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Metropolitan Nashville Board of Public Education Panel Discussion

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METROPOLITAN NASHVILLE BOARD OF PUBLIC EDUCATION PANEL DISCUSSION

FEATURING: DR. SHARON GENTRY^{*}, MS. CHRISTIANE
BUGGS^{**}, MS. TYESE HUNTER^{***}, MR. WILL PINKSTON^{****},
AND MS. MARY PIERCE^{*****}

*Moderated by Professor Jeffrey Usman
October 6, 2017*

Moderator: Thank you to all of our panelists for being here today. We greatly appreciate it. Some of our discussion thus far has involved issues of diversity in higher education, and I want to bring that to the K-12 context.

* Dr. Sharon Gentry represents District 1. Dr. Gentry received her Bachelor of Science degree in physics from Xavier University. She also holds a Master of Engineering and a Doctorate of Education from Tennessee State University. She is the Director of Clinical Informatics Strategy Development, Innovation and Integration for HCA.

** Ms. Christiane Buggs represents District 5. Ms. Buggs received her Bachelor of Science in physics and her Master of Education in curriculum construction from Tennessee State University. She also holds a Master of Teaching in education in urban schools from Vanderbilt University. Ms Buggs has previously worked as a teacher in Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools, and currently is the Assistant Director of Trial Programs at Tennessee State University.

*** Ms. Tyese Hunter represents District 6. Ms. Hunter received her Bachelor of Science degree from Auburn University. She holds a Master of Education from Tennessee State University, and she's currently a faculty member in the Department of Speech Pathology and Audiology at Tennessee State University.

**** Will Pinkston represents District 7. Elected in 2012, Will has been a leading advocate for expanding pre-kindergarten programs, improving educational services for young New Americans, and advocating for increased education funding from the State of Tennessee. Will is a product of Metro Nashville Public Schools (Overton High School, Class of '89), and is an MNPS parent. Before joining the school board, Will served as a senior advisor to former Tennessee Gov. Phil Bredesen. Will is also a former reporter for The Tennessean and The Wall Street Journal. In his "day job," Will works as a strategic communications consultant advising businesses and nonprofit organizations in the education, health care and workforce development fields. He holds a bachelor's degree in communications from the University of Tennessee.

***** Ms. Mary Pierce represents District 8. Ms. Pierce holds a Bachelor of Arts in journalism from the University of Mississippi, and most recently she served as the Director of Development for the Vanderbilt University Blair School of Music.

Reports from the United States Government Accountability Office have noted a persistent, and even increasing in recent years, racial and socioeconomic segregation in America's public schools.¹ What should be done to address racial and socioeconomic segregation in our public schools? Let's start with Mr. Pinkston and we'll work our way through the panel.

Will Pinkston: Dr. Gentry and I are actually co-chairing an initiative of the Board right now to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of the desegregation of Nashville's public schools. I was in the school system and a product of MNPS and Overton High School in the eighties, which, as it turned out, was the height of integration in Nashville. We have slid backwards since then. There are no easy solutions. The district does have a diversity management plan that strives to create and ensure balance across the school system,² but when you are dealing with issues that are out of our control, such as affordable housing and transit, it becomes increasingly complicated to strike that balance.

Tyese Hunter: The type of education you receive should not be based upon your zip code and where you live. Unfortunately, we have pockets of low socioeconomic areas within the city of Nashville. One of the things I feel that the school board tries to do is to not make everything equal. We have to focus on making sure that it is equitable. We have to focus on equity so that children in the low socioeconomic areas also have services that meet their needs. Focusing on equity I think will help solve the problem.

Sharon Gentry: We need to get back to increasing and improving our diversity. It cannot be a pass-the-buck response, but it has to be a holistic approach to addressing diversity in our community. Our community schools are always going to be a reflection of the communities in which they sit. As our communities become more segregated because of issues of affordable housing and access, that's the nut that has to be cracked. But it has to be a multifaceted approach to deal with it. The corollary of that is what the MNPS board owns. We own providing high-quality programming, because students and families will go where they believe their students are going to get the most value, where they're going to have the most challenging experience, and where the outcomes are going to be the best for their child. So, what our challenge is and what we have owned as a part of trying to improve diversity within our schools is to make sure the programming is rigorous, that we have

1. U.S. GOV'T ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE, K-12 EDUCATION: BETTER USE OF INFORMATION COULD HELP AGENCIES IDENTIFY DISPARITIES AND ADDRESS RACIAL DISCRIMINATION (2016), <https://www.gao.gov/assets/680/676745.pdf>.

2. *Diversity Management Plan of the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools* ("MNPS") (Feb. 28, 2013), <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57752cbcd1758e541bdeef6b/t/57927c2b414fb54f6682d70a/1469217835841/Diversity%2BManagement%2BPlan.pdf>.

a diversity of programming, and that we help parents understand what programming actually means. It is not about just the extracurricular activity, but also about the focus of the school. We have Paideia programs, Montessori programs, and we just infused all of our middle schools with STEM curriculum. Dr. Joseph came in with a few of our schools having the word “STEM” tagged on the end of the name, but once he got in there, he realized that STEM was not the focus. He took a group of teachers that were in those schools to visit another school, I believe it was in New Orleans. There, the STEM focus was heightened, there was actual rigor and a curriculum that reflected STEM, and the Nashville teachers realized that they were not doing STEM. Now we get grants to support changing our programming that students experience. So, the part that we own is ensuring that we have a diversity of high quality programming, because again, we believe that parents will make the effort to get their students into an environment where they believe the academic experience will be the best.

