

Chapter 5

Collective Impact: Community Partnerships to Model Mutual Learning and Growth Through the Arts

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ABSTRACT

H. O. Wheeler Elementary School, labeled as a failing school in 2004 became the Integrated Arts Academy, an arts magnet school through the development of strong school/community partnerships. It tells the story of how initially two key community arts organizations provided the Burlington School District with vision and professional development to address excellence and equity in a school with a diverse population that included 98% free and reduced lunch, 40 percent English language Learners (23 different languages/dialects spoken) and 25% Special education. To help achieve success the school has expanded partnerships with arts and community organizations. This chapter demonstrates how the partnerships through articulating mutual vision and expectations have contributed to a balanced population that has sustained its cultural richness, enhanced student academic and behavioral performance, and positively impacts grants, curriculum, residencies, community, and teacher education.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-2581-3.ch005

INTRODUCTION

The Integrated Arts Academy (IAA) at H. O. Wheeler Elementary is situated in the Old North End of Burlington, Vermont. The Old North End neighborhood has the highest poverty rates of any municipality in the state. Also, Burlington is a designated refugee resettlement area. Due to the Old North End's affordable housing, many refugees initially settle in the neighborhood, often right next door to longer-term residents caught in intergenerational poverty. H. O. Wheeler Elementary School in Burlington has been serving students and the community for more than 100 years.

Prior to becoming an arts magnet school H. O. Wheeler Elementary School had the poorest student achievement scores in the district. In 2007, rather than closing the school down as failing, the Burlington School District evaluated different school-wide reform proposals that addressed school equity and excellence. One proposal was submitted jointly by the Flynn Center for the Performing Arts and Saint Michael's College to transform H. O. Wheeler Elementary School into an arts magnet school with a focus on integrating arts throughout the curriculum. There were many sessions with the school community and members of the Burlington School District that illustrated how an arts focus would attract a broad distribution of families to the schools, increase the socioeconomic diversity of the student population, and improve student academic performance. The Flynn Center for the Performing Arts Center/ Saint Michael's College proposal included summaries from national research which validated how an arts magnet school would greatly improve student engagement and achievement, bring about socio-economic integration in this school as well as across the district, and increase parental participation. An extensive survey conducted in the fall of 2007 found that parents of elementary- and preschool-aged children strongly favored features of the integrated arts theme.

Significant grant funding and in-kind donations from our partners enabled this transformation to occur. The consortium of funders that launched the two schools included The AD Henderson Foundation, the Turrell Fund, the Bay and Paul Foundations, the Vermont Community Foundation, the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and the Kennedy Center National Partnerships Program, the National Endowment of the Arts, and the Burlington School District.

After approval to become an arts magnet school, the Flynn Center for the Performing Arts and Saint Michael's College became key partners to IAA and developed a series of professional development courses for all staff members of the school. Two year-long three-credit graduate courses titled *I Sing, Paint, Act, and Dance: Developing an Arts Magnet School from the inside out* (2008-09) and *The Arts as Content: Building Integrated Arts Curriculum* (2009-10) offered teachers and

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