

Robert L. Vann Elementary: The Achievement Gap of Today & Doris Brevard of Yesterday

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# **ROBERT L. VANN ELEMENTARY: THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP OF TODAY AND DORIS BREVARD OF YESTERDAY**

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This paper explores the history of Robert L. Vann Elementary, an elementary school in Pittsburgh's Hill District, which was once one of the highest achieving schools in the city. During Vann's most successful years, Principal Doris Brevard implemented specific procedures and developed rules to ensure that Vann students—who were predominantly black and impoverished—would achieve at the highest level. After Brevard's retirement in 1995, and a series of educational reform laws and practices were put into effect, Vann's success ended. This paper examines why those changes occurred and questions if the practices that principal Brevard once used could be put into place today to close the achievement gap between black and white students.

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## **I.**

### **“The Lingering Effects of No Child Left Behind”**

Parents and teachers reluctantly took their seats in the cafeteria of University Prep, a 6-12 school in Pittsburgh’s once famed and vibrant Hill District. The school district’s proposal to close Pittsburgh Vann, a neighborhood elementary school, had pushed the community into a public meeting once again. Three years earlier, in 2007, Superintendent Mark Roosevelt had insisted upon closing Vann, pointing out its declining enrollment and expensive repair costs. Although Vann narrowly escaped the first closure with an improved performance on statewide achievement tests, its lack of students could no longer be ignored.

Community leaders pressed their backs against their chairs, making eye contact with one another, mumbling. Teachers rolled their eyes and sighed, looking towards the ceiling where bright college banners hung high. Parents shook their heads and groaned, listening to the same words they had heard years before.

Deputy Superintendent Linda Lane spoke soft but firm. Another representative, a black man dressed in a sweater vest and slacks, presented a PowerPoint.

Their plan was simple. Besides Pittsburgh Vann, there were two remaining elementary schools in the Hill District, Miller Elementary and Weil Elementary. Vann’s current enrollment was 184, although the school’s capacity was 427. Miller had 188 students but could hold 484; Weil had 260 but could hold 550. They suggested that Vann be closed and the remaining students be split between Weil and Miller. The money currently used to run a nearly empty Vann—lighting, plumbing, cleaning, heating, cooling, and maintenance costs—would instead be put towards better student programs at Miller and Weil.

Mark Turner, the parent of a Vann student, flipped through the printed proposal then folded his arms. “I’m concerned about the apparent absence of a strong commitment to really create superior schools in the Hill District,” he said. “The language in the slides was, ‘We would *explore* the sustainability of certain types of resources and programs necessary for the schools.’ That to me is a soft commitment. It’s not a hard enough commitment as far as I’m concerned. It doesn’t seem like the board is serious about elevating the quality of education in the Hill District. And to say that the minimum requirement is that ‘they can read and write’—for our kids that’s not enough. They are already *way* behind in the achievement gap.”

Parents nodded their heads in agreement. The achievement gap between black and white students appeared each year within reports on the Pittsburgh Public Schools. Predominantly black schools like Vann consistently underperformed compared with Pittsburgh’s predominantly white schools. In 2009, only 19 percent of Vann’s fifth graders were proficient in writing. Thirty-one percent were proficient in reading and 47 percent were proficient in math. Across town at Pittsburgh Roosevelt, a predominantly white elementary school, 70 percent of fifth graders met standards in writing, 85 percent in reading, and 81 percent in math.

Vann’s fifth-grade math and science teacher, Robert Muchow, held his head in his hands. “What I got out of that presentation was that Vann was being closed because of low enrollment,” he said. “But all three schools have low enrollment. Why was Vann singled out? Why not Weil or Miller?”

“Right now we’re putting money into three buildings that are half empty,” Dr. Lane replied. “That money could be better used and dedicated towards educational opportunities. And we decided to recommend to the board that, given the fact that we have this issue, we would close the school that we were always talking about closing.”

A woman in the back of the room stood up. “I’m a parent and my child attended Madison Elementary. Many of the things I’m hearing tonight are the same things I heard when the board was talking about closing Madison. When they did close the school, my child was moved to Vann and I’m very pleased with how my child was taught at Vann. I’m not so much worried about the potential closing, but stability is a very important thing for children. My child is in fourth grade this year. Next year, if Vann closes she’ll have to go to another school *again*. What I want to know is: When are you going to stop moving our children around based on numbers?”

With an already dwindling population and new housing redevelopments pushing residents outside of the community, the Hill District, like other African-American neighborhoods in Pittsburgh, had seen its share of closed and reconfigured schools. In a fifteen-year span, Vann had changed from Robert L. Vann Elementary School to Pittsburgh Vann K-8 to Pittsburgh Vann K-5. The fifth graders at Vann had been led by a different principal every year since third grade.

“It seems as if you have already made up your minds,” an elderly woman said, sighing. “It seems as if you are going to close Vann regardless of what any of us have to say.”

“That’s not true at all,” Dr. Lane said. “Our board members are here tonight to hear everything you all have to say. This is just a recommendation. Ultimately, the board has a final say on whether or not to close Vann. What’ll happen is that the board will meet on the twenty-fourth of this month. Our recommendation will go to agenda review, and then to a legislative meeting. Even if the board acts on the recommendation on the twenty-fourth, that is not the end of it. We would still come back and meet to talk about transitioning. But if they decide not to act, we’ll still have to come back.”



Dr. Lane paused and looked around the room to recognize board members. Of the nine elected officials who made up the school board, only four were present. The other five, all of whom were white, were nowhere to be found. As murmurs filled the room, former school board member Randall Taylor and community leader Sala Udin began to argue.

“You had your turn to talk, Randall!” Udin shouted. “This is not one of your school board meetings! Let Dr. Lane finish!”

“It’s not your meeting, either!” Taylor snapped. “I just wanted to tell these people the truth!”

Dr. Lane looked down at the floor, avoiding the conflict. When the arguing ended, she lifted her head and called upon a school board member to speak.

“Hello, I’m Sharon Shealey and I’ve been on the board since December,” she said as she attempted to make eye contact with everyone in the room. “I’m only here because I think that you need to hear from the board – well, from a member from the board – a *perspective*. The administration has worked diligently to come up with a plan and from my perspective, I’m only one out of nine, but I don’t care about buildings. And I’m sorry to say that so crassly, but *I don’t care* about buildings. I need our kids to be educated. I need every kid in the city to be able to read and write and think and contemplate and move our city forward. So if that means that a better opportunity for these kids is in a better place, the kids need to be moved to a better place.”

Some teachers averted their gaze from the ceiling and looked towards Shealey. Parents sunk further in their seats and forced themselves to listen. Others tuned out completely, patiently waiting for a distraction so they could slip out of the cafeteria. For another half hour, leaders and residents expressed their concerns about the closing of their beloved Pittsburgh Vann. Although no one in attendance could disagree that the Hill District schools were failing to meet high

academic standards, the closing of another school seemed too much to bear for an already struggling community.

“They’re always tryna’ close *our* schools,” an elderly man said with a frown when the meeting ended. “You don’t ever hear about them tryna’ close all the white folks’ schools. Before you know it we’ll only have one elementary school in the Hill. Hell, they might even decide to put it together with UPrep and we’ll have one K-12 school. Period.”

“That’s right,” a woman chimed in. “I don’t even know why they announced this meeting when they know they’re going to close Vann anyway. I wish it was like it used to be. Our kids don’t have a chance now. They really don’t.”

“When did they ever have a chance?” the elderly man countered. “Ever since they started that achievement gap talk and that No Child Left Behind, our kids have literally been pushed and kept *behind*.”

“They need to get rid of all that useless mess and get back to the basics. Back when the Hill was well, you know, *The Hill*, teachers knew how to teach. I never heard nothing ‘bout no achievement gap when my daughter went to Vann back in the day.”

“Back in the day,” a time that only some Hill residents can claim to have experienced, is a time that seems generations removed, although it was less than sixty years ago. Even when “back in the day” began, amid the rise of destruction and change in the Hill, residents could always count on one constant, one school; one school that would shatter each and every notion about the achievement gap; one school with a determined principal who refused to ignore the idea that all children could learn, one school made up of predominantly black and impoverished

students that would outscore numerous city schools—white and black—for more than two decades: Robert L. Vann School.

