.

CHAPTER 39

While some might claim that many of these key players demonstrated degrees of negligence in their varied responsibilities, the question remains – did the WEDJ Board of Trustees, the DC Charter Schools, TenSquare and Charter Board Partners act independently or not? While each player may have acted in isolation of each other, it is possible within the current system to collude about which charter schools can thrive or perish in DC. This is not simply a story of a Board who didn't support its' leader or an awkward clash between a Board Chair and its school leader. It's a story of systemic power that has the capacity and authority to dictate a way of doing school, without the requisite rigor of research to back it up. People made money, a lot of money on what could be interpreted as a sloppy analysis of the WEDJ school. It was in TenSquare's best interest to identify limitations. Middle States Accreditors were already coming in the spring, and could have provided an impartial audit, but the alignment of these players did enable fetal businesses to take advantage of funds that should have been dedicated to urban children. While this story has shed some light on how cracks in a foundation can form on the way to building a dream school, it hopefully has revealed how people can develop substantial best practice, that can support learning in a challenging educational environment.

APOLOGY ACCEPTED; OPPORTUNITY DENIED

In the fall of 2016, I spoke with Jeri Epstein about a conversation she had with Justin Rydstrom, current Executive Director at the Idea School, and a former Board member at WEDJ. She mentioned to me that he wanted me to contact him. It took me a few months to respond, but I phoned Justin. What promoted my call to Justin was a headhunter's email that listed the ad for the City Arts (WEDJ's new name) Executive Director position – with a note that read: “Would you consider going back?” Every part of me wanted to return to WEDJ, but it was important to put time and careful thought into the decision. When I contacted Justin, I listened as he informed me that John Goldman had been let go at Idea and at WEDJ, Rydstrom said was sorry for being part of my release at WEDJ. As I suspected, he did not want to step up and challenge his boss, given that he was a new school leader. I appreciated that Rydstrom had the courage to apologize for his part in the process that led to my ‘administrative leave’ and subsequent dismissal. I mentioned to him that I had been approached about the position at City Arts. He told me that the school would be lucky to have me and seemed very supportive. I followed up our conversation with a request for a reference letter, however, there was no reply to the e-mail. Around the same time, I received a text message from Ms. Palmer, suggesting that I return to WEDJ because the Board members were gone, and the staff wanted me back. I reviewed the list of Board members on the City Arts site, and discovered there was one remaining Board member, Tammy Daub. Goldman had indicated that the Board's decision was unanimous, so for me, her presence was a deterrent. Apart from being deeply committed to opening a new school in Canada, I realized that even if there was hope at the micro school level of making it work at WEDJ, I could do little to change the culture of the DC Charter Schools that worshipped test scores to the detriment, I believe, of learning and success in college, careers and life. Had I returned to WEDJ/City Arts, this story could not be told.

BUILT TO LAST

Dreaming a school can happen in so many ways. An Ideal school can arise completely from scratch or it can emerge from a transformation or reform of an existing school. A charter school can be part of a for profit organization, a non-for-profit independent Board, a management company or it may be under the umbrella of an existing district board or state or provincial body. WEDJ, housed in an industrial warehouse, had its own local Board of Trustees, who were under the authorization of the DC Charter Board. In the early days of DC charter schools, there were two authorizer choices: schools could report to either the DCPCSB or DCPS, the local public school board. During my time at WEDJ, there was only one option. While I do not believe being under the umbrella of the local public board makes sense for a charter school, I do feel that charter schools should have options, in terms of oversight. In my opinion monopolies can limit a school's capacity to thrive and survive.

In the introduction, I spoke about how this story might be of interest to students, educators, families and significant others, committed to promoting better ways of doing charter schools. After reflecting on nearly a decade of charter experiences in the US, in addition to the twenty plus years in education outside such schools, I believe that it is in the best interest of young people to have a charter choice, that has an authorizer choice, and that it not be affiliated or controlled by the local school system. If the state or provincial governing body has approved charters than the schools should ideally report to the state, where these officials can work with authorizers and accreditation agencies to ensure accountability. In the case of charter schools in DC, I would urge universities with committed education faculties to consider how to become authorizers, much like Central Michigan University, so charter schools can have options that link to credible rigorous educational research. These appears to be a gap in terms of input from universities, into DC charter schools. Finding ways to bring in such expertise, could only strengthen the foundation of the current charter school offerings.

