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No School Left Behind:

The Power of School-Community Partnership

By Emily Dunuwila

Advised by:

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Introduction

Imagine a beautiful, freshly renovated 19th century building on the campus of a high school with sprung floors for dancing, full length mirrors for movement and theatre, a state-of-the art Mac lab full of brand new computers, and a multi-use art room. Inside the building, an after-school program has teenage and adult learners working side-by-side, all immersed in various projects. Some are putting the finishing touches on their documentaries in the downstairs computer lab, while students across the hall produce sketches for their Fashion Drawing and Design class, in anticipation for “Kanton’s Project Runway”. In the upstairs studios, dancers perfect their latest hip-hop routine in one studio while Theatre Workshop students recite lines from their original productions in the other. Outside the building, students in the Eco Art class are jazzing up old bike racks with bright painted designs while the Street Art class puts the finishing touches on the school’s first sidewalk mural. It sounds like an art lover’s paradise, right?

That is what administrators at the Institute of Creative Education¹ (ICE) imagined at the start of the 2011-2012 school year. Having recruited a roster of high-profile artists from around the area, the Kanton-based nonprofit was ready and excited to open what would be the queen of all afterschool programs. “We have art, dance, theatre, computer art, you name it, going on in here from 7am to 9pm

¹ All names of people and locations have been changed for the protection of the subjects interviewed in this study

everyday for the community,” boasted ICE’s education director.² The idea was that students at Kanton High School (KHS) would finish off the school day and head over to the Carter Learning Center where they would join other students and community members for their choice of arts-based classes. These classes, taught by community professionals, including college professors and working artists, would be tuition-based for most, and free for students in need. Both institutions were responsible for the cost of the multi-million dollar building. The school district would cover its share with a \$2.93 million bond and money from a Federal Block grant. The non-profit would lease the building to pay for the additional cost. Students, collaborators, and community members greatly anticipated the opening of the new center. Kanton Mayor Craig Sanders praised the project, celebrating that “the potential benefits to students and the community are enormous.”³ It would not be the school’s first partnership, but after about seven years of planning, it would be the most significant school-community project the district had ever seen. Despite all the planning and anticipation, however, the afterschool program fizzled out before it even began.

ICE is no newcomer to the Kanton City School District; the nonprofit has been offering in-school and extracurricular arts programs within the district for more than a decade. Executive Director of ICE, Dale Lycek, first saw the need for supplementary arts instruction in the public schools when his daughter was a student in the Kanton district. After communicating with the school principal, he

² “[Name of video concealed to protect identity of subjects]” YouTube, Accessed October 3, 2011. Youtube.com.

³ [Name of website concealed to protect identity of subjects] Accessed March 30, 2012.

started offering afterschool music classes at one of the district's elementary schools. His program was so popular that parents demanded it continue the next year. Surrounding schools soon caught wind of Dale's programs and invited him in for both classroom and afterschool instruction. Institute for Creative Education even ran a small academy for at-risk youth within the district for one year.⁴ Throughout all those years, Dale Lycek kept eyeing the old, abandoned Carter Library building on the high school campus that sat idle and ignored. He always dreamed of hosting arts classes for the community in the building, but did not have the money or permission from the school board to take action.

His chance finally came when the school began to restructure from traditional classrooms to smaller, more student-centered academies. As we will see in chapter two, the New York State Department of Education (NYSED) was concerned by low student achievement and pressured the school to make structural changes. NYSED recommended that the district implement Smaller Learning Communities (SLCs). The U.S Department of Education recommends Smaller Learning Communities to large schools of over one thousand students. Though the structure depends on the students' needs and interests at the school, the U.S. Department of Education recommends "structures such as freshman academies, multi-grade academies organized around career interests or other themes, "houses" in which small groups of students remain together throughout high school, and autonomous schools-within-a-school, as well as personalization strategies, such as

⁴ [Name Concealed], interview with author. January 25, 2010.

student advisories, family advocate systems, and mentoring programs.”⁵ School administrators decided that the old Carter Library building would be the perfect place to house two Smaller Learning Communities. In order for that to happen, however, the building would need serious renovations. Mindful that taxpayers would not be too enthusiastic about bearing the hefty construction costs, the district reached out to the Institute of Creative Education to help it pay for the building. In return, ICE would be able to host afternoon and evening classes in the Carter building. Hoping to see his dream of providing low-cost teen and adult art programs for the Kanton community, Dale agreed to the financial partnership.

When it came time to actually begin the afterschool programs, however, ICE found itself unable to move into the building. They were first delayed by electrical and flooring construction, but then issues over Internet use arose. Kanton High School restricts Internet access on its campus, requiring students to register in advance for usernames and passwords. ICE, however, wanted its own username and password so that individuals outside of the high school could stop in to take classes at any time. After years of planning and months of promotion for the afterschool program, the district has still not passed the lease over to ICE.

While the afterschool program has been squashed, the academic programs that take place during the school day in the Carter building have gotten off to a good start. These two programs are the Media and Communications and Global Themes modules, which are Smaller Learning Communities, led by teams of three high school teachers. In the Global Themes classes, tenth graders take classes in English,

⁵ “Smaller Learning Community Programs,” US Department of Education, accessed January 17, 2012, <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/slcp/index.html>

Art, and Global History and work on projects that bridge all three subjects together. The unique module is designed around the New York State Global History Regents standards, but has an additional emphasis on cultivating personal and life skills. Later in the day, students in grades ten through twelve convene for the Media and Communications module taught by Art and English teachers. In this course, they explore methods of storytelling and communicating using various computer programs and digital art techniques. Both modules are “Smaller Learning Communities,” which were recommended by the State as “a way to organize students in large, impersonal schools into smaller groups, helping individual students from being lost or alienated.”⁶ These are the first two Smaller Learning Communities at Kanton High School, and if they prove successful, the school hopes to implement five or six more throughout the main building.

In order to make the shift from the traditional “chalk and talk” teaching method to a more student-centered and project-based approach, the school called on teaching artists from ICE to lead teacher trainings and assist with curriculum design. Over the summer, ICE’s education director, Ed Emerson, led summer training sessions for the six Kanton High School teachers who would be teaching in the Carter Learning Center. Emerson taught them about collaborative planning, guided them through innovative teaching strategies, and introduced them to other teaching artists. The non-profit also recently allocated \$8,600 in new grant money for outside teaching artists to continue working with the classes during the day.⁷

Although ICE has not able to run their afterschool programs, they have remained

⁶ [Name of Newspaper, article headline, and author concealed], September 12, 2011.

⁷ [Name of Newspaper, article headline, and author concealed], February 11, 2011.

supportive of the school's challenging mission to restructure into Smaller Learning Communities.

There is no telling, however, how long the nonprofit will be willing to stay connected to the school without some mutual benefits. Ed Emerson, who has been the Carter's main resource provider, does not even have an office in the Carter building. In fact, he has admitted to feeling like an outsider when he stops in to visit classes and observe teachers. The teachers, however, report that they would like to have some more support from the nonprofit, particularly in regards to planning lessons and implementing new changes. They have also noticed the nonprofit's interest slowly dwindling. Having started off on a sour note, ICE no longer seems to be prioritizing the Carter as they did over the summer. Their waning interest could potentially hinder the success of the in-school program because Kanton High School teachers have come to rely on the community partners for support and resources.

If the two Smaller Learning Communities fail, the future of the school will be in danger. These modules were recommended to Kanton High School by the New York State Education Department after the school failed to meet minimum student achievement standards set by the No Child Left Behind Act. As we will read in Chapter Two, the NYSED responded to low test scores and graduation rates by sending out a Joint Intervention Team to evaluate the school and recommend necessary changes. The team concluded that serious restructuring was needed if the school was to survive. The Smaller Learning Communities are the school's first attempt to change. If achievement levels do not rise within three years, the school could be completely shut down. Change is therefore absolutely necessary, but the

school will not be able to effectively implement new strategies without outside support. ICE holds expertise in innovative learning techniques, and is one of the school's best options.

The Achievement Gap

This case study represents the thousands of public schools around the country that are struggling to close the achievement gap, a term used to describe the disparity in academic achievement between students of different races and socio-economic backgrounds. In her book *Reframing Dropouts*, Michelle Fine identifies the main sources of the gap as unequal funding and overpopulation in schools. She tracks the root of the achievement gap back to the '70s and '80s when school class sizes in New York City increased by 16.6% to around thirty-four students per class in some inner-city schools. Despite this growth, the state cut funding by 5% and failed to distribute the remaining funds to the schools in low-income areas that served the largest populations. Instead, proportionately more money went to schools in better areas where class sizes were smaller and students came from wealthier families where most parents spoke English and held Bachelors or Masters degrees. Citing the high number of English Language Learners and Special Education students in low-income, high-need areas, Fine argues "not only was [funding] disproportionate to sheer numbers, but the students residing in the city were, of course, disproportionately those with academic and families difficulties."⁸ The dearth of resources within the school, coupled with the lack of academic and

⁸ Michelle Fine, *Framing Dropouts* (Albany: State University of New York, 1991), 15.

economic support at home positioned students in overcrowded urban schools as victims of the achievement gap.

Forced to persevere in large classrooms headed by disempowered teachers and few amenities, many students dropped out. Referring to the dropout rates as “the crudest indicator of unequal educational outcomes,” Fine presents astounding evidence that links lack of resources to low graduation and high dropout rates. Although the national dropout rate was 25% in 1985, it was reported at 60% to 70% in some low-income urban districts.⁹ Inner-city schools suffer from high student-teacher ratios, harsh tracking, and low funding, all of which contribute to the dropout rate. Disempowered students, who feel more like numbers than individuals, conclude that school has nothing to offer them and view dropping out as the best game plan. As education credentials become more important for employment, these high school graduates find it difficult to secure even the lowest-paying jobs. In this way, the school merely perpetuates the cycle of poverty.

Acclaimed author Jonathon Kozol echoes Fine’s argument that both overcrowding and lack of resources in needy schools exacerbate the achievement gap. In his book *Savage Inequalities*, Kozol exposes the disturbing conditions within an overpopulated public school in the South Bronx. Although P.S. 261 was only meant for nine hundred students, there were thirteen hundred students packed into the building in the late 1980s. The school literally overflowed with students as multiple class groups squeezed into single classrooms, divided ineffectively by blackboards and file cabinets. While the school principal knew that adding staff

⁹ Fine, *Framing Dropouts*, 21.

members would allow for smaller classes, he mourned, “I can’t add five teachers, I would have no place to put them.”¹⁰ Serving a low-income population in a dense, urban area, P.S. 261 was expected to relieve its students of the cycle of poverty in spite of a lack of resources.

In comparing the quality of education in P.S. 261 to that of PS 24 in the wealthier region of Riverdale, Kozol exposes the inequity of resources. Although PS 261 served twice as many students as its wealthier counterpart in Riverdale, it did not receive more resources. In fact, both schools were given the same number of computers, which left only thirty-some computers for 1300 students at P.S. 261.¹¹ Furthermore, while each school was given a planetarium, PS 261 had to use the allocated space for additional book storage because the school library had been converted into additional classrooms. Although both schools were granted the same amount of resources, the state did not take into account the vast difference in student population. The state’s failure to provide extra space, staff, and resources to the P.S 261 crippled the school’s potential. Both Kozol and Fine draw links between inadequate resources and low-achievement, pointing to the government as source of the achievement gap.

As historian William J. Reese points out, the achievement gap displays both income and racial divides in the city. Although *Brown vs. Board of Education* legally desegregated schools in 1954, many poor urban schools were predominately Black during the second half of the twentieth century. When thousands of southern Black workers immigrated to urban areas in the North, they crowded into cities and

¹⁰ Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1991), 88.

¹¹ Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*, 84.

caused an upsurge in public school enrollment. Both this internal migration and the outward pull of suburbanization caused many middle class White folks to flee the city, leaving public schools for the poor and colored students. While Black children comprised only 17% of the student population in New York City Public schools in 1950s, their presence expanded after White flight. By 1967, 33% of students in New York City Public School system were Black.¹² Unfortunately at this time, many adults in the Black community had trouble securing jobs due to the decreasing presence of blue-collar work. With no income to support their children, many families relied on schools to provide supportive resources for their children. As Reese points out however, “precisely when educational credentials counted for more, these children’s needs were greater, and their schools faltered.”¹³ Overpopulation, lack of resources, and a disempowered staff made it difficult for schools to prepare students with the necessary skills for entrance to college and success in the white collar job market. Reese’s historical account of the causes of the achievement gap constructs the division between students as both socio-economic and racial.

Standardization of Education

As we will see in the following chapter, the federal government has relied on standards-based testing to close the achievement gap. In order to account for variation between classrooms, districts, and states, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has set minimum levels of achievement that all students are expected to reach by the year 2014. NCLB holds teachers and administrators accountable for

¹² William J. Reese, *America’s Public Schools* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 234

¹³ Reese, *America’s Public Schools*, 233

low student performance, by imposing harsh sanctions upon schools that fail to improve. The newest education initiative, Race to the Top (RTTT), provides monetary rewards to schools that show progress and willingness to reform. RTTT also relies on test scores and evaluations to measure the effectiveness of individual teachers. In an effort to close the achievement gap, the federal government has put educators under the microscope in an effort to ensure effective teaching.

Amidst the growing presence and importance of standardized testing in the public school system, some argue that such tests do not adequately measure a student's abilities. Nevertheless, schools use test scores to track students into classes based on ability level. Author Sherman Dorn admonishes such faith in test scores, however because the tests themselves are not created to showcase the student's maximum ability. Not only do test scores reveal little about particular skills in a subject, but they also exclude many topics that the student may have spent hours of class time learning. In fact, a sample of Florida state science exams revealed that only fifteen out of fifty learning standards issued to teachers actually appeared on the exam.¹⁴ Teachers have no way of determining which standards will be tested. If teachers are short on time and do not address all of the recommended learning standards, their students may score very poorly on the exam.