## II.

### “A Glimpse into *Back in the Day*”

The “Harlem of Pittsburgh,” the Hill District’s nickname during the thirties through the fifties, was once a city in itself. One mile south from downtown, the renowned Wylie Avenue snaked through the neighborhood with its array of specialty stores, food markets, restaurants, and jazz clubs. Famous musicians and entertainers—Lena Horne, Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, Billy Eckstein—made it a mission to stop by the second Harlem whenever they were on tour. Black social clubs and organizations sponsored lavish parades and retreats, beauty contests and mixers, exclusive dinners and formals. Newspaper boys shouted “Courierrrr, Get your Courierrrr!” every morning in hopes of selling a copy of the largest circulated black newspaper in the country, *The Pittsburgh Courier*.

Robert Lee Vann, the *Courier*’s revered editor, sensed the importance of the black community and culture, and sought to better the lives of blacks through literature. *Courier* photographer Teenie “One Shot” Harris—famous for using just one shot at each event he covered—owned a large studio on Centre Avenue. Nesbit’s, a diner renowned for its irresistible sweet potato pie, was frequented by the thousands. The Owl Cab Company, black owned and operated, transported Hill residents daily.

Although blacks were not welcome into nearby downtown, they didn’t care to venture outside of the Hill District. In the Hill there was community, there was entertainment, and there was life. But as the Civil rights movement and the Pittsburgh Renaissance picked up speed, that life began to change.

In the late nineteen fifties, as part of its efforts to reinvent itself, the city opened an urban renewal office in the Hill District. Despite the Hill's thriving businesses and sense of community, some sections were an eyesore. The homes and businesses in the Lower Hill, a few steps away from downtown, were dilapidated and poorly maintained.

George Evans, a member of City Council wrote, "Approximately 90 percent of the buildings in the area are substandard. There would be no social loss if they were all destroyed. The value of the elimination of these disease-ridden slums would be impossible to estimate in dollars and cents." The rest of council agreed.

They voted to demolish the Lower Hill to make way for a new state-of-the-art arena with a retractable roof and spacious seating. It would be an unmistakable sign of revitalization, a symbol of change for the rest of the renewals that would soon follow. In addition to a new arena, the council agreed to build a new cultural center, complete with new apartments for the many Hill residents who would be forced to move.

Within days of the groundbreaking ceremony, cranes, dump trucks, and wrecking balls treaded into the lower part of the Hill. Shards of shattered windows and broken buildings lay in the street; tattered signs of former businesses were unrecognizable in the dust. While middle-class whites beamed with excitement and anxiously waited for the new arena to be completed, more than eight thousand displaced blacks cursed their fortune.

The promised cultural center would never be built.

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In 1944, four years after his death, the Hill's Watt Street School was renamed Robert Lee Vann School. It was the only school in the history of Pittsburgh to be named after a local black leader; another school, named after the city's first black interim superintendent Helen Faison, would not be dedicated until more than sixty years later, in 2005.

In 1954, the Supreme Court delivered its decision on the *Brown versus Board of Education* case. The "separate but equal" doctrine was ruled unconstitutional and all school boards were to implement desegregation plans. In response, the Pittsburgh Public Schools, like other schools in the nation, reluctantly implemented a weak busing plan to accommodate the orders. The board would not fully implement a desegregation plan until 1980.

In addition to the educational and civil changes that were shifting public education, the demographic of schools, particularly Vann, was changing. Formerly attended by a small percentage of white and immigrant students, the city renovation inspired whites and immigrants to move elsewhere and attend other schools. The government projects that sat a couple blocks away on Bedford Avenue were once for families who had stable jobs and income. Yet years after the *Brown* decision, the housing was occupied by more single-parent families who had little to no income, pushing the middle class blacks away and pulling in the lower class. By the late seventies, Vann's student body was 99 percent black and poor.

### III.

#### “The Difference One Principal Can Make”

On a cold November day Doris Brevard sits in her finely furnished living room, clutching her neck brace with frail fingers. Her glossy gray hair complements her fair brown skin, and her dark eyes gleam in the streams of sunlight that the angled blinds allow into the room. Her living room walls are adorned with dozens of awards from the city, special organizations, and education advocacy groups. A former teacher and librarian of Robert L. Vann School, Brevard was principal from 1969 to 1995.

Before becoming the principal at Vann, she'd never paid much attention to the words “achievement gap.” It was not talked about—not during her undergraduate years at the University of Pittsburgh, not during her graduate years at Colombia University, and not during her certification years at Bank Street College and Carnegie Institute of Technology. .

Before starting her role as principal, Brevard met with a group of educators at the University of Pittsburgh. As they were discussing the schools in the Hill District, a white supervisor said, “Well, you can’t expect anything more from *the Hill Schools*.”

“Oh, I went off!” Brevard remembered. “I was so mad. I told them that the students in the Hill District could learn as well as any other students. I told them that they were going to be the *best* students in the city. The other white supervisor looked at me and said, ‘You’ll find out as soon as you get there.’”

When Brevard arrived in 1969, it was not the students that she first had to address. Racial tensions simmered in the community. Race riots in the wake of Martin Luther King’s assassination from the year before had destroyed what little urban renewal remained in the Hill,

and revolutionaries were working at strategies to reclaim the community. Black militants had come into the school and threatened the white teachers. They told students that white teachers were not to be trusted. The former principal, Thelma Miller, was herself a revolutionary and had, on occasion, allowed community members of the same belief to share thoughts with the students.

“I did not want any of that,” Brevard said. “Those types of people were not welcome at Vann. If they wanted to come in and teach our children something of substance then I was fine with that. If not, they couldn’t come in and talk to us. I wouldn’t allow it.”

Brevard wasted no time implementing changes. She remembered when Vann had been a high-achieving school years earlier and refused to let its reputation falter, despite the influx of impoverished students. She believed that all children, regardless of how much their families earned and regardless of the social problems they faced, could achieve great things. Determined to show the rest of the city that the children of Vann could learn and excel, she would do anything to make that possible, even if it meant going against the rules.

“The board told me that I needed to interview teachers once a month,” she explained. “I thought that was a waste of time. I spent my time throughout the building and very little time in my office. I would sit in on the classrooms and make sure that things were orderly. If I didn’t see the children improve over a year or make much progress, I would ask the teacher not to come back the next year.”

According to Brevard, Superintendent Richard Wallace and the education administration disliked the way that she ran Vann. Wallace had distinct rules in place for principals and Brevard ignored nearly each and every one of them.



The school system implemented a new reading book for elementary schools, *The Bank Street Reader*, but shortly ordered for it to be pulled out of the schools. It was deemed to be too hard for the students. Brevard kept them.

“They were amazing books! They weren’t *too hard*,” she insisted. “The teachers just had to teach. We used those books until they fell apart.”

The administration thought that the lunchtime in schools could be adjoined with recess. They argued that allowing the students a few minutes of unstructured free time would give them a break from their studies and allow the teachers more time to reorganize their lesson plans. Brevard did not agree.

“Lunch is quiet and peaceful. That’s what I thought. *After* that you can have recess. My children sat down for lunch. There has to be organization when you’re eating your lunch.”

The school system once decided to adopt the New Math curriculum, part of a national effort to enhance the skills of American students and bring them up to par with Russian students. Instead of teaching students how to solve math problems, the New Math focused on *how* students should think when they solve math problems. Brevard thought it served no purpose.

“I did not like the New Math. I had my teachers develop their own math curriculum. I told them to do the old math for four days a week and the New Math for one.”

After a couple of years under Brevard, Robert L. Vann Elementary was one of the highest achieving elementary schools in the city. Despite the fact that 99 percent of the students were black and poor, their scores on the California Achievement Tests were equal or above the scores of their white and advantaged peers.

“Visitors from all over the country and the world came to see Vann,” Brevard said. “Malaysia, Germany, England, San Diego, all along the west coast. Union members came from Philadelphia, New York, New Jersey, and a couple came from the South. The Getty Foundation once asked me if there was anything that my school needed. I gave them a list of things that would help us. The administration said no. They wouldn’t accept it.”

As a result of her defiance, Brevard said, she never received a raise. She felt that Superintendent Wallace awarded her with an average rating for each year that she was principal under his direction, keeping her salary to a minimum.