Christiane Buggs: Yes, we need equity and advocacy. I graduated from Martin Luther King Jr. Magnet School (“MLK”) here in MNPS, and it was during a time of white flight. Schools had been integrated, but affluent families were sending their students either to the same schools or sending them out of county. To try and make MLK and Hume Fogg a bit more diverse, one African American student was selected for every two Caucasian students that were selected. That was our trial and error. We tried that, but it did not seem to work too well because we still had neighborhood schools that were very much segregated. Not only are we now trying to spread out the resources and make sure that programming is rigorous at every tier, cluster, and school, but we also have to make sure that parents are aware of and are advocating for the programming. When it comes to the gifted and talented program or Encore, more often than not, students are tested based on parent suggestion or parent request. There are students in low-income areas that are not being tested for giftedness. So, we have to make sure the parents understand all the resources and all the programming that is available to them and advocate to make sure the student gets those services. As I think everyone will say, parents want what’s best for their kids, but they just don’t always know what all of the options are. So, we need to make sure that our resources are spread out but then also make sure that we are advocating to and for parents so that they know what to look for, what to request, what to encourage, and how to hold us accountable.

Mary Pierce: I don’t have a whole lot more to add to what my colleagues have covered. I do agree about programming and getting the information out. In looking at the schools that are diverse and do not have a majority, we look at how they got that way. Some of them are our choice programs. I know my son’s school, Valor, has a mission to be intentional about diversity. They even do their marketing intentionally depending on which group they are

targeting. They have found that low-income families respond more to door-knocking, whereas middle-income families maybe respond more to a mailer. I think these are things we could adopt as well, as we look at how we advertise our programs or our schools in general.

Moderator: In terms of teacher pay and teacher benefits, is there a role for merit-based pay in the public school system?

Mary Pearce: The question that we were sent asked about merit-based incentives.

Moderator: Merit-based pay and incentives.

Mary Pearce: I think incentives would be very useful in our harder-to-serve populations, in the schools that really need it most, and the schools where we're struggling to serve our students well. If we can send our best and brightest teachers to share their talents with those students, I think that is a very beneficial use of incentives.

Christiane Buggs: I'm still deciding where I stand with the merit-based pay, because I was a teacher. I was a teacher in a charter and traditional public school. I have seen and experienced what it feels like to have my livelihood connected to the performance of a child. As teachers, we love all of our children, but children have bad days, and sometimes those days fall on a testing day. Heaven forbid my livelihood fall on a kid's bad day. When thinking about merit-based pay, more often than not we think about growth and proficiency scores. When testing scores come back, the teacher either gets a raise or has a stipend depending on how many students meet certain benchmarks. If the teacher is working in an underserved or low-income area, the scores may not be as high, especially if they have traditionally not been high. This is because there is a curve that we still have to meet. If students are coming to me in the seventh grade and they are reading on a third-grade level, or if I am teaching them seventh grade math but they are doing math on a second-grade level, my growth scores might be pretty good, but my proficiency scores will not be. What would merit-based pay look like for me in that situation? Does it mean that teachers in lower performing schools will look for a magnet school or a higher performing school because their stipend and livelihood will be connected to a higher score? Does it mean that teachers in higher performing schools will be a bit frustrated when their growth scores are not high, because their students are already high performing? In either case, the teacher would not get the stipend because we would only send stipends to priority schools. It is a situation where we definitely want teachers to feel supported and to grow professionally, but merit-based pay is just tricky. I think that is why so many of the school districts are still playing

around with what it would look like, because there would be some unintended consequences.

Sharon Gentry: At my company, we have something that is called “merit pay.” We get a merit increase every year, and if you knew how much that merit increase was, you would be as offended as I am. There is a place for things like merit pay, but it goes back to the concept of equity. The factors that would contribute to the merit increase should be based on the school and the school’s goals. Every company does not have the same goals every year. Sometimes those goals change every year. So, we need to use the data that we have to go into a school and determine the factors that we believe will contribute most to student success. It is not always test scores. Rarely, especially in our low socio-economic status schools, is the test score really the thing that is going to make the most difference in that child’s life that day. It is them feeling confident or having a boost in their self-esteem. It is them having the ability to play well with others for more than two hours at a time. The targets have to be defined specifically for each school, and possibly even for that teacher and his or her individual students. I think there’s a space for merit-based incentives, but it just takes a lot of work.

Tyese Hunter: I had an opportunity to sit in the listening sessions that we have had with our teachers, and one of the greatest concerns is pay. So, I am all for any opportunity that we have to pay teachers more money. They deserve more, and we cannot figure out enough ways to give them more. I will say, however, that how you do it is a big question. Who gets it, when, and where, are also big questions. It needs to be a conversation that not only the community stakeholders are involved in, but also teachers themselves, so that they feel like it is fair and equitable.

