



Remarks to the School Reform Commission and Dr. William Hite

May 29, 2014

Elements of Success

My name is Barbara McDowell Dowdall. A member of the Alliance for Philadelphia Public Schools (APPS), I am a retired teacher and English Department Head whose 36 years of experience began at Vaux Junior High in what you would likely (and Mark Gleason would definitely) call a “failing school” with “low-performing seats.”

We had a wonderful alternative learning program with a small class, two teachers and two aides. The students assisted with taking care of children in the school’s day care center. Vaux had two home and school visitors, residents of the community, who kept the lines of communication open and parent and guardian concerns addressed. The faculty included two teachers of art and two music teachers, one vocal and one instrumental. Four counselors guided students as they prepared for high school. Language study included both Spanish and French. A librarian and library assistant welcomed students individually and in classes on a regular basis. A fulltime nurse and peace officer, an office staff of five, two elevator operators, seven non-teaching assistants, a cafeteria staff of twelve, a custodial staff of thirteen, one principal and two vice

principals rounded out the adult contingent. Students enjoyed home economics, industrial arts, business and physical education. They assumed leadership in student council; served as library and counselor aides; joined the stage crew, drama, math, tennis, travel and world affairs clubs; served on the yearbook staff; and joined basketball, soccer, softball, swimming, gymnastics and track teams. Oh, and did I mention our three-time national championship chess team?

Perhaps our California Achievement Test scores were below average, a research-established function of economic stresses. <http://researchnews.wsu.edu/society/169.html> So the school board kept its experienced, committed teachers in place, and welcomed newly-minted instructors who stayed on to eventually achieve that status themselves. Budget woes grew. Gradually, the staff, the academics, the programs, the extra-curriculars were cut. Even so, the school district maintained its responsibility to administer every school and support every staff, and wherever and whenever possible, provide essential resources to communities in greatest need. Students returning each September found the re-assurance of familiar faces. Staff members knew the students and their histories. Graduates came back to visit the adults who had guided them to share their stories of both struggle and success.

Let us reflect on the words of Maya Angelou: "I loved the poetry that was sung in the black church: 'Go down Moses, way down in Egypt's land,'" . . . "It just seemed to me the most wonderful way of talking. And 'Deep River.' Ooh! Even now it can catch me. And then I started reading, really reading, at about 7 1/2, because a woman in my town took me to the library, a black school library. ... And I read every book, even if I didn't understand it."

<http://news.yahoo.com/university-poet-author-maya-angelou-dies-86-134624581.html>

On one occasion, Angelou compared school librarians to rainbows that shine for many children. <http://www.americanlibrariesmagazine.org/blog/remembering-maya-angelou>

And note the sentiments in a letter to President Obama signed by Angelou and more than 120 other authors and illustrators of children's books: "Our public school students spend far too much time preparing for reading tests and too little time curling up with books that fire their imaginations." <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2013/10/22/top-authors-including-maya-angelou-urge-obama-to-curb-standardized-testing/>

Do not all our children, in every school, merit these conditions and true keys to success?