Leadership for Social Transformation: Portraits of Three K-12 Black Male Education Leaders in Southern Dallas

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Leadership for Social Transformation: Portraits of Three K-12 Black Male Education Leaders in Southern Dallas

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to the educators in southern Dallas who each day remind their students of the greatness they possess;

to the mothers and fathers who sacrifice so much so their sons and daughters can live choice-filled lives;

and to Marissa, Bailey, and John for reminding me that all things are possible to those who believe.
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This dissertation represents the support of numerous individuals. Without their counsel, accountability, and affirmation this project would have not been completed.

I extend my heartfelt thanks to Dr. Terry Flowers, Nakia Douglas, and Quinn Vance. Thank you for inviting me into your spaces, and for allowing me to probe and prod. I am grateful for your vulnerability, trust in me, and unwavering belief in the transformative power of education.

Thank you to Professors Lawrence-Lightfoot, Mapp, and Warren. Throughout my leadership journey, I have the great privilege of working with teachers whom have nurtured my intellectual curiosity while holding me to a high bar of excellence. Thank you, Professor Warren, for reviewing early drafts of my dissertation and providing much needed clarity. Professors Lawrence-Lightfoot, Mapp, and Warren—this has been a long and at times challenging journey. Nonetheless, your patience and pushes have reminded me of the joys of learning; and beauty and complexity of finding goodness in communities about which I care so deeply.

In addition to my research, I have had the honor of leading a southern Dallas school district. My team’s support has been invaluable as I have worked to balance the integrity of research with the challenge of leading change. Thank you to my board, leadership team, parents, and students whom have all provided the space and time for research and writing.

Family has always played an integral role in my personal and professional development. This project was no different. To the Horne family: Thank you for instilling in me a commitment to service and an appreciation of a rich legacy of black American achievement. I especially want to thank my mother Patricia Horne whose prayers have provided much-needed spiritual fortitude. To the Wattley family: Thank you for showing me the richness that is southern Dallas. To the Morgan-Welch family: Your hugs and meals reminded me of the value of family and friendship. I especially want to thank the late Reverend Mark Welch for reminding me to “never to sell myself short,” and “to risk something big for something good.”

To my children Bailey and John. You enrich my life daily and remind me of the awesome gift of parenting. Marissa—without your love and sacrifice, this project would have never begun, let alone been completed. Thank you for believing in me and setting a powerful example of unconditional love for me and our family.
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Abstract

Twenty-first century K-12 education leaders are increasingly positioned as critical levers in transforming chronically underperforming schools and school systems. Efforts to enhance student and school performance however have narrowly centered around standardized test scores. Education leadership has similarly been reinterpreted as developing systems and structures optimized for improving students’ assessment performance. This narrow vision of education and model of leadership practice, while popular, is inconsistent with well-documented evidence that supports students’ cognitive and social-emotional development to increase positive life outcomes.

This is a study of three K-12 black male education leaders in southern Dallas, a geographic area that is educationally and economically under-resourced, who have chosen to advance a vision of education rooted in social change. Using portraiture as my research methodology, this study examined the following questions: how do three K-12 black male education leaders in southern Dallas conceptualize their role as leaders? How do the social, political, and historical contexts within which they reside inform the leaders’ professional and personal identities? Using semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and document analysis, the data derived from this study expands our understanding of how black education leaders translate their values into action.

This study builds upon existing leadership theory and research on transformational leadership, black political leadership, and social justice leadership to explore how the leaders’ lived experiences inform their leadership practice. Using semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and document analysis, the data derived from this study deepens our perception of the ways black education leaders advance their visions of social transformation.

Upon examination of the leaders’ narratives, this study finds that the leaders prioritized their constituents’ well-being above their own advancement when responding to persistent social, political, and economic inequality in southern Dallas. This leadership choice aligns to historical models of servant leadership and black social movement leadership.

Additionally, the leaders have created school environments shaped by a belief in supporting the whole child, not just improving test scores. Despite their commitment to social change and early indicators of success, the leaders were unable to fully reject the technocratic approach to education leadership underscoring the complexity of transformational education leadership. As policy makers and practitioners work to address persistent academic underperformance, this study helps us critically explore the convergence between transformational and technocratic leadership. Moreover, this study helps elevate black leaders’ voices whom have largely been absent from the dominant education discourse.
Chapter 1
Introduction

In his 1959 sermon entitled “A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart,” Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote the following: “truth is found neither in the thesis nor the antithesis, but in an emergent synthesis that reconciles the two.”\(^1\) Citing German philosopher Georg Hegel, King believed adopting the dialectic framework was necessary to systemically eradicate the scourge of white supremacy in the United States. Moreover, by espousing a “strong mind” and a “tender heart,” King believed that black Americans would achieve the social, political, and economic freedom for which they had long struggled.

For many black Americans, education has historically been the primary mechanism by which they could gain access to the principles and practices of a liberal democracy. In keeping with this belief, schools and school leaders promoted a holistic conception of education in which cognitive and social-emotional development were both necessary for individual and collective success. Developing students’ hearts and minds therefore was the convergence of the “strong opposites” Dr. King claimed is necessary for social transformation.

Changes to local and state K-12 education policy over the past several decades have challenged the holistic philosophy of education. Citing persistent racial and socio-economic variance in academic performance and implications on life outcomes, policy makers have increasingly defined student and school performance in quantifiable terms. While performance on standardized tests is an important component of evaluating students' readiness for college and careers, quantitative measures of performance do not fully capture the complexity of students’ development. In this era of *education reform*, K-12 education leadership practice has been interpreted as actions designed to help ensure organizational adherence to a metric-based vision of education. Under these circumstances, the nuance of education leadership has been minimized—the “synthesis and antithesis” at the heart of how leaders advance a vision of social change.

It is in this context that I am interested in how three K-12 black male education leaders in southern Dallas navigate an education reform environment to advance a vision of social transformation. Terry J. Flowers, age 56, is the Perot Family headmaster and executive director of St. Philip’s School and Community Center. Located in South Dallas, St. Philip’s is a comprehensive private elementary school serving students in grades pre-kindergarten through sixth grade. In addition to the elementary and middle schools, St. Philip’s offers a variety of health and social service programing through its community center. Dr. Flowers grew up on the South Side of Chicago, and taught in Iowa and New York City where he earned his Ph.D. from Columbia University’s Teachers College. Dr. Flowers joined St. Philip’s in 1983 as its second principal.
Nakia Douglas, age 39, is the executive director of Dallas Independent School District’s South Oak Cliff feeder pattern—a portfolio of twelve K-12 public schools. Prior to becoming executive director, Nakia was the founder and first principal of the Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy—Dallas’ only all-male public magnet school. Founded in 2011, the Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy serves male students in grades 6-12. Nakia Douglas is a native of South Dallas, and graduate of Livingstone College.

Quinton “Quinn” Vance, age 41, is the executive director of KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) Dallas Fort-Worth Public Schools. A district of open-enrollment charter schools in southern Dallas, KIPP DFW is part of the national KIPP network. Prior to joining KIPP Dallas-Fort Worth, Quinn was responsible for expanding KIPP’s K-4 charter elementary schools in New York City. Quinn is a graduate of the University of Oregon and Saint Peter’s College where he earned a Master’s degree in education.

I have known each participant professionally as we all comprise a small, but growing group of black male education leaders seeking to redefine how education is used to drive social, political, and economic change in southern Dallas. It is in this context that this study explores the following research questions:

- How do three K-12 black male education leaders in southern Dallas conceptualize their role as leaders?
• How do the leaders’ lived experiences inform their ability to navigate social, political, and economic contexts to advance their visions for community change through education?

As the title to this research inquiry denotes, Terry, Nakia, and Quinn’s choice to lead in southern Dallas, an area whose residents have historically been marginalized is aligned to their vision of addressing social, political, and economic divisions that persist in Dallas. Consequently, these men have become agents of change, reimagining the role of education in advancing social transformation. In the chapters that follow, I first locate the research questions and the participants' narratives in existing literature about transformational leadership. Next, I describe portraiture, my research methodology which allows me to present the participants’ narratives, blending aesthetic description with empirical analysis. I then introduce three portraits: The Lighthouse, Building Bridges, and Team and Family. I conclude by exploring themes that have emerge across the three portraits and implications for future research, policy, and practice.
Chapter 2


To say we are in a transformative moment in our history is not hyperbole. In response to persistent K-12 academic achievement performance gaps between low-income students and students of color and their more affluent and white peers, federal and state education policymakers have readily embraced quantitative measures of school and school system performance. Education excellence, once conceptualized as students’ academic and social development, has been increasingly redefined as students’ readiness for college and careers as measured by formative and summative assessments. Education leadership has similarly been reinterpreted as developing systems and structures optimized for improving students’ assessment performance.

While these changes have perhaps been helpful in getting educators to focus on improving instruction, some education leaders see this approach as too narrow, especially given the persistence of societal social and economic inequities. To that end, changes in demographic shifts have exposed social, political, and economic inequities that have prevented historically marginalized groups from accessing rights extended under our democracy. Within this context, education leaders have emerged, advancing a more holistic vision of education as a critical mechanism for broader social transformation.

Indeed, these leaders, and their constituents, interpret student and school variance as

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related to pervasive social, political, and economic systems that have historically marginalized low income and black and Latino communities. Exercising a more holistic vision of education and leadership practice that combines technical and adaptive skills, these education leaders conceptualize their roles as school and school system leaders—as well as community leaders promoting social transformation and equity. Moreover, they define a successful student as an individual who can navigate across social, cultural, and historical contexts to positively contribute to their communities’ empowerment. Translating this more transformational approach to education leadership within the institutional confines of technocratic and test-based accountability systems however remains a challenge.

To examine how the three leaders navigate this challenge, I will first look at existing research on transformational leadership. As a conceptual framework, transformational leadership expands our understanding of Terry, Nakia, and Quinn’s visions for social change. Within this context, this chapter will explore social movement leadership as a historical model of black leadership in the United States. I will conclude this chapter by discussing the literature on socially just leadership as a model for education leadership practice in the 21st century.

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Transformational Leadership

The late historian Manning Marable defined leaders as “individuals who have the ability to understand their own times, who express or articulate programs or policies that reflect the perceived interests and desires of particular groups, and who devise instruments or political vehicles that enhance the capacity to achieve effective change.”

Building upon Manning’s definition of leadership, I define leaders as actors who seek to alter or transform systems and structures to advance a shared vision of what is possible. To this end, leadership is a dynamic, transformative process.

In his 1978 book Leadership, organizational theorist James MacGregor Burns introduces the theory of transformational leadership, citing that leadership is the process by which “leaders and followers help each other to advance to a higher level of morale and motivation”. Transformational leaders therefore strive to advance a greater public good—operating as transcendent leaders, “lifting people into their better selves”. Transformational leadership theory posits that change occurs when a leader develops a relationship with others predicated on mutual trust and reciprocity rather than self-gain. A leader’s personality and style are central to their ability to impact and influence others.

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Transformational leaders are visionaries, employing charisma to invest their constituents in envisioning future states of being.10

Bernard Bass builds upon Burns’ theories of transformational leadership by suggesting that a leader's impact on the performance of his or her followers could be measured. According to Bass, observed changes in a follower's action is influenced by his or her admiration and reverence for the leader.11 Similarly, Bass asserts that transformational leaders generally exhibit several personality traits including charisma and selflessness. More specifically however, Bass contends that transformational leadership is composed of four “elements”: inspirational motivation; intellectual stimulation; individualized consideration; and idealized influence.12

Inspirational motivation relates to the leader's ability to motivate others by communicating a clear and compelling vision of the future. Articulating the purpose for collective action is a necessary component of followers choosing to change their behavior. Intellectual stimulation describes the value a leader places on the development of new ideas and bodies of knowledge. Challenge is embraced as a learning opportunity, and leaders encourage others to think independently as a means of solving problems. Individualized consideration is defined as the “empathetic regard” leaders demonstrate.

for their followers. Rather than adopt a uniform approach for engagement, leaders differentiate their leadership activity to attend to their followers' unique needs and desires. Finally, idealized influence denotes the extent to which the leader becomes an aspirational figure for his or her followers.

*Transformational School Leadership*

Efforts to address national and state level persistent academic underperformance of low-income and black and Latino students has resulted in a reinterpretation of student success as performance on standardized tests. For school and school system leaders, this shift in outcomes has resulted in an increased value placed on leaders' technical skills in managing process and structure at the expense of advancing a comprehensive vision of schooling. To the contrary, other voices have emerged advocated for a more holistic vision of education—and for schools to reposition themselves as environments where students acquire the tools necessary to engage with our democratic systems. One of those voices is Thomas Sergiovanni who asserts that “our young need to become cultured educated citizens able to participate fully in society, not just trained workers with limited potential for such participation.”

Realizing a vision of inclusion and access in this current education reform context requires school and school system leadership that is transformative in nature. Situating his analysis in transformational leadership theory, Sergiovanni submits that transformational school leaders exhibit five behaviors:

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technical—derived from sound management techniques; human—derived from harnessing available social and interpersonal resources; educational—derived from expert knowledge about matters of education and schooling; symbolic—derived from focusing the attention of others on matters of importance to the school; and cultural—providing a set of norms that defines what people should accomplish and how; and provides a source of meaning and significance for teachers, students, administrators, and others as they work.¹⁴

In the face of a technical interpretation of the purpose of schooling, John Goodlad cautions school leaders to resist committing what he calls a “fundamental error which ultimately, will have a negative impact on both education and one’s own career.”¹⁵ Rather, transformational school leaders must assume responsibility for crafting and communicating a vision of education that speaks to the development of the heart, mind, and body in service of advancing a greater public good.

Empirical research has been conducted on transformational school leadership revealing the conditions in which this type of leadership is prevalent. Kenneth Leithwood and Doris Jantzi analyzed 32 quantitative and qualitative studies between 1996 and 2005 to identify the impact transformational leadership had on student and school performance.¹⁶ Leithwood and Jantzi’s research revealed a more expansive list of “transformational leadership behaviors” evident in school contexts. These behaviors included direction setting (setting high expectations and communicating an inspiring

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¹⁵ Ibid., 7.
vision); helping others (providing individualized support); organizational redesign (developing systems and structures to foster collaboration; and management (building instructional capacity).\textsuperscript{17}

Analyzing the impact of organizational culture on school performance in 26 Singapore secondary schools, Heck and Marcoulides found that “schools perceived to have less rigid organizational structures, more flexible application of rules (less bureaucracy) and more collaborative and collegial values were perceived to have leadership that is more transformational.”\textsuperscript{18} Studies evaluating the impact of transformational leadership on students' scholastic achievement are mixed. For example, using the results of a national, standardized test of achievement, Heck and Marcoulides reported “nonsignificant effects of transformational leadership on student achievement.”\textsuperscript{19} Ross reported significant positive effects of transformational leadership on achievement in math and language, whereas Leithwood and Jantzi found nonsignificant effects.\textsuperscript{20}

\textit{Social Movement Leadership}

Thus far, I have advanced a theory of school and school system leadership rooted in transformational leadership theory. In the current K-12 education reform environment, the notion of changing systems and structures aligned to a holistic vision of education is

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 184.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 191.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 184.
relevant for examining how Terry, Quinn, and Nakia conceptualize their roles as K-12 education leaders in southern Dallas. Leaders, much like their constituents, are social actors situated within complex and dynamic social, political and historical contexts. For historically marginalized groups, much like the black and Latino students Terry, Quinn, and Nakia serve, education is a tool to disrupt and dismantle dominant systems of oppression. Rather than changing actors’ behavior within existing structures, socially just leadership calls for dismantling systems of inequity. Transforming socially dominant structures therefore requires a concerted, coordinated, and sustained effort on behalf of leaders and their constituents. Furthermore, accepting this paradigm shift, requires us to interpret leadership practice as akin to leading a social movement—and transformative leadership as social movement leadership.

Social movements, according to Ganz, “emerge as a result of the efforts of purposeful actors (individuals, organizations) to assert new public values, form new relationships root in those values, and mobilize the political, economic, and cultural power to translate these values into action.”21 The duality inherent in social movements—disruption and creation of systems and structures—suggests that social movement leaders must be visionaries possessing what theologian Walter Brueggemann notes is a prophetic imagination: “a combination of criticality (experience of the world’s pain) with hope

(experience of the world’s possibility), avoiding being numbed by despair or deluded by optimism.”\textsuperscript{22}

\textit{Servant Leadership}

Inherent to social movement leadership is the idea that leaders are acting on behalf of their constituents’ needs. To that end, the leader conceptualizes his or her activities as service to others as opposed to advancing his or her own agenda. The notion of leadership as service is what Robert Greenleaf describes as servant leadership. Servant leadership “requires that the concerned individual accept the problems he or she sees in the world as his or her own personal task, as a means of achieving his or her own integrity.”\textsuperscript{23} Unlike transactional leadership which is primarily based on the exchange of external rewards, a servant leader measures his or her success as the degree to which they have improved his or her constituents’ well-being.\textsuperscript{24} Moreover, “while capable leadership is highly individualistic, the quality of servant leadership—a selfless desire to be of genuine service—is essential to those seeking to lead others toward transcendent, extraordinary goals.”\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{24} Greenleaf, \textit{The Servant as Leader} (Westfield: Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 2008).
Black Leadership

Race is a social construct that informs the distribution of individuals and resources into social, political, and economic categories. Since Africans’ arrival to North America as property, black Americans have existed within a dominant white power structure, and have subsequently struggled against systemic forms of racial oppression. Within this social and historical context, black leadership has been oriented towards advancing black Americans’ collective socio-political and economic well-being.

Walters and Smith highlight the relationship between black leaders and black Americans’ collective interests in their definition of black leadership. “Black leadership,” they posit, “is enacted by people of African descent; derived from the collective interests and concerns of people of African descent—including involvement in historical events defined by a ‘racial uplift’ tradition; and relies on social rather than economic resources due to systemic economic disenfranchisement of blacks.” For this purpose of this study, I define black leadership as “leadership that seeks to directly remove the physical and institutional impediments to the achievement of black progress both individually and collectively.”28

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The civil rights movement of the 1960s provides a historical frame of reference for exploring the relationship between black political leadership and servant leadership. Fannie Lou Hamer’s leadership of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party’s push to be formally recognized during the 1964 Democratic National Convention is an example of the “sense of duty and self-sacrifice” black leaders during the 1960s espoused in an effort to achieve social, political, and economic freedom. Enduring physical harm and resistance, Hamer’s steadfast advocacy on behalf of black Mississippians for a more fair and representative delegation process was instrumental in the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

For many civil rights leaders like Hamer, their commitment to elevate the needs of others above their own needs was rooted in Christian principles of service. Guided by the biblical commandment to “love thy neighbor as thyself,” the servant leaders of the 1960s interpreted service to others as a necessary leadership practice to disrupt dehumanizing social systems. The black church, which initially served as a protector of cultural rituals—helped organize “resistance against socio-political and economic oppression . . . influencing public and private systems of power.” Writing about the black church at the beginning of the 20th century, W. E. B. DuBois noted the following:

The Negro church of today is the social centre of Negro life in the United States, and the most characteristic expression of African character....

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Various organizations meet here,—the church proper, the Sunday-school, two or three insurance societies, women’s societies, secret societies, and mass meetings of various kinds. At the same time this social, intellectual, and economic centre is a religious centre of great power.32

The black church’s hierarchical structure and authoritative leadership model positioned the black minister to assume a visible role as the public face of black Americans’ struggle for civil rights. At the age of 29, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a Baptist minister, became the face of the Montgomery Bus Boycott which successfully dismantled Montgomery’s system of racial segregation in public accommodations. Like King, Adam Clayton Powell’s rise as an influential United States Congress member originated in the black church. In 1937, Adam Clayton Powell Jr. succeeded his father as the eighteenth minister of Harlem’s Abyssinian Baptist Church. In 1941, at the age of thirty-three, Powell was elected to the New York City Council, receiving the endorsement of then Mayor Fiorella LaGuardia. Powell’s critique of racial discrimination in the United States armed forces during World War II, something he wrote about in The People’s Voice, a weekly newspaper, increased Powell’s national prominence as a political figure.33 In 1945, Powell was elected to the 79th U.S. Congress, representing Harlem until 1971. As a member of Congress, Powell advocated for ending racially-based discrimination, successfully adding a rider to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 later called the “Powell Amendment.”

The intersection between religion and social transformation is evident in southern Dallas. Bryan Carter, senior pastor of Concord Church, a black megachurch in the Redbird community of southern Dallas, is also chairman of Impact Dallas Capital. Impact Dallas Capital (IDC) markets itself as a “double-bottom line” organization designed to increase southern Dallas economic viability through investments that generate a market rate of return to investors.34 Among Impact Capitals investments was a multi-million investment in Redbird Mall, the largest shopping mall in southern Dallas. Additionally, Ritchie Butler, Senior Pastor of St. Paul AME, one of Dallas oldest Black Church, is the founder of Year of Unity. This initiative, is designed to bridge racial and class gaps that continue to plague Dallas—divisions that were made most evident after the tragic shooting of five Dallas police officers on July 7, 2016.35

**Socially Just Educational Leadership**

Transformational leadership theory is helpful because it emphasizes leadership action as derived from a desire to advance a public good. As a conceptual framework, however, it does not directly engage with issues of racial equity and social justice. Nevertheless, theories of socially just leadership elevate this dimension. Goldfarb and Grinberg defined social justice “as the exercise of altering these arrangements (institutional and organizational power arrangements) by actively engaging in reclaiming,  

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appropriating, sustaining, and advancing inherent human rights of equity, equality, and fairness in social, economic, educational, and personal dimensions.”

Marshall and Ward maintained that “social justice means ensuring that laws for individual rights are observed so that access to educational services is available . . . social justice can mean finding ways to ‘fix’ those with inequitable access.” However, Bogotch asserted that social justice is a social construction and “there are no fixed or predictable meanings of social justice prior to actually engaging in educational leadership practices.” For this study, I use Theoharis’ definition of social justice leadership: “principals advocating, leading, and keeping at the center of their practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States.” Social justice principals are individuals who work with their teams to develop school-wide systems and structures that help ensure that students have the support necessary to achieve academically. This could include protocols for monitoring special education services to implementing a positive behavior intervention system. In addition to creating systems that promote equity, social justice principals are unapologetic about holding their teams accountable for complying with school-wide procedures and practices designed to foster equity across student groups.

38 Ibid., 5.
39 Ibid., 5.
Social Justice Leadership Characteristics

Theoharis’ qualitative study of seven urban school leaders across elementary, middle, and high school reveals several traits of social justice school leaders:

- Arrogant humility: Paradoxical combination of confidence that their beliefs and actions are correct and necessary for their constituents. Self-awareness of mistakes and willingness to privately and publicly question their efficacy.\(^{40}\)

- Passionate visionary leadership: Embodying a personal and deep commitment to enhancing the welfare of others. Theoharis notes that “it is this personal vision that allows social justice education leaders to focus their efforts and the work of their staff in achieving equity and social justice for the marginalized students.”\(^{41}\)

- Tenacious commitment to justice: The principals exhibited a steadfast focus on equity and social justice. Moreover, in working towards a more equitable setting, the principals displayed a balance between communicating and modeling a vision and empowering others.\(^{42}\) The leader does not carry the torch alone, but practices shared decision-making. In this context, social justice leaders ascribe to democratic principles of decision making as opposed to autocratic leadership.\(^{43}\)

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\(^{40}\) Ibid., 13.  
\(^{41}\) Ibid., 16.  
\(^{42}\) Ibid., 16.  
\(^{43}\) Ibid., 19.
This study in part is a response to the dearth of literature documenting black male education leaders. Indeed, Rusch and Marshall contend that the education leadership literature continues to be dominated by white men. Moreover, many scholars of education leadership examine leaders as disconnected from the very social and political contexts within which leaders reside. Not only does this limit our understanding of leadership practice, it also minimizes student achievement as aligned to the social and political contexts within which students exist. Rather, leadership and decision-making should be explored as connected to and influenced by complex contexts.

There is a small, but growing field of literature on black female education leaders—individuals whose voice and stories have also historically been absent from the dominant discourse on education leadership. These studies provide powerful examples of how black education leaders champion education visions predicated on the ideals of equity and inclusion.

Latish Cherie Reed’s study of three Black female urban high principals reveals that school leaders’ lived experiences informed how they made sense of and responded to racial and gender oppression. Having attended a segregated high school during the civil rights movement, one of the principals specifically sought to work in majority black, rural, and poor school environments “in an effort to raise their achievement and offer

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them opportunities beyond their community.”45 In her analysis of black female superintendents, Alston found that her participants adopted the persona of a tempered radical which she defined as “individuals who identify with and are committed to their organizations and also to a cause, community, or ideology that is fundamentally different from and possibly at odds with the dominant culture of their organization”.46 By assuming this identity, Alston determined that the black female superintendents were able to resist racist and sexist practices within their school systems.47

This study builds upon the existing literature on black education leaders by situating leaders as social actors embedded within social, political, and economic settings. Indeed, leaders’ ability to navigate through multiple contexts is informed by the intersection of their lived experience and the rules and codes of the social, political, and historical contexts within which they exist.

*Researching Transformational Education Leaders*

My goal in researching three black education leaders in southern Dallas was to illuminate our understanding of the complexities of advancing change in rapidly shifting social, political, and historical settings. The literature review therefore provides several conceptual frameworks to help us better understand how the three education leaders

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conceptualize their roles and practices in advancing a vision of social transformation in southern Dallas.

In this context, transformational leadership theory appropriately captures the efforts of the leaders as they seek to develop systems and structures designed to support the academic and social-emotional development of their students. In seeking to educate historically marginalized communities through a more holistic academic program, the transformational leaders counter the technocratic leadership aligned to narrow definitions of education as measured by formative assessments.

Critical examination of the three leaders must also acknowledge that as social actors, they are situated within broader social, cultural, and historical context. To that end, the men in this study are connected to a historical legacy of black leadership in the United States in which the role of the leader within the struggle for equal rights has been inextricably linked to the collective empowerment of others. In this light, transformational leadership is represented as social movement leadership. As black men, the three leaders in this study are connected to a social movement leadership practice that promotes the well-being of the group above that of the individual. Accordingly, servant leadership is an expression of the “we over me” philosophy that has been a driving force in the evolution of black leadership in the United States.

The three portraits in this study expand our understanding of the challenges and possibilities of translating values into action. Terry, Nakia, and Quinn’s voice illuminate the emergence of education leaders of color who reveal a leadership practice rooted in the
belief that education is a primary pathway for liberation. In the face of immense local and broader change, the inclusion of their voices informs how we conceptualize new models of leadership needed to help black and Latino students fulfill the promise of our democracy.
Chapter 3
Methodology

Zora Neale Hurston once declared that “research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose. It is a seeking that he who wishes may know the cosmic secrets of the world and they that dwell therein.” This study began with my curiosity about the emergence of a type of education leadership in southern Dallas that differed from the dominant models of leadership I had witnessed being promoted among individuals and institutions interested in improving the quality of K-12 education in southern Dallas. Terry, Nakia, and Quinn illustrate an education leadership style rooted in the tradition of socially just leadership, and relevant for a context in which persistent social, political, and economic inequities impede black and Latino students’ ability to live lives of choice.

Introducing the three leaders’ narratives required my commitment as a researcher to examine the fullness and complexity of their leadership journeys. Indeed, Lawrence-Lightfoot states that “research should be critical and generous, allowing subjects to reveal their many dimensions and strengths, but also attempting to pierce through the smooth and correct veneers.”48 This inquiry aims to uncover the points of tension and contradiction that have informed how these leaders have translated their values into action on behalf of the school-communities they have chosen to serve. Examining the

complexity of their visions and leadership practice, I have chosen portraiture as my research methodology.

Portraiture is a method of qualitative inquiry that brings together empirical research and aesthetic expression.\textsuperscript{49} Through an iterative and dynamic engagement between the portraitist, his or her research participants, and the context within which they reside, the portraitist reveals the complexity of the human experience. Explorations of the human experience have often originated from a focus on pathology. Indeed, the dominant discourse on black male leadership has been constructed within a pervasive and historical black pathology. Even while acknowledging systematic oppression against black men in the United States, the historical construction of black masculinity fails to recognize the ways in which black men have developed a sense of self-worth and dignity.\textsuperscript{50}

Portraiture documents actors as their authentic selves by beginning with the search for what is good. Goodness is not an idealization of the actors or the lives they lead. Rather, the search for goodness assumes that there are imperfections and aims to expose the dialectic—“the counterpoint and contradictions of strength and vulnerability, virtue and evil.”\textsuperscript{51} The portraitist assumes that the qualities of “strength, health, and productivity—will always be imbued with flaws, weaknesses, and inconsistencies.”\textsuperscript{52}

In the search for goodness, the portraitist does not impose his or her definition of goodness. Moreover, portraiture does not align to a singular definition of goodness. Each

\textsuperscript{49} Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis. \textit{The art and science of portraiture}, (San Francisco, Calif: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 41.


\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 9.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 142.
participant in this study has a vision of education that he has worked to realize in his own southern Dallas educational institution. Despite many similarities, each leader's vision and leadership practice is the result of a dynamic interplay between the leaders' experiences, their constituents, and the social, cultural, and historical context within which they operate. Through a disciplined approach of questioning and listening to the participants, I uncovered the varied representations of goodness in each leaders' narratives.

Presenting more complete and authentic representations of how the participants navigate southern Dallas requires removing the barriers that traditional methods of research create between the researcher and his audience. For the past seven years, I have been a K-12 education leader in southern Dallas. My understanding of the distinct communities each research participant represents, as well as the broader historical and cultural settings within which they reside informs my interpretation of their leadership practice. Nonetheless, as a portraitist, I must balance “analysis and solidarity as the twin poles of scholarship.”

Maintaining a discerning perch, asking impertinent questions, and making evident my assumptions and biases allowed me to achieve the counterbalance needed to present an authentic narrative.

Portraiture is designed to broaden the audience’s understanding of K-12 education in southern Dallas, by illuminating the narratives of the very people who are working to realize a vision of education predicated on social transformation. Through the leaders' narratives, we are invited into their spaces, deepening our understanding of K-12

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53 Ibid., 10.
schooling and education leadership practice. Additionally, portraiture also addresses the implicit and explicit boundaries that exclude individuals from marginalized communities from conversations about education. Most of the commentary and analysis about K-12 education in southern Dallas is not informed by those working inside of schools. By entering the leaders' schools, their portraits add depth to broader conversations about education reform. Additionally, the portraits will give voice to the thousands of black and brown families the leaders represent, and who are often not included in the conversations about the very spaces they occupy.

To create a narrative that reveals the depth of the human experience, portraiture utilizes five methodological frames: context, voice, relationship, emergent themes, and an aesthetic whole. Actors are embedded within complex and overlapping social, cultural, and historical settings. As such, to interpret actors' actions and perspectives, portraiture examines individuals in context. Viewing actors in their respective contexts allows them to be their authentic selves, illuminating their social interactions.

Southern Dallas as a geo-political setting is a central part of this inquiry and frames each leader’s narrative. My immersion in Oak Cliff, Red Bird, and South Dallas deepened my understanding of how the physical and symbolic places influence the leaders’ visions and leadership practice. The sounds of the Dallas Area Rapid Transit light railway cars, and the modest slope of the post-World War II homes give shape to the environment in which Nakia, Quinn, and Terry imagine new possibilities for their staff, students, and families. The broader physical setting also provides the reader insight into

54 Ibid., 253.
how the leaders conceptualize efforts to advance southern Dallas economic development and where their constituents are located within those changes.

The school is another important setting in this study. The physical structure, cafeteria, hallways, and classrooms are physical representations of the shared norms, beliefs—cultures the leaders professed. Observing the artifacts on the walls and listening to and for informal and formal conversations helped amplify the themes and undercurrents throughout each narrative.

In addition to context, the researcher's voice is a critical component of his or her narrative. The researcher's voice is omnipresent in the knowledge, perspectives, biases, and assumptions he or she brings to the inquiry.55 This study is informed by my own personal and professional journey as a K-12 black male education leader in southern Dallas. As a child, I recall listening to my mother, a public-school teacher in a predominately black New York school district, and my father, a middle manager in a New York cable company, respectively share stories of how they navigated racially segregated school settings in North Carolina, Long Island, and Rhode Island. Their stories of survival became the framework for how I navigated predominately white educational institutions throughout my academic journey. My mother's commitment to improving black students' well-being through education—what she referred to as her "life's work"—influenced my decision to abandon a career in pediatric medicine to enter the field of education. My roles as a middle school principal and district administrator in southern Dallas, coupled with my study of the literature on systems leadership are the

55 Ibid., 85.
lenses through which I have interpreted Nakia, Quinn, and Terry's behaviors and leadership practice.\textsuperscript{56}

The insertion of the researcher's voice, however, reveals an inherent dialectic in which the omnipresence of his or her voice is balanced by the researcher's discerning stance. Portraiture requires the researcher to be balanced—not allowing his or her perspectives, biases, or assumptions to overshadow the inquiry. Through disciplined questioning and gathering multiple data sources such as organizational documents, interviews, and participant observation, I remained open to “disconfirming evidence”. Assuming an outsider's stance, I was able to offer a counter-balance to my biases and assumptions in the narrative.\textsuperscript{57} Additionally, I made visible behaviors or patterns that go unnoticed by the actors as they navigate the complexity of their work.\textsuperscript{58}

Developing a narrative that captures the authenticity and complexity of the leaders’ practice also required me to listen for their voices. Laughter, frustration, and concern are all components of the human experience. As such, during my interviews and participant observations, I listened to the tenor and cadence of their speech and observed their physical movements. Including those emotions in the portraits represented the leaders as their most authentic selves.\textsuperscript{59} Listening to the leaders, I was also attentive to points of contradiction between the leaders' words and deeds. “Listening for voice not

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 93.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 85.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 87.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 99.
only requires listening, watching, and questioning, it also requires that the portraitist be attentive to what is not spoken.”

Lawrence-Lightfoot notes that portraits are “constructed, shaped, and drawn through the development of relationships.” Indeed, relationships are dynamic, complex, and grounded in notions of understanding and reciprocity. As a black male education leader in southern Dallas, I began this study with established relationships with all three participants. These relationships were instrumental in building the initial trust required to explore their personal leadership journeys. Time and proximity are critical factors that shape the depth and nature of the relationship between the portraitist and actors.

Meeting with the participants formally and informally, and observing them in their school-communities over sustained periods of time revealed new dimensions of each participant and myself. My interactions with Terry, Nakia, and Quinn became a way to not only shine light into their lives, but to illuminate the assumptions I held about leading educational institutions in southern Dallas. Recalling my own personal and professional narrative enabled me to exercise “empathetic regard”—affirming the challenges each participant has experienced in their personal and professional journeys. Nonetheless, I was also conscious of my existing relationships with the leaders and the need to help ensure that my relationships did not inhibit in my ability to critically examine their leadership practice. Accordingly, at the onset of the study, I developed clear boundaries with each participant which included making transparent my intention to

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60 Ibid., 100.
61 Ibid., 135.
62 Ibid., 146.
ask questions that would trouble the waters. By making my intentions known, I also clarified that my role as a skeptic was necessary to develop portraits that captured the nuance and complexity of the leaders’ narratives.

Lawrence-Lightfoot contends that “the process of creating the narrative requires a difficult (sometimes paradoxical) vigilance to the empirical description and aesthetic expression.”63 I began this inquiry with an intellectual template informed by personal and professional experiences that gave shape and depth to my voice.64 Additionally, leveraging the theoretical and empirical literature, I brought a set of guiding questions to this inquiry. Through analyzing the data, refrains and patterns emerged that would create a thematic framework for the construction of the narrative.65 Nonetheless, to achieve the aesthetic whole, I also recognized that what gets left out is often as important as what gets included; the blank spaces and silences also shape the form of the story.66

Portraiture details the convergence of empirical description and aesthetic expression to create a narrative that captures the complexity and dimensionality of the human experience in social, cultural, and historical contexts.67 The three portraits in this study represent the union of four methodological elements central to the narrative—context, voice, relationship, emergent themes—all coming together in an aesthetic

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63 Ibid., 186.
64 Ibid., 186.
65 Ibid., 185.
66 Ibid., 12.
67 Ibid., 3.
whole. Lawrence-Lightfoot likens the aesthetic whole to a tapestry. The process of weaving a tapestry reveals the contours, colors, and consistency of the threads--interwoven into a structural design that allows the tapestry (the narrative) to emerge with authenticity and resonance. Converting the parts into an aesthetic whole requires the portraitist to scrutinize all details, removing those parts that prevent the audience from engaging with a coherent and authentic representation of the actor's experience.

Lawrence-Lightfoot writes that “the portraitist seeks to document and illuminate the complexity and detail of a unique experience or place, hoping that the audience will see themselves reflected in it, trusting that the readers will feel identified.” When I began this research journey, I sought to amplify the voices that were silenced by incomplete and distorted narratives of black male education leadership. In sharing Nakia, Quinn, and Terry's stories, my hope is to shift how we conceptualize educational leadership. Through disciplined questioning, I raised and challenged my own assumptions and biases to best interpret the leaders' visions of K-12 education. The search for goodness was not as an idealized and superficial celebration, but a rigorous exploration of the subtle tensions and contradictions that give shape to how each leader navigates complex and dynamic social, cultural, and historical contexts. It is for this reason that I chose portraiture. What follows is a description of my methodological

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68 Ibid., 243.
69 Ibid., 245.
70 Ibid., 269.
71 Ibid., 14.
process: the selection of participants, data collection, data analysis, and how I attended to issues of research validity.

**Participant Selection**

There were several factors that informed my selection of Terry Flowers, Nakia Douglas, and Quinn Vance as my research participants. First, all three were black male education leaders in southern Dallas managing complex institutions. Terry is the headmaster and executive director of the St. Philip’s School and Community Center. At the onset of this study, Nakia was the founder and first principal of the Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy, Dallas' only public all-boys school. Toward the conclusion of this study, Nakia was promoted to the role of executive director managing twelve schools within the Dallas Independent School District’s South Oak Cliff K-12 feeder pattern. Quinn is the executive director of KIPP Dallas-Fort Worth Public Schools, a district of five open-enrollment charter schools. Part of Quinn’s role is to expand KIPP DFW to ten schools educating five-thousand students—roughly five percent of the total population of K-12 public school students in southern Dallas.

Additionally, I was interested in education leaders who oversaw organizations that were explicitly connected to Dallas’ documented efforts to transform the southern Dallas’ communities. All three leaders or their organizations have been featured in Dallas Mayor Michael Rawlings *State of Grow South* presentations. Additionally, the participants’ organizations represent models that have been cited by city stakeholders as critical levers for revitalizing southern Dallas. For example, Mayor Rawlings has frequently asserted
that charter schools like KIPP DFW, while not being the panacea, inject “quality” choice into the city’s education system—helping to ensure that a child’s future is not solely dependent on family income. The Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy’s academic success has been heralded by prominent Dallas institutions including the Dallas Independent School District, Southern Methodist University, and the Dallas Chamber of Commerce for improving academic outcomes for southern Dallas students. St. Philip’s dual-role as a school and community center has increased Terry’s visibility with city officials and their efforts to mobilize development in South Dallas. When the city of Dallas attempted to redirect portions of Interstate 45 which would impact South Dallas, Terry and St. Philip's assumed a prominent role in fostering communication between the city and South Dallas residents.

Lastly, I wanted individuals to whom I had access. The role of a leader is challenging and entails balancing constituents’ competing interests. As such, I knew I could leverage my existing relationships with Terry, Nakia, and Quinn to yield the data I needed to answer the research question. Through conversations and observations, it became clear to me that the participants prioritized their engagement with me, at times at the expense of other interests. The process for participant selection was perhaps a unique advantage. It did however present challenges to validity—something to which I had to attend and will explain later.
Data Collection

Charmaz states that “the quality—and credibility—of your study starts with the data.”\textsuperscript{72} To pursue my research questions, my data collection methods consisted of three cycles of 90-minute semi-structured interviews, field observations, and document analysis. Between 2011-2012, I conducted semi-structured interviews with Nakia when he was principal of the Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy. Between 2014-2015, I interviewed Terry. Additionally, my interviews with Quinn spanned 2015-2016. In June of 2016, Nakia was promoted to executive director of the Dallas Independent School District’s South Oak Cliff feeder pattern. Given Nakia’s promotion to executive director, I conducted three additional semi-structured interviews.

The first interview I conducted with each participant was exploratory in that I used it as an opportunity to gain baseline information. The exploratory nature of the first interview also allowed me to be “open” and listen to the participants to gain a deeper understanding of their lives.\textsuperscript{73} In addition to interviews, I documented informal interactions with the school leaders. These interactions occurred either after participant observations or during times before or after interviews. I often found that the informal settings provided rich data that triangulated other information I collected.

A critical aspect of examining the research question is observing the participants in settings associated with their roles as education leaders. Accordingly, I conducted field

observations of each participant every six weeks across the academic school-year in which I conducted interviews. To begin, I observed each participant in the following settings: a leadership team meeting they led, a meeting with a direct report, and a community gathering. In addition to leveraging my knowledge of the various stakeholder groups with whom the education leaders engaged, I asked them to explicitly define and segment their constituents.