“That was the thing that hurt me. After all I did, I get an average rating every year? I never really had too much trouble with the board. It was *that superintendent*.”

She once heard that Wallace remarked in a school board meeting, “Doris Brevard is a big bag of wind with a lionized staff.”

“I was one of four principals that Wallace could not stand,” she said. “All of us were the principals that did what we wanted to do. He avoided us like the plague. At workshops they would place us all together and everyone knew why.”

Although the administration was never blatantly hostile towards Brevard, she doesn’t recall them ever being supportive. No representative came when international visitors took notes and applauded her techniques. No representative came when she sent an open invitation about the governor of Pennsylvania visiting her school. No representative came when Vann was featured in a national education case study. Brevard can only remember two visitors from the school board who came to the school.

“As far as they were concerned, Vann did not exist,” she said. “The only person who ever said something to me about how well I was doing was Helen Faison. Most of the black principals weren’t even in my corner. Wallace said I was not a game player. I was supposed to be working closely with him and following his rules and regulations to the letter but I was not that type. I did not like the rules of the game. I made up my own rules, rules that would benefit *my* children. I did not care if people did not like me. I did not care if I wasn’t invited to certain things. I was in control of my life.”

To further make Vann a better place for her students and to build their self esteem, Brevard implemented “the magic door.” Once students walked through the door they were no longer poor or black. They were just students. They were students and they could be whatever they wanted to be. She told them daily that they were “the best, the very best” and as they entered the school building a large picture of a clown boasted that Vann was “The Greatest School on Earth.”

“If other students would ask my students what school they were from, they would say, we’re from the *best* school in the city,” Brevard said, laughing.

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In 1980, Frick Academy, a renowned magnet school, shifted from being an elementary school to a middle school. A group of the displaced students were bused to Vann. Upon arrival, Brevard and her staff tested the Frick students and found that they were below the standard. Despite their previous placement, Brevard felt that they were not on par with her Vann students.

Since they hadn't mastered all of the skills necessary to be in their current grade level, she would have to hold them back a grade.

"I postponed them. I put them in the level that I thought was best and for some of them it was a year behind what they were at Frick. The parents were very angry and upset with me about that. They said 'My child was a straight-A student at *Frick*.' And that was fine, but they weren't a straight-A student at Vann. They were new and they weren't where they should be according to standards."

In addition to holding back the Frick students a grade, Brevard and her staff struggled to get the new students to fit in socially. The Frick students were from a rival neighborhood.

"We had an *awful* time trying to bring those that were in the Frick area into the Hill with our children. It was just like night and day. The Upper Hill? Don't you dare mix that with the Lower Hill. When we had a student come in from Weil Elementary we had to really work to get that child to fit in with children of the Middle Hill."

At the end of the transitional first year, the Frick parents had a change of heart. They profusely thanked Brevard for what she had done with their students and kept them enrolled at Vann. Although there was once a parent-initiated petition to remove Brevard as principal when a teacher was accused of calling a student a "sloppy bum," it failed to garner many signatures since few parents disagreed with her methods, or results.

The school board once considered adjusting some of the kindergarten schools from K-5 to K-3 and closing a group of elementary schools altogether. If implemented, white students from the West End section of the city would have to be bused to Vann.

One morning, a group of concerned West End parents showed up to Vann to get a sense of how the school operated. Brevard gave them a tour, allowing them to peer into the classrooms and speak with teachers.

“They were delighted, very impressed. They said yes. They would be more than willing to send their children to Vann,” Brevard said.

The board, without explanation, dropped the plan. Vann remained all black.

In the late nineteen eighties, as Vann continued to outshine the rest of city students, the crack epidemic hurtled through Pittsburgh. Addicts and junkies became common staples in black neighborhoods, the rate of violent crime heightened, and the secure feeling of walking around alone languished. In the Hill, drug dealers dealt out in the open, a street away from Vann Elementary. One morning, a custodian notified Brevard of a pile of needles and used condoms that had been left near the school’s flag post. Brevard helped to clean them up, and prohibited her students from playing near the back of the school.

Despite Vann’s success, administrators were highly suspicious about how Brevard’s students were able to achieve so much when, down the street from Vann, Miller Elementary, a similar all-black institution, was the lowest-achieving school in the city.

In fact, one particular year, Brevard couldn’t remember the exact one, the administration refused to believe that her third-graders had scored the highest on the achievement tests. They had the students retested. The students scored the highest again.

“I did not realize how important those achievement tests were,” Brevard said. “I was shocked that we were scoring the highest in the city because I did not really give much attention

to them. We taught *the curriculum*. The students knew the curriculum and they passed the test. That was it.”

Still, the fact that Vann students were indeed scoring like they were from “the best school in the city” was hard for even some principals to believe.

“I had a fellow principal from Colfax talk to me. We were talking about achievement and what our students accomplished. He said, “Oh, I didn’t think black kids could do that.’ He was a *principal* and that was the way he was thinking? Oh, no. I just couldn’t believe that. Our school philosophy was that every child could learn and we achieved that. We didn’t do anything unethical. We taught. They learned.”

In 1992, Vann was featured in a national documentary entitled *Every Child Can Succeed*. The video, a montage of the daily happenings of Vann, showed how Vann operated every day. In highly structured classrooms, students sat in rows on the floor and sang together. Before each and every lesson, they greeted the teachers in unison. The hall monitors wore large red sashes and proudly shouted their duties outside the school in the morning. Parents stood in the office and listened to Brevard talk about their children’s future. First graders sat quietly in the auditorium as Brevard welcomed them to the Spirit Day Program. Fifth graders patiently awaited instruction from the math teacher. The hallways were clear; the school was under control.

Brevard continued to run Vann Elementary until 1995, when she retired. Her name would be go on to be remembered by some, but most would forget. A few awards would be given, but the little attention given would quickly fade. Invitations to conferences would never appear. History books would not record her name or accomplishments; educational textbooks

would avoid drawing her model. Her phone would never ring with phone calls asking for her help or insight on educational matters.

Although a couple of newspaper articles from the nineteen nineties once boasted “Maverick Principal Brings out Best” and “She’s the Reason Her Students Succeed,” none asked why her success could not be duplicated. None asked if it was possible to copy her methods and close the achievement gap, again.

#### IV.

#### **“The Beginning of a Never-Ending Struggle”**

The Hill’s days of popular restaurants and exciting nightlife are long gone. Wylie Avenue’s array of designer stores and boutiques is nothing more than a distant memory. The empty school buildings and community centers that were once brightly painted places of enthusiasm now appear dull and faded—a testament to the light that was blown out of them.

The Crawford Grill, a jazz club that once saw the likes of Dizzy Gillespie and Lena Horne, sits vacant with a historical marker in front of its doors. The building that once housed Teenie Harris’ photography studio no longer exists; a patch of grass sits in its place. The New Granada Theater, once a witness to a performance from Duke Ellington, remains closed and unvisited; efforts to restore it seem stalled.

Garbage is strewn throughout the neighborhood; a group of soda cans rest feet away from an outdoor trash can, food wrappers lounge in gaping grass spaces where homes once stood, and every now and then a loose paper saunters down the sidewalk. Cracked and splintered streets are a staple, and the aged houses that line them—with the exception of the newly renovated apartment complexes on Memory Lane and Crawford Square—reflect another era, another place and time.

Tall weeds and matted waste clamor at the bases of vacant houses as brown boards guard the windows to keep trespassers away. Graffiti scars the rusted brick sidings of deteriorating buildings. Even the home of playwright August Wilson, the most famous person from the Hill



District, is now abandoned—boarded and chained. Down a strip of Watt Street, a few steps away from Pittsburgh Vann, homes display broken furniture and garbage piles on their porches.

Unlike most of the neighborhood, Vann has not changed. A low black iron gate still stands guard in front of the three-story structure. A flag flies high atop a shiny silver staff and the blond bricks that built the school still seem new.

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When Doris Brevard retired as Vann’s principal, education was beginning to move in a different direction. During her last years, the standardized test was changed from the California Achievement Test to the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. Students’ test scores dropped significantly, signaling the end of a successful reign and the beginning of a struggle that would never end.