With more experts in the mix, I suspect more charters would be built to last, rather than subject to the overused, simplistic and ineffective solutions of shutdowns and full-scale re-structuring. While I am not opposed to closing schools that lack the desire and capacity to grow, the mass of recall and threat of extinction hurled by the DCPCSB, did not seem necessary. Reform that is built to last, should, in my opinion, rest on ongoing coordinated school improvement efforts, that are nourished by all the cast members and guardians in a school. The edges of the school need to be polished, rather than sanded down with the constant rub of grit, of an unproven

kind. Students, staff and families need to part of the mix. Rigorous research is the kind of grit that needs to be integrated more into charter school foundations. In the case at WEDJ, not all guardians were prepared to work in concert with one another, making it difficult to secure sustainable improvement. There were, however, many lessons learned along the way.

A school is a complex context of moving parts, mostly human, and their measure of achievement far surpasses what a student can score on a given test, at a given time. My narrative does not end without renewed strength and a deepened understanding of what propels, and what can stagnate charter school life. Identifying these triggers may help other schools, and Boards, and staff, and parents, and authorizers think about how they serve and protect the children within the walls of charter schools, moving forward. This narrative, while raising many questions, shares possible solutions for future consideration.

First of all, I hope this snapshot of a charter school can instigate a pause in action, so that decision makers in education can see how the narrow focus on testing data may not be the only road to school enlightenment. Beyond the tracking of test scores, I believe there are several deliberate actions charter schools should take in their quest for improvement:

- The Boards of Trustees for each charter school need to be elected by parents who have children attending that school (with a predetermined term ie. 1–3 years). As well, these Trustees should be visible and active in the school.
- The Charter Board Chair and the School Leader should work collaboratively.
- All charter schools should, as a regular annual practice, survey their parents, staff and students to ensure continuous improvement and gain insight into these voices.
- A Charter Board, that has oversight over all charter schools in a district, should be an elected body. (with a predetermined term ie. 1–3 years). There should be a clear process for removing a Board for not acting in the best interest of the students.
- Schools should have authorizer choices. Monopolies should not exist in charter school districts.
- Charter authorizers should ensure that if tools are used for ranking schools, that they be based on peer-reviewed research and recommendations from experts in the field.
- Charter Board authorizers should accept the input from experts in accreditation agencies who are independent of an overall school ranking system. School authorizers should not be duplicating efforts of accreditation agencies and conducting Qualitative Site Reviews.
- Ideally, charter schools should be small schools to increase quality control.
- Charter schools need highly qualified staff members and teacher-leaders.
- Individual charter schools and charter school authorizers should have very clear guidelines about conflict of interest—to avoid the promotion of third party

providers. Charter authorizers should resist the temptation to promote specific consulting groups, avoiding conflict of interest.

If the integrity of the Board of Trustees, the authorizers and other influences outside the school are intact, then the grassroots players can do their job.

At the *Board of Trustee* level more parents would have had more of a say in their school, if all trustees stood for election, ideally each year, with the caveat for being in the position for no more than three years. Given that the Trustees are responsible for the school leadership, they need to be visible, in order to make the determination of whether or not the school leader is fulfilling his or her responsibilities. For a school to thrive, the school leader and the Board do need to communicate regularly and work hard to ensure the mission is met at the same time as build, sustain and/or revise the vision, in accordance with the strategic plan and school improvement plan. Without a trusting and respectful relationship, it is difficult for a school to move forward. Finally, Trustees need to be part of a learning organization, that is, they need to be part of a process that enables them to learn the difference between what is quality practice in education, as determined by rigorous research, and what is not. Without making time to learn about the field, it is easy to be deceived into supporting anything. Finally, Trustees, as representatives of a school, need to have a pulse on all the voices in a school. As such, they need to embrace the input gathered from annual student, staff and parent surveys. In order to ensure that the direction for continuous improvement is not only grounded in peer-reviewed research, but addresses the needs and concerns of the constituents. At the end of my experience at WEDJ, I admit I was troubled by the fact that charter schools, fueled by public funds, would have less accountability than publicly traded corporations. How is it that significant public money can be directed to organizations that are not accountable to their constituents – the parents of students who attend these schools? Such funds should not end up in the hands of friends, associates or others, who have much to gain from the public trough.

