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A Beautiful Thing

Traversing a Deep Divide through Partnership and Hope

By Melissa Quan and Bob Hannafin

Connecticut's Fairfield County is a tale of two cities. It has the wealthiest residents in the country, on a per-capita basis, and also the poorest. A recent *Business Insider* ranking rated Bridgeport-Stamford-Norwalk the single most unequal metro area in America, with the top 5 percent of earners making almost 30 percent of total income and the bottom 20 percent accumulating a mere 2 percent share. "The Nation's Report Card" – a U.S. Department of Education test given to students in every state – recently showed that Connecticut had the largest achievement gap between its minority students and their peers across five of the 12 indicators. Connecticut also has the dubious distinction of one of the highest incarceration rates for Hispanic and African-American males.

That aforementioned income-based achievement – or opportunity – gap takes an obvious toll on students, their families, and communities, but it also creates an unsustainable economic drag on the state and country, as evidenced by the fact that long-term job growth prospects in Connecticut lag behind the national average. Addressing inequality is not just a moral and social-justice imperative. It is an economic necessity as well.

Bridgeport, the state's largest city, faces several political and economic challenges. The city has a chronic revenue problem. Nearly a quarter of the city's residents live in poverty – paying little or no income tax and requiring a host of support services that the city struggles to provide. In addition, over a third of the city's land is owned by nonprofit organ-

izations and other entities that don't pay taxes, and much of the remaining two-thirds is blighted with shuttered mills, factories, and warehouses, once the pride of a thriving pre-war economy. Finally, county governments in Connecticut lack taxing authority; this further exacerbates the city's plight. Although the city is located in the state's wealthiest county, there is no mechanism for the county to contribute to city needs.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Bridgeport Public Schools (BPS) experience deficits and shortages that are uniquely acute. Furthermore, BPS serve one of the most diverse student populations in the state with Hispanic (49 percent) and black (36 percent) children comprising the largest subgroups. They rightfully celebrate that diversity, but it presents challenges as well.

Students of color lag behind their white counterparts on almost every achievement measure. The Bridgeport Public Schools also have an unacceptably high dropout rate and a low percentage of students who pursue higher education.

As a Jesuit institution situated at the nexus of these national crises of inequity, we have felt called to respond. Fairfield University's partnership with Cesar Batalla Elementary School (CBES), one of BPS's largest and most diverse schools, has been emblematic of that effort.

CBES is an elementary school where all of its students qualify for free or reduced-price meals and 40 percent are English-language learners. As at many



The campus of Fairfield University (photos courtesy of the university).

large schools in high-poverty urban districts, CBES students struggle to meet grade-level goals as measured by standardized tests (just 11 percent in language arts and only 4 percent in math). Amidst these struggles, CBES nonetheless remains a vibrant community of dedicated teachers, learners, and families.

By contrast, Fairfield University's 5,000 students are predominantly white and from mid-to-upper class backgrounds. A mere four miles apart, CBES and Fairfield represent, in many ways, the stark inequity that plagues the county and nation as a whole.

In an effort to bridge this gap, some six years ago CBES and Fairfield entered into a partnership focused on raising literacy levels of CBES students. The partnership began with a few service-learning courses and the commitment of Fairfield's Center for Faith and Public Life and Graduate School of Education and Allied Professions. In 2015, we began to explore an even more holistic approach that would include support for the students, teachers, and parents and address academic achievement, social-emotional wellness, and

family engagement, particularly through a place-based community engagement model.

Place-based community engagement focuses resources and partnership activities in a specific neighborhood or other geographically defined place – in our case, a school – to impact defined, measurable outcomes. Together, we identified goals focused on literacy development in grades K-5 and worked with middle school students to foster long-term aspirations for higher education.

Over the past six years, nearly 700 Fairfield students enrolled in 35 service-learning sections have engaged with that partnership through courses across a variety of disciplines; hundreds more CBES students have visited Fairfield's campus through the support of athletics, modern languages, and other departments; and CBES teachers have benefited from intensive professional development trainings led by our education school faculty. The Fairfield and CBES communities have become increasingly interconnected with CBES teachers taking graduate

classes and Fairfield alumni being hired by CBES as the partnership became integrated in hiring decisions at both schools.

Evidence points to modest gains in academic performance, particularly among participating second graders and middle schoolers. CBES teachers also report that partnership activities impact student enthusiasm for school overall and that professional development helps them improve instruction. In turn, Fairfield students report that the experience helps them better understand issues related to diversity, even as they struggle to make sense of the complex social justice issues at play. For some, it has affirmed their desire to teach in an urban district while others feel called toward policy work. There is much more to uncover here as the work moves forward.

As leaders of this initiative, we are occasionally asked to justify the decision to invest so much in one school, especially when there are 32 other elementary schools in the district facing challenges as severe as or worse than CBES. Our response is that we need

to see the dial move – to gain evidence of real, lasting change before we can consider this as a model worth replicating. We are not interested in simply placing hundreds of bodies into struggling schools in hopes of having a positive impact. Too much is at stake; the crises are too urgent. As Jesuit schools, educators, and students, in the spirit of *magis*, we are called to do more and to do better. For the time being, then, we are “all in” with our partners at CBES.

We fully expect that the road will be long, sometimes frustrating, and rife with political obstacles. We are living the challenge of bridging different worlds and trying to apply a place-based method to this suburban-urban partnership. With our partners, we remain optimistic and hopeful in what CBES principal Hector Sanchez has labelled, “A Beautiful Thing.”

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