

A Charter School Principal's Story

A View from the Inside

Barbara Smith

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University of Toronto, Canada



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ADVANCE PRAISE
A CHARTER SCHOOL PRINCIPAL'S STORY

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

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

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

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

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

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

“There is no gain without struggle.”
– Martin Luther King Jr.

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FOREWORD

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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

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

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

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

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

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

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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

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

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INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 1

BEGINNING SKETCHES

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

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

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