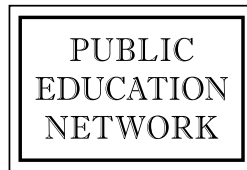


A Time for Change: The Search for a New Superintendent in Carlton City



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This case was commissioned by Public Education Network (PEN) and prepared by the Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy. Written by Jill Norton and Paul Reville, the case was designed for use at PEN's 2006 annual conference. This case is hypothetical and not based on any actual people or events. All names and locations are fictional.

A Time for Change: The Search for a New Superintendent in Carlton City

Carole Miller closed the door of her office and slumped in her chair. It was 6:00 pm on Friday, May 22, 2006, and the end of a particularly difficult week. Carole had just come from a meeting with the board chair of the Carlton City Alliance for Excellent Schools (CCAIE), the local education fund that she helped found and had led for the past 14 years.

The meeting centered on issues surrounding the Carlton City Public Schools' (CCPS) search for a new superintendent. This week, the search committee had publicly released the names of its two finalists: Janelle Jenson, an African-American woman and the superintendent of a large urban district in a nearby state; and Michael Fitzpatrick, a white male, the current CCPS deputy superintendent of finance and operations and a long-time friend of CCAIE.

In August 2005, Timothy Allen, the highly respected superintendent of CCPS who had held the position since 1998, announced his pending retirement in June. Since then, the school district, community, and CCAIE had been in a state of flux. As the school board reviewed the finalists and prepared to make its decision on June 15th, the business community, parents, and the media were each becoming more vocal in making their diverse opinions known. The community was divided over which candidate to support.

This week, as several issues came to a head, Carole sat down to review her options and formulate her next steps. To date, CCAIE had played a minimal role in the search process, focusing more on shaping the search process than on the outcome of the search. Many members of the community were now calling for CCAIE to weigh in on the selection of the next superintendent and to provide some guidance as to who would be the best candidate. CCAIE Board Chair Frank Willow asked Carole to lead a discussion at next Monday's board meeting that would help resolve the question of whether or not CCAIE should endorse a candidate to be the next CCPS superintendent.

Carlton City

Carlton City, the capital of a Midwestern state, has undergone significant changes over the past 10 years. For five decades, the auto industry provided many middle income jobs to Carlton residents. As more and more of the auto industry moved overseas, auto manufacturing plants and other auto industry-related factories closed and the city fell on hard times. The city and its surrounding area recently reported an unemployment

rate of 9 percent – and this number was expected to rise over the coming summer months.

The population of Carlton City had already begun to drop; in the past five years, the city had seen a decrease of 13 percent in its population from 199,000 to 173,000. Located just over an hour from one of the largest cities in the Midwest, Carlton City was losing many residents to surrounding communities.

Some of the city's business and professional leaders were growing increasingly alarmed about the economic downturn and feared that Carlton City might become another Flint or Detroit. This fear spurred increased involvement in the search for a new superintendent by many community members, business leaders, and local officials who felt that one of the ways to stave off a large exodus of middle class residents was to ensure that the city had a vibrant, high-performing school district.

By weighing in on the selection of the next superintendent, these leaders felt they could influence the future direction of the school district. They were worried that if they didn't make their voices heard, the school board might select a leader who accepted the status quo instead of one who would lead the type of aggressive reforms that the business community deemed critical. As a result, a group of Carlton City's corporate elite, believing it was time for real change in the school system, supported the selection of a prestigious executive search firm to lead a national search for the next superintendent.

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Carole Miller and the Carlton City Alliance for Excellent Schools

Carole Miller was known throughout Carlton City and the state as a dynamic, effective leader. She began her career at Carlton City South High School, where she developed a program for dropouts and under-served youth. Within four years, Carole had expanded the program to all four of the district's high schools. The program was remarkably successful at shrinking the number of dropouts and Carole proved so effective at working with low-income and minority students and families that Wilson University, a prominent private university in Carlton City, recruited her to serve in the newly created position of Director of Community Programs. While at Wilson, she directed a groundbreaking national study, *State Policymakers: Keys to Effective Legislation for Children and Families*, which examined the attitudes and opinions of state legislative leaders regarding children and families, especially low-income families. Among the findings of the highly acclaimed study was the need to involve business leaders as legislative advocates for children and families.