Will Pinkston: The research on merit-pay and performance-pay is very mixed at best. I can see the idea of playing around with incentives, such as one-time bonuses, to incentivize teachers to go into environments where we are having a problem recruiting. However, building in a performance measure to the compensation system is very complicated, and like I said, the research is mixed. I think we need to focus on getting our teacher pay at levels with peer school districts. We used to compare ourselves to Wilson County and Williamson County. Now, we are beginning to set teacher compensation in comparison to Indianapolis, Louisville, Charlotte, Austin, and Atlanta—truly peer districts in our region. I think we can also find ways to help bring high-quality teachers into the city. One of the discussions we have is how to participate in creating affordable housing for teachers, so that they can afford to live in the city in which they are teaching. I think the teacher compensation question is a major one. We are a district of 88,000 kids with a \$900 million

operating budget.³ Eighty percent of that budget goes to human capital, most of which is the certificated workforce. I think we have a lot of opportunity to do better on our base compensation structure.

Moderator: What lessons for improving struggling schools can be learned from Tennessee's experiences with the Achievement School District ("ASD")?

Will Pinkston: The Achievement School District was an outgrowth of Tennessee's Race to the Top program in 2009 and 2010.⁴ Tennessee and Delaware were the first big winners in the federal Race to the Top competition.⁵ The intent of the program originally was to take over thirteen schools state-wide—rural, suburban, and urban—to help the schools turn around in a reasonable period of time and then return the schools to the home school systems. Governor Haslam and his team came in, there was a lot of irrational exuberance in the reform conversation, and we had hundreds of millions of state and federal philanthropic dollars pouring in to the state. The state officials turned it into a charter-authorizer, and it has more than thirty schools, most of which are in Memphis. Many of them, in fact almost all of them, are failing. I think the lesson learned is that the Achievement School District in its current form is not working, and that the original plan probably would have been a better path to go down.

Tyese Hunter: I think the better lesson we can take from the ASD is that educating kids is very difficult. It requires attention and thought, and hopefully we can begin to pull some of the politics, if not all, out of the conversation.

Sharon Gentry: I think that what we've been saying is true, that educating children is challenging. Instead of changing the umbrella under which a school sits, we need to provide the school with equitable resources and take time to understand the challenges that the students are facing. Often, our students come into classrooms with every experience they have had from 3:01 p.m. the previous day to 7:59 a.m., or whatever time they start school that day. Many of our teachers are simply not equipped to address the social

3. Metro Nashville Public Schools: Budget and Finance Committee, *Fiscal Year 2017-2018: Operating Budget* (May 16, 2017), <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57752cbcd1758e541bdeef6b/t/591c8be52e69cf01a23dd3be/1495043046329/FY2018+Operating+Budget+-+5-17.pdf>.

4. See generally Lauren Camera, *Tennessee Schools Learn a Lesson in Reform*, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REP. (Aug. 11, 2017), <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/articles/2017-08-11/tennessee-moves-beyond-ambitious-school-turnaround-model>.

5. Nick Anderson & Bill Turque, *Delaware, Tennessee Win Education Awards in First Race to the Top Competition*, WASH. POST (Mar. 30, 2010), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/03/29/AR2010032901276.html>.

and emotional challenges that students bring to bear in the classroom. We hear stories of teachers who have seen students have a PTSD attack when a book hits the floor, or a chair falls over, because of an experience that the child had the night before or something else in their recent memory. It is challenging. It takes intentionality. It takes, I believe, letting the academic experts do their job and giving them time, resources, and the space to do that.

Christiane Buggs: I'm sorry. I am very much a teacher, so I would just like to know—is everybody familiar with what the ASD is and what it does? I see a lot of head shaking, so I'll try to make this brief. Priority schools are schools in the bottom 5% of the state⁶ based on test, growth, and culture scores. For the bottom 5%, more than anything they're looking at achievement. Originally, yes, the ASD was intended to take schools that were in the bottom 5%, focus on those schools, and develop models that would help students in those communities thrive. As everyone has said so far, the great understanding that we are now getting is that schools that are under-performing, under-funded, and under-supported are just not easy work. There is not a silver bullet solution to education. So, the goal is always to find a model. Charter and magnet schools were meant to be a pocket of innovation, to try something different, and to be that model. They do something well, and then the rest of the district replicates it. The ASD is probably working to provide a model. However, it is just not easy work. You need time, resources, and as Dr. Gentry said, the ability to allow the administrators and the experts in education—the teachers and administrators—to have some time to figure these things out. You cannot have a program in a third-grade classroom and think it will turn test scores around in one year or two years.

You might see a change in three years, but you have to allow it some time to grow and get acclimated, and we just have not seen that yet.

Mary Pierce: When I saw this question, I Googled Chris Barbic's Achievement School District resignation letter.⁷ When the first superintendent of the Achievement School District resigned a couple of years ago, he wrote a really thoughtful letter that to me would sum up a lot of lessons we learned from this process. One of the points Mr. Barbic made was that we do far better when we trust our teachers and school leaders.⁸ That reflects a theme we hear on the Board that if we trust the people on the ground that are working directly with our students, we do much better than when we try to over-centralize or micromanage to achieve perfection. He also said autonomy cannot outpace talent.⁹

6. *Authorization Priorities*, ACHIEVEMENT SCH. DIST., <http://achievementschooldistrict.org/new-schools/priorities/> (last visited March 20, 2018).

