

Notes from K-16 Partnerships: Supporting Housing-Insecure Schools
February 26, 2020

Principal Robinson, Spring Garden School:

Spring Garden School is located at 12th & Melon, adjacent to Northern Liberties. The school has 315 students, which is over capacity. The demographics have changed in the last ten years since I started at the school. Ten years ago, the school was 99% African American. Now, the school is 61% African American, 35% Latinx, 2% White, 1% Asian, and 1% other/mixed. The ELL population is about 25%. The Special Ed population is 9%. A large increase in the number of immigrant families.

30% of the student body has experienced housing insecurity at some point in their lives. This is not just due to poverty and straightforward eviction but also due to a parent's incarceration, foster care, drug and alcohol treatment, domestic violence – sometimes a combination of these factors.

It is very hard supporting families in crisis. We have to become conscious of our practice. We are getting teachers professional development in trauma-informed care. We use PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports), a District-wide approach that reinforces positive behavior rather than punishing bad behavior. One issue we have, and that CCP has started supporting us with, is finding resources for the incentives such as trips and special events for these PBIS rewards.

The school is in flux constantly. In other schools, the student body is basically set by September. At my school, I have children registering new all year round. These children desperately need continuity and structure to help them feel safe. Continuity and structure are actually good for all children so when we provide this type of environment for our children in crisis, it helps everyone.

Housing insecurity is often not a one-time event. It can be something that affects them year after year. Thus, it's not surprising when children experiencing multiple instances of housing insecurity have skill gaps. They need highly structured one-on-one tutoring and support, which CCP has been helping to provide. Though it's important that those tutors have adequate and appropriate training.

Attendance is a barrier. It is often difficult for parents in these situations to get their children to school on time, every time. Especially when children are traveling far distances. The McKinney-Vento Act allows children experiencing homelessness to stay in their original school before being displaced, but this may mean that children are riding buses for over an hour each way. CCP has helped by providing incentives for students who have good attendance.

We need more training for medical providers and healthcare professionals to recognize what is and is not a learning disability. We need to be careful about over-labeling children who have these skills gaps due to crisis rather than to an actual deficit. This leads to over-representation of black and brown children in special education.

We are creative in reaching out to parents – we capitalize on report card days when we have the highest parent participation. We try to provide resource fairs to parents during those events to connect them to other critical resources in the community. We need to meet folks where they are at.

We also have a great need for self-care (and externally provided care!) for teachers and administrators experiencing secondary trauma witnessing these crises day in and day out.

Principal Brown, Waring School:

Waring is located at 18th & Green in the Fairmount neighborhood. We have similar attributes to Spring Garden School. However, Waring is one of three schools in the District, (the other two being McCall and Kearney), that are designated as shelter feeder schools. Meaning, students in shelters are placed intentionally in these schools. We have students who are doubled up (living with relatives). We have foster students from the YES Shelters. We have students in the US on medical visas living in the Ben Franklin Home.

We did an audit in 2016 and discovered that 65% of our students had ever experienced homelessness.

We have a large Autistic Support program. We are a K-8 school with four autistic support classrooms (though we also practice inclusion).

Our school is located in Fairmount but it is not representative of the neighborhood, which is now affluent. 88% of our students are African American. Our catchment area includes five shelters (including drug and alcohol treatment facilities). I attend monthly meetings of at least one of the shelters, to listen to the parents of children in my building in a place where they are comfortable (and available).

Housing insecurity is compounded by food insecurity. In many cases, if you live in a shelter, you cannot bring in food, so it is hard to keep food on hand. We have a food bank in our school for this reason. We give out non-perishable items, but we also have a partnership an organization that will provide other items like meat. However we have challenges distributing the food due to transportation limitations – some parents can't come to the school to pick up the food so we send it home with older children. ZIA has capacity to feed 50 families but right now we're only servicing about 20 due to the transportation challenge.

School breakfast is critical. If we don't feed children in the morning we all pay the price. We serve breakfast to everyone even if they come late to school. Same with lunch. We open the building early since some parents need to drop of their children early. I come in at 6:45 every morning, the building opens at 7 AM and breakfast starts at 7:45.

We also need to talk about mention and emotional health. Chronic instability can lead to stress and trauma for students.

This is challenging for teachers and administrators. We also experience secondary trauma. Our teachers need training on implicit bias, cultural competence. I grew up in this neighborhood, and actually attended Spring Garden School. I can communicate with our families but not everyone can.

We need health professionals to provide services on site. Our families don't always have insurance or the means to take children to medical appointments.

Despite all of this, we are progressing as a school. We have developed creative partnerships, not just with CCP. Masterman High School students come and tutor our kids – this is a program the students set up themselves since they recognize the injustice of the disparities between the two schools. We have a Friends of Waring group. They are helping us to open a library. We have a library but no librarian. We are looking to CCP for volunteers for the library.

We need tutors for classroom support. We need spaces for special events and athletics. We have no gym or auditorium. We use the cafeteria for both of these purposes and it's just not adequate.

We just have to show up for kids day after day. This is social justice work.

Michelle Lopez, Manager, Institute for Community Engagement and Civic Leadership, CCP

Michelle provided an overview of the Institute. It's about three years old. The Adopt-a-School program pre-dates the Institute by many years, but prior to its inclusion in the Institute, it mainly focused on tutoring through the Federal Work Study program. Now, the Institute is trying to expand partnerships with the schools, particularly those in the neighborhood around the College, and use a social justice framework to approach the work.

Michelle noted that CCP serves students with many of the same challenges as Spring Garden and Waring. CCP students face housing and food insecurity. They are likely to be non-traditional age, be working, and/or have children themselves.

Michelle reviewed the goals and services of the Adopt-A-School program.

They have a long-list of special projects and events in addition to the basic tutoring -- school supplies drives, community dinners, First Book, and personal care products drives to name a few. They are also trying to mobilize other CCP partners to provide service to these schools. For example, CCP works with Junior Achievement's early college awareness program which brings 3rd graders to college campuses. At CCP's request, JA is now also doing financial literacy at Spring Garden and Waring.

The CCP Marketing office created a children's book, *Oh Dear, What a Career*, that explores careers for young readers. They distributed copies of the book.

Some of the CCP tutoring comes through service-learning classes. One of the more successful partnerships last year, was two developmental English courses, ENG 098 and ENG 099, which provided tutoring to kindergarteners in these schools. The kindergarten teachers rated this experience very positively and the CCP students also had increased retention. Unfortunately, this partnership did not continue this school year because the instructor was not available to teach the course.

One big challenge is that students are in crisis – both at these schools but also at CCP.

They have now formed a three-way partnership. Principal Robinson and Brown are close and collaborate often. Michelle used to communicate with each of them separately about the needs at their respective schools. Now she talks to them together – they are becoming a united team and taking a group approach to this work.