Following that, Carole led a United Way-funded project focused on providing quality after-school alternatives for the city's low-income children. Under her leadership, key business and civic leaders became advocates for children and several public policy initiatives were enacted to improve the well being of low-income children.

In 1992, Carole founded the Carlton City Alliance for Excellent Schools with a mission to improve education opportunities and outcomes for every student in the city. In founding CCAE, Carole was able to bring all her past experiences to bear. She leveraged relationships she had built with local business leaders to secure initial funding. At the same time, she rallied other community organizers and advocates to serve on her board to ensure that the Carlton City schools provided a high quality education for low-income students and families.

Under Carole's leadership, CCAE partnered with the district on many reform efforts. Five years ago, the CCAE-district partnership garnered the attention of one of the region's largest foundations. The Midland Foundation awarded CCAE a five-year, \$3 million grant to fund a Leadership Institute to provide professional development and leadership training for teachers. During her tenure, Carole had grown CCAE from a local grassroots organization into a multi-million dollar organization with a national reputation for successful school district partnerships.

The many district-wide reform initiatives directed by CCAE require Carole and her growing staff to work closely with members of the current district administration. Some critics in the community expressed opinions that the relationship

was too close – that because of Carole's close ties, CCAE was losing sight of the minority and low-income students and families it was supposed to represent and was instead doing the bidding of central office leadership – which many felt was not adequately focused on the needs of minorities. Community members were also concerned that CCAE was so close to the district that it was no longer able to serve as a "critical friend." There were also district staff members who felt that CCAE had accumulated too much power and influence over the district.

While CCAE was in sound financial shape, one of its largest grants was due to run out in August 2006. Despite working with CCPS central office staff, meeting with other potential donors, and exploring other funding sources. Carole was finding it increasingly difficult to obtain new sources of funding in view of the economic downturn. Carole also suspected that donors were stalling until the outcome of the superintendent search was known, at which time they could better assess the future direction of the CCAE-district partnership.

The CCAE Board

Throughout the history of the organization, Carole had maintained a balance of business leaders, school officials, and community advocates on her board. Current CCAE board members include Tim Allen, Carlton City's superintendent; Frank Willow, the board chair and one of the city's top business leaders; Sherisa Aguirre, a community advocate who had recently launched a parent organization; and Bernard Martin, president of Wilson University.

The CCAE board, mirroring the community, was divided over who was the best candidate to be the next superintendent. Frank Willow, Tim Allen, and others supported an internal candidate who they recognized as an insider who could facilitate a smooth transition for CCAE. With an inside candidate who knew CCAE and its initiatives well, CCAE would likely be able to continue its current work and preserve its solid partnership with the district.

Some board members, Sherisa Aguirre and Bernard Martin among them, were eager for radical change. Sherisa, an advocate for low-income parents, saw how the district was failing to adequately serve many low-income and minority students. She and other board members supported the search for an outsider with an aggressive reform agenda who would meet the challenge of the achievement gap head-on. These board members felt that CCAE needed to focus on its mission of ensuring that every student in the district received a high quality education and worried that an inside candidate would perpetuate more of the same slow-paced reform initiatives that had been the norm.

Carlton City Public Schools

Carlton City serves roughly 25,000 students in 32 public schools (24 elementary, 4 middle, 4 high schools). According to a wide variety of indicators, Carlton City public schools accommodate a diverse and disadvantaged student population, with 46 percent of the student population black, 31 percent Hispanic, 14 percent white, and 9 percent Asian. During the past 20 years, the percentage of non-white students had more than doubled, from roughly 40 percent in 1980 to just over 80 percent in 2005.

As the economic fortunes of the city declined, the number of low-income students grew. In the 2005–2006 school year, 70 percent of the student population was classified as low-income. The district also serves a growing number of special education (19 percent) and limited English proficient students (12 percent). On the state's standardized tests, Carlton students were 8 to 20 percentage points less likely to score at or above proficiency than students statewide.