“The tests were awful,” she remembered. “My teachers said that the only way the students would have passed those tests was if they had studied the test itself. It was not in line with the curriculum.”

While the California Achievement Test was a norm test, meaning that the students’ percentile scores were based on how they placed according to the scores of other student test takers, the Iowa Test was different. The Iowa Test measured the students against a standard. There were certain items that students in each grade level were responsible for mastering. The test tracked each of those items and rated students based on how well they mastered the items.

In line to take Brevard's place was Martin Slomberg. He trained under her as a part of a special program by the board, the second phase of Superintendent Wallace's School Improvement Program. It was supposed to continue for at least two years. However, the board thought the program too costly and cut the program after one.

"The program was supposed to help the principals learn what the high-performing principals did and implement it in other schools," Slomberg said as he smoothed his blue and gray Vann sweatshirt at a sandwich bar. "Brevard had been in Vann since 1969 and she was considered to be a top administrator in the district. She was kind of nationally renowned. She was really a little bit different than other administrators in the district back then. She did what she wanted to do *when* she wanted to do it. And she usually got her way because she had the support of the school board. From her, I learned the tools of the trade and I learned how to run a school. It was often managing a lot of discipline and student behavior. Students were expected to walk up and down the halls quietly, to behave in class, and to behave in the lunchroom."

Under Slomberg's control and with the new test in place, Vann's scores continued to drop and it was no longer one of the highest achieving schools in the city.

"The California Achievement Tests were *easy*," Slomberg said. "Teachers knew what was going to be on the tests and students generally did pretty well on them. It was the same test every year. You knew what your kids needed to know. When I was teaching fifth grade I knew, for example, that they had to know how to multiply fractions so I'd work on these things. But basically you knew what was on the tests, you knew what they needed to know, and you prepared them and they generally did very well."

The change from the California Achievement Test to the Iowa Test of Basic Skills would be temporary; more drastic changes would follow.

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In 2001, Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act. It required that all students excel in their grade level, and that every school show increased annual improvement by making AYP: Adequate Yearly Progress. Every state was now required to create a set of academic standards for their schools to follow. Each school would be tested at the end of every year and the scores would need to show that the majority of students had met the standards. If the school did not make progress and the students weren't up to standard, the school district would be forced by the federal laws to take action.

If a school failed to meet the standards for two straight years, the school would be put on an improvement list and students would be offered the chance to go to a better school. If the school did not achieve AYP for three years straight, the teachers would be subject to more intensive training and the district would have to offer free tutoring for the students who were behind. If the school failed to achieve AYP for four consecutive years, the school would be forced to change curriculum, get rid of staff, or extend the school day; in some cases, all three, in addition to allowing students to transfer and retraining teachers. If a school failed to meet the standards for five years, the school would be taken over by the state.

“The No Child Left Behind Act and the AYP changed a lot of things,” Slomberg recalled. “I found that I had to be a different type of leader. I couldn’t just be a manager of the school anymore. Managing the school is not the same as being an instructional leader. Just because kids are quiet and teachers are teaching and everything seems wonderful doesn’t mean that kids are learning.”

With No Child Left Behind in place, students had to take the newly designed PSSA, The Pennsylvania System of School Assessment. The PSSA was another standard based test, but this time, it categorized the scores: below basic, basic, proficient, and advanced.

Students in third, eighth, and eleventh grades were tested in reading and math. Fifth, eighth, and eleventh graders were tested in writing. Fourth, eighth, and eleventh graders were tested in science.

According to Slomberg, when the tests were first given, there were no preparation materials. Teachers hadn’t prepared for the questions it asked. Their practice tests didn’t match the real exams.

After it was in place for a year, the state began to give out foresight tests, practice tests that were similar to the PSSA. The data taken from the foresight tests allowed teachers to see what they needed to work on, and showed the scores that the students would most likely get on the PSSA.

“The PSSA is different every year,” Slomberg said. “Kids don’t take the same exact test. You may get a packet of tests and twenty students are sitting in there doing the reading but some have different tests than others. You’re going against the Pennsylvania *standards*. You have to make sure that you teach the anchors, the eligible content, and tie it into the curriculum. They

give the foresight tests a few times a year and you analyze the data to see where your students fall and you know what to go over in time for the real tests.”

Despite the testing changes, Slomberg still tried to do the same things that he’d watched Brevard put into practice. He was visible throughout the building, hardly spending any time in his office to answer calls and sign paperwork. He did informal observations of the teachers; he commended students for good behavior.

But as the administration tightened the freedoms of what a principal could and could not do, Slomberg had to change. There were new sets of student data he had to look over every night. There were extra teacher meetings he had to schedule, teacher evaluations he had to complete. There were new things he needed to know about the PSSA, new types of statistics and curriculum adjustments that he needed to learn and address.

There was PVAAS, the Pennsylvania Value Added Assessment System, which measured the growth of student performance from year to year. There were assessment anchors, specific content that teachers needed to teach the students in preparation for the tests. There were also new students who were dealing with more socioeconomic problems. Single-parent homes had become the norm for Vann students. Seeing drug dealers on the way to school was no longer newsworthy.

Slomberg spoke with his teachers about troubled students. He asked them to focus more on reading and math skills, to give art and music less attention. He had students take dozens of practice exams and made them read during lunch under his newly created *Dear Time* program.

Despite Slomberg’s efforts, in 2002 Vann failed to boost its comprehensive test scores. The school district was forced to allow students the option of transferring to better achieving

schools. Few bothered. Slomberg continued to stress more reading and math, but in 2004 scores dropped even lower. The district was forced to offer tutoring and enforce the transfer method. The students of Vann remained at their regularly assigned school, and the tutoring option was barely used. Slomberg would have to work even harder to get his students to achieve on the PSSA.

“I don’t think the PSSA was a fair test,” he said. “None of those tests are fair. But nobody could say that we were cheating because our scores were low. When we started to make AYP the last years I was there, we did not make it because most of our students were proficient. We made it based off safe harbor.”

“Safe harbor” was another new definition that Slomberg had to learn under the new system. If a school was considered to be in safe harbor that meant that there was a significant decrease in the students that were not meeting the proficient and advanced levels compared to the year before. According to the No Child Left Behind Act, by 2014 all American students will be proficient or advanced in reading and mathematics—every school will reach AYP.

“There’s absolutely no way that by 2014, every student will be proficient or advanced in every subject,” Slomberg says. “If they keep raising the bar at that rate, not even the high-performing schools will be able to make AYP. Everything today is so scripted.” He sighs. “The district wants you to teach a certain way, lead a certain way, and if you don’t do it their way, you’re out.”

With all the new changes in education, Slomberg highly doubts that what Brevard did in the past could be done today. It would be nearly impossible.

“I think that what she did was good for her time, but it takes a lot more today. She ran her school with an iron fist and that really worked for that time period, but today you would have to do so much more. You can’t just focus on behavior and things like that.”

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In the fall of 2004 and the winter of 2005, Amy Schaarsmith of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* slipped into the fifth-grade classrooms of Vann, taking notes and remembering all that she could. In her seven-year career as a reporter, she had never before covered education. Her past assignments were all about politics, city council business, and city hall meetings.

Once a week for nine months, she shadowed Vann’s fifth-grade students. She arrived at the school before classes began and stayed long after they were over. She sat in on their classes, ate lunch with them, and played with them during recess. She interviewed Slomberg, teachers, and several students.

For her final story she focused on the lives of three students and how their backgrounds affected their education. After spending time with the students in their homes and following them around for an entire school year, the story was complete. Yamin Harris, Eric Biggs, and Tresa Green’s life stories appeared in the pages of the *Post-Gazette* on June 20, 2005. Eric’s mother was dealing with a drug addiction. Tresa’s brother was serving time for failure to report to his probation officer on former drug charges. Yamin was fighting to survive in a world where no one he or his mom knew ever became successful.

The city was hooked. The harsh reality that Hill District students encountered every day spurred dozens of readers to call and e-mail Schaarsmith. The series received the Robert L. Vann Award and an award from the Pennsylvania Associated Press Managing Editors. What no one seemed to question, however, was something that Slomberg had said. When Schaarsmith had asked him about how prepared students were for the tests, his assured reply—"I did all I could do. Teachers did all they could do. Students did all they could do"—bothered her for months.