To achieve a deeper understanding of themes that emerged from the interviews and field observations, I collected and analyzed documents from each participant. These documents included strategic plans, meeting agendas, school handbooks, annual budgets, and student assessment data. Furthermore, in analyzing the documents I collected, I took note of their specific purpose and recognized that the documents themselves, just like the participants, existed “within social, economic, historical, cultural, and situations”.

Data Analysis

To illuminate the textures and dimensions of the data I collected, I composed analytic memos or impressionistic records. Lawrence-Lightfoot describes impressionist records as “a ruminative, thoughtful piece that identifies emerging hypotheses, suggests interpretations, describes shifts in perspective, points to puzzles and dilemmas (methodological, conceptual, ethical) that need attention, and develops a plan of action.

for the next visit.” The impressionistic records gave me the space to bring voice and light to my assumptions—reinforcing my critical lens, and the interplay between “data gathering and reflection.” Memoing helps the analyst move easily from empirical data to a conceptual level, refining and expanding codes further, developing key categories and showing their relationships, and building toward a more integrated understanding of events, processes, and interactions in the case.”

To code the interviews and field observations, I utilized MAXQDA, a qualitative analysis computer program. My initial coding “stuck close to the data,” a method of coding Charmaz asserts “curbs our tendencies to make conceptual leaps and to adopt extant theories before we have done the necessary analytic work.” Upon examination of the initial codes, I proceeded with a more focused coding of the data. From this smaller group of codes, thematic patterns emerged. To refine the emergent patterns, I continued to write analytic memos. This was especially helpful when I compared data across participants and contrasting perspectives emerged. Lawrence-Lightfoot encourages the portraitist to attend to the “deviant” voice or the perspectives that fall outside the norm.

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76 Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffmann Davis. *The art and science of portraiture*, (San Francisco, Calif: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 188.
By listening to the deviant voices, the portraitist maintains his “counterintuitive stance…finding new ways to understand dominant themes.”

**Validity**

In constructing the aesthetic whole, the portraitist aims to develop a narrative that is aesthetically compelling—full of texture and nuance—and substantively believable. Doing so, requires that the portraitist maintain his role as a “discerning observer,” bringing light to the subtleties, and exercise a deep knowledge of the context within which he and his participants exist. To that end, the portraitist satisfies three audiences: “the actors who will see themselves reflected in the story, with the readers who will see no reason to disbelieve it, and with the portraitist herself, whose deep knowledge of the setting and self-critical stance allow her to see the ‘truth value’ in her work.”

To evoke the “yes, of course” feeling among those audiences, I had to confront three threats to validity. To begin, my prior relationship with all three participants was instrumental in their selection. However, I was also aware that the relationships are in part built on respect due to my perception that all three leaders, based on their chosen profession, represent a counter-narrative to dominant deficit-oriented archetypes of black male leadership. Lawrence-Lightfoot cautions that the researcher “must be careful not to

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83 Ibid., 247.
give powerful people undue prominence in the narrative or mistake articulateness for knowledge or wisdom.” 84

Additionally, my identity as a black male education leader in southern Dallas, and relationships with prominent southern Dallas stakeholders gives me deep knowledge of the topic and setting. Nonetheless, I am aware that because of my knowledge, I must avoid applying a “simplistic logic that will misrepresent the complex reality I am documenting.” 85

To address these concerns, I intentionally spent time with the participants in their settings. Leveraging formal and informal engagements with the participants, analyzing relevant documents, and conducting participant observations, I was better able to discern emerging patterns, as well as contradictions and tensions. Moreover, the time I spent with Terry, Nakia, and Quinn created a degree of trust such that they were able to exercise a level of vulnerability needed for self-reflection. Composing the analytic memos through the research process also provided the space to confront my assumptions. The consistency of this check helped me guard against applying a superficial lens to my evaluation of the participants and their stories.

My personal connection to this topic has made this research project one of the most fulfilling and challenging experiences I have had. With each story, I have found

84 Ibid., 246.
85 Ibid., 246.
myself holding up a mirror, gaining a deeper understanding of the topic and myself. My hope is that Terry, Nakia, and Quinn's portraits similarly resonate with my readers.
Chapter 4

The Lighthouse: A Portrait of Terry Flowers

Part I: Self-Determination

Terry Flowers walks in front of the Morningstar Chapel’s wooden altar, a wired microphone in his left hand. This is a familiar journey, one that first as principal, and now as the Perot family headmaster and executive director of St. Philip’s School and Community Center, Terry has made for the past thirty years. His steely gaze and quick pace both confirm his confidence and acknowledge the sanctity of the moment and place. The audience is comprised of 210 students—the majority of whom are black—in grades pre-kindergarten through sixth, gathered for weekly chapel service. Taking their seats, the students affix their gaze towards the altar where their fifty-eight-year-old leader is standing.

Moments before Terry’s arrival on stage, the students, faculty, and family attendees sang a series of liturgical songs led by a visiting quartet from New Life Spiritual Baptist Church in South Dallas located minutes from St. Philip’s. Breaking the silence, Terry asks the congregants a question, his raspy but animated voice amplified by the chapel’s audio system: “Today, what are we about to celebrate, students?” In unison, the students reply, “the birth of Christ.” It is two weeks before Christmas, a special time for the Christian private school. For the next seven minutes, Terry leads the chapel in a homily centered on the importance of service as an example of God’s gift of life through the birth of Jesus Christ. The homily follows the traditional structure of religious
discourse—religious text, thesis statement, examples, and conclusion. However, it also includes aspects of black American theological exposition—specifically call and response. “Our job is to remain faithful,” implores Terry, “even in tough times, knowing that he is coming back. Say ‘coming back.’” The audience responds by engaging in a lively verbal exchange. Terry would later share with me that “chapel is his classroom.”

The message’s seriousness is balanced with moments of subtle humor. “At St. Philip’s, the advent season is not about the latest Nintendo system.” Before finishing his sentence, students laugh at Terry’s antiquated cultural reference—a jovial repudiation by the audience of youthful game system enthusiasts. Aware of his folly, Terry joins in on the joke, asking the students, “You don’t play Nintendo anymore?” Terry’s attempt at feigning ignorance is futile as he quickly flashes a wide grin. “I have to keep the students engaged,” Terry later reveals, noting that the students’ age range—two to ten—requires high-interest, culturally relevant, and developmentally appropriate messages or what Terry calls “lessons”. Waiting for the laughter to subside, Terry concludes chapel with a statement about the broader meaning of the Christmas season: “This season is about helping others who may be less fortunate.” Bowing his head, Terry leads the school in a benediction—“let’s go in peace to love and serve God”—before dismissing the students to class.

Shortly after the chapel service, Terry and I meet for an interview in his office. Sitting at a small, teal-colored table, Terry reflects upon the purpose of chapel. “Chapel is used to address what happens in school and the world,” he said. “We are preparing our students for life [and] have to be intentional about teaching life lessons.” Emphasizing the
relationship between chapel and life preparation is consistent with how Terry understands his own role at St. Philip’s School and Community Center: “I am the lighthouse. . . chapel is a way to cast out the beam.” The lighthouse metaphor befits a man who has dedicated the past thirty years of his life to setting the direction for how St. Philip’s can serve its students and the broader South Dallas community within which it resides. Since his arrival in 1983, hundreds of students have graduated from St. Philip’s, some returning to teach as they have been taught. In that time, Terry has become a pillar in the community, and his tenure at St. Philip’s is a rare symbol of stability in an education sector that often prizes change.

Nonetheless, seventy years since its founding, St. Philip’s faces an altered educational and social environment. The emergence of charter schools, in-district choice schools, and targeted diversity and inclusion initiatives by larger, more affluent north Dallas elite private schools have caused some to question the relevance of St. Philip’s model. At the same time, pervasive economic inequities across South Dallas preclude many of its residents from fully accessing the prosperity Dallas has seen with the emergence of new economies. Despite these challenges, Terry resists any effort that detracts St. Philip’s from its “dual-mission”. Terry’s commitment to St. Philip’s mission is informed by his three-decades long tenure with the organization, stewarding it through organizational changes. “Change happens,” Terry explains, “but we must stay the course.” Additionally, Terry efforts to realize his vision of a social change in South Dallas through a service-oriented, college-preparatory education, and his leadership
identity is influenced by his experiences overcoming challenges as a child growing up in Chicago’s South Side.

Terry was born in 1957 on the South Side of Chicago, into a working-class family. The eldest of five children—three boys and two girls—Terry’s parents separated when he was young. Terry’s parents later divorced during his first year of high school. Shortly after the divorce, Terry’s father was killed while moonlighting as a livery driver. The loss was difficult for Terry and his brothers. “My brothers and I idolized my father,” he shares. With the loss of his father, Terry reasoned that he needed to assume more responsibility for his family—engaging what he calls “step-up time.” In the absence of an older male figure in his home, Terry’s desire to assume more responsibility for his family’s well-being was complicated by what he believes was a dearth of positive black male role models in his community to emulate. “You grow up in inner-city Chicago, you didn’t want to be [an] alcoholic, drug dealer, or pimp,” he comments. Terry and his siblings could not even look to church, an institution they revered, for role models. Laughing, Terry reveals that “there were deacons in the church that did not present the best modeling.” Undeterred, Terry and his brothers formulated their own archetype of black masculinity based upon the character traits they did not want to emulate. “Not having role models, we basically said, ‘that’s what I don’t want to do. That’s what we don’t want to do in our lives.’”

In the absence of male role models, Terry’s mother and grandmother worked together to provide him and his siblings with safety and stability, and to insulate them from negative influences. “[We] lived all over the South Side, depending on where gangs
would spring up,” Terry remembers. “My mother, Jeralean Flowers, would move us around to keep us [safe]. At one point, we lived with my mother’s twin sister. She had six kids. My mother had five kids.” It was through their quest for daily survival that the matriarchs imbued Terry and his brothers with the values that would later shape how they conceptualized their identities as black males. Terry credits his grandmother, whom he affectionately refers to as “Big Mamma,” as being the “anchor of the family.” Terry’s grandmother possessed the only car in the family and would thus transport eleven children and adults to various places around Chicago. “Public transportation either didn’t reach every part of Chicago or it wasn’t safe to take public transportation,” Terry explains. He smiled as he recalls his grandmother’s daily routine of picking him and his siblings up: “The car was a green Buick and I still remember the horn that she would blow when she would pull up.”

One value reinforced by Big Momma was the notion of self-determination, what she would call “making a way out of no way”:

Every Saturday we took the bus going to the laundry because there was no washer and dryer in the household; even in the slushy, dirty black snow of Chicago. Washing the clothes at the laundromat, folding them, putting them back in those bags, getting back on the bus to ride back home. No excuse for being dirty and not carrying yourself in a presentable way, because where there is a will, there is a way. And [you] make a way out of no way.

The dogged determination that so many black Americans from Terry’s grandmother’s generation possessed was necessary for their survival. Institutional barriers to social mobility and a barrage of human indignities deeply shaped how many black Americans
made sense of the world and their place within it. In seeking to understand his grandmother’s actions and her unwavering drive, Terry recalls a story she shared with him about the circumstances surrounding the death of one of her children. “My mother, Jeralean Flowers, was a triplet,” she had told him. “When the third child was born, the doctor, a white man, suffocated the third child.” Terry’s grandmother is adamant that the doctor’s action was driven by his opposition to the State of Illinois’s policy of providing financial assistance to families with more than two children. “I have not been able to verify the story,” Terry soberly admits, noting that his grandmother continues to share the story among family members. Whether the account is true or not, Terry suggests that his grandmother’s experience and her retelling of the story was meant to underscore the importance of self-reliance. “My grandmother was preparing us for the future,” he said. “[She was] teaching us things such as the importance of learning to cook for yourself so you would never have to rely on a woman. Every Saturday, is rise and shine, taking on the matters of the household that need to be”—he laughed—“engaged in. It’s cleaning. It’s taking out the trash, whatever.”

In addition to self-discipline, Terry learned from his mother how to respect women. “My mother taught me how [to] walk across the street, if there’s a lady in the environment,” Terry shares. “You start off, as a man or male, on the side that the traffic is flowing, so if a car is going to hit anyone, it’s going to hit you first before it hits her.” Terry attributes his mother’s practical lessons to her desire to prepare him for adulthood.

Terry and I leave his office, to take what has become his daily walk throughout the school. The role of headmaster and executive director at St. Philip’s does not allow
Terry the opportunity to consistently engage with students as he did when he was a teacher and principal. His daily walks however allow him to interact with the students. As we approach a staircase, Terry sees a young man waiting to enter the school’s glass doors. “Good afternoon son,” Terry says as he opens the door. “I have not seen you in some time. How are you?” Terry asks, shaking the student’s hand. “I have been sick, but I got all A’s on my report card.” Smiling, Terry responds by asking the student to bring a copy of his report card to school. “If you bring me your report card, I will give you an ice-cream cone.” “I will definitely bring it tomorrow” the student says hurrying up the staircase.

One of Terry’s primary responsibilities at St. Philip’s is to raise $2.5 million annually to cover school and community center operating expenses. “I spend close to 75 percent of my time fundraising,” Terry shares soberly. These duties, however, have not prevented Terry from teaching a rites-of-passage class to St. Philip’s and non–St. Philip’s males. The rites-of-passage class is based upon the belief that through mentorship, youth can acquire a sense of self-awareness, self-discipline, and connectedness to others that will inform how they engage with others as adults.86 Every Monday for ninety minutes, Terry gathers with a group of boys in St. Philip’s community center to participate in activities designed to help them develop a model for what it means to be a young man. The first class is structured around the same questions that Terry and his siblings wrestled with as black boys on the South Side of Chicago. “The first rites-of-passage class we

have, we have magazine[s] all over the place and there are two questions to respond to: ‘What is a man, what is not a man.’” Using images from magazines, the boys develop visual maps of masculinity. Excursions and team-building exercises are also used to help normalize the lessons that, as a husband and a father, Terry epitomizes. Early in the development of the rites-of-passage program, Terry and other faculty members recognized the need to expose students to positive examples of black men in the South Dallas community. One idea they had was to produce a male gospel concert. The concert entitled, “Brother to Brother, Here to Stay” was staged in South Dallas’ Fair Park, and was designed to make a visual statement that black males were not endangered as the dominant narrative suggested. Additionally, the concert producers’ hypothesis was that by inviting black men of faith to perform, the young men—both St. Philip’s and non-St. Philip’s students—in the class would see that celebrating their faith was an honorable characteristic of black maleness. Admission to the concert was a canned good or book, and the organizers asked black churches to send male choruses to participate. “All men were praising the Lord,” Terry recalls.

Terry’s involvement in the rites-of-passage program is illustrative of a strategic attempt to challenge a pervasive black pathology. This pathology suggests that the societal challenges facing black men—disproportionate levels of incarceration, unemployment, underemployment, and more—are emblematic of a culture of social degradation and failure, as opposed to the impact of systems of racial disenfranchisement. In working to understand and address this pathology, Terry concedes that there are real challenges facing black males. A study by the Dallas chapter of the children’s advocacy
group Stand for Children found that “ten Dallas zip codes have sent more than 3,100 prisoners into Texas prisons, at an annual cost to the state of $137 million.” St. Philip’s zip code is one of the ten cited by Stand for Children. Yet the more research Terry conducted—including studying literature written by Dr. Jawanza Kinjufu and other writings whose premise was that black males are an “endangered species”—and the more he assessed his own life and peer network, the more Terry questioned the dominant narrative that black males are endangered and that any response to counteract their challenges, therefore, must begin with the premise that they are troubled. “There are boatloads of data about black males’ challenges,” Terry affirms “but I know... men that are far from being endangered. I did not want to contaminate our young men [with] that negativity. I wanted them to see what I see.”

Terry and I exit the school building and walk alongside its perimeter. Stopping, Terry points to an abandoned nightclub St. Philip’s has purchased. “I would like to turn this into a social incubator space,” I hear Terry say, his voice competing with traffic noise from Interstate 45. Terry’s vision for what St. Philip’s can become is shaped by his memory of what St. Philip’s was when he first arrived in 1983.

I remember driving through the St. Philip’s neighborhood before my interview with the board of directors. I saw the drugs and the people hanging out. Folks on the lawn. Old sofas sitting in yards and on porches. Dominoes under the trees. Drug sales taking place in broad daylight. Typical urban, impoverished, crime-ridden scenario.

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Terry expected to see St. Philip’s as a beacon of hope for the South Dallas community. Rather, when he arrived at St. Philip’s, he saw “a building that was tucked away.” “You wouldn’t even know it was there until you got out through your vehicle and walked around,” he recalls. “You could barely see it. You just had a little portable building on the front of Pennsylvania Avenue that had a—it’s a doublewide portable.” Terry interpreted the school’s physical obscurity as illustrative of the organization’s disconnection from its mission to meet the South Dallas community’s needs.

At the time of the St. Philip’s founding, a key component of the institution’s ministry was to facilitate programming that could address a growing population of children who otherwise did not have structured out of school time activities in which they could participate. To meet a growing demand for programming, in 1959, the church, the Episcopal Diocese of Dallas, and community members raised funds to build a gymnasium to accommodate the enrichment program. Eight years later, St. Philip’s began a daycare; by 1983 it had grown into a school serving ninety students in grades pre-K through first. However, even as the community’s need for academic and extracurricular programming grew, the school did not, facing a series of challenges that threatened its operation. “The school was small with about 100 to 110 kids,” Terry recollects. “The books. . . had been donated from various schools. You knew that by opening up the books and seeing the stamps from various schools.” Terry’s predecessor had left unexpectedly a few months prior to his hire, leaving a leadership vacuum at the school.

Sensing organizational instability, Terry asked the board if they had a strategic direction for St. Philip’s. “I asked them a series of questions: ‘What do you see for the
future of St. Philip’s? Do you anticipate adding grade levels? Do you anticipate any growth?’ At that point the response was, ‘Yes, but we’re pretty much trying to hold on to where we are right now.’” Terry concluded that the organization had to evolve to fulfill its mission. He interpreted his appointment as the board’s agreement with his assessment. “The mission was fairly clear: to provide an excellent academic education with Christian values and social services that were compatible to meeting the needs of the community. The actualization of that was a bit challenging for St. Philip’s when I came. My energy signaled ‘Let’s go for a ride. Let’s see what else we can do to advance what we’re doing.’”

The optimism surrounding Terry’s appointment did not diminish the gravity of the challenges St. Philip’s was facing. At the time, the school was not fully accredited, lacked sufficient curricular resources, and did not have a clear student behavior management system. Upon evaluating the complexity of the challenges and his limitations in solving them alone, Terry reasoned that he had to, from the onset of his tenure, actively involve individuals who were on the front lines of the organization. “The advantage was that everyone is knowledgeable about what is there and why it’s there. Everyone has buy-in in terms of what that process is going to be,” he notes. “They [also] begin to hold themselves accountable because they have been included.” Terry’s strategy to address the challenges at St. Philip’s was to bring together the faculty, ask questions, and listen. “What I was attempting to do was to have the teachers articulate what should happen to advance St. Philip’s,” he shares. “Providing some sort of guiding questions that
you kind of know what the answer should be at least. You’re able to have the teachers
starting to voice and articulate areas that they felt needed more attention.”

St. Philip’s School and Community Center has expanded since Terry’s
appointment as principal in 1983. As an outsider, it was imperative to Terry that he work
alongside the faculty to addresses challenges impacting the organization from realizing
its mission. In the role of executive director and headmaster, Terry oversees a more
complex organization, working through others to affect change. Accordingly, Terry will
have to increasingly institutionalize systems and structures to support collaboration as a
way of advancing his vision for social transformation in South Dallas.

Part II: Collaboration

Every other week, St. Philip’s seven directors—representing academics,
admissions, athletics, development, finance, and human resources—gather for a 60-
minute directors’ meeting. Terry established this forum after noticing that that the
directors, all of whom report to him, and their respective teams were not communicating
with each other which had significant implications given St. Philip’s complexity as a
school and community center with more than sixty programs. “I remember an incident
when the admissions office scheduled an event at the same time the community center
had programming which caused confusion for staff and attendees.” To foster intra-
departmental communication Terry asks that each director come to the meeting prepared
to share updates about their team’s activities. “All of the meetings are communication
opportunities,” Terry asserts, “so we are knowledgeable about what is going down the
pipeline; that’s why we always go over the calendar and [are] aware of . . . what is happening across departments.”

In addition to communication, Terry created the meetings to advance what he calls “strategic” work. “The meetings are also strategic at the senior leadership level. We need to harness each other’s talents to ensure that we are accomplishing our goals.” According to St. Philip’s 2015-2019 strategic plan, the organization has three priorities: “fostering innovation and instructional excellence; expanding community services through collaboration; and increasing operational efficiency and effectiveness.” The priorities which were approved by St. Philip’s board of directors were established through a process Terry facilitated in collaboration with the directors. “We met over the summer during our retreat and evaluated St. Philip’s organizational strengths and gaps. Using survey data we collected from the staff, we were able to narrow our focus to three priorities.”

The meeting space is adjacent to the school’s chapel, both areas separated by a removable wall. The silence of the meeting space is interrupted by a group of first grade students practicing in the chapel for a Friday’s school assembly. “Let’s try it again boys and girls,” says a teacher as the students practice their recitation in unison. Terry enters the room and sits in one of the empty chairs. Four tables are adjoined to create a square. There are more than enough seats for the seven directors which Terry shares is helpful for the breakout sessions. Checking his watch, Terry glances at the one-page agenda his

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88 St. Philip’s Strategic Plan-Big Rocks Fall 2015- Spring 2019 (Dallas: St. Philip’s School and Community Center, 2015).
executive assistant, a St. Philip’s alumnus, has placed in front of the chairs. The agenda has nine items listed on it, five of which are identified as “updates.” Beneath the updates is a session entitled “up all night” and a reference to an eleven-by-fourteen worksheet. Terry develops the agenda. “This is the first time the directors will see this agenda.” Terry explains placing the agenda on top of his tablet. “I have individual department head meetings in addition to the directors’ meetings, and from there, some things will surface that will become agenda items.” The activity entitled “Up and Night” was developed in response to Terry’s assessment of systemic issues impeding the directors from making progress towards St. Philip’s priorities.

There is an intersection between what we call our big rocks—big initiatives and everyone has a role to play in—and the ability for individuals within a department to contribute individually. I want the directors to work together to determine what is keeping them from accomplishing their goals—and how can they leverage their peers to support their work.

It is five minutes before the meeting is to begin and the directors begin entering the room. “Should we sit somewhere specific,” ask the director of development. “You can sit wherever you feel moved,” replies Terry, smiling. Nodding, the woman places her laptop at a seat opposite where Terry is sitting. Slowly other directors begin to enter the room. Once settled, I notice that all the directors are sitting away from Terry who is sitting by himself. “Thank you all for coming,” Terry begins talking over still audible conversations. “Let’s us bow our heads for prayer,” Terry says complying with the first agenda item. The room is now silent as Terry leads the group in a moment of reflection.
“Let us work together to use our light to advance the work of St. Philip’s. Amen.”

Opening their eyes, the group looks towards Terry, who takes places his agenda in front of him. “Let’s us begin with department head updates starting with admissions.” Setting her pen aside, the director of admissions describes upcoming admissions events. “We are preparing to host prospective families in two weeks.” Looking at his tablet, Terry asks if the fliers have been printed and distributed. “Yes,” the director responds, her tone respectful, but short. “Also, is the community center personnel aware of this event?” “I am working with them,” the director responds. The direct and transactional questioning between Terry and the director presenting continues with the other six directors. Absent from the conversations is dialogue with the other directions. Rather, as a director is speaking, the other directors occupy their time typing on their laptops, or writing in notebooks they have brought—activities to which is not clear if they align to the meeting objectives.

Thirty-five minutes have transpired, and Terry introduces what he calls a “public service announcement”. “The parent association would like assume more ownership over the community garden. Do you have any ideas for how we could assist them?” This is the first opportunity for the directors to engage with each other. “I think we could meet with the parents to listen to what ideas they may have,” says one gentleman. Three of the seven directors nod in agreement with their colleague’s suggestion. Terry, writing on his agenda, shares “that he will schedule a meeting to provide guidance to the parent association on how to revamp the garden.” The clarity of Terry’s answer appears to
suggest that while he sought feedback from the directors, he had a plan he was going to implement that may or may not have aligned with the directors’ suggestions.

It is 1:43pm and the meeting is scheduled to conclude in seventeen minutes. The final agenda item is denoted as the “activity”. “Each of you should have in front of you a packet that we going to use.” Holding his packet up, Terry communicates directions for the group activity. “I would like for you to pair up with someone and use the packet to identify what is keeping up at night. With your partner, I would also like you to determine what support you would need to help you and your team accomplish your goals connected to our big rocks.” Pausing, Terry scans the room for any questions—there are none. “Let’s begin,” Terry announces as he stands up. For the next seven minutes, Terry walks around the room, silently observing each group. At the completion of the first seven minutes, Terry tells the directors to rotate clockwise to work with another group. With less than two minutes left in the meeting, Terry asks the directors to discuss the lessons learned from the activity. Leaning forward in her seat, the director of development shared that she “is working on prioritization.” Elaborating, she explained that “I could work more closely with the principal to see how the school activities could inform the development activities.” Terry concludes the meeting, sharing that they will come back to the worksheets in his one-on-one meetings with the directors, and in a future directors’ meeting.

The directors leave the room as they entered—engaging in small conversations among themselves. “Please email me the notes,” Terry says as he confers with his executive assistant. During the meeting she had been taking notes, a practice Terry
explains helps him plan for future meetings. “I will meet with Taylor to determine what we may need cover in the next meeting. If there are outstanding questions or issues, I will address them individually with directors.” Sitting the now empty room, Terry reflects upon the meeting, and what he believes was the meeting’s objective. “Overall, I think the meeting was successful as we created a space for communication, and for the directors to work together on solving problems that are preventing them and us from moving our goals forward.” Rubbing his goa-tee, Terry sits back with a contemplative disposition pondering what he believes could have improved the meeting. “The last activity, if I had more time, we would have invested more in an understanding of what is keeping people up at night.” Sitting up in his seat, Terry further elaborates: “everybody didn't get to touch with all of the groups. And everyone didn't get to report out so there are things that are keeping people up at night that everybody didn't get to hear. We could have flushed that out, but we'll have more meetings.”

Terry gathers his belongings and prepares to attend another meeting. Exiting the meeting room, Terry walks with the same confident and energetic stride he exhibited upon his entrance. As with many things at St. Philip’s, the directors’ meeting is illustrative of how Terry conceptualizes the organization’s mission and his role in guiding St. Philip’s to accomplish its mission. The impetus behind the meeting structure and the activities were in part influenced by Terry’s belief that the increased number of cross-functional activities require clear and consistent communication across departments. Additionally, the directors’ meeting is derived from Terry’s belief that cross-functional
collaboration is a necessary organizational process that best positions St. Philip’s to meet its constituents’ needs.

We are St. Philip’s School and Community Center. The complexity of our organization means there is a constant need to look across the organization. There is a whole community center side and we rely so heavily on fundraising. Then there is the school. Kelly Murrell, the principal—she was a principal with Richardson ISD—she would say that in her role as principal there, the decisions she made did not necessarily impact all of the departments of the school. The reverse is the case here. The decisions she makes impact the philanthropy office or the decisions the philanthropy office makes impacts the school. All of that is to help the school. Myself and the executive assistant are the only two people who constantly think across all departments. All of our meetings have a need for an activity like that or some dialogue.

It is not clear that the meeting’s structure and activities were aligned to Terry’s objectives of inter-team dialogue and helping the organization’s leaders develop a deeper understanding of the interdependent nature of their work. Seventy-two percent of the meeting’s agenda consistent of information dissemination. The transactional transmission of information, while important, did not include meaningful opportunities for directors to engage in dialogue which is one of Terry’s stated goals. By Terry’s own admission, the directors would have benefited from more time to complete the “up all night” activity—a strategy he believes could support the directors (and their teams) in advancing St. Philip’s strategic priorities or “big rocks”. This recommendation, while meaningful, does not begin to address Terry’s physical and symbolic isolation and distance between Terry and the directors that I observed during the directors’ meeting. The choices that Terry made in the meeting’s design and as the main facilitator are emblematic of a disconnect
between Terry’s vision for collaborative leadership and his leadership practice.

Understanding this disconnect requires an analysis of the experiences that have shaped Terry’s understanding of his role in fostering collaboration and the circumstances that contribute to his leadership.

Terry’s belief that individuals should work together to solve problems hearkens back to his childhood. The oldest of his four siblings, Terry recalls that his brothers and sisters would collaborate as a method of survival.

As a group, we would strategize. Specifically, I remember we decided what we were going to get my mom for Christmas. We collaborated, putting our money together, digging around the seats of the couch for coins.” In addition to celebrations, Terry and his siblings worked together as a means of protection against gang activity. “We were in Chicago in gang-time, so we banded together to survive in Chicago. We always stayed together as best as we could. We would develop a yell or a whistle that if one of us were in trouble, the three [others] of us would come running in that direction. We were close, and we still are.

Admittedly, Terry’s relationship with his siblings did not prevent disagreements. In fact, as children, they would resolve arguments through confrontation: “Fuss, fight, and fright . . . you couldn’t fuss too long and too loud, or fight too long and too loud, out of fright that my mom would step in and resolve the issue. As we got older, we couldn’t fight. It was very clear to my brothers and I that we couldn’t fight each other, so we would do some fussing.”

At Columbia University’s Teachers College, Terry was exposed to empirical frameworks that helped him expand his leadership practice. “I remember working with Ann Lieberman and Linda Darling-Hammond on course evaluations,” Terry notes,
“specifically, the notion of having faculty being a part of articulating what criteria they would be evaluated upon.” Arriving at St. Philip’s in 1983, Terry found great synergy between what he learned in graduate school and his assessment of the programmatic challenges impacting the school’s performance. “When I came to St. Philip’s, we did not have a teacher evaluation tool. No one on the faculty could define instructional excellence. Teachers existed in their roles without receiving feedback on their practice.”

To address this challenge, Terry remembers gathering the staff together to begin to define teaching at St. Philip’s. “Through a series of meetings, we answered two questions: ‘what does good teaching look like?’ and ‘if you are going to be evaluated, what should the criteria be?’” While St. Philip’s has continued to iterate on the original teacher evaluation tool, Terry credits his graduate school experiences for informing how he lead the faculty through its initial design. “Teachers College was a lot of doing things in groups and building upon the knowledge and experience of people in your cohort,” he remembers.

Terry also worked with St. Philip’s faculty to develop the school’s positive behavior reinforcement system. Prior to the development of the titans reward system, St. Philip’s did have a student handbook stipulating the rules students must follow. Teachers nonetheless expressed concerns to Terry that they were expending a disproportionate amount of time and energy addressing students’ poor behavior rather than celebrating students’ positive choices. “We are putting a lot of investment and money into turning kids around who are doing the wrong thing,” Terry recalls the teachers sharing. “A group of faculty members came to me and said, ‘why can’t we put some emphasis on doing the right thing?’” Terry assembled the faculty and they spent time over several weeks
developing the framework for the Titans. Their efforts produced the positive behavior reward system. Terry rattles off the system’s criteria: “ninety-five percent you do your homework, you turn it in, you practice great citizenship. You come to class prepared. That’s the basics, and you are not necessarily the smartest kid in the class.” Across the school, being named a titan is coveted in part because of the prestige and rewards associated with the designation. “[As a titan] you don’t have to wear uniforms on Friday,” Terry explains. “If you are a titan, you get free tickets to basketball games; there is a limousine ride once a year. We are just celebrating the titans; we make a big, big deal. Parents bring flowers—it is a big deal.”

Over time, the titan’s popularity generated unintended consequences. “What if you are not a titan?” Terry ponders aloud. “You cry, your mother gets upset, the parent wants to interview the teacher about why their child was not selected. The parent tells the teacher, ‘you don’t like my child.’” Concerned about the negative perceptions parents and students may form about the titans system, teachers asked Terry to discontinue the program. “That was a difficult request to consider as I was and am deeply attached to the titans program,” Terry acknowledges. Terry’s investment in the program is influenced by his experiences as a long-term substitute teacher at PS 180 Hugo Newman, a pre-K through eighth public school in New York City. “It was October and the classroom had had four substitutes in there, and the students had run all of those subs off,” Terry remembers. “I’m with the principal. He opens the door, and all sorts of things are going on in the classroom.” Terry described a classroom devoid of structure. “There was a light ballast that hung by two poles, and boys were stepping on the chair to the desk like a
trampoline, slam-dunking over the light ballast, and then landing on the floor. The principal was right there with me. They continued. Not until he yelled so loud that the whole building probably heard did they begin to even sort of settle down there.” The principal was not taking the role of setting the culture for the school, Terry noted: “His presence wasn’t felt. He wasn’t setting the tone for the culture. He wasn’t the campus leader and he definitely wasn’t [an] instructional leader.”

After observing the classroom dynamic, Terry concluded that his strategy for student engagement would be predicated on motivating students to make better choices. “I began to develop my belief that if you can’t motivate, you can’t educate; and the motivation comes first in my theory that rules without relationship lead to rebellion,” he states. “Despite the circumstances and the conditions that you could get the kids and begin to try to turn their lightbulbs on.” Turning on the students’ lightbulbs required Terry to first bring visibility to the students’ academic standing. “I had to make the academics transparent [so] I took the scope and sequence and made a huge chart. It covered up an entire wall.” Gesturing to the wall, Terry mimics his classroom demonstration. “These are all of the things that you’re supposed to learn in your third-grade year, and when you learn it, I’m going to put a star next to it. You get your block filled in.” By making the students’ performance visible and by celebrating their performance, Terry began to see a shift in the students’ engagement with school. “Soon, the students were beginning to see what they were missing out on. That was something we would just constantly refer to, so it made it very visible.”
The teachers’ request to discontinue the titans program presented a challenge for Terry. His experience as a teacher in New York City reinforced his belief in the merits of investing students in school through positive reinforcement. Consequently, he did not agree with the St. Philip’s teachers’ request to end the titans program. Terry also understood that not seriously addressing the teachers’ concern could undermine the legitimacy of collaboration as an organizational operating principle and leadership philosophy. Terry ultimately decided to consider staff ideas for replacing the titans program. However, to help inform his decision, he asked the teachers a series of questions. Comparing a leader to a lighthouse, Terry equates a lighthouse’s signals with the questions a leader asks informed by the leader’s perception of the organization’s values and mission: “The leading questions are all along the lines of allowing you to articulate what you think is best for the mission.” The role of the leader is therefore to facilitate deeper analysis through a series of questions. Part of the facilitation is to evaluate responses against a set of core operating principles or beliefs. The existence of beliefs creates parameters that orient the leader’s questions and in turn the group’s collective thought and action. Thinking of the variety of responses a leader could receive, Terry posits that “if the response that you provide is off and doesn’t really help to actuate what we’re trying to accomplish, another question should be presented to the group or the individual who gave that response causing them to reflect on their response and the mission of St. Philip’s.”

It could be a what if or it could be, *if we do that isn’t it likely that x, y, and z might happen?* Through the course of that dialogue you get to *oh, good point,* or a counter. It’s a process that could be frustrating for some, but it educates, and it
causes people to embrace what you’re about as opposed to the leader saying, this is our mission. This is what you’re supposed to [do]. This should’ve been the answer to your question.

Terry eventually asked the teachers to suggest alternative programming they believed was aligned to the ideals of uplifting student scholastic achievement. “I asked them, ‘what other celebratory, high-level accolades and shower are you going to bestow upon the kids that are doing what we ultimately want them to do?’ They came back with a couple of thoughts.” Evaluating the teachers’ proposals, Terry did not believe that the ideas met the titans program’s intended outcomes. “I am not opposed to changing it,” I told the teachers. “I don’t want to be the dinosaur here, but I want you to be clear on the genesis behind where it came from, and if we are going to replace it we are going to replace it with something that meets the same standard or exceeds.” St. Philip’s kept the titans program. However, through conversations with the faculty and analyzing the titans’ programmatic structure, the faculty and Terry jointly concluded that the challenges they were experiencing with execution ensued from a lack of clear rules around how titans were nominated, and expectations titans must meet. That level of reflection and collaboration resulted in the development of a set of norms or the “ten titanments”. “The first push against the titans program produced the ten titanments,” Terry notes. “Now every parent, child, student gets one, and you want to know what it takes to become a titan—here you go.” Each year, the faculty evaluates the ten titanments, proposing changes. “We get new iterations of it. Now it is not just one teacher who selects titans; all teachers do. There was an iteration that says your parent can turn you in—if you are
acting silly at home; you relinquish your reward. It gets better with the concerns that are being raised. I am open to that whatever it may be.”

The development of the teacher evaluation and student behavior systems are indicative of Terry’s ability to operationalize systems of collaboration across St. Philip’s. As principal, Terry was able to create the condition in which his personal experiences and beliefs aligned with St. Philip’s value of working together to drive community transformation. In Terry’s current role as headmaster and executive director, there appear to be differences between Terry’s vision of leading through and with others and his execution of collaborative practices. This difference is in part influenced by contextual factors that inform Terry’s leadership. As principal, Terry worked directly with teachers who were critical to making programmatic changes. Additionally, in assuming the role of principal, Terry, under the direction of St. Philip’s board of directors, was tasked with creating the processes and structures to drive programmatic improvements. As headmaster and executive director, Terry is responsible for overseeing an organization that is more complex in terms of size, and hierarchy. Terry must lead through multiple layers to achieve organizational goals. Therefore, in addition to exercising formal or positional authority, Terry should employ “soft power” to impact and influence not only his direct reports, but the teams they manage. Changes in organizational context, however have not resulted in an observable change in Terry’s leadership behavior. Rather, in “stepping up” to the organizational challenges facing St. Philip’s, Terry appears to unintentionally step over the coalition of stakeholders he desires and needs to work with.
Part III: Capacity Building

The second stanza of the St. Philip’s School and Community Center creed begins with the following line: “Look at me! I am sharp, empowered, talented, and proud without limit.” Since its founding, over 500 students have graduated from St. Philip’s. Moreover, 95 percent of St. Philip’s alumni attend a four-year college or university. Thirty percent of St. Philip's graduates are first-generation college students. Terry asserts that St. Philip’s academic success is the result of an intentional celebration of academic excellence as the foundation of the school’s cultural fabric. “I believe that to motivate students, we have to highlight their potential and celebrate their successes. Doing well in school has to be more popular that scoring a touchdown.” To reinforce the importance of scholastic achievement, St. Philip’s has instituted a weekly school-wide academic pep rally. Each week, teachers gather in grade levels and nominate students whom exhibited the school’s values and have achieved over a 95 percent on their academic assignments.

At Terry’s invitation, I attend a weekly academic pep rally in Snyder Activity Center, one of St. Philip’s two gymnasiums. Entering the gymnasium at eight o’clock in the morning, the space appears suited for a basketball game. Long banners commemorating basketball league championships hang from the rafters. Close to one hundred family members are in the wooden risers and there is a palpable energy among the crowd. Silver-haired men and women snap their fingers to classic soul music emanating from the gymnasium’s audio system. Mothers hold young babies who seem not to cry among all the excitement. I secure a seat in the third row next to a gentleman noticeably fumbling with the battery to his digital camera. Nodding, he leans over and
explains that he “doesn’t want to miss his daughter” who will be a recipient of an award.

With a proud smile on his face, the gentleman returns his attention to his camera, eventually securing the battery in his camera and joining the crowd that is now swaying to the music.

St. Philip’s staff have been mostly inconspicuous, making what appears to be final logistical preparations for the academic pep rally. A young black American staff member walks to a closet and retrieves a microphone. Another staff member stands near the gymnasium’s entrance, directing classes of students that are now entering. The students are dressed casually, wearing bright colored t-shirts and sneakers that are fashionable. Separated into four groups, approximately thirty students sit on the gymnasium floor. The remaining students sit on the wooden benches. The students like the family members are also joyous, with many of the students dancing to the music. “We want to create an atmosphere where students can have fun,” Terry explains, “and in doing so believe that celebrating learning is fun.”

Terry enters the gymnasium carrying a small decorative shoebox. Wearing a pecan colored suit, he stands in the middle of the students seated on the floor. Facing the audience, Terry takes the microphone and shouts “It is now time for scholar of the week!” On cue, the song “I Love School” by Nelda Washington plays over the gymnasium’s audio system. Terry gently sways to the music and high-fives one of the students as he sings “I have to be the best I can be.” The song ends, but Terry maintains his jovial demeanor as he begins to announce the students of the week. “In kindergarten for English language arts, please welcome to the front Br, Br, Br, Brook!” The audience
erupts in clapping as snippets of instrumental versions of popular songs play. The atmosphere mimics that of an award show as winners are ushered up to claim their prizes, basking in the audience’s praise and support. Upon arriving at the podium, Terry greets student winners in jest, raising his hand above his head at a height that the students cannot reach. After a few ardent attempts, Terry lowers his hand with a smile and the students triumphantly slap his hand before returning to their spots on the blue tarp.

Since its inception, the academic pep rally has been a key lever to motivate students’ investment in academic achievement. Furthermore, the rally has defined what it means to be a St. Philip’s student, as well as what it means to be a staff member, parent, or extended family member. Academic celebrations as schoolwide rituals have historically been a critical component of the cultural blueprint of schools serving mostly black American students. The academic pep rally at St. Philip’s reflects a belief in the importance of rituals in memorializing an organization’s culture. Through assembly and celebration, St. Philip’s students develop and affirm a narrative that defines academic achievement and the act of celebrating the achievement of others as honorable.