7. Letita Aaron, *A Letter from ASD Superintendent Chris Barbic*, ACHIEVEMENT SCH. DIST. (July 17, 2015), <http://achievementschooldistrict.org/chris-barbic-announcement/>.

8. *Id.*

9. *Id.*

In that same vein, we want to give the leaders on the ground a lot of decision-making ability, but you have to make sure they are talented and capable to make those decisions. There was a lot that Chris said, and I think it would have been great if the adults could have gotten out of the way and realized that they both struggled with these populations. Then, they could focus on what they both learned, and how they can work together to make it better.

Moderator: I heard a few references to data. Data analytics is a very powerful tool for businesses in terms of how you model things, but it can also be a lot of noise that does not produce any real direction in terms of which way we should move. How can or should schools make better use of data analytics in terms of shaping policies? Ms. Pierce?

Mary Pierce: Ms. Buggs and I were at the Chamber Report Card this morning discussing data and how we use it. I know the previous speaker referenced disaggregating the data.¹⁰ For me, one of the best ways to determine your return on investment for different programs or initiatives is to know how you are going to disaggregate the data to find out if you met the objectives that were stated. Did you meet the goal? Do you have clear measures in place? Are we using the right data to determine if we are getting the return we are expecting? We have to show that we have a fair goal, stated measures, a time frame, and that we are in regular discussion about the end goal.

Christiane Buggs: You specifically asked about using data to influence policy, and that is definitely a school board concern. First, we have to do a much better job at making sure that parents, teachers, students, and administrators all understand what the data means. Look at the example of Hume-Fogg Academic Magnet School. It is the number one school in our city, the number one school in our state, and it is typically in the top ten of the country. Students at Hume-Fogg have an average ACT score of about a 27 or 28. However, based on our metrics that are proficiency and growth-based, Hume-Fogg was “level one,” meaning that it was under-performing. We hear that schools are on the priority list because they are a level one, but they of course do not have the same achievement that Hume-Fogg has. So, we have to explain what these metrics mean and what that really looks like.

If you understand the scores, you know that the growth scores are not going to be as high at Hume-Fogg, because those students are already high performing. It is a bit more difficult to move the scores quickly year to year because you are working on maintaining an already 99th percentile student. So, we need to make sure that we explain the metrics so that parents

10. See generally Margareth Etienne, *Vouchers and the Failed Promise of Osmosis*, 5 BELMONT L. REV. 59 (2018).

and teachers can understand them. If teachers understand the data, then it can inform their instruction.

For example, I know if my students are getting Fs on tests that I need to go back and re-teach that material. At the board level, we have to do a better job at asking for data, looking at it, getting thorough explanations, and then checking in with our only employee, our superintendent. He is the only person that we should be having these discussions with, to see what his plan is to further growth and how our policies can support that.

Sharon Gentry: One of the things that Ms. Buggs' statements reminded me of is that data does not mean the same thing from school to school. It is about having policies that allow for flexibility to create the equity that we need. Our job is to remove the obstacles to success, so that is what policy should do. I think that the challenge, and what makes data noise, is if you don't have the right lens through which you're looking at it. It is the lens that says, "What am I really trying to accomplish, and does this data say that I am on the right path to get there?" That has been the work of this first year with the administration, making sure we have the right people in the right seats on the bus while also creating a strategic plan that says, "Now that we know the road we need to be on, are we on it?" I think we've begun and done the early stages of work to change and get the noise out of the data, but we must also educate people on how to read the data.

Where I work, we have these things called "dashboards." If you walk into any C's office—CEO, CFO, COO, Senior VP, VP—there is a huge 32- or 42-inch screen on the wall. There are numbers moving constantly, and they can tell you how many people are in the operating room or waiting to have surgery at a specific hospital in a specific city at any given moment. We have to be aware of the fact that it is not just about getting a report on Monday about something that was going on two weeks ago, but it's about keeping the data current. We also have to realize that this is not an organization, but an organism with students. I have a school in my district that has a 72% mobility rate because it sits in the neighborhood of a housing development as well as across the street from three homeless shelters. Every nine to twelve weeks, 72% of the population within that group changes. So, that data can almost mean nothing to the people within that district. There is a point where data is almost useless, but there is also the other end of the spectrum where it is relevant, probably in Hume Fogg because of the consistency of the population and the consistency of the performance. To avoid data being just noise, the lens must be different from building to building, and we must train data coaches to understand that, respect what it means, and learn how to use the resources available to respond to the trends the data reveals.

Tyese Hunter: Amen to all of that. [Laughter] In addition, I am a speech language pathologist, and we screen. We do a full diagnostic battery. We then baseline to see if our assessment was correct in the errors that we find, and

then we go back and treat, and then we screen again. We baseline again and then reassess when needed. If I had it my way, each child would have an Individualized Education Plan (“IEP”). We would begin by screening and doing all of that assessment on each child. I would also have elementary school, middle school, and high school, but the standards would be based upon a child’s individual IEP and the route that they are taking, instead of expecting every eighth grader be able to meet certain standards. It would be based upon their own Individualized Education Plan.