At the *Authorizer level*, it is also critical that an elected Charter Board oversees the work of the employees in the authorizing agency to ensure accountability to the public. As such, annual elections, with pre-determined maximum terms, would enable the oversight to be in a better position to embrace a range of perspectives. In my experience, I believe that having only one authorizer choice, with an appointed Board, creates a situation that promotes a narrow view of education. In the case of the DC area, it would be advantageous for universities, with education faculties, such as Howard, Trinity, George Washington, and UDC to discuss the possibility of becoming authorizers, so charter schools in DC would have viable options, that I believe could lead to improving the quality of the current services offered by the monopoly currently led by the DCPCSB. Not only would this be a revenue-generating opportunity for local colleges of education, it would extend the reach of more reliable tools for assessing and ranking charters. As well, a school of education needs quality spaces for their student teacher practicums; there should be a link

between the teacher education curriculum and the interning experiences. By shaping the standards for excellent teaching in charter schools, universities can extend a positive reach into the community and influence a more credible context for their student teaching experiences. While the opportunity to be an authorizer can guide best practices for student teaching, it can also provide alternative revenue streams, much needed in many higher education institutions.

Finally, it doesn't make sense that an authorizer duplicates the efforts of an accreditation agency. If it is the responsibility of each school to be accredited by an independent body of experts who conduct thorough school reviews, there should be no need for a charter board to have personnel dedicated to duplicating this task. It is surprising that such a costly replication of services by the DCPCSB, has not been challenged. The employees of the DC Charter Boards, the volunteer experts from accreditations agencies (Middle States; Advanced-Ed...) and the vast resources of the education faculties should not be islands separate from each other and the urban youth, who I believe could be better represented, if all forces made concerted efforts to coordinate their assets and row in the same reputable direction.

So many educational resources are not peer-reviewed by experts in our field. How can charter schools make a difference if they are shielded from the research, if teaching professionals are demoted to readers of scripts, if students are to become compliant slaves? The supporters of the current storm of 'educational' consultants, in urban centers across the United States, could benefit from pressing the pause button and thinking, not only about who benefits from the school turn-overs, but what possibilities are shielded from a process of expert vetting. Whether within or beyond the walls of a school, all community members can be more informed about current research in education. Not only can such practices as teacher-directed instruction and test-based curriculum be vetted according to credible research-based standards, as they should be, charter schools can contribute to the growing theories on how students learn best, too. If the DC Charter Board's PMF report card on schools is to be accepted as a model for all charter schools, then it must evolve and improve like the schools it serves. The people responsible for evaluating and ranking charter schools need not be isolated from rigorous research findings. It makes no sense to alienate university experts; such actions only serve to harvest a reputation that charter schools are not seriously contributing to advancing education. Educational research and rigor should not be sidestepped, ignored or rendered powerless in the challenge to grow charter schools into viable and respected institutions.

The small school solutions as a school improvement option has been lost in the 'disconnect' between conventional charter school practice and the abundance of educational research. The massive evidence, that points to a school having a much better chance of flourishing with fewer students, does not appear to be part of the charter school conversation. While there exists a constant demand for charter school teaching jobs in the media, there appears to be a lack of understanding for the need for onsite quality support and mentorship. Exceptional teachers are not yet flooding the market to work in urban schools, and the number of jobs advertised for charter

schools seems off the charts in each state, compared to the openings in the public and private sectors. It makes sense that for charter schools to succeed they need strong teachers. An alternative strategy to firing or passing around ineffective teachers may be for institutions to consider enrolling fewer students. In this way charter schools could ensure that students will experience an education from a highly qualified and talented team, that has the capacity to support for teachers. While smaller schools can reduce the number of students falling through the cracks, they also lessen the number of weaker teachers, who can also fall through the cracks in schools labeled ‘failure factories.’ A small school can keep a focus on all learners, and as such, give teachers more opportunities to reach their potential. Finding ways to make small schools an option where “*everyone knows my name*” might be just what’s needed in the challenge of finding that ideal school. The litmus test I use is simple; if a principal cannot name everyone in his or her school within the first three months, then it is simply too big. A principal’s appeal and potency is reduced in an overpopulated school. I believe it is best for classrooms to have 20 students or less, ideally 10–14, with an overall K-8 school capacity with no more than 300 students. There is no point, however, in cultivating a small school culture, if the quality of the staff is not reaching beyond mediocrity.

I believe it is not charter schools that should be called into question; rather, we need to challenge decision-makers and funders to read more about educational research, and not simply follow the easy-to-read recipes of non-reviewed testimonials. If we are aiming for students in charter schools to embrace rigor, then we all must take part in the hard work.

Within the walls of the charter schools, the administration can make quality staffing a major priority. Finding and building a highly qualified, motivated and talented team is THE most important hurdle to overcome in order to move a school from good to great. I agree with Ravnich (2010) who claims:

If we are serious about improving our schools, we will take steps to improve our teacher force, as Finland and other nations have done. That would mean better screening to select the best candidates, higher salaries, better support and mentoring systems, and better working conditions. (p. 29)

At WEDJ, we did have a mix of talent at the beginning of the school year, but we were clearly making effective changes and building strength in our active files. Teaching is, and always will be, at the heart of the matter of a school’s success. Contrary to the QSR report that indicated many of our teachers were struggling, the school was filled with a strong staff, well on their way to moving beyond expectations, to being a critical mass of exceptional teachers.