Although the academic pep rally is a school-wide celebration, Terry is the event’s main facilitator. Indeed, by assuming the role of master of ceremony, Terry is the embodiment of the school’s value of academic excellence. Terry’s investment in one of St. Philip’s signature rituals is shaped by his own life experiences and the dearth of institutional support he received as a child for his academic and character development.

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Reflecting on his formative schooling experiences, Terry somberly notes that “there was nothing about the school experience that really said, ‘You’re here to make the best possible grades; you’re here to be excellent.’ The school didn’t drive me towards excellence.” Terry’s mother and grandmother did not graduate from high school. However, that did not prevent them from holding him accountable for academic achievement. Terry recalls bringing home a second-grade report card with unsatisfactory grades.

I walked home with a report card that had some Es and some Gs—that’s excellent and good—but I had an unsatisfactory grade in handwriting. I got my report card. I recall walking home thinking, Pretty good report card. My siblings and I got home. My mother became incensed and did her thing with me, letting me know that that was unacceptable.

Jeralean Flowers’ expectations for her son’s scholastic achievement motivated Terry to focus on improving his academic performance. “From that point on,” Terry shares, “I paid a little bit more attention.” Two years later, Terry remembers bringing home a fourth-grade report card and receiving a very different reaction from his mother than what he received in second grade: “She cried because I had made As and Bs, or Es and Gs, straight across on the report card. She basically demonstrated her pride in how pleased she was in my performance.” As the oldest child, Terry also equated his scholastic achievement with his responsibility. “I thought to myself, ‘if she’s so overjoyed by this, my being the oldest of five kids, if grades make her happy, that’s my form of a paycheck for my mother.’”
Jeralean Flowers’ investment in Terry’s academic achievement was not reciprocated by his teachers. “The push for academic excellence really wasn’t there,” Terry somberly recalls. “Except for one or two teachers along the way who would have a certain demand.” The inconsistency in messaging and support was particularly troubling as Terry made a pivotal transition from elementary to middle school. “By seventh or eighth grade or so, I dropped back into the just doing what we do and keeping the grades in a fashion that wouldn’t create a tornado at home.” “It was like breathing,” Terry remembers thinking. “You get up, and that’s what you do, but you don’t think a whole lot about it until later on.” At the time, Terry’s perception of the value of education did not include an understanding of the relationship between schooling and his family’s socioeconomic status. “No one in my family had graduated from high school.”

The absence of familial and school support had real implications for Terry’s ability to navigate high school and, later, college. One experience that still resonates with him is learning about the honor roll system as a ninth-grade student at Simeon Vocational High School. “By the end of the ninth-grade year, I was sent to the school office to run an errand for a teacher and I saw, for the first time, on the wall something that said ‘honor roll.’” Terry eventually received the academic honor roll designation which he attributes to leveraging childhood lessons he learned from his grandmother and mother about persistence. As Terry reminisces about the accolade, there is a somberness to his voice as he recalls the absence of adult guidance or a teacher realizing his potential. “All of these academic opportunities, I learned about by accident, just kind of stumbling in,” Terry
notes. “I inquired about the honor roll specifically because a girl named Gloria’s name was on the honor roll. I had a crush on Gloria.”

When it was time to apply to college, Terry found himself having neither a comprehensive understanding of the college application process nor access to social networks at school or in his neighborhood with this information. “Mom didn’t really know the ropes of getting her child into college, and school didn’t really provide the support to help navigate that,” he shares. The support Terry did receive from high school teachers was aligned with the school’s goal of helping transition students into the workforce or career programming. “At Simeon Vocational High School, you took vocation. If there was any discussion about life after high school, there was trade school or getting a job.” Terry recalls that his academic counselor did not plan any college visits for him. Rather, Terry visited colleges by joining a college bus tour that he and his friends had causally learned about. “I got to college by way of the word getting out that a bus was going to meet at O’Hare Airport, and it was going to take whomever showed up, it would take you to visit some college campuses. A group of us went and got on the bus, and it took us to several college campuses over the weekend. It was free. All we had to do was get to O’Hare Airport.” Once on the trip, Terry realized that he had points of connection to college. For example, his football coach had attended Central State University, one of the universities visited on the bus tour. Additionally, one of the schools Terry and his friends visited was Upper Iowa University, where several of their classmates attended on athletic scholarships. However, Terry perceives those connections as coincidences, since no adult explicitly helped him navigate his post-secondary
options—including using their social networks to help support Terry’s college application and matriculation.

Returning from the bus tour, Terry began to formally apply to colleges. As he began however, Terry quickly realized that he was cognizant of intricacies of the college application process, including the steps a student should take to increase the competitiveness of his or her application. “I took [a college admissions] test without ever knowing that you were supposed to study for it,” he recalls. “Just went and showed up that morning and took the test.” Terry was eventually accepted into Upper Iowa University. However, even after matriculating into college, his high school’s lack of post-secondary preparation would continue to influence his academic journey. “When I filled out my college application, I thought I was filling in the little bubbles to major in pre-engineering, PE,” Terry notes. “I get to college, and I am on the physical education track. Not only that, my school doesn’t really—they offer the prerequisites, but they don’t offer an engineering program at all. I would have to stay on that track for the entire semester and then shift in the spring semester to make a change.”

During the second semester, Terry enrolled in education courses, with the initial thought that he could do well because of the number of young children he cared for in his family. Once in the education department, Terry met an advisor who would later be influential in illuminating the path toward a career in education. In his first meeting with Ira Tolbert, then professor of education at the University of Northern Iowa, Terry was asked a simple but powerful question. “He said to me, ‘I’ve looked over your records and your background here. What do you want to do?’” At the time, Terry was deciding
between pursuing a fellowship as a graduate student or accepting an invitation to try out for the Chicago Bears professional football team. Playing for the Chicago Bears offered the opportunity to provide Terry and his family with the financial resources they never had. Professor Tolbert acknowledged the financial resources a contract with the Bears could provide. Mimicking Professor Tolbert, Terry noted, “He also said, ‘On the other hand, I see that you have leadership skills. Your grades are very good. I think you can probably not only teach, you can become a principal or superintendent of schools, if you’d like to.’” Professor Tolbert was the first black professor Terry had ever met, a point that resonated deeply with him.

Leaving Professor Tolbert’s office, Terry investigated the professional football opportunity. “At that point, it’s an invite. You get to come out.” Laughing, Terry continues sharing his epiphany. “No guarantees, no compensation, really no insurance, just this invitation. T-shirt, shorts, bring your own cleats kind of situation. The fellowship was the real deal. It would be in print, so I ended up, basically, pursuing that, and he [Tolbert] helped me to raise my aspirations. I took the athletic energy and channeled that into my academics.”

With Professor Tolbert’s encouragement, Terry applied and was accepted to Columbia University’s Teachers College. Taking evening courses, Terry taught in Harlem during the day. It was during his first year of teaching, however, that he discovered that his school’s organizational culture mirrored the culture he experienced as a student in Chicago’s public schools. “What was surprising was some of the colleagues—some of the other teachers and their attitudes towards the students and
towards their profession,” he said. “They didn’t have vigor or rigor. Some, not all.”

Through his observations of his colleagues’ classrooms, Terry concluded that the adults at his school generally held low academic and behavioral expectations for their students. He recalls one incident in which students were misbehaving without any adult intervention: “I remember going over to observe [one teacher’s] classroom to see what the commotion is all about. I open the door and again, there’s a lot of horseplay and craziness going on in the classroom.” When Terry further investigated, he saw two students whose actions were particularly troubling. “My attention is drawn to two boys who are going outside the window and climbing around the pillar and back into the classroom. I said to him [the teacher], ‘don’t you see what they’re doing?’ He says, ‘They’ll come in when they get tired.’” Terry, dissatisfied with the teacher’s response, asked the teacher to leave his classroom. “I asked him to leave his room. I put him out of his classroom and I restored order in the classroom. I told them [the students], ‘I’m across the hall, and if they didn’t get it together, they’d have to deal with me.’” Terry was not laughing at the time, but he laughs now when he recalls the boldness of his actions. “I was called into the principal’s office for demanding that a teacher get out of his classroom.”

Terry relocated to Texas in January of 1983 and was hired as St. Philip’s principal in October at age twenty-four. Assuming the principalship, Terry found an organizational culture misaligned with the school’s stated mission. Terry attributes the discontent with his predecessor’s decision to maintain the instructional practices implemented by the school’s founding Episcopal nuns. “In the reports that I’ve read, the nuns were a little bit
hesitant to implement standardized testing,” Terry shares. “They weren’t as rigorous.”

Terry thinks that the lack of instructional rigor may have been a consequence of the nuns’ adherence to the original St. Philip’s mission to provide a safe and structured place for students: “The climate may have been more of one to adhere to the initial establishment of St. Philip’s as a daycare to get kids off the street and make sure they’re in a wholesome and loving environment.” Creating a safe and structured environment for students in the South Dallas community was important. Terry remembers observing nefarious activity in the surrounding neighborhood—“open drug sales and prostitution”—when he first arrived at St. Philip’s. Despite the importance of addressing community-level challenges, Terry reasoned that as the school’s second principal, strengthening St. Philip’s instructional program was within his primary locus of control. To that end, Terry set and communicated a vision of instructional excellence that reset the level of responsibility teachers would assume for their students’ academic development.

Terry’s ability to shift St. Philip’s organizational culture was the result of the alignment of several contextual factors. First, Terry was an outsider. Being new to St. Philip’s meant that he was not encumbered by the school’s history and its challenges. Rather, Terry approached the work with the freedom to leverage prior personal and professional experiences to think creatively and establish a vision for what was possible in the future. Secondly, Terry had formal permission to institute changes. “When I met with the board [of directors], I questioned what they were trying to do,” Terry recalls. “You have to remember they had one portable and some evidence of Montessori
education.” The board, sensing the possibility for change, hired Terry and in hiring him, validated his vision for change. “I think that my energy was enticing. My energy conveyed to the board, ‘Let’s go for a ride.’ I told the board, ‘Let’s see what else we can do to advance what we’re doing.’” Finally, Terry entered St. Philip’s during a period of crisis. Prior to his hiring, Terry’s predecessor had unexpectedly resigned, creating a leadership vacuum. The absence of operational and symbolic stability, embodied by an organization’s leader, can inform followers’ reception to new leadership. These conditions can also lead a leader to adopt an authoritarian disposition which in the short-term may yield results, but in the long term may alienate a staff and lead to further organizational disruptions.

Terry’s calculus on how to interpret his role at St. Philip’s and his strategy was mediated by a recognition of the parameters in which he was operating. “There is a talent war in Dallas for competent educators,” Terry notes. “We are all trying to creatively find and keep talent.” The dearth of talent, the school’s limited resources to compete for quality talent, and the opportunity costs associated with onboarding new talent informed Terry’s decision to invest the staff in his vision and to work with them to realize it. Investing the staff in a new vision for St. Philip’s required Terry to first affirm the prevailing belief that St. Philip’s students could compete with other students to attend college. “I championed the belief that St. Philip’s could produce students who would go on to the strongest colleges in Texas and the nation—and that they would not only compete, but lead in those environments.” In affirming that belief, Terry was also transparent that St. Philip’s did not create the conditions for its students to compete. “I
said, ‘Look, you have donated books. These were donated to you because they were twelve years old. They’ve been written in. It’s not what you want to hand the students here. It’s not up to date.” Terry notes that St. Philip’s has had students go on and become valedictorians at the very schools from which it once received donated books. “We had to change a mentality that excellence is possible. Our students have proven that it is.”

To change staff’s mindset about their role in shifting expectations at St. Philip’s, Terry worked to elevate the school’s mission:

I was trying to get people to rally behind a movement as opposed to just a mission. It’s a movement. You have an opportunity here to outperform those who have far more resources than you do. You have the opportunity to outperform them on the academic side. Also on the humanistic side in regards to the confidence that they exude, the leadership, the respect, and the concern for others—that you can instill that. That alone will set your students aside and bring them spotlights in most environments.

Changing the staff’s mindset about the nature of their work in relationship to the school’s mission also required Terry to articulate the operating principles the staff would use to govern their behaviors, including how decisions would be made: “It was important that our thinking and motives were aligned to the best interest of a child—B.I.C.” Expounding upon this belief, Terry shares his belief about teaching: “My belief from my time in the classroom in Harlem—some Chicago and some Iowa, but mostly Harlem—is that teaching is very hard work. It does require staying up late at night. It does require your Saturdays and your Sundays—preparing for whatever the challenges that you have in the classroom.” It is because of the demands of teaching that Terry believes that St. Philip’s teachers must internalize that their effort is inextricably linked to their students’
performance. “The resistance that we encountered early on here, and we still encounter, is primarily from those who are not willing to work as hard as others,” he shares. “Teachers who come from public schools who are accustomed to maybe a faculty meeting once a month—having one every week or twice a month or who are not necessarily accustomed to someone walking in and saying, ‘May I have your lesson plans that I can take with me or see them?’ and expecting them to be there.”

Developing “bright and compassionate leaders of tomorrow” does require teachers to work hard. Terry’s expectations for St. Philip’s teachers is to “love my children, first and foremost; and stay true to one of our mantras—‘a day without learning is a day wasted.’” Terry notes that it is important that teachers see themselves as lifelong learners. “I love for [teachers] to be in continuous pursuit of their next degree, constantly learning in their field.” Working hard and pursuing continual development are teacher competencies that can contribute to success. Nonetheless, within a school, the successful application of those competencies must exist within broader systems and structures that the principal helps develop and stewards.

Terry is no longer St. Philip’s principal, a position that he relinquished in 1992 after serving in the role since 1983. As the school grew, Terry realized he was not able to support teachers in the way that was needed to advance the school’s mission. “I could not get to classrooms as much,” Terry confides. “I couldn’t support faculty in the way I felt they needed support.” As headmaster and executive director, Terry is ultimately responsible for academic performance at St. Philip’s. However, Terry must work through his principal, Kelly Murrell, as opposed to working directly with teachers. At thirty-seven
years of age, Kelly is an experienced education leader Terry has tasked with school management. Prior to serving at St. Philip’s, Ms. Murrell was the principal of Dallas’ Hamilton Park Elementary School, a school named after black physician and civic leader Dr. Richard T. Hamilton. Hamilton Park Elementary was founded in the 1950s to educate the black children living in Hamilton Park, a black subdivision created in response to the city’s dearth of housing for black families, due in part to the racially motivated bombing of blacks Americans’ South Dallas homes.

Terry and Kelly meet every week in his office for a sixty-minute meeting. According to Terry, the purpose of the meeting is to review academic progress, upcoming school events, and to problem-solve any challenges that have emerged. Kelly walks in the office and Terry rises from his seat to greet her. “Good morning Dr. Flowers,” Kelly says, shaking Terry’s extended hand. Opening her laptop, Kelly sighs, noting that “we have to discuss a parent situation.” Looking at his tablet, Terry smiles, acknowledging Kelly. His demeanor is calm, and he listens to Kelly describe the situation. “Ms. Johnson still has not confirmed the date for her son’s evaluation even after the additional time we gave her,” Kelly explains with an exasperated tone. Kelly had previously communicated to the parent that the external evaluation was a requirement for his continued enrollment at St. Philips due to his documented behavioral challenges. “I assumed that with the upcoming winter break, Ms. Johnson should have sufficient time to schedule the evaluation prior to her son returning to school in the new year.”

Terry has been listening intently to Kelly, his face pensive and hands folded on the table. Unfolding his clasped hands, Terry breaks his silence with a question: “What is
in the best interest of the child?” Before Kelly could answer, Terry answers his own question. “It is best that the child receives the evaluation.” Turning his attention to his tablet, Terry communicates a series of directives to Ms. Murrell: “Compose a letter to Ms. Johnson stipulating that her son’s return to St. Philip’s is contingent upon her completing an external evaluation. Failure to do so by the start of the new year will result in a separation from St. Philip’s.” As Terry is speaking, Ms. Murrell quickly types on her laptop.

The remaining twenty-minutes of the meeting focuses on several transactional items. “Where do we stand on the afterschool programming,” Terry asks. As they communicate, Terry and Kelly rarely make eye contact, peering instead at their devices. Signaling the end of their meeting, Kelly closes her laptop. “Okay, I am going follow-up with Ms. Johnson by the end of the day,” she says exiting Terry’s office.

Reflecting upon meeting’s objectives, Terry notes that his role is to support Kelly as St. Philip’s instructional leader. “She is the school leader and my job is to support her.” Terry states that his management approach is informed by the professional and personal experiences Kelly brings to her role as school leader. “Kelly is an experienced school leader. She was also a St. Philip’s parent before assuming her current role.” Terry’s perception of his role in supporting Kelly is inconsistent with his method of support. Indeed, in describing the structure of his weekly meeting with Kelly, Terry noted that he and Kelly problem-solve. In the context of Terry’s professed goal of supporting Kelly to lead St. Philip’s as the school leader, problem-solving seems to suggest that Terry and Kelly would work together to determine how Kelly could best respond to a
situation. Furthermore, this notion of engagement is consistent with Terry’s belief in collaboration as a method of addressing obstacles. Nonetheless, rather than operating collaboratively, Terry was directive. Terry solved Kelly’s problem by giving her specific instructions on how to respond to the parent, as opposed to guiding Kelly to determine how she could respond to the challenge she presented.

In a welcome letter to parents, Terry writes that at St. Philip’s, “we vow our sacrifice to serve.” In his role as executive director, Terry believes that he is responsible for creating the conditions in which children can develop the academic and character skills to positively contribute to the South Dallas community. This service to the community, Terry purports that it requires a village of stakeholders aligned to St. Philip’s mission of “providing an unparalleled education and compatible community services through a faith-based experience, with emphasis on serving low and moderate-income families.” Terry’s facilitation of the academic pep rally and his participation in his weekly meeting with Kelly illustrate a disconnect between Terry’s vision of service and his leadership practice. Indeed, in both contexts, Terry’s actions reinforce a model of leadership that is leader-focused rather than group focused. The contradiction in Terry’s belief and practice around leadership development has implications on St. Philip’s sustainability in a changing education landscape. When asked who will succeed him, he quickly notes that he is not yet ready to leave. “I am fifty-eight, feeling strong—what’s all this talk about retirement?” he said. “I am having fun.” Terry’s belief that there is still work for him to complete at St. Philip’s is tempered by his acknowledgement of the impact not having a succession plan can have on an organization. “Too many preachers
and perhaps principals stay around so long,” he said. “They don’t empower anybody to let them know that they’re not doing the best by the congregation or the school. They just stay there and stay there and stay there.” Terry noted that there are St. Philip’s employees he believes could succeed him. “On our staff, we have a couple of people who could do the job. What I am doing right now is watching. Whether you can do the job is not the question. I know we have people who can do the job. It may not be my call to make, but whether or not the level of passion I think is necessary and the embrace of the full school and community center is there is what I am observing and watching now.”

It is important that Terry observes how individuals perform aligned to his understanding of what it means to be St. Philip’s executive director. However, the quality of what he observes is influenced by the expectations he establishes as a leader—and the direct support he provides to help individuals meet or exceed those expectations.

Part IV: Community

Etched on the wall of St. Philip’s lobby is the phrase “serving others with dignity.” Service is one of the school’s core values and is the foundation of the type of education Terry believes is necessary to advance social transformation. “You can be a Rhodes Scholar,” Terry once declared, “but not have a real understanding of God’s purpose for your life and not be successful.”90 St. Philip’s has strategically partnered with more than seventy-five organizations across the Dallas metropolitan area to provide social services to approximately two thousand people within the South Dallas

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community. In August 2014, St. Philip’s partnered with the North Texas Food Bank to develop a food pantry on the site of a former 1,500-square foot liquor store. At full operation, the food bank serves nearly 170,000 meals a day. St. Philip’s food pantry has served more than seven thousand individuals since it opened. A key component of the food bank’s service delivery model is partnerships with community-based agencies including schools.

I join Terry as he leads an executive director of a nonprofit whose mission is to provide clothing to men who are either homeless or have recently been released from prison on a tour of St. Philip’s food pantry. On our way through the school’s parking lot, we then approach what looks like a small-box grocery store. The inside of pantry is a bright, with colorful displays of fresh produce. An older woman is walking with a gentleman wearing a North Texas Food Bank polo shirt. Pushing a grocery cart, I observe the man describe the nutritional value of different leafy greens. “The community pantry is predicated on the idea of customer service” Terry shares with us as we walk down the pantry’s wide aisles. “Each member has an account with a certain number of food credits they can use.” To shop, members make an appointment to meet with a personal shopper—a North Texas Food Bank employee whose job it is to help members navigate the aisles and make informed selections.

The food bank and pantry meet critical needs in the South Dallas neighborhoods surrounding St. Philip’s. City officials have often depicted areas south of the Trinity River as a “food desert” given the dearth of retail grocery stores that provide residents

91 St. Philip’s School and Community Center (Dallas: St. Philip’s School and Community Center, 2016).
access to fresh fruits and vegetables. According to Terry, it is not uncommon to see children enter school in the morning with the red stain of corn chips on their fingers. The need for food access and education among black Texans is dire as 41.5 percent of black Texans are obese compared to 36.9 percent of Latinos and 27.9 percent of whites. Terry’s cognizance of the need in his school community does not mean every means of outreach is appropriate; he strongly insists on providing acceptable methods of service delivery. “We used to have a food pantry window,” he describes, “where seniors and other members of the community could come and get a bag of food. There was no dignity in that process.”

Community service is a key component of students’ experience at St. Philip’s. “Every student does community service even if it is the two-year-olds picking up paper on campus,” according to Terry. Making service an integral part of the St. Philip’s cultural fabric has required the development of programming that aligns with St. Philip’s students’ developmental journeys from early childhood through sixth grade. As students get older, the community service opportunities become more complex. On Thanksgiving Day, fifth- and sixth-grade boys will branch out from St. Philip’s to serve at another community-focused ministry. Fostering positive multigenerational relationships through service is also a key component of the St. Philip’s programming. Fourth, fifth, and sixth-grade students serve seniors lunch at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Cultural Center.

Helping restore senior citizens’ access to food is important. In 2014, 9 percent of seniors across the United States struggled with food uncertainty.94 Twenty percent of Texas’ 3.8 million seniors are food insecure.95 St. Philip’s partners with the Visiting Nurses Association as the only Meals on Wheels depot in South Dallas. Students support the program by placing food on the pantry shelves.

Terry and I depart the food pantry and return to a second-floor conference room. The conference room overlooks the pediatric children’s clinic housed on the school’s campus. The clinic, open to St. Philip’s students and the public, serves approximately one thousand students annually in a community with limited quality medical options. “Like many schools, we see the relationship between access to healthcare and learning,” Terry notes. “If you are sick and don’t come to school, you don’t learn.” Despite the documented value of St. Philip’s community investments, Terry has had to defend the school’s community-focused mission against critiques that the school’s service orientation detracts from the instructional program’s academic rigor. His retort is sharp—“you can be a Rhodes Scholar but not have a real understanding of God’s purpose for your life and not be successful.”96

Terry’s defense of the dual-nature of St. Philip’s mission is rooted in his what he believes is a failure to recognize the organization’s multiple dimensions. “It is a complicated organization—school and community center,” Terry tells me leaning back in

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his chair. “You have families whose parents are both attorneys,” Terry shares. “You have families where one parent is an attorney and one is a doctor. You have a parent who has been prosecuted by the district attorney and their kids go to class together. One parent is in jail and one parent is the district attorney. Then you have the homeless who are here for [the] food pantry or who may walk [through the] front door.” Terry admits that not everyone understands or has agreed with the school’s mission, including his board of directors. In fact, in the mid-1980s, around the time of Terry’s arrival at St. Philip’s, the board vigorously debated whether they should continue with the school and community center or only operate a school. As principal, Terry was primarily focused on the institution’s curricular activities. “At the time, all I did was kids, curriculum, and parents, in that order.” It was during this time that the St. Philip’s board decided to separate from the existing executive director and approached Terry about assuming the role. In presenting the opportunity, however, the board explained that it wanted to close the community center. “The school’s success caused our board to decide that St. Philip’s should just be a school and not be St. Philip’s School and Community Center,” Terry explains. After assessing the offer, he informed the board that he had decided to leave St. Philip’s: “After I listened a little bit more, I said I would be leaving also because the community center is one of the things that attracts me to St. Philip’s. What you are doing is a departure of mission; if you want to dismantle the community center, I am not interested. I will move on as well.” The board decided not to close the community center, but it did reduce its funding. To keep the programming going there, Terry shares that he
“worked for a period of time in the evenings at the community center until we could rebound.”

The St. Philip’s School and Community Center has rebounded, providing services to the broader South Dallas community. Indeed, more than one thousand South Dallas children access pediatric services annually. St. Philip’s has recently partnered with Southern Methodist University’s Lyle School of Engineering to apply human thinking design as a framework to reimagine how the new building could be organized to better meet the South Dallas community’s needs.

Terry’s commitment to providing comprehensive social services is also personally informed by his experiences as a child in Chicago. At that time, his church, Mount Eagle Missionary Baptist Church, played an integral role in providing a safe and structured environment for his siblings and other neighborhood children. “I grew up in the church,” Terry notes. “I cannot ever remember not going to church. It was just part of what we did.” . . . The church was located at 45th and St. Lawrence—site of gangs, poverty, and drugs.” The church was firmly embedded in Terry’s community as he recalls that he “used to live [down] the street from the church.” The church’s proximity to Terry’s community informed the programs it offered. “During that time, churches did activities and took responsibility for issues happening in the community,” he said. Terry was involved in a variety of church programs including the choir and scouting. Outside of school, Terry spent most of his time in church: “We stayed in church pretty much all day from Sunday school to doing Sunday service. We would eat at church, and then there’s the Baptist Training Union, and then there would be an evening program sometimes.”
Terry’s mother was a member of a gospel singing group. “My mother sang in a gospel group called [the] Ernest Franklin Singers, and so she traveled around Chicago, and, eventually, around the country with this gospel group,” Terry said. “They recorded a few records there, so that kept us engaged in the church community.”

Mount Eagle Missionary Baptist Church’s support did not fully address the Flowers family’s financial challenges. “I observed what it took for my mother to make ends meet—what it took for us to stay safe. The additional resources that were making it possible for us to have cheese, bread, and butter.” The Flowers family’s dearth of resources was complicated by structural barriers that prevented them from accessing resources that were in fact available. In Terry’s family, fourteen individuals relied on his grandmother’s one car. Moreover, while public transportation was available, it was not always the best option. “Even if you took the train or bus,” Terry reasons, “the place where you got the government cheese wasn’t down the street from the bus or train stop. It also wasn’t safe to take the train or bus because of gangs.” The structural barriers that existed in Chicago similarly exist in South Dallas. “If you don’t have a car in South Dallas and want to get to [the] State Fair—you have to go downtown and transfer,” Terry says. “St. Philip’s partners with other agencies; our interest [is] in neighborhoods so we work to attract resources here so it is accessible.”

St. Philip’s service-oriented mission and educational programming has elevated Terry as a Dallas leader. In 2014, the city of Dallas wanted to alter the traffic pattern on Interstate 45, which runs through South Dallas. Terry was critical of the city’s proposal, citing the negative impact that it would have on residents. “[The] city’s proposal was that
[the] Martin Luther King exit as it exists today would go away and farther south they would create a new exit—Lamar-MLK. One way to get into South Dallas,” he notes. “If there was a traffic jam, your next exit would be north of downtown. I didn’t think one exit in was a good idea.” St. Philip’s held a town hall meeting hosted by state senator Royce West and state representative Eric Johnson. Both politicians joined with Terry in opposing the city’s proposal, which was not approved. The “ground game” that Terry refers to is operating in the general bounds of the civic system. One example Terry offers of “ground game” activity is calling Dallas City Hall to request a service. “Over time, I realized that starting with a phone call to City Hall is less effective than building a relationship with a political representative.” In southern Dallas, relationships with local and state politicians can be a critical lever to accomplish key initiatives.

As a community leader, Terry has had to navigate across lines of racial and socio-economic difference to secure resources on behalf of St. Philip’s constituents. Terry concedes that he didn’t always know how to navigate systems of power on behalf of the school’s interests. “I didn’t always know about the political game. I didn’t grow up understanding it.” Terry’s vision of a socially, economically, and politically empowered South Dallas community is informed by how his interpretation of the complex intersection of race, gender, and class has evolved from his childhood. Growing up on the southside of Chicago, Terry lived in a racially and socio-economically segregated community. “I didn’t attend school with a white student until college,” Terry recollects. The potency of that statement lingered against the backdrop of the St. Philip’s “Wall of Fame”—framed, autographed black-and-white photographs of black celebrities,
businesspeople, and political luminaries that adorn the walls of the building in which we are meeting. Outside of school, he and his siblings spent most of their time at Mount Eagle Missionary Baptist Church. Mount Eagle’s congregation was predominantly black, reflective of the community in which it was located. In 1970, Terry left Chicago to attend Upper Iowa University. Relocating to Iowa was a significant cultural shift for Terry and challenged the familiar racial schema that he had developed as a child immersed in a predominately black community. “It was Iowa!” Terry exclaimed. “There were racist fraternities and you have to remember, I didn’t attend school with a white student through the twelfth grade.” Terry’s attempts to reconcile his identity as a black male in Iowa were mediated by broader social changes that were happening across the United States. “*Roots* came out in the 1970s,” he notes. For Terry, watching the miniseries fostered a racial consciousness and pride that did not exist for him as a child. “Growing up as a child, television did not offer a lot of positive images of black Americans.” Art represents life, and the diversification of black images through mediums such as television and film paralleled a political shift in how black Americans conceptualized their racial identities.

Younger black activists such as Kwame Ture began increasingly to critique more established civil rights organizations and resisting political platforms they believed failed to address black Americans’ pervasive political and socioeconomic disenfranchisement at the expense of racial integration. Black college students’ activism was a vibrant thread in the fabric of the civil rights movement. Their use of protest to reimagine the democratic experiment shifted historical notions of blackness across the United States, especially on predominately white college campuses wrestling with unprecedented numbers of black
college students. Terry actively participated in black political protests at Upper Iowa University. “We brought Stokely Carmichael to campus to speak. We had a house called ‘the black house’ where BSU [Black Student Union] had all its meetings.” At the same time, it was through Terry’s interactions with white students and his proximity to people different from him that he began to understand dimensions of racial narratives, and challenges associated with fixed perceptions of race. Recalling that time, Terry shares the following with me:

In Iowa [I had] the opportunity to identify ignorance and draw distinction between ignorance and lack of education and really interact with white people who just didn’t understand and were looking to understand from those who were just hardcore, straight-out racists. [College] gave me the opportunity to see that there are different kinds of humans who are white.

During his undergraduate years, Terry did not engage with professors or courses that helped him to make sense of his life experiences and changing racial identity. “The structure of the classes didn’t allow for deep thought.” As a graduate student at the University of Northern Iowa, however, Terry met a professor who helped provide him with the cognitive space to develop a more nuanced conception of his racialized experiences as a black man. The educator, Ira Tolbert, was Terry’s first African American professor. Terry credits Professor Tolbert for introducing him to Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed, a work Terry believes “helped to connect some dots as it relates to conditions I was familiar with from growing up in Chicago and peoples’ perspectives in Iowa.” Graduate school and Professor Tolbert’s courses created a space for Terry to talk openly about issues of race, class, and education. “There were more
opportunities for dialogue,” Terry notes. “We would discuss readings such as Janice Hale’s *Black Children: Their Roots, Culture, and Learning Styles.*”

Looking back at his time in Iowa, Terry asserts that his time as a graduate student at the University of Northern Iowa as essential for his leadership development: “Had I not gone to Iowa, my social justice platform, my radical side would [have] continue[d] to grow.” After a pause, Terry expounds upon that sentiment by sharing a story about an incident he and his wife experienced at a philanthropic event that is the pinnacle of Dallas’s high-society social calendar:

I was at an event—the Crystal Charity Ball—in a tuxedo with my wife. Someone handed me their drink as [if] I was a waiter. So how do I deal with that? Do I blast into the person? I have learned “scanning.” I scan the person to determine where are they coming from with this? Is this blatant? Like what we do as teachers in the classroom, you figure out how to be effective with what your step is going to be. You want to have an impact. So in that case I say to the gentleman, *I am not a waiter. Do you need me to help you find one? Do you know what they look like?* Nothing else said. He says, *I’m sorry* and apologizes. He walks away with [my] question, *do you know what they look like?* That question places him the position to say, *yeah, they look like you,* or *I made a big assumption that they look like you.*

The evaluative process that Terry engaged in—what he refers to as “scanning”—is consistent with strategies many people of color use to determine how to best navigate
racial micro-aggressions. Terry’s decision to scan—or not—is also mediated by other important factors including his awareness that as the chief ambassador for St. Philip’s, he must secure the support of individuals such as the man who mistook him for a waiter. The financial implications of Terry’s options were not lost on him in that moment: “I—we—have to raise $2.5 million annually to support the school and community center.” The network of altruistic, affluent individuals and philanthropic organizations in Dallas is small. If Terry had decided to confront the man based on his perception of racial discrimination, he could have jeopardized his institution’s ability to access future sources of funding in a market where many nonprofits and social organizations are competing for limited resources. In addition to the financial implications of his choice, Terry was also cognizant of the fact that he was accompanied by his wife Gerneise. Given his deeply-seated belief in respecting women, did not want to respond in a public way that would disrespect his wife—no matter how demeaning he may have perceived the situation to be.

At a macro level, Terry’s response and the inherent tensions with which he was faced parallels a broader shift in post–civil rights black political leadership. That is, as more blacks gained entry into bastions of power and prestige from which they and their forbearers were formerly excluded, they evidenced racial identities that ran counter to a false dichotomy that categorized black leaders as either *accommodationist* or *militant*. Rather, in an exercise of political pragmatism, black leaders recognized that it was more

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advantageous to work on behalf of black communities’ interest in a manner that did not alienate the nonblack communities from which they needed support. It is in this context that Terry has developed a leadership strategy and persona that allow him to acquire the resources necessary to motivate change in South Dallas. “My social justice side is savvier, more effective,” Terry notes, laughing. Asked to elaborate, he shares the following example: “look at this, I will be called to come and talk to your group, your child’s Eagle Scout group, or your church group. They will have an opportunity to hear my approach and they have to sit and listen to it. I am able to be sought after to come and talk to you.” Terry is also cognizant of how his actions could impact a small group of black male education leaders in Dallas “If I continued down the other path,” he shares, “then you are afraid of me and if you are afraid of me, you are afraid of other black men who look like me.”

Terry’s navigation across Dallas’ racial and social boundaries is also shaped by St. Philip’s history as a model of interracial collaboration. “The Episcopal community in Dallas is very white; yet it was a small group of black Episcopalians working with the Episcopal Diocese of Dallas in 1946 to start a church.” Terry believes St. Philip’s serves as a model for interracial engagement:

If you ask the leadership team to give a tour, they talk about trying to fill a void in America regarding race relations. We have been convinced that there was very little racial harmony happening. But there are lots of examples of white people standing with black people. St. Philip’s is an example of late ’50s, early ’60s positive race relations. And why there is still a white-black partnership.
The Destiny Award Luncheon, St. Philip’s annual fundraiser, celebrates the institution’s belief that inter-racial dialogue is necessary for unifying racial divisions. Explaining the meaning of the luncheon, Terry states that “the destiny of [the] world is tied to how we can get together regardless of ethnicity. We try to bring in a speaker to talk to that issue and get communities to have dialogue. At the end of [the] luncheon there is a call to action, usually by St. Philip’s alums who I try to get to be a of a different race.”

The luncheon is illustrative of Terry’s vision of the need of a constellation of actors working together aligned to the organization’s mission, vision, and values. Although, Terry has successfully navigated across lines of difference, he has not developed systems and structures to help other staff members acquire the tools he has developed to advance St. Philip’s mission. Indeed, when asked about intentional actions he has taken to help his staff mediate complex racial and socio-economic dynamics, Terry soberly says “no.” Terry’s admission is striking given the dearth of black private school leaders in Dallas. Closing his eyes, Terry attempts to recall the names of past black private school leaders. “There was Lobius Murry…there are more private schools up north” Terry says, his voice trailing off.

Terry is not solely responsible for the lack of black Dallas private school leaders. Rather, Terry’s understanding of the lack of leadership diversity in the Dallas private school sector and his belief in the importance of engaging across racially and socio-economic context is misaligned from his efforts to develop a pipeline of constituents whom could effectively advocate on behalf of St. Philip’s school-community. As a result,
St. Philip’s relevance in a changing education landscape is inextricably linked to Terry’s leadership. And while Terry contends that he has more work to do as the headmaster and executive director, this work requires others who are intentionally positioned by Terry to similarly lead, irrespective of their role or title.

Part V: Reflections on The Lighthouse

For over thirty years, Terry Flowers has served as St. Philip's School and Community Center's lighthouse. Indeed, Terry's steadfast approach to leadership has enabled him to transform an organization he once described as “hidden behind bushes” to an institution where 95 percent of St. Philip’s graduates attend college; and nearly 85 percent graduate in four years. Moreover, to achieve this success, St. Philip’s has remained committed to its core belief in providing students a Christian-based, college-preparatory education predicated on service to others.

Terry's portrait reveals a man whose self-determination and consistency in vision is rooted in his experiences overcoming personal challenges. From losing his father at a young age to leaving the familiarity of the South Side of Chicago to navigating the racial politics of the 1970s on the predominately white campus of Upper Iowa University, Terry affirmed his belief that it was his responsibility to remove obstacles. It was indeed the lessons he learned from his grandmother and mother—lessons in self-determination and perseverance—that enabled Terry to elevate St. Philip's presence in South Dallas.

Applying those lessons to St. Philip’s, Terry surmised that collaboration was the most effective method of advancing organizational change. Indeed, by establishing a
shared vision and working with others, Terry believed he could invest his staff, families, and students in adopting new behaviors aligned to St. Philip's mission. Nonetheless, Terry's portrait also reveals dissonance between his leadership vision of working with and through others and the systems and structures he has employed to support collaboration. Indeed, my observation of his department heads' meeting and weekly meeting with St. Philip's principal illustrate transactional activities that reinforced a reliance on Terry as opposed to developing and leveraging his leaders' competence.

Despite the disconnect between Terry’s leadership beliefs and practice, St. Philip's has achieved academic success. Moreover, St. Philip’s has expanded the South Dallas’ community’s access to resources through strategic partnerships with organizations such as Children’s Health Pediatric Group and the North Texas Food Bank. Nonetheless, the paradoxical nature of Terry's leadership has contributed to his perception of being isolated. “I feel isolated all the time,” Terry somberly noted reflecting upon his service to St. Philip’s. “Every day I feel isolated and it is the role that I play, the amount of time that I have been here, a lot of it is the responsibility, the weight of the responsibility you feel it.”

Terry will not be able to combat the isolation of leadership without empowering his directors to serve as a leadership council and create the space for true dialogue, shared-decision-making, and even dissent. Additionally, without meaningful engagement with his leadership team, Terry will not position someone internally to succeed him which is a threat to St. Philip’s sustainability. As St. Philip's leader, Terry must fulfill a
key aspect of the school's creed: “it is my responsibility to do what is right. I must start today to pave way.”
Chapter 7
Building Bridges: A Portrait of Nakia Douglas

Part I: Holistic Education

Wearing a black robe and light-blue hood, Nakia Douglas, founder and first principal of the Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy (BOLMA), walks across the stage of the all-boys, public magnet school’s Sandra Jay Foster Auditorium toward a small podium. After several minutes of searching for a seat, I settle into the back row, joining nearly 200 parents, extended family members, community supporters, and current students to celebrate the class of 2016’s graduation. Graduations are traditionally celebratory occasions, this graduation being no exception. BOLMA has the distinction of being Dallas’ only all-boys public school—a source of pride among south Oak Cliff residents whose community is often depicted as socio-economically and educationally disenfranchised. That dominant narrative is pervasive among “reform” minded stakeholders focused on improving the quality of southern Dallas K-12 schools. Since moving to Dallas in 2010, I have attended numerous meetings organized to discuss persistent academic challenges such as why only 15 percent of the 79,000 students graduating from southern Dallas high schools in 2011 were college ready based on their ACT and SAT standardized test scores.99

99 Sagar Desai, “Dallas County Post-Secondary Challenges” (presentation, Commit! June Superintendents’ Roundtable, Dallas, TX, June 8, 2017).
Despite the educational challenges that exist and implications for many low-income, black and Latino children’s life outcomes, existing models of academic excellence are often overlooked. BOLMA is one such example, evidenced by the class of 2016’s 100 percent college acceptance rate—the school’s second cohort to have all of its students accepted to a four-year college and university. BOLMA students’ academic accomplishments is part of Nakia’s vision that BOLMA graduates would honor the institution’s namesake by “becoming impactful leaders through the development of their intellectual, moral, physical, social, and emotional skills for the global society of tomorrow.”