Will Pinkston: As a non-educator, I am always careful to defer to the educators on the board—Ms. Hunter, Dr. Gentry, Ms. Buggs, and others—when it comes to the use of data in the classroom level and in the school building level, but at the system level, I do think that there are some interesting things going on right now, which hopefully you will be hearing and reading more about in the coming months. Dr. Gentry and I co-chair the Director Evaluation Committee which evaluates the superintendent. We are moving into a framework that is going to allow us to evaluate, as Ms. Buggs said, our sole employee, the superintendent, under four big categories and twenty-three different key performance indicators that cover everything from closing achievement gaps to improving proficiency in English learners and other key measures. We are moving to a place where we are not just assessing at the end of the year, but we are going to be assessing in the middle of the school year using information that we gather from the schools. So we, as a nine-member board, are moving aggressively to be a more data-driven organization.

Moderator: We heard a reference earlier in the day to the Tennessee Promise program. Is there an impact already being seen in high schools here in Nashville from the Tennessee Promise program, and are there steps that should be taken at the school board level in responding to Tennessee Promise?

Will Pinkston: I represent south and southeast Nashville on the school board. A part of that district is Nolensville Road between the Fairgrounds and Harding Place, the part of town where I grew up. It is now the most internationally diverse corridor in the city, and I represent primarily the Glenciff cluster of the schools, which are extraordinarily diverse. In my school board district, 43% of the students are English learners, which about ten times the state average. Many of them are undocumented, and therefore the Tennessee Promise does not work for them. We have had, in Glenciff High School, for example, undocumented immigrants who are unable to go to college because of financial aid issues and inability to qualify. I am being very specific about an issue that is very specific to my district, but for my kids, the Tennessee Promise is not working out, and we have to come to grips in this state with a real policy about how we handle undocumented children.

Tyese Hunter: There is always more to do, but I do know that Tennessee State University had their largest freshman class this year, so that shows that we are doing something right in the district.¹¹

Also, our community schools, like Nashville State, have full parking lots. So, it's working out well for our students, but there is still so much that we need to do. We need to have more community input and do more community work. Something is working, but there is still more to do.

Sharon Gentry: I think we've learned a lesson from it. In addressing Will's example that we have a large population of students that aren't able to take advantage of Tennessee Promise, we have to solve that problem. We have a campus that is dual enrollment, located on the Nashville State Community College campus where we have students that starting in tenth grade, can do tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade on that campus.¹² They are in a collegiate environment and going to different classes. It is a different model of learning, a different model of teaching, and it is a smaller population of students, but the thing that we learned was that the students were not taking advantage of college courses on the campus, even though college courses were being offered free of charge.

We are restructuring that program so that you can start as a ninth grader. We did not know the magic reason for starting at tenth grade. Also, we are encouraging more students to get that college exposure, especially when those college courses are at no cost to them. It has helped to close the gap where Tennessee Promise isn't working for a large population of our students.

Christiane Buggs: My first thought when you asked the question went back to our discussion this morning that we're not seeing the data. It is not that our administration doesn't have it, and I am sure they are trying to present it to us, but as a board we are not talking about it. We have not seen it. I cannot tell you how many of our students are in school right now. I cannot tell you how many of them took the Tennessee Promise. I cannot tell you how many of them are Hope Scholarship recipients. We are working now on being more data-focused and having data-driven conversations. That is just something for us to own and for us to work toward. In my day job, I work with a Tennessee State pre-college program where I go into area high schools. What we are seeing nationally is that it has become that much harder to hold students back, so there have been a few different things to try and make sure that students are getting their credits. If a student failed three core subjects in

11. See generally, Emmanuel Freeman, *TSU Welcomes Largest Freshman Class in University's History*, TENN. ST. UNIV. NEWSROOM (Sept. 13, 2017), <http://tnstate.newsroom.com/archives/20395>.

12. *High School Programs*, NASHVILLE ST. CMTY. C., <https://www.nsc.edu/admissions/high-school-programs> (last visited March 20, 2018).

the past, he would get held back a grade. Now, there has to be an “S-Team” or support team, sometimes lawyers and advocates get involved, and there has to be a parent to sign off on the decision. Research says that holding students back is not always beneficial. Looking at all of that, we are trying to find innovative ways to make sure students are getting a second chance at regaining credit. We used to have this thing called “A-Plus.” “A-Plus” was an online program where students who, for example, failed Algebra 2, could look at Algebra 2 at home the next school year, watch different videos and modules, and gain credit eventually.¹³

But if the student already failed Algebra 2 the first time, there’s no teacher in front of them, and the online program is not very rigorous, he is probably going to fail again. So, we invested in what is called Edgenuity,¹⁴ a new online program that replaces “A-Plus.” It is more rigorous and allows students to have access to a teacher that is in the state, who can answer questions, and who can meet them on campus. It also allows them to work at their own pace, or they can do it during allotted times for intervention. I think intervention in our high schools was another good addition to make sure that students are recovering credit. We know that there are things happening, but the reality is that we don’t see the data, so we don’t know.