"How can you say that?" she said five years later. "How can you ever do all that you can do? That's why we have this problem. The reason that schools like Vann don't succeed is not because they are poor and [kids] come from broken families. It's because we aren't trying hard enough."

Schaarsmith remembered how often she would walk home with the students, shaking her head at the environment that oppressed them. She wanted to help them, to be a permanent figure in their lives and an inspiration, but the rules that came with being a reporter would never allow it.

"I still believe that poverty makes education harder for students," she said. "It's not an excuse, but it's definitely a hurdle."

Schaarsmith often asked the students what they wanted to be when they grew up and they weren't sure. The ones who were certain thought they would become doctors and lawyers; those who weren't picked jobs like truck driving, cashiering, and rapping.

She can still vividly remember how some of the teachers weren't as enthusiastic about discussing the future with the Vann students.



“I remember standing in the lunchroom with a fourth-grade teacher when he said, ‘A lot of these kids they come from poor families, single-parent homes. They’ve grown up in really hard circumstances and we really do the best we can with what we’ve got.’ And I thought, ‘How dare you?’ This is the teacher who taught the kids I was writing about a year before. He was basically excusing himself from responsibility. That attitude just shocked me. It was appalling.”

It seemed like the school board did not even believe in the students of Vann. According to Schaarsmith, Vann’s board representative, Mark Brentley, never visited the school: “I asked people in the school when was the last time he came by and they said never.”

She felt that the students needed someone who would push them and make them work hard. They needed someone consistent, someone who would make sure that they learned. She did not believe that Slomberg was that person.

“He was a really nice guy but I think he underestimated the abilities of his students. I think he was more interested in being a good guy than the *right* guy for them. And I think he would disagree, but it didn’t seem like he was there to rock their world. He was there to get to work and do a good job and they needed somebody who thought they could burst open the world and make it happen. They needed somebody to believe in them and I don’t think they had many people who did.”

In 2008 Slomberg retired as principal. For the 2008-2009 school year, his assistant principal Derrick Hardy served as head principal. Just one year later, Shemeca Crenshaw, former principal of Westinghouse High School, was appointed to take over.

## V.

### **“A Fall from Grace, with the Glory Days Ahead”**

Barbara Sizemore came on as fast as a gust of wind, whipping up against all those in power, pushing herself into all open eardrums. The mere mention of her name in education circles stirred debate and incited anger. Once a teacher and an administrator, she was named superintendent of the D.C. Public School District—the first black woman to accomplish the feat—in 1973.

To the school board, choosing Sizemore seemed like a great idea. She had experience in education, she knew what difficulties the system faced, and she seemed determined to make positive changes. However, after she was in office for a couple months, darker attributes seemed to overshadow her once positive light.

She was critical of those who thought that they knew what was best for black children, she had issues with the proposals that members of the school board presented. She argued that black students should be taught by black teachers; students should learn more about their own culture’s history and know about the world according to them—textbooks that showed functional black families sitting around the table eating dinner were irrelevant and fictitious. According to a 1974 *Courier* article, Sizemore once “insisted on elementary school use of a primer featuring a black boy with an absentee father, a brother who is a gun-carrying dropout, and an uncle who pimps for a living.”

“I know of no change without chaos,” Sizemore would say when asked about her questionable tactics. She often admitted that her main goal was to raise black student

achievement, and in a city where more than 70 percent of the students were black, she accused the system and its reliance on standardizing testing of being racist.

She proposed that all the achievement tests be removed since “the tests were not designed for black students to be able to pass.” She spurred arguments among the school board and went against its recommendations, causing a permanently estranged relationship. She changed the curriculum, significantly transformed staff, and followed her own rules.

The members of the school board changed three times since her arrival, and with each new set of members the board’s main goals shifted and the tolerance level for Sizemore’s ideals lowered. Exhausted from her charges about racism and her radical educational theories, the board offered Sizemore the opportunity to quit. They offered to pay her remaining salary in the three-year contract, in hopes that they would find someone else more affable. Sizemore turned down the offer. She was fired in 1975.

Undaunted, she continued to work in education. She became a professor and interim chair of black studies at The University of Pittsburgh. She joined Advocates for African-American Students in Pittsburgh Public Schools. She visited schools and spoke to principals, she monitored the board’s goals, and she began to criticize Pittsburgh’s state of education for blacks.

While other black leaders were criticizing their cities’ lack of desegregated schools, Sizemore didn’t consider that the racial makeup of a school determined whether or not blacks would succeed.

“Whether a school is segregated or desegregated, if the role for blacks is inferior, the outcome will remain the same,” she once said. “Simple mixing does not insure redefinition of roles, especially when the larger social order makes no such stipulation.”

In July 1981 she wrote a letter in response to an article about Miller Elementary's biscuit program that had appeared in the *Pittsburgh Courier*:

The highest achieving black school in the Pittsburgh Public Schools is the Robert L. Vann Elementary School in the Hill. Ninety-nine percent of its students live in public housing. Yet, of fifty testing checkpoints during the past five years, Vann has been at the national norm or the Pittsburgh norm forty-six times. Why can't you cover this school and tell principal Mr. Reeves how he can avoid the pitfalls he claims he could do nothing about? [...] Do you feel that a mark of competency is made only by feeding children biscuits? Is this the schools only function?

Miller Elementary School is one of the lowest achieving of the black schools. If Reeves' colleagues consider him one of the best, it is because they know that incompetency in black schools is rewarded by the school system and lauded by the Press which supports the system and for whom the education of black children is not a high priority.

In 1983 she published a study, "An Abashing Anomaly: The High Achieving Predominantly Black Elementary School." It was funded by the National Institute of Education and allowed her and her team to chronicle the practices of three black Pittsburgh schools: Beltzhoover, Madison, and Vann Elementary.

She and her team of researchers studied each school carefully. They documented the size of the schools, the structure of the school, and the outside community that surrounded the school. They watched the principal's habits, each teacher's style, and the students' adherence to learning for over a thousand hours. They compared each of the school's test scores, comparing them to the national averages and to the national black student averages. At the end of the project, Vann and Madison were deemed outstanding and effective schools.

She concluded that Vann and Madison had high achievement because of common elements that they shared, but the main aspect that led to their successes was the leadership of the principal. Doris Brevard of Vann and Vivian Williams of Madison were principals who both

believed that their students could learn, despite the fact that they were poor and black. They both disagreed with some of the practices that the board put in place and often went against them and did what they thought was best.

However, Principal Doris Brevard's leadership style was markedly different from Williams'. Brevard demanded order in her school, and offended some parents when she acted as an authoritarian. Her failure to allow students to express their blackness in the late seventies by requiring students to wear mandated school uniforms caused a few parents to remove their students from the school. Brevard was frank with her colleagues—too frank, according to some, and made it clear that everyone in Vann was accountable for the students' success. She often shunned the superintendent's recommendations to garner more community support, and instead focused on high achievement as the top priority. In "An Abashing Anomaly," Sizemore wrote:

One observer noted that [Vann] was an anachronism, a throwback to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the preservation of a form that was outdated and no longer useful. Another resented the designation of [Vann] as a high achieving school to be used as a model for other schools because of its emphasis on regimentation and regulation. Yet, [Vann] accomplished what every school in the city wanted, high scores on the standardized tests. The principal stood like a rock in this tempest. She calmly responded when queried about her reactions to the divided community and opposing central office: "If someone knows how to do it better, let them show me." To date, no one has.

Moreover, according to the report, Brevard stood apart from other principals because of her firm belief that expectations influence education. Sizemore printed Brevard's self-written description of education at Vann:

The philosophy of the school dictates the expectations of the staff. A principal, having strong positive expectations about the learning potential of all children, will influence teachers' expectations. The principal must identify mechanisms and processes that effectively convey these expectations to the teachers. The faculty must be convinced that their students can learn. The principal must have control of the school to eliminate the possibility of the fears of teaching minority children being translated into reality. Everyone is accountable. There is no excuse for

children not learning. Poor health habits and apathetic parents can also be alleviated. The expectations of success must be built into the structure of the school's philosophy.

"An Abashing Anomaly" was regarded as an exemplary research project by community leaders and black educators, but it was largely ignored by the school system and the education administration. Few newspapers reported the findings.