What goes hand-in-hand with the solution of establishing a strong school team is a system for establishing in-house teacher leadership development. This does not mean that all administrators would come from within the walls of the school. In order to improve upon a school culture, a staff can benefit from a refresh of a school leadership structure with new blood, at the same time as developing future

school leaders from within. It also makes sense for teacher leaders to engage in developing opportunities outside the school as delegates, presenters and members of organizations such as the *National Association of the Teachers of English* (NCTE), the *National Council of Teachers of Mathematics* (NCTM), *ASCD*, as well as programs like *Harvard Project Zero*. For teacher leaders to be innovative, there must be enough flexibility in the structure for new ideas to flourish. Deliberately aiming to have a school “crawling with teacher leaders” was something we took seriously at WEDJ. This strategy, however, was short-lived as the TenSquare Consulting Group, with the support of the WEDJ Board of Trustees, put an end to this development plan.

When I first spoke to my university colleagues about working in charter schools, they seemed to shutter, as if I’d lost my way. My intent was to build a small school – a laboratory school, drenched in credible teaching and learning choices, filled with a motivated and talented staff. I did not want my experience to be more proof that charter schools cannot be places for innovation, nor did I want to paint all charter schools with the same brush.

I discovered as I reflect on this formidable experience that without a solid roof of accountability, many urban students are under-served. In order to build an ideal school, there must be accountability, not only for the students and staff and administrators, but for the Boards, the consultants, the test makers, the accreditors and the authorizers. Without accountability charter schools are not protected from forces of ignorance and exploitation. I’ve learned that it is possible to build a charter school that is accountable, so long as all participants in the system embrace the rigor of criticism and take responsibility for doing the hard work needed that leads to wide-scale change.

Like any whirlwind journey, there were regrets. Sadly, I did not achieve my goal of learning the names of every student and parent. While we made some good headway in mobilizing our parent volunteers, and began a conversation about ‘being green’, probably my deepest regret was not being able to mobilize a Board of Trustees, to work as a team to improve the school. I was clearly the wrong fit for a Board that viewed their role as an hour-a-month oversight team. Without a Board committed to learning about education, there was no way they could know whether the TenSquare approach was better than the plan we had in place. The WEDJ Board of Trustees had no way of knowing that Middle States Accreditation had more qualified experts than TenSquare, so my inability to build their trust remains at the heart of my deepest regret.

When you examine the advantages of the school turn-around business, there are many people who can benefit from the public trough, by ‘ambushing’ a culture before it has time to establish its roots. In the case of WEDJ, we can never be sure if the goal of those players, who had much to gain from instability, intended for the school to be in a constant leadership flux or not. This autopsy will hopefully prompt discussions about systematic problems inherent in DC Charter Schools and decisions that played key roles in grinding our work to a halt. Specifically, the WEDJ Board of Trustees, the TenSquare Consulting Group and employees of the DC Charter Board, were

instrumental in dismantling an incredible experience for WEDJ students, staff and families. In the past year, the WEDJ Board changed its' name to City Arts, leaving behind the legacy of individual, William E. Doar, Jr. who had made significant contributions to the community. Changing the name does not change this story of school improvement interrupted. However, the opportunity to learn from mistakes and assumptions can help build better foundations so that student engagement and exceptional practices can prevail in all schools.

I sense it was never the intention of the WEDJ founders to build a school where consultants and administrators would be key beneficiaries of their hard work. Nearly a decade later, this WEDJ story presents as an account of an institution compromised by a lack of accountability for governance and authorizers, which paved the way for personal financial gain.

No matter what point a school is on a growth continuum, it should be the intent of all cast members to make sure it can not only last, but everyone within the culture, can thrive. I am proud of the work we did at WEDJ, and while I believe I exercised much restraint over the course of the experience, I was able to grow and strengthen my resolve. Reflecting on the intricacies of my charter school experience enabled me to examine the complexities of forces, policies, practices and limitations of this schooling culture through my seemingly eclectic education lens. I remain strengthened by the chance to work with the incredible WEDJ staff, committed to school and self-improvement. We found a sense of joy in much of what we did, while weathering what felt like a storm of ignorance. Many staff members emerged as trusted teacher leaders and will carry this development wherever they wind up in DC, or elsewhere. It continues to be an easy task to write reference letters for people who were creative, hardworking and passionate about helping students learn.