Mary Pierce: I think the board and our administration can help our students by making sure that we are using our guidance counselors well and making sure that they are working with our students to know about these opportunities. We hear from schools that our guidance counselors are consumed with test monitoring, meaning they are basically monitoring the tests and administering the tests. We can be more thoughtful and figure out how we resource more guidance counselors to help children take advantage of these opportunities. Guidance counselors can also look at students’ ACT scores when they are juniors to determine where they are college-ready and where they are not, so that we can provide intervention in high school so that when students get to college, the first year is not spend remediating.

Moderator: Is there a role for values education in the public school system, and if so, what is the role for values education in the public school system?

Mary Pierce: This one was a little hard for me when I first read it. It feels to me that, at some levels, we have taken some accountability off of our students, and maybe a values education, almost like an honor counsel approach, can help bring that back.

13. See generally *Credit Recovery & A Plus Learning*, FUEL EDUC., <https://www.fuel-education.com/curriculum/curriculum-focus/intervention-remediation/anywhere-learning-system.html>.

14. See generally EDGENUITY, <https://www.edgenuity.com/> (last visited Mar. 18, 2018).

I know our social and emotional learning and restorative justice practices that we are trying to implement in our schools touch on these things, because we are touching on lessons learned and how treating other people then impacts your relationships with each other. These practices would be value-driven. One of the things that my son's school tries to work on is really teaching the value of having a diversity of perspective and diversity of opinion. They don't always do it well, and it doesn't always translate outside of the circle time.

But, I do think there is a place for modeling human kindness and doing unto others as you would have done unto you through a value-based system.

Christiane Buggs: I think any adult that has ever interacted with any person under twenty-five-years-old could agree that values education is important just because little people, as little as they are, recreate what they see. If they are taught to be nice, to say please and thank you, to raise their hand, to take turns and to share, then they are more apt to model that as they get older. It goes without question that we should definitely, if there is not already a space for it, make a space for it in public education. Of course, the social norms of learning are supposed to take care of a lot of that because we are teaching students how to interact and how to disagree amicably. In districts like ours, where we are always looking to grow, I think we focus a lot on content from the very beginning.

As a teacher, there was a paradigm shift for our school when we had a dynamic principal that came in and said, "Yes, you should focus on content from the very first day, but you are also relationship building." So, as I am teaching math, I am making sure that I am establishing the rules and the expectations in my classroom. I am making sure to learn about my students. I am making sure to include rigor, but content will come. We have a year to work on content, but we have to make sure that students not only feel comfortable with the teacher, but that they see the teacher as a person and a colleague. If they are in the classroom, they're on the same ship with the teacher. I think part of a healthier way for us to make sure that values education is part of the everyday curriculum in our schools is to make sure that teachers understand that that is the expectation. No matter what you are doing, in every interaction with a student, you are to be modeling some kind of value, establishing some kind of normalcy and something that they should be thinking of and be cognizant of.

Sharon Gentry: Yes, I would definitely agree. My daughter attends a Paideia public school, and it really is about citizenship, self-accountability, and accountability to one another. They do not talk about anything academic the entire first week of school. Instead, they talk about the Paideia model, go over the rules of the classroom and the rules of the school, and discuss respect for authority and what it means to be accountable to yourself and to your

fellow student. Second, as a board we have gone through a training course from the Arbinger Institute called Outward Mindset¹⁵ which taught us to view one another as people first, with our own sets of values, challenges, thoughts, fears, hopes and dreams, so that when we interact with each other, I see Mary, Christiane, Tyese, and Will as people who are sitting at this table with me as an equal striving for something bigger.

Third, I am always amazed at how we can find this pocket of greatness. My daughter holds me accountable, and she is nine. I have to watch the music that is on my radio and the words that come out of my mouth. She will call me on my stuff; she calls me on my stuff. I'll tell you one even better than that. If I dare ask about the race of that child when she is telling me about a new interaction that she had, she will ask me, "What does it matter?" She will say, "What difference does it make?" Then she'll go on with her story, and I never get an answer. So, I know it's effective.

I joke all the time that I wish you could just call all the schools P.S. number one through one seventy-two "magnet," because we spend an inordinate amount of time arguing over the names of schools. Look at the schools that are magnet schools. Because it's a magnet school, we expect great things, but if it's not a magnet school, we don't have those same expectations. So, I would just name them all magnet schools so that children do not get treated differently. My daughter started magnet as a kindergartner. They didn't know if she could tie her shoes. They didn't know her name, how to spell it, or anything about her. But because she walked into a building called a "magnet school," they treated her with a different set of expectations. The values of the Paideia model, of outward mindset, and of just having high expectations for one another, definitely have a place in public education, and we have models for doing that today.

Tyese Hunter: I think values relate to the person, the organization, the board, and the teachers. Many times, a teacher may be results driven, and results are their value, or rule driven, and they base values on the rules of the class, the rules of the district, or the policies that we're setting. Alternatively, they can be driven by their own personal moral values or virtues. I do think values play a huge role in our district, in our classroom, and on our board. The challenge is that most individuals are driven by certain values, and it can be someone who is driven by rules, just making sure that we always follow the rules. They don't really care much about how people feel or how to fix the person's feelings. For them, morals don't matter as long as we are getting results. So, I do think that values matter, but it is a tough conversation to have because people are individuals.