Sizemore, who died in 2004, once said that almost every city in America has a school like Vann. There were several schools that shatter the myth that black students would always be behind in the achievement gap, but they were largely ignored by the public. She made it clear that there was a conspiracy to keep the successes of black schools like Vann a secret. Furthermore, she believed that principals like Doris Brevard were not given credit because not only was the system against them, but so were other black principals.

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Richard C. Wallace was regarded as the best superintendent that the city of Pittsburgh had ever hired. During his reign, he revamped the entire education system. He trained teachers, created innovative programs that narrowed the achievement gap, and made the Pittsburgh Public School District one to be envied across the country. Through his vision, most residents believed that Pittsburgh Schools changed for the better. Parents and teachers refer to Wallace's days as "the glory days."

Before coming to Pittsburgh, Wallace had served as superintendent in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, and helped the system's achievement scores skyrocket. He had created programs for students and teachers and completely transformed the district. The Pittsburgh school board had voted to hire him 8 to 1, hoping that he could duplicate that feat there. Over the phone, board

members told him that their main concern was the poor quality of education for black students. They also needed someone to assist them in rebuilding the sufficiency and trust of the Pittsburgh Public School system.

When he arrived in 1980, he realized that most of the schools were still segregated; the achievement scores of blacks were far behind that of whites, and the state of public education as abysmal. As he settled into his position, the board finally agreed upon a desegregation plan and put it into effect—twenty-six years after the Brown decision.

Before making any significant changes, Wallace wanted to get an idea of how public education was perceived by people of the city. He assembled a task force of thirty people and conducted a survey that sampled the opinions of all major stakeholders: parents of children in public schools, parents of children in private schools, teachers, administrators, and all district employees. He needed to know what people thought the major problems with public education were and how they could be fixed during his term.

After the survey was conducted and analyzed by a University of Pittsburgh taskforce, all of the public's problems were presented to the board. The list was extensive. It would take decades to fix some of the problems. He had the board pick six major issues that they wanted him to address. They listed, "Improving student achievement in the basic skills, improving the quality of personnel evaluation, managing the enrollment decline, attracting and holding students, discipline, and the low-achieving African-American segregated schools.

"Give me six months," he promised.

In that time, he and the task force worked to develop plans to overcome the issues. To improve the basic skills, he wanted to develop a program. When he had been superintendent in

Fitchburg, he'd created SAM: Skills Achievement Monitoring. He decided to implement a similar program in Pittsburgh to boost achievement. He called it MAP, Monitoring Achievement in Pittsburgh, and labeled it as phase one of his School Improvement Program.

The program was designed to increase students' scores on the California Achievement Test by giving out practice tests every six weeks. The scores from the practice tests would help students realize what they needed to work on, but they would also notify teachers of the weaknesses in their techniques.

"When I came in 1980, about 30 percent of the African American students scored at or above the national norm," he said. "Sixty percent of the white students did, so there was a gap. We implemented the MAP program and within three years the African-American achievement doubled. It went from 32 percent to about 64 percent. But the white students' achievement improved from 60 to 90. There was still a thirty-point gap."

He created PRISM, Pittsburgh's Research-Based Instructional Supervisory Model, to train principals how to successfully evaluate the teachers. He closed schools and opened others that stressed academic achievement, schools that would accommodate the desegregation plan. To bring back students that the system had lost to the private and suburban schools, he designed a PR scheme for the system's magnet schools that had special career-driven programs.

According to his book, *From Vision to Practice*, "During the mid-1980s, the Pittsburgh schools were attracting close to 1,000 students per year back from private and parochial schools." By 1992, every school that had been closed in the early 1980s had to be reopened. Student enrollment was increasing so much that the district had to buy or lease closed parochial schools to accommodate them all."



He successfully addressed the discipline issue of students, and continued to create programs to fix every problem. He wanted every school to be high achieving and he was determined to make that happen. He made a pledge to get inside every school to find out what was not working.

“There were over a hundred schools and I visited every one. I had a keen interest in Miller Elementary, though. It was the lowest achieving of all eighty-seven elementary schools. I really didn’t want it to continue on that path. I assessed the situation and decided to place a new principal in there. That really changed the school around.”

He worked with the NAACP and NEED, organizations that were primarily concerned with minorities in education. Although a few elementary schools and high schools were left segregated after the desegregation plan, the board managed to integrate most of the schools. But the achievement gap still lingered.

“Bridging the gap is a very difficult thing to close because children of poverty, whether they’re African American, Hispanic, Appalachian Whites,” Wallace said in 2010. “They don’t have the typical expansive vocabulary that other children from middle- and middle upper-class homes have. In those homes there’s typically a culture of reading in the home. And the children of poverty don’t have that environment. So to overcome the gap of language facility is a significant problem and this is why a lot of districts have gone to early childhood programs. There’s a lot of evidence that suggests that if you can get children who live in poverty in school early and give them a lot of experience to build their working vocabulary. If children don’t have

access to books in their homes and they're not accustomed to so much reading. They won't do as well. A lot of times it really depends so much on the parent."

After a few years with the MAP program, the Pittsburgh Public Schools was solidified as a high-achieving system. But towards the beginning of the nineties, Wallace became sick. He wasn't as energetic as he usually seemed. He went home earlier in the day, canceled meetings, rescheduled appointments.

Eventually he learned that he had a tumor in his bladder.

Determined to beat the cancer, he had the tumor removed and returned to work, but not for long. He decided to retire early.

Soon after he stepped down, the board decided to cut the second phase of his school improvement plan, which called for successful principals to mentor aspiring principals. It was too costly, it was argued, to pay the mentoring principals an extra five days' pay. The money needed to be spent elsewhere.

The school system's scores would go into decline for the next few years. Parents would withdraw their students and place them in magnet and private schools once more. The city of Pittsburgh would lose residents. And the school system would lose students.

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Although almost every school made gains while Wallace was the superintendent, the achievement gap was never completely closed while he was in charge. It narrowed some years, and it slightly widened during others.

“I don’t know if the gap is ever going to be closed,” he said. “Children who come from very wealthy environments are read to even before they’re born. They are read to constantly and they live in an environment of books. Children in poverty just don’t have that same exposure. Perhaps you could perhaps close the width of the gap, but I don’t know about completely closing it any time soon.”

Wallace still believes that all schools need high-quality instruction. But the schools that need it the most, inner-city schools, are handed the most inexperienced teachers. They’re given the teachers who are still learning how to control a classroom, how to break down material, and how to develop effective lesson plans.

“What often happens is that they get put in schools that are ill equipped, run-down, and they themselves don’t have the experience or the skills base to effectively teach the kids,” he said. “Another aspect of the problem is that when you’re dealing with children of poverty there’s an incredible mobility rate. It’s not unusual for there to be a 100 percent turnover from September to June. Unless the district has the ability to monitor the turnover and transfer records quickly and structure classroom techniques effectively, students fall through the cracks.”

For example, in a small urban school district in Missouri, three schools serve one large urban neighborhood. Students transfer in and out of the schools and it’s never unusual to have a 60 percent or more turnover rate within one year. To accommodate the problem the three schools develop their lesson plans together. They model their schools’ structures to be as equal and as similar as possible.

If a student were to pull out of School A on Friday, when he enrolled in School B on Monday, the lesson would pick up where he left off the week before. However, similar districts are few and far between and Wallace doesn't understand why

When asked who is responsible for the low-achieving schools, Wallace blamed everyone. He feels that every person involved is at fault. If one person fails, then the system fails.

“It requires very strong leadership at the district level—the superintendent has to really champion this effort. There has to be very strong leadership at the school level. The principal has to be concerned primarily about the achievement of students and the instructional process. He cannot be preoccupied with just management issues. And there has to be a board of education that is supportive and will provide the resources that are needed to increase the likelihood that the students will perform well. If you have all of those ingredients together, you can turn around low achieving schools. But principal leadership is absolutely critical, along with very good teachers.”

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Wallace especially remembered one of the principals in the School Improvement Program: Doris Brevard. He described her as talented and motivated, admitting that had the utmost respect for her.