WEDJ made the attempt to pull together a courageous team committed to building a dream school. In the end there were not enough hands to stop the outside forces from weakening our foundation. Unfortunately, many people felt powerless because the system rendered them so. In a perfect world, students need all players, from within and outside the school walls, to come together to work in concert with one another to support and promote their learning and preparations for success in life.

So did this narrative inform and engage stakeholders to think about the blend of realistic and idealistic perspectives on growing a model school? I continue to hope that students will have opportunities to learn about teaching others, so they can provide enriched experiences for others within the field of education or beyond in other workplaces. The craft of teaching has much to offer life lessons in parenting and relationships. While this book addresses many adult interactions, it is hopeful that such a narrative can provide further discussion of how student voices can participate more in the development and improvement of ideal schools.

Was this book able to enlist the support of parents in education? Did it share the complex nature of the education field and debunk the notion that schools would be easy to fix? I do hope this story encourages parents to volunteer, share their voices and find constructive ways to have a say in the education of their child.

Did teachers within or outside the charter school world have an opportunity to learn about more possibilities for schooling? I hope teachers are encouraged to become teacher leaders, teacher researchers and experts in their field. I believe educators, by their very nature of teaching young people, have the capacity and the talent to teach each other. I hope teachers will have the freedom to question ideas that are not grounded in valid research, and that they are not subject to performance reviews that are linked to student test scores. Finally, did this book promote the idea of fun in schools? While our students need to feel the joy of school, I feel it is important for professionals in the field of education to demonstrate happiness as part of their love for teaching and learning. I believe we deliberately planned for ‘fun’ to live at WEDJ, and if such experiences can encourage more schools to infuse the culture with spirit, laughter and joyfulness, we might be able to expand the depth and breadth of future educators.

Did this WEDJ principal story give new and seasoned school leaders an opportunity to compare and reflect on their own insights about teaching and learning? I am hopeful that school principals will be moved to discuss the limitations of the status quo, and be courageous in action about making schools exciting places for all students and guardians of children.

Will Board members, as key guardians of school leaders and schools, be motivated to become life-long learners in the field they provide oversight for? Will they be more inclined to learn how to distinguish between rigorous peer-reviewed practices and self-published commentary? Will Trustees understand that change takes time for significant sustained improvement? I hope the WEDJ story will help support policy change so that Boards will be representative of the people they serve and held accountable for mismanagement.

Will this narrative spike more interest from the public about what happens behind school doors? Will public school budgets be more transparent and aligned with the values of each school? Will this story inject more advocates for quality education into a society that could benefit from more engaged and passionate learners? Will this story help others dream about and act on growing ideal schools?

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to be part of all that was happening at WEDJ and while this narrative ended abruptly, I have learned so much about dreaming a school and constructing it with others. In this principal role, I counted my blessings often. Being in a school, where so many staff members were committed to kids, is a school leader’s dream. We had a mission to build confident and successful students and after more than thirty years in the education business, I’d almost given up on finding such a critical mass of talent – all committed to our promising and passionate community. We were on the right track to making a difference in the lives of WEDJ students. I was proud to be part of the WEDJ WOLF pack. Like it was yesterday, I can still hear me saying: *“I imagine with some hope, hard work and creativity we can do wonders together.”*

The timeline was short, but the memories and lessons, everlasting.

ANNOTATED TOOLBOX

My toolbox for building a dream school was based on my experiences before, during and upon reflection of my time at WEDJ. These experiences were shaped by interactions with vibrant colleagues and many mentors who modeled leadership in fresh and inspiring ways.

In addition to the rich opportunities afforded me in assorted educational cultures, my professional library also influenced my thinking and actions. Over time, this collection of print materials has merged education with more business-themed offerings. I am somewhat shameless about annotating my resources, choosing to add my commentary in the form of phrases, underlining, circling and when a message evokes an emotional response, I hurl exclamation marks at will! I admit that my habits of engagement with writers in this way, runs counter to my husband's preference, to leave a book clean for the next reader! When I made a mess of things inside such books as Collin's *Good to Great* and Buckingham's *Go (Put Your Strengths to Work)*, I was warned often to put my pen away. Personally, I hope *A Charter School Principal's Story: A View from the Inside* propels you as a reader, to engage with the writing by sharing your own ideas and impressions, in the blank spaces in the columns or at the end of chapters. This is not a textbook with a set of questions, to guide your thinking; rather this is a resource that I hope can expand your thinking. I've included, as an appendix, my top 50-list (briefly annotated) of toolmakers that helped to shape my perspective throughout my principal role and as the reflective writer sharing this experience. By annotating this list, the reader can have a window into these works that contributed to informing this charter school principal story.

