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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

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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.