Today, however, amidst the graduation’s pomp and circumstance, Nakia is visibly demure, an anomaly for the usually energetic man I first met in the fall of 2012. At that time, I was the principal of an open-enrollment charter middle school located 1.3 miles away from BOLMA—our schools connected by a Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) light rail and commercial district in transition. Prior to visiting my school, Nakia emailed me asking if he could come and observe an after-school provider with whom he was considering partnering to facilitate extra-curricular programs. Nakia’s interest in meeting was unusual mostly because I was leading a charter school and he was leading a traditional district school in a city where the political fault lines pitted charter against public schools. Disregarding politics, Nakia embraced me as “brother Horne” and later shared his rationale for visiting. “I learned to see value in everyone,” Nakia later shared with me. “I visited KIPP Truth Academy and saw that they partnered with After School All Stars, a partnership I later formed.”
Placing his written remarks on the podium, Nakia pauses before speaking, his hands visibly gripping the podium’s sharp edges. This will be Nakia’s last public address as BOLMA’s principal. He has recently been named the executive director of the South Oak Cliff feeder pattern—a portfolio of twelve Dallas Independent School District public schools educating 5,482 students in grades prekindergarten through twelve. “I would like thank you all,” Nakia begins, his voice faltering, “as it was a privilege and honor to serve you.” With tears streaming down his face, Nakia’s normally baritone voice is reduced to a soft whisper made audible by the microphone. “To much is given,” Nakia begins a phrase he has often repeated at BOLMA assemblies. His students respond in unison, “much is required”. “A lot was poured into me as a child. And so, when you experience our young men, and the work that we are privileged to do each and every day, this is me giving back everything that was given to me.”

In his moment of vulnerability, Nakia takes time to honor the people who have helped him support the very community that supported him as a child. “This isn't easy work,” Nakia shares, “but it’s blessed work.” With the audience affirming their native son with calls to “take your time,” Nakia thanks those who were instrumental in the founding of BOLMA.

When I say thank you, I say thank you from the bottom of my heart. Thank you to Ms. Newsome for taking a chance on me. Thank you. Thank you to my mom, for loving, for guiding, for disciplining, and securing and seeing a future for me. Thank you to my wife for loving me unconditionally when I always had dreams. Thank you to my sister for always having to follow in my shadow. Thank you to this faculty and staff. I can't do this, and I haven’t done this by myself. It is ultimately
through you and your work, your commitment and dedication to our young men.

Despite the public adulation Nakia has received as BOLMA’s founder and leader, he consistently communicates his success as the result of a constellation of actors who believed in his potential and supported his development. It is in this community of supporters that Nakia has conceptualized his education leadership as creating the systems and structures whereas students and adults can work together as a necessary condition for achieving socio-political change. “My life, my experiences, my mentors, my teachers, my family members, my friends all helped me become who I am today. This community is part of my fire and desire to create the next generation of leaders not only for Dallas, the state of Texas, for this country, but more importantly, for the world.”

To better understand Nakia’s vision, I visit the Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy. Driving along Lancaster Road in South Oak Cliff was a familiar journey given my leadership of a middle school less than two miles away from BOLMA. However, it was driving to a new destination that buildings I had rarely noticed became more visible. Adjacent to BOLMA is the Veteran Affairs North Texas Health Care System. Serving more than 123,000 veterans, the Veteran Affairs North Texas Health Care System is the second largest veteran affairs health care system in the United States.100 A massive complex, the VA of North Texas’s 853 beds are housed in a patchwork of multi-story,

red-brick buildings. Nakia later explains that BOLMA students visit the hospital, meeting with patients as a part of students’ community service modules. Across the street from BOLMA is the Urban League of Greater Dallas. A patch of uncut grass is the future home of the Urban League job skills training center, a 50,000-square foot building funded through a public-private partnership and designed to provide residents with skills needed to compete for variety of jobs.101

Approaching the Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy, I first notice the one-story school building’s curved maroon and tan brick veneer forming the outline of the Sandra Jay Foster auditorium. The auditorium is part of the Dallas Independent School District’s 2008 $1.35 billion bond program. Completed in 2011, the auditorium was one component of a facility upgrade that included a building addition, the construction of ten classrooms, and outdoor greenspace.102 Affixed to the new addition in steel letters is the school’s full name: Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy at B.F. Darrell. Closed by the Dallas Independent School District in 2009, the Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy occupies the site of Benjamin Franklin (B.F.) Darrell Elementary School. After graduating from Fisk University, Darrell and his wife relocated to Dallas in 1899, where he became a teacher at Dallas’ Colored School Number One.103

became principal of the Wright Cuney School, a position he held until his death in 1919.\textsuperscript{104}

Although Barack Obama has never visited the school—Nakia recalls a time when President Obama met with BOLMA students during a trip to Dallas. “It was a chance of a lifetime for our boys,” Nakia states grinning. BOLMA’s history and its legacy of black American achievement is evident in the cultural artifacts adorning BOLMA’s walls. Pictures of Dallas black leaders such as Democratic Texas State Senator Royce West, one of the most powerful black politicians in Texas and a prominent supporter of BOLMA’s development reinforce the Nakia’s message of leadership and service. During BOLMA’s dedication ceremony in November 2011, State Senator Royce West made the following pronouncement: “We have an opportunity to commit that every young man developed at this leadership academy will have the opportunity to go on and contribute to society. What we pledge to you today is that you will not have an excuse.”

Nakia greets me in the school’s vestibule. Dressed in a grey suit, and wearing his trademark spectacles, Nakia is energetic, smiling and shaking students’ hands as we walk towards the common area. “I rise at 5:45 a.m. every morning,” Nakia shares between greeting students. “I like the quiet of the morning before the students arrive. It’s my time to think and prepare for the day.” Nakia walks over to a group of ten students huddled together. The black and Latino students are dressed in the school’s mandatory uniform—navy blazer, blue oxford shirt, grey dress slacks, and black slip on or lace up shoes. “It is

important that students dress for their future careers. We are preparing future husbands, fathers, doctors, lawyers, principals.” Nakia also believes that the uniforms help counter stereotypes about black and Latino males living in under-resourced communities.

Before many black and Latino young men can realize their future, they must confront the negative images and perceptions society has about who they think they are. Those stereotypes cause our young men to be invisible, shut out of opportunities based on false notions of who they are and are not. The uniform doesn’t address larger factors that are disenfranchising our communities. But what it does do is it allows our young men to be seen—to be included, to demonstrate their talents.

Nakia’s decision to implement a uniform policy was also designed to proactively address the social divisions that arise among students based on the clothing they possess. According to the 2012-13 Texas Academic Performance Reports, 78.3 percent of BOLMA’s 213 students are classified as economically disadvantaged and are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Nakia notes that within the less than twelve percent of students who are not economically disadvantaged, “some come from some middle-class households, and some come from some pretty affluent households. But they're here together. They don't know that the other doesn't have because we all wear the same uniforms.”

Wearing a uniform is especially meaningful for Nakia given his experience growing up poor in South Dallas. “I can remember I had a lot of clothes passed down to me from pretty much kindergarten through sixth grade.” As Nakia aged, he relied on the

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generosity of his friends to borrow clothing. “I used to go to my friend’s house during freshman and sophomore years [of high school] to change my clothes because my mother could not afford to buy clothes that fit. I eventually hit a growth spurt and my secret was let out that I didn't have a lot.” Despite the emotional anguish Nakia experienced, he recalls the support that he received from his friends. That support has informed his compassion and reciprocity. “My friends, and their parents opened their doors to me. They are still true friends to this day. They know if there's anything they could ever do or ever need from me, I'm only a phone call away. Again, it was those people that believed in me.” Nakia’s commitment to provide BOLMA parents uniform assistance was shaped by his memory of the assistance his family received when he was a child. “I told them if your young man qualifies to come to this school, you just give me enough for a deposit. We'll take care of the rest. It may only be one uniform and you may have to wash it by hand, but we're not creating an excuse to prevent learning.”

Nakia and I walk over to another group of students sitting at a cafeteria table. On Fridays, BOLMA students come together for house meetings. Upon enrolling at BOLMA, each student is enrolled in a “house” to which they will belong throughout their tenure at the school. According to BOLMA’s student handbook, there are four houses named after the symbols depicted on the school crest: house of decree (the open book); house of alliance (the handshake), house of justice (scales), and house of expedition (the
“During my planning year before the school opened,” Nakia explains, “I visited several private schools in north Dallas. In speaking with the school directors, I learned more about how the house system was used to foster unity and positive competition across the school.” Another factor that informed his adoption of the house system was his assessment of the geographic diversity of the student population relative to other schools in BOLMA’s Dallas ISD feeder pattern. “The majority of BOLMA students—70 percent—reside in Dallas,” Nakia notes. “The other 30 percent—reside outside of Dallas. Additionally, we have students whose parents are doctors and others who are clerks.” The house system is one way that Nakia is trying to reinforce the importance of community and brotherhood, core school values. “It is true that we have differences. Yet, we are all members of BOLMA, so we have to learn how to work together.”

Affixed to the cafeteria’s walls are posters advertising a reward for the house with the highest scores on a weekly English language arts assessment. Two students who were previously seated at a table introduce themselves to me as “brother Carter” and “brother Smith”. “We are coming up with a study plan for the house,” brother Carter shares with me. “I was selected by my brothers to lead the house of alliance” he proudly shares. As if on cue, the students all say house of alliance and stand with the hands clasped in front of them. Nakia points to a crest embroidered on brother Carter’s uniform jacket. “This crest is the blazon of arms. It is symbolic of everything we do with our young men.”

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handshake denotes the house of alliance, representing the importance of “building genuine relationships among peers, mentors—either a new beginning or an ending to a situation.”

I ask the students how important this week’s house competition reward was to them. Turning his body to face me, brother Carter offers his perspective. “When I first arrived at BOLMA, the rewards were important because my old school didn’t give students rewards. As a junior, I am more interested in getting good grades because I want to go to college.” Nakia high-fives brother Smith as we prepare to walk back to his office. “That’s it, that’s it,” Nakia repeats. “Success is brought about by perseverance, not chance,” Nakia says, referencing BOLMA’s school creed.

The Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy and its house structure are the institutional embodiment of the support, structure, and stability Nakia desired as a child, but did not always receive. “My dad left me when I was four,” Nakia shares, his voice somber. Born on March 21, 1975 in the historic Fair Park section of South Dallas to Edna and Earnest Douglas, Nakia did not have a strong relationship with his father. “He actually lived eight blocks away from me, and so I would see him maybe once every three months.” Nakia’s knowledge of his father’s absence despite his proximity led Nakia to resent the man he wanted to love him. Speaking about his relationship with his father, Nakia shares that “being a young man, there's only so many times you can go and be neglected by your father and not build up hostility toward him, so I did develop a very,


very strong dislike of my father during my early teenage years.” Despite the marital separation, Edna Douglas hoped that Nakia would follow her example of unconditional love and rebuild his relationship with his father. “No matter what, my father and mother never divorced. She would always tell me, ‘no matter what, that's your dad.’”

As a child, Nakia struggled to exhibit the unconditional love for his father that led his mother to overlook Earnest Douglas’ transgressions. Over the course of Nakia’s childhood, however, the sense of loss and abandonment he felt intensified as Earnest Douglas’ action challenged his son’s sense of what it meant to be a father. There was one incident Nakia especially remembers that impacted his perception of Earnest Douglas. “One day my friends and I were riding our bikes down a hill, and a car was backing out of my driveway. A guy, my father, got out the car cussing. He told my mom he didn't have any money for my mom. However, I saw his girlfriend and her kids in the car with gifts. My dad lived eight blocks away, but when I saw him he wasn't being a father.” Nakia was unable to reconcile the juxtaposition between his father’s support of his girlfriend’s children and Nakia’s own financial instability. As Nakia retells that incident, his eyes reveal the pain of abandonment by the very person he believed was supposed to provide for his safety and well-being.

In Earnest Douglas’ absence, Edna Douglas assumed responsibility for her family’s welfare. “My mother wanted my younger sister and me to have better life than our surroundings.” Nakia’s mother initially worked as a department store clerk before entering the childcare sector. “When I was first born, my mother worked at Neiman
Marcus. Her manager later approached her about running daycare, a job she held until I graduated from high school.” Despite her best efforts, Edna Douglas’ employment was not enough to shield Nakia from the challenges of being working poor. “I used to always tell myself, there's going to be one day, I'm not going to have to wear nobody else's clothes.” Nakia’s family’s financial struggles and the absence of his father caused him to question his Christian faith. “Growing up not having a lot, you wonder if God exists, why does he allow you to go through things.”

Despite the circumstances, Edna Douglas was determined to provide a better future for Nakia, choosing education as a pathway toward future success. “My mother believed education was the key that would unlock doors of opportunity for ourselves and others.” Nakia statement lingers in the air as his disposition noticeably changes. Sitting upright, it is as if the emotional weight of his father’s absence and Nakia’s family financial challenges was lifted when discussing the transformational nature of education. Dissuaded by the quality of her neighborhood public schools, Edna decided to enroll her son in private school. Reflecting upon his mother’s choice between public and private school options, Nakia believes her assessment was based primarily on her perception of the neighborhood schools’ safety as opposed to the school’s academic performance. “She never had a lot of confidence in the public-school system and specifically the neighborhood schools. My neighborhood elementary school was not perfect. It had its challenges and like our neighborhood, after living it in it, you become conditioned to the issues.”
Edna Douglas enrolled Nakia in Southwest Junior Adventist Academy, a private, religiously affiliated pre-kindergarten through eighth grade school. The school, located on Bonnie View Lane in the Oak Cliff community, was five miles from Nakia’s childhood South Dallas residence. Looking back, Nakia contends that his mother’s choice to assume the financial burden was informed by her belief in education as an equalizer. “She always wanted us to have better than our immediate surroundings.” Edna Douglas’ criteria for the type of school she desired for Nakia was low teacher to student ratio and Christian values of service and community. Southwest Academy’s religious affiliation was particularly important given the social-emotional challenges Nakia endured due to his father’s absence and his family’s financial insecurity. “As I look back on it,” Nakia notes, “Southwest Academy did give me a solid spiritual and emotional strength. Not saying I couldn’t receive it in the public-school setting, but for the gaps that I had in my life—social-emotional and spiritual—it fit what I needed.”

Nakia initially struggled to acclimate himself to the student population’s middle-class composition. “There were times when I didn’t have the basic supplies, or my mother couldn’t pay the tuition.” It was in those times of need that Nakia believes the school teachers would demonstrate two of the school’s core values: “loving your neighbor as yourself” and “setting high, but realistic expectations”.109 “The teachers would pitch in and support me when we didn’t have the resources—making sure I completed all my assignments.”

In addition to his teachers, Nakia’s friends helped him overcome difficult periods of his childhood. Taking a deep breath, Nakia discloses the crisis of faith he experienced in high school after having to borrow clothes from his friends because he could not afford to purchase properly fitting clothes. “I kept wondering if God exists, why does he allow you to go through things.” Even as Nakia questioned his faith, his friends unconditionally supported him. Those same friends joined him as students at Livingstone College where at the start of their first year they made a pact to commemorate their friendship. “Our pact to each other, the four of us was that when we all get there, we will all finish. Some of our commitment swayed a little bit. All of us didn’t finish in the traditional amount of time, but we graduated.”

Cognizant of the financial implications of attending a private college out of state, Nakia worked hard to complete his undergraduate degree in early education in four years. “Unlike my peers, I stayed on campus during summers, making up courses or taking accelerated courses so I did not finish with student loans.” Nakia also secured a job to pay for his travel to Dallas to visit his family. “Every well eventually runs dry,” Nakia says laughing, “and so I had to begin work in the summer going into my sophomore year to maintain my transportation means back and forth to North Carolina.” Traveling back to Dallas, however, Nakia was again confronted with his family’s financial insecurity. “My mom actually lost the house that we were renting, and so there were times when she stayed with my grandmother.” In his time of need, Nakia relied on the familiar support of his friends. “My grandmother didn't have space for me, so I would stay with my friends.”
Nakia never lost sight of the stability and structure his friends provided him, even when joining other peer groups. While at Livingstone, Nakia pledged the historically black fraternity, Alpha Phi Alpha—a decision that initially tested the strength of his relationships with his four high school friends. “I am a proud member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. and when the four of us arrived at college, we pledged different fraternities—two of us [pledged] Alpha and two of us [pledged] Omega.” For Nakia and his friends, “brothers” as he refers to them, the community they had formed—predicated on a pledge of trust shaped by life experiences—superseded the pledges they would make to their fraternal brothers past and present, and the fraternal communities they would join—communities that included luminaries such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Thurgood Marshall. “We made a pledge to each other that no matter what, we knew each other before the letters, so we would not let the letters cause us to lose a sense of self.” Nakia recalls resisting calls from his fraternity brothers to disavow his relationships with his high school friends: “I was quick to tell my fraternity brothers, if you have a problem with them, you have a problem with me. I don’t care that we are in the same fraternity. Because when I didn’t have anything, these guys were there. They were the only ones to help me maintain sanity to this point and not be a statistic are these guys right here.

Sixteen years after graduating from Livingstone, Nakia’s commitment to his friends endures, rooted in their unconditional care for him without an expectation for reciprocity. “And to this day, we are still known as the Texas boys” Nakia explains laughing. “We are so close that if someone sees one of the four by himself, they ask how the other three are
doing. People that know us, have heard the stories of my friends that I consider my brothers.”

Nakia and I stop by his office to review his schedule. The air in his office is thick as the autumn temperatures in Dallas hover around 90 degrees Fahrenheit. Turning off his desktop monitor, Nakia rises from his chair. “Let’s go outside,” he says as he opens his office door, hanging his suit jacket up before we depart. The hallways are mostly empty except for a few students at the lockers. We exit a side door to a grassy field adjacent to the school parking lot. On the field are thirty students running around with lacrosse sticks in their hand. The students were learning the basics of lacrosse through a partnership with Bridge Lacrosse, a Dallas-based nonprofit. Founded as a summer camp in South Dallas in 2004, Bridge Lacrosse has since expanded to serve students in South Dallas, Oak Cliff, and West Dallas. By teaching students the fundamentals of lacrosse, Bridge Lacrosse aims to use a nontraditional sport to address what they perceive as a pervasive opportunity gap in north Texas urban communities. According to a 2010 report by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), 2% of the approximate 5,100 Division I male and female lacrosse players are black. There are a number of contributing factors to the racial disparity in collegiate lacrosse participation included the cost of playing and prevalence of lacrosse fields in mostly affluent and suburban areas. Despite the prominence of professional black athletic stars such as Jim Brown—Hall of Fame professional football player and Syracuse University lacrosse star—there is a wide

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perception that lacrosse an affluent and white sport. Nakia was determined to change the dominant narrative about sport participation at BOLMA by exposing students to nontraditional sports. “As a child, I swam at the Moorland Family YMCA, so it was important that my students understood that we can play more than basketball and football. Additionally, there is [college] money for black and Hispanic students playing non-traditional sports.” As an incentive, Nakia created a policy that students had to play one non-traditional sport throughout the year before they could play a traditional sport such as basketball. Nakia’s insistence on non-traditional sports at BOLMA has not come without critiques of elitism, paternalism, or “white-washing” from individuals including the very individuals he feels calls to serve. “There have been some guests that have come by and said, ‘this feels like posh north Dallas private schools like St. Mark’s.’” Nakia sees similarities between these critiques and the historical debates regarding how to blacks should achieve socio-economic and political mobility. “The critiques make me think about the great debates that went on between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois. We are still in that debate about what is best for our children and community.” In response to that critique, Nakia firmly responds that BOLMA is supposed to feel like St. Mark’s. Expanding upon that thought, Nakia shares the following:

Why can't public education feel like private education? All children should have access to teachers trained in their content, access to science laboratories, technology centers, arts programming—conditions that prepare students for college and careers. We say we want to create more doctors, scientists, engineers. We have to expose them to that. We can’t just haphazardly say, you’re going to be an engineer, but they’re never exposed to robotics. Every Black and Hispanic child can't afford private education, so why don't we provide what they could receive at a private school at a public-school cost?
Nakia’s belief that exposing his students to activities outside their current context as a condition of improving their future socio-mobility is consistent with his mother’s decision to enroll him in extra-curricular activities outside their South Dallas neighborhood. “I was born and raised in South Dallas,” Nakia proudly notes, “but I played football at the Oak Cliff Boys and Girls Club, learned to swim at The Moorland Family YMCA, took karate at the Oak Cliff recreation center, and played soccer at Kiest Park.” Edna Douglas believed Nakia’s involvement in those activities was necessary for his social development. “For my mother, it was important that I was exposed to different experiences and situations—all as preparation for life. For my mother, money wasn’t a barrier to access.” The access Edna wanted Nakia to have also included his participation in extra-curricular activities outside of their Fair Park neighborhood. Nakia’s involvement in the breadth of activities outside of his neighborhood expanded his conception of community as not defined by explicit or implicit geographic, racial, or socio-cultural boundaries. “My mother wanted to expose us to as much as possible and by doing that, we would be able to make better decisions for the remainder as our lives.” Making better decisions required Nakia to be immersed in an environment that would challenge his preconceived notions of the human condition and help him move beyond the socio-economic and racial boundaries that had at times caused him to be socially isolated. “That exposure early on as a child allowed me to see people as people,” Nakia
notes. “I learned not to develop a stereotype or develop a perception about a specific individual based on the masses.”

Nakia’s movement across Dallas’ social and racial hierarchy also helped normalize his lived experiences as not endemic to South Dallas, but as part of the broader human narrative. “I was exposed to young men and women from all over the city of Dallas of various backgrounds, religious beliefs, socio-economic backgrounds and it made us all better. I realized that some of my friends that had money had the same if not more socio-emotional issues than I faced.” Shifting in his seat, Nakia describes how his friends would question why they never visited his house. “My friends would always say that you get to come to our house, but we don’t get to come to yours. I had to give them a perspective of the adults. My mother is not married and as such, your family wouldn’t allow you to come to my house. And so that was alarming to them, but it was a reality that I understood that they hadn’t been exposed to.” Listening to Nakia, it is unclear if his mother’s marital status was the primary reason his friends were not invited to his house, or if welcoming his friends to his home would further reinforce socio-economic differences. Irrespective of the reason, Nakia’s immersion in social settings beyond the familiarity of South Dallas, might have helped him develop the assume greater agency over how he would confront implicit societal barriers and the implications they have on children’s lived experiences. To that end, rather than experience the sense of shame that may arise from a peer questioning his family structure of socio-economic status, Nakia controlled both the narrative and situation by not inviting his friends to his house.
I leave Nakia standing outside watching the students practice drills, the sound of traffic along the Lancaster corridor muting the coach’s whistle. As an education leader, Nakia has worked to build an institution that prepares students for a world that has not always been receptive to black and brown men. “We talk about why the young men stay in trouble with the law, where our society is pushing them, through the arts and entertainment, toward that.” Nakia’s solution is to reimagine public education by creating spaces where students’ academic and socio-emotional development are equally prioritized. “School is our sanctuary. The environment we create really allows our young men, to get away from the worries of the world for a while. I just need you to stay in your role as a child and a learner.” Nakia’s vision for BOLMA is to develop learners by attending to students’ academic and social-emotional development. “If you're a student here, we're taking a holistic approach in our delivery from classroom instruction to the social activities to the extracurricular activities to their emotional development.”

Changes to state educational policy however offer a narrower view of the academic experiences necessary for college and career readiness. In 2010, the Texas Education Agency adopted the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness assessment system. Under this new system, students in grades 3 through 12 would be tested on their mastery of reading, mathematics, writing, and history.112 Student performance was used as a primary determinant in state accountability ratings of schools and school districts. One of the main drivers for the changes was the state’s interest in

preparing more students for college and careers. Texas is no stranger to educational accountability. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 championed by former President George W. Bush was predicated on Texas’ education accountability system during his time as Texas’ governor. It is therefore in this context of high stakes testing and increased school and district academic accountability, that I am interested in how Nakia has developed systems and structures to advance a vision of strengthening students’ academic and character development.

Part II. Instructional Excellence

It is 7:00AM and Nakia walks towards BOLMA’s front doors, his pace spry. Glancing at his watch, Nakia opens one of the school’s main doors. The sounds of cars entering and leaving the school’s roundabout enliven the once silent hallways. “Good morning brother Oliver,” Nakia says, extending his hand. Nakia’s smile is infectious and with each handshake, the students smile back at him. Shaking students’ hands is a consistent part of Nakia’s morning routine. “You never know what happened last night or on the way to school,” Nakia shares with me after closing the door to mark late arrivals. “Shaking the students’ hands lets them know I care.” The morning greeting is also a way Nakia teaches students social cues. “We are preparing our students to be husbands, fathers, doctors, and lawyers. To get power, you have to know how to interact with people in positions of authority.”

After the morning bell has rung, Nakia and I walk to the school’s auditorium where in fifteen minutes Nakia will lead morning assembly or lyceum for students in
grades six through eight. Lyceum is a mandatory twenty-minute morning meeting facilitated by Nakia with the purpose of introducing character development principles. No longer a full-time teacher, Nakia views lyceum as an opportunity to instruct students. “The morning lyceum is still my classroom. That’s where we recite our pledges, our school creed, school song, but more importantly we discuss the leadership focus of the day.” One of the components of Nakia’s school design plan is a year-long calendar of lyceum topics are organized around the Costa and Kallick’s book *Learning and Leading with Habits of Mind*. With the premise that there are sixteen behaviors or habits of mind that if employed, can help students successfully solve problems, Nakia developed a scope and sequence to introduce students to fourteen habits throughout the academic year. Taking out a large three-ring binder, Nakia shares with me the plan he developed to guide the lyceum lessons. “We introduce a different habit of mind each week. Each day we include quotes, and the quotes are meant to not only cause students to think but also to reflect over their daily practices.”

Looking at the clock affixed to the wall, Nakia claps his hand, exclaiming that it is “showtime”. Nakia quickly moves toward a projector positioned stage center, advancing his presentation to the opening slide. Two hundred middle school students begin to enter the auditorium, each with a required notebook and writing utensil in their hands. The students talk to each other as they wait for lyceum to begin. “To much is given,” Nakia begins, his voice echoing throughout the half-filled auditorium. The students stop talking and respond, “much is required”. “Good morning brothers of the Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy,” Nakia notes, emphasizing the word *the* as if
to highlight the school’s prestige among its peer schools in district 4. “Good morning Mr. Douglas,” the students and staff members respond. Standing in front of the first row, Nakia begins to recite the school creed. “We are the Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy,” his voice punctuating each word with the slow cadence of a southern Baptist preacher. “We have the audacity to hope, we have the audacity to succeed.”

Walking towards the projector, Nakia advances his Power Point presentation to a slide entitled “listening with understanding and empathy”. “Before you lead someone somewhere, you have to gain a better perspective of where they have been. I had to learn the skill of listening first, resisting the temptation of always speaking.” As Nakia speaks, the students write feverishly in their composition books, a learning method Nakia later explains is a requirement for BOLMA students. Reflecting upon his lesson, Nakia connects the lyceum lesson to BOLMA’s mission. “Our mission is to develop young men into impactful leaders for the development of their intellectual, moral, physical, social, and emotional skills for the global society of tomorrow. Success in the global society of tomorrow requires leaders who see their job as unifying people together. To do that work, you have to listen to others.” The importance of habits of mind as a critical component of honing the students’ executive functioning skills requires intentionally creating environments whereas students can engage with the content and each other. Yet, in the twenty-minute lesson, I observed that there were only three times in which students directly responded to questions or engaged with each other. Elevating the student voice would seem an integral part of creating opportunities for students to acquire the transformative powers of knowledge and wisdom as noted in the BOLMA creed. “Time
constraints limited the amount of student talk,” Nakia notes when I question him about the dearth of opportunities for student to engage with each other during lyceum. “We should observe more student engagement in the classroom,” Nakia says as we exit the auditorium to participate in his daily classroom observations.

Since founding the school in 2011, Nakia and his instructional leadership team—Michelle Neely, assistant principal, and Courtney Cummings, instructional coach—have adhered to a schedule of weekly classroom observations that. “Normally on Mondays at 9:30 a.m., the administrative team will get together, and we review the previous week, but more importantly we look and see what’s coming forward for the coming weeks. Then I try to get into classes.” BOLMA’s instructional leadership team is responsible for observing 35 teachers. While Nakia acknowledges that there are several competing priorities—such as parent meetings, district meetings, or staff requests—he prioritizes observing classroom as a central component of his role as principal. “Parents choose to send their children to our school. Therefore, we must ensure that students are learning and performing well. If students are not showing mastery on the state test, or matriculating to college, it will be difficult to justify to a parent why they should send their son to the Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy.” Nakia also acknowledges that BOLMA exists within larger educational accountability contexts which inform his actions and that of his teachers. “There was a time when being an administrator meant overseeing student discipline, buses—logistics. Now, administrators are expected to oversee teacher professional development, review student data, observe classrooms. This shift is so that schools, especially those that traditionally underperform, can improve.”
Nakia asserts that increased accountability for students’ academic performance is not in conflict with his larger vision for creating student leaders. “Performance has privileges. Lack of performance has consequences.” Consequences without support however, does not according to Nakia engender trust among faculty or result in student achievement. “If there's a gap, be it academic, social, emotional, we have to fill it. That is our charge. As principal, it is my responsibility to support our teachers, and ensure that what they are teaching is preparing our students for life beyond high school.”

Nakia and I enter a ninth-grade history classroom. The windowless classroom is organized with twelve students sitting at desks arranged in rows. There are on average 11.6 students per teachers in grades 9 through 12 at BOLA. The district and state averages are 15.1 and 15.2 students respectively. Nakia explains that the smaller learning environments “foster greater student engagement and help ensure the individualized needs of students are met.” The classrooms walls are bare except for a bulletin board with student essays. The essay prompt asked students to apply lesson learned from the civil rights movement to a contemporary issue their community is facing. One student wrote an impassioned essay about the lack of grocery stores in his neighborhood—calling it a “food desert”.

A young black male teacher is standing at the front of the classroom. Like Nakia, the teacher is wearing the school’s mandatory student uniform, a weekly tradition Nakia launched to engender unity among the faculty and students. The instructor is in his third—calling it a “food desert”.

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year of teaching. Forty-six percent of BOLMA’s high school teachers have between 0 and 5 years of teaching experience. Moreover, approximately 29 percent of BOLMA’s high school teachers have a Master’s degree. The teacher stands near the classroom’s white board, not venturing beyond the front row. Reading off the whiteboard, the teacher explains the learning objective. “The aim for today’s lesson is to discuss the impact Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* had on the civil rights movement.” The lesson’s learning objective aligns to Texas Education Agency’s ninth-grade history learning standard: “The student is expected to discuss the impact of the writings of Martin Luther King Jr. such as his ‘I Have a Dream’ speech and ‘Letter from a Birmingham Jail’ on the civil rights movement stand standard students.”

“Can someone please tell me what motivated Dr. King to write his letter?” Half the class raises their hands in response to the question. “Dr. King was calling out white ministers he thought were not supporting civil rights.” Walking to the board, the teacher writes “lack of support for civil rights.” “Please take out your copies of the letter so we can revisit the text.” The students retrieve their copies of the text and the teacher begins to read a passage aloud.

Throughout the thirty-minutes that Nakia and I observe the classroom, I notice that the teacher only explicitly asks four questions. Although the action verb for the lesson was “discuss”, students spend most of the class copying notes directly from the teacher. Peering over a student’s notebook, Nakia writes in his own notebook. In August

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of 2013, the Dallas Independent School District introduced a classroom observation form for school administrators to use. The “spot observation” form was designed to establish a vision for excellent classroom instruction. Improving the quality of classroom instruction is a stated goal of Superintendent Mike Miles who in his strategic plan entitled “Destination 2020” reasoned that “placing an effective teacher in front of every child” would help DISD reach its goal of having the highest college and career-ready percentage of graduates of any large urban district in the nation. Under this plan, principals would have “one year” to demonstrate that they could drive consistent student achievement across their schools. The observation form is designed to allow instructional leaders or instructional coaches to document “indicators of proficient instructional practice.” One category in which teachers are evaluated is “engagement”. According to accompanying rubric, and exemplar teacher “uses purposeful multiple response and instructional strategies that engage all students.” If teachers utilize those instructional strategies, one of the learning outcomes is that students will “consistently collaborate, engage in discussion, use peer questioning, and integrate diverse perspectives.”

Back in his office, I ask Nakia to share his reflections about the lesson. “There should have been more attempts to involve students in the classroom discussion. “The students need to wrestle more.” Looking at his notebook, Nakia describes the feedback he

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will give to the teacher. “When I speak to the teacher, we are going to talk about how he could introduce more questions in his lesson to activate the students’ thinking. I am going to reference the lyceum lesson and how that could be a springboard for introducing the lesson.” Since opening, BOLMA has achieved success as measured by students’ performance on the state standardized tests. During the 2014-15, 90 percent of BOLMA students met the post-secondary readiness standard for the social studies state of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness, compared to 36 percent of students across DISD and 44 percent of students across the State. I ask Nakia why he did not use the spot observation form for the classroom observation especially as it is a key instructional practice DISD central administration believes is critical for driving rigorous college preparatory instruction across classrooms. “I have used the form before, but like the freedom of taking literal notes in my notebook.” Closing his notebook, Nakia elaborates on his choice. “The lesson observation is a guide, a framework. However, when I speak to BOLMA teachers, I want to push them to think outside the box because we are reimaging public education. We may think about how a teacher’s movement can introduce zest into the lesson. Or we may reference a popular song lyric as a way of building a cultural bridge with a disengaged student.” Scribbling on his notepad, Nakia explains his attempt to shift his teachers’ mindsets. “What we have created is a paradigm shift for a teacher who may have a student who’s not engaged and not know how to turn the light switch on. Rather than permit the student from not investing in their education, we work together to build interest in that child.”
Sitting more upright in his seat, Nakia begins laughing. “I have always been a little radical.” Testing boundaries is a practice Nakia traces to his time at Livingstone College. In 1995, as vice-president of Livingstone College’s student government association, Nakia worked to get the college to fund students’ travel to the Million Man March, an event primarily organized by the Nation of Islam. Nakia believed that the march would be a counter-narrative to dominant notions of black male pathology. “Society is dominated with negative images of black men so much so that many young black men believe that what they see is how they must act. The Million March was a rare chance for black men across the country to come together in solidarity…to uplift themselves, and commit to being better husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers.” Despite his belief in the importance of attending the march, Nakia was aware that the march’s affiliation with the Nation of Islam did not align with Livingstone College’s Christian identity. “Livingstone is an AME Zion school. When we first got to the campus, the Nation of Islam had started one of their first chapters in North Carolina. The school and the state weren’t very open to them.” Nakia and his classmates however would often engage with members of the Nation of Islam. “We would see the brothers out selling bean pies and the Final Call and we would always buy one.” After observing the interaction between Nakia, his classmates, and the Nation of Islam, one of Livingstone’s faculty advisors questioned the students’ engagement with the Nation of Islam. “We responded to him by sharing that where we are from, there are a lot of churches, but the only people who were really active and making a difference was the Nation of Islam.” Nakia’s interaction with the faculty advisor illustrated for him the class differences
among the faculty and students and how those distinctions and lived experiences informed how individuals defined community. “We brought a different perspective because a lot of the Livingstone students were legacy students. We were talking about what we were dealing with coming from Dallas, particularly South Dallas, the inner city. The students and faculty admitted that they didn’t think about the Nation in the way we did because it was not aligned with their shared experiences.” Livingstone College agreed to broadcast the march in the school’s campus center and close the school on the day of the march. Nakia attended the march, traveling to Washington, DC, on a bus with other student leaders. “It was transformative for not only the young men who were able to attend, but the sisters who saw why we were going and the vows that we made to be better leaders around the campus.”

Scratching his beard, the speckle of grey visible in Nakia’s beard dates his collegiate experiences. And yet, it was those experiences that have influenced how Nakia navigates the education context to realize his vision of transforming southern Dallas through education. In addition to redefining instructional leadership at BOLMA, Nakia has also reimagined student discipline. The student code of conduct entails a four-tier process beginning with classroom consequences and culminating in a referral to the principal’s office. Student misconduct deemed “serious or persistent” are evaluated against the Dallas Independent School District’s code of conduct and includes expulsion. When student discipline situations escalate to Nakia, he often involves teachers in evaluating and rendering a decision. “I recall once that one of our young men violated probation. At the time, the parents were a little nervous about meeting with me. I told
them, ‘we are going to have a panel of teachers that have been here since the beginning. We’re going to let you state your case to the panel and we will go forward with our decision.” Smiling, Nakia notes how the parents were surprised by the Nakia’s response and the structure he had proposed. “The parents looked at me and said, ‘it’s not just you?’ I said, ‘we do this as a team. I am not always in every classroom and these staff members may have a perspective I may not have. I need their input.’” Much to the surprise of the family, Nakia implemented the staff panel, which he credits as a learning experience for his staff. “When it was time to vote, I closed my eyes. My staff questioned what I was doing, but I told them I wanted to hear their voices. I didn’t want them to ever think that I’m trying to sway them one way or another. Afterwards, when we debriefed, they commented on how I allowed their voices to be heard. I replied by telling them that what I hired them for. If they got to hear me talk all day, and everything is only my way and it's only one idea, how are we really building leadership?”

The Barack Obama Male Leadership is a model of academic excellence within the Dallas Independent School District. Guided by creativity and innovation, Nakia has challenged systems and structures to create a school environment aligned with his vision of student and school success. BOLMA results have increasingly raised the attention and interest of parents who have increased their demand for high-quality schooling options in southern Dallas. In this context, Nakia must develop a vision of parental engagement that aligns within his vision for social change.
Part III. Parent Engagement

Parents have long been the catalyst for change within Dallas public schools. On October 6, 1970, Sam Tasby, a black father of two children attending racially segregated schools in the Dallas Independent School District, famously filed a lawsuit in federal court charging the Dallas Independent School District with continuing a racially segregated school system prohibited by the United States Supreme Court under Brown v. Board of Education. Despite residing within walking distance of an all-white Dallas ISD school, Sam Tasby’s daughters were bused several miles to an all-black Dallas ISD school.\(^{117}\) United States Federal Judge Harold Barefoot Sanders ruled in favor of the plaintiffs in the class action lawsuit Tasby v. Estes, placing Dallas ISD schools under federal oversight. “The magnet school concept originated as a part of the 1976 Desegregation Court Order of the United States District Court for the Northern District of Texas and included the implementation of magnet schools in Grades 9-12, academies in Grades 7-8, and vanguard schools in Grades 4-6 (PK-6 for Montessori).”\(^{118}\) Magnet schools such as the Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing Arts, established in 1892 as Dallas’ first high school for black students, were intended by district officials to serve as a mechanism to attract middle-class and white families back


to Dallas’ urban public schools who left for private and suburban schools in response to mandated busing orders. Indeed, prior to Dallas’ desegregation efforts, more than half the student population was white. In 2014-2015 school-year, 5 percent of Dallas ISD’s 160,253 students are white. ¹¹⁹

Similar to the 1960s, Dallas officials view expanded in-district choice schools in the twenty-first century as a strategy to stem the flow of families out of DISD. ¹²⁰ Dallas officials additionally cite studies that reveal the positive impact racial and socio-economic diversity on student achievement and earning potential. ¹²¹ Specifically, students’ exposure to other students who are different from themselves and the novel ideas and challenges that such exposure brings leads to improved cognitive skills, including critical thinking and problem solving.”¹²² This is particularly compelling given statewide demographic shifts and legacy discriminatory housing policies that have contributed to Dallas ISD being labeled as one of the most segregated school districts in the United States.¹²³

Nakia is keenly aware of power many parents wield in the Dallas education sector, and their ability to collectively champion the type of social transformation he

envisions occurring through schools like the Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy. “Our mission isn't necessarily just for our students,” Nakia contends. “It's for anyone who comes into our building.” Rather than wait for parents to come into the Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy, Nakia believes it is his responsibility to go out into the community and speak directly to parents. “Whether I am at churches, recreation centers, or earth day fairs, I meet with parents so they can hear about BOLMA’s mission and my, our commitment to help their sons become the next generation of leaders.”

Eager to observe Nakia engaging with parents, I visit him at the city’s annual Earth Day Fair in South Dallas’ Fair Park. Earth Day is a city-wide event where schools (traditional district, charter, and private) and other community-based organizations increasingly showcase their programs. Walking past the collection of art deco buildings, I reach the Automobile building where I find Nakia and two BOLMA students standing around a small booth. Despite the extremely warm temperatures inside and outside the facility, Nakia and the students are all dressed in their BOLMA uniforms. The students, both sophomores, are holding brochures that provide an overview of the academic program. On the table, was a tri-fold poster-board showcasing information about the school’s robotics club. One mother, with a reusable bag in her hand, stops at the table, picking up a brochure. Her son, dressed in a Dallas Cowboys jersey and shorts stood behind, sheepishly looking at the floor. “Good afternoon young man,” Nakia said, extending his hand to the child. Noticing that the boy did not make eye contact, Nakia asked the boy and mother to watch him greet one of the BOLMA students. “Good afternoon brother Rico,” Nakia said. “Good afternoon Principal Douglas”, the student
responded, maintaining eye contact. “That’s what I want for my son,” the mother exclaimed, taking a brochure and stepping closer to Nakia to listen to him describe the school. “The mission of the Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy is to develop young men into impactful leaders through the development of their intellectual, moral, physical, social, and emotional skills for the global society of tomorrow.” Reading the brochure, the mother noted that she didn’t believe her son would meet BOLMA academic admissions requirements. Nakia encouraged her to apply anyway, thanking the mother and her son.