15. See generally *Developing and Implementing an Outward Mindset*, ARBINGER INST., <https://arbingerinstitute.com/diom.html> (last visited Mar. 18, 2018).

Will Pinkston: I'll be brief. I think we're unanimous on this subject. Cory, can we take a vote on this right now? Cory is our attorney. [Gestures to audience.] I think it's important for the school system to play that role, particularly in a high poverty school system like ours. We've got 72% of kids who are socioeconomically disadvantaged. In many ways, the school system is playing the role, for better or worse, of the parent, in addition to everything else that we do. I think that there is definitely a role there and definitely some space to be filled.

Moderator: There has been some disagreement among board members over the issue of charter schools. There are members of the community that have different views on charter schools.

Sharon Gentry: You're kidding me, right? [Laughter.]

Moderator: People of goodwill have differing views. What would each of you say to someone in the community who wants to understand this issue better, as to why they should see it the way that you do?

Will Pinkston: I have been on the board since 2012. I was formerly on the board of what was considered to be a high performing charter school, and through that experience, I learned that there is a lot of smoke and mirrors in the charter sector. There are also a lot of very good actors who are in it for the right reasons. I don't want to cast aspersions on any particular charter chain, but the issue in my position has never changed. Charters do have a role to play. They serve as labs of innovation for large-scale improvement across the system, but you can't have unabated growth of any type of government without it having a fiscally destabilizing effect on the others. There was a period in the first two or three years when we were on the board in 2009 when we had about four charter schools. Now there are thirty, I think, that are either open or in the pipeline. You just can't grow any form of government at that rate without it having a negative fiscal impact on the rest of government. So, that's my position as a budget hawk, and I think having a healthy sense of skepticism about what they really are, and what they really aren't, is important.

Tyese Hunter: That charter school that Will sat on the board of served one of my children, and they served her very well. She is seventeen years old, medically fragile, and for years teachers would look at her, and because of her physical impairments, they would assume that she was cognitively impaired and couldn't learn. She is now in a traditional public school; she is at Cane Ridge. They served her well. I think the bigger part of the conversation is what we are doing for children and how we are meeting their individual needs. Also, are we giving parents choices in the education of their children? I have three children, and charter schools will not work for all of

them, but I, as a parent, deserve the opportunity to make that decision for my own kids so that they have the best outcomes possible. So, Will and I haven't always agreed, but I am so happy that you sat on that board. Will, I appreciate you, because it has done my child justice.

Sharon Gentry: As part of my introduction, you heard that I represent District 1. If you don't know what that is, start at Joelton, one rural community, come all the way down Ashland City Highway to Whites Creek Pike, which turns into Buena Vista Pike, then work your way through Metro Center, which hits Germantown and Salemtown, and we've gone through a couple housing developments. It is the largest district, based on landmass, that we have. If you sort all one hundred plus schools in the district, you will find a significant number of schools in District 1 that are the lower performing schools. You will also find a good number of schools in District 1, I think it's about eleven, that we would say are "under-enrolled." They are at about sixty-five to seventy-five percent capacity. They are traditionally under-enrolled schools because they are small. Because they are under capacity or under-enrolled, they get additional dollars out of the district.

However, they're still not performing the way they need to perform. That's a challenge for me. I have a significant number of charter schools in that district. It's a challenge for me to look at a parent and suggest to them to put their child in a traditional public school and just hang in there until we get our stuff together. Hang in there just a little bit longer. As Ms. Buggs pointed out, we have great faith in our new director, but we are not expecting to see a 180 in these schools in the next year. It's going to take a while. The corollary to that, I have to agree with Will on the fiscal impact. I can't say that if I had additional funding and resources that I could do more, but then keep opening charter seats that take funding away from the school district. I like the idea of what a charter school is designed to do—find out what works for the most challenging population of students and help us, as a district, grow those solutions.

That relationship is not happening in MNPS today. I'm not saying the innovation within the charter schools isn't happening. The exchange isn't happening within MNPS today. The other "gotcha" and rub of all of that is that at some point in time, I am going to have to make some very challenging decisions about my traditional MNPS schools that are under-enrolled and are draining the resources that I have remaining. I'm going to have to make some very challenging, tough, and emotional decisions about what to do about those schools. The relationship between charters and MNPS traditional schools is just not what it needs to be. I think it's Denver where the public school district actually manages the charter growth, so that they can actually look across their school system and recognize, for example, an increase in

the English Language Learner population.¹⁶ They can then say they're short on seats in traditional schools that will really serve that need. They then tell the charter where it needs to be and that it needs to specialize in the English Language Learner population.

I wish we could be more of a driver of that innovation that charters provide, of that low teacher to student ratio, and of the requirements that they have for parental engagement. I go to community meetings for District 1 schools, and I ask how many students have parents in the building. I may get two out of twenty people to raise their hands, if I've got twenty people there. There are things that charter schools are doing that will guarantee their success, from how they choose their students, to the fact that they can dismiss a student if they choose to. I'm not saying that they are, but if they want to turn a student away, they can turn a student away. They can send a letter home that says, "Your child is not going to be successful in this environment." Then, the student comes back to us. So, there's such an imbalance in the relationship that it is hard to make an argument from my perspective 100% for or 100% against.

