

## 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

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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.