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God Has Created Me For Some Definitive Service

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About Jacqueline Kelleher

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I was teaching a Special Education class at Sacred Heart University when it all began. On July 5, 2011, the Bridgeport Board of Education voted 6-3 in favor of a voluntary state takeover of its district. Bridgeport is home to one of the nation's largest academic achievement gaps. The Board cited irreconcilable conflicts among members as barriers to effectively educating over 20,000 children and youth in Connecticut's largest, poorest, lowest achieving school district. The State agreed to replace the local Board with a state-appointed one, which would be selected following a rigorous application process open to all Connecticut residents. This was an unprecedented

action that entered into national and international spotlights. As an education professor, I often bring current issues into the classroom for my students to debate and discuss; it was indeed ironic I brought this particular issue to my graduate students.

The Bridgeport school district boundary lay a mere 500 feet from our classroom door. "What will happen, Dr. Kelleher?" my students asked incredulously after reviewing the many news articles popping up like corn across the Internet. "I have no clue." I answered honestly. "I don't know of anything like this happening before. There have been state involuntary takeovers in the U.S., but I don't know of a case where a Board turns the keys over to its state government saying 'we're done'. This is history. We'll have to watch and see."

NCLB and Low Performing School Takeovers

To fully understand the context, and while much of this information is about to change given state waiver applications for No Child Left Behind (NCLB) exemptions, including Connecticut, it is critical to reflect on the laws that have been in place and corrective actions concerning low performing schools. According to NCLB, states had to create accountability systems through standards setting, testing students in target areas at specific grade levels, and setting proficiency performance levels. Schools have been required to attain adequate yearly progress (AYP) towards set proficiencies (all schools were to reach proficiency for 100 percent of their students by the school year 2013–14). The federal government designed layers of interventions and supports that involve improvement, corrective action, and restructuring. If schools fail to make AYP for three years, they enter the stage of intensive, district-specific corrective action; staff can be removed, curricula mandated, management authority revoked, and instructional time extended. A fourth year failure can lead to major restructuring such as reconstitution, state takeover, conversion into a charter, or transfer to a private, educational management organization. A school that fails to improve for five consecutive years ceases to exist in its original form according to NCLB. Districts encounter a similar approach with a similar system of support and intervention, ranging from programmatic changes to losing their authority to govern itself. Although NCLB creates

some uniformity in states' approaches to low performance, there have been great degrees of variability on how programs differed on what kind of growth it took for a school to exit the program and to shed the low performance label (Mintrop & Papazian, 2003). A report by Southwest Educational Development Laboratory called for more research on the impact of corrective actions given preliminary inconsistent results (Rudo, 2001). In some cases, there have been school district takeovers as part of the major sanctions or consequences falling on chronically "failing schools". The ultimate sanction is reconstitution or school/district takeover. In a takeover, the State Legislature, the State Board of Education, or a federal court charges the State Department of Education or another designated entity with managing a school/district for a specified period of time. A takeover is when a state officially assumes governance of a low-performing school or, much more commonly, an entire district, supplanting the local school board. States have varied in what a district takeover looks like, but for several states, replacing board members involuntarily has indeed been put into policy. Rupo (2001) reported early on that in states where school/district takeovers have been implemented as part of a sanction or corrective action, improved outcomes for students were inconsistent. It is important to note here that these aforementioned cases pertain to involuntary state takeovers of districts under NCLB as related to progress toward AYP. The Bridgeport case was different.

At the time of the Bridgeport case, there were no reports of a district requesting voluntarily to be taken over by a state department. This is what made our particular class quandary interesting. Just a few miles down the road, the school board of Connecticut's largest school district had voted to be taken over by the Connecticut State Department of Education. Bridgeport Public Schools have been long listed as "failing"; however, at this time, there was no involuntary takeover. Still, it was a tumultuous, stressful period for this cash-strapped, struggling school district looking for solutions to avoid cuts, lay-offs and increased class sizes.