Over the past three years, this growing minority population, coupled with the growing achievement gap between minority and white and Asian students, became the focus of several influential community groups. The Carlton City Parent Network (CCPN) was formed two years ago to organize parents and communities as advocates for the improvement of the Carlton City Public Schools. Headed by Sherisa Aguirre, CCPN helps reconnect parents and communities to the educational and decision-making processes, with a special focus on reaching out to recent immigrants for whom language is a barrier. The parent network recently partnered with the other community organizations to launch a campaign to raise awareness about the growing achievement gap in the Carlton City schools.

Nine of the previous 10 superintendents have been insiders – the one superintendent hired from outside lasted only two years.

Leadership of the Carlton City School District has long been predominantly white. Most district leaders started their careers in Carlton schools and worked their way up to the central office. Nine of the previous 10 superintendents have been insiders – the one superintendent hired from outside lasted only two years.

Local community members were divided about the type of candidate needed to take Carlton City schools to the next level. Some felt that the district, which had a good history of effectively serving the needs of white students – who 20 years ago were the majority of the student population – had not adequately responded to the diverse needs of the current student population, now dominated by minority students. They urged the district to seek a dynamic, visionary candidate who would be an agent for drastic change.

Others felt that the current district administration would be capable of meeting the needs of the student population, if it had the full support of the community behind it. They felt the district was moving in the right direction and was not in need of a sweeping overhaul. With a committed leader who knew the district well, they felt the district would be able to demonstrate steady improvement. They worried that an outsider, unfamiliar with the district and its history, might do away with some of the existing programs that were starting to show promise and, in doing so, cause more harm than good.

The Superintendent Search

The superintendent search committee, a 12-member panel appointed by the mayor and the Carlton City School Board, includes parents and representatives from business, higher education, clergy, and other sectors. The committee is charged with identifying, recruiting, and screening candidates and recommending finalists for the position of CCPS superintendent to the school board. In mid-October, the search committee convened a series of community meetings to solicit public input about the needs and priorities for the school district. More than 100 members of the community, including parents, students, and educators attended the first meeting, which was held on October 17th. Several key themes emerged from the testimony given at that meeting:

- an acknowledgement of the progress toward district reform made under Superintendent Allen
- a desire to accelerate reform efforts to meet higher standards of student achievement
- an urgency to reduce the dropout rate and eliminate the achievement gap
- a recognition of the importance of actively engaging families and the community in school reform

At the end of October, the nationally recognized search firm of Barnes and Cerrino was hired (with financial support from local corporations) to identify and recruit potential candidates.

Carole and the CCAE board and staff were being careful to keep their distance from the superintendent search. Carole knew there were those in the community who thought CCAE was too close to the district and she didn't want to be seen as influencing the selection. Throughout October and November, CCAE helped the search committee coordinate the community meetings by ensuring that a good balance of parents, business leaders, community advocacy groups, higher education, and education foundations were included in the process. Carole purposefully kept CCAE's involvement process-focused, not outcome-focused.

News about how the search was proceeding was meager and without a sense for how things were progressing, the community grew anxious.

Throughout the winter and early spring, the search committee continued to meet, mostly behind closed doors. News about how the search was proceeding was meager and without a sense for how things were progressing, the community grew anxious. Carole was frequently asked what she knew about the search since people assumed she had an inside track. But Carole and CCAE continued to keep their distance from the search process and awaited word of finalists with the rest of the community.

Events of the Past Week

Monday, May 18th - Carlton City's largest newspaper, the *Carlton City Ledger*, publishes the names of the two finalists selected by the search committee:

- **Janelle Jenson**, an African-American woman who had served as a superintendent in two other urban districts. With a national reputation for improving achievement of minority students, she is known for being an aggressive reformer. Given her background in curriculum and instruction, she is acutely focused on instructional reform and teacher professional development. A teacher mentoring program that she initiated in her current district has become a national model. She told the search committee that she would like to leave her current position as superintendent in a nearby state to be closer to her grandchildren and family. However, many in the community speculate that she was tired of

the well-publicized turbulent relationship she has with her school board and teachers' union. Publicly, Janelle stated she wanted to lead a district that supports more radical reforms. She was forthright during the interview process and with the media about her desire to "accelerate the pace" of reforms in Carlton City.