Dorn also critiques the comparative nature of tests, wherein the end goal of the exam is to rank students. Test makers, he argues, do not want all students to perform well on the exams because equal scores make it difficult to stratify them into levels. Questioning the purpose of pressuring teachers to teach to the test, Dorn

¹⁴ Sherman Dorn, *Accountability Frankenstein* (Charlotte: Information Age Publishing, 2007), 63.

asserts, “test construction techniques can omit topics *because* teachers teach it well.”¹⁵ Instead, he argues, test makers prefer exams that will yield a fair amount of wrong answers. Crafted to solicit a spectrum of test scores, standardized tests employ unfair strategies that undermine teachers’ classroom efforts and falsely construe students’ knowledge and academic potential.

Others take issue with the entire system of standardized learning that relies on both high-stakes testing and state-issued curricula. Popular educator and writer Sir Ken Robinson argues that standardization kills creativity, an asset that he argues “is as important as literacy and [should be treated] with the same status.”¹⁶ Creativity is necessary for technological innovation and societal progress, but today’s unaesthetic educational system, he claims, limits students’ creative faculties. Rather than encouraging students to explore scientific and philosophical questions through their own research and creative devices, the standardized exams teach students that there is only one right answer to every problem. As a result, ADHD levels have risen as the education system has become more reliant on standardized tests.¹⁷ Young learners who have an innate tendency towards self-exploration and creative expression have trouble adjusting to the narrow demands of standardized learning, and are constructed by test scores and curricula as unable to concentrate and unlikely to succeed. In other words, while schools could be taking advantage of students’ creative faculties, to produce graduates who push the boundaries of

¹⁵ Dorn, *Accountability Frankenstein*, 64.

¹⁶ “Sir Ken Robinson: Do Schools Kill Creativity?” Youtube.com, Accessed February 23, 2012. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iG9CE55wbtY>

¹⁷ “RSA Animate—Changing Education Paradigms” Youtube.com, Accessed February 23, 2012. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDZFcDGpL4U>

scientific and social knowledge, they endorse a system, which encourages students to find the existing right answer.

While the standardized education system has drawn many critics, some defend it as the key to closing the achievement gap. Authors Barbara R. Foorman, Sharon H. Kalinowski, and Wayne L. Sexton argue that standards act as a target for teachers and provide focus and structure to the lessons. Standards, they maintain, inevitably help schools keep students progressing on a focused track. While Foorman, et. al acknowledge that the newest education policies are harsh on struggling schools, they argue that administrators can implement strategies to meet standards without trouble. The authors recommend that schools set grade-level benchmarks and implement curriculum-based assessments to track student progress. They also describe successful schools as those that feature parent involvement, good-quality textbooks and instructional aids, professional development for teachers, and outside support staff to help educators plan lessons.¹⁸ While current education policy places pressure on schools to produce measurable progress, there are definite steps that administrators can embrace to ensure success.

Unable to obtain such resources on their own, many struggling schools have begun to enlist community partners to help serve students. Under Title I of No Child Left Behind, failing schools are required to provide all low-income students with free tutoring by outside providers. These providers can range from non-profit

¹⁸ Barbara R. Foorman, Sharon J. Kalinowski, and Waynel L. Sexton, "Standards Based Educational Reform is One Important Step to Reducing the Achievement Gap," in *Standards-Based Reform and the Poverty Gap*, ed. Adam Gamoran (Washington D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2007),17-45.

agencies and free community programs to for-profit tutoring agencies. Authors George Farkas and Rachel E. Durham argue that this system of outside tutoring is costly and inefficient for low-income schools. They call attention to a 2005 case study that found over one-half of tutoring service providers were for-profit organizations that charged \$30 per hour and raked in considerable profits. As a result, low-income schools could only afford a limited number of tutoring sessions. Furthermore, though most programs enlisted certified teachers, the tutoring sessions were often plagued by high student-teacher ratios, low student attendance, and lack of student engagement. Though the authors offer a list of recommended actions, their ideal solution is to place the tutoring sessions during the school day, rather than afterschool.¹⁹ This solution presents an opportunity for schools and community agencies to work together to create a stronger academic infrastructure during the school day. Not only would this partnership offer added support to the school, but it would also help to bridge the divide between school and community.

The idea of reaching out to community partners for help is nothing new, but it is now more important than ever because schools risk shutting down if they do not change their current methods. Many proponents of school-community partnership argue that the schools cannot effectively educate students using a solely standards-based method. Criticizing the “sterile conformist school environment,” authors Jack L Nelson et. al recognize a need for outside innovation that will add

¹⁹ George Farkas and Rachel E. Durham, “The Role of Tutoring in Standards-Based Reform,” in *Standards-Based Reform and the Poverty Gap*. ed., Adam Gamoran. (Washington D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2007), 202-223.

diversity and innovation into curricula.²⁰ Schools have a mission, they argue, to mold critical thinkers and active citizens who will learn to change flaws and injustices rather than conform to the system. It is difficult to instill those values under the guise of a standardized and academically focused system. Cynthia Jackson-Elmoore and Richard C. Hula nominate non-profit organizations as good community partners because they are interested in shaping a society of concerned, proactive citizens.²¹ The civic mission of non-profit agencies combined with the teachers' curricula could be the perfect recipe for molding committed, educated thinkers who are concerned for their communities but who can also pass state exams and thrive in academics. Furthermore, partnership with nonprofit agencies can provide students with job skills and experiences that they may not glean from the academically focused curricula.

A close-knit and concerned community is also crucial to creating lasting school reforms. Having researched one school's structuring process, author Jan Nespore concludes, "the weakening of community attachments could [make it] difficult to implement and maintain support for innovations over the long term."²² As she observed, community members including parents and political leaders can have strong influence over the school board's decisions to implement changes. Weak school-community relations could prevent a faltering school from implementing necessary changes like replacing unproductive teachers, cutting school programs, or

²⁰ Jack L. Nelson, Stuart B. Palonsky, Mary Rose McCarthy, *Critical issues in Education: Dialogues and Dialects* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004), 247.

²¹ Richard C. Hula and Cynthia Jackson-Elmoore, *Nonprofits in Urban America* (Westport: Quorum Books, 2000, 210.

²² Jan Nespore, *Tangled Up in School* (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1997), 3

mandating certain classes for students. Not only could community partners act as a buffer between the school and community, but they could also help to involve parents and leaders in school programs. In sociologist James R. Coleman's influential report entitled "The Coleman Report," he asserted that a child's family and community hold far more influence over the child's development than the school possesses.²³ It is therefore very important that the school's mission and goals are respected within the community. If schools work with parents and community leaders to set high academic standards for their children and emphasize the importance of education, the school will be more likely to succeed under the current legislation.

In following chapters, we will investigate Kanton High School's own effort to close the achievement gap that divides low-income students of color and high-income White students. As Fine and Kozol observed, the large population, lack of funds, and disempowered staff have all contributed to this gap. The spectrum of achievement mirrors the socio-economic landscape of the city, in which areas heavily populated by Non-White residents are also the lowest income areas in the city. While the school has struggled to establish equal achievement levels between its high and low-income students, the Institute for Creative Education (ICE) has extensive experience working with this population. Their expertise could be the key to unlocking the potential of Kanton High School's at-risk youth. This collaboration, however, will require ICE to work within the confines of the standardized public school system, in which every change must be approved, every classroom activity

²³Nicholas V. Longo, *Why Community Matters* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 7.

must incorporate state standards, and every child's progress must be measured. Through patience, communication, and partnership, ICE and KHS can close the achievement gap and stop the cycle of poverty, creating a more racially and socio-economically even landscape for the city.

Methodology

My idea to follow the Carter Learning Center project at Kanton High School grew out of my initial interest in the Institute for Creative Education. I first saw ICE's renowned youth hip-hop dance group, the Spirit Dance Team, perform three years ago at a regional dance concert. My dance group was performing at the festival, so I had an opportunity to watch Spirit's routine. While there were over fifteen acts in the show, their number stood out to me as not only well-choreographed and technically strong, but also very unique and engaging. The dance began with a duel inspired by the musical *West Side Story*. Two young dancers started the dance, and soon the whole group flooded the stage, dancing perfectly in sync and displaying the strength and enthusiasm of a professional dance crew. Apart from their impressive skill, each dancer exerted an undeniable display of confidence that set the group apart from the other young dance teams at the festival. It was clear to me that the Institute for Creative Education worked on developing high self-esteem as well as talent.

When I decided to use my thesis to explore youth empowerment through the arts, I immediately thought of ICE. I recalled the dancers' confidence and pride, and wondered if they brought that same self-assuredness to their academic work as middle and high school students. Still intrigued by the performance I attended years

before, I scoured the Internet for videos and information about the group. I then met with a Vassar faculty member who served on the board of the nonprofit. She told me about the Spirit Dance Team's various awards and unique experiences, the other classes and programs offered at the center, and the organization's newest partnership with Kanton High School. This ambitious collaborative project intrigued me. I wanted to know how the two seemingly separate worlds of extracurricular arts and academics would pair together, and what inevitable issues would arise. Could ICE's method of empowerment through the arts be the key to closing the achievement gap? How would the school collaborate with the nonprofit's mission despite the rigid structure and expectations of the standardized education system? After contacting Ed Emerson, the Education Director at ICE, who enthusiastically welcomed my inquiries, I dove into the very complicated world of school-community partnership at Kanton High School.

As a participant observer, I watched and participated in various activities at the Carter Learning Center, and interviewed an array of key players in the partnership. My first contact in the process was Ed Emerson. Ed and I first met at the Carter where he gave me a short tour, introduced me to teachers and their classes, and spoke to me about the current project. He acted as my guide for the first few months, keeping me updated on upcoming meetings, projects, and issues, meeting with me at the Carter and introducing me to other key players. In order to better understand ICE's inclusive and casual way of operating, I tagged along on art field trips and took a Zumba class. These experiences helped me to better understand the basic differences between the public school and the nonprofit.

Ed also included me in ICE's efforts to tweak and refine the Carter Learning Center teaching methods. In December, for example, I had a chance to sit in on a meeting of teaching artists who were developing a teacher development program for Carter instructors. Ed sent me every draft and in-the-works document that the group created, allowing me to stay up-to-date with changes and future plans. While the convenience of emailing and Google docs no doubt subtracted from the richness of face-to-face meetings, I felt that I was kept in the loop.

After the first few months of communicating with Ed, however, I began to sense that there was much more to the story than he could possibly convey. It was clear and understandable that he was biased towards ICE in conflicts between the school and nonprofit. Ed often pointed out that his opinions were his own, and even suggested that I conduct my own appraisals of the people he referenced. He often criticized the slow-moving school district, for example, and told me how hard it could be to work with a system that was so resistant to change. Hearing this, I decided to question various teachers and school administrators to get their take on the process of change. I was able to sit in on a few Carter classes, interview teachers, and even view their syllabi. I also interviewed Dale Lycek, Executive Director of ICE, who is the visionary behind the Carter Learning Center. By the end of my research, I felt I had gained the perspectives of a good mix of players both within and outside of the school.

It may seem odd that I do not include any student voices in my work, but this was a conscious decision. Though I observed and spoke to students in classes at the Carter and worked alongside KHS students in the fieldtrip that I attended, I did not

incorporate their opinions or profiles in my work. In my opinion, the most intriguing issues lay in the logistics of the partnership, which involved only the adults. It seemed that no matter how much the students enjoyed their classes at the Carter Learning Center, there were still little conflicts and gaps in communication between the school and ICE that undermined the entire Carter initiative. I wanted to get at the root of those conflicts in order to understand how the partnership could be sustained. With that said, if I had to repeat the process, I think it would have been effective to consider how the various conflicts between community-school partners were felt at the student level.

Chapter Summary

In the first chapter, I profile the history of the federal education system. Tracking the process from the early twentieth century to today, I attempt to show the development of the standards-based education system that endorses unproductive methods of schooling. This chapter lays the framework for understanding why it is so difficult for public schools to foster innovative teaching strategies. Despite their best efforts, they are tied to a very rigid federal system that resists change.

In the second chapter, I present Kanton High School's past struggles to narrow the achievement gap, and I introduce its current reform initiative. After failing to meet minimum achievement levels set by the No Child Left Behind law, the school is now undergoing a restructuring process. This chapter explains the pressure for change and profiles the in-school players responsible for orchestrating the process.

In chapter three, I introduce the Institute for Creative Education and explain the group's role in the restructuring process at Kanton High School. I introduce ICE's unique philosophy and illustrate the impact it has on teachers and students at the Carter Learning Center.

Chapter four exposes growing tensions between Carter teachers, school administrators and community partners. Due to conflicts of interest and incongruent visions, the various relationships are sometimes strained. These tensions threaten to weaken the partnership.

Chapter five explores the issue of poor communication between the school and Institute for Creative Education. This problem seems to be the main source of tension shown in the previous chapter. While I point out various gaps in communication between the two parties, I also offer plausible solutions that have proven effective in other case studies.

In the last chapter, I recount the reasons that this partnership is crucial to the success of Kanton's public schools. I also suggest changes to the partnership that could strengthen the school's reputation while allowing ICE a little more autonomy. I argue that the school should revitalize the original vision for the partnership that included ICE's afterschool program as a complement to the Carter Learning Center. Considering the needs of the students and the limited reach and resources of the school, I argue that the partnership can turn into an extended day program that allows each partner to operate in its own realm of expertise while working together towards the same goal of uplifting education in the City of Kanton.

Chapter One

In his book *The School and Society*, Progressive reformer John Dewey wrote, “all that society has accomplished for itself is put, through the agency of the school, at the disposal of its future members.”²⁴ What goes on in the school, he argued, must aim to benefit future society. Teachers, for example, were expected to foster students who would be productive workers and responsible citizens. This required a curriculum that mirrored the rapidly changing society. Not only was the application of science necessary to keep productivity and efficiency levels high in the Era of Industrialization, but Progressive educators like Dewey also argued that students should have strong interpersonal and creative thinking skills that would enable them to lead the nation rather than idly fill jobs. In an era when schools were knocked for being too focused on establishing discipline and order rather than employable skills, Dewey and his contemporaries called for a new way of educating that would reconnect the school to the conditions of the outside world.