1. Mitch Albon (1997). *Tuesdays with Morrie*. *A touching tribute to a rich teaching life
2. Marlene Scardamalia & Carl Bereiter (1994) "Computer Support for Knowledge-Building Communities" In *The Journal of the Learning Sciences* 3 (3). *Viewed CSILE Project/Knowledge Forum first hand when I worked at the Institute of Child Studies in Toronto, Canada. Incredible how such young students were building theories
3. Douglas Barnes (1976) *From Communication to Curriculum*. *key influence on value of talk in learning
4. David Booth (2008). *It's Critical: Classroom Strategies for Deepening and Extending Comprehension*; (2011). *Caught in the Middle: Reading and Writing in the Transition Years*; (2013). *I've got Something to Say: How Student Voices Inform Our Teaching...*plus many more! *Booth shares incredible insight and inspires so many educators to do better. Humbled to call him a mentor
5. Marcus Buckingham (2007). *Go: Put Your Strengths to Work*. *Trust your strengths and be proud of them – make strengths relevant

ANNOTATED TOOLBOX

6. Dave Burgess (2012). *Teach Like a Pirate*. *Creativity happens when the pirate educators reject the status quo and refuse to conform to the same old way of 'doing school'
7. Jack Canfield (2013). *Dare to Succeed*; ...plus Chicken Soup series! *Writing generates images that melt the heart and confirm the importance of social and emotional development
8. Lucy McCormick Calkins (2003). *Launching the Writing Workshop*. *A strong force for teaching writing in schools.
9. Jim Collins (2001). *From Good to Great*. *"Good is the enemy of great..." love the first line!
10. Tom Connellan (1997). *Inside the Magic Kingdom: Seven Keys to Disney's success*. *More detailing of behind the scenes of a business giant – interesting lessons for educators who can think beyond the edges of schooling
11. Arthur Costa and Bia Kallick (2000). *Habits of Mind*. *Putting thinking at the forefront of education
12. Daniel Coyle (2009). *The Talent Code: Greatness Isn't Born,.. It's Grown. Here's How*. *Deep practice, ignition, master coaching from 'talent whisperers'
13. Linda Darling-Hammond (2010). *The Flat World and Education*; (2012). *Getting Teacher Evaluation Right: What Really Matters for Effectiveness and Improvement*. *Transform schools and attract strong teachers and strong learning – organize schools for teaching and learning
14. Charlotte Danielson (2011). *Enhancing Professional Practice: A Framework for Teaching*; (2006). *Teacher Leadership that Strengthens Professional Practice*. *Provides practical resources and training for performance reviews based on solid educational research – raises the bar on standards for teaching
15. John Dewey (2015) *School and Society*; (2016) *Democracy and Education*. *must read classics that belong on every educator's book shelf
16. Patrick Diamond (1991). *Teacher Education as Transformation: A Psychological Perspective*. *An exceptional 'constructivist' educator who models use of engaging and authentic teaching practices – former professor at OISE-UT
17. Susan Drake (2012). *Creating Standards Based Integrated Curriculum*. *Solid insight into authentic and integrated learning environments
18. Carol Dweck (2007). *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*; (2012) *Mindset: How You Can Fulfill Your Potential*. *Promoting growth mindsets can break through barriers in education for all students
19. Elliot Eisner (2002). *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*; (2005). *Reimagining Schools*; (1991). *The Enlightened Eye*. *Champion of arts education; made a solid case for ensuring arts in a balanced education
20. Douglas Fisher & Nancy Frey (2014). *Better learning through structured teaching*. Alexandria: ASCD. *Solid ideas with extensive research-based references
21. Michael Fullan (2001). *The New Meaning of Educational Change*; (2014). *The Principal: Three Keys to Maximizing Impact*; (with Andy Hargreaves, 2012).