Christiane Buggs: We have this conversation all the time because there are going to be people at both extremes. There are people that believe every charter school is great, and that they are the best option. There are people who believe charter schools are terrible, and do not understand why we have them and why we approve them. What I've said from the beginning is that I taught at a charter and a traditional public school, and I will always think about what is best for students first. There is a part that politics plays in this, only because there are tax dollars involved. It is public money. So, when it comes to managing growth, to looking at metrics, to determining how well or ill-performing a school might be, that should be a political discussion at the board level.

However, when I talk to a community member, a parent, neighbor, or just someone who is concerned about public education and children, it is a very nuanced conversation. It has to be, because you're talking about 88,000 students.¹⁷ You're talking about little people whose minds are still developing. I try to always listen first and hear what their perspective is. Then, I want to offer them the perspective that a charter should be another choice. I think the community at large has not had a really good understanding of what charter schools were intended to do. They were intended to do something different and to try something different. Once that model works, then they are supposed to share it. I'll use the schools in my

16. See generally Eric Gorski, *Denver Public Schools' Glaring Conflict: Both Authorizing and Operating Schools*, CHALKBEAT (May 18, 2017), <https://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/co/2017/05/18/denver-public-schools-glar-ing-conflict-both-authorizing-and-operating-schools/>.

17. *Education*, NASHVILLE.GOV, <http://www.nashville.gov/Mayors-Office/Education.aspx> (last visited Mar. 20, 2018).

district. I have the smallest landmass but the largest district. Out of one hundred and seventy schools, I have forty schools,¹⁸ because I represent East Nashville, which is highly gentrified. I have Cayce Homes and Napier Homes, which are housing developments, and those are right beside \$300,000 and \$400,000 homes. There's a school like Warner that sits in the middle of a very affluent neighborhood, but the school is 99% free or reduced lunch, 95% minority, and they are not getting the support. Parents are not sending their kids to Warner, but they are sending them to a few of the area charter schools that are really thriving and doing well. I'll use a school like Nashville Classical, which is not far from Warner. Nashville Classical does literacy very well. Those students are reading very well. Those students are engaged. They have very few incidences of behavior. The culture of the school is just great. They should develop that model, work out a strategic plan, and then share it with a school like Warner and kind of work in tandem with them so that the good things happening at Nashville Classical are also happening at Warner. We haven't done that well, and so I think that's the basis of the argument.

A school like Nashville Classical is not looking to model itself and have four or five different Nashville Classics pop up. I think that's where our conversation is convoluted. When a school like that wants to share with the district, it's great. The unfortunate reality is that we have some schools that want to find the model, but before they have perfected the model, they sometimes continue to replicate charters instead of sharing ideas with district schools, and then that defeats the purpose of the collaboration. I want community members to understand what charter schools are intended to do and understand that every school, even by type, is going to be different. One magnet school is not the same as another. One charter school is not the same as another. One community school is not the same as another. I would also want them to understand that we are supposed to be collaborating, and we are still trying to figure out what that looks like.

Mary Pierce: We're here at the end, and I think a lot of great things have been said. I agree with Ms. Buggs that you can't paint charter schools with a broad brush. It can't be all charter or no charter; they're all different. I am for high performing schools, and I am less concerned about the school type. If it is a high performing charter, great. If it is a high performing district, great. I would say to this well-meaning individual who has been hearing the narrative or the myths and allegations, let's go and take a look. Let's take a day, and we'll go unannounced to some charter schools, maybe go to several district schools, and just observe. To Dr. Gentry's point about a charter sending a letter home to tell a child that they can no longer attend, at the board level we have a policy called the Annenberg Standards that say that can no longer

18. *District 5, METRO NASHVILLE PUB. SCHS.*, <https://www.mnps.org/district-5> (last visited Mar. 20, 2018).

happen.¹⁹ I think part of an unintended consequence is that we forgot to ask if our own district schools do this as well. We tend to focus on some aspects of charter schools without realizing that our own district schools do the same exact practices. So, it is a good question for the media. When there is an allegation, is this happening in district schools as well, and why? On the fiscal side, when we talk about the fixed costs of when a student leaves for a charter, whether that is in transportation cost or utility cost, these things happen whenever a child leaves. Whether a child is leaving to move to Williamson County, or a child is leaving for private school or charter school, that fixed cost remains, but we tend to put all the blame on charter. That's just another thing that you want to make sure you are asking the question both ways. Also, in regard to the tax dollars, whose money is it? If it is a parent's money and a parent's child, I think it should be a parent's choice. I do think that our role should be to manage that growth, as Dr. Gentry mentioned. Even in our areas of overcrowding, we do not give charter schools capital dollars. So, when charter schools open in a really crowded part of the city, they are providing a physical building that we are not paying for. That is at no cost to taxpayers. I would say come and see. Don't believe all the rhetoric, and come take a look for yourself.

Moderator: Our panelists have been incredibly generous in sharing their time with us and sharing their views. Please join me in thanking them. [Applause].

19. See generally Jason Gonzales, *Annenberg Standards Include Unknown for Metro Schools*, TENNESSEAN (May 20, 2015), <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/education/2015/05/20/annenberg-standards-bring-questions/27688895/>.