- **Michael Fitzpatrick** has spent his entire life in the Carlton City School District. He attended district schools and graduated from Carlton City North High School. He worked his way up through the Carlton City school district from an economics teacher at Carlton North, to high school principal, and currently to deputy superintendent for finance and operations. Michael is generally well liked by the central office staff and by the majority of the teaching staff with whom he has worked. In 2000, when he was a high school principal, he received a national award for developing an innovative professional development program for training teachers to use data to inform their instruction. He leveraged the attention he received through the award and worked with Superintendent Allen and Carole Miller to secure outside funding to expand the program to every school in the district. From 2000–2002, Michael and Carole worked closely together to develop the professional development program into a district-wide initiative, which CCAE operates for the district. Carole has remained a close and supportive ally of Michael in his current role at the central office.

Wednesday - the *Ledger* publishes an editorial emphasizing the need for new, bold leadership from an outsider with a fresh perspective, the ability to lead the district in a new direction, and the experience to improve the achievement levels of minority and low-income students. The article gives a nod to the solid list of accomplishments of Superintendent Allen, but goes on to chronicle the ongoing widening achievement gap between the city's Asian and white students and its black and Hispanic students. The editors then tout the background and experience of Janelle Jenson and point to her as the right person to initiate the more radical reforms necessary to shrink the achievement gaps and improve the quality of the school district.

Most important to CCAE, the editorial includes a paragraph directed explicitly at CCAE and its leadership, calling on CCAE to take a position on this important choice:

The future of the Carlton City Schools lies in the balance and its closest partner remains mute. CCAE's mission is to advocate for a high-quality education for all Carlton City students. Thus far, however, CCAE has taken a limp-wristed approach to the search process and has been unwilling to support a candidate. Now that the candidates

have been identified, how can CCAE not weigh in on the selection of the district's next leader – arguably the most important issue facing the future of the district? It is irresponsible of CCAE not to play a role in this process, when the community is so in need of guidance on this issue. Now is the time for everyone to stand up and be counted and as the district's closest partner, CCAE, more than anyone else, has an obligation to publicly support one of the candidates and to make it clear to the community its reasons for doing so.

The story was picked up by some of the local television and radio stations and Carole began fielding phone calls from reporters asking for a response to the newspaper's call to action.

Late Wednesday morning, Carole receives a call from Frank Willow, her board chair and president of CompTech, one of Carlton City's largest employers. Frank urges Carole to call a board meeting on Monday so that the board can collectively plot a course of action in response to the editorial. Frank is worried that if the CCAE board maintains its neutral stance and decides not to respond, CCAE could end up looking irrelevant and irresponsible. He wants Carole to be clear in her correspondence to the other board members that they must come to the meeting prepared to make a case for supporting one of the candidates.

Frank, a life-long friend of Michael Fitzpatrick, is also concerned about the tone and direction of the *Ledger* piece and wants Carole to know that he is planning to support Michael Fitzpatrick. He tells Carole that he called a member of the search committee that afternoon to discuss the two candidates. The search committee member mentioned that during the interview process, Janelle questioned whether the district was engaged in too many partnerships with external organizations. She indicated that she would like to see the district focus more on the internal work of improving the achievement of its students. Frank tells Carole he takes this to mean that Janelle would not be as willing to partner with CCAE as Michael has been.

Frank assumed that given their history and strong working relationship, Carole would support Michael, too. Frank feels that, in addition to being the right thing to do from a personal standpoint, supporting Michael is the best course of action for CCAE and for the district since it would ensure the continuity of their effective initiatives. Carole admits she has not made up her mind about which candidate to support and arranges to meet Frank on Friday afternoon to discuss the agenda for the Monday board meeting.