Professor Development in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition

At the time of this historic Bridgeport vote, I was enrolled in a Presidential Seminar at my institution, a course designed for faculty to strengthen methodological and pedagogical work with students in the Catholic intellectual tradition (CIT). We were focusing on what it means to be human. With an emphasis on contributing to the human journey through learning, leadership, and service, I was particularly moved by the seminar's call to prepare our students to serve those deeply affected by poverty and inequitable access to quality opportunities. I kept thinking like our neighbors in Bridgeport. Seminar leaders encouraged faculty to immerse our scholarship and service in these areas and model this to our students. We've been blessed with knowledge, skills, and professional preparation – how can we share these blessings with those who need it most and in ways it will raise them up? The more Catholic works and philosophies we explored, the more I hungrily contemplated how to infuse the CIT throughout my academic life; it became apparent that Bridgeport was calling me.

I reached out to the Education Commissioner tasked with appointing the new Bridgeport Board of Education and offered pro bono service as a professional. I offered my expertise in assessment, outcomes-based student learning, and strategic planning to support board

member training. My institution was literally a few miles away from Bridgeport and I was willing to serve in any capacity. Further, I was a new Bridgeport resident with children in the system. I wanted to help. The Commissioner contacted me and asked if my 'willingness to serve' meant as a state-appointed board member to govern this struggling district; if so, he'd appreciate a resume and letter right away.

The prospect was overwhelming. In Bridgeport, a city where the median income is a little over \$35,000 annually, over 98% of students are eligible for free/reduced lunch; a city with over a hundred languages spoken and less than a third of its children reading at proficiency levels. Bridgeport, with one of the highest drop out rates in the state and less than 65% of its students graduating in four years, deserved more than me. No. I did not have the skill I told myself. And despite my Catholic upbringing, I had not experienced a moment in my life where I was truly called to service through God. No way.

Poverty and impact on school achievement: Bridgeport's True Dilemma

I reflected on Bridgeport and what I could possibly offer its community – my community – in light of what I was learning in my CIT seminar. Poverty has a powerful impact on student growth and development in academic and non-academic areas. When a child is struggling with the stressors of safety, food insecurity, neglect, lack of resources, unstable households, health issues, inadequate parental education, and other conditions associated with an impoverished environment, being "present" to learn is a significant challenge. In my work with Bridgeport Public Schools, I have known hundreds of cases of learning challenges associated with poverty. For example:

Latiffe is a junior in High School. Latiffe's mother has been feeling ill due to an undisclosed illness. There are four younger siblings and Latiffe is responsible for getting them to their elementary schools and day care while Mom is recuperating. He is often late to school and misses his first two classes. He is also leaving school early for sibling pick up. This has been happening more and more frequently as there are no other family members to support these efforts. Latiffe's school is large and he has been under the radar as far as his attendance. It's not until the end of the semester that his tardiness and absences are discovered. By now, Latiffe has gotten further and further behind in his coursework. Participating in after-school activities such as tutoring is out of the question. He's about to give up. His family comes first.

Saarah's parents are not sure how to support her learning at home. They do not speak the language and cannot assist their struggling daughter in her schoolwork. Both mother and father had negative experiences with schools in the past and are reluctant/afraid to enter the building. Neither graduated from high school. They are hoping for the best for their child, but have little guidance on how to be involved as parents. Both parents are overworked and overstressed and struggle just to provide effective parenting strategies with their daughter. At the age of nine, Saarah is unsure how to convey to her parents how they can best meet her needs.

Jerome listens to the sounds of yelling and screaming in his small apartment he shares with his twin brother, John, and mother and stepfather. Noise is also abundant in the hallways

and throughout the courtyards of his South End complex. Noise can consist of gunshots, swearing, threats, fights, and squealing of car wheels at all hours of the night. There is a large gang presence in his neighborhood. A 12 year-old child was recently injured in a gang-related incident where she was an innocent bystander. The girl is Jerome's classmate. It is difficult to get homework done, especially assignments that require access to the computer or Internet. There is no free wi-fi. There are no computers or laptops at home; cell phones are the only forms of technology in the house and minutes cost money. Jerome's mom won't let him walk to the library to access the computers due to the external threats that exist during the afterschool hours. There is no transportation available and she is uncomfortable having Jerome wait alone for the bus that can take him to the library.