At this same time, conservative education reformers at the other end of the political spectrum also criticized the school’s emphasis on academic learning over practical skill. If schools were to properly serve society, they argued, they should teach job skills and training. Some radicals even argued that schools should be purely vocational and should discard all academic subjects, including mathematics and science, except those that had practical applications.²⁵ In the wake of industrialization, urbanization, and immigration, school reformers in the early

²⁴John Dewey, *The School and Society* (Mineola: Dover Publications Inc., 2001), 6.

²⁵William J. Reese, *America’s Public Schools* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 188.

twentieth century feared that students would leave schools unprepared for life after graduation. These disputes between reformers led to an amalgam of schools across the fifty states that educated students in different ways.

It was not until 1957, when the Soviet Union launched its famed satellite Sputnik, that the federal government decided to step in and create a national education system that would foster a generation of students who would be capable of countering Soviet resistance. Prior to this, the education system was State-run, a set-up that caused several discrepancies between schools across the country. After the shocking release of Sputnik, however, President Eisenhower's administration immediately reacted with the Nation Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958. This act apportioned \$887 million to be used to align the American education system to the country's economic goals. Hoping to mold future graduates who could rival the Soviet geniuses responsible for Sputnik, the government allocated almost one third of the NDEA money for strengthening math, science, and foreign-language instruction programs in schools. Funds were also used, among other areas, to create college loans for promising students and National Defense Fellowships for future teachers.²⁶ As the Soviet threat intensified, the government tightened its reigns over the education system in order to build a more mathematically inclined and scientifically minded workforce.

After the shock of Sputnik began to fade and Civil Rights struggles took center stage in American politics, government spending shifted focus from quality of

²⁶ "National Defense Education Act of 1958," *American Decades* (2001), accessed February 14, 2012, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3468301841.html>

education to equality of education. Though *Brown vs. Board of Education* ordered school desegregation in 1954, racial tension and suburbanization led many White folks to flee urban areas. Because public school funds depended on the area's tax base, White flight significantly decreased funds for inner-city schools and created an achievement gap between races and socio-economic levels. In response to this gap, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, which waged a war on poverty through schools. Money went to establishing Head Start programs, providing textbooks and resources to needy schools, and serving free and reduced lunches. Despite the President's good intentions, historian William J. Reese describes this era as one of "wishful thinking, or heightened aspirations that almost inevitably led to discouragement."²⁷ Many anti-integrationists considered the act to be a waste of money because it did not aim to increase test scores or standards. An education system that aimed for equality over excellence, they argued, would weaken the nation's workforce and international reputation.

Johnson's War on Poverty quickly disappeared after President Ronald Reagan took office and decreased educational spending in the 1970s. Despite the obvious effects of the achievement gap that left many poor schools without adequate resources, funding fell by 5% in New York City between 1973-1983.²⁸ Goals for education in this period drifted away from equality and refocused on preparing the nation to face global domination. Conscious of looming foreign

²⁷William J. Reese, *America's Public Schools* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 218.

²⁸ Michelle Fine, *Framing Dropouts*, (Albany: State University of New York, 1991) 15.

powers, an anxiety-stricken Reagan administration released the well-known publication, *A Nation at Risk*. Citing various industrial successes in Japan, South Korea, and Germany, the document professed an urgent need to construct an education system that could keep the United States on top.

A Nation at Risk also criticized America's low literacy rates and declining test scores, and asserted, "if an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war."²⁹ Determined to orchestrate change in the nation's schools, the document recommended standardized testing, textbook learning, increased homework, and strict attendance policies as tools for success. Authors Paul Shaker and Elizabeth E. Heilman identify *A Nation At Risk* as the impetus for a standards-based education system that radically changed the structure of public schools. This shift towards a federally controlled system, they argue, minimized the autonomy and creative freedom of the classroom teacher.³⁰ Emphasizing the common risks that all Americans faced, *A Nation at Risk* argued for a uniform system that could produce high achieving graduates. Despite the administration's good intentions, however, the introduction of a standards-based system would introduce new problems in schools.

Standardized tests did not necessarily produce capable graduates. Multiple-choice exams seemed to assess students' ability to memorize isolated facts rather

²⁹ National Commission on Excellence in Education. "A Nation at Risk," in *The Great School Debate: Which Way for American Education* ed., Beatrice Gross and Ronald Gross (Minneapolis: Simon and Schuster, 1985), 23.

³⁰ Paul Shaker and Elizabeth E. Heilman, *Reclaiming Education for Democracy* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 83.

than test their critical thinking and problem solving skills. Furthermore, these tests did little to close the achievement gap. In 1998, scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress showed that 43% of Black high school seniors and 36% of Latino seniors scored below proficiency on the exam. Although the federal government recommended standardized testing to ensure that all students graduate with at least a minimum competency of reading and math skills, discrepancies between states and school practices led to gaps in achievement across the nation. While some states, like Iowa, allowed failing students to graduate without penalty, other states demanded that low scorers retake the exam or even repeat a grade. Schools were not held accountable for failing students, so many administrators allowed students to slip through the cracks. Some went on to college, where they had to retake remedial subjects, while others graduated into the workforce, where they accepted low-skill, low-income positions.

After fifteen years of waiting for nationwide improvement, a desperate Bush administration created the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002. This act rested on the premise that every student should be achieving at a certain level. Claiming that students in America were graduating high school illiterate and unprepared for active participation in society, NCLB established a system of accountability that would reprimand schools whose students did not meet or exceed standards. While the reform program gives states the freedom to create assessment tools, achievement standards, and curriculum aides, it considers overall federal supervision crucial to the academic success of America's children. Proponents of the program have argued that without federal legislation, local and state governments

may assume low standards, or “individual teachers might decide to limit the education opportunities they provide to special needs students.”³¹ Wary of a decentralized educational system, No Child Left Behind seeks to ensure that schools properly serve every child regardless of race, economic status, or academic ability.

In order to monitor achievement levels, NCLB demands that schools meticulously track students through testing. Students are divided into eight subgroups: White, Black, Hispanic, Native American, Asian, Economically Disadvantaged, Special Education, and English Language Learners. They are assessed through yearly reading and math tests, which at least ninety-five percent of the group must take. Every subgroup has an Annual Measurable Objective (AMO) which defines the minimum level at which this group can be considered proficient. NCLB aims for schools to reach one hundred percent proficiency in every subgroup by the 2013-2014 school year. The school’s ability to meet or exceed every AMO is reflected in the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) rating. If there are less than thirty students in any given subgroup, that category is not considered in the school’s AYP. Penalties for failing to meet Adequate Yearly Progress get increasingly serious with every year that the school does not progress. When a school fails to make AYP for two years in a row, it is labeled “in need of improvement” and must develop a plan for change. In the third year that a school fails to meet AYP, staff can be removed and replaced, new curricula mandated, and instructional time extended.³²

³¹ Rod Paige, “No Child Left Behind: The Ongoing Movement for Public Education Reform,” *Harvard Educational Review* (2006): 466.

³² Paul Shaker and Elizabeth E. Heilman, *Reclaiming Education for Democracy* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 45.

While former President George W. Bush sees NCLB as a success, others argue that it is simply too extreme. Arguing, “I don’t think it is fair for parents or students not to be informed of how their children perform relative to other children,”³³ Bush emphasizes that NCLB works in favor of America’s families. Others in government, however, say that the law is simply not practical. According to Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, “it’s like taking a hammer to kill an ant.”³⁴ Duncan empathizes with the hundreds of schools across the country that have taken extreme measures to raise the test scores of just one or two subgroups.

Rachel Carson Middle School in Herndon, Va., for example, is home to a gifted-and-talented program and has won state competitions in several academic areas, and yet the school has been labeled “in need of improvement.” This is because sixty-nine students in the Black, Hispanic, Economically Disadvantaged, and Special Education subgroups did not score high enough to meet their AMOs. Although these students represent only five percent of the student body, the school could potentially be shut down if those individuals do not make progress within the next few years. In an effort to make progress, the school has implemented several new programs for struggling students including a lunchtime math review session, a peer-tutoring program, and optional Saturday review classes. These proactive changes reflect the administration’s anxiety. “We’re doing everything we can possibly think of to get there,” says the school’s principal, “so to be told we’re not making

³³ Kayla Webley, “Why It’s Time to Replace No Child Left Behind,” *Time Magazine*. January, 23, 2012, 43.

³⁴ Webley, “Why It’s Time to Replace No Child Left Behind, 42.

progress—that we’re failing---well, it would really take a toll.”³⁵ The school has had to refocus its efforts on getting these students to pass a test, rather than aiming to educate them in more creative and enriching ways. One student, for example, had to quit the school band in order to review for the state reading test. Many at Rachel Carson Middle School would criticize NCLB for its overemphasis on testing.

Although the law attempts to close the achievement gap in schools, it has resulted in teachers teaching to the test and narrowing their curricula in hopes of achieving “success”.

Despite widespread criticism of No Child Left Behind, the Obama administration has introduced a similar initiative that continues to put the fate of America’s schools at the mercy of government approval. Introduced in 2009 under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, Race to the Top offers 4.3 billion dollars to states that show dedication to educational change. In considering which regions deserve money, the government weighs their decision on both proven accomplishments and future plans to close the achievement gap, improve graduation rates, and ensure post-secondary success. Like NCLB, Race to the Top relies on state-issued assessments to track accomplishments. New York State has recently released the new Common Core curriculum, which is designed to grant students the academic tools they will need to succeed in college. Each curriculum comes with an assessment, also designed by the State, which will track students’

³⁵ Webley, “Why It’s Time to Replace No Child Left Behind, 44.

progress. Teachers are once again pushed to teach to the test and prove to the federal government that their students are making progress.³⁶

Race to the Top maintains that teachers are the primary agents of school success. Teacher improvement, which is labeled an “Absolute Priority” by the U.S. Department of Education, is tracked through student assessment scores and observation periods. Race to the Top administrators argue that they need “use of data to improve the teaching process,”³⁷ but critics question whether test scores can accurately reflect a teacher’s effectiveness. Author Diana Senechal, for example, believes, “there is something strange about placing so much trust in the test scores themselves without regard for the nature of the subject, the material tested, the relation of the tests to the curriculum, etc.”³⁸ Her point illuminates the issue that there is only so much that a test can say about a teacher. This system completely discounts the personality of a teacher and her ability to connect with students on a personal level. Under Race to the Top, teachers who are well-liked by students for their charisma and approachability, may be replaced by test-driven teachers who intimidate youth more than empower them.

Even if they are not replaced, teachers who like to focus on students’ personal growth will be restricted under the new state-mandated curriculum. David Coleman, one of the creators of New York State’s Common Core curriculum in English Language Arts and Literacy, urges teachers to stop assigning narrative

³⁶ Race to the Top. “Race to the Top: Real Time Competition State by State.” Accessed November 23, 2011. <http://racetotop.com>

³⁷ Race to the Top. “Race to the Top: Real Time Competition State by State.” Accessed November 23, 2011. <http://racetotop.com>

³⁸ Diana Senechal, “The Cult of Success,” *American Educator* (2011): 4, accessed January 14, 2012, <http://www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/winter1112/Senechal.pdf>

writing projects. Coleman considers this popular writing style to be useless because “the more you enter the world of career and college, people frankly care a lot less about what you feel or what you think.” Instead, he says, teachers should only teach the students how to write analyses of data, arguments, and critical lens essays.³⁹ Many teachers, however, use narrative style to engage kids in the act of writing. Journaling and personal storytelling help students to develop their own styles and voices, which they can then apply to other forms of writing. Since administrators at the state level consider narrative assignments to be a waste of time, however, teachers are left without this key strategy of developing reluctant writers.

Not only does a standardized curriculum minimize students’ personal development and suppress their individual voices, but it also ignores cultural differences in the classroom. Author Paul Shaker points out that multiculturalism is often ignored in federal initiatives like Race to the Top because “aspects of difference are viewed primarily as obstacles to meeting common goals.”⁴⁰ Teachers who feel pressured by the new test-based accountability strategy will inevitably teach the same lesson, assign the same homework, and administer the same test to every student. In most New York State schools, these lessons are a part of the Common Core, so students in inner-city areas will read the same books and take the same assessments as students in the suburbs and rural areas, regardless of how well those books match their interests and experiences. Disregarding diversity in the

³⁹ “Common Core in ELA/Literacy: An Overview,” EngageNY, accessed March 23, 2012.
<http://engageny.org/resource/common-core-in-ela-literacy-an-overview/>

⁴⁰ Paul Shaker and Elizabeth E. Heilman, *Reclaiming Education for Democracy* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 46

classroom can be dangerous because students may feel that school has nothing to do with them, and may consequently lose motivation and eventually drop out of school.

Even in the least diverse classrooms, however, the Common Core curriculum still stifles learners by limiting their creative development. Teachers cannot be expected to measure students' progress while allowing them creative license in the classroom. The famous American psychologist, J.P. Guilford, concluded that tests only mold students into convergent thinkers who limit themselves to finding the one right answer. This kind of thinker is "not required to invent anything, to exercise ingenuity or originality, or to seek novel solutions."⁴¹ Convergent thinking skills, though handy for test taking, hinder success in the real world. As history has shown, divergent thinkers make the most valuable workers. Arthur J. Cropley sites the successful Sputnik creators as divergent thinkers who were able to imagine and invent a brand new technology. After Sputnik, many realized that "a society which was to survive in the face of rapid technological advancement desperately needed creative thinkers"⁴² Despite the importance of innovative thinking skills in the real world, teachers simply cannot expect to mold divergent thinkers through tests. Unfortunately, however, multiple choice tests seem to be the most direct way of measuring difference in student achievement, and will likely become the dominant strategy in schools competing for Race to the Top funding.

Ironically, Sputnik also led to the creation of a standards-based system that has proven counter-productive to furthering societal goals. Today's rapidly

⁴¹Arthur J. Cropley, *More Ways Than One: Fostering Creativity* (Norwood: Ablex Publishing Company, 1992), 41.