- Professional Capital: Transforming Teaching in Every School...plus many more!* *Writing reflects strong understanding of what works and what doesn't for educational leaders in the public sector – worked for Fullan at OISE-UT.
22. James Garbarino (1999). *Raising Children in a Socially-Toxic Environment*. *Understanding Columbine in order to prevent more tragedy; endorsed Stewardship courses at the Sterling Hall School in Toronto (customized proactive character education program)
 23. Howard Gardner (1985). *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multi-Intelligences*; (2007) *Five Minds for the Future*. *Rationale for serving the multiple needs and potential of students.
 24. Malcolm Gladwell (2002). *The Tipping Point*; (2011). *The Outliers*. *Coloring outside the lines – hard to Gladwell's books down
 25. Daniel Goldman. (1995). *Emotional Intelligence*. *Emotional mind is quicker than the rational mind – fast thinking is over-rated
 26. Andy Hargreaves & Dean Fink (2005). *Sustainable Leadership*. (with Dennis Shirley, 2012). *The Global Fourth Way: The Quest for Educational Excellence*. *Brilliant message about quality education and the systems that can support it
 27. John Holt (1964). *How Children Fail*. *A must read classic for anyone who calls themselves an educator. Timeless, relevant and thought-provoking
 28. Theodore Kinni (2011). *Be Our Guest: Perfecting the Art of Customer Service*. *This Disney training manual opened my eyes to seeing students and parents as 'guests' and staff as 'cast' members – how to build a brand with respect and going the extra mile....
 29. Alfie Kohn (2006). *The Homework Myth*; (1999). *The Schools our Children Deserve: Moving Beyond Traditional Classrooms and 'Tougher Standards.'* *Brilliant writer and the 'Oliver Stone' of comprehensive research – arguments about homework and making schools better are rock solid
 30. Ken Leithwood (with Deborah Montgomery) (1986). *Improving Principal Effectiveness: The Principal Profile*; (with Karen Seashore-Louis, 2011). *Linking Leadership to Student Learning*. *Leithwood's insight about educational leadership has always been helpful; I appreciate how he takes time to respond to emails
 31. Jay Lemke (1990). *Talking Science: Language, Learning and Values*. *Less is more – reduce the amount of content to get to deeper thinking – my external reviewer for PhD. thesis
 32. Robert Marzano – *Classroom Assessment & Grading that Works* (2006); *The New Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (Marzano & Kendall, 2007); *Effective Supervision* (Marzano & Livingston, 2011) *Shares bold practical tools for getting transformation happening in schools
 33. Frank McCourt (2005). *Teacher Man*. *Vivid descriptions of learning to love a profession

ANNOTATED TOOLBOX

34. Jay McTighe & Grant Wiggins (2007). *Schooling By Design: Mission, Action, Achievement*. *A great start
35. John P. Miller (1996). *The Holistic Curriculum*. (2010). *Whole Child Education*. *An incredible professor at OISE – truly a world leader on educating for social and emotional growth
36. Alan November (2012). *Who Owns the Learning? Preparing Students for Success in the Digital Age*. *Kids can manage their own learning – time to give them more credit and opportunity to lead their learning
37. Daniel Pink (2010). *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. *Autonomy, mastery, and purpose are keys to motivation – progressive ideas to inspire employees
38. William Pollock (1999). *Real Boys: Rescuing our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*. *Single-gender education can truly meet the needs of some students – powerful messages
39. David Perkins (2010). *Making Learning Whole: How Seven Principles of Teaching Can Transform Education*. *Pleasure of meeting Perkins at Harvard – world expert on curriculum and learning
40. Diane Ravitch (2013). *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools*; (2011). *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*. *Pays attention to corruption in education – a much needed voice
41. Ron Ritchhart (2004) *Intellectual Character: What it Is? Why it Matters? How to Get It?*; (2011) *Making Thinking Visible*. *Ron's work with teachers at Harvard's Project Zero is transforming – leading/cutting edge ideas
42. Ken Robinson (2015). *Creative Schools: The Grassroots Revolution that's Transforming Education*; (2009). *The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything*. *Robinson's ideas and presentations (TedTalks) have challenged the narrow test-testing culture that misses the mark of teaching the whole child
43. Pasi Sahlberg (2011). *Finish Lessons: What Can the World Learn From Educational change in Finland?* *A good read about the strengths of a model education system
44. Carol Anne Thomlinson (2014). *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners*. *Powerful rationale for meeting the needs of all children
45. Michael Thompson & Dan Kindlon (2000). *Raising Cain*; Michael Thompson (2002) *Mom They're Teasing Me*. *Honored to know such a kind and generous expert who cares deeply about children
46. Tony Wagner (2015). *Creating innovators: The Making of Young People Who Will Change the World*. *Letter to the young innovator is inspiring – may feel lonely – seek out kindred souls who think differently, too
47. Jack Welsh (2009). *Winning*. *Dynamic messages about success and hard work

48. Lev Vygotsky (1978). *Mind in Society*. (1934/1964). *Thought and Language*.
**Nurturing a transformation from novice to expert learner through apprenticeship in the zone of proximal development*
49. Elliott Wigginton (1972). *The Foxfire Books*. **Shares the works of a classroom of student journalists – powerful authentic model*
50. Steve Zemelman, Harvey Daniels & Arthur Hyde (2012). *Bringing Standards to Life in America's Classrooms*. **Great ideas with sound connections to solid research in education*

Libraries store the energy that fuels the imagination. They open up windows to the world and inspire us to explore and achieve, and contribute to improving our quality of life. Libraries change lives for the better. (Sidney Sheldon)

REFERENCES

Artifacts

Smith, B. Principal Journal; B. Smith word documents.