“She ran a tight ship. Vann ran like clockwork. She really did the job,” he said. “Vann didn't really need much of my help when I came. It was already off to a great start and it was well supported by the community and the board. Doris had achieved it all.”

He remembered visiting Vann during his tenure, but he didn't recall denying Doris Brevard a salary raise for her achievements.

"I don't believe that happened while I was there. That may have happened afterwards. If that was the case then she was at maximum pay on the salary schedule. I never heard that. There was a salary schedule for the administrators. ... I find that difficult to understand. Unless all the salaries for all administrators were frozen or unless she was at maximum pay and maxed out ... she never said that to me."

In 1983, in his personnel report to the board, all of the principals' salaries were listed and were resolved to go into effect on January 1, 1984. Doris Brevard's current salary was listed as \$38,989. Her proposed salary for the upcoming year was \$38,989. Principal Charles Allebrand's current was \$41,088, his proposed new salary was \$42,522.

"Central administration was not too happy with her," he admitted. "I was a man of results. As long as someone is getting results and they're not doing anything unethical or illegal, that was fine with me. So I have a lot of respect for Doris and what she did."

When asked if he ever called her "a big bag of wind with a lionized staff," he shook his head. "Big bag of wind with lionized staff"? No, I would never say anything like that to anybody, especially in public. I'm the kind of person, if she really knew me, to speak my mind. I'm from New England and New Englanders don't keep their tongues in their pocket. Someone may have told her I said that, but I never said that."

Barbara Sizemore was a strong critic of the school district and Wallace during his term. She argued for the betterment of black schools and for the board to model schools after Vann.

“Eventually she became a very strong ally,” he said. “She was very outspoken. She took no prisoners.”

After the two had been acquainted, he met with her many times and even requested her assistance in an educational program one summer. He read her study “An Abashing Anomaly” within days of its release.

“Oh, yes, I definitely read the book,” he said. “A lot of it rang true. But in the final analysis, you really have to monitor the leadership of the principal. You need someone who is a no-nonsense person who has high expectations for staff and students. You have to find someone who holds people’s feet to the fire and gets results.”

Wallace’s superior work in Pittsburgh earned him many awards: The Harold W. McGraw Jr. Prize in Education, the Richard L. Green award, and the Leadership for Learning Award from The American Association of School Administrators awarded Wallace an honorary doctorate degree from Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

His success even prompted the New York City Public Schools to offer him a position as its new superintendent. They admired his qualifications from afar and told him that he was the first choice for the job. He declined: “The board wanted me to stay in Pittsburgh, and I was very happy in Pittsburgh.”

Upon leaving his post, Wallace wrote a farewell letter that analyzed his past years in education: “On Exiting the Superintendency: An Autobiographical Perspective.” His letter

detailed how he succeeded in Massachusetts and Pittsburgh and how he feared that America's public education system would cease to exist if achievement was not made stable.

During his time in Pittsburgh, he remembered that most of the teachers and faculty were experienced and excited about learning. Even the lower-achieving schools had great teachers. Today, he feels that this is not the case.

"I think teacher tenure is a concept that has outlived its usefulness," he said. "I would put teachers on a performance contract. They would have to demonstrate that they could improve student achievement. I would everybody on renewable contracts, three- to five-year contracts, and the contracts would be based on performance."

The idea doesn't sit well with many teachers who are in the teacher's union, and the effectiveness of the contracts would be difficult to measure. Just like No Child Left Behind, there's no sure administrative fix to closing the gap. Wallace can list many flaws with the No Child Left Behind Act, but believes that there was one positive aspect of the bill.

"No Child Left Behind brought intense focus on student achievement and at least it held schools accountable for improving student achievement," he said. "But the board has to give the superintendent a charge and hold him accountable for delivering. The teachers have to be held accountable, and the *principal* has to be held accountable."

## VI.

**“The current Vann Elementary—without Brevard, without a stable principal, and without much hope to survive for another year”**

On a frigid day in March, Robert Lee Vann Elementary appears to be like any other American school. The students wear uniforms; boys fiddle with their tightly fastened belts and girls smooth their white blouses as they enter the building.

Student artwork adorns brightly painted walls. Pastel-yellow and azure staircases give way to a small, inviting cafeteria in the basement, and the main hallway leads into a beautiful blue newly renovated auditorium. Polished hardwood floors stretch from classroom to classroom, stopping at every stairwell and restroom.

Underneath a large arch pictures of the Haiti earthquake disaster float atop the words “hope,” “determination,” “support,” “overcome,” “faith,” “encouragement,” “compassion,” “despair,” “endurance,” and “humanitarian.” Handwritten essays are stapled next to each word.

One essay reads:

“Dear children of Haiti,

My name is David Dobbins and I’m 10 years old and I’m a forth grader. I’m really a suppose to be in fifth grade. I’m writing this because I’m sorry for your loses and I hope this cheers you up. Your parents are not lose they are in heaven with god watching you do great things as long as you love them they will always be with you in your heart.

Your freind David Dobbins,  
PS god bless you.  
PSS I fill bad for you.”

Across the hall, limerick poems and favorite food assignments brighten the wall. Short biographies of black leaders and large photos—Dr. Mae Jemison, George Washington Carver,



Jesse Owens, Rita Dove, Oliver Brown, Clarence Thomas, Dr. Alan Keyes, Dr. Ben Carson, Booker T. Washington, Alex Haley, W.E.B. DuBois—rest on a dark poster.

In the classroom next to the poster, teacher Robert Muchow sports an ink stain the size of a sand dollar under the left breast pocket of his olive shirt. He is teaching his fifth-grade class a geometry lesson. He places a green protractor on the overhead and begins to teach.

“Mr. Muchow, I can’t hear you!” a boy shouts.

Mr. Muchow clears his throat. “Place the protractor over top the vertex. Rotate the protractor so that the zero line is on the other side of the angle,” he notices a girl combing her hair. “Tanayshia, look up here.”

“I am.”

“You’re doing your hair.”

“I have to.”

“Well, look up here while you’re doing that, please. Make sure that the 0 line is on the other side of the angle.”

The students look off into the distance, past the projector, past Mr. Muchow and his geometry. Near the back of the room, on a file cabinet, a poster reads, “Dream Big. Work Hard. When you graduate, the Pittsburgh Promise has a scholarship waiting for you.”

“Raquel.” Mr. Muchow points to the screen and awaits her gaze.

“I’m looking.”

“How many of you do not have a protractor at home?” he asks.

Hands fly into the air. Mr. Muchow walks around to each desk and passes out protractors.

“Okay, you can take these with you,” he says. “You need to bring them back when you turn in your homework, though. Now, let’s go back to the lesson. If you want to measure—”

A young boy sighs. “Mr. Muchow, when do we get our report cards?”

“I’m not sure of the exact date but sometime next week. If you—”

“The date on the board is wrong,” a girl says.

“Are we having recess today?” another asks.

“Let’s not worry about that right now,” Mr. Muchow remains calm. “Everyone needs to *focus* on the protractor on the screen.”

Minutes pass. He pulls a stack of paper out of his desk and passes one sheet to each student. Two boys whisper to each other. A girl crosses her arms and looks down at the floor. Another girl digs in her jacket pocket for change.

“Write your name on the lined paper and, using your compass, draw me a circle on your paper,” he tells them. “Those of you who have your circle done, with a straight edge, draw a line on your paper.”

Frustrated, a student puts her compass down and draws a line on her paper. Mr. Muchow shakes his head. “Boys and girls, first of all, your metal point and your pencil point need to be set up correctly. If you need to adjust the pencil in the compass, turn the knob to loosen or tighten the pencil. Take your compass, the metal point on one end of the line you drew and the pencil point on the other end of the line.”

A bell rings. It’s 10:45.

The students emit sighs of relief and throw open the tops of their desks, thrusting their pencils and papers inside. The room becomes noisy as they shuffle towards the door, chattering and laughing.

Mr. Muchow tells them to form a straight line at the door, chiding them for brushing against the poster boards. One of the boards, white with green letters, lists the rules for Class 101: Be on Time, Be Respectful, Be Responsible, Be a Good Listener.

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Mr. Muchow's class travels down a staircase to a room where they join other fifth graders for Ms. Conway's health class. The desks form one huge circle around the room. One table sits in the center of the room; three girls grab its chairs quickly. The students talk loudly, taking their places in the room.