⁴² Cropley, *More Ways Than One*, 23.

diversifying and advancing world demands a more student-centered educational approach that will build creative thinkers and responsible citizens. Unfortunately, however, the government's persistent control over the education system prevents many teachers and administrators from focusing on the individualized needs of their students. Though every student has the potential to flourish in the real world, that potential cannot be tapped through testing and standardized curriculum. To find this, we must revisit the ideas of Progressive-era reformers, like John Dewey. These educators appreciated the students as holistic learners who needed to develop academically, creatively and personally. Unfortunately it seems nearly impossible to balance these goals with the current education system.

For the past few decades, students have gained creative thinking and interpersonal skills in venues outside of school. Art programs, for example, reward students for thinking outside the box and adopting their own styles. Volunteer organizations provide students with opportunities to assume responsibility and engage in issues beyond the classroom. Mentoring programs introduce students to older role models who help to foster good communication and decision-making skills. Though these activities are generally absent or marginalized in today's public schools, children can still become prepared for life outside of school by interacting with community organizations.

While public schools may not be able to escape the standards-based system, they can provide their students with a more enriching experience through a partnership with a community group. Outside educators who are well versed in student-centered learning, can be very helpful in implementing innovative solutions

into schools that find themselves caught between test preparation and real world demands. Through collaboration, teachers and educators can create creative and engaging lessons around core curriculum goals. School-community partnerships could therefore be the answer to helping schools address both students' personal needs and government standards. For schools like Kanton High, partnership can be the answer to simply keeping the school afloat.

Chapter Two

As the largest school in its county, Kanton High School caters to an array of students. The school's diverse student body requires it to offer a large menu of programs. Many other schools in the area send their students to Kanton High School (KHS) in order to take advantage of the school's many offerings, which include Special Education classes, a free- and reduced-price lunch program, and a student-run television studio. Despite these options, however, Kanton High School has spread itself too thin in past years. "We've not been as successful as we need to be," admitted one administrator "because we have not been making [the] standards."⁴³ Five out of eight possible subgroups as defined by No Child Left Behind are monitored at Kanton High School. As a racially and socio-economically diverse institution, Kanton High School must work hard to ensure that all groups are making progress and meeting the strict federal standards.

The student diversity reflects the racial and socioeconomic differences within the City of Kanton in which the very poor live in neighborhood tracts just a short distance away from the very wealthy. Broadway is a main street in the city where various community institutions like the high school, hospital, and theatre are stationed. While the street is one continuous route, it seems to split the city both ethnically and racially into east and west sides. On the east side is tract 9519, which is located close to several amenities and always bustling with life. The tract is composed of 72% White residents, 8% Black residents, and 10% Hispanic residents. The median household income is \$54,214, with 25% of residents earning below

⁴³ [Name Concealed], interview with author, December 15, 2011.

\$30,000.⁴⁴ While these residents may not be living in wealth and grandeur, they are certainly better off than those living in the adjacent area, tract 9521. 24% of the residents in this tract are Black and 23% identify as Hispanic. Less than half of those living in tract 9521 identify as White. The median household income in this area is \$32,350, almost \$22,000 lower than the median income in the neighboring tract. Furthermore, 47% of tract 9521 residents earn under \$30,000. That means that almost twice as many people are living around or under poverty level in this area than in the neighboring tract. Despite the vast racial and socioeconomic differences between these two neighborhoods, all of the children in this area attend Kanton High School.

Despite the efforts of teachers and administrators to serve students equitably regardless of background, there is an undeniable opportunity gap between students. Students coming from higher income families can afford tutors and enriching afterschool activities, while other students may not have access to similar academic aids. City statistics show a link between family income and level of education. While 87% of tract 9519 residents graduated from high school, 75% of the lower income residents in tract 9521 graduated. This indicates that students living in these low-income, racially diverse neighborhoods, where school completion rates are lower, are less likely to have academic support at home and are more likely to drop out of high school. Unfortunately, Economically Disadvantaged students at Kanton High School have a traditionally low graduation rate. School statistics show that only 59%

⁴⁴ "Mapping America: Every City, Every Block," The New York Times, accessed February 2, 2012, <http://projects.nytimes.com/census/2010/explorer>

of Economically Disadvantaged youth graduate, while 80% of non-economically disadvantaged students successfully finish high school.

Graduation from high school has been proven to affect both income level and employment status. While individuals with a high school diploma earn an average of \$42,000 a year, those without a high school diploma earn an average of only \$23,000 a year. Furthermore, among high school graduates, 8.6% are unemployed, while a whopping 12.3% of high school dropouts are unemployed.⁴⁵ If Economically Disadvantaged students, like many of their parents and neighbors, fail to complete high school, they will have a much harder time becoming self-sufficient.

As we will see in the following investigation, students classified as Black and Hispanic, many of whom live in lower-income tracts like 9521, are less academically successful. In fact Kanton School Principal, Jack Carlyle, estimates that one-third of Black students in the school have two or more regents exams that they must retake and pass if they expect to graduate.⁴⁶ If the school fails to find a way to better serve its economic and racial minorities, it will no doubt perpetuate the current economic division that divides the city today. Low graduation rates will also indicate to prospective businesses that the area is filled with predominantly low-skilled workers. A lack of business interest means a lack of jobs, and the continuation of poverty. Kanton's low graduation rates may not only continue the cycle of poverty, but also worsen the economic climate within the city.

This palpable achievement gap at Kanton High School has been highlighted and attacked by state administrators under No Child Left Behind initiative. Criticism

⁴⁵ [Name of Newspaper, article headline, and author concealed], November 13, 2011.

⁴⁶ [Name of Newspaper, article headline, and author concealed], March 11, 2012.

began after the state-administered 2010-2011 school report card showed that all of the school's subgroups had failed to meet their target graduation rates. While 76% of White seniors graduated, barely missing the state's 80% standard, only 47% of Black students, 60% of Hispanic students, 59% of Economically Disadvantaged students graduated in 2010.⁴⁷ Furthermore, Black, Hispanic, and Economically Disadvantaged subgroups failed to meet Annual Yearly Progress in English Language Arts, making White students the only group to meet the national standard. In danger of leaving behind a large portion of its students, the district was labeled a "District in Need of Improvement" by the state government.

This low grade prompted an investigation by a Joint Intervention Team (JIT). Dispatched by New York State, the JIT is sent out to persistently low-achieving schools in order to "assess the school's educational program, using multiple measures of quantitative and qualitative information and make recommendations that will inform the development of the school Restructuring Plans."⁴⁸ Composed of a NYSED representative, a district representative, an Outside Educational Expert (OEE) and a Subgroup Specialist, the team first meets to discuss the high school's statistics and then spends two days conducting interviews, observing the school and taking notes. After this two-day period, the Outside Educational Expert, an individual who has experience with restructuring failing schools, writes up a proposal for the various changes that need to take place. Together the JIT team

⁴⁷ "New York State Report Cards," New York State Education Department, accessed October 30, 2011, <https://reportcards.nysed.gov/>

⁴⁸ "Office of Accountability: School Improvement," New York State Education Department, accessed January 2, 2012, http://www.p12.nysed.gov/accountability/School_Improvement/JIT.html

discusses the proposal and solidifies a solution that will help the school to effectively serve its low-performing subgroups.

When the JIT team members arrived at Kanton High School three years ago, they sat in on both accelerated and remedial classes, talked with parents, conversed with teachers, and interviewed students both within and outside of the struggling subgroups. Within three days, the Joint Intervention Team came up with a new structure that would change the face of Kanton High School. The team recommended that the school implement Smaller Learning Communities and project-based learning.⁴⁹

Smaller Learning Communities (SLCs) are recommended by the U.S Department of Education as “a way to organize students in large, impersonal schools into smaller groups, helping to keep individual students from being lost or alienated.”⁵⁰ In SLCs, Kanton High School teachers would be able to work individually with students in the Black and Economically Disadvantaged subgroups. Traditionally these students have gotten lost in the large school environment where they receive little attention or support from their teachers. In the Smaller Learning Communities teachers not only have more time to spend with each student, but they can also help to plan the curricula to suit the needs of the specific students in the class.

As profiled in the Introduction, KHS’s two pilot Smaller Learning Communities are Media and Communications and Global Themes. The former is taught by three Kanton High School English and Art teachers and caters to tenth,

⁴⁹ [Name Concealed], interview with author, December 15, 2011.

⁵⁰ [Name of Newspaper, article headline, and author concealed], September 12, 2011.

eleventh and twelfth graders. Students learn ways of communicating their own ideas and recording and reporting the ideas of others. In the Global Themes module a different team of three KHS teachers use Social Studies, Art, and English to create an innovative approach to prepare for the New York States Regents Exam in Global History. Both modules are housed in the Carter Learning Center, on the KHS campus, and use a project-based learning approach. While students do need to take Regents exams and are expected to learn the Common Core curriculum standards, the collaborative, project-based approach offers a creative alternative to normal Regents classes. Furthermore, the Smaller Learning Communities allow teachers to devote more attention to each student. In this way, students at the Carter Learning Center enjoy innovative, technology-infused lessons and receive individualized attention that helps them grow both academically and personally.

The idea of Smaller Learning Communities poses a direct challenge to the charter school movement. Known as “public schools of choice,” charter schools began appearing in the 1990s as alternatives to large impersonal schools. Today there are over 4,900 charter schools across 39 states, educating a grand total of 1.6 million children.⁵¹ Every charter school has a different pedagogical focus; some are art or science-based, while others focus more on teaching students discipline, responsibility, and character. Regardless of their focus, however, all charter schools uphold the basic belief that small schools work better than large schools.

⁵¹ Susan Dynarski, et al., “Charter Schools: A Report on Rethinking the Federal Role in Education” (Report conducted by the Brookings Brown Center Task Group on Charter Schools, December 16, 2010), accessed January 27, 2012
http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2010/1216_charter_schools.aspx

While research has shown some public schools to be just as successful as charter schools, recent studies have shown that charter schools operating in large urban areas are remarkably effective. Four studies conducted by the Brookings Institute found that minority students in New York City, Boston, and Chicago charter schools fared better than their peers in the public schools.⁵² Due to the limited number of spots available in these “public schools of choice,” charter schools rely on a lottery system to admit students. These studies compared the success of students who had been selected through the lottery to the success of students who had not won the lottery and therefore continued on in the public school. These studies point to the need for urban public schools to create more personalized environments in order to enhance the learning experience for minority youth.

While charter schools are independent of the public system, the U.S. Department of Education recently dedicated a large portion of the budget to supporting them. Charter schools are eligible under Race to the Top (RTTT) to receive some of the \$650 million set aside for schools that find effective education strategies. Furthermore, RTTT encourages states to support charter schools. States cannot win Race to the Top reward money if they limit the number of charter schools.⁵³ It therefore seems that while the government is responsible for public schools, they are clearly impressed by and interested in the potential of charter schools.

Some even wonder if public schools will ever be able to compare to charter schools. Skeptical of public school restructuring strategies, one critic argues, “it is

⁵² Dynarski, et al., “Charter Schools.”

⁵³ Dynarski, et al., “Charter Schools.”

common for small learning communities to revert to big-school strategies and lose much of the autonomy that makes them successful.”⁵⁴ Others point out that Smaller Learning Communities, which are often pioneered by a few proactive administrators or teachers, are dependent on those individuals’ dedication to the project. Faced with these critiques, administrators and teachers at large public schools must dedicate themselves to making the new structure work. Not only are they at risk of falling back into the large school mentality, but they are also in competition with small charter schools for federal money.

Kanton High School recently hired several new administrators who are ready to take on the challenge of implementing necessary changes. In addition to a brand new superintendent, KHS just welcomed Jack Carlyle as principle. Carlyle, a 1996 graduate of the high school, is passionate about serving the diverse student body at his alma mater. Hoping to restructure the school to effectively empower every subgroup, Carlyle writes, “we will strive to be academically rigorous, student-focused, and innovative in our efforts to solve tough problems.”⁵⁵ Confident in the Carter Learning Center pilot program, he hopes to implement at least five or six new Smaller Learning Communities within the next five years. His plans may sound idealistic for a large public school that has been and continues to be on the NCLB watch list, but this idealism and willingness to change the system is at least a step in the right direction.

⁵⁴ Garret Delavan, *The Teacher’s Attention* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 146.

⁵⁵ [Name of website concealed to protect identity of subjects] Accessed November 14, 2011.

Carlyle joins Vice Principle Jeff Goldberg who has served as a school administrator for over five years. Goldberg is a friendly, dedicated guy who does not seem to fit the stereotypical persona of an aloof high school administrator. He does not have the bird's eye view over classroom operations that many school administrators have. Having taught English at the school for several years, Goldberg has a deep appreciation for the teachers and what they face. Furthermore, he understands the power of project-based learning. As the former supervisor of the KTV, the student-run television studio, Goldberg understands how kids thrive when they are engaged and interested in their work. Given his unique position as a former teacher, he is enthusiastic about the idea of student-centered learning that goes on at the Carter. In fact, he served on the initial planning committee for the Carter Learning Center and worked with ICE director, Dale Lycek, to see the project through to fruition. Although he is unable to observe the Carter classrooms on a regular basis, he continues to work with ICE teaching artists and educators to develop the supportive relationship between the teachers and community leaders.⁵⁶

Several of the school's administrators have faith in the Carter Learning Center, and want to use it as a model for the rest of the school. Vice Principal Goldberg has been working for the past few years with Michelle Earle, Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, to implement Smaller Learning Communities throughout the school. "There should be choice involved," stated Earle, who wants to see the school acknowledge its various learners by giving them more diverse options. Although she is very aware of and respects the standards that the

⁵⁶ [Name Concealed], interview with author, December 15, 2011.

school is expected to meet, she wants the school to capitalize on its diversity. “I am not opposed to the philosophy of Race to the Top,” admits Earle, “but I believe we must create learning opportunities outside the traditional norms, where students have choice.”⁵⁷ Like Principal Carlyle, Goldberg, and Earle are dedicated to making the Carter Learning Center work so that they can use it as a model for developing other small academies within the school.