Books

- Bambrick-Santoyo, P. (2102). *Leveraging leadership: A practical guide to building exceptional schools*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Copp, J., & Smith, B. (2010). *Mining for gems: A casebook of exceptional practices in teaching and learning*. St. Catherines: Canadian Educational Standards Institute.
- Lemov, D. (2010). *Teach like a champion*. San Francisco, CA: Wiley & Sons.
- Ravitch, D. (2012). The myth of charter schools. In W. S. Swail (Ed.), *Finding Superman: Debating the future of public education in America*. New York, NY: Teacher's College Press.
- Swail, W. S. (2012). *Finding Superman: Debating the future of public education in America*. New York, NY: Teacher's College Press.

Web Sources

- <https://charterboards.org/>
- <https://charterboards.org/services>
- <https://danielsongroup.org/framework/>
- <http://www.dcpsb.org/about-us>
- <http://www.dcpsb.org/policy/revisions-performance-management-framework-guidelines-policy>
- <https://www.defenders.org/gray-wolf/basic-facts>
- <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2015/10/28/students-take-too-many-redundant-tests-study.html>
- Council of the Great City School in Washington
- <http://www.livebinders.com/play/play?id=1174998> (2013 Qualitative Site Review)
- <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2010/11/11/myth-charter-schools/>
- http://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/publication/attachments/FFY.2013.Con_.App_Program.Evaluation_WEDJ.PCS_09-14-13.pdf
- <http://principalcowart.blogspot.ca/2009/02/how-we-learn-william-glasser.html>
- <http://www.teenvogue.com/story/rochelle-ballantyne-chess-brooklyn-castle>
- <https://www.udmercy.edu/stay-connected/news-events/newsletters/clae/2015/01/alumni-achievement/index.htm>

School Newsletters/Handbooks

- <http://archive.constantcontact.com/fs091/1110378510852/archive/1111117486606.html>
- <http://www.wedjschool.us/artspcs/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/WEDJ-School-Handbook-2012-2013-Final.pdf>
- <http://www.wedjschool.us/artspcs/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/AUGUST-PRINCIPALPOINT.pdf>
- <http://www.wedjschool.us/college/dorm-life-for-wedj-students-brings-future-college-possibilities-into-focus>
- <http://www.wedjschool.us/debate/paul-kanellopoulos-teaches-wedj-eighth-graders-the-art-of-debate>
- <http://www.wedjschool.us/dr-smith/important-news-about-count-day-on-october-15>
- <http://www.wedjschool.us/dr-smith/january-2013-message-from-the-principal>

REFERENCES

http://www.wedjschool.us/dr-smith/message-from-the-principal-library-cards-open-doors-for-students?utm_source=November+E-
<http://www.wedjschool.us/dr-smith/principal-point-february-message-from-dr-smith>
http://www.wedjschool.us/leadership/december-letter-from-the-principal?utm_source=December+E-News+from+WEDJ+PCS&utm_campaign=December+2012+Newsletter&utm_medium=archive
<http://www.wedjschool.us/leadership/new-teacher-and-staff-leadership-roles-at-wedj>
<http://www.wedjschool.us/performing-arts/august-message-from-the-principal>
<http://www.wedjschool.us/students/a-letter-from-our-leaders>
<http://www.wedjschool.us/students/announcing-the-john-goldman-awar>
<http://www.wedjschool.us/students/home-library-project-fills-families-homes-with-books>
[News+from+WEDJ+PCS&utm_campaign=November+2012+Newsletter&utm_medium=archive](http://www.wedjschool.us/students/home-library-project-fills-families-homes-with-books)

E-mail Documentation

Carter, T (3/13/16)
Chang, T. (3/13/16)
Cordova, S. (06/02/13);
Goldman, J. (4/24/14); termination email – John Goldman to Barbara Smith (5/6/14)
LeVault, A. (3/13/16)
Lopez, A. (6/3/15)
Smith, B. response to Administrative Leave – Barbara J. Smith to John Goldman and WEDJ Board members (2/19/14); Smith, B. self evaluation email and hard copy to John Goldman and WEDJ Board (4/29/14)