Shortly afterward, Carole receives a call from Sherisa Aguirre, the head of the Parent Network, who calls to say that she

agrees with the editorial, namely, that it was time for CCAE to take a public position on the candidates. She also expresses her enthusiastic support for Janelle Jenson. Carole and Sherisa have worked together often over the past decade advocating for the rights of low-income and minority families in Carlton City. Sherisa encourages Carole to join her and other community and advocacy groups in supporting Janelle. Sherisa sees Janelle as "one of our own," someone who would fight for minority and low-income students, while Michael Fitzpatrick is just "more of the same." Supporting him would mean "accepting the status quo" when they both know that is not good enough for the minority students they care so much about.

Thursday – Carole receives a call from Eleanor Stewart, president of the Midland Foundation, CCAE's largest donor and supporter of CCAE's Leadership Institute. Eleanor wants Carole to know that she has always been impressed with Michael Fitzpatrick and his work for the students of CCPS. She feels Michael would be the best candidate to lead the ongoing work of the Leadership Institute and worries that its work could be compromised or marginalized under Janelle Jenson's administration. Eleanor asks Carole to be mindful of this as she and her board plan their response to the *Ledger* editorial.

Friday – Carole meets with Board Chair Frank Willow to plan for Monday's meeting. Frank makes it clear that he wants the meeting to focus on discussing ways for the board to support Michael Fitzpatrick, and suggests that he and one or two other local business leaders set up a meeting with the mayor to let her know that the business community is behind his candidacy. He also says that he and Carole should ask other members of CCAE's board to call members of the school board to highlight Michael's strengths and exceptional capacity to lead the district.

As Carole sits at her computer and prepares to draft the agenda for Monday's board meeting, several questions are swirling in her head. Was it really wise for CCAE to get involved in the search process? Carole still wasn't sure if it was prudent to back one candidate over another. After all, she and CCAE will need a strong working relationship with the new superintendent, no matter who was selected. What if they support the losing candidate?

Carole thinks Michael Fitzpatrick would make a fine superintendent. He is hard-working and focused on the needs of all district students. He knows the district well and could hit the ground running. Carole also feels that having Michael fill the superintendent slot would ensure that CCAE's initiatives would continue. Personally, she feels compelled to support Michael, a trusted friend and ally for many years.

On the other hand, Janelle's focus on closing the achievement gap is compelling and her prior success at leading effective

urban school reform proves that she is skilled at making progress in districts like Carlton City. Carole couldn't help being excited by the prospect that Janelle would be able to shrink the achievement gap and change the culture in the district from one of making excuses for low-income students to one of high standards for all students. Carole is worried that Michael's background as a district insider would make it far less likely that he would initiate aggressive and far-reaching change.

Carole recognizes that the easiest course of action would be for her to do nothing and wait until the school board has a chance to do its due diligence over the next three weeks. Backing a candidate – either candidate – would have unpleasant consequences for the CCAE. Supporting Michael was likely to alienate the parents, community advocates and corporate leaders who are passionate about radical reform efforts in the district and concerned about the needs of low-income and minority students and families. Supporting Janelle would upset CCAE's biggest donor as well as the parents, local business leaders and school employees who support the solid track record and continuity that Michael represents.

However, the community and media are clearly calling for CCAE to make a decision. If she doesn't act, Carole worries that CCAE could become marginalized and would be viewed as irrelevant in making future decisions concerning the district.

Carole is also pondering the financial implications of each candidate for CCAE. The amount of funding CCAE has been able to secure is a reflection of the strength of the relationship between the school district and CCAE, and it is also an endorsement of the district leadership. With Michael Fitzpatrick leading the district, donors, especially the Midland Foundation, would feel confident that the strong partnership between CCAE and the district would remain intact. However, with Janelle Jensen bringing new energy and a reputation for getting results in urban districts, this was likely to attract new donors and could even lead to more resources for CCAE and the district.

Finally, Carole thinks about CCAE's mission and wonders how much it should influence her decision. CCAE, while funded by several corporate donors and local businesses, has always remained loyal to its mission to advocate for the needs of minority and low-income students. The growing achievement gap is compelling evidence that black and Hispanic students are not getting the same quality education as white and Asian students. In order to ensure the best for all students and families, maybe it is time for CCAE to become more aggressive in its approach to school reform. Maybe it is time for CCAE to go out on a limb. With all of this in mind, Carole begins to prepare her presentation to the board.