Earle, a graduate of Kanton High School and former educator, is determined to save her school district from sinking. During her own years as a student, Earle was able to learn both French and Russian, which aided her later in life when she worked abroad in France. Not only is she indebted to the district for her own positive experience, but she also believes that it is the country’s duty to provide education for all students. “I truly believe you look at society by the public education system,” Earle stated, “we must provide a parity of opportunity to all.”⁵⁸ Although she sees some flaws at the federal level with NCLB and RTTT, she does not want to see the public system taken over by charter schools. Not only do charter school educators rely heavily on grants, but they also must rely on the voters to approve higher taxes in the name of charter school education. Earle is well aware that Kanton’s two percent cap on tax increases would make that difficult. Determined to keep KHS from sinking under No Child Left Behind, Earle is supportive of Smaller Learning Communities and believes that they are the future of the high school.

While the three aforementioned administrators support Smaller Learning Communities, they want the change to happen from bottom up. “We want grassroots

⁵⁷ [Name Concealed], interview with author, January, 26, 2012.

⁵⁸ [Name concealed], interview with author, January 26, 2012.

change from the teachers,” explained Goldberg. He is against telling them what to do because he knows that all six Carter Learning Center teachers are creative people and effective teachers.⁵⁹ Ms. Earle agreed with Goldberg, stating that the teachers are responsible for creating the curriculum. “I’m the person to say, ‘this is how it’s got to work with state regulations,’” says Earle, explaining that her duties begin only after the teachers create their own curriculum.⁶⁰ Although both administrators said they fully supported the teachers, they were admittedly taking a back seat to grant the teachers some autonomy. Faced with the grave task of leading the school’s first Smaller Learning Communities, the six Carter teachers are ultimately responsible for orchestrating change and redefining the school’s reputation.

As we will see in the following chapter, the six teachers in charge of the Carter Learning Center Smaller Learning Communities were coached and guided by teaching artists from the Institute of Creative Education nonprofit in Kanton. Not only has ICE been an important part of preparing teachers to take on the responsibilities expected of them, but the nonprofit has also served to represent the needs of the community within the school. Having worked with disadvantaged youth and families for over twenty years, ICE recognizes the lack of financial resources that prevent parents from helping their children succeed. In the past, ICE has provided scholarships and waived program fees for those in need so that children of all backgrounds could enjoy the organization’s extracurricular arts programs. Not only do ICE educators know the poverty that exists in the community, but they also recognize that these disadvantaged youth have incredible potential to

⁵⁹ [Name concealed], interview with author, December 15, 2011.

⁶⁰ [Name concealed], interview with author, January 26, 2012.

succeed and achieve when they are provided adequate resources. Having witnessed the success of minority youth from low-income households, the nonprofit has a valuable perspective that the school must acknowledge. ICE educators have facilitated award-winning programs that helped young people of all backgrounds to succeed, if they can help the school inspire academic success among its minority and Economically Disadvantaged youth, they can close the achievement gap and help the community to bridge divisions.

Chapter Three

Although all six teachers were selected because they seemed able to juggle the responsibility of creating a new project-based, arts-infused model of learning, they could not have made the shift without inspiration and guidance from outside artists. That support has come from the Kanton-based organization, Institute for Creative Education. Although the nonprofit boasts award-winning programs in dance and music, it aims more towards academic and personal empowerment than artistic perfection. ICE programs are meant to help young people build creativity, maturity, perseverance, and dedication to task. In addition, all performers are required to maintain a B average.⁶¹ Although the Institute for Creative Education focuses its time on afterschool learning, its high academic expectations promote scholastic goals and qualify them as strong partners in the Carter Learning Center pilot project.

One of the keystone players in the partnership is ICE's Education Director, Ed Emerson. As a former social studies teacher in the New York City and Rondout Valley Public School systems, Ed has a strong grasp on the demands and pressures that teachers face from both the federal and state levels. He is also very aware of the negative consequences that the standards-centered system can have on students. Rather than trying to fight the system from inside the classroom, Ed has dedicated his post-teaching career to restructuring schools as a community organizer. One of his projects, the Expeditionary Learning High School (Now Bronx Collegiate Academy), which he helped found, employs a student-centered, project-based

⁶¹ [Name concealed], interview with author, January 25, 2012.

approach to schooling that he would like to bring to public schools. Although Ed represents ICE in this partnership, his background in education and familiarity with the public school system has helped ICE transition from extracurricular to in-school programming.

ICE has been involved with the Carter Learning Center (CLC) from its conception. ICE Executive Director, Dale Lycek, who has always held great respect for the public school system, proposed the project seven years ago as a way to establish a deeper connection between the Kanton Schools and his organization. Referring to music as his personal “saving grace” that has helped him through various challenges, Dale believes in the power of the arts to inspire success in all areas of a child’s life. “We’ve had a lot of success in boosting academic achievement,” boasts Lycek, as he explains that ICE’s music and dance programs instill discipline, teamwork, focus, and persistence that empower youth both in the studio and in the classroom.⁶² His experience with ICE programs led him to suggest to Kanton High School administrators that the old Carter Building be renovated and turned into an arts-based learning center.

After voters approved of the project in October 2010, the transformation of the dilapidated Carter library into the innovative new Carter Learning Center began. ICE and Kanton administrators sent out a call for submissions to all teachers interested in getting involved with the two Smaller Learning Communities at the Carter Learning Center. Teachers submitted ideas for the theme of the modules and also applied to teach in the center. Out of five module ideas proposed, the panel of

⁶² [Name concealed], interview with author, January 25, 2012.

administrators and community collaborators selected Media and Communications and Global Themes as the two that would be offered in the coming year at the Carter Learning Center. School and ICE administrators also worked together to choose the six teachers who would staff the Carter. While some of the teachers had taught in the district for several years and had reputations as strong teachers, others chosen lacked experience but had the enthusiasm necessary for carrying out the new program. ICE's work in the selection process was just the beginning of their relationship with the Carter Learning Center teachers.

ICE's biggest contribution to the school has been in fostering collaboration between teachers and teaching artists. Teaching artists are guest leaders who instruct one or several arts-infused lessons that incorporate creative thinking skills. Although these instructors are in fact skilled artists, they do not aim to transfer the technique of their craft. Teaching artist Eric Booth, for example, writes "I place engaging students, getting them to participate actively in [the] work, as a higher priority than the actual information exchange."⁶³ This de-emphasis on information retention is a departure from the traditional curriculum-centered model that pervades public schools. ICE connects Carter teachers with outside teaching artists in order to help them implement student-centered strategies that will affect the diverse body of students at KHS.

⁶³Eric Booth, "Guidelines for Teaching Artists," accessed December 27, 2011, http://www.artseveryday.org/uploadedFiles/Teaching_Artists/Booth-TeachingArtistGuidelines.pdf

Booth spent several weeks over the summer working with Carter Learning Center teachers to hone student-centered teaching methods. The team collaborated to create lesson plans that implemented the four C's: Critical Thinking, Creativity, Collaboration, and Communication skills. These project-based lessons were designed to push students to brainstorm and construct their own ideas, work together with their peers, reflect on their work, and present it at the end of the unit.

One of the Media and Communication team's lessons, for example, was a multi-faceted biography project that required students to identify and interview a role model and present the individual's biography through film, writing, and photography. Not only did students take the initiative to interview the adults on their own time, but they were also responsible for interpreting and communicating that information in a creative and effective way. The project was divided into increments so that students had to meet various deadlines, including a date for completing the interview, turning in drafts, and revising for the final exhibition. Students were encouraged to critically analyze their work and constantly reflect on how they could make the project more coherent, creative, and personal. According to English teacher Tim Redd, the project was about cultivating habits of mind rather than training future journalists. The interview-based project allowed the students to engage in real world learning, while the creative process pushed them to communicate effectively by persistently working through multiple drafts.

The concept of active learning is one that Eric Booth derived from the theories of progressive educator, John Dewey. As an advocate for project-based learning, Dewey argued that student-led assignments are both fun and enriching.

Project-based learning, he maintained, draws from young people's innate interests in communication, inquiry and discovery, construction, and artistic expression. These natural impulses, Dewey argued, "are the natural resources, the uninvested capital, upon the exercise of which depends the active growth of the child."⁶⁴ Dewey observed that children learn naturally through active involvement, and he therefore concluded that schools should honor that innate learning process. Rather than having to sit in class and listen to the teacher talking at them, students embark on a learning journey in which they investigate, create, and communicate their own findings. Eric Booth promotes this simple yet effective idea in his teacher trainings in order to help public school teachers get students actively involved and interested in lessons.

In addition to drawing inspiration from John Dewey, Booth also introduced teachers to Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences theory. Gardner argues that individuals can never be completely smart or completely incompetent, rather they have different kinds of intelligences. Identifying seven different kinds of intellect, Gardner points out that only linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligences are usually drawn upon in the classroom. This means that students who possess spatial intelligence like surgeons and sculptors, or interpersonal intelligence like politicians and talk show hosts, are less likely to succeed in the school.⁶⁵

As the Carter teachers work more closely with students in the Smaller Learning Communities, they have begun to see these hidden intelligences come out.

⁶⁴ John Dewey, *The School and Society* (Mineola: Dover Publications Inc., 2001), 31.

⁶⁵ Howard Gardner, *Intelligence Reframed* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 64-65.

Art teacher Valerie Hendricks has observed that the group work and small class size have strengthened students' social skills. Some of her students, who began the school year with reputations as school bullies or as social outcasts, have found new beginnings in the Smaller Learning Communities. These previously maladjusted students are comfortable at the Carter, she explained, mentioning that they seem more extroverted and better connected to their peers.

Class assignments at the Carter Learning Center also acknowledge and enhance multiple intelligences. The biography project, in which students interviewed their role models and created biographical timelines and videos, tested their interpersonal and spatial intelligences. Through the process of creating, implementing and perfecting, students are challenged to step outside the box of textbook learning. Rather than grading students solely on their ability to memorize, compute, and write, the Carter teachers, under the guidance of teaching artists, have realized a more holistic model of learning and teaching that is both engaging and challenging.

This holistic model incorporates multiple academic disciplines and artistic mediums. Students in Valerie Hendricks's art class for example, used stop-motion animation to illustrate historical turning points. Collaborating in groups, the students chose a historical turning point to depict, then wrote out a script, designed a set and action figures, recorded the scenes, and then edited the entire production. One group, for example, used clay figurines to depict the events that inspired the abolition of child labor.⁶⁶ Not only did the students practice both digital and non-

⁶⁶ Field Notes, December 12, 2011.

digital art techniques, but they also came to understand the concept of cause and effect, which is a curriculum standard in the Common Core curriculum. Holistic education is rigorous and enriching in multiple areas and offers students an alternative to traditional textbook learning. Valerie's assignment gave students artistic freedom and agency while preparing them for the New York State Global History Regents Exam.

The artistic component of project-based assignments serves to enhance rather than simply complement academic learning. Authors Cynthia Okolo and Ralph Ferretti cite studies in which students who engaged in project-based learning scored better on tests and reported heightened self-efficacy than their peers who engaged in textbook learning and traditional worksheet assignments.⁶⁷ Students in the former group were actively involved in projects that required a deep inquiry and investigation into the course material. Hendricks's art students, for example had to thoroughly understand the causes and effects of their historical events in order to re-interpret them through art. Though art is absent in most academic classes, the high test scores of project-based learners testify to the power of the hands-on, multidisciplinary model of education.

These benefits of project-based learning, however, are dependent on effective planning and teamwork between teachers of multiple disciplines. Eric Booth and Ed Emerson introduced the collaborative planning process to the Carter

⁶⁷ Cynthia M. Okolo and Ralph P. Ferretti. "Preparing Future Citizens: Technology-Supported Project-Based Learning in the Social Studies" in *Technology, Curriculum, and Professional Development*, ed. John Woodward and Larry Cuban, 49 (Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press, Inc., 2001)

teachers during summer planning workshops. Central to the teamwork is a collective lesson-revision method called Project Tuning. In this constructive process, one teacher presents her lesson plan, and the group responds with clarifying and probing questions. After collecting the questions, the presenter then steps back and listens as her peers discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the proposed project. During the discussion period, the fellow teachers examine how the lesson offers a window to the real world, how it engages students in exploratory learning, and how it relates to state curriculum standards. By introducing the teachers to this process in the very beginning, the ICE teaching artists empowered the two teams with tools to steer their Smaller Learning Communities to success.

In addition to fostering the collaborative planning process that has strengthened the teachers as a group, ICE artists have impacted teachers individually. Tim Redd, who teaches English at the Carter, testifies that the partnership “has definitely re-inspired me, giving me a forward-thinking perspective on teaching and learning that’s much closer to that of an artist or craftsman than a traditional classroom teacher.”⁶⁸ Redd has found ways to implement the arts even in his English classes outside the Carter building. As a tenth grade Honors English teacher at KHS, Redd must create portfolios of his students’ written work. Rather than simply compiling individual assignments, however, Redd wants to get creative. For the personal writing piece, for example, he would like each student to create an e-book that features different medias and draws on

⁶⁸ [Name Concealed], email message to author, January 23, 2011.

multiple literacy skills. Working with the teaching artists has inspired Ted to imagine a new approach to the state's assessment requirement.