I was reminded in my CIT seminar about the impact of poverty and I reflected how it plays a significant role in my field of education. How does poverty affect behavior and academic achievement? Students raised in poverty are especially subject to stressors that undermine school behavior and performance. Children raised in poverty are much less likely to have crucial needs met than their more affluent peers are and, as a result, are subject to consequences impacting their education, ranging from academic performance to parent engagement. One study found that only 36 percent of low-income parents were involved in three or more school activities on a regular basis, compared with 59 percent of parents above the poverty line (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000). Students with chronic stress are affected in terms of learning and behavior. Chronic stress affects social judgment, social reciprocity, motivation, determination, volition, and self-regulation. It impacts the extent to which a child is depressed and "present" to learn in a classroom. Stress and poverty is linked to: over 50 percent of all absences (Johnston-Brooks, Lewis, Evans, & Whalen, 1998); impairment of attention and concentration (Erickson, Drevets, & Schulkin, 2003); and, reduction of cognition, creativity, and memory (Lupien, King, Meaney, & McEwen, 2001).

These issues completely and fully permeate Bridgeport Public Schools. My preparation at Sacred Heart in the CIT philosophy propelled me (and many of my colleagues at SHU) to actively understand and find solutions for these issues. Initially, as a junior faculty member, I was not certain how to support the work in this large urban district. But things were about to change. Clarity was on the horizon.

A Call to Service

Enter Newman. As part of this faculty seminar in the Catholic Tradition, faculty members were struggling through the, in my opinion, dense literary styling of John Henry Newman and his reflections on higher education and university teaching. I found his messages frustrating initially, but as I struggled to make sense of his arguments, a particular quote emerged with brightness and stark clarity:

God has created me to do him some definitive service. He has committed some work to me, which he has not committed to another. I have my mission.

I reflected. A jolt of energy sprang forth unexpectedly. Despite the cliché nature of the words I am about to put to paper, there was that clarion call resounding loudly within. Service to

your community and your profession needs you! I sent my CV and philosophy of education to the Commissioner that evening. God was speaking to me. My heart was hungry despite my lack of confidence. This was an opportunity to serve in a critical capacity – an opportunity to support the governance of a district in need and lead it toward equitable excellence, speaking and advocating for those whose voices have been silenced or yet to be heard.

I didn't particularly like the other Newman writings to be honest. I'm more of the Freire persuasion. Still, the quote and the context got me moving. The Catholic tradition of service is rooted firmly in us as professors, and, in Catholic higher education institutions, it should be a priority to model our actions. Modeling service. Going back to principles of Bandura and observational learning, our post-secondary students will be impacted by the work they observe in their professors given observation can be effective for learning in various domains. Given this, professors in Catholic institutions may consider it a duty to model behaviors of service that we wish our graduates to espouse and go on to incorporate within their own lives.

A great part about working in an institution dedicated to the CIT is being surrounded by an academic community that encourages direct involvement in making the world a better place as part of your occupation in order to model to students the process we go through along the human journey. Faculty works out our own issues and struggles as we slowly come to understand the love and complexities of our faith before a student audience. We go beyond the great books and great conversation. We live our journeys quite visibly as faculty members and become observational models and mentors for our students as we stumble along our path. We wear our way of life on our sleeves, which is acceptable in our living faith community. It's a way of thinking that allows us all to fulfill their intellectual, spiritual, physical, moral, and emotional potential; it works best if their faculty and staff are on similar journeys with practices informed by faith and justice that serve as a teaching tool.

Back to the Service at Hand...