After the mother departs, Nakia shares that he is not selective with whom he speaks when recruiting families. “When I go out to recruit students, I want to speak to all students. It doesn’t matter if you are in the top ten percent or the bottom ten percent. That's a paradigm shift for a parent who may not even see single-gendered education as an option for their child, and now they're realizing, okay, somebody went in and spoke to my child. He's coming home, talking about that. He's excited about this.” Nakia’s vision of increasing educational access and opportunities for students is constrained however by the admissions criteria all applicants to the Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy must meet. In 2013, applicants needed to have a minimum 80 grade point average in 5th grade; as well as a 1533 and 1571 scaled score on the English language arts and mathematics State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness.

Nakia insistence that he must engage with all families is informed by his personal experience attending a school of choice. Indeed, despite his family’s financial challenge,
Nakia’s mother enrolled him in a private K-8 school. His mother’s belief at the time was the education was transformational, and Nakia’s attendance at Southwest Adventist Junior Academy would better prepare him navigate life outside of South Dallas more so than his neighborhood public school. As Nakia matured, he longed to attend school with his friends. Laughing, Nakia remembers unsuccessfully persuading his mother to enroll him in his neighborhood Dallas ISD middle school. “I talked her into taking me to the middle school I would have been assigned to—John B. Hood.” Nakia fondly remembers that his mother only considered his request based upon an acquaintance’s recommendation. “It was on a wing and prayer that I even got my mother to visit the neighborhood middle school. That was based on the word of one of my friend’s mother who said her son was doing okay over there. My mother was still hesitant because she didn’t hear it from a lot of people.” Despite the acquaintance’s recommendation and Nakia’s own advocacy, Edna Douglas was dissuaded.

Thinking about his mother’s decision, Nakia believes it was a school fight that reinforced his mother’s perception that the middle school lacked structure. “One evening we went to an open house and a fight broke out. She immediately changed her mind. Sometimes perceptions can lead people to different decisions.” Nakia admits that his mother’s perception of John B. Hood as an unstructured middle school did in fact match reality. “Despite its best efforts, it struggled to maintain structure such that learning occurred.”
Decades later as principal of a magnet school within the Dallas Independent School District, Nakia asserts that his mother’s decision, like that of many parents, cannot be evaluated in isolation. Rather parents’ perceptions and ultimately their decisions are shaped by many factors such as their social networks. “When we think about a lot of our inner-city families,” notes Nakia, “a lot of their perceptions of our school system is grounded in grassroots interactions. I may hear things at the beauty shop, I may hear about it from a neighbor…I may even hear something because I have a church member who works at the campus and they are telling me about it.” It was Nakia’s mother’s social network, and what the social network valued that shaped and later reinforced her decision regarding Nakia’s elementary and middle school enrollment. “The private school I attended for elementary school, my mother found it by way of her beautician. Visiting the neighborhood middle school was based on the word of one of my friend’s mother who said her son was doing okay over there.” Given the power of perceptions, Nakia believes that the success or failure of the schools and school systems is connected to their ability to meaningfully close the perception gap that may exist between educational institutions and parents as educational consumers. “When I think back to when I was a child, the neighborhood schools didn’t brand themselves or put out enough of a word or name for themselves to encourage my mother to allow that to be a viable option for me.” Expounding upon that thought, Nakia shares how the connection between perception and evidence has shifted over time, and the impact that shift has had on school systems’ strategic approach to enrollment.
All I know is that when I look at social media, read the Dallas Morning News, or watch the news, they are constantly talking bad about DISD, not highlighting that there are some great schools within the district. Not everyone has access to technology and therefore may not know that a campus is comparable to a charter school or private school that’s in the neighborhood. When I was a kid, we didn’t have social media so it really was word of mouth. Your word was your bond. As a school, either you were providing those services or you weren’t. Now, in the age of social media, not only does our word have to be our bond, but so does the end product in regard to performance.

Nakia’s critique of the pervasiveness of negative characterizations of the Dallas Independent School District are the result of schools not actively engaging with their constituents overlooks the myriad of factors that inform individuals’ school choices. As a southern Dallas administrator who has had to annually recruit families, I would agree that school-community engagement does help shape the narratives parents may form about a school. Nonetheless, the stories individuals form and internalize, and the schooling decisions they make are also influenced by other factors including prior school performance, a school’s racial and socio-economic composition, or class size. Efforts to transform perceptions therefore must be multi-faceted to effectively address the complexity of what individuals believe and how they act based on those beliefs. Moreover, the actions that schools might take are constrained by what is in their locus of control--such as resources or time.

Reflecting on his engagement with parents, Nakia notes that he has modeled himself after his high school principal whom he affectionally calls Dr. Lewis. “When I got to high school age, [my mother] had been hearing about Lincoln High School and what Dr. Lewis had been doing in the community and how he took care of the kids. It
was Dr. Lewis’ words and actions outside of the campus; his expectations of the faculty, staff, and students that even had her open to the idea of me attending Lincoln.” Grinning, Nakia noted however that his mother’s permission was conditional. “She was willing to allow Lincoln to be an option—with the warning that if it didn’t work out, I didn’t do what I needed to do, or if the school did not perform to the level it said it would, she would pull me out and find a way to make sure I went to private school.” Cognizant of his mother’s warning, Nakia graduated from Lincoln. Structurally, Lincoln High School presented a cultural shift for Nakia. Lincoln was an urban, non-religious, comprehensive high school—exponentially larger than the smaller, religious-affiliated private school where Nakia was known and personally supported by his teachers. Nakia enrolled in the high school’s magnet humanities program to take advantage of the school’s smaller learning environment. “The instructional specialization afforded me opportunities for personal growth.” The magnet program’s focus on world cultures afforded Nakia the opportunity to travel aboard. “You have to remember, I was from South Dallas,” Nakia exclaims laughing. “I had the opportunity to travel to West Africa twice, travel to Senegal, Gambia, and Ghana. I had the opportunity to stay with families there, experience schools not only in the main capital cities, but also got to go out and visit schools out in the bush and families there. That was a really eye awakening—a life awakening experience as a sixteen and eighteen-year-old student who was finding himself in life.”

The crowd at the Earth Day Dallas begins to disband. The two BOLMA student ambassadors begin disassembling the booth. As they are finished, their parents arrive,
waving at Nakia. “Principal Douglas, it is good to see you,” says a mother. Nakia walks over and gives her a hug. “Thank you for allowing your son to attend this afternoon—he represented BOLMA and his brothers well.” As the students and their parents walk off, Nakia says “see at Lyceum on Monday.” Nakia takes off his jacket and we find a seat at a small circular table away from the exhibits. Checking his phone, Nakia appears tired. “It has been a long day, and week, but we are doing good work.” It is a rare moment that Nakia appears relaxed as his usual disposition evokes the urgency with which many social entrepreneurs operate. “This afternoon was a success,” Nakia says after drinking from a water bottle. “Success based not on the number of applications taken, but the exposure families and attendees had to the work our kids are doing.” Not all parents choose to send their child to BOLMA. Despite this reality, Nakia believes that every interaction he has with parents is an opportunity to invest them in a vision of their child predicated on their involvement in their child’s education.

Maybe parents say single gender is not for my child. But now I'm going to make sure that he has all the opportunities, whether or not he wants to stay in his home school or if he decides to go to a magnet school, or if he's recruited to go to a private school. I believe the burden that we're carrying, which is a good burden to carry, is that we're really reimagining not only education for our students here, but in some instances, through the ripple effect, education for students all over Dallas.

I wonder at what cost the exposure comes for a man that has been building his school for the past three years. One of Nakia’s self-reported strategies is to leverage his parent teacher student association as ambassadors for BOLMA. In fact, the PTSA has become a
primary vehicle through which Nakia has reinforced his belief in parent engagement as a critical component for realizing the school’s mission. Nakia recalls one the parent group’s early meetings where he observed social divisions that were forming among the members. “I remember when we were getting ready to elect our officers. One of the parents I knew was from a public elementary school said, ‘we want to have the same relationship that these parents have.’ When I looked, all the parents had clustered together based off their kids’ prior education. I had a group of private school parents. I had a group of parents from the north. I had a group of parents from Pleasant Grove and Oak Cliff sitting together. They wanted that familiarity with each other.” Despite seeing the humor in the parents’ reaction, Nakia did conclude that social divisions undermine his belief that the school and its systems and structures must be grounded in educating all students. “I explained to them ‘everything you all want, we have to want the same for our young men, and so you all have to model this.’” To shift parents’ mentality from focusing solely on their child to caring about the school-community, Nakia reinforces BOLMA’s mission. "As long as you keep everything focused on the students,” Nakia states, “the adults will fall in place. That's why we say the mission before every PTSA meeting. It is important that you remember why we're here, why we're making our decisions at every meeting. If you keep that in the forefront, it actually allows some of the egos to fall to the side. That is the key. It's much like faith. We put ourselves before God, you lose your way. In the school setting, we put our adults before our children, you lose your way.”

Over time, Nakia has begun to see evidence of the parents working together on behalf of all students. “Before we left for our Thanksgiving break, our PTSA did a potato boil for
the faculty and staff. When I was looking at the ladies that were volunteering, one of my parents I know qualified for free and reduced lunch, had another middle-class parent, had another from an affluent family, and they were together. Again, changing that paradigm, providing those opportunities and experiences has been a great reward.”

During the 2014-2015 school-year, the Texas Education Agency awarded the Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy an exemplary rating for parental engagement. Nakia attributes the commendation to setting clear expectations for parents, staff, and students aligned to the school’s vision and mission. “From the minute students sit for their admissions interview, I meet with the parents and talk through what it means to be a part of the BOLMA family. This is important because for the school to work, everyone has to be clear on their role.” To inform that conversation, Nakia shares with me the “oaths of agreement”—a two-page document that enumerates what students and parents must do to maintain good standing with the school. According to the oath parents must “ensure that our child attends each required Saturday Academy and we will provide the appropriate transportation.” As stipulated in the document, parents’ inability to comply with the seven commitments could lead to their child losing privileges including their enrollment at BOLMA.

In reviewing BOLMA’s handbook, I notice that the oaths are not accompanied by an articulation of how the school will support parents. Additionally, absent from the handbook is an oath for the staff and school leader. The absence of those components is misaligned from Nakia’s vision of an inclusive environment, the “we” that is evident in
the school vision, mission, and value statements. Additionally, the rigidity of the oaths as a method of accountability contrasts with Nakia’s own experience as a child in private school. In describing his time at Southwest Junior Adventist Academy, Nakia recalled times when his mother could not afford to purchase supplies or fully pay the tuition. Rather than expel him, the teachers would contribute to help ensure Nakia had the resources to participate in school.

Upon probing, Nakia shares that in the year prior to founding BOLMA, he visited schools and observed the presence of pledges or oaths as a cultural artifact to support their school cultures. “When I was developing the school plan, I visited high performing choice schools. One thing they had in common was that their cultures were driven by a clear understanding of what mattered the most.” Nakia also ascribes to the notion that accountability is not without support. “For some parents, the school expectations are not new, so they easily comply. For others, our school is different than what they experienced as a parent or a student. For those parents, we must work with them.” Nakia notes that he makes himself available to BOLMA parents, and meets with those parents who have trouble complying with the rules. “Just like students need help, parents may also need help as well. We are here to be that help.” Sitting back in his chair, Nakia describes a time when a student consistently missed a mandatory Saturday academy a requirement noted in the parent oath. “I met with the child’s mother because her son had missed three Saturday academy sessions. The mother shared that she did not have reliable transportation and could not afford a bus or cab. I worked with the school counselor and we provided the parent with bus passes that her son could use to get to and from school.”
Nakia’s desire to support BOLMA families is consistent his work as an assistant principal at River Oaks Elementary School. As an educator, Nakia first honed the idea of designing systems to promote community as a critical lever for learning through his experiences at River Oaks Elementary School. “I applied for and received a job as an assistant principal at River Oaks Elementary School in Pflugerville, Texas.” Nakia was hired at a time when the school and town were undergoing demographic shifts that were impacting the school-community’s culture. “It was an interesting campus because it was dealing with the transition from a predominately Anglo-American community to a growing Vietnamese immigrant population. The campus was also on the border of East Austin, and so they were also experiencing increased numbers of African American students to their campus.” The demographics shifts led to what Nakia recalls were mounting tensions between the two communities. “My principal asked me to develop a plan to bridge the communities together. I was personally invested because the children who were having the most challenges were new African American and new Hispanic students coming from one apartment complex. I remember as a child the role a school can play in welcoming you.” Nakia’s first action was to ask his colleagues what efforts they had made in building relationships with the new students and their families. “No one had ridden the bus, visited the children’s homes, or invited the parents to the school. My colleagues just assumed that the children being assigned to the campus was going to be enough.” Undeterred, Nakia devised a plan to ride the bus with the students and visit their homes. “After visiting the families and riding the bus, I spoke with the principal who shared the staff was afraid something was going to happen to me. I said everything
worked out fine because the parents were excited to meet me—because they knew their kids had some challenges at their last campus.” In speaking with the black parents in the comfort and familiarity of their homes, Nakia confirmed that like most parents, the River Oaks parents wanted their children to learn in a safe and supportive learning environment. He also confirmed the sources of the parents’ opposition to the school.

The parents were somewhat hostile toward the school because they felt that River Oaks wasn’t meeting their children’s academic and social-emotional needs. They just wanted to know that the new school would welcome them. They wanted to know that there were adult advocates to speak on their behalf or to care for their kids in their absence because this was working class families who could not take off during the day to come and check in on their kids or were doing what they knew to do based on their limited experiences.

As a black educator, Nakia recognized symbolically and substantively that he had to make a concerted effort to meet with the non-black parents and listen to their needs as well. “In speaking with many Vietnamese families, they acknowledged that they were trying to find their way in a community that was culturally different. Anglo-American parents shared the challenge they were having being in an environment that was once familiar that they increasingly could not recognize.”

After hearing the parents’ concerns, Nakia developed a plan to reposition River Oaks’ increasing racial and ethnic diversity as a critical lever to provide the type of education parents across the racial and ethnic groups shared with him that they desired. “When I think back on it, there was a professional responsibility, but ultimately in our
profession, when you are passionate about it, you have a social, emotional, and humanitarian responsibility to make it better that when you arrived. Or have an impact that will help other attain more in life.” To have a broader impact, the school would eventually reimagine its institutional responsibility as helping disparate groups gain proximity to each other and thereby countering existing perceptions along lines of difference. “We began by inviting the parents to have lunch with the students knowing that it would be an opportunity for the parents to see the students interact.” Cognizant that River Oaks parents had varying professional schedules, Nakia altered the timing of parent meetings or school events. “We made sure we did a program during the day. We also invited the parents that were working. The working-class parents would come out in the evening. We really made sure that we were more community friendly.”

Another area in which Nakia worked to foster more inclusive and transparent school-family relationships was in River Oaks Elementary School’s special education program. Serving as the special education administrator, Nakia became concerned that River Oaks Elementary School’s annual review and dismissal meetings for students receiving special education services were not structured to provide families with sufficient information such that they could make informed decisions about their children’s education. “In the admission, review, and dismissal meetings, I would ask questions so that the parents could have clarity on what is being provided. As I would ask the questions and I became conscientious as to how some meetings were being handled without inclusion of the parent.” To address this matter, Nakia insisted the school adopt instructional systems and practices founded on principles of transparency, compliance
with state and federal special education law, and trust. “I was the designated special
education administrator and as such, I was conscious of making sure parents understood
their rights regarding their children’s special education services. I also wanted parents to
know that there are roles and responsibilities kids, the adults at the campus, and parents
must play in support of their children’s education.” To shift the school’s practice, and
rebuild trust among parents, Nakia leveraged his positional authority as an administrator
to ask questions designed to elucidate understanding and expectations for parents and
staff. “I would ask specific questions in front of the parent,” Nakia recalls, “to make sure
the parent knew the services they were receiving.” By invoking questions into the
meetings, Nakia shifted the balance of power situated in the school-parent relationship by
equipping parents with the information needed to more effectively advocate on behalf of
their children while also holding staff accountable to honoring parents’ desire to work in
concert with the school. “I wanted to make sure parents always understood the services
their kids were receiving and that they had the opportunity to accept or deny the services
because sometimes pre-determined meetings were being held.” “It was a paradigm shift,”
Nakia notes, “in that I was reminding staff members that parents are your partners in this
process, not the adversaries. And the most important component outside of what we are
doing in this campus and what they are doing at home is the child so let’s make sure we
are making a shared decision that is in the best interest of the kid.”

Nakia asserts that not being a special education expert was a strategic advantage
in his effort to transform the behaviors of River Oaks Elementary School’s existing
special education department. “Prior to River Oaks, I worked at a campus with a small
special education that the principal oversaw. Coming into this role and setting, the staff accepted that I was going to ask questions.” Strategically, Nakia also recognized that the special education teachers’ power in part derived from the perception that they were subject matter experts. In that context, Nakia realized that by introducing questions into the parent meetings, he would satisfy the River Oaks staff members’ desire to assert their positional authority, while he helped to ensure that parents and children’s rights were honored. “I don’t think it was received wrong because the staff wanted to make sure they were viewed as the experts. If I was more seasoned, staff could have seen my questions as giving preferential treatment to parents.”

Nakia credits River Oaks’ academic and cultural turnaround to building systems and structures to foster community. “We were fortunate to have scores that moved us to recognized status in the state of Texas’ accountability system. While I was in Pflugerville, I learned how to use your community to support your campus so you can have success.” Being away from Dallas also gave Nakia the space he needed to address the emotional pain he experienced as a child in South Dallas. “Leaving Dallas in high school, I told my friends that I would never move back to Dallas. I was hurt and wanted to escape the demons from my past.” It was through his experiences however at River Oaks Elementary School that Nakia began to reconcile with the dream he had held to return to the very place that prepared him to lead. Leaving BOLMA, Nakia does what he so often does and invoke his faith as a touchstone for how he had made sense of the contradictions in his life. “The humbling part about faith, however, is that sometimes God prepares us for opportunities and experiences we don't even realize.”
Reflecting upon the example Nakia shared, it is unclear what is motivating the disconnect between his personal and professional experiences prior to BOLMA, and the BOLMA policies that define parental engagement. Moreover, Nakia’s actions and lived experience align with a balance between accountability with support. BOLMA, like many choice schools across the United States have increasingly incorporated derivations of oaths or pledges that parents and students must sign. The documents and what they communicate reinforce the idea that a child’s education requires the commitment from a variety of stakeholders. While that premise is correct, it appears that public school systems and schools have utilized pledges to enhance more accountability over parents and students. Support for the tool is predicated on the belief that schools are increasingly operating in a results-driven environment. As such, it is imperative that parents and students contribute to support the schools’ goals. While he is not critical of the Dallas Independent School District’s performance-driven culture, he does acknowledge the pressure he faces as a school leader. “At the end of the day, we have to get results. I am accountable to DISD and the Texas Education Agency.” As a leader, Nakia must balance his belief in creating a supportive environment and respond to the disparate needs of his students and their families, while also working to ensure that a core set of expectations about schooling are internalized. The result is misalignment between policy and practice and the question of whether Nakia within the broader accountability context can be his authentic self.

The goal of increasing shared responsibility aligned to a vision of community-centric vision of education can be adulterated by the pressure to perform. Rather than
being used to support parents, oaths or pledges can be used to counsel parents and students out who don’t comply with the rules. The result is that school can become a place for only certain types of students or parents. The exclusionary aspects of oath appear at odds with Nakia purported belief in creating an inclusive environment at BOLMA.

Part IV. Change Management

In July 2016, Nakia was promoted to executive director with the Dallas Independent School District. In this role, he is responsible for directly managing three instructional coordinators and twelve principals whose schools comprise the South Oak Cliff feeder pattern. The schools, which educate a total of 5,482 students in grades pre-K through 12, are all located in southern Dallas and include the school he founded, the Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy. Dallas ISD has established several student achievement goals for which Nakia is responsible for helping his principals meet or exceed. Included in these goals is that all students will exhibit satisfactory or above on performance on state assessments.\(^\text{124}\) Additionally, 95 percent of DISD students will graduate; and 90 percent of graduates will qualify for post-secondary education (community college, a four-year university), the military, or an industry certification.\(^\text{125}\)


The Dallas Independent School District has seen progress in reaching its district student achievement goals. For example, the four-year graduation rates increased to 86.9 percent, up from 80.3 percent in 2011.\(^\text{126}\) Moreover, between 2014 and 2016, the percent of graduates who attained a 21 or higher composite score on the ACT increased from 9.0 percent to 15.3 percent.\(^\text{127}\) Nonetheless, between 2015 and 2016, the percentage of students passing all subjects at level II or above decreased by 1 percentage point from 67 to 66 percent.

In addition to improving student achievement, the Dallas Independent School District has been working to retain its students. Over the past decade, families have left Dallas ISD, choosing to enroll their children in a variety of alternative school settings including private, parochial, charter, and suburban school districts.\(^\text{128}\) During the 2015-16 school-year, Dallas ISD lost 2,000 students representing $10 million in lost revenue from state per pupil funding allocation.\(^\text{129}\) The exodus of students amounted to nearly $23 million in lost revenue. There are many variables contributing to Dallas ISD’s decrease in student enrollment. One area that district officials have focused their attention has been increasing greater consistency in student performance across its schools. To that end, in 2015, Dallas ISD Superintendent Mike Miles introduced the district’s action plan. One of the guiding principles of the district’s theory of action is providing schools that

demonstrate strong academic results more latitude over management decisions. Through “earned autonomy,” campuses are empowered to make decisions that are informed by their students’ needs. Moreover, “formalizing the system shapes behavior across the entire district, creating a performance-driven culture where educators are given more ownership of their work, and based on student performance and other factors, can receive more autonomy. This ownership ultimately creates a culture which moves the needle on student achievement.”

The adoption of the Dallas Independent School District’s theory of action has transformed definitions of education leadership. Rather than focus on non-instructional tasks, principals were expected to utilize student academic data to identify areas of strength and challenges. Moreover, principal managers are expected to increase principal’s ability to develop systems and structures within their schools that contribute to student progress. As a school leader, Nakia exercised latitude as it pertained to the adoption of district policies. Nonetheless, I am interested in how Nakia supports school leaders in adopting practices designed to foster increased school performance under a new district accountability system,

I observe Nakia during one of his weekly meetings with the principal of R.L. Thornton Elementary School. Built in 1962, the two-story south Oak Cliff elementary educates 435 students in grades kindergarten through 5. Ninety-four percent of the

student population identifies as black American. Ninety-one percent of R.L. Thornton’s student population is economically disadvantaged compared to 87.8 percent for the district. In the 2015-2016, the school met standard according to the Texas Education Agency. Seventy-two percent of students achieved satisfactory standard on the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness compared to 66 percent of students for the district.

The school’s weathered brick veneer exterior matches the surrounding working-class neighborhood’s modest ranch style homes. Standing outside the six portable classroom buildings and steel covered walkways, the school’s antiquated aesthetics contrast with the commercial development occurring less than 3 miles away. Indeed, two miles west of the school in the Glen Oaks community is Glen Oaks Crossing, a master-planned shopping center that includes a Super Walmart and IHOP. Less than 3 miles south, development is evident on the campus of UNT Dallas, southern Dallas’ first public four-year university. Dubbed the education corridor, the goal is to attract more families back to Dallas by increasing and improving the educational options in South Oak Cliff.

A front office assistant directs me to room 107, a classroom that has been converted into a teacher workspace. Clara and Nakia are sitting opposite each other at a rectangular wooden table. Directly behind Nakia is a bulletin board displaying reading data with the title, “stepping in cadence with success”. Sitting to the left of Nakia is Cassandra Gilmore, academic facilitator. Cassandra has been employed by DISD for

thirty-five years, twenty of which she has been providing curriculum support. In her current role, Cassandra manages twenty campus instructional coaches. In describing the role of campus instructional coaches, Cassandra notes that “they are the heart beat” of our schools, working alongside principals to support teachers in the areas of instructional planning, lesson execution, and data analysis.

Clara briefly leaves the room, returning with a copy of a document she has prepared to discuss with Nakia. Introducing the document, Clara shares that her goal is to address some parents’ concerns that their children were assigned behavior consequences without proper documentation of the disciplinary infraction. During the three minutes Clara spends introducing her proposal, Nakia is silent, modulating his gaze between the paper and his laptop. After a brief pause in the conversation, Nakia breaks the silence by asking Clara, “have you gone over this with teachers?” “No, not yet,” Clara responds, looking away from Nakia as her voice hesitates. Exhibiting a calm demeanor, Nakia looks directly at Clara, continuing a line of questions designed to gain more context for Clara’s proposal. “So, the counselor hasn’t been meeting with parents and students?” “Yes,” Clara states firmly, “but I want documentation.” Sitting more erect in her chair, Clara’s body language and tone suggest her exasperation in responding to Nakia’s questions.

For the next thirty minutes, Nakia continues to ask Clara questions designed to evaluate the merit of her proposal within the existing student discipline systems. “How many kids are having conferences,” Nakia asks, writing on his copy of the proposal. “We
don’t have a lot of kids needing conferences,” Clara responds. Her words are drawn out as if she recognizes that her response contradicts the premise upon which her proposal has been predicated. Smiling, Nakia interjects noting, “this is coming from somewhere. . .so you worked on this by yourself?” Expressionless, Clara says “yes”. Content that he has exposed his point, Nakia shares with Clara his rationale for his questioning. “I am pushing you to see if you’ve shared this with your lead and to explain what is happening that you need this form.”

The room has become tense as Clara is visibly frustrated, looking down as she responds to Nakia questions. Despite the tone and tenor of the conversation, Nakia continues asking Clara questions as Cassandra Gillmore sits as a quiet observer. Breaking a moment of silence, Nakia asks Clara to identify the specific grades in which she is experiencing the most behavioral challenges. “Three, four, and five,” Clara responds. Not satisfied, Nakia follow-up, seeking greater specificity. “Which classrooms specifically? This is me drilling down.” “Fifth grade,” Clara notes, “but I need to go back and think because the fifth grade can misbehave in any class.” With a quizzical look on his face, Nakia shares that “in my visits, we know which teachers have a tendency to raise their voice. Because sometimes an issue with a child has more to do with teacher systems. For example, breakfast in classrooms has led to less late parents.” What is remarkable is that this is the first strengths-based comment Nakia has noted since his meeting with Clara has begun. That comment however did not alter her disposition. Nakia concludes the discussion about the behavioral system with the following guidance: “If it is all about the fifth-grade level team, then do it. If it only two teachers, focus on them.” Checking his
phone for the time, Nakia asks Clara if we could tour the school’s portables as she cited them as the overflow location for students in her standardized assessment plan. Clara notes that she will meet everyone in the front office because she needs to retrieve her keys to the portables. With the door closing behind Clara, Nakia gently shakes his head. Breaking her silence, Cassandra states that she predicted Nakia was going to ask about the school counselor’s role in Clara’s proposed plan. His disposition visibly perturbed, Nakia reasserts his point about the plan’s unintended consequences, this time with more conviction and assuredness. “This will blow up as those who do not have issues will see this as punitive. Teachers talk among themselves.”

Walking back to room 107, Nakia shares with me his assessment of the meeting. “It was clear that she did had not shared the plan with her team. Moreover, the plan while targeted to the school, was based on an isolated issue within one grade.” Nakia then explains what most troubled him about the development of the plan. “This cannot be a top-down mandate. It has to involve the team.” Expounding upon his comment, Nakia contextualizes his push within his vision for leadership development with the South Oak Cliff High School feeder pattern that he manages. “When I would talk to principals they would say ‘I, I, I’. I would then ask them ‘where is your team?’ We are developing our bench which is the only way that we are going to have the talent needed to support our students’ development into young men and young women capable of leading tomorrow.”

Nakia’s meeting with Clara provides great insight into how Nakia interprets his role as an executive director within a context focused on improving student achievement
by increasing principals’ leadership capacity. To that end, Nakia questioning, and even persistence in the context of Clara’s visible frustration, illustrated the dual-nature of his role as both a manager and coach. As a manager, Nakia’s questions and insistence for answers must be interpreted through the operating principles under which Nakia operates. Noting that “data matters,” Nakia believes that decisions must be grounded less in subjectivity, but informed by qualitative and quantitative information. As Clara’s manager, Nakia expected Clara to have developed a plan that was both driven by data. Nakia’s questions were then designed to seek more information, as well as subtly underscore the need for Clara to ground her proposals in data as a perquisite for submission.

Adopting the role of coach, Nakia’s strategic use of questions as opposed to being directive appear to align with his overarching vision of collaboration as a method of people and organizational development. Expounding upon this idea of collaboration as a mechanism for change within his twelve-school portfolio, Nakia shared the following: “When I would talk to principals, they would say ‘I, I, I’. I would then ask them ‘where is your team?’ We are developing our bench which is the only way that we are going to have the talent needed to support our students’ development into young men and young women capable of leading tomorrow.” To this end, Nakia conceptualizes his direct meetings with principals as opportunities to model the very collaboration that he expects his principals to foster with their leadership teams to create the conditions that support student and school performance.
Nakia’s use of questions to alter adult behavior is a management strategy that he employed in other setting prior to his role as executive director. Serving as the special education administrator, Nakia became concerned that River Oaks Elementary School’s annual review and dismissal meetings for students receiving special education services were not structured to provide families with sufficient information such that they could make informed decisions about their children’s education. “In the admission, review, and dismissal meetings, I would ask questions so that the parents could have clarity on what is being provided. As I would ask the questions and I became conscientious as to how some meetings were being handled without inclusion of the parent.” To address this matter, Nakia insisted the school adopt instructional systems and practices founded on principles of transparency, compliance with state and federal special education law, and trust. “I was the designated special education administrator and as such, I was conscious of making sure parents understood their rights regarding their children’s special education services. I also wanted parents to know that there are roles and responsibilities kids, the adults at the campus, and parents must play in support of their children’s education.” To shift the school’s practice, and rebuild trust among parents, Nakia leveraged his positional authority as an administrator to ask questions designed to elucidate understanding and expectations for parents and staff. “I would ask specific questions in front of the parent,” Nakia recalls, “to make sure the parent knew the services they were receiving.” By invoking questions into the meetings, Nakia shifted the balance of power situated in the school-parent relationship by equipping parents with the information needed to more effectively advocate on behalf of their children while also
holding staff accountable to honoring parents desire to work in concert with the school. “I wanted to make sure parents always understood the services their kids were receiving and that they had the opportunity to accept or deny the services because sometimes pre-determined meetings were being held.” “It was a paradigm shift,” Nakia notes, “in that I was reminding staff members that parents are your partners in this process, not the adversaries. And the most important component outside of what we are doing in this campus and what they are doing at home is the child so let’s make sure we are making a shared decision that is in the best interest of the kid.”

Nakia asserts that not being a special education expert was a strategic advantage in his effort to transform the behaviors of River Oaks Elementary School’s existing special education department. “Prior to River Oaks, I worked at a campus with a small special education that the principal oversaw. Coming into this role and setting, the staff accepted that I was going to ask questions.” Strategically, Nakia also recognized that the special education teachers’ power in part derived from the perception that they were subject matter experts. In that context, Nakia realized that by introducing questions into the parent meetings, he would satisfy the River Oaks staff members’ desire to exercise their positional authority, while he helped to ensure that parents and children’s rights were honored. “I don’t think it was received wrong because the staff wanted to make sure they were viewed as the experts. If I was more seasoned, staff could have seen my questions as giving preferential treatment to parents.”
Nakia’s use of questioning did raise Clara’s awareness about the design and proposed implementation of her student behavior system. However, the context in which Nakia’s strategy was being employed were different. Although Nakia’s positional authority was similar in River Oaks Elementary and as executive director, how power was perceived was different. That is, in River Oaks, Nakia’s questions bolstered the special educators’ authority as content experts. However, with Clara, Nakia’s questions reinforced his authority as her manager, undermining the trust he needs as Clara’s coach.

Nonetheless, Nakia’s facilitation of the meeting did not appear to align with his longer-term goal of fostering collaboration as a critical component of people development. There were several moments throughout the conversation where Clara was visibly frustrated. However, rather than acknowledge her frustration, Nakia continued asking questions. While, Nakia’s persistence allowed him to achieve his goal in exposing the futility of Clara’s plan, it appears that it led to an erosion of trust. As Clara’s manager and coach, trust is particularly important as Nakia is pushing Clara to adopt practices that there did not appear evidence she had internalized. During our meeting debrief, Nakia acknowledged that as a seasoned principal, Clara had not adopted many of the newer leadership practices the newer principals had internalized. The change management necessary to support Clara’s adoption of new practices, would suggest that Nakia would want to foster trust.
Part V: Reflections on Building Bridges

A defining aspect of Nakia's leadership practice is a desire and commitment to bring disparate groups together to advance a shared vision of social transformation. Nakia's belief in building bridges is shaped by how he has personally and professionally navigated racial, social, and economic contexts—settings that have tested his character and affirmed his resolve in the power of education to transform lives. Reconciling the absence of his poverty, and financial instability expanded Nakia’s understanding of education as needing to develop the “whole child”.

During Nakia’s childhood, the school and community existed in concert to create an ecosystem of academic and social-emotional support. A coordinated web of community-based organizations, teachers, and school leaders assumed responsibility for Nakia’s well-being and affirmed his potential. As the founder of the Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy, Nakia institutionalized values of brotherhood, service, and engagement in cultural artifacts and programs—values that have shaped Nakia’s personal and professional identities.

Like the other leaders in this study, Nakia has achieved success in advancing his vision of social change in southern Dallas. One hundred percent of Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy students were accepted to a four-year college or university. Nonetheless, there is a tension between Nakia's vision for community and social transformation and the expectations established by the broader accountability systems within which he operates.
One area where this tension was evident was in Nakia's adoption of Dallas ISD's teacher observation rubric. Rather than fully use the teacher observation rubric as a critical tool to drive teacher development, Nakia chose to use his own system for diagnosing and supporting his teachers' instructional practice. To that end, while BOLMA has achieved academic success as measured by the state of Texas' academic accountability system, it is unclear what impact Nakia's interpretation of how he supports teachers' development will have on future student performance.

As a school leader manager, Nakia is responsible for fostering greater standardization of practice among the twelve schools his oversees. Nakia's coaching of Clara Daniels reveals the complexity of impacting and influencing others to change their practice. Like Nakia, the principals he now manages bring to their work a plethora of shared experiences that shapes how they in turn make sense of the path toward helping to ensure his or her students succeed. Nevertheless, the misalignment between Nakia as a visionary and Nakia as manager calls into question the broader context in which Nakia exists. Accordingly, one wonders if the idea of community, specifically the extent to which the district supports leaders in Nakia’s position to effectively help their principals internalize the systems needed to drive student achievement has been operationalized.
Chapter 5

Team and Family: A Portrait of Quinn Vance

Part I: Resilience

Putting a mobile phone into his pants pocket, Quinn Vance reaches for a wireless microphone and asks everyone assembled to form a circle and join hands. One hundred and fifty KIPP Dallas-Fort Worth Public Schools employees slowly rise from their seats, joining hands around KIPP Destiny Elementary School’s cavernous cafeteria. Led by Quinn, the July 2015 gathering, also referred to as convocation, is an annual opportunity for district employees to reflect upon the prior year’s academic performance, and collectively explore the new organizational priorities.

Clearing his throat, Quinn leads the group in the recitation of the KIPP Credo projected onto a barren white wall. Five stanzas in length, the KIPP Credo is a set of commitments all KIPP employees across the national network of charter schools are expected to uphold. In unison, the group begins, concluding their recitation with the following statement: “as a team and family, we will either find a way or make one.”

Breaking hands with his neighbor, Quinn explains the significance of the last line. “This circle, and everyone around this circle, makes up the KIPP DFW team and family. Our quest to serve more children and families requires us to work together, irrespective of your title or position in our organization.”

Releasing hands, the circle dissipates as employees walk back and assume their seats at colorful lunch tables. During the transition, Quinn has replaced the KIPP Credo
with a photograph of himself during what appears to be his adolescence. Tall and thin, Quinn is staring straight, with a subtle smile. Wearing a tank top, he has a flattop hairstyle, popular among black youth in the 1990s. Seeing the picture, many of the black teachers who collectively represent 53 percent of KIPP DFW’s teaching staff laugh. One black teacher points to his bald head and jokes that he once had a hairstyle like Quinn’s. Quinn contorts his six-foot-four frame as he walks in the tight spaces between the lunch tables. Stopping at a table with teachers wearing KIPP Truth Elementary t-shirts, Quinn provides context for the picture. “There were many exit ramps during my childhood. Because of those experiences, I understand our KIPPsters’ journey; and in many ways, I represent many of the KIPPsters who will walk into your classrooms in three weeks.”

The room is silent as Quinn returns to where his laptop is perched on a cart. Eighty-two percent of KIPP DFW students are economically disadvantaged. Moreover, 56 percent of the students are black, and 38 percent are Latino. Advancing the presentation, Quinn introduces the chief academic officer who spends the next thirty minutes reviewing KIPP DFW’s academic progress. Walking to the back of the cafeteria, Quinn stands alone, drinking a cup of coffee, surveying the room. Taking a long sip from his cup, Quinn exhales, sharing with me that he is exhausted. “I took the red-eye from Chicago and am operating on very little sleep.” This quiet revelation does not match the energetic persona Quinn displays when speaking to KIPP DFW staff members. “One of the rules I learned

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early on my career is that as a leader, you have to sell the vision. Your energy and enthusiasm motivate people to walk alongside you and invest.”

Placing his cup on an empty table, Quinn slowly makes his way to the front of the cafeteria. Advancing the presentation, Quinn displays a chart depicting KIPP DFW’s growth. “KIPP DFW’s vision is to have a transformational impact on the city of Dallas,” Quinn says walking in between seats. “Our ability to prove what is possible regarding K-12 education requires us to expand our footprint in southern Dallas, a community in which we launched our first school, KIPP Truth Academy, in 2003.” The mention of KIPP Truth Academy resulted in a thunderous applause from staff members adorned in the middle school’s orange and blue uniform, “That’s right, I see you KIPP Truth,” Quinn says, playfully recognizing the staff’s enthusiasm. Quinn punctuates the importance of KIPP DFW’s growth, noting that “we must continue to grow, from one school educating 400 students to 10 schools educating 5,000 students in grades K-12.”

The room is silent as Quinn shares KIPP DFW’s strategic growth plan. Over the next six years, KIPP DFW will add one to two schools until the district consists of ten schools, educating 5,000 students across grades K through 12. Each new KIPP DFW school will adhere to KIPP’s national school growth model of starting with one grade and adding an additional grade each year until the school has reached its maximum enrollment. To complete the ten-school expansion by 2020, KIPP DFW will need to raise $23 million. According to the KIPP DFW Case Statement, a report that outlines the

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financial analysis supporting KIPP DFW’s growth plan, the $23 million will support operating losses the organization incurs from staffing a central office aimed at supporting the growth of schools that are not a maximum capacity.\textsuperscript{135} “To grow, we need teachers and leaders who will found our new schools and instruct future KIPPsters. If you are interested, let your manager know. Even if you are not ready now to be a school leader, we should create a plan to support your development.”

KIPP DFW Public Schools’ 2020 growth metrics are connected to KIPP’s national growth goals. By the year 2020, the KIPP Foundation projects that the KIPP network will educate 120,000 students in grades kindergarten through twelve across 20 states and the District of Columbia. At this scale, KIPP will be the 127\textsuperscript{th} largest school district.\textsuperscript{136} To reach this goal, nationally KIPP will need to open an additional 148 schools by 2020. Additionally, KIPP will need to identify and develop approximately 380 leaders over the next five years to lead new and existing schools. Historically between 78-85 percent of school leaders are promoted from within an existing KIPP school. Only 34 percent of school founders and 28 percent of successors have a tenure of three or more years. This leadership attrition means that school leaders are not in place long enough to fully develop their assistant principals.