The Honors English writing portfolio is just one of many grade-level standards released by the New York State Education Department in 2009. Drawing on international curriculum models, scholars, other state education departments, and assessment developers, the state established College and Career Readiness (CCR) anchor standards, which “work in tandem to define college and career readiness expectations—the former providing broad standards, the latter providing additional specificity.” Under CCR anchor standards, special emphasis is placed on helping students to master “complex informational texts.” These texts are literary nonfiction pieces that include essays, scholarly journals, speeches, editorials, and textbooks. Common Core developers argue that students are exposed to informational texts at the college and career level, and should become familiar with these literary genres in high school. It is recommended that seventy percent of reading at the twelfth grade level should be informational texts, while thirty percent should be devoted to literary texts like poetry, drama, fiction, historical fiction, and graphic novels. These percentages are aligned with the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) that students must take in order to measure their progress.⁶⁹

Despite the emphasis on informational texts, teachers need not rely solely on textbooks or dry materials. Rather they must realize their freedom to create

⁶⁹ “New York State Common Core Learning Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy.” NYSED, January 10, 2011., accessed March 12, 2010. http://www.p12.nysed.gov/ciai/common_core_standards/pdfdocs/p12_common_core_learning_standards_ela.pdf

innovative lessons around the curriculum standards. ICE teaching artists have been crucial to helping the Carter teachers work around the Common Core standards. Teaching artist Eric Booth considers the standards to be “big rocks” around which teachers can construct student-centered assignments. As long as teachers are aware of those essential standards that root the lesson, they can dress the requirements up to suit the needs and interests of the class. “It’s a weird balancing act,” says Carter teacher Tim Redd, “but it’s not the end of education.” According to Redd, “if you see [standards] as roadblocks, you’re not looking at what’s fundamentally important.” He explains that the Common Core is important because it helps teachers keep their students on track for college and career success.⁷⁰ His work with ICE’s teaching artists has taught him that standards and project-based learning are not mutually exclusive if teachers are willing to put in the effort.

ICE plans to continue to guide and support teachers with its new teacher development program. Inspiration for the program arose after Kathleen Rice, an English teacher in the Global Themes module contacted ICE Education Director Ed Emerson for advice. Her students, she noticed, were enthusiastic about the new projects, but were not as self-motivated as she knew they could be. She felt that some students were not using their full creative potential and were capable of conducting deeper research and investigations that she had seen throughout the year. Kathleen hoped that Ed and the teaching artists could get the Carter Learning Center teachers together to help them develop strategies to inspire their students towards deeper engagement in class projects. In response to this call for support,

⁷⁰ [Name Concealed], interview with author, January 25, 2012.

Ed put together a team of outside educators and teaching artists, who he had met through various ICE projects, to begin planning a Student-Ownership workshop for teachers.

On their first meeting, the team observed class projects and then met to compare their first impressions. While most of the projects were creative and impressive, there seemed to be a few students who were taking the back seat in their groups. Aware that it is this type of student that can fall behind in the classroom, the visiting team brainstormed ideas, habits, and activities that teachers could use to empower every student.⁷¹ In the subsequent meetings, the team identified the most effective ways of supporting teachers. Basing their proposed strategies off of the five elements of cooperative learning (collaboration, self-assessment, face-to-face interaction, social skills, and processing), the team began to compose an outline with aims and goals for the teacher development workshops.⁷² Rather than isolating these workshops outside of the school, these teacher development workshops have been integrated into the pre-unit planning phase that takes place at the Carter Learning Center. Teaching artists work with each team to develop their teaching strategies as they plan for the upcoming lesson.

These low-cost, informal workshops compare to expensive Professional Development Schools (PDS). Professional Development Schools have gained recent praise over the past decade for their mission to “deepen educators’ content and pedagogical knowledge, strengthen their leadership skills, and broaden their ability

⁷¹ Field notes, December 14, 2011.

⁷² [Name of document concealed], January 18, 2012.

to analyze, diagnose, and intervene in classroom issues.”⁷³ The main difference between a PDS and ICE’s teacher development workshops, however is that a PDS usually requires the public school to partner with a university. The school-university partnership is both a method of helping practicing teachers, and providing sites for teacher candidates to gain exposure to the real world classroom. While Professional Development Schools are no doubt effective, the partnership between school and university is much more formal and complicated than the partnership at the Carter Learning Center.

Nevertheless, ICE is providing a teacher development program very similar to a formal PDS. Thomas Del Prete, Professor of Education and Director of the Jacob Hiatt Center for Urban Education at Clark University, oversees a PDS for teachers in Worcester, MA. Del Prete advocates a method of teacher development that is similar to ICE’s Project Tuning method. The “Rounds” is a process of classroom-based observation and reflection that brings teachers together to critique and support one another. After sitting in on one teacher’s class, the peer educators reflect on their observations and offer advice. According to Del Prete, “the goal is to make the teacher’s thought process as clear and transparent as possible,” but can also lead to changes in the lesson plan.⁷⁴ Although ICE’s Project Tuning method does not involve actual in-class observation, the Carter teachers use professional strategies of critical observation and peer feedback.

Authors Barbara Foorman, et al, site professional development as one of the

⁷³ Pia Lindquist Wong and Ronald David Glass, ed. *Prioritizing Urban Children, Teachers, and Schools through Professional Development Schools* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 110.

⁷⁴ Thomas Del Prete, *Improving the Odds* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2010), 51.

key characteristics of most high performing schools in the country. Maintaining that a bachelor's degree and a state teaching license do not sufficiently prepare teachers, the authors assert, "it is critically important to provide teachers with professional development that links assessment with instruction."⁷⁵ In the midst of state and federal standards and assessments, it is crucial that teachers learn how to foster an open and student-centered classroom while preparing students for progress tests. By providing some method of professional development for teachers, ICE ensures that Kanton High School meets and exceeds federal standards without the help of a formal university partnership.

From introducing teaching artists into the classroom to offering skill-building workshops for teachers, ICE has been instrumental in helping Kanton High School implement Smaller Learning Communities. While similar schools that implement student-centered learning methods are often connected to a university, ICE offers KHS a similar teacher support program without the formalities. KHS has therefore been able to accomplish a task that many schools achieve only by partnering with universities or by obtaining a charter. ICE's continued involvement will be pivotal to the school's restructuring process.

⁷⁵ Barbara R. Foorman, Sharon J. Kalinowski, and Waynel L. Sexton, "Standards Based Educational Reform is One Important Step to Reducing the Achievement Gap," in *Standards-Based Reform and the Poverty Gap*. ed. Adam Gamoran, (Washington D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2007), 35.

Chapter Four

With all that ICE has to offer Kanton High School and its teachers, it seems odd that Education Director Ed Emerson neither has his own office nor feels completely welcome at the Carter. Although Ed sees ICE as the incubator that can foster and implement change in the school, he is regrettably aware that he is not the teachers' favorite person. "Anybody coming from the outside does not have that much agency or 'juice' with the teachers," admits Ed. He observes that the teachers seem a bit closed off to him and are not always enthusiastic about his plans.⁷⁶ In order to understand this perceived coldness, I consulted the in-school partners who had worked with Ed. Hearing their perspectives gave me a sense of the many difficulties involved in working with an organization outside of the rigid school system. Both teachers and administrators recounted moments of disconnect with ICE leaders that arose from the fundamental differences between the two organizations. As a public institution, there are many expectations, requirements, and duties to which the school must adhere. These formalities can feel excessive and inconvenient to individuals from small, nonhierarchical organization like ICE. Nevertheless, the success of the school-community partnership depends on ICE's willingness to work within that system.

Teacher Accountability

According to Valerie Hendricks, an art teacher at the Carter, working with an outside resource has been a challenge. Although her team first planned to incorporate teaching artists in every unit, they found that their plans were simply

⁷⁶ [Name concealed], interview with author, October 26, 2011.

too big and broad when trying to accommodate the artist in the classroom. Lack of focus can keep the teachers from reaching key academic goals in their classes. This teacher recalled one module when the Carter students performed worse on a Global History exam than students in the regular high school classes. In response to the low scores, Hendricks and her fellow team members decided to proceed without a teaching artist. Though a visiting artist may have contributed creativity to the lesson, the teachers felt that an artist's presence would have detracted from academic imperatives. This incident highlights the one fundamental difference between ICE leaders, who wants to maximize creativity and innovation, and the Carter teachers, who must remain mindful of their responsibilities as Kanton High School teachers.

Teachers must record student progress throughout the year and are held accountable for any dips in achievement. In order to prepare students for the class, state, and national assessments, the Carter teachers must make certain that their lessons are aligned with the New York State's Common Core learning objectives. As defined earlier, these are College and Career Readiness standards that the state considers essential to success after graduation. A teacher's ability to align her lesson plans to Common Core standards affects her accountability rating. If her students perform poorly on end-of-the-year exams, it will imply that she has failed to incorporate the expected standards into her lessons. Teacher accountability ratings and student progress determine the amount of federal funding that New York State receives for its public schools. Teachers are therefore under pressure from both school and state administrators to address the Common Core learning standards.

Failure to do so could lower state and school funding and even cost the teacher her job.

Though ICE teaching artists want to improve test scores and teacher effectiveness, they are not held accountable for student achievement. This has led to a lack of awareness and mindfulness towards school standards and expectations. Carter English teacher, Tim Redd, described an experience at the beginning of the year in which ICE Education Director, Ed Emerson, roped the teachers into joining an extracurricular project without the teachers' or school's full consent. In an effort to connect the Carter students with the greater community, Ed planned a project with a professor from a nearby university whose Urban Revitalization class was working to re-envision and revitalize the dilapidated Kanton Rail Trail. He organized for the Carter students to work alongside the university students in afterschool hours. Although this service learning project was a fantastic opportunity for the Carter students to gain exposure to college-level coursework, the project was poorly organized and quickly fell apart.

Assuming that the Carter teachers were interested in the Rail Trail project, Ed had relied on the teachers to get their students excited about the opportunity. Little did he realize, the teachers were nervous about their new classes, strategies, and curricula at the Carter, and needed to focus on their own lessons. One teacher admitted that his team members were afraid of overcommitting and were therefore uninterested in the project.⁷⁷ Unaware of the teachers' disinterest and fed up with their inaction, Ed took it upon himself to recruit students for the project. Attempting

⁷⁷ [Name concealed], interview with author, January 30, 2012.

to set up a roster of kids within twenty-four hours, he gave a quick yet convincing pitch in each classroom and then enlisted several eager students after class. Swayed by the promise of a trip to the High Line in New York City and the chance to work in the real world, students were ready and excited to join.

While Carter teachers found the project interesting, they knew that it demanded more organization than Ed could manage. In preparation for most fieldtrips, administrators must look over instructor's plans and parents must submit their written permission. According to one teacher, it usually takes at least a week to organize a field trip. Although Ed attracted many students off the bat, the kids began trickling out as they realized how much time they had to commit. Students were expected to spend many afterschool hours meeting with the college students, visiting the Rail Trail and designing revitalization plans. Few were ready to make that kind of commitment when they first signed up. Furthermore, there was little connection between the project and their in-school curricula. Had Ed been more receptive to the teachers' reticence towards the project, he would have realized that it was not a good time to introduce such an ambitious endeavor. The lack of communication between Ed and the teachers caused a conflict of interest by demanding teachers and students to promise involvement to a system outside of the school. Under the pressure of accountability from the state and school administrators, however, teachers were anxious to devote their energy where it counted the most.

There were also gaps in understanding and communication between ICE and Kanton City School District administrators. Superintendent of Curriculum and

Instruction, Michelle Earle, explained that the non-profit sometimes overlooked the standard regulations and procedures that the public school must follow. Although she acknowledged that the organization is used to having more flexibility, she pointed to the regulations that extracurricular programs must acknowledge. In order to run a school-affiliated extracurricular program, the organization must obtain official permission forms from a parent or guardian, organize free transportation, and adhere to guidelines about using school-owned buildings during afterschool time.⁷⁸ Though Earle acknowledged that these regulations could be inconvenient, she insisted that they not be ignored. In order to work in partnership with the public school outside organizations must adopt and respect the formalities of the system.

Juggling Many Responsibilities

It is difficult for ICE to arrange meetings with administrators because the Carter partnership is just one of the millions of activities that administrators must oversee. On my first visit to Kanton High School, for example, I remember leaving the main entrance of the school and passing by a police car that was parked out front. Earlier that day a belligerent student had prompted the school to call 9-1-1. As we passed by the car, Ed made a comment that high school administrators must deal with this kind of drama every day. While the Principle and Vice Principal both support the Carter Learning Center, neither can consider it his main objective.⁷⁹

I saw this firsthand when I interviewed Vice Principle Jeff Goldberg. As I sat in his office, I could hear beyond the closed door, an angry mother who was arguing

⁷⁸ [Name concealed], interview with author, January 26, 2012.

⁷⁹ Field notes, October 25, 2011.

with Goldberg's assistant that she needed to meet with him at that very second. Though she had scheduled a meeting with him earlier in the week, she failed to show up, and was now insisting that she still see him. Rolling his eyes as he tried to block out the woman's shrill complaining, Goldberg's reaction hinted that he dealt with this sort of thing all the time. He also mentioned that he is in charge of calling parents when their children act up or break the rules.⁸⁰ With his primary responsibilities taking up much of his time, Goldberg understandably has little time to observe classes or even communicate regularly with the Carter teachers and teaching artists. This separation, however, slows down the process of gaining permission from administrators for changes in classroom resources and teacher duties.

Compromising with the Teacher's Union

Carter teachers issued a request at the beginning of the year, for example, for more planning time. They had been excused for their initial teacher duties like supervising the cafeteria and monitoring the hallways, but that luxury was soon redacted when the teacher's union found out. Though the union insisted that the six Carter leaders be given duties like every other teacher, Vice Principal Goldberg was gracious enough to grant their duties in the Carter building, so that they could still do some planning. While this was a thoughtful gesture, Goldberg did not seem to realize that the teachers needed planning time together, as a group of six. His response to this, however, was that "if we do it for some we've got to do it for everybody, we've got other teachers asking why don't I have a twenty-five inch

⁸⁰ [Name concealed], interview with author, December 15, 2011.

screen apple computer? We can't satisfy everyone."⁸¹ Responsible for pleasing teachers throughout the building, Goldberg simply cannot focus solely on the needs of the Carter teachers. As an administrator, he has other duties and is also expected to diplomatically consider the needs of all teachers.

This tension reveals the issue of teachers' unions in establishing Smaller Learning Communities that require new planning methods and establish new demands for teachers. As a student-centered environment, the Carter Learning Center seeks to place the needs of the youth before the needs of the staff. This goes against the purpose of the teachers' union, which functions to protect the rights and liberties of the teacher. The American Federation of Teachers, which aims to "give voice to [educators'] legitimate professional, economic, and social aspirations," has been the driving force behind collective bargaining efforts for higher salaries and preferential treatment of veteran teachers.⁸² Though unions protect teachers from hierarchical oppression, the group's traditional ideologies conflict with the demands of Smaller Learning Communities. Garrett Delavan, a proponent of the small schools movement, explains that due to the manageable size of small classes, the teachers' unions must allow teachers to lead classes outside of their trained subject areas.⁸³ Smaller Learning Communities often utilize cross-discipline teaching, and could require teachers to step into new roles. While this may necessitate more planning

⁸¹ [Name concealed], interview with author, December 15, 2011.

⁸² "American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO," American Federation of Teachers, Accessed April 3, 2012 <http://www.aft.org/about/>

⁸³ Garrett Delavan, *The Teacher's Attention*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 183.

time and higher work load, the reduction in class size creates a more manageable atmosphere that is more enjoyable for both students and teachers. In spite of planned activities and structure, teaching artists at the Carter Learning Center must understand the duty of the school to consider rigid union demands.

Building Codes

When ICE initially struck up a deal to partner with Kanton High School, they agreed to supplement the rent of the Carter building in return for afterschool programming space. Not only did the classes need space, but they also needed Internet access, which would only be possible if each individual student obtained personal username and password. While many of the program participants would be enrolled at Kanton High School and already have this information, ICE wanted to also easily serve youth and adult students from outside the school system. For this reason, the organization wanted one universal username and password for all program participants.. Although Ed insisted that Michelle and the district administrators could snap their fingers and easily grant ICE a password, Earle told me that the issue was far more complicated. Explaining that the afterschool programs conducted on the school premise are subject to several guidelines, she framed the Internet access problem in terms of building codes. While she did not go into detail about those guidelines, she made it seem that she did not have as much control as Ed believed. Rather she insisted that ICE simply could not have all the authority that Ed wanted in the building because there were so many rigid guidelines working against them.⁸⁴ Earle's statements reveal the complexities

⁸⁴ [Name concealed], interview with author, January 26, 2012.

within the district and serve as a reminder that even top administrators are subject to inconvenient formalities of the system.

Communication between ICE, KCSD and the Carter teachers is complicated. These two different systems have always worked independently, and it is difficult to expect them to see eye to eye within a few months of partnership. While the district blames ICE for disregarding guidelines, and systematic procedures, ICE is fed up with the slow moving system and wonders if the district will ever change. These frustrations stem from the fact that KHS, as a public institution, is accountable to the state and must be meticulous about aligning their actions with state and federal guidelines, while ICE is a free agent uninhibited by the restraints of accountability. Each partner's patience and willingness to overcome these differences will determine the success of the partnership.

Chapter Five

From the onset of the project, Ed Emerson claimed that the success of the Carter Learning Center would be dependent upon the ability of the professionals to work together. Emphasizing that the two Smaller Learning Communities are based on a “professionally collaborative model,” Ed insisted that the teachers, teaching artists, and administrators be “willing to bring their commitment, reputations and efforts together to make it happen.”⁸⁵ To his chagrin, however, he has been sensing a lack of commitment and communication from the various players involved. While this may be a misinterpretation, many of the teachers echoed Ed’s belief that a lack of communication was weakening the partnership.

Though Ed claimed that the teachers were not taking advantage of their spare time to meet as a group and plan or tweak lessons, the teachers did make an effort to communicate with each other. Art teacher Valerie Hendricks referenced her team’s weekly meetings when testifying to the value of group planning. She remembered the team’s efficiency in tweaking the lesson plans after some students had scored surprisingly low on their Global History unit exams. The teachers planned for the next unit to ensure that students absorbed specific facts and did not get lost in the art and media component of the projects. Reflecting on her experience, Valerie felt that the group communication had strengthened her lessons and strengthened her as a teacher. She prioritized that planning period and even had to cut our interview short in order to run to her weekly team meeting.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ [Name concealed], Email message to author, October 25, 2011.

⁸⁶ [Name concealed], interview with author, October 25, 2011.

According to English teacher Tim Redd, however, it was important that the teachers meet as a team of six, rather than as individual teams of three. Project Tuning, the lesson tweaking method mentioned earlier, was most effective with a mix of teachers from different teams. Unfortunately, Tim found it nearly impossible to meet as a group because all six teachers maintained hectic teaching schedules that had them running between the Carter and main buildings. His day, for example, was spent teaching classes, grading papers, and preparing for lessons, and he barely managed to meet with his team of three. His afterschool time was dedicated to his own family, who relied on him as the head of the household. Though Redd was dedicated to his students, he could only allocate so much time to his in-school duties. He could not put extra time into his day at school, but he also felt it important to meet with the whole Carter staff in order to compare lessons and classroom issues.

While Ed Emerson faulted the teachers for not being more proactive in establishing meetings, Redd blamed the issue on the administration.⁸⁷ What the Carter teachers needed, he explained was a regular planning time allotted to them every day. During this planning time, all six teachers would ideally meet together to discuss their lessons, share issues, and practice the Project Tuning method. Without this daytime planning period, they do not have other options. Mr. Leach explained that his afterschool hours are devoted to his family. His wife depends on his help to take care of the kids, and he is not willing to sacrifice that family time. Rather he

⁸⁷ [Name concealed], interview with author, January 30, 2012.

wants the administration to grant a change in the structure of the teachers' schedules.

When I presented this issue to Assistant Superintendent Michelle Earle, however, she seemed disconnected from the gravity of the problem. Claiming to have already solved the issue, she very confidently explained that she had assigned substitute teachers to cover each of the six Carter teachers while they spent a day planning.⁸⁸ While the teachers appreciated the action, only one day of planning was simply not enough. Earle did not seem to realize that Project Tuning was meant to occur on a regular basis. Furthermore, she did not recognize the need for a daily and weekly debriefing session in which the teachers compared successes and failures. As Tim Redd had said, lack of planning and meeting time weakens the potential of the two Smaller Learning Communities.

Communication is key to maintaining a healthy and cohesive organization. Author Wendy Poole uses the constructivist theory to explain how teacher-administrator relationships can fall apart through gaps in communication. This theory looks at the ways in which individuals make assumptions and construct meaning based on personal observations. Two people may derive different meanings from the same situation depending on what behaviors and actions they observe. In considering this diversity of perception, constructivists "refute the assumption that organizations can be viewed as single, objective realities. Rather, organizations are perceived as being comprised of multiple realities that are highly

⁸⁸ [Name concealed], interview with author, January 26, 2012.

subjective and socially constructed.”⁸⁹ As an organization, the school is a compilation of subjective realities. Staff members may perceive the same situation differently because they make different observations that lead to varying assumptions. It is very easy, in the school environment, for one person to misinterpret the actions of another. Frequent communication is the best way to safeguard against misinterpretations and to preserve healthy staff relations. From a constructivist perspective, the teacher-administrator, teacher-teacher, or teacher-teacher artist relationship can work as long as every member of the organization is on the same page.

If we apply the constructivist theory to the Carter Learning Center, it becomes very clear that teachers, administrators, and community partners all have a different view of the same reality. This separation is inherent in the fact that they are each involved in the school system at different levels. It is therefore imperative that they meet on a regular basis in order to align their interpretations. Failure to interact on a daily basis will weaken the sense of mutual understanding and solidarity. After the school year commenced, the teachers stopped meeting regularly with Ed Emerson from ICE. As a result, Ed wrongfully assumed that the teachers were interested in supporting the Rail Trail Project, when they were in fact overburdened with their school responsibilities. Without having solidified a plan as a group, Ed acted individually and left the teachers feeling disrespected and ignored. Offended by Ed’s wrongful assumptions, the teachers jumped to the conclusion that

⁸⁹ Wendy Poole, “Reconstructing Teacher-Administrator Relationships” (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA, April 1995) 2.

he did not respect their teaching duties. Without any productive meeting time to discuss the issue, the teachers solidified their negative perceptions of Ed.

There is no doubt that the partnership could be strengthened if Ed committed to meeting with the teachers every week. Even if the meetings only lasted twenty minutes, a planned system would allow him to check in and listen to their concerns. It would be even more beneficial for Assistant Superintendent, Michelle Earle, to sit in on one weekly meeting every month and to maintain frequent contact via email. Building strong communication skills will enhance the possibility of creating more Smaller Learning Communities throughout the school. If the school does manage to divide into several small academies, it will lose some of its inherent interconnectedness. Teachers, administrators and community partners will need to create a system of communication to relay their needs and coordinate changes. In regards to the pressure that KHS faces under No Child Left Behind, frequent and organized communication will ensure a unified and successful system that can lead to effective schooling and academic progress.

In his chapter “Hidden Eddies That Can Drive Us Off Course,” Arthur Shapiro suggests that establishing a “Curriculum-Steering Task Force” will help to support teachers in Smaller Learning Communities. Composed of teachers, principals, Assistant Superintendent of Pupil Personnel, Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, the Superintendent, and a Director of Research, the committee members separate into groups that each follow one Smaller Learning Community. Each sub-group meets monthly from 3:45-5p.m. to review the curriculum, and then meets as an entire Steering Committee once a month. At the

large Steering Committee meetings, sub-groups have a chance to present their observations of the Smaller Learning Community and recommend changes to the curricula and course. Through a concrete system of meeting and discussing, this task force fosters teacher-administrator communication and strengthens the course as a whole.⁹⁰

While this task force does not include community partners and deals solely with curriculum changes, Kanton High School could follow aspects of the model. In addition to the committee of teachers, school administrators, and district administrators, the school could include teaching artists and directors from ICE. Rather than only discussing curriculum changes, the groups can also discuss behavior issues, teacher issues, and other interpersonal conflicts. These monthly meetings will ensure that conversation between the different levels will occur.

As the constructivist theory illustrates, gaps in communication can create rifts between teachers, administrators, and community partners. If Kanton School district administrators expect their staff to lower dropout rates and increase test scores, they will need a system of organized communication to ensure support for the teachers. Through regular communication, administrators and community partners can get a sense of the needs and problems within each classroom. Supplementary discussion periods will give them time to address possible solutions to those issues. Organized communication allows all individuals in the school to voice their needs and opinions, and ensures that no problem gets swept under the rug

⁹⁰ Arthur Shapiro, *Making Large Schools Work* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2009), 54-58.

Chapter Six

Kanton High School administrators must prioritize staff empowerment in preparation for the critical changes that the state has recommended. Like Rachel Carson Middle School, mentioned earlier, KHS is under pressure to increase test scores, and graduation rates and undertake a serious restructuring. Not only have Black and Special Education students scored below their Annual Measureable Objectives, but there is also a very wide gap in graduation rates between White and Black students. Faced with similar statistics, the faculty at Rachel Carson Middle School has put in extra work in order to help students prepare for the upcoming exams. Some teachers stay after school just for those struggling students who did not pass the exams, while others come in on Saturdays and help to lead test preparation programs. “There’s an energy in this building I haven’t seen in years,” recounted the middle school principal, “we’re charged up like a basketball team before a big game.”⁹¹ Faculty at Kanton High School must tackle the achievement gap with this same vigor. While the test scores and achievement rates have remained stagnant for the past five years, the state has increased its pressure on the school to change. In order to enact this change, the staff must prepare to devote more time and energy to their students, and stay in constant communication in order to wage a cohesive and successful battle against low test scores.

⁹¹ Kayla Webley, “Why It’s Time to Replace No Child Left Behind” *Time Magazine*. January, 23, 2012, 44.

Though its immediate goal is to raise achievement levels and get off the state's watch list, the high school's long-term goal requires dedication to a new structure. Jack Carlyle, who is in his first year as KHS principal, hopes to implement five to seven new Smaller Learning Communities within the next five years. Each module would host about three to four hundred students and would offer a range of topics. Example themes proposed by Principal Carlyle include "foundational skills" in which ninth graders learn the necessary skills for success in the high school arena, and an engineering and technology-centered academy. While the themes would vary, all Smaller Learning Communities in the school would offer low student-teacher ratios, student-centered teaching methods and creative learning strategies.

As seen in the Carter Learning Center, however, a Smaller Learning Community demands a lot of extra work from teachers. They must work together to plan creative, interdisciplinary lessons that also incorporate state standards. Principle Carlyle expects every course to be interdisciplinary. His vision of the engineering- and technology-centered Smaller Learning Community includes Language Arts and History assignments in which students read biographies of great inventors and explore the history of technology in America. In order to create these interdisciplinary lessons, teachers from multiple subject areas will need to learn to work as a team to construct their own lesson plans.

Effective multidisciplinary lessons are very complicated and require teachers to strategically compose projects that are relevant to students' interests and reflective of Common Core standards. Teachers must be comfortable with group

planning and project-based learning in order to construct effective lessons. Considering that only 24% of teachers within the Kanton School District have obtained their Masters degrees in teaching, the school should be concerned about preparing teachers for their new responsibilities.⁹² If three quarters of the teaching staff does not have the training necessary to support five to seven new Smaller Learning Communities, the school will need to find a way to prepare them.

Just as the Carter teachers received outside help in crafting multidisciplinary lessons, new Smaller Learning Communities should have the same support. ICE teaching artists would be very beneficial to teachers who are new to the student-centered, project-based approach. Identifying the most important aspects of the restructuring process as “high quality instruction, high quality relationships developed between students and staff and high expectations for success,” Principal Carlyle expects a lot from his staff.⁹³ It would be naïve, however, to believe that his staff members could step up to the plate without outside help from community partners. An empowered and well-supported staff that maintains close relations with administrators and teaching artists will be key to executing the extreme restructuring process.

In addition to establishing an empowering atmosphere within the school, teachers and administrators will need to strengthen ties with the community. Not only can nonprofit partners help to implement refreshing ideas and perspectives and present new opportunities for service learning or apprenticeships, but

⁹² “New York State Report Cards,” New York State Education Department, accessed October 22, 2011, <https://reportcards.nysed.gov/>

⁹³ [Name of Newspaper, article headline, and author concealed], March 15, 2012.

community members will also help to turn Kanton into a learning community. According to Vice Principal Goldberg, the school has had trouble empowering students because many parents are disconnected from the school. “There’s a sense of despair out there,” observes Goldberg, “we’re losing generations of students...we can’t educate students without community help.” Having been cursed at, hung up on, and challenged by parents who deny their child’s involvement in gangs, drugs, or truancy, Goldberg senses a lack of support for the school from some parents.⁹⁴ Perhaps parents are discouraged by the school’s poor ratings and inability to inspire progress among students of color. Whatever the case, the school will wage a much more successful battle against the achievement gap if parents and community members support the school’s initiative from the outside.

A deeper partnership with ICE can turn this attitude around. ICE is seen as a gem within the Kanton community. Not only have their dance and orchestra groups won several awards and titles, but the nonprofit also has a great relationship with the community. In the summer of 2011, for example, ICE joined forces with a community health organization to lead a very well attended “Let’s Move” dance event at a nearby sports arena. Their adult hip-hop and Zumba classes also draw many adoring participants. In fact dance and Zumba instructor, Nick Steinn has been compared to the mayor of Kanton because everywhere he goes people wave and shout hello. ICE’s extensive track record of successful in-school partnerships within the district strengthens its status as a potential partner. Both the Executive Director and Education Director at ICE have extensive experience working inside schools,

⁹⁴ [Name concealed], Interview with author, December 15, 2011.

and are passionate about public school education. ICE is committed to academic achievement, and has a good relationship with parents, community members, and other Kanton organizations. If Kanton High School can maintain its relationship with the Institute for Creative Education, the public school will be more likely to win the respect of past critics.

In fact if the school is willing to continue working with the organization, ICE is ready and willing to deepen its relationship. In February 2012, the nonprofit submitted a proposal to the district superintendent for the Kanton High School Extended Day Program (KHSEDP). If approved, this ambitious program “would offer project-based, arts-in-ed, multidisciplinary, Common Core driven, credit-bearing, courses aligned with the Kanton High School curriculum from 2:11pm to 6:00pm in the [Carter].”⁹⁵ Offering choices ranging from dance classes to private tutoring and study skills classes, the KHSEP aim far and beyond an average afterschool program. The program creators acknowledge the Common Core standards, which New York State created in June 2010 to address skills needed for academic success and college and career readiness. Curriculum standards for grades K-12 are divided into English Language Arts & Literacy, History/ Social Studies, Science & Technical Subjects and Mathematics. Because the Common Core is a system in which each successive level builds upon the skills gained in the previous level, it is necessary that students master the essential skills for progress. ICE’s afterschool programs would prioritize these standards by helping students gain the mathematical and literary skills identified in in the Common Core K-12 and College and Career-Readiness standards.

⁹⁵ “Proposal for Community-School Collaboration,” email message to author, February 12, 2012.

While the program would welcome all students, it would specifically target learners who struggle academically or behaviorally in the classroom. By aligning the extended day program with KHS's academic goals, ICE aims to bolster the school in its mission to close the achievement gap and meet state standards.

In considering this proposal, Kanton High School must also acknowledge the various ways that this KHSEDP can provide generously in areas where the school is lacking or weak. As the proposal states, the school has a limited budget that only continues to shrink. ICE, on the other hand, has been nominated for a MacArthur Foundation grant and receives money from several other national funds. Through partnership, ICE could provide programs, staff, and resources that the school cannot afford. The KHSEDP proposal also promises support from the Bard Masters in Teaching program, SUNY New Paltz, and SUNY Ulster education departments. These education programs would provide enthusiastic tutors and dedicated graduate students who would value the program as an opportunity to gain experience. KHSEP presents an opportunity for the school to redeem its financial standing and academic reputation through community partnership.

Research and experience shows that afterschool programs can help schools close the achievement gap and establish strong rapport with parents and the community. According to the Afterschool Alliance, schools benefit from partnering with community-based organizations because these outside institutions often "have the unique ability to reach at-risk children and youth who are disenchanted with school, hard to reach, or may be isolated from their communities."⁹⁶ The Alliance

⁹⁶ Metlife Foundation. "Afterschool: The Bridge Connecting Schools and Communities."

also promotes a study conducted by the William T. Grant Foundation, which determined that students who participate in afterschool programs have fewer absences, higher grades, and more consistent homework completion than their peers. Programs that offer free services and transportation are particularly important to low-income parents who may not have money to pay for private tutoring or time to take off from work. Parents of the fourteen million youth who are left to take care of themselves during after school hours inevitably feel more supported by schools that offer free after school programs. Establishing positive relationships with parents and community-based organizations can be the first step in creating a community of learning in which all citizens understand, support, and contribute to the school's mission.

While the decision to enact the Extended Day Program is ultimately in the hands of Kanton City School District administrators, there are many community members who believe that after-school programs are the key to closing the achievement gap. According to a Kanton Teachers Federation representative, keeping school buildings open, accessible and active during the late afternoon and evening can provide support to families with few resources. By welcoming students to stick around school after the final bell rings, extended day programs can “provide students whose families cannot afford afterschool opportunities with the same chances had by students whose families are more affluent.”⁹⁷If parents know that they can rely on the school to both educate and take care of their children when

Afterschool Alert Issue Brief, No. 30. (2007). Accessed January 12, 2012.
http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/issue_briefs/issue_bridge_30.pdf

⁹⁷ [Name of Newspaper, article headline, and author concealed], May 9, 2012.

their homes are empty, they will be more likely to work together with the school in other ways. Whether they work harder to ensure that their children are doing daily homework assignments or make an effort to establish good rapport with teachers, parents who feel supported by the school will respect and promote the school's academic mission.

In addition to drawing parents into the school community, afterschool programs can foster Economically Disadvantaged and minority students in a way that brightens their perception of the school. Miston School District, located in a nearby area, used afterschool programs to dramatically increase its graduation rates and close its achievement gap. In 2010, the school district's report card stated that 71% of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunches, and 76% of students were classified as racial minorities. In that same year, the overall graduation rate was 83%, with 87% of Black students graduating and 79% of Hispanic students graduating. These numbers are even more impressive when compared to 2006 when the overall graduation rate was just 60% for Black students and 43% for Hispanic students. During that time, the Miston School District has spent about \$4 million on afterschool programs, including a need-blind music program that provides string instruments to students and trains them in an orchestra. The school's successful effort to close the achievement gap correlates very strongly with the increased expenditure on afterschool programs. Students felt more connected to and supported by the school and were more motivated to shoot for success in the academic arena.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ [Name of Newspaper, article headline, and author concealed], March 11, 2012.

While the Kanton School District is interested in following Miston's lead, it is disabled by the two-percent tax cap, which limits that ability of the district to raise money for afterschool programs. Partnership with the Institute for Creative Education offers a solution to this funding issue because the organization can obtain grants and use funds generated from their other programs. ICE also benefits from the partnership because they are able to apply for larger grants if they are able to prove their dedication to academics as well as the arts. By partnering with the school district to offer both academic and arts-based afterschool programs, the organization will have a better chance of securing generous loans, providing the school with ammunition to close the achievement gap.

If Kanton High School decides to accept ICE's proposal for an extended day program, they may potentially open a new door for education in the City of Kanton. Not only does ICE have a strong relationship with parents, but it is also well connected to other community institutions including the YMCA, Boys and Girls Club, and various universities. Just as Miston School District made incredible gains through afterschool education programs, Kanton High School must open its eyes to the enormous potential that lies with school-community partnership.

Conclusion

The achievement gap affects multiple aspects of a school and its surrounding environment. Not only has Kanton High School's achievement gap led to a high dropout rate among impoverished and racial minorities, but it has also affected the economic health of the city. While the average New York State unemployment rate is 8%, it is 14% among Black citizens and 12.3% among high school dropouts. If

Kanton High School does not make a concerted effort to prepare students of color and students living below the poverty line for the workforce, the school will fail to break the vicious cycle of unemployment among minority and economically disadvantaged populations.

In recent years, the disparities in graduation rates and test scores between various subgroups at KHS have proven the existence of an achievement gap. “You can see the consequences if you drive down any street in Midtown,” mentions the pastor of a local Kanton church.⁹⁹ He describes how hoards of “young people who were at one point effervescent with potential” are now simply loitering on the sidewalks around the school, as if to remind the school of its past failure. Local newspaper journalist Jackson Cantor explained that these high school dropouts do not have the skills that local businesses desire, despite the fact that many of employers are looking to hire.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, the lack of a skilled workforce deters future employers from moving into the area and opening up the job market. As the local economy declines, the Kanton City School District will find it harder to convince taxpayers to contribute to new projects. In order to convince the Kanton residents that the district deserves their tax dollars for yet another project, the school must improve its achievement statistics and prove that it can benefit both the social and economic health of the city.

While the inequalities in education among racial and socioeconomic groups were most ravaging under conservative governments of the Cold War era, recent reform efforts have presented new problems. In 2002, the Bush administration

⁹⁹ [Name of Newspaper, article headline, and author concealed], November 13, 2012.

¹⁰⁰ [Name of Newspaper, article headline, and author concealed], November 13, 2011.

passed the No Child Left Behind Act in hopes of increasing accountability of schools. As the name suggests, no student, regardless of family background, race, gender, or academic ability, would graduate without the skills necessary for success in college and the workforce. In order for the state to gather statistics on school achievement, however, students must submit to standardized testing throughout their K-12 years. Their test scores are heavily relied upon when determining the school's accountability. If any student subgroup does not make Annual Measurable Progress, the school is placed on a state watch list and pressured to improve to avoid drastic consequences.

In 2009, the Obama administration issued the Race to the Top (RTTT) initiative, which holds both schools and teachers accountable for their students' successes and failures. The initiative relies on high stakes tests to determine teacher effectiveness, student progress, and school improvement. If the state can show that its school districts have improved, it is eligible to receive funding under the RTTT initiative. New York State has published the Common Core curricula for public schools in order to guide student progress. Teachers are therefore faced with enormous pressure. Not only must they prepare students for tests and assessments, but they also must carefully align their lesson plans to state standards. Maximum pressure is placed on teachers whose schools have not shown any improvement. These teachers must choose between drilling students for test preparation and educating them as holistic learners who are socially, academically, and artistically competent.

In the midst of all the stress and anxiety over test scores and standards, teachers and students need support. All too often, adequate support does not come from administrators, leaving teachers to their own devices to create lesson plans, deal with students' social and academic issues, and ensure progress. As the case study at Kanton High School's Carter Learning Center has shown, outside support from educational nonprofits can be a school's saving grace. Teaching artists from the Institute for Creative Education (ICE) provided summer training for Carter teachers to introduce them to project-based learning, and has continued to support the teachers throughout the year. Furthermore, the nonprofit offers financial assistance to the school during its mandatory restructuring process. Due to the city's two percent tax cap, the school district can only reap a limited amount of funding from the public. Additional grants from ICE allow the school to implement Smaller Learning Communities, thus achieving the goal of surviving under No Child Left Behind. Improvement within the two pilot Smaller Learning Communities has already begun to show. Every one of the ten Juniors in the Media and Communications module passed the English Regents exam in the winter of 2011, while nine out of ten met the New York State Common Core college and career readiness benchmarks. While the six Carter Learning Center teachers have been diligently working with students, ICE collaborators certainly deserve a large portion of the credit for their efforts in supporting the center.

Despite the success in narrowing the achievement gap, however, the school-community partnership tended towards benefiting the school more than the nonprofit. The art-based afterschool programs that were originally set to take place

in the Carter building never occurred, creating a social tension between the ICE leaders and school partners. This tension manifested into gaps in communication that weakened the supportive relationships. In order for the school to save this partnership, administrators will need to grant ICE some of its wishes. In an attempt to deepen the relationship with Kanton High School, ICE recently submitted a proposal for an extended day program held in the Carter Learning Center. Featuring a combination of art-based and educational classes, this program could help the school connect with the parents and community members in order to create a community of learning. As proven in other counties, afterschool programs can lead to remarkable increases in student motivation and participation in classes.

Kanton High School must do whatever necessary to salvage this partnership. Having failed to make improvements in the past five years, KHS must acknowledge its internal weaknesses, and take advantage of eager community partners who offer social, academic, and financial support. At the same time, teaching artists and leaders at the Institute for Creative Education must also stay patient and engaged within the partnership. Though the partnership has had its ups and downs, ICE leaders must realize their essential role in the school restructuring process. In order to keep the partnership strong, the community partners must commit to frequent communication with school partners. Due to the demands on teachers, ICE should take the responsibility of planning regular check-in meetings, and should organize a system of communication that includes school and district administrators. They should continue to stay receptive to teachers' issues and plan teacher development programs based on those needs. Perhaps they could even plan monthly parties for

teachers so that they can socialize and unwind outside of school. Such measures will ensure a healthy and enjoyable partnership. Though school administrators are busy and often disconnected, ICE should make an effort to include them in all activities including meetings and events. The more cohesive the team, the better the results will be.

No federal or state administrator can create an initiative or plan a curriculum that effectively serves every single child across the nation. Though they can and should set benchmarks for success and survey schools to ensure efficient practices, they cannot be expected to understand the needs of each particular community. Nonprofit organizations and other local institutions serve the public and know the demographic very well. Not only do these leaders have a sense of the needs, personalities, and potential of children in the community, but they also have a stake in the economic health of the city. Schools should not be alone in the effort to prepare students for college and the workforce. In order to craft skilled graduates who are prepared for a variety of responsibilities, schools need the financial aid and expertise of local organizations.

School-community partnerships represent a realistic view of education that both acknowledges the limits to state curricula and recognizes the link between school and local economy. Throughout history, schools and communities have looked to the federal administration to close the achievement gap and solve the inequities in the education system. After decades of insufficient federal programs, it is time to stop waiting for the right president to enact the perfect reform. There is

no need to look to a higher administration for the answer to the achievement gap, school-community partnerships are the answer and can create the change.

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