Within the first year of my service, the Board of Education made many changes and spirits were up! The state-appointed Board let the Superintendent go in a mutually amicable decision, reorganized the strategic vision for the system, and secured new, innovative district leadership that southwest Connecticut had never seen. I need to be frank at this point. There were a number of significant issues the Board uncovered ranging from fiscal mismanagement to inequitable distribution of resources; we needed a radical change to address immediate needs and we made them. I believe on my part I was guided by a new inner strength to help make tough decisions. We needed a balanced budget as required by law. We needed to figure out why there were such inconsistencies across our schools, such as expectations, resource allocation, class sizes, and school climate. We were faced with challenges to parent engagement – parents and caregivers wanting to be involved, but not knowing how to do so or lacking differentiated opportunities beyond the regular school day. There was a tremendous need for early intervention and differentiation of instructional practices given the district diversity of academic and nonacademic issues. Further, there were problems with school leadership and teacher quality, as well as with the support and evaluation system for school-based personnel. And safety and security...members of the public we spoke to expressed concern and sadness over not feeling physically safe in the

buildings, walking home, or waiting for the bus. All of these issues became the forefront for dialogue and decision-making. Immediate change was necessary and we worked hours on end to address each and every one to implement positive change.

At this time, the work to address these and a plethora of other issues is underway. There is a strong five-year plan in place and we continue with forward momentum despite ongoing political challenges. After a year of state appointment, the State Supreme Court ruled that the elected board prior to the state-appointed board did not go through the necessary steps to warrant state takeover and ordered the state-appointed board revert back to the locally elected one. There were four open seats of this nine member elected board now open. Again, thanks to the tools I had been developing at Sacred Heart and my renewed energy for the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, I became a reluctant politician and ran for a school board seat. I won the seat and was voted to serve as the board's Chairman for my first year.

It is important to note that this experience has changed my life. I learned to analyze assumptions and biases. Initially I was an outsider to Bridgeport, affected by statewide negativity directed toward this vibrantly diverse city. I've come to know a passionate, dedicated community that rallies around its children. I've learned that our district is teaming with best practiced in education. The teachers and administrators are unsung heroes and throw themselves into their work. They encounter the barrier of poverty. Poverty is the enemy here. Still, I am privileged to be able to play a small part in improving outcome for students under my care. I have a lot more work to do. Since writing this reflective piece, a new Board was voted in by the people of Bridgeport. Democracy is a major player in how the Board is now conducting business. The Board and community are working to envision a statement of mission and strategically targeted goals to get the district headed in the direction to close one of the nation's largest achievement gaps.

Conclusions: Catholic Tradition of Service

A hallmark of being Catholic is a concern for and dedication to those in need and our service to others. From the esteemed and necessary Catholic Charities Community Services to the daily soup kitchens operated by parishoners and partners, we believe in being stewards of God and preserving human dignity. We believe in actions for justice – it is our civic, moral, social and ethical duty. It is what our tradition teaches under God. In my case I had and continue to have the privilege to serve the poor and vulnerable and to have God's guiding hand steadying my, at times, shaking one. As university professionals, we must trust in our faith and be relentless in finding ways to serve. As institution of higher learning, we must provide professional development opportunities in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition that feeds and nurtures us so that we can carry out these commitments. I believe my own experience and metamorphosis can occur across other universities and colleges; I believe we can have a lasting impact through the empowerment of local efforts guided by those values we hold so dear.

Bridgeport may still have challenges of significant magnitude, but it's growing in strength and improving on measures of student engagement, school climate, and academic gains. The school board is focused on a long-term mission and vision for its children and youth, and addressing poverty through unified community-based services and outreach remain

paramount in next steps. The faces of these little ones remain front and center and we refuse to be thought of as fractured and “failing”. We are Bridgeport and we are strong. We will rebuild ourselves into a model of excellence and capitalize by sustaining the amazing practices that already exist and build them to scale across our schools and services. We have faith and that is half the battle.

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