KIPP DFW’s talent pipeline is highly dependent on recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers. “Our first goal should be to attract, develop, and retain highly

\textsuperscript{135} “KIPP DFW Case Statement,” KIPP Dallas-Fort Worth Public Schools, July 2015.
\textsuperscript{136} “KIPP DFW Third Thursday Breakfast Tour” (presentation, October Third Thursday Breakfast Tour, Dallas, TX, October, 15, 2015)
qualified teachers. However, the reality is that in Dallas County, like many cities the demand for qualified teachers is greater than the supply.” It is projected that Dallas County will need 34,500 new teachers by 2021 to meet the teacher demand.\footnote{Sagar Desai, “Dallas County Teacher Pipeline” (presentation, February Superintendents’ Convening, Dallas, TX, February 6, 2017).} However, the pool of future Texas teachers does not match the demand as approximately 2 percent of bachelor degrees conferred in Texas are in education compared to 6 percent nationally.\footnote{Desai, “Dallas County Teacher Pipeline” (presentation, February Superintendents’ Convening, Dallas, TX, February 6, 2017).} Like many charter operators across North Texas, KIPP DFW’s existing teacher corps is relatively inexperienced. Indeed, according to the Texas Education Agency’s 2014-2015 Academic Progress Report, 24 percent of KIPP DFW’s teachers are “beginning teachers” and 67 percent of teachers have between 1-5 years of teaching experience.\footnote{“Texas Academic Performance Reports,” Texas Education Agency, accessed October 26, 2017, https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov.} Additionally, all KIPP DFW’s school leaders and assistant principals are within their first or second year of leadership.\footnote{“KIPP DFW FY15 Human Resource Records,” KIPP Dallas-Fort Worth Public Schools, accessed October 14, 2017.} Nonetheless, it is within these conditions that Quinn must increase the number of schools and students KIPP DFW educates. In response to concerns about the strategy of leveraging existing talent to build future schools, Quinn contends that “we cannot become territorial about people in our building. We must all work on people development because we are going to need to build bench depth.”
Returning to the front of the cafeteria, Quinn introduces the question and answer portion of his presentation. “On your seat, you should have found an index card,” Quinn shares with the crowd. “Please take two minutes and write a question down. We will select questions that I will answer now. Any questions not answered now, I will follow-up in an all-staff email.” Quinn sets a digital timer on his mobile phone for two minutes and streams jazz music through his laptop. As the sound of a saxophonist plays in the backdrop, KIPP DFW staff members write furiously on notecards. Hearing the timer’s ring, Quinn turns off the music. For the next five minutes members of the KIPP DFW’s central office or shared services team, assist in gathering and sorting the questions. Staff members stand up, many stretching after sitting at elementary lunch tables for the past sixty minutes. Speaking into the microphone, Quinn asks everyone to take their seats. “There are a lot of good questions,” Quinn prefaces as he sorts through three questions in his hand. “Understandably, many questions were about KIPP DFW’s growth. The first question asks why are we adding new schools instead of supporting our existing schools?” Many staff members nod their heads in agreement with the question.

Our mission is to educate more students. Right now, for the majority of our students, attending KIPP DFW is on average better than attending their neighborhood school. There are things we need to improve upon. However, our ability to make those improvements—shoring up our curricular resources, strengthening how we develop teachers and leaders—comes from scale. Rather than one fifth grade science teacher evaluating student data, several fifth-grade teachers can come together and analyze student performance on a common interim assessment; and discuss what they can do to improve their practice. That is the power of growth. This is what I experienced in KIPP New York City and what I know is possible in Dallas.
Looking at his watch, Quinn informs the staff that there is time for one more question. A teacher towards the back of the cafeteria ask a question about the organization’s finances. “I heard that KIPP DFW raised several hundred thousand dollars at our annual fundraising event. Why then are we being asked to conserve resources?” “Good question,” Quinn begins, pacing back and forth as he addresses the group.

KIPP DFW is a publicly funded school system. We receive close to $8,400 per student from the state. Our program—longer school day, longer school year, supporting students with high school placement and college matriculation—are additional costs. The money we raise is used to fund the gap between what we receive from the state and what it costs to educate our students. Our goal is to operate mostly on public funds which means that we must assume direct our dollars to the classroom. In KIPP NYC, I called this a culture of thrift. Small things such as cutting the lights off in your classroom when you leave the room, reduces our electricity bill. That is less money that our development team has to raise. We can all do our part.

Placing the notecards in his hand on a table, Quinn concludes the meeting. “We all have mountains we need to climb. We must work together to climb those mountains, paving a way for our KIPPsters and their families. Thank you and have a great year.” Quinn remains in the cafeteria, as staff members walk up to him. “Your story is inspiring,” one teacher says, shaking Quinn’s hand. “Thank you for working on behalf of our KIPPsters,” Quinn responds. Within fifteen minutes, the cafeteria is empty except for a cleaning crew sweeping the floors. Sitting alone at a table, Quinn checks his mobile
phone. A self-described introvert, Quinn enjoys the solace, something he notes is rare as a leader. “People expect you to always be on.” Placing his laptop in his yellow highking backpack, Quinn reflects upon the convocation. “I am not surprised by questions about growth. There is a natural tension between founding new schools and working to ensure our existing schools and students have the resources they need to succeed. That frame is a false dichotomy however because growth is what will allow us to support all our schools and students.” Explaining further, Quinn perceives the underlying concerns many school based personnel have regarding the costs associated with KIPP DFW’s growth as informed by the limitations of their perspectives. “If I am a teacher, I spend most of my time focused on my students and my classroom. There is a world outside of my classroom that I most likely don’t focus on. As leaders our job is to find ways to broaden their perspective around how growth supports their ability to help their students, our students.”

Quinn gathers his belongings and walks towards the cafeteria’s double doors, ducking his head as he exits. His backpack is covering a KIPP t-shirt that he is wearing. Earlier in the day, he explained the significance of his KIPP t-shirt. “I wear a KIPP t-shirt every single day. The KIPP wrist-bands on my arms that I never take off, I have had for over twelve years.” Quinn’s longevity with the KIPP networks was one of the factors that persuaded KIPP DFW’s Board of Directors to select him as the organization’s second executive director. According to Peter Brodsky, KIPP DFW’s board chair, “Quinn is a KIPPster…bringing a wealth of experience and knowledge for how to grow an organization.” It is in this context that Quinn is responsible for expanding the number of
KIPP DFW schools, a decision ratified by KIPP DFW’s board of directors in 2010 three years before Quinn assumed the role of executive director. Stepping into the role of executive director, there were several challenges Quinn had to confront. KIPP DFW’s fund development infrastructure was anemic, raising at most one million dollars. In fiscal year 2015, Quinn must raise close to four million dollars.\textsuperscript{141}

KIPP DFW also operates in a state academic accountability environment that has shifted. In 2013, the Texas legislature passed Senate Bill 2, also known as the “three strikes rule”. According to SB2, a charter is revoked if it fails to meet academic or financial accountability standards established by the Texas Education Agency for three years in a row. Twenty-seven charter schools have been closed since the law’s enactment.\textsuperscript{142} To date, KIPP DFW has met academic and financial accountability standards. KIPP DFW does not yet have a kindergarten through fourth grade elementary school. As such, the majority of KIPP students enter middle school in fifth grade academically under-performing relative to their peers across the state. In the spring of 2015, 63 percent of KIPP DFW’s 120 fifth grade students scored proficient on the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness reading exam, compared to 87 percent of fifth grade students across the state.\textsuperscript{143} In the spring of 2015, 84 percent of KIPP DFW’s 85 eighth grade students score proficient on the reading STAAR exam compared to 88

percent of eighth grade students cross the state of Texas. KIPP DFW is working to close the academic gaps however with larger teacher to student ratios as a function of needing to cover operating expenses associated with growth. For example, a fifth KIPP DFW grade classroom has 30 students on average, compared to 19 students in the Dallas Independent School District, and 21 for the state.\textsuperscript{144} Despite the scope and scale of KIPP DFW’s challenges, Quinn is optimistic that the school system he leads will achieve its mission of providing more southern Dallas students with a high-quality education. “At KIPP, we believe in the Stockdale paradox—confronting brutal facts, but having absolute faith. Looking across the KIPP network, there are enough example of other KIPP systems experiencing similar growing pains that eventually succeeded.”

It has been three weeks since convocation and Quinn and I decide to meet at KIPP Truth Academy. Founded in 2003, the middle school is KIPP DFW’s first school educating students in grades five through eight. The South Oak Cliff middle school is in the Lancaster-Kiest Shopping Center, a collection of bargain stores anchored by a low-cost supermarket. Two yellow faded speed bumps outside the school do little to decrease the speed of cars that travel through the shopping center to avoid the traffic delay caused by the Dallas Area Rapid Transit light rail stop. KIPP Truth’s storefront exterior does not evoke the traditional image of a school situated within a residential neighborhood. Instead of green space, KIPP Truth has a fenced in, non-regulation basketball court with an uneven slope. I observe a class of 30 black and Latino students are running around the

basketball court. The students are wearing the school’s uniform—blue polo shirts and khaki-colored pants. A black female teacher dressed in athletic pants is blowing a whistle. “Keep running, you can do it,” she shouts as several students walk, audibly panting.

Walking down the narrow hallways towards the school’s conference room, I notice college pennants from schools such as Texas A&M adorning the walls. “We have to promote college from an early age,” Quinn later shares with me. “Seeing the pennants, taking students to visit colleges all help reinforce the idea that college is attainable.” Nationally, 45 percent of KIPP students graduate from a four-year college or university which is close to five times the average for low-income students across the United States.145 As I approach the conference room, I observe a class of seventh grade students transitioning between a passing period. I spot two male students laughing as they wait to enter the classroom. A black male teacher is standing at the door, greeting students. “Good afternoon, please take a packet and begin working on your do now.” The hallway dynamic is a stark contrast from the silent hallways and straight lines KIPP was known for, labeling the organization as “militaristic” and even prison-like.

The conference room’s muted white walls are interrupted by poster board images of black and brown middle school students. The photographs capture a glimpse into the life of KIPP DFW’s middle school students—their hands raised in class, their faces smiling as they write on a board. Quinn finds a seat at the middle of the table, placing his

laptop and two mobile phones on the table. He begins our conversation by expounding upon the comments he shared at convocation regarding his childhood, revealing how the circumstances into which he was born and how his family structure has shaped his leadership journey with KIPP. “I was born on June 24, 1975, in Portland, Oregon to Weldon Vance and Blanche Hagger.” Quinn’s earliest recollection of his life in Portland is residing in a carriage house directly across the street from a park. The idyllic picture that emerges in my mind contrasts with Quinn’s description of his family’s financial insecurity. “We were poor. There is no euphemism needed to sugarcoat that there was a lot of poverty.” Being poor for Quinn meant that his family adopted a series of survival rituals. “We were constantly getting food from the local food pantry, and using food stamps. I could tell you all about government cheese,” Quinn quips. Quinn’s parents were employed however their compensation was not enough to elevate the family out of poverty. “My parents were not in professional lines of work,” Quinn shares. “I recall my mother worked for the telephone company for a while. My parents however did not do anything that had longevity.” Quinn believes his family’s socio-economic challenges were the result of his parents’ inability to graduate from college. “My dad was a track star in high school, and a track star at the University of Oregon for a year or two,” Quinn explained, “but he ultimately dropped out because he couldn’t handle the academic rigor.” Quinn’s mother matriculated into Portland State University, dropping out after her first semester. “My mother tells this story that she took a geography class, and the first day, the professor was throwing out vocabulary—simple words like latitude and
longitude, and she had no idea what they were. She quickly became overwhelmed and quit college.”

Quinn’s parents separated when he was one-years old. Quinn doesn’t have many memories of his relationship with his father mostly because as he notes, his father was not very present in his life. “After my parents separated, I saw my father occasionally. I did live with him for half a year in the fifth grade, but that just did not work out.” Without elaborating, the terseness of Quinn’s assessment of his time living with his father illustrates the tenuous nature of their relationship. Quinn’s mother eventually remarried when he was four-years old to a man Quinn remembers as being “deeply troubled”. “My stepfather, Danny Hagger, was plagued by demons.” Danny’s drug activity introduced a high degree of instability into Quinn’s life. “Danny hung with people who were into criminal activity and drugs.” The security and support associated with the institution of family was largely absent from Quinn’s life, replaced by emotional and physical pain, and uncertainty. “There was a lot of drug and drug related behavior around—that became a pervasive theme. My stepfather was somewhat abusive, and so there were times when we were displaced. We spent times sleeping in cars, and sometimes in motels. When it got bad, we would spend time in shelters.”

By the age of two, Quinn, his mother and stepfather left Portland eventually settling in the eastern suburb of Beaverton. The transition to Beaverton amplified Quinn’s awareness of his socio-economic and racial identities. “I went to schools where the average student was probably middle to upper-class in terms of their earnings. It was
interesting to go to school with kids who had $100 jeans and fancy birthday parties.” At age 41, Quinn doesn’t recall many childhood birthday celebrations, noting that he “was lucky to get a yellow sheet cake.” Beaverton’s public schools were predominately white, a contrast from the predominately black Northeast Portland neighborhoods in which Quinn and his extended family had resided. “The biggest transition for me from out of Portland,” Quinn recalls “was that I went from schools that were predominately African American to schools that were predominately white. In elementary school, I was one out of ten black kids.” On the weekends, Quinn would travel with his family back to Portland where his extended family still resided. “My aunts and cousins all lived in Northeast Portland, and went to Northeast Portland schools. Going to grandma’s house was a very black cultural experience.” As a child navigating between Portland and Beaverton’s disparate social contexts, Quinn recalls being aware of the duality that emerged in his social identity. “Monday through Friday, I lived in a predominately white world. On the weekends, I was immersed in black culture.” The compartmentalization of Quinn’s life gave him perspective on how to operate in multiple worlds—an ability he describes as “code switching.” It has been his journey across lines of differences that Quinn believes has informed how he has led diverse educational organizations. “I can talk to a black grandmother wanting to enroll her grandson in one of our schools, as easily as I can sit next to a wealthy, old white man at a Board meeting.”

Part of how Quinn makes sense of his ability to work across lines of differences is that he has learned not to allow race and dominant racial narratives to preclude him from engaging with individuals from different racial groups—a behavior Quinn notes many
black education leaders with whom he worked have not adopted. “I have worked with or coached black leaders who are unable to engage with others of other races because of the weight of their own racial history.” Quinn’s ability to operate freely within overlapping social contexts appears also to be shaped by how he has historically developed relationships. Accordingly, I ask Quinn to describe his childhood friendships.

I probably didn’t have friends. I hung out with lots of people. In school, I chose to be in the clique with the ten black kids, but also be into every other clique. I floated from group to group, and hung out with lots of different people, but didn’t have any real deep connections with anybody. I had one good friend who—a guy I met when I was in fourth grade, and we were friends, basically, from fourth grade, all the way through the senior year, with a couple of bumps in between. Everyone else was associates, affiliates.

Quinn’s independence increasingly became a response to overcoming challenges. “Part of my survival mechanism has been [a] go it alone, do it alone mentality. I am like, ‘I don’t need you. I don’t need anybody. I can make it.’” Unlike many of his peers, Quinn priorities during his adolescence became working and attending school. “When I turned 14, what I got for my birthday was the expectation to go to work. Two days after my 14th birthday, I became gainfully employed at the local Burger King. I was gainfully employed at the local Burger King through my freshman year of college.” Bearing the responsibility for supporting his family financially meant that Quinn deprioritized forging friendships. “I never let go of the fact that my prime job was to earn money and go to school. I went to school every day. I went to work every day.”
Quinn’s attempts to mediate the tension between assuming adult responsibilities and holding on to the innocence of adolescence created distance in what was already a tense relationship with his mother and stepfather. It was during this time that Quinn’s mother entered a drug rehabilitation plan, further destabilizing Quinn’s family structure. “Around the time I was sixteen, my mother entered a drug rehabilitation program.” Initially living with his stepfather, Quinn left home and returned to his old neighborhood in Portland to live with his neighbors. Recognizing how serendipitous the story sounds, Quinn details how he came to find a home. “One day, I was walking through my old neighborhood and found my former neighbors living in the same place, just downstairs. I told my story and Joy, the mother, said, ‘that sounds terrible. If you want to stay here, you can.’” Quinn credits the year he spent with his neighbors as providing the structure and security he did not receive from his mother and stepfather. “The chaos that surrounded my parents was definitely pulling me down. I was able to focus a little bit more, because I went home and ate food every night and slept in a bed every night. I had two pseudo-siblings who lived regular lives, had birthday parties, and all those things that I really hadn’t done in a long time.”

Quinn’s separation from his mother and increased independence transformed his relationship with his mother. “From sixteen on, our relationship was more transactional: “There was no oversight as she was either working or dealing with her own challenges.” Elaborating on the impact of his mother’s absence, Quinn noted the following: “I was left to direct everything on my own. I worked and went to school. She wasn’t at home, so I hung out with whomever I wanted, whenever. I would see my parents periodically. Talk
to them on the phone. I’d go over for the weekend. I was doing my own thing, and they were doing their own thing, and it worked.”

The lack of parental oversight, coupled with the expectation to work impacted Quinn’s academic performance. “Starting high school, I wasn’t that great of a student because I was hungry, poor, and gainfully employed with a job. I was more focused on helping to support my family, and putting some money in my pocket so that I could try to be on an equal footing with my peers.” Quinn’s attempt to level the playing field with his peers eventually motivated him to more seriously consider his post-secondary school options. “I remember walking past the library, and every year they put up this board of all the high school seniors, and where they had been accepted to college. I was like, am I going to be on that board when I graduate from high school?” Part of Quinn’s analysis of his future trajectory included contrasting what at the time he perceived as the short-term, and visible rewards working at Burger King provided versus the long-term, and unknown rewards of a college education. “After seeing the bulletin board, I went to work one night, and I was like, okay. . . I can work here. I could probably become a manager at the Burger King. There were a couple of guys there who were in their twenties—they were really cool, and I looked up to them. One of them let me drive his car, and I was like, this is great or, I could go to college.”

Quinn’s conversation with a Burger King colleague who was a University of Nevada Las Vegas graduate ultimately provided him the perspective and motivation needed to apply to college.
I met this guy there, I don’t remember his name anymore, but he graduated from UNLV. He told me about college. How exciting it was, how fun it was. Being a guy that never thought about college and really wasn’t that academic at all, I was really intrigued by this idea that you could go to college, have fun, there are girls, and all this good stuff, coupled with seeing those names on the wall, and thinking, ‘I don’t want to be left out of that.’ I decided that I was going to really double down on getting better grades—that I was going to study and focus on the SAT. I was going to just give it a shot.

Unlike his peers, Quinn did not receive any parental support when applying to college. “I had no family support in the college-going process. My mother by that time was dealing with her own demons and working. No one in my family had graduated from college. My grandfather had an eighth-grade education—he was a Merchant Marine.” In the absence of parental support, Quinn did take advantage of the resources his high school provided students applying to college. “I went to schools that were set up for every kid to go to college, and so there were structures. You took a course where they taught you how to look up schools. I was the poorest [student], but I remember being in the library, and they would walk you through how you look at these books, and how you get an understanding of what your opportunities were and how you looked at scholarships, and all these things.” With the resources he did have, Quinn worked to make his vision of attending college a reality. “Once I decided it was really what I wanted, I just went at it. Whenever I had free time, I was in the library looking up schools.”

Motivated to attend college, Quinn spent his junior and senior years of high school balancing a forty-hour work schedule and preparing for the SAT. “I went from getting by to becoming a B student, while still working forty, forty-plus hours a week.” Quinn eventually applied to three universities—the University of Nevada, Las Vegas; the
University of Nevada, Reno; and the University of Oregon. “I wanted to go to the University of Oregon,” he recalled. “I had a terrible GPA, so I was like, ‘well, if I’m going to get in the University of Oregon, I may have to just kill this SAT.’” To meet his goal of matriculating into the University of Oregon, Quinn adopted a daily regimen of attending school, working, and studying for the SAT. “I enrolled in an advanced speed reading and vocabulary course. I [also] bought three SAT books. When I was travelling back and forth from work, when I was working in the drive-through, or at any minute when I wasn’t running the street and getting into fights, I was studying my SAT book.”

Quinn graduated from Sunset High School and was accepted to the University of Oregon. Looking back at his childhood, Quinn believes confronting and overcoming obstacles ultimately prepared him guide KIPP DFW through a period of immense change. “When I stand in front of the KIPP DFW team and family as I did at convocation and say, ‘we are not frightened by the challenges of reality,’ I am speaking with a personal conviction that says we can truly overcome roadblocks.” Part of removing those roadblocks however requires Quinn to reimagine a deeply embedded KIPP narrative that from the national network’s founding in 1994 as a counter-narrative to Houston Independent School District is inextricably linked to the idea of autonomy as a requisite of innovation. Instead, Quinn must help KIPP DFW invest in a new organizational model predicated on achieving scale with quality through centralization and standardization of systems and structures. To do this, Quinn must also reconcile his lived experience as operating independently as a survival mechanism to uniting others to invest in a different
model of educational operation in an effort of achieving shared goals of achieving social change through education.

Part II: Centralization and Standardization

I meet Quinn at KIPP DFW’s headquarters which houses the organization’s shared services team. The shared services team is comprised of fifteen employees working across five domains: academics, alumni services, finance, human resources, and operations. Quinn directly manages three of the fifteen SST members: a chief academic officer responsible for academic strategy and school leader management; a chief operating office, responsible for finance, state compliance, and regional operations; and a direct of development who oversees fund development, volunteerism, and brand marketing. According to Quinn, the purpose of the shared services team is to “remove rocks off the road, enabling school leaders and teachers to focus on teaching and learning.”

The shared services team occupies the basement of an early twentieth century Sears & Roebuck manufacturing factory. Located one mile south of downtown in the Cedars neighborhood, the uniform brown brick building is part of a multi-million-dollar commercial redevelopment initiative spearheaded by Dallas developer Jack Matthews and his firm Matthews Southwest. Matthews has been a catalytic force for revitalizing the Cedars, developing the Dallas police headquarters, a hotel, and loft-style condominiums all within a hundred yards of KIPP DFW’s central office. Shortly after joining KIPP DFW, Quinn moved the shared services team out of KIPP Truth Academy’s Lancaster-
Kiest shopping center school site. “I made some investments in personnel and we therefore needed more space. I do like being in schools as it allows us to be proximate to our students.”

Hidden by a hedge of bushes is a small white sign with the words “KIPP DFW SST” in navy blue embossed lettering. Entering the office, I am struck by its open design. Pods of desks of varied sizes are assembled in a patchwork arrangement, separated by painted support pillars that interrupt the office’s open space. Quinn explains the significance of the office design. “We are a team family, and so it is important to remove physical barriers that may reinforce hierarchy. I have an office for meetings, but work at a desk among the broader team.” The office is empty this afternoon as SST members are working in schools. “Being in the field is important because our teams need to be in schools to learn how they can best support students. Optically, not closing the physical distance between SST and our schools reinforces an us versus them perspective that undermines our collective work.”

The SST office is sparsely decorated except for a wall displaying colorful foam board arrangement of KIPP tenets such as “all of us will learn.” Inside a small, dimly lit conference room is the ten-member KIPP DFW regional leadership team gathered for a monthly meeting. The regional leadership team consist of chiefs, directors, and school leaders. “We meet one a month to discuss regional updates as well as engage in work aligned to our strategic imperatives.” According to KIPP DFW’s 2014-2015 annual plan, there are seven regional imperatives ranging from “recruiting and retaining KIPPsters” to
“helping alumni climb the mountain to and through college”. Quinn notes the importance of the academic priority—“building a curricular and assessment ecosystem.”

“When I joined the organization, teachers did not have a north star to guide the lessons they were creating. We had to develop a clear system that noted what students should know and be able to do—and when we would assess their mastery. Absent of that, you can objectively know how students are performing.”

A one-page agenda outlining the meeting’s topics is placed at each seat. Quinn explains how he develops the regional leadership team meeting agendas. “In the summer, I start with the annual priorities and then create a year-long plan of topics aligned to the priorities. At least two weeks before the meeting, I draft an agenda that I share with the chief operating office and chief academic officer for input.” According to the agenda, the meeting is supposed to begin in two minutes. Nine of the ten participants sit silently at the conference room’s small wooden table working on their laptops. “We will wait two more minutes,” Quinn says as he audibly counts the number of attendees. Shortly after Quinn’s announcement, the conference door slowly opens, and a school leader enters, apologizing for being late. As everyone shifts to create more space on the table, Quinn asks everyone to place their laptops on the conference table outside the conference room.

“Good afternoon everyone,” Quinn says signaling the start of the meeting. “We have a lot to discuss as noted on the agenda in front of you. But before we begin, let’s share some visible results.” Quinn looks at the team waiting for a response. The team

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members instead stare intently at their agendas. After nearly thirty seconds of silence, Quinn interjects. “Remember visible results are actions someone has taken to advance our collective work.” Looking around, the director of development shares a visible result. “I want to shout-out the school leaders for helping with our most recent third Thursday breakfast tour. The KIPPster ambassadors were prepared and did a good job leading the school tours.” “Thank you, Mackenzie. Any more visible results?” Quinn scans around the room, his fingers impatiently tapping the table. Placing her pen down on the table, the chief operating officer, the only other senior black official in KIPP DFW, shares a visible result. “The operations team did a great job getting our six-weeks attendance report submitted on time and without errors.” “Thank you Donnidra. As we go throughout the week, let’s continue to identify and celebrate the things we are doing to better serve our KIPPsters.”

Glancing at his watch, Quinn places a check next to the agenda item entitled “visible results”. Switching to a PowerPoint presentation, Quinn introduces the main discussion topic—centralization and standardization. “As we expand, it is important that we begin to identify the functions across our organizations that we believe that we should clarify who and how we should move our work forward.” Pausing, Quinn continues to elaborate on the purpose of the exercise. “Doing this analysis will help us spend time on what matters most, and support quality control as we grow. Every year, we should revisit what we ratify and determine if we need to make changes to our decisions.” Tapping his keyboard, Quinn advances the presentation to a slide entitled “what do we mean by ‘standardize’ and ‘centralize’?” After distributing a printed version of his presentation,
Quinn turns to the second page and points to a graph. “On the y-axis,” Quinn explains pointing to the graph, “you will note ranges from high and low standardization.” “The x-axis depicts low and high centralization.” In each quadrant there was a model depicting four schools and a black circle representing the regional office. “There are two models I want to especially call out,” Quinn says standing up and approaching the wall where the graph is projected. “In the high standardization, high centralization model, all schools operate out of the same playbook determined and overseen by the regional office.” “In the low standardization, high centralization model, the schools employ different strategies and systems to get to a set of shared goals established and overseen by the regional office.”

The room is silent as Quinn introduces the framework. Some of the participants are writing notes on the agenda or in notebooks. Others are looking at a copy of the presentation Quinn has distributed. “The next side introduces the decision framework that we will use to determine the degree to which functions we currently manage should be standardized and centralized. Take two minutes to review the framework independently.” Quinn sets a timer on his phone for two minutes as the regional leaders review the framework. During the independent review, Quinn writes some notes in the margins of his agenda. The alarm on Quinn’s phone rings and after silencing it, he asks if there are any questions. Quinn waits, but after no one asks a question he directs the group to “return to the graph and the models we reviewed.” Pointing to high standardization and

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high centralization quadrant, Quinn describes the criteria listed for that model. “The belief is that through high standardization and high centralization, stronger and more consistent outcomes are more likely. Additionally, cost-savings and efficiencies can be realized. Lastly, this model assumes that the region has the expertise to determine the appropriate approach and is best positioned to do it on behalf of schools.” The school leaders present glance at each other, one giving a visible smirk. Quinn looks at the school leader and responds in a more reserved tone that when he began the meeting, Quinn shares that “this exercise is designed for us to determine together what functions should be standardized and centralized. There is no value placed on the decision other than we need to better codify who owns what to ensure we are operating with quality.”

According to the agenda, there are thirty minutes remaining in the meeting and the group has not yet considered which functions should be standardized and centralized. Positioning his body forward, Quinn works to advance the analysis. “I am going to transition us to the next slide, but note independently the criteria for low standardization and high centralization.” In this model, school leaders are best positioned to determine the systems and structures need to meet students’ needs. School leaders however are not positioned to do the work independently. Advancing the slide, there is a list of fifty activities across academics, finance, development, talent recruitment, and operations. “We won’t have time to go through all the functions in detail, but I want you to take the next seven minutes and with one or two people sitting next to you, review the list, plotting the functions against the decision framework.” The leaders turn their chairs and begin reviewing the list. Quinn walks around, sitting with each group. The conversations
amplify in the small space. As he sits, he listens, occasionally scribbling notes in the margins of his agenda.

“Let’s come back together,” Quinn says as the meeting participants turn their chairs back towards the table. With the conversations subsiding, Quinn describes the next steps for the centralization and standardization activity. “Over the next several weeks, you will drill down on the functional areas in your department meetings. For example, school leaders, when you meet with Lauren, you will evaluate academic functions against the decision framework. When we come together as a regional leadership team, we will evaluate each group’s findings.” The meeting ends with four members remaining in the conference room for another meeting. Opening the conference room door, a rush of cool air displaces the room’s hot air. There are no functional windows in the conference room and central air system is not operating.

Departing the conference room, Quinn and I walk to his office. A piece of visibly worn chart paper is affixed to the outside of Quinn’s office door. Entitled “KIPP DFW Leadership Norms,” the chart includes five statements including: “we are all on the same bus” and “full, frank, and rally.” Sitting across from me at his desk, Quinn shares the origin of the norms. “I have adopted those norms from my time in KIPP NYC.” A small whiteboard affixed to the wall behind his desk has words “centralization and standardization” written under the heading “regional strategic imperatives”. Siting back in his chair, Quinn discusses the regional leadership team members’ reticence. “One of the challenges that I had in my first couple of months in this organization, being very
candid, is that I’d go into rooms and my perception was that everyone was waiting for me
to tell them the answer. I’d ask, ‘what do we think about this?’ and everyone would be
silent. Everyone would stare at me.” Quinn contends that the leaders’ reticence was in
part due to their inexperience. “I think back to when I began, there were no experienced
managers in this organization.” Additionally, prior to Quinn, the leaders operated in an
organization that his recollection “was very hierarchical”. Elaborating upon that
comment, Quinn explains that his predecessor informally oversaw all functions of the
organization. “You had individuals in roles, however, they were not involved in decision-
making. Rather, they executed upon decisions that were made centrally.” Quinn is
adamant that that as KIPP DFW’s executive director, he does not intend to lead through
hierarchy, explicit or implicit. “For me it’s not top down, right. It’s consensus of what is.
I think a maturation in that thinking about leadership and organization building is that no
person can be more important than the collective. I have failed as a leader by being the
dictatorial decision-maker. I don't ever want to be that.”

The centralization and standardization exercise aligns with Quinn’s belief that
KIPP DFW must have a clear process when making decisions that impact the
organization’s ability to realize its mission. “Variation in how we define school,” Quinn
notes, “can jeopardize not only our ability to serve the students we have in our schools,
but future students as we grow.” Despite his belief in the import of this new framework
and acknowledgment of the regional leadership team’s hesitation in embracing the new
process, Quinn never shared explicitly the organizational functions he believed should be
centralized or standardized. Quinn’s own reticence in driving the regional leadership
team toward specific outcomes appears to be influenced by his concern that his actions—
and leadership—are perceived as being autocratic as opposed to aligned to the democratic
principles KIPP upon which is predicated. “The idea is not that I’m saying, or anyone is
saying, ‘this is what we do,’ but we are all buying into a framework that we believe is
good for our organization, right.” Quinn points to KIPP DFW’s curriculum choices as an
example where decisions should be made in collaboration with school leaders as opposed
to by Quinn unilaterally or in consultation with the chief academic officer. “If we believe
all our schools are going to use the same math curriculum, that’s not me deciding top
down. It’s us looking at the data. It’s us looking at the outcomes. It’s us looking at the
fact that eventually all of our kids are going to sit in a ninth-grade math class together and
deciding this is what our ecosystem should look like to best serve kids.”

Quinn’s belief in the value of a collective decision-making process as a critical
condition for organizational change is shaped by the impact his personal independence as
a survival mechanism has had on his leadership journey. As a child, Quinn relocated
several times, and consequently did not establish strong social relationships. “I probably
didn’t have friends,” Quinn shares with me laughing. “I floated from group to group, and
hung out with lots of different people, but didn’t have any real deep connections with
anybody. I had one good friend who—a guy I met when I was in fourth grade, and we
were friends, basically, from fourth grade, all the way through the senior year, with a
couple of bumps in between. Everyone else was associates, affiliates.” As an adolescent,
Quinn’s independence was a response to the need to contribute financially to his family.
“When I turned 14, what I got for my birthday was the expectation to go to work. Two
days after my 14th birthday, I became gainfully employed at the local Burger King. I was gainfully employed at the local Burger King through my freshman year of college.” Bearing the responsibility for supporting his family financially meant that Quinn deprivatized forging friendships. “I never let go of the fact that my prime job was to earn money and go to school. I went to school every day. I went to work every day.”

It was during his adolescence that Quinn’s mother entered a drug rehabilitation plan, further destabilizing Quinn’s family structure. “Around the time I was sixteen, my mother entered a drug rehabilitation program.” Quinn’s separation from his mother and increased independence transformed his relationship with his mother. “From sixteen on, our relationship was more transactional: “There was no oversight as she was either working or dealing with her own challenges.” Elaborating on the impact of his mother’s absence, Quinn noted the following: “I was left to direct everything on my own. I worked and went to school. She wasn’t at home, so I hung out with whomever I wanted, whenever. I would see my parents periodically. Talk to them on the phone. I’d go over for the weekend. I was doing my own thing, and they were doing their own thing, and it worked.”

Without familial support, Quinn applied and was accepted to the University of Oregon. A self-described avid bike rider, Quinn proudly wears a University of Oregon bike racing outfit to competitions across Texas. As a college student, Quinn maintained his sense of independence, framing social relationships as associations. Just as he did in high school, Quinn formed associations with classmates some of whom were from
Portland. “I had a lot of associates. I used to play a lot of basketball with four guys from Portland.” As the academic-year progressed, Quinn observed that his peers were having difficulty adjusting to life at the University of Oregon, eventually leaving the university. “The sad thing is, I met four guys and played basketball, hung out with them, semi regularly, and by second quarter, half of them were gone. Half of them didn’t come back from winter break. By the end of the year, all of them were gone. None of them came back for their sophomore year. They all dropped out.” Cognizant of his classmates’ challenges, Quinn chose to distance himself from them out of a concern that a deeper engagement could jeopardize his ability to successfully navigate college. “I never tried to get too, too close to those guys,” Quinn recalls, “because I had a sense that they weren’t going to make it, and I didn’t want to be drawn down by that. There’s a limit to how far and how down I’m going to be with you because I want to define my own path. That’s always been important to me.”

After graduating from the University of Oregon, Quinn continued to establish his own path as a first-grade teacher and Teach for America corps member in the Newark Public Schools. “When I entered education, I was taught that as adults, we had to be the constant—that through our consistent and clear actions, we could create a safe and structured environment to support our students’ development.” Despite his best efforts, Quinn realized that the other teachers in his school were not equally invested in executed the school-wide practices designed to support student achievement. “I thought I was part of a chain that sends kids through a system. However, the constant was broken, and I worried no matter how much work I did or how hard I tried to do well in my classroom, if
I sent my kids on to the next person, they didn’t do the same things and the outcomes were not going to be the same.” In addition to inconsistencies in teachers’ actions in his school, Quinn recalls being frustrated by the disconnect he perceived in the school district’s actions and its purported goal to support students’ scholastic growth. “At the time, there was a belief in Newark that curriculum was the panacea for the district’s underperformance. The district then significantly invested in curricular resources and mandated that it was taught. Additionally, as the district’s bureaucracy became more complex, Quinn interpreted policies like teacher tenure as creating an environment where school-based decisions were based on “what was best for adults, not children.” Quinn eventually decided to leave his school after he observed a decline in his students’ academic performance. “The real catalyst for leaving was watching my first graders go backwards in terms of their academics and culture.”

Discontent with the limitations he perceived existed within Newark Public Schools, Quinn pursued charter schools as way to circumnavigate the constraints of a traditional district system and empower his students. Thinking about the shift in his thinking, what Quinn notes was his “district versus charter” moment, he recalls that when he entered education, he only wanted to be a teacher. “While I was content to just be a teacher, I soon realized however that if you want impact, you have to actively increase your sphere of influence.” Through his graduate studies at Saint Peter’s College, as a part of his Teach for America teacher certification program, Quinn began to research charter schools, learning that there were schools in New Jersey educating the same children he taught, but receiving different outcomes. “I met Norman Atkins and Jamie Verrilli,
founders of North Star Academy in Newark. Everything that I was frustrated about in my classroom as a kindergarten teacher at Horton elementary school, they’d created an environment where kids came in, they thrived, and the teachers were supportive of one another, supportive of the kids. . . just this ecosystem.” Inspired by his meeting, Quinn decided to apply to open a charter school. Thinking about his decision to lead a charter school, Quinn remarks, “I was young”. Expounding upon what he described as youthful exuberance, Quinn shares “it was the wild days of open a school, so I started to write a charter. I was going open my own school. I would’ve failed miserably because there’s so many things I didn’t’ know.”

Quinn indeed never completed his charter application. Nevertheless, Quinn’s decision to start a charter school is illustrative of his perception of independence as a critical lever to enact change—a perception shaped by his personal experiences in which his independent actions were essential to overcoming obstacles. Quinn could have worked with Newark Public Schools to address the inequities he experienced as a teacher. Rather, he decided to join a sector predicated on the belief that innovative, resilient, and impassioned leaders—visionaries—could reimagine how education was delivered. With KIPP, Quinn found an organization founded by two individuals, Dave Levin and Mike Feinberg, who believed that they could reimagine how low-income, black and Latino students were educated. “I remember receiving a call from a KIPP executive inviting me to interview for a fellowship funded by the founders of Gap for social entrepreneurs to replicate the KIPP model across the United States. I flew to Houston and interviewed with KIPP co-founders, Mike Feinberg and Dave Levin.” Quinn laughs when recalling
his interview process. “The joke of my meeting with Dave is that I flew to Houston, had two, hour long interviews and a school tour. Dave asked me only two questions and I don’t recall what they were.”

Despite the brevity of his interview questions, soon thereafter, Dave invited Quinn to meet with him in the Bronx where Dave had founded and led KIPP Academy, KIPP’s second middle school. “It was Saturday,” Quinn recalls, “and I met him in front of the school. He had just gotten done tutoring kids in math and we went to a Giovanni’s pizza shop.” Over pizza, Quinn listened to a proposal that has changed his leadership trajectory. “He’s like, ‘here’s the deal. We’re going to grow KIPP and I’m going to spend a bunch of time on that. I’m going to need someone to take over for me as principal, running the school and I think you’re the right person. You can come and work for me for a year, if things go well, you’ll be that person.’ Decades later, Quinn wonders aloud what gave Dave the confidence to introduce the idea that Quinn could be his successor before working with Quinn. “I have asked Dave what he saw in me during our early interactions and he has never been able to articulate what he saw in me. He says, ‘I just knew.’ Years later after that meeting at Giovanni’s, I gave a speech at Teach for America’s tenth anniversary gala about one his kindergarteners. He then told me that was the moment he knew he made the right choice.” Reflecting upon that moment, Quinn acknowledges that Dave’s confidence in his potential to become a school leader was rooted in a story like that of KIPP’s students. “I was able to speak about how education was the defining factor in where my life ended up. I was able to communicate how that has informed me to be a student-focused educator with aspirations that informed my life choices.”
Joining KIPP at the start of its expansion in New York City meant that Quinn had to embrace a high degree of change and uncertainty—common attributes of entrepreneurial ventures. Within the school’s start-up context, Quinn had to exercise a high degree of independence, something that was familiar to him. “There was really no intentional plan to develop me either as a teacher or a leader in that first year. It was more of—and this was how KIPP was in the beginning—there was a lot of really great, talented people and you went, and you observed them and then you went and did what you saw.” Quinn adopted this model of instructional development to hone his skills as a middle school English language arts teacher. “I taught fifth and sixth grade for and the other teacher across the hall from me was Robin Cash who was phenomenal. I would go in her classroom and I would observe her. Then I would go to my classroom and I would teach it. Then, gradually, I would pick up a lot of her tricks and practices, like how she did guided reading, and then I would take it and I would put it into my planning.”

After teaching for two years, Quinn became KIPP co-founder Dave Levin’s successor, leading KIPP Academy in the Bronx, KIPP New York City’s first school. Reflecting on his transition from teacher to principal, Quinn notes that it was challenging. “The first year as principal was difficult. I hadn’t done enough to build bridges with staff.” As he shares, Quinn notes that part of his challenge was that he misinterpreted what staff members needed from him and how he should respond as principal.

Again, I was very young, and I didn’t understand that servant or relationship piece. When problems came up and they’d come to me and say, we have a scheduling problem in the cafeteria, what I didn’t
understand was that they weren’t coming to me and saying, *Hey, we have this problem, I want you to solve it.* They were coming and what they wanted me to say is, *do you have suggestions? or what have we done in the past? or how do we thought partner together to fix this problem?* I was just directing. I was just, go, go, go.

Quinn entered his principalship with several leadership qualities that had contributed to his past success. Indeed, throughout his life, Quinn’s sense of independence enabled him to solve problems, a leadership characteristic particularly suited for a school designed to reimagine how students should be educated. One structural problem that Quinn sought to address early on was the dearth of books in the school’s classroom. “The fifth-grade classrooms had very few books. We needed to build classroom libraries so students had access to books, so I worked to find a solution.” In devising a solution, Quinn worked alone, choosing not to partner with and seek input from the English Language Arts teachers who would most use the books as a part of their instruction. Quinn repeatedly chose to operate independently, failing to invest the very individuals he needed to advance his vision of education. Consequently, staff dissatisfaction grew, and teachers, many of whom were at the school before Quinn joined, became frustrated by the negative impact the perceived Quinn’s actions were having on the school. “People were tied to that school because they deeply believed in the mission and values. It was because of their investment in the school that I remember in November or December of that year, someone came to me and said, ‘you’re messing this up. This has been a great place and you’re not building the relationships or putting in the work to listen to people.’”
The strength of Quinn’s independence became a limitation in a context where the organizational culture was predicated on collaboration. “KIPP was founded on the idea that everyone was on the same bus moving in one direction.” Although Quinn was philosophically aligned with that principle, his lived experience was such that he had not developed and nurtured meaningful relationships with others. Cognizant of the disconnect between his leadership abilities and the organization’s values, Quinn began to question his competence as the school’s leader. “I think there was a good stretch in my first year as the principal of KIPP Academy where I felt inadequate. I felt like I didn’t have the interpersonal skills to keep the team together. I was always super nervous speaking in front of the staff and I was even more nervous speaking in front of the school. When we had all-team meetings or parent gatherings, I wouldn’t sleep for the two days before.” Reflecting upon his belief in empowering students, a belief that brought him into education, Quinn realized that he need to learn how to build relationships with his staff. “It soon became apparent that I need to invest them, and that I couldn’t do the work alone.”

Seeking input from his predecessor Dave Levin, one strategy Quinn adopted to repair his relationships with staff was to resist the desire to immediately propose a solution when presented with a problem. “I said to myself, ‘whenever someone asks me a question, I’m going to either tell them that I need to think about it’ or I’m going to ask them what they think we should do. For the remainder of that year, I never answered a question directly.”
Entering his second year, Quinn worked to establish a culture predicated on identifying and leveraging the staff to increase consistency in performance across the organization. “I started to create a small nucleus of people that I could trust for feedback, but more importantly that I could leverage to do more and own more.” One area where Quinn reinforced the idea of working with and through others was with the design of KIPP Academy’s daily schedules. Strategically aligning time to instructional activities is a core KIPP tenet as it allows teachers to optimize for student learning. In his first year as principal, Quinn developed KIPP Academy’s schedule by himself, assigning times based on his perception of how much time should be expended on a specific activity. In his second year as principal, Quinn sought the assistance of the very teacher whom had previously challenged him about the school’s schedule. “She was good, so I enlisted her help to be the scheduler. People saw that I was not working on the schedule alone, so they would come into the scheduling meetings and participate. Although they may have felt frustrated about a version they were never then able to say, ‘Quinn, you suck at schedules.’ Rather they were like, ‘these schedules are really hard, and we need to keep working at it.’ The team bought into those things.”

Transitioning into his third year as principal, Quinn began to focus more on different ways as principal he could invest others in making decisions. “Through most of my third year, I just really started to expand that idea of bringing more people into every decision. I began to explore how I could create clarity around where we were going so that people would participate. There were missed opportunities there, but I think that my relationship with my team was really predicated upon them being brought closer to the
point of decisions and the process.” Quinn stepped out of his comfort zone and began to consult others to broaden his leadership perspective. “I would check in with Dave and a gentleman named Jerry who was a thirty-five-year veteran of education. I’d go talk to those guys and I’d be like, ‘hey, this problem was brought to me, how do you think I should approach it or think about it?’ I gave them permission to be very directive with me so that I could be a better leader” Quinn also leveraged his relationship with Dave to gain a deeper understanding of how his predecessor would make decisions. “I learned that Dave had built consensus with his team by being religious about not making top-down decisions.” Explaining further, Quinn recalls that “in team meetings, everything was built towards ‘here’s a problem, let’s unpack the problem and identify a course of action,’ even if he already knew what he wanted to do. That was the biggest learning of my first year as a leader [and] the thing that, quite frankly, I’ve used ever since. If I hadn’t learned it in those first three or four months, there’s no way that I’d be here today.”

There were several reasons why Quinn prioritized working with others. First, he wanted to build a talent pipeline of future leaders whom had a broader perspective of the school’s operations beyond their immediate functional area. “As a growing organization, it was important that we had enough people who worked across functional areas such that if people left the organization, someone could step in without the organization suffering.” Additionally, Quinn wanted to institutionalize systems that were not dependent on one person. “One challenge young organizations face is when individuals who possess a lot of institutional knowledge leave and there is no method of memorializing what they know.” Finally, Quinn recognized that external changes such as increased competition for school
choice and increased school accountability meant that KIPP Academy needed greater alignment of individuals and teams towards the school’s goals. “Half of our schools were pretty good, and half of our schools were not so good. Then, when New York State recalibrated academic expectations, it turned out that most of our schools were not good enough. We needed to get to a place where every member of the team understood their role and how their role contributed to achieving our school priorities.” By creating opportunities for dialogue, Quinn began to see greater staff investment in his leadership. “I shifted my mentality, and everything started to flow in a much more positive way because people felt, again, that they were part of a team that was working towards a mission.”

Quinn came to KIPP DFW because he saw an opportunity to leverage the lessons he had learned about building a shared understanding of the work to achieve student outcomes. “I saw an opportunity to serve more kids in the way where I was in a role that was largely about building a nation. I was excited about KIPP DFW because it was the nation to be built.” To build the nation, Quinn believed he could align himself with a growing group of education stakeholders who wanted to transform Dallas’ K-12 public education system. “Coming to Dallas—I realized on the ground, there were a lot of people who were driven by the same motivations to change and fix education. Largely they were the same education reformers that I knew in New York City were in Dallas. The challenge was that nucleus was much smaller and not as connected to the power structure of the city.” Finding his nucleus would prove to be critical as Quinn worked to transform KIPP DFW’s identity from being a single school to a school system. In doing
so, Quinn would have to leverage the lessons he learned in KIPP NYC to build organizational systems and structures to invest stakeholders in the idea of collaborative leadership. Quinn’s vision for growing KIPP DFW from a single school to network of ten schools requires increasing the number and competence of school and central office leaders.

Given these circumstances, Quinn notes that the role of the leader shifts from exercising complete autonomy as a social entrepreneur, to working with others to adopt and enforce a set of common practices. In 1999, as the principal of KIPP NYC’s only school, Quinn concedes that the size and scope of the organization meant he had the autonomy to make decisions he alone believed were best for the organization. “In 1999-2000, when KIPP Academy in the Bronx was a single school, power to lead meant I’m KIPP in New York. I have the power to define this school, right. I’m the principal. One of the consequences of KIPP NYC’s growth was that increased organizational complexity meant that variability in practices led to inefficiencies. “We realized that having five different algebra programs meant that the curriculum writers were unnecessarily spending time and financial resources in a manner that was not prudent. Additionally, the absence of common instructional programs prevented teachers from evaluating student assessment data and identifying best practices to drive student achievement.” To leverage the advantages of growth, KIPP NYC shifted how leaders would make decisions. “Fast forward to today—we have these larger ecosystems that are interdependent, so the idea of power to lead doesn’t mean that you as the individual principal within a larger ecosystem doesn’t have power to tweak, adjust and shift your
program. However, it does mean that the organization and the leadership of the organization has to hash out best practices and systems so that the quality of the product at KIPP school number one through number ten is within the same plus or minus range of quality.”

In a system where individuals are aligned on a shared understanding of the work and processes to achieve goals, the role of the leader changes. Commenting on the role of a school leader, Quinn shares the following: “The school leader should say to his or her assistant principals, ‘let’s talk about the non-negotiables such as developing and grading daily exit tickets for each lesson. Let’s talk about how you’re going create accountability for those things. Let’s map them into your calendar. I’m going talk to you every week about whether you did these things.’ This needs to be done because the kids that are walking into that building should never see an inconsistent system because they don’t have to.”

Quinn contends that in his first year as executive director, he did not explicitly teach his leaders how to invest their teams in how to adopt new processes. “When I first joined KIPP DFW,” Quinn notes, I believed that I didn’t have to teach a framework for how to make decisions. I would never come into a leadership team meeting and go, ‘today, let's talk about the framework for making decisions at KIPP DFW.’ I would, however, want to have a one-on-one meeting with my direct reports. Talk to them when they're working through their strategic plan or grappling with meaty challenges in the interim.” In many respects, Quinn functioned as a manager, a role that he had with KIPP
New York City prior to joining KIPP DFW. As KIPP NYC’s managing director of elementary and middle schools, Quinn was responsible for ensuring that the schools he managed executed standard systems and procedures to meet or exceed their academic goals. As KIPP DFW’s executive director, Quinn must be a leader and a manager. As such, he must develop and communicate a vision, as well as the processes to keep individuals motivated and aligned to produce results.¹⁴⁸ The dearth of leadership experience among KIPP DFW’s leadership team suggests that Quinn must prioritize developing his leaders. In fact, Quinn now concedes that as KIPP DFW’s executive director he must spend time intentionally teaching leaders how to invest others in changes. “I think that there's tremendous benefit in helping and teaching leaders to think about how they invest their teams in decisions. I think it boils down to a very simple idea: if you think you're going to do something or move in a direction, before you do so, share and ask others for their input.” Planning for the next school-year, Quinn intends to work with his leadership team to implement strategies to invest their teams in decisions. “Part of what I want to do when I reconvene our leadership team, is talk about some of the critical work at the top and then frame a discussion around how do you as a leader carry this back to your teams. I want to create a model where I'm going to lay out a critical piece of work and then talk through how each of the folks in the room is going to drive that work.”

By changing his perception of his role as a leader in KIPP DFW, Quinn has also recognized that motivating others to change their behavior requires developing a relationship built on upon trust. “I have never put my trust blindly in any person or entity. You look at the person who you are working for or working with and you say as a function of their work and function of the relationship they have with me, the outcomes that they've gotten, I believe that this person shares a desire to get the outcomes that I want.” Trust based upon a shared understanding takes times to develop, something that Quinn learned as a principal in KIPP NYC. “I started to create a small nucleus of people that I could trust for feedback, but more importantly that I could leverage to do more and own more. I started to lean on grade-level chairs to communicate about non-negotiables and for new teachers. I identified a teacher who was good at developing schedules and enlisted her help.” Indeed, as a principal, Quinn recognized that he need to develop relationships with the very people he relied upon to operationalize systems—something that was difficult for him given that for most of his life he operated independently.

Quinn believes that this shift in leadership behavior also applies to him as the district leader. “The executive director has to be a role model,” asserts Quinn. “[Moreover, the] executive director has to be willing and able to represent those ideals in their engagements and interactions with the folks across the team to signal to everyone that there’s a bar.” Quinn asserts that in setting a bar of excellence, the leader should not act unilaterally. “For example, we talked about this fall doing this exercise of what is centralized, what is standardized. With this approach, all of us, not just me, must align with the systems and structures that move our work forward.” Applying that logic, Quinn
explains how KIPP DFW’s leadership decided upon its algebra-aligned math curriculum. “If we believe all our schools are going to use the same math curriculum, that’s not me deciding top down. It’s us looking at the data. It’s us looking at the outcomes. It’s us looking at the fact that eventually all of our kids are going to sit in a ninth-grade math class together and deciding this is what our ecosystem should look like to best serve kids.”

Quinn believes that KIPP DFW’s adoption of a collective decision-making model will position the organization to scale with quality. A more stringent state educational accountability system, along with competition from other charter operators, has transformed the environment in which KIPP DFW operates. As KIPP DFW’s leader, Quinn must redefine what it means to lead in a changing environment. As KIPP DFW’s executive director, Quinn must reconcile a tension between the making decisions he is best positioned to do as the organization’s district leader without alienating the very stakeholders he needs to achieve a shared goal of help students acquire the academic and character skills to live a life of choice.

Part III: Cultural Navigation

Every third Thursday of the month, KIPP DFW hosts visitors for a breakfast and school tour. Publicized as the “third Thursday breakfast tour,” the monthly event is part of KIPP DFW’s fund development effort. In fiscal year 2016, KIPP DFW must raise $4 million dollars to cover the difference between revenue derived from state and federal per pupil expenditures and operating expenses. The breakfast tours are designed to introduce
new groups of potential donors to the organization, increasing KIPP DFW’s base of individual donors which currently comprises less than 10 percent of its fund development efforts.

This morning’s breakfast tour is scheduled to occur at KIPP Truth Academy. The cafeteria is the school’s only interior communal space. The cafeteria appears functional with a serving kitchen and rows of lunch tables. College pennants adorn the walls, disrupting the monotony of the cafeteria’s white walls. Ten minutes before the breakfast tour is scheduled to begin, Quinn enters. Wearing a grey suit, he immediately begins to talk to guests mingling near the display of bagels and coffee. After a few minutes, the director of development walks over the Quinn and informs him that he can begin.

“Good morning everyone,” Quinn says, his smile effusive. “Thank you starting your day with us at KIPP Truth Academy.” The tables the guests are seated at are arranged with an aisle that Quinn walks through, making eye contact as he speaks. “The true power of this morning is the opportunity to observe classrooms to see our KIPPsters in action. But before we embark on the tour, I want to share with you my journey to KIPP DFW.” Although a projector is present, Quinn does not use a presentation, choosing to engage the audience directly. “Like many of the students in our building, I was a child facing tremendous obstacles that served as exit ramps. Along the way, I had the opportunity to meet individuals who have supported me to here, working alongside a team of individuals committed to expanding educational opportunities for students irrespective of zip code.” Quinn concludes his brief remarks by encouraging the attendees
to ask the student ambassadors questions, thanking the attendees once again for visiting KIPP Truth Academy.

Quinn remains in the cafeteria during the tour. Checking his phone, he walks over to the breakfast table and pours a cup of coffee. Today, he is the only person of color among a predominately white and affluent group of attendees. As KIPP DFW’s chief ambassador, Quinn is responsible for cultivating relationships among a diverse group of constituents who he believes could impact and influence the work of KIPP DFW. “Expanding KIPP DFW to educate 5,000 students across ten schools requires political and financial support.” Garnering support to advance KIPP DFW mission has required Quinn to become adept at navigating across lines of difference. Thinking about the racial and socio-economic context of many of KIPP DFW’s fund development activities, Quinn notes that as a black man, he has not allowed his racial identity, to impede his ability to engage with others whose racial identities and life experiences is different that his. “I am not precious about who I am in that moment,” notes Quinn, “and the way I engage is not informed by my race.”

Quinn’s comfort in navigating across social context is informed by a series of personal transitions he has made. Indeed, by the age of two, Quinn’s family relocated from their predominately black Portland neighborhood to the predominately white suburb of Beaverton. “I went to schools where the average student was probably middle to upper-class in terms of their earnings. It was interesting to go to school with kids who had $100 jeans and fancy birthday parties.” At age 41, Quinn doesn’t recall many
childhood birthday celebrations, noting that he “was lucky to get a yellow sheet cake.”

Beaverton’s public schools were predominately white, a contrast from the predominately black Northeast Portland neighborhoods in which Quinn and his extended family had resided. “The biggest transition for me from out of Portland,” Quinn recalls “was that I went from schools that were predominately African American to schools that were predominately white. In elementary school, I was one out of ten black kids.” On the weekends, Quinn would travel with his family back to Portland where his extended family still resided. “My aunts and cousins all lived in Northeast Portland, and went to Northeast Portland schools. Going to grandma’s house was a very black cultural experience.” As a child navigating between Portland and Beaverton’s disparate social contexts, Quinn recalls being aware of the duality that emerged in his social identity. “Monday through Friday, I lived in a predominately white world. On the weekends, I was immersed in black culture.” The compartmentalization of Quinn’s life gave him perspective on how to operate in multiple worlds—an ability he describes as “code switching.” It has been his journey across lines of differences that Quinn believes has informed how he has led diverse educational organizations. “I can talk to a black grandmother wanting to enroll her grandson in one of our schools, as easily as I can sit next to a wealthy, old white man at a Board meeting.”

The transition from Sunset High School to the University of Oregon also shaped Quinn’s understanding of his racial and socio-economic identities. “I was a poor black kid living in a dorm with a bunch of moderately wealthy white kids who did a lot of things that I just couldn’t afford to do. Within that, I defined my experience very
narrowly. I went to school. I played basketball, and that’s about it. I had a routine that kept me sane within my structure. It allowed me to be largely successful within that transition.” To offset expenses during his first year, Quinn worked in the university’s cafeteria. “My first semester, the job I got was in the cafeteria. When I was in high school, I negotiated with the school for them to increase my work—they doubled my work/study offer so that I could afford to go to school. I basically had loans, grants, and work/study.” Quinn only worked in the cafeteria for a semester, frustrated by the social stigma he felt as a poor, black college student serving mostly middle-income and affluent white students.

Here I am, [a] six-foot five, two-hundred thirty-pound black kid, slinging mash potatoes and cleaning up tables in this predominantly Caucasian world and I absolutely hated it. I didn’t hate the work, because I’d spent the last four or five years working at Burger King. It was really no different than that, but the social stigma of the work was just overwhelming. I was like, I’m cleaning up after all these middle class white kids. It felt terrible, so I quit.

In retelling his experience with his college cafeteria job, Quinn recalls that he has always been cognizant of socio-economic differences with his peers. “In the elementary school, middle school, high school. I remember feeling jealous of what other kids had in their parents or in their—more so their birthday parties. Because everyone always had these super cool birthday parties at school, and I was like, we never could have that. We don’t even have any money. We are eating government cheese.” Even after acknowledging his pre-college experiences, Quinn admits that it was during his time at the University of
Oregon when he first confronted the emotional anguish his socio-economic status caused. “I never really had an emotional struggle with that,” Quinn soberly notes, “until that freshman year of college when I’m the cafeteria guy. That was hard.”

The difference in Quinn’s emotional response to his socio-economic status in high school and college may be related to variances in the schools’ structural dynamics, and their respective impact on Quinn’s decisions when interacting with peers. Prior to attending the University of Oregon, Quinn controlled the rules of engagement with his classmates—choosing to form mostly transactional relationships with his classmates or “associates” as he called them. Within Beaverton Public Schools’ social boundaries, Quinn determined the patterns of socialization. Moreover, within Beaverton, Quinn’s social toolkit—which included “codeswitching”—was validated and thereby allowed him to cross racial and class boundaries, while minimizing the emotional costs that may be associated with engaging across lines of difference.

The rules of engagement at the University of Oregon however were different. As a first-generation college student dependent on multiple streams of financial aid, Quinn did not have a choice with his initial employment assignment. As a result, Quinn had to conform to an environment that operated with a different set of perceived social expectations or codes. Moreover, although Quinn attempted to activate his social “toolkit” as an employee of the University of Oregon, the contextual differences between college and high school—and what was valued in those respective settings—impacted Quinn’s social navigation. Additionally, within the University of Oregon’s racial and
class-based social structure at the University of Oregon—where according to Quinn “1 percent of the school was black,”—Quinn’s identity as a black man of stature serving food to white students mapped onto a larger socio-cultural and even historical narrative equating status with position in a racially hierarchical system. Thus, although the concept of working was familiar to Quinn, his interpretation of working within the University of Oregon made it difficult for Quinn to fully integrate into his cafeteria job.

Quinn and I meet at KIPP Truth Elementary to observe classrooms—something Quinn has adopted as a bi-weekly practice. Originally incubated within KIPP Destiny’s K-8th grade campus, KIPP Truth Elementary is housed in a brand-new facility one mile south of the Dallas Zoo on the grounds of a former residential center for boys. Entering the school, my attention was captivated by laminated sheets of yellow paper—*KIPP Commitments to Excellence*—prominently displayed in the lobby. The papers delineate shared expectations or commitments faculty members, parents, and students must make to support students’ growth through the school.

Walking down the hallway, Quinn and I are stopped several times by students marveling at the sight of two black men over six feet tall wearing suits. Quinn, a former kindergarten teacher, playfully engages with the students, reminding them to tuck in their shirt or get to class to not miss reading. Reaching a first-grade classroom, we sit on small white stools in the back of the classroom. The class has twenty-six students, the majority of which are black. The teacher, a white woman, is leading a guided reaching lesson with a group of seven students at a small kidney-shaped table. The remainder of the class is
divided into two groups: one working at a laptop lab on a computer adaptive reading program; the other group, independently reading at their desks. A digital stopwatch is displayed on a projection screen, and at the zero count, the teacher uses a countdown to call the students to attention.

The racial incongruence between teacher and students in the classroom we observe exists within a larger debate regarding race and education reform. Critics of charter school organizations like KIPP who educate predominately black and Latino and socio-economically disadvantaged student populations contend that the mostly white and affluent staff members enter communities to which they are not personally connected, and fail to build relationships with the very people and institutions with whom they are attempting to “change”. Interestingly, only sixteen percent of KIPP DFW teaching staff identifies as white which is not consistent with national teacher demographics. Indeed, in the 2011-2012, approximately 82 percent of elementary and secondary public school teachers were white compared to 7 percent black and 8 percent Latino. The dearth of teachers of color contrasts sharply with the increase in students of color who are enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools. While there is little evidence of a correlation between a teacher and student’s race and academic performance, there is evidence that teachers immersed in schools with predominately low-income and black


American student populations possess lower expectations, and overall sense of responsibility, for their students compared to schools with more socio-economically advantaged student populations.\(^{151}\)

Sitting in an empty classroom, Quinn asserts that a diverse teaching staff is important especially given the population of students KIPP DFW educates.

My mantra as a leader has always been hire the best person to serve the kids. My thinking on that has morphed over time, because I think when I was twenty-eight that was just like, I don’t care if they’re white, black, brown. Hire the best English teacher. Then I led a school where every single English teacher in my building was a white woman between twenty-two and twenty-eight years old, and they were all great. However, the truth was still there that my kids needed to see that black women and black men are literate, so I was definitely doing a disservice to them by not expanding my idea of the best teacher.

Quinn’s perspective on race and impact on his leadership has been shaped initially by his childhood experiences navigating across racial contexts. From first grade through high school, Quinn was one of small number of black students. “Throughout most of my academic career, I was one of five, one of ten, one of twelve African American students in school. It wasn’t until much later that I really reflected on how different that was from what my cousins and other folks in my family may have experienced. I think that had an interesting effect on, not only the quality of my education, but also my world view, as I looked at my role and my place in society.” Quinn vividly remembers a second-grade

history lesson that amplified his awareness of his racial identity was amplified. “I remember as a kid, I was in second grade history class and it was the section about slavery—no one was looking at me, but I felt they were. And I got totally hot in the face. I was the ‘black people’ in the class.” Schools are political institutions embedded in larger contexts. To that end, Quinn notes that his schooling experiences were connected to Oregon’s historical troublesome history with black Americans. “The state has a sad history when it comes to the inclusion and experience of black people.”

The racial composition of the University of Oregon mirrored that of Quinn’s primary and secondary schooling. “I went to the University of Oregon, where less than 1 percent [of students] on campus was African American.” Nonetheless, unlike many of his black peers at the University of Oregon, Quinn contends that his experience from primary school through high school helped prepare him to successfully navigate predominately white and affluent settings.

I saw some of my peers struggle because they hadn’t been in that environment, and so they struggled culturally to adjust to being different. The transition from high school to college, from a cultural standpoint, was not very challenging for me, because it was more of the same, where I was like, I live in a dorm and there were two Korean guys and me, and a bunch of white guys. Just that narrative had been so pervasive in my educational experience, and my social experience, for that matter. I did not struggle to fit into that space.

Quinn’s experience navigating racial and cultural difference as a KIPP education leader has been an asset. “Whether I was speaking with a parent that received
government assistance,” recalls Quinn, “or sitting in board meetings next to millionaires and billionaires, I was comfortable.” Quinn’s comfort in turn became useful in helping him and the organization achieve its goals. Unlike many of his black educational peers, Quinn’s contends that his awareness of his racial identity, particularly when immersed in mostly white and affluent settings, did not impede his ability to engage with others whom racial identities and life experiences were different than his. “I think that sometimes I think leaders that carry that as baggage. The way they engage is informed by what the other person gives to them. I never felt encumbered by the white old rich person in the conversation.”

Joining KIPP DFW, Quinn was cognizant of the intersection of the politics of race and school choice in southern Dallas.152 As a school district educating predominately black and Latino students in a predominately black and Latino populated section of Dallas, KIPP DFW’s expansion would necessitate the organization confronting Dallas’ troubled history of institutionalized racism. From decades-long judicial and activist battles to desegregate its public schools, to federal lawsuits to uphold federal fair housing laws, KIPP DFW was entering the city’s complicated and unresolved intersection between race and public education. “I think that coming into this city and trying to do this work of introducing and increasing choice is made harder by the level of entrenched social structure,” he comments. “It’s a lot harder to convince a mom or a dad that their school that they may have gone to and their grandmother may have gone to is not a good

place for their children to be than that has been in New York City.” Quinn attributes the
difficulty he has encountered in part to the embedded messaging in southern Dallas about
education and public-school choice. “Part of my analysis is just the fact that there is a
really strong machine that perpetuates a message around the status quo being okay, good,
worth fighting for [here], that has generational weight, has political weight within the
political machine, within the African American and Hispanic social structure of southern
Dallas that is very strong, very old, and very hard to undermine even when data, even
when outcomes, are telling a different story.”

Quinn’s strategy to alter the narrative in southern Dallas has been to leverage
informal and formal alliances with those in power. To that end, Quinn recognizes that the
political divisions in southern Dallas means that it is politically unpalatable for some
individuals to publicly support KIPP because it is a charter school system. “Some of the
work that we have coming up is all about acknowledging the fact that a lot of the people
who have power and influence in the city just can’t—because it’s politically suicide, or
from a business standpoint suicide—go and say, ‘I support KIPP and choice.’”

Nonetheless, Quinn believes there is a segment of the public that do not support charter
schools because they are uninformed about the schools and why they exist. “If they’re
friendly with us, they’ve come to our schools, we sit and have lunch with them, meet
with them, et cetera. We start to chip away [at] their lack of understanding of what
they’re opposing.”

Forging political alliances requires developing relationships built on trust—trust
that is often predicated upon shared experiences. Quinn acknowledges that his racial
identity within the southern Dallas political structure is valued and thus has created opportunities for him to communicate his message about expanding public-school choice through KIPP DFW’s growth. “I think that part of the reason why a six-foot-four black male who’s in his thirties is able to walk in and at least be heard is the fact that I’m a six-foot-four black male in his thirties who’s running a multi-million-dollar entity serving our community. If I was the same person and I was white, I would probably have that same audience, but I think part of the draw is affinity.” As a leader, Quinn concedes that part of building political alliances is elevating shared experiences or narratives as the entry point to building investment around your key message. “You sit down with a sixty-year-old business guy from southern Dallas [and] I can relate to the story of your making [it] in some way, shape or form, and then I can tie that back to there’s a ten-year-old somewhere in your neighborhood who has an opportunity to do one of the three things that you did to get to where you are today if you are actively with us or neutral, right?”

Diversifying KIPP DFW’s workforce also means students must acquire the tools needed to engage successfully with individuals of different backgrounds. “Our kids are just as damaged from having an educational experience made up of only Caucasian teachers as they would be by only having black and brown teachers, because when they get into higher education they’re definitely not going to have all black and brown teachers,” Quinn said. “When they get into the workforce, they are definitely not going to have only black and brown colleagues. We have to prepare them through exposure.” Quinn also believes KIPP DFW’s expansion in southern Dallas requires individuals across the organization, not just him in his role, to have the tools to communicate and
build support for KIPP DFW’s growth. This is particularly true for school leaders who lead schools that are embedded in broader community contexts. “You want your city councilperson to know there’s a KIPP building in my district. You want that councilperson to have a relationship with that building and think about it with pride,” Quinn said. “That is something that I can do, but that is something that the principal and the leadership team of that school can just as well do.”

Quinn believes it is important to prepare individuals working in racially different settings with the tools they need to navigate those contexts on behalf of the communities they feel called to serve. “There are plenty of people who may be Caucasian who have a compelling story as to why they are driven into this work and why they do this work. By just looking at face value and saying, ‘you can’t be part of this because our kids need something different,’ I think you’re excluding a vital and urgent piece of the work.” Quinn’s belief does depend on context in it reasonable to expect that within a school setting where a predominately white staff educates predominately black and Latino students, questions may arise regarding the teachers’ commitment to the students. Quinn underscores his belief in the importance of preparing individuals to operate across social spaces with the following example: “If you were never Baptist, you couldn’t just go into a Baptist church, pick up the hymnbook and get down like if you were Catholic, where the tradition is less focused on singing and more focused on prayers, and vice versa. I’ve been to a Catholic church, and I was totally confused. I went to Baptist churches when I was a kid. You want me to pick up a Baptist hymnbook, nine times out of ten I’m going to be able to get down wherever.” One strategy Quinn believes can assist in helping
educators develop cultural competence is through mentorship, or what he calls developing cultural ambassadors:

If you bring someone who has been solidly upper-middle class all of their life but has a compelling reason for why education is important to them and why they want to do this work, and then you say, ‘go have home visits to poor black and brown kids’ families,’ right, and you expect them to be successful with that or comfortable with that, you’re being naïve and you’re probably setting that person up to fail unless they’re just an extraordinary person who will climb over any mountain and just figure it out. There are plenty of those folks within our organization and within our world, right? More appropriate is to say, “Hey, we’re going to do home visits and I’m going to pair you with someone who’s a cultural ambassador, who has the relevant experience or has the relevant practice, who’s going to go with you, do those conversations and then allow you to do them, to help you to navigate the emotional tone, the perception of what you’re going to see, the tone in which you’re going to be responded,” because all of those things are just about calibration and tweaking and so we can do a better job of providing the access point.

Quinn’s support for cultural ambassadors is influenced by his experience in navigating southern Dallas politics as someone who is not from Dallas—but from Portland, Oregon, a “completely different social construct.” Although Quinn admits he may have entry points into relationships with stakeholders in southern Dallas as a “black male, as a first-generation college student, as a kid who grew up in poverty,” that does not mean he has the same insight into his new community as long-time residents. “I’m not a native of southern Dallas, so there are plenty of times when I walk into a room and don’t understand the hierarchy or the structure and have to step back lest I overstep my
place. So, the Caucasian male equivalent of me, who grew up in Portland, Oregon, may have twenty less access points than me, but we’re all learners.”

Despite Quinn’s belief in cultural ambassadors in advancing KIPP DFW’s growth in southern Dallas, there is no short-term strategic imperative to have the organization’s staff trained to serve in this role. “I think it is more important to have a smaller group of ambassadors who are doing that work in the short run,” noted Quinn, “while the largest percentage of our troops are deployed towards our mission,” he said. School leaders are a part of that small group and Quinn contends that part of their role is to build relationships with individuals outside of the school community on behalf of the school. “There’s an external game, an external network that you have to be able to tap into,” he said. “Frequently, that door is either open or closed by you having the right key. That key visually may be: Looks right, sounds right. Check. Can he then relate to me on a level that’s emotional and personal? Check. Can he then bring his work or what he’s selling to me in that same space? If you’re not able to check those checks in each of the boxes, you might get a, ‘Love what you do and thank you so much. Have a great day,’ versus, ‘Let’s talk for real,’ right?”

Real challenges remain that may impede KIPP DFW from operationalizing Quinn’s vision for cross-racial and class alliances. To begin, Quinn theory of change is predicated on the belief that all politics is local. Accordingly, Quinn believes that KIPP DFW would be best served by leveraging a small group of individuals such as school leaders to develop relationships with members of the school-community. As Quinn has noted, many of the school leaders are new to their roles, and thereby have not had time to
develop a shared narrative with the broader school-community. Moreover, Quinn’s theory assumes that school leaders know how to engage with individuals across different racial, socio-economic, and even geographic areas. Growing up black and poor in a mostly affluent and white community, Quinn learned how to navigate across racial and class boundaries in ways that many people have not. Nonetheless, Quinn assumes that other KIPP DFW leaders will engage their school-communities with the same preparation and ability to effectively cross social boundaries as he has developed. As executive director, it seems plausible therefore that Quinn will need to develop opportunities to teach the very people who are responsible for helping to develop and affirm the coalitions the organization needs to grow. The absence of doing this not only undermines the ability of leaders to the work, it can perpetuate a narrative that the work is not important.

Additionally, Quinn's is not originally from Dallas, more specifically southern Dallas. “I am not from Dallas,” Quinn admits. “I am from Portland, Oregon, [and] went to school in suburbs. Nonetheless, I have translated across race and diverse communities.” One of the benefits of Quinn’s identity is that it affords him a unique perspective unbuoyed by the weight of past efforts to address failed coalition efforts. Unlike many of his black educational peers, Quinn’s contends that his awareness of his racial identity, particularly when immersed in mostly white and affluent settings, did not impede his ability to engage with others whom racial identities and life experiences were different than his. “I am not precious about who I am in that moment,” notes Quinn, “and the way I engage is not informed by my race.”
Nonetheless, in a context in which individuals and organizations such as the NAACP and the League of United Latin American Citizens have a history of working to build cross-racial and class coalitions, it appears imperative that entering this space requires developing relationships based on shared understanding, trust, and alignment. Coalition building requires time and meaningful engagement to develop a shared vision of what is possible through working together. Quinn recognizes that his lived experiences as a black male is mediated by Dallas’ racial and cultural context. “Even for me I have had to go and listen intently, and follow behind folks who had connections and understanding of this community, to be able to go have those conversations.”

Looking at the future of KIPP DFW, Quinn acknowledges that the work of education leadership requires external engagement. “There’s the work of building the schools, running the organization, but there’s an external game, an external network that you have to be able to tap into.” Even for a person such as Quinn who has successfully navigated racially complex environments, and the investments he has made, he is aware of the existence of pervasive political challenges to KIPP DFW’s expansion in southern Dallas. “I’ve had some real conversations with at least two or three politicians who represent southern Dallas who have been very plain. “I’m never going to go on television or to the State House or wherever and support you, but that doesn’t mean I don’t support you.” I understand that. I disagree with it because I think that for us to make real change in our society, we have to have bold champions who are willing to put their own selves at risk and in jeopardy for the sake of the generations to come. I do understand it.”
Although, Quinn contends that empowering school leaders and school-based personnel is an effective strategy to combat the political inertia, he has not developed a long-term plan to teach school leaders, many of whom are not from southern Dallas, how to successfully build deep, political alliances.

It’s important. It has not been our priority. Again, I think that our number one, two, three, four, five priority is making sure that the quality of the product that we deliver to kids is at the absolute highest quality. When we have those conversations with people, we should tell them a truth, and we have to sell them a good. If the good is flawed then no matter how much affinity I have, we have, etc., if the truth is not—if the proof is not in the pudding, it’s all bull. It has not been my priority to make sure that every senior leader in this organization is culturally trained nor will it be in the short term.

As the debate between charter and non-charter public schools becomes increasingly politicized nationally and local, it remains to be seen if KIPP DFW’s lack of strategy impedes its ability to expand. Given the dominant education reform narrative, this equates to outsiders parachuting in to save poor, black and Latino students. Failure to address this proactively has the potential to undermine Quinn's efforts to realize a vision of expansion in southern Dallas.

Part V: Reflections on Team and Family

Quinn's portrait reveals the challenge of leading through change. As KIPP DFW’s executive director, Quinn has accepted responsibility for completing the district's ten school, five-thousand K-12 student strategic growth plan in southern Dallas. Enticed by the opportunities for growth, Quinn left the familiarity of New York City and a district he had spent twelve years helping to expand. The role of outsider was familiar to Quinn
given the familial instability he experienced as a child. Separation from his family, and poverty forced Quinn at a young age to confront the many life challenges that disenfranchise the very communities Quinn has served as a teacher and education leader. Nonetheless, overcoming those obstacles instilled in Quinn a degree of resilience and flexibility--both of which expanded his understanding of the educational conditions necessary to support low-income black and Latino students.

Embracing challenges has been especially salient given the tension between KIPP DFW's vision of growth in southern Dallas, and broader accountability, political, and fiscal constraints. organizational context as a growing social-entrepreneurial entity. As an outsider, Quinn has been well-positioned to establish a vision of a future possibility that required key stakeholders to free themselves from existing or conventional thought. This process of change leadership was most evident as Quinn sought to introduce the concept of centralization and standardization to KIPP DFW's leadership team.

As a growing organization in an increasingly stringent state educational accountability system, the need for consistency in practice across KIPP DFW's schools was apparent. Nonetheless, the idea of operating within set parameters was anathema to KIPP's cultural identity as an autonomous, change agent within a more established and bureaucratic K-12 public education system. Persuading KIPP DFW's leaders to invest in a mode of operation that contrasted with how they have operated since KIPP DFW was established necessitates technical and adaptive leadership. From an adaptive leadership perspective, Quinn was forced to reconcile his identity as an independent social actor and
the need to foster relationships predicated on trust, shared understanding, and empathy. To that end, while independence had contributed to Quinn's success, developing systems and structures that foster collaboration across an increasingly complex organization is necessary for KIPP DFW’s success.
Chapter 7

A Vision of Change: A Cross-Portrait Analysis of Educational Leadership Practice for the 21st Century

K-12 education leaders are increasingly positioned as critical levers in transforming chronically underperforming schools and school systems. Efforts to enhance students and school performance however have traditionally been centered around narrowly defined student standardized test scores. Accordingly, education leadership has similarly been reinterpreted as developing systems and structures optimized for improving students’ assessment performance. This narrow vision of education and model of leadership practice, while popular, is inconsistent with well-documented evidence that supports the relationship between students’ cognitive and social-emotional development and positive life outcomes.\(^{153}\)

In this broader context, Terry, Nakia, and Quinn’s portraits reveal education leaders whose visions for K-12 education are inextricably linked to social, political, and economic transformation in southern Dallas. While each leaders’ personal and professional journeys are unique, several consistent themes have emerged across their narratives that I will explore in this final chapter. To begin, each leader exemplifies servant leadership by prioritizing their constituents’ needs over their own advancement. The leaders’ commitment to uplifting the communities they serve as the cornerstone of their leadership is influenced by their experiences overcoming personal obstacles.

Additionally, as black education leaders in southern Dallas, navigating complex racial and class boundaries is both a strategic and necessary choice for resource acquisition in an increasingly pluralistic society. Moreover, while Terry, Nakia, and Quinn are all black men, the elasticity of their racial identities in southern Dallas is mediated by their proximity to the civil rights movement.

Lastly, organizational context matters. Indeed, Terry, Nakia, and Quinn exist within broader political and governance structures that have implications for how they realize their visions. Exploring the particular design of the private, traditional district, and charter settings offers a more nuanced perspective of transformational leadership in southern Dallas’ K-12 education ecosystem. I will conclude this chapter by raising ideas for future analysis. While not in the scope of this research, consideration of these ideas will provide a more nuanced perspective of the educational leadership needed to address persistent systems of inequality.

Servant Leadership

The leaders’ service-first mentality has allowed them to promote a vision of education aligned to social, economic, and political mobility. The notion of education as freedom is deeply entwined with the history of black Americans’ struggle for full inclusion in the United States’ democratic principles of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In this context, education becomes a form of political resistance utilized to disrupt systems of oppression. Positioning schools to address systemic issues of social and political oppression requires the development and implementation of organizational
systems and structures to help ensure stakeholders are equipped to operationalize a vision of education as service and emancipation.

Historically the black church has had a consequential influence on black political and social movements in the United States. To that end, the black church has long been the epicenter of black political and social life. Accordingly, it was the merging of the religious and secular where black leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Jesse Jackson exemplified “a powerful, magnetic presence and the ability to articulate deeply held grievances and hopes among their people.” There are however key distinctions between historical models of charismatic leadership evident in twentieth-century black political leaders and the protagonists’ models of servant leadership.

Many twentieth-century black political leaders, many of whom operated within religious and political sectors, operated within hierarchical organizational structures. Reflecting upon her direct work with civil rights organizations, civil rights activist Ella Baker noted that it was better to “promote the development of group-centered leaders rather than leader-centered groups.” From Baker’s perceptive, achieving community empowerment necessitated a leadership model predicated on advancing the participation of community members over the leadership hierarchy. A people-centric leadership model suggests that change is not dependent on a single charismatic individual. Indeed, as historian Clayborne Carson noted the most effect

154 Manning Marable, Black leadership: four great American leaders and the struggle for civil rights. (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), xii.
organizers of the 1960s were not preoccupied with keeping their positional authority. Rather, they approached the work of leading change with the goal that their job was to work themselves out of a job.\textsuperscript{156}

Instead of defining success as the acquisition of power, servant leaders interpret their success as their ability to enhance their constituents’ well-being. Accordingly, a servant leader “accepts the problems he or she sees in the world as his or her own personal task.” Likewise, Terry, Nakia, and Quinn have chosen to lead educational organizations designed to prepare students, many of whom are from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, to acquire the tools and experiences needed to improve their life outcomes and those of their communities. Achieving this ambitious goal, the leaders have consciously identified and removed barriers they believe prevent their students and broader organizations from addressing socio-political and economic inequities that make Dallas a divided city.

The leaders’ choices about how they invest their leadership capital—time and positional authority—are informed by their childhood experiences with financial instability. Growing up on the South Side of Chicago, Terry recalls that his mother sacrificed to “make ends meet”. While assistance was available, his family’s limitations in transportation became a barrier to accessing those resources. “Even if you took the train or bus,” Terry noted, “the place where you got the government cheese wasn’t down the street from the bus or train stop. It also wasn’t safe to take the train or bus because of

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., xv.
gangs.” South Dallas has similar structural barriers as the South Side of Chicago. Under Terry’s leadership, St. Philip’s has positioned itself as an “accessible” institution where South Dallas residents, irrespective of their formal affiliation with the organization, can take advantage of resources.

Nakia recalls the painful memory of having to borrow clothes and having his “secret let out” when he outgrew the borrowed clothing. Despite the embarrassment he felt, that experience helped Nakia recognize that his development was enhanced by the selfless support he received from others. As an adult, Nakia has achieved the dream he once shared with his mother: “that one day, I am not going to have to wear nobody else's clothes.” Nakia’s determination to build a better life for himself also included supporting others’ development much in the way that he was supported as a child. By intentionally building in support mechanisms for students and families, such as providing uniform assistance, the Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy is Nakia’s way of operationalizing his belief that “to much is given, much is required”.