"Quiet! QUIET!" Ms. Conway yells.

The talking dies down. Ms. Conway moves to the center of the circle and flips open a folder. She smiles, "All right, this lesson is about—"

"Germs!" someone yells.

"It's about germs?" a boy asks.

"Germs," Ms. Conway says. "I know you've heard of the swine flu. Do not talk while I talk. It's disrespectful and *rude*. This is a learning environment and there are too many of y'all in here so if necessary I will get rid of some of you. 'How Lou Got the Flu' is the story. I'm going to read and you're going to listen."

Chatter ensues. A group of boys sitting by the heater exchange glances and begin talking. Three girls share a secret by the door.

She begins: “Six months ago on a farm in China, when the duck flew over Min Peng’s farm and pooped on the ground, a pig sniffed the duck virus into his body. Can everyone oink like a pig?”

Oinks ranging from soprano to bad baritone fill the room.

“Okay, good. Now back to the story. The pig spread the virus to many of the other—”

“Oink! Oink! Oink!” the class continues.

“Okay, enough of that! That’s over! You’re being *rude*! Be quiet! How many people in here share sodas?” Ms. Conway changes the subject.

The students say “eeew,” shaking their heads and rolling their eyes at the thought of sharing a drink. They begin talking.

“Quiet! Let’s use Taniqua as an example—BE QUIET! BE QUIET!” she says, turning towards the boys by the heater. “Y’all three are talking way too much over there. Do you know what quiet means?”

“Why aren’t we in the gym?” a boy asks.

“Yeah, Ms. Conway, how come we aren’t in the gym right now?” another says. “I thought we were going to be in the gym today.”

She looks at her watch. “Because they’re busy doing stuff over there. Quiet.”

By the cabinet, two girls play with each other's hair. Three boys point at them and whisper. The rest of the class continues to talk as Ms. Conway passes out a worksheet that reads "Personal Health Self-Evaluation Questionnaire."

"Put your name on this and fill it out! Marcus! Sit over here!"

She pulls a yellow chair close to the door and motions for him to sit down. He slowly walks towards the chair with his arms crossed. A girl by the sink picks up a couple of bright plastic purple rings and passes them to another student.

Ms. Conway shakes her head at Marcus. "Now, Marcus!"

He rolls his eyes and takes a seat.

"Aquella, sit down and be quiet, *please*. Cameron, move your desk into the middle. Put my rings down!" she yells as she takes her rings from a student and places them back onto the counter. "All right! All eyes up here! I am going to show you the correct way to wash your hands when you're using a public restroom. You get your paper towels ready so that you won't have to touch—"

"I already do that," Aquella says as she sits down.

"I don't care what you do. I want you to watch and listen. Sit down, Dorian! Stop talking! If we don't get this lesson done we'll be in here on Thursday too. Get the water as warm as you can take it."

Raquel and Chris begin arguing. Raquel threatens to hurt Chris after school. Chris laughs and teases her about her weight. Raquel stands up.

“Be quiet, you two! Just let it go!”

“He started it, Ms. Conway!” Raquel screams.

“Nuh-uh! She said she was going to beat me up. Didn’t you hear her say that she was going to beat me up?”

Ms. Conway purses her lips and taps her foot. “Just let it go, Raquel and Chris! Have a seat, Raquel. Be quiet, Chris. Pay attention to the lesson.”

Raquel takes a seat and shoots a mean look towards Chris. Chris turns away from her.

“Okay, back to washing your hands the proper way. Use the soap on your hands, front and back, in your nails, work up lather and sing your ABCs. A, B, C, D, E,” she sings. “F, G....Then, rinse all of the soap off of your hands. Why do I not turn off the faucet with my hands?”

“Kevin is a—” someone whispers.

“Be quiet! You all are acting like kindergarteners! Work on your manners and classroom behavior!”

Hands continue to flutter in the air, begging to answer her question about the handle. She beckons a quiet girl near the door to answer.

“Because you don’t want to get any germs on them.”

“Correct! So then you wrap the paper towel around the handle and then you can throw it away. On that note, guess how many times should you wash your hands a day?”

“Eight!”

“Nope, try again.”

“Three!”

“Four!” Ms Conway beams. “And that’s the *minimum*. Now, someone name a pathway that a germ uses to get into your body.”

“Dirt!”

“No, that’s not what I said. Let me repeat it. Can someone name a *pathway* that a germ uses to get into your body? ”

“Mouth?”

“Yes, that’s the biggest one! For instance, let’s take these pencils. One of the students in my last class sucks his thumb and he touched a pencil. You’re my third class to use these pencils—”

“Raquel sucks her thumb! She’s sucking her thumb now!”

Laughter ensues.

Ms. Conway sighs. “We’ll be in this room on Thursday. I’m sick of shouting and asking people to be quiet. We’re gonna finish these worksheets next time.”

A bell rings. It’s 11:30.

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Mr. Muchow’s students file back into his classroom. It’s time to read. The students pull out books from their desks and open them. None of the books are the same.

“Everyone please read your books for the next few minutes. Even if you’re almost done with the book, you can go over a section again.”

“Mr. Muchow, I only have one page left to read in my book,” a student says.

“Me too!” Raquel says, sighing. “I’m almost done.”

Mr. Muchow shakes his head. “Let me say this again. Even if you have finished the book go back to another spot and *reread* it. I’m going to get some book report papers for you all to fill out today.”

“What? I’m finished!”

“You need to *listen*. I said that if you are finished with your book then you need to go back to a chapter that you liked or to a chapter you did not understand and reread it to see if you’ll understand it the second time.”

“Okay.”

“Remember that these books are to stay in your desk. Do not take them home or out of this classroom. Nina, where is your book?”

“In another class.”

“Okay, I’m going to have to mark that down on my sheet.”

“Why?”

“Because you did not follow directions.”

“How?”

“What do you mean *how*? I told you that you were not supposed to take the book out of this room and you took it out of this room.”

“But the other teacher said I needed a book so I took my book down there because I did not want to get in trouble for *not* having a book.”

“You were irresponsible by not bringing it back.”

“*Whatever.*” She turns away from him and folds her arms.



He passes out the book-report papers and stands in front of the room. Clearing his throat, he begins. "On this sheet you'll notice that you need to write your name, the title of the book, and the date you finished reading. So, if you finished the book today, put today's date on the paper. Can anyone tell me what we are reading? Can someone tell me the genre of these books?"

"Informational text."

"Exactly. On your sheets it asks you for the character, setting, and plot, but since we're doing informational text you're not going to have that. You're going to have to write down the facts."

He takes a book from a student and holds it up high for the class to see. "Like Anaya's book is about lizards so she's going to write down everything that she learned about lizards."

"When is lunch? I'm hungry."

"Me too."

"I hope we get to go outside."

"We have a minute before we get ready for recess." Mr. Muchow says. "Fold the paper in half and put it inside your *Dear Time* book. If you lose the paper I'm going to make you read the book all over again. I'm not sure if it's an inside day or an outside day but let's line up and get ready."

It's 11:50.

The students line up, brushing against the poster boards once more. Mr. Muchow stands in front of the line, blocking the door's decorated green bottom that proclaims his alma mater: Slippery Rock University.

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Raquel saunters into the auditorium with her classmates as the credits of *Shrek 3* play on a large screen. They are told to sit every other seat and to be quiet. Upon hearing a student ask why there is no outdoor recess today, Ms. Gibson sighs.

“It took too long for us to decide if it was going to be an outside or an inside day. Ms. Woodson was not sure if I would be able to help. We only have five minutes anyway. That’s really too much of an explanation that I just gave to you, though. Be quiet, we’ll be leaving here soon.”

At noon Ms. Gibson tells the students to line up for lunch. The students file out of the auditorium and into the basement. In the cafeteria, a room that houses tables of brightly colored stools, two staff workers finish placing the food onto a large silver stand.

On the wall hangs a poster that reads:

*Pittsburgh Vann K-5 cafeteria expectations:*

*Remain seated*

*Sit quietly at your assigned table*

*Use your inside voice*

*Raise your hand for help*

*Clean up your area*

*Line up in line order*

The cafeteria becomes noisy once all the students have taken their seats. A group of girls sing lyