

A Charter School Principal's Story

A View from the Inside

Barbara Smith

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University of Toronto, Canada



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ADVANCE PRAISE

A CHARTER SCHOOL PRINCIPAL'S STORY

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

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

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

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

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

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

“There is no gain without struggle.”

– Martin Luther King Jr.

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FOREWORD

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

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

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

FOREWORD

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

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

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

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

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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

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

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

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

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

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

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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

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

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INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

BEGINNING SKETCHES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 2

TRUST

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 3

DAY 1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WEDJ MISSION STATEMENT

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

This was the first time I had worked directly with Manahan, my co-leader, and I was inspired by his contributions to this task. We etched out six goals that were built into an agreement for students and staff to sign and commit to, at the beginning of the year:

THE WEDJ COMMITMENT

1. We are committed to the SAFETY of all members of the William E. Doar, Jr. Public Charter School the Performing Arts community.
2. We are committed to CREATIVITY.
3. We are committed to PREPARING all members of the community to be successful in their academic pursuits, college, and life.
4. We are committed to COMMUNICATING RESPECTFULLY.
5. We are committed to HONESTY.
6. We are committed to creating a next generation of GLOBAL LEADERS through the arts.

<http://www.wedjschool.us/artspcs/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/WEDJ-School-Handbook-2012-2013-Final.pdf>

Figure 2. WEDJ mission statement and commitment

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 3

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

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