During high school, Quinn did not receive support from his family to help him with the college application process. As a first-generation college student, Quinn had to rely on his high-school and guidance from peers to shepherd him through the college application process. Those challenges however have given Quinn the perspective needed to work to improve education outcomes for KIPP DFW’s students. Reflecting upon his journey to KIPP DFW, Quinn noted that “I’m a black male who’s lived in poverty [and] who has experienced the challenges of a dysfunctional family and social structure. I had
personal challenges, but it’s given me a very optimal platform to access the experiences of the families with kids that I serve, and will always serve.”

The leaders’ portraits reveal a tension between being a servant leader and managing complex organizations. Terry admitted to spending up to 75% of his time fundraising to meet the community center’s annual operating expenses. In the absence of a chief of staff overseeing internal operations, Terry’s external commitments means that he has less time to devote to internal development including programmatic oversight, and leadership development. Similarly, Quinn noted that in his first year as executive director, he spent a considerable amount of time fundraising to meet a three-million dollar fund development target despite the organization only raising one million dollars prior to his tenure. Addressing KIPP DFW’s fiscal gap prevented Quinn from helping his mostly inexperienced leaders internalize his organizational expectations and teaching them how to help their teams implement agreed upon systems to drive student achievement.

Quinn and Nakia both lead publicly funded educational institutions. Federal, state, and local district and school accountability policies inform, and in some cases, dictate what each leader must prioritize. In 2015, the 84th Texas legislature passed House Bill 2804 altering the state’s public school academic accountability system. According to the law, each Texas public school district (including open-enrollment charter schools) and schools would be assigned one of five letter ratings (A-F) based on their ability to support students’ post-secondary school success, as well as close racial and socio-economic academic achievement gaps. Additionally, the legislature intended for HB 2804 to better
inform parents about their district and school performance as they made decisions about where to enroll their child.

Addressing increased district and school accountability influenced Quinn’s perception of KIPP DFW’s priorities. Despite acknowledging the importance of building his leadership team’s capacity to engage in grassroots political advocacy in support of KIPP DFW’s southern Dallas expansion efforts, Quinn acknowledges the need to prioritize KIPP DFW’s core activity of educating students. “When you look at the mission of our organization, our organization is to serve kids, give them the academic and character skills needed to succeed in college and life beyond, right. Our business, our hedge-hog if you will, is not building relationships with politicians and business folks so that they will clear a path. It is an ancillary function of our work.”

Nakia led a magnet school and now oversees twelve K-12 schools within the South Oak Cliff feeder pattern. During his tenure, two system-level shifts have occurred. First, in response to loss of revenue from Dallas parents relocating to suburban school districts, private schools, and charter schools, Dallas ISD has increased its focus on student and school academic performance. Given these circumstances, Nakia's belief in performance is even more salient. Indeed, he noted “performance has privileges. Lack of performance has consequences. Parents, the school district, entrust us with our students’ lives. It is our responsibility to make sure we honor that trust by creating a school environment that is safe, structured, and academically rigorous.” Although Nakia was successful in navigating the tension between his holistic vision of education and increasing demands from Dallas ISD, it is unclear what changes he will make now
overseeing a portfolio of schools that have been historically academically under-performing.

Cross-Racial and Cross-Class Leadership

Black leadership in the United States historically has been characterized by a commitment to developing policies and procedures that improve the collective well-being of black Americans. The passage of the major civil rights legislation of the 1960s was a watershed moment for black leadership as greater socio-economic mobility had implications for how black leaders strategically established and executed upon their vision for social transformation. Citing this shift, political theorist Andra Gillespie contends that post-civil rights black leaders resist notions of being “deracialized” social actors. Rather their leadership identity and practice are indicative of a dynamic interplay between a deep commitment to black empowerment and an ability to form diverse coalitions as a strategic means of survival in an increasingly pluralistic society.

Terry, Nakia, and Quinn’s portraits reveal that being a black leader necessitates the ability to navigate across racial and class boundaries. Operating in a post-civil rights and increasingly diverse socio-political context, the leaders have built diverse coalitions to support their holistic vision of social change through education. The leaders’ lived experience mediating across lines of difference has ultimately prepared them to bridge racial and socio-economic divisions in southern Dallas—divisions that threaten to undermine their visions for social, political, and economic transformation through education.
Terry attended Upper Iowa State University and Northern Iowa University in the 1970s during a time of significant social and political transformation in the United States. It was in that setting—reading texts such as Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and listening to black political speakers like Kwame Ture—that he “connected the dots” between his experience growing up as a black child in Chicago and Iowa’s racially stratified environments. Iowa also provided Terry with “opportunities for dialogue,” with black and white students. Indeed, it was after he interacted with students, individuals with whom he had never attended school, Terry gained a more nuanced understanding of racial identity, concluding that “there are different kinds of humans who are white.”

Engaging with others across lines of difference also expanded Nakia’s perception of race and his racial identity. As a child, Nakia’s mother insisted that he participate in extra-curricular activities to gain the exposure he needed to make “better decisions” as he matured. Leaving the familiarity of his predominately black American South Dallas neighborhood, Nakia engaged with children from across Dallas and across racial and class groups. Nakia credits those interactions and the subsequent relationships he formed with challenging racial stereotypes he had developed. “I learned not to develop a stereotype or develop a perception about a specific individual based on the masses.” Crossing social boundaries as a child also helped Nakia “to see people as people.”

Traveling between Portland’s residentially segregated neighborhoods as a child enabled Quinn to migrate across implicit or explicit social boundaries. Adopting a technique widely referred to as code switching, Quinn formed associations across racial and class peer groups. Those experiences helped Quinn later adapt to the University of
Oregon’s predominately white student population, something he recalls several of his black peers were unable to do. “We were poor and black. I observed them complain about the white guy fraternity parties,” Quinn recalls. “Sadly, by the end of the year, all of them were gone.”

The protagonists’ narratives also reveal a tension between working on behalf of their communities and working across racial and class differences. Terry soberly recalls the time he was mistaken for an attendant at a black-tie fundraiser even though St. Philip’s was a named beneficiary. Rather than directly confront the white gentleman for what he perceived could have been a racial micro-aggression, Terry politely stated that he was not a waiter and offered his assistance in locating a waiter. Terry’s use of a technique he calls “scanning”—assessing an “aggressor’s” intent before responding—was shaped by his post-secondary experience in Iowa. Reflecting on the charity incident, Terry asserts that his time in Iowa helped him adopt a “savvier social justice mindset”. Indeed, Terry’s experience engaging with individuals in positions of authority—such as the time he marched on his college president’s house as a form of protest—helped him become more cognizant of the costs of adopting a social justice strategy predicated on narrow perceptions of racial engagement. As the leader of an organization heavily dependent on philanthropic support, Terry acknowledged that he could not afford to jeopardize his ability to receive future funding from the affluent benefactors that had historically supported initiatives he believed were essential for advancing his vision of uplifting South Dallas. Additionally, Terry was empathetic to the possibility that the gentleman’s question was the result of limited engagement with black Americans. To that end, Terry’s
choice to respond with dignity was a form of resistance against any preconceived notion that the gentleman may have held about black Americans.

Leading KIPP DFW, Quinn has learned not to be “precious about his identity,” but instead define his identity and leadership practice based on a shared understanding of what it means to pursue educational success. “I can sit in a board room next to a white millionaire as well as talk to a black grandmother about enrolling their grandchild in one of our schools.” Searching for the shared experience or story of us has been a strategy Quinn has employed within southern Dallas’ fractious political climate. Quinn’s identity as a black leader, supportive of education has been an entry point when engaging with black constituents who are skeptical of charter schools and the perception that they will disrupt the community. Playing the “external game,” Quinn has been able to promote narratives that are specific to groups, while also universal. “Frequently, that door is either open or closed by you having the right key. That key visually may be: looks right, sounds right…relates to me on a level that’s emotional and personal.” Quinn’s efforts to fundraise to support KIPP DFW’s southern Dallas expansion has required him to engage with individuals whose racial bias, while implicit, is often revealed. Quinn recalls speaking with a potential benefactor whose comments about poor black and Latino students were patronizing at best. Cognizant that he was in a room surrounded by affluent individuals many of whom could meet KIPP DFW’s fundraising target, Quinn carefully crafted his response. “I may not have changed his perception about our students, but by sharing my story, I hoped to humanize our students and families.”
Realizing his vision of creating a school that developed the future leaders of Dallas motivated Nakia to build relationships with the leaders of north Dallas elite private schools. Through those relationships, Nakia gleaned and later adopted organizational practices that contributed to the schools’ success. At the time, Nakia noted that he was criticized as “being elitist” for modeling the Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy after the predominately white north Dallas private schools. Reflecting upon that criticism, Nakia notes that achieving his vision for BOMLA students meant he had to adapt his leadership style. Referencing Malcolm X’s transformation into el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz, Nakia notes that his transition included a greater awareness that people may have different experiences, but “their spirits are the same”. Additionally, Nakia believes that operating with a limited perception of people perpetuated the very stereotypes he was aiming to counter through his school. Learning from others became a form of survival, avoiding the consequences he has observed others face “the moment they think they know everything.”

Nakia believes that meeting individuals with preconceived notions about the communities he represents based on their limited exposure to those communities is a challenge and opportunity. Nakia recalls being asked to by the Dallas Regional Chamber of Commerce to speak to its members after he founded the Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy. Noting they were not interested when he was “in the trenches before BOLMA,” Nakia also recognized that the meeting was an opportunity to share his story. “I was not disrespectful and used the meeting as a chance to explain that every story has a story”.

Terry, Nakia, and Quinn all self-identify as black American and profess a deep commitment to improving the lives of black children. Nonetheless, how they perceive their racial identity, and their subsequent actions suggest that an individual’s racial identity is not fixed. Sellers et al.’s multidisciplinary model for racial identity (MMRI) provides a framework through which we can examine how Terry, Nakia, and Quinn conceptualize their racial identity. There are several assumptions upon which the multidisciplinary model or MMRI is based. To begin, the MMRI assumes that individuals have several identities and that those identities are not fixed.\textsuperscript{157} Moreover, Sellers et al. contend that individuals internalize beliefs, opinions, or racial ideologies about how members of their racialized groups should behave.\textsuperscript{158}

For many black Americans, the civil rights movement is a defining moment in their history given the impact civil rights legislation had on socio-economic and political mobility. Additionally, this time-period defined generational differences in how black Americans conceptualized their racial identity and how those perceptions informed their navigation of social and political contexts. This nuanced approach to racial identity formation is a key component to Andra Gillespie’s assertion that there are three phases to post-civil rights black political leadership.\textsuperscript{159} One key distinction among leaders in these three groups is the extent to which they actively built cross-racial coalitions of support.


while articulating a public narrative inextricably linked to black Americans’ collective empowerment.\footnote{Gillespie, \textit{Whose Black Politics?: Cases in Post-Racial Black Leadership} (New York: Routledge, 2010), 13.}

Applying Gillespie’s theory of post-civil rights black political leadership formation to this study, there are differences in Terry, Nakia, and Quinn’s proximity to the civil rights movement. Terry was born prior to the enactment of major civil rights legislation. Noting that “he did not attend school with a white student until college,” Terry left his predominately black southside Chicago neighborhood in 1970 to attend the predominately white Upper Iowa University. As a student, Terry was navigating an unfamiliar socio-cultural setting during a time of immense social change for the United States. Like many black Americans, Terry recalls the impact watching the Roots miniseries had on the development of his racial identity. “Growing up as a child, television did not offer a lot of positive images of black Americans.” Terry's racial identity formation was further influenced by the confluence of the rise of black nationalism among youth activists, and his own recognition of the benefits of galvanizing a racially and socio-economically diverse stakeholder group to advance his commitment to black Americans' social, political, and economic empowerment.

Nakia and Quinn grew up in a post-civil rights era. Entering the University of Oregon, Quinn joined other black college students at predominately white institutions who walked through doors that individuals like Terry opened a generation before their arrival. While Jim and Jane Crow were gone, it was in the post-civil rights context that
Quinn and Nakia fought against the implicit discrimination and institutional oppression masked under the guise of political pluralism. Nakia remembers his participation the 1995 Million Man March as a reawakening and reinterpretation of black nationalistic principles to combat the persistent disenfranchisement of black men in the United States.

While Gillespie’s framework provides a more nuanced method for analyzing post-civil rights black political leaders, I did not find measurable differences in Terry, Nakia, and Quinn’s racial ideologies and the ways they navigated Dallas’ racial context based on their ideologies. Similarities in the intersectionality between racial ideology and practice is the result of how the leaders have internalized the idea that the sustainability of their organizations requires building racially and socio-economically diverse coalitions. Moreover, Terry, Nakia, and Quinn’s emotionally muted reactions to racial aggressions and racial indifference illustrate their calculation that as leaders, they must reconcile personal indignities with opportunities to acquire resources for their constituents. Additionally, I also contend that Terry, Nakia, and Quinn recognize that their acceptance and long-term viability among their core constituents requires them to work across racial groups, while projecting an identity and public narrative aligned to black empowerment.

Social psychologists have found racism to be a cause of stress among black Americans.\(^{161}\) Despite their resilience, it is unclear what potential long-term negative psychological and even physical effects the leaders’ decision to overlook racial

indignities may have on Terry, Nakia, and Quinn. In addition to informing future research, further exploration of this topic should include the viability of structural supports such as counseling and peer-mentoring as mechanisms to reduce racially-induced stress among black American education leaders.

**Collaborative Decision Making**

Ganz defines leadership as “the creation of the conditions that enable others to achieve shared purpose in the face of uncertainty.”\(^{162}\) Historically, leadership has been conceptualized as the activities of a single person—often charismatic in nature who is able to motivate others to transform their collective circumstances.\(^{163}\) Nonetheless, social movements entail creating new values and the systems and structures that support the new values. Therefore, leadership practice must be diffused throughout an organization not simply with the hierarchical leader.

The idea of collaborative decision-making as a leadership practice is consistent with Theoharis’ analysis of social justice school leaders. Indeed, he found that principals committed to social justice and equity practice eschew autocratic leadership, and instead


practice shared decision-making. In this context, social justice leaders ascribe to democratic principles of decision making as opposed to autocratic leadership.

Moving beyond symbolic claims of collaboration requires intentional activity on the part of a leader working with his or her team. Indeed, the intricate nature of this work suggests that social movements by design and structure are dynamic as “new” people are usually trying to make “new” things happen under novel conditions. To that end, leadership practice and the implicit development of leadership capacity throughout an organization is required. Leaders therefore must assume the role of a coach, “developing the leadership skills of those with less experience, and avoiding both micromanagement on the one hand and hands-off management on the other.” This requires making time to meet before an action, during an action if need be, and afterward to evaluate the action. Managing an effective team means scheduling time for the team to meet, to learn, to coach each other, and to receive expert coaching.

The protagonists all expressed a commitment to advocate on behalf of their constituents. Indeed, their personal identification with the communities they serve coupled with their ability to navigate across racial and class boundaries has been critical to their efforts to realize their holistic visions of education. Despite their belief in

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collaboration, their personal and professional experience has not fully prepared them to develop systems and structures to support collaboration across their organizations.

In setting the agenda for his department head meeting, Terry did not structure activities to support his leadership team in actively identifying challenges and solutions to enhance their ability to meet their organizational priorities. Rather, most of the meeting was comprised of transactional updates. Moreover, the meeting’s dominant discourse pattern—Terry to participant—reinforced a hierarchical power dynamic as opposed to a structure wherein all participants had an opportunity to contribute to the construction of knowledge.

Nakia communicated that working with principals is imperative to achieving his vision for the portfolio of schools he manages. In his meeting with Principal Daniels, Nakia did work to provide Daniels with perspective asking a series of questions designed to explore the utility of her proposed student behavior systems. Questioning is an effective method of coaching. However, Nakia’s questions were disconnected from an overarching framework for how Principal Daniels could have evaluated student behavior across her school to inform the various components of her proposal. Introducing this framework could have challenged Nakia’s perception that Principal Daniels’ responses were indicative of her opposition to his suggestions. Moreover, by teaching Principal Daniels how to develop a proposal with her key stakeholders, he would have equipped her with a process that she could similarly introduce to her staff as a school-wide system.
Quinn’s transition from teacher to Principal within KIPP New York City was challenging in part because he sought to solve problems unilaterally, rather than engage his staff in addressing concerns that had arisen. Quinn recalls that during this time, he “was just directing,” and “didn’t understand that servant or relationship piece.” Operating independently, a trait that had served Quinn well personally, led his staff to begin to question his leadership. Through inspection, Quinn realized that the efficacy of his leadership required him to invest his team in his vision—working with and through them.

Upon joining KIPP DFW, Quinn attempted to implement a collaborative decision-making process that mirrored KIPP NYC’s decision-making system. One of the factors that contributed to successful collaborative decision-making in KIPP NYC was the strength of the relationships Dave Levin, KIPP co-founder and at that time KIPP NYC’s superintendent, formed with his leadership team members. The existence of trust built over time created the impetus for individuals to invest in the new policy or procedure Dave was introducing.

Quinn did introduce a framework for leaders to determine what school functions should be standardized across schools, as well as the functions that should be centrally managed. Nonetheless, in introducing this model, Quinn did not introduce a plan for how he would work with the leaders to translate collaborative decision making downstream—becoming part of the ethos of KIPP DFW. Most of the department or team leaders were either new to their role or to the organization. As such, Quinn needed to not only introduce the purpose of collaborative decision-making as a critical lever for enacting the organizational goals—the “why”—he also needed to teach them how to make
collaborative decision-making—the “how”. Structurally, this level of coaching requires dedicated time to enable all participants to engage in a cyclical learning process which entails introduction of methods, adoption, execution, and feedback.

Additionally, Quinn did not have mature relationships with the leaders predicated on trust. Although he had consulted with KIPP DFW prior to assuming the role of executive director, his past engagement did not provide Quinn with the level of proximity needed to create relationships. Trust is important as it allows leaders vision of hope to overcome uncertainty caused by internal or external variables. Trust can be built, but requires leaders to intentionally create time and space to gain an understanding of individuals through their work. Stakeholders’ trust and investment in a leader and his or her vision is also developed through the spaces leaders create for members’ interaction. Peer interactions, and the subsequent relationships that form in social movements are not only between the leader and his or her stakeholders, but entail peer relationships. Leaders must therefore assume responsibility for developing meaningful opportunities for members “to form interpersonal relationships—relationships that become the foundation for developing the collective identity, commitments, and collaborative action that constitute a movement.”

The inability of social movement leaders to “develop the systems and structures to build the relationships, sustain the motivation, do the strategizing, and carry out the action required to achieve success” communicates that

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\textit{Organizational Context}

Terry, Nakia, and Quinn all lead educational institutions predicated on parental choice. The operating principle for each school and school system is that parents are empowered to make schooling decisions informed by their assessment of the environment that best supports their children's development. Despite this similarity, differences in the school structure and accountability system have implications for how each leader advances his vision of education.

St. Philip's School and Community Center is a religiously affiliated private school. St. Philip's is accredited by the Independent Schools Association of the Southwest, a consortium of 88 schools, 61 of which are in Texas. The timeline for accreditation is ten years and includes a site visit in year one and annual reports from the school site. In addition to evaluating the schools' finances, a "self-study" is a critical component of the ISAC accreditation process. Self-study is designed for schools to reflect upon progress towards realizing its mission, as well as opportunities for improvement. The evaluation calls for a cross-section of stakeholders including administrators, staff, students, parents, and alumni/ae) as vested members of the school-community.
The Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy and KIPP Dallas-Fort Worth are public schools authorized by the Texas Education Agency. The Texas Education Agency academic accountability system consists of four indices designed to evaluate the academic performance of Texas public schools. Moreover, in establishing the accountability system, the Texas Education Agency and Texas legislature have asserted that they desire Texas will be among the top ten states in postsecondary readiness by 2020 by accomplishing the following: improving student achievement at all levels in the core subjects of the state curriculum; ensuring the progress of all students toward achieving advanced academic performance; closing advanced academic performance level gaps among student groups; rewarding excellence based on other indicators in addition to state assessment results.” The accountability ratings are based on students' annual performance on the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness.

As an open-enrollment charter school district, KIPP DFW is subject to additional accountability measures. Each year, KIPP DFW must satisfy a series of annual financial metrics stipulated by the Texas Education Agency's School First Rating system. According to the Texas Education Agency, “the purpose of the financial accountability rating system, known as the School Financial Integrity Rating System of Texas (FIRST), is to ensure that open-enrollment charter schools are held accountable for the quality of their financial management practices and that they improve those practices.” Under Texas House Bill 2 also known as the “three strikes rule”, the Texas Education Agency will close a charter school or district if it fails to meet either the academic or financial accountability for three consecutive years. Since 1996, there have been a total of 150 total
open-enrollment charter school closures. Thirty-six of those closures were charter revocations.

The structural differences in the respective accountability systems have varied implications for the leaders' practice. ISAC's ten-year accreditation time span means affords Terry the opportunity to be innovative in the development of programs. For example, during one of the department head meetings, Terry's finance director delivered a presentation on her analysis of residential and commercial real estate opportunities in St. Philip's zip code. The impetus for the analysis was Terry’s vision of strategically acquiring land to expand St. Philip's academic program into high school, as well as to foster new partnerships with community-based organizations to broaden the services St. Philip’s can provide to South Dallas residents. The ISAC accreditation process also includes a wide spectrum of stakeholders. St. Philip’s board, students, and parents’ participation in the accreditation process aligns with Terry’s collaborative decision-making approach. Additionally, by engaging others in the accreditation process, Terry has an opportunity to invest others in St. Philip’s mission.

There are several noticeable differences between the Texas Education Agency’s accountability rating system and ISAC’s accreditation system. Texas traditional public schools and open enrollment charter schools are rated annually. Moreover, the academic ratings are based primarily on students’ performance on a state standardized test. The narrow measure of student performance contrasts sharply with Nakia and Quinn's education visions that focus on students' academic and social-emotional development. This system presents a series of decision-points and potential tradeoffs for Nakia and
Quinn. Accordingly, as a Dallas ISD executive director, Nakia is responsible for ensuring the implementation of instructional practices district administrators believe will contribute to students meeting proficiency and mastery on the STAAR test. Interestingly, as a principal, Nakia exercised autonomy as a principal to align his instructional program to his educational vision. The inclusion of lyceum at the start of each academic day was informed by Nakia's visit to elite private schools in Dallas that managed to emphasized students' academic and social-emotional development. In his role managing twelve Dallas ISD principals, Nakia, and the principals, operate under parameters established by Dallas ISD in accordance with the state’s academic accountability system. Nakia's meeting with the principal of R.L. Thornton elementary school revealed the underlying tension that exists between the interplay between the state accountability system, the district's policies and academic priorities, Nakia's responsibility to execute the district's priorities, and the principal's belief in the systems and structures she felt was necessary to support her students' development.

For Quinn, the pressure to perform on STAAR is compounded by the significant academic gaps in reading and math that students enter KIPP DFW schools with. To that end, while STAAR results reveal KIPP DFW students' academic growth over time, the accountability ratings are oriented towards absolute performance. As such, schools with one tested grade have a small margin of error relative to the state academic accountability. This is particularly salient given KIPP DFW’s growth model of one grade per year until full growth. Quinn's efforts to drive standardization across KIPP DFW was in part his recognition that the accountability system as currently designed, does not
reward innovation. As such, Quinn’s self-proclaimed “bet” is that by solidifying a set of practices across KIPP DFW schools, KIPP DFW is more likely to attend to students’ needs within the annual accountability system.

In addition to overseeing KIPP DFW’s academic performance, Quinn is responsible for meeting the state of Texas’ charter school financial accountability metrics. The School FIRST system requires that charter schools’ revenue is greater than expenses in the same fiscal year. KIPP DFW received federal and state funding for each student that enrolls and attends its schools. Nonetheless, there is an annual gap that KIPP DFW must raise private funds to support programs such as college application assistance that are aligned to the organization’s mission to support students “to and through college”. The combination of the financial accountability system, mission critical programming, and a new development team, Quinn acknowledged that in his first couple of years, he spent most of his tenure raising money. One of the implications however was that Quinn was not as present in schools, observing the program in action, and crafting and disseminating messaging aligned to his vision. In the absence of clear messaging, individuals create their own narratives. This was evident during KIPP DFW’s convocation when employees questioned KIPP DFW’s strategic growth plan and fundraising efforts.

KIPP DFW’s status as an open-enrollment charter district in southern Dallas is another structural difference that has implications for Quinn's leadership. With over 18,000 employees Dallas ISD is one of the largest employers in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. Consequently, Black mobility has been inextricably linked to the public
education sector in Dallas. The rise of charter schools in southern Dallas has not only challenged Dallas ISD prominence in black communities, it has also revealed the politicization of race and education. KIPP DFW’s ability to meet its strategic expansion goal of ten schools educating 5,000 students in southern Dallas requires local political support. Locally, KIPP DFW needs the Dallas City Council to approve zoning permits. Reflecting upon challenges another charter school system in Dallas faced getting a new site approved by the city council, Quinn surmised that city council members are ultimately beholden to their constituents. Moreover, Quinn noted that he often meets politicians who privately support choice, but publicly do not support KIPP DFW as it may negatively impact their office.

Choice and charter schools is southern Dallas, like many urban areas across the United States evoke images of mostly white leaders and financial backers. The Knowledge is Power Program was founded in 1994 by two white male Teach for America teachers. As the largest network of charter schools in the United States, KIPP has become representative for the education reform movement. Although they see themselves as an extension of the civil rights movement, the growth of charter management organizations like KIPP have been criticized for displacement of black educators. Urban charter schools, like KIPP whom educate a predominately black and Latino student population, have also been criticized for perpetuating racial and socio-economic segregation despite decades of research citing the positive impact of socio-economically diverse environments on low-income students’ academic achievement.
Additionally, KIPP has been depicted in the mainstream media as a “no excuses” school for its perceived belief that the circumstances under which a child arrives to school, while meaningful, should not impact student achievement. Researchers and critics alike contend that this operating principle disregards the well-documented link between poverty and trauma on students’ academic achievement. Furthermore, given that 95 percent KIPP students nationally are black or Latino, and 88 percent are free and reduced-price lunch eligible, critics claim that KIPP’s “no excuses” stance is misaligned with the realities many KIPP DFW students face every day.

As KIPP DFW’s executive director, Quinn must carefully navigate this broader context. Despite demonstrated a deep commitment to improving the well-being of black and Latino communities, Quinn, a black man, must represent KIPP and all its complexity to communities skeptical of change because historically change has been done to them and not with them. Quinn acknowledges the southern Dallas’ political fault lines and the reality that despite his best efforts to change political perceptions, politicians in power want to remain in power. Nonetheless, intellectualizing the circumstances does not fully mediate the frustration Quinn notes that he feels. “I’ve had some real conversations with at least two or three politicians who represent southern Dallas who have been very plain. “I’m never going to go on television or to the State House or wherever and support you, but that doesn’t mean I don’t support you.” I understand that. I disagree with it because I think that for us to make real change in our society, we have to have bold champions who

are willing to put their own selves at risk and in jeopardy for the sake of the generations to come. Southern Dallas like many areas is parochial. Unlike Nakia who is a native son of South Dallas and attending school in Oak Cliff, Quinn is not from Dallas. Moreover, unlike Terry who was raised in Chicago, he has not spent enough time in the city to establish the social and political relationships that could mediate.

School Success Factors

Terry, Nakia, and Quinn's portraits reveal a leadership practice rooted in a rich tradition of social justice leadership. Their choice to educate mostly low-income and black and Latino students in southern Dallas is informed by their personal experience navigating and overcoming obstacles leveraging the skills they developed in school.

It is important to note that the leaders are achieving results. Ninety-five percent of St. Philip’s graduates attend college; and nearly 85 percent graduate in four years. One hundred percent of Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy students were accepted to a four-year college or university. Fort-three percent of KIPP DFW students graduate from college which is nearly five times the national average for low-income students. These academic results are evidence that the three leaders offer a model for how school and school systems can educate low-income and black and Latino students. Consistent with long-standing educational research, the schools assert that K-12 education should be structured around the following elements:

- **Community engagement**: The complexity of the challenges facing students in southern Dallas suggest that it will take a constellation of actors to support their
academic and social development. As education leaders, Terry, Nakia, and Quinn have developed systems and structures to actively partner with community based organizations to advance their vision of social transformation. Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy partnership with Bridge Lacrosse and St. Philip's partnership with the North Texas Food Bank were informed by Nakia and Terry's childhood experience with the presence and absence of extra-curricular activities. In positions of authority, the leaders have designed schools where students are developing the skills to cross social boundaries.

- **Intentional support of students' social-emotional development**: Terry, Nakia, and Quinn's visions for education emphasis the co-existence of students' cognitive and social-emotional development. Educating the whole child means intentionally developing support mechanisms that help children address the normative developmental process which for many of the leaders' students is compounded by incidences of trauma or the daily recriminations people of color often face. Lyceum at BOLMA and St. Philip's rites of passage program are examples of how the leaders have created spaces where children can be affirmed.

- **Inspirational leadership**: One of the traits of social movement leadership is that the leaders inspire others to envision the possibilities of a future that may not yet exist. Terry, Nakia, and Quinn's portraits illustrate leaders who crafted and communicated a vision that invests and influences others to change their behaviors. Quinn's facilitation of convocation was illustrative of Ganz calls public narrative or the translation of values into action. Beginning with the collective
recitation of the KIPP Credo, and continuing with his own story of the transformative power of education, Quinn galvanized the KIPP DFW employees around the feasibility and necessity of KIPP DFW's expansion in southern Dallas. Moreover, recognizing the challenges associated with change, Quinn reintroduced KIPP values of resilience, responsibility for students, and collaboration as critical for the team's work.

While the school-communities should be lauded, we do not have empirical evidence that the leaders have realized their visions. Indeed, each leader has professed an educational vision that calls for deep systemic change. More time is needed to determine if the students from the three institutions will become better husbands, fathers, scientists, teachers, and school leaders Terry, Nakia, and Quinn express are needed to transform southern Dallas. Shifting our focus to students’ is important as it will broaden our understanding of the transformational educational leadership needed to create the conditions under which students can acquire the academic and social skills to advance societal change.

Additionally, I am interested in the impact that social and political changes will have on the leaders’ visions and implementation. Dallas Mayor Mike Rawlings is the chief architect and champion of the city’s comprehensive economic investment strategy in southern Dallas. During his tenure, there has been a commitment to involve local stakeholders like Terry, Nakia, and Quinn in shaping the direction of change. Investors increasing attraction to southern Dallas in part to due to higher cost of commercial development in north Dallas suggest a continued commitment to comprehensive social
and economic investment in southern Dallas beyond Dallas Mayor Rawlings’ completion of his last term in 2019. Nonetheless, investment in southern Dallas does not mean that Dallas social power structure which has historically marginalized southern Dallas’ predominately black and Latino communities will change.

Changes to the state of Texas’ educational accountability system may also influence the translation of K-12 transformational education leadership. Beginning in 2018, the Texas Education Agency will rate schools and school districts according to an A-F letter grade. This shift is aligned to existing efforts to use high stakes testing to qualify schools’ ability to prepare students for college and the workplace. Despite the policy’s intent, implementing the policy may lead to a race to the bottom as school systems comply with a narrow definition of scholastic achievement despite the documented benefits of supporting students’ academic and social-emotional development.

Lastly, school systems are increasingly having to respond to a more harrowing social and political climate. The repeal of federal protections for undocumented students and efforts in the state of Texas to pass legislation aimed at undermining LBGQT youth’s civil rights has pushed schools to examine educators’ role in combatting social challenges. It is in this context that education leaders themselves must acquire a new toolkit, to prepare their teachers on how to best help students navigate what can be psychologically harmful settings.
Future Considerations

Terry, Nakia, and Quinn have taken on a tremendous challenge. Indeed, despite their commitment to advocating on behalf of disenfranchised school-communities, their portraits reveal leaders who are increasingly isolated. The leaders’ social isolation has implications for their sustainability and the sustainability of their social movements. Moreover, the leaders’ isolation can reinforce the dominant perception that leadership is lonely, undermining efforts to deepen the pool of education leaders of color. There are several steps that should be taken to address this challenge. To begin, more investment is needed in professional development intentionally designed to help education leaders of color navigate social, political, and cultural contexts within which they reside.

In addition to introducing leaders to transformational leadership theory, efforts should be made for leaders to examine leadership practice through case studies as a way for leaders to examine their own leadership practice. Additionally, education leaders of color would benefit from spaces where they can build relationships with peers. These spaces are important as individuals can create support mechanisms they can activate to celebrate successes as well as discuss challenges in a non-threatening and non-judgmental environment.

Terry, Nakia, and Quinn’s narratives reveal leaders who have courageously chosen to work to transform southern Dallas into a place where every child irrespective of their zip code has access to a quality education. Leadership however is as much an exercise of heart as it is mind. Leaders, courageous leaders, must work to connect the
heart and mind, illuminating a pathway whereas a coalition of individuals can advance change. Through the protagonists’ narratives we find evidence of how the leaders’ lived experiences have helped them make sense of how they will drive their organizations toward success.

Despite the strength of their visions, the protagonists’ narratives also reveal disconnects between their visions and the systems and structures they have developed to help ensure their vision is lived throughout their organizations. The absence of these processes raises questions about the long-term sustainability of the organizations. Reimagining community is a collective effort made more complex by the centrality of southern Dallas schools to a political system predicated on race and power. To that end, all members of an organization tasked with engaging with the community must be equipped with the tools to do so in a way that is culturally affirming and build relationships.

Leaders have a responsibility to develop the processes needed to support their key stakeholder to also lead. Barbara Kellerman asserts that for far too long society has been “intoxicated with the romance of leadership”.170 Our fixation on leaders fails to account for the critical role followers can play as agents of change. Servant leadership inherently shifts the focus from leaders’ actions for self-aggrandizement to the very constituents they feel called to support. The three protagonists’ narratives suggest that the act of service, informed by life experience, is also rooted in an educational philosophy that

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reimagines schools and the relationship between adults, students, and content as the nexus for societal change. Achieving such ambitious goals however requires a rethinking of a leadership praxis—one in which leaders explicitly teach their followers how to be the agents of change their constituents need.

My Journey

When I began this research, I was a middle school principal in southern Dallas. At the time of this writing, I am now the superintendent of a growing southern Dallas charter school system. Although my role and responsibilities have changed, my vision for my students—and broadly the children of southern Dallas—is predicated upon the belief that education is the primary means of social, economic, and political freedom.

Like many researchers, this study has been personal endeavor. Over the course of my fifteen-year career in education, the pace of life and work have not provided meaningful opportunities for me to reflect. And yet, by listening to Terry, Nakia, and Quinn’s stories, I have had been gifted with the space to make meaning of my journey to education leadership. Through this process, I have been given permission to question the many tensions and contradictions raised in the three leaders’ portraits—tensions and contradictions that lie at the heart of how I too navigate across complex and overlapping racial, political, and socio-economic contexts.

Framed on the wall of my office is the following W. E. B. Du Bois quote:

Now is the accepted time, not tomorrow, not some more convenient season. It is today that our best work can be done and not some future day or future year. It is today that we fit ourselves for the greater usefulness of
tomorrow. Today is the seed time, now are the hours of work, and tomorrow comes the harvest and the playtime.”

I have often repeated this quote in the quiet moments reflecting upon the triumphs and challenges of leading an education system in southern Dallas. I recall the discipline hearings, sitting across from a young black male whose actions caused harm to our school community. Listening to his mother advocate for him to remain at the school, I was unsettled, knowing that the child had to be expelled, but that his departure from the school could be an exit ramp, impeding his ability to live a life of choice. I also remember the home visits, when a grandmother, with tears in her eyes, shares the hopes and dreams for her granddaughter. “I want to her to go to college because I was not able.” With each moment, I have reminded that the pervasive inequities in southern Dallas requires leadership guided by the fierce urgency of now. And it is in response to the challenges that exist, that Nakia, Quinn, and Terry plant seeds, such that one day, their constituents, our community may reap the harvest.
Appendix A

School Site Location

- KIPP Truth Academy
- St. Philip’s School & Community Center
- KIPP Destiny Elementary
- Barack Obama Male Leadership Academy
Appendix B

One-on-One Interview Sample Protocol

*Interview #1:* This interview will focus on your personal history. My questions will center around your family, your childhood, your educational experience, and how you entered education and education leadership.

**Childhood**

Please share about your experiences growing up
- When and where were you born?
- Where did you reside as a child?
- Please describe your residence and neighborhood?

**Family**

- What is your mother and father's names?
- What was the marital status of your parents during your childhood?
- Were your parents employed during your childhood? If so, what were their professions?
- What is the highest level of education your parents achieved?
- What was your family's socio-economic status?
- Do you have any siblings? How many; and what are their names and ages?
- Did you live with or spend time with extended family (grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins)?
- Were there any specific values or principles to which your family adhered?

**Community Engagement**

- Where you involved in extra-curricular activities as a child?
- Were you and your family members of a church (or another religious institution)?
- (If the answer was yes) Was your church (or other religious institution) politically active?
• Did your church have a visible presence in the broader community? For example, did your church have service programs?

Peer Engagement

• Did you have friends as a child? Have you maintained any friendships from your childhood?
• Did you have friends from other racial and socio-economic groups?

Education: K-12

• What types of schools (public, magnet, private, parochial, independent, home-school) did you attend for primary, elementary, middle, and high school?
• What were the student demographics for your K-12 schools?
• Was there ever a time when you wanted to change schools? If so, why?

College

• What are the names of the college/universities to which you applied? Why did you apply to those colleges/universities?
• Did your parents or extended family assist you during your college application process?
• What college or university did you attend?
• Did you receive financial aid? Did you work during college? If so, what was your job?
• What was your major? Why did you choose that major?
• Where there any college/graduate school courses or literature that have influenced your educational leadership?
• Where you involved in any social organizations in college—i.e. fraternities? If so, as you reflect on those experiences, how have they influenced your leadership?

Teaching

• Why did you enter the field of education?
- Describe your first experience as a teacher? What grade did you teach? What was the name of your school?
- Describe the school demographics--racial make-up, SES, age of teacher corps.
- Describe your classroom and students?
- Were you aware of and aligned to the school's mission?
- Describe the school's academic performance?
- How would you describe your teaching philosophy and practice?

**Leadership**

- What was your first instructional leadership role? Describe a program or function that you oversaw?
- Did you choose the leave the classroom or were you promoted/appointed?
- Describe the transition from teacher to instructional leader?
- What successes and challenges did you experience?
- How did you overcome those challenges?
- Did your engagement with your peers change (particularly if your role changed in the same school in which you taught)?)

**Interview #2: Leadership Style**

**K-12 Education**

- What is the purpose of schooling?
- Is the current K-12 education system designed to help all students realize your vision for education?
- Do you believe that the current local, state, and federal K-12 education accountability system aligns with your vision of education?

**Current Organization**

- What is the vision, mission, and values of your organization?
- Describe how the vision, mission, and values are reflected across your organization?
- What about your organization compelled you to work in this particular context?
- Were you the founder of your organization?
• What are your strategic priorities? How do you use your time to achieve your stated priorities?
• What organizational challenges are you working to address?
• How would you describe your organizational structure (hierarchical, flat, etc.)?

**Current Leadership Role**

• What is your current leadership role?
• How many direct reports do you have? Did you hire them?
• Who is your direct manager?
• What is your management philosophy? Are there specific systems and structures that you use when managing your direct reports and/or team? Are there tools or artifacts that you use--meeting agendas, shared notes, performance management plans?
• What expectations do you have for your employees? How have you communicated those expectations?
• How do you make decisions? Describe a mission-critical decision that you made?
• Do you leverage your leadership team in making decisions? Have there been times when you have had to make executive decisions without input from your team? If so, how did you reconcile that action with your practice of engaging your team in decisions?

**Instructional Leadership**

• How do you define instructional leadership?
• How often do you observe your teachers?
• Are there specific practices you expect instructional leaders in your schools to employ?
• When you walk into a school or classroom, what should you see, hear, and feel?

**Identity**

• Do you recall any experiences as a child in which your identity as a black male was amplified? What was the situation and what did you do?
• In your current role, how have you navigated across social contexts?
• Have there been times when your personal and professional beliefs have contrasted? If so, how have reconciled that conflict?
• Do you believe that your employees should reflect your students' racial identity?
If so, what systems or structures have you implemented to recruit, retain, and develop a racially diverse staff?

Do you discuss race and class in your school(s)?

**Southern Dallas**

- How do you describe Dallas?
- What is your vision for southern Dallas?
- How has southern Dallas changed since you have become an southern Dallas education leader?
- How do you conceptualize your role in Dallas' history of educational equity?
- How do you define community?
- Do you engage with black politicians? Do they share your vision of education?
- Does your school formally engage with community-based organizations?

**Participant Observation Reflection Questions**

- What was the objective of the meeting I observed?
- Do you believe that you achieved the objective? If so, what evidence do you have?
- What is your role in the meeting?
- What is your method of preparation?
- If you had more time what else would you have hoped to accomplish in the meeting?
- What are the action steps you or your team must take based on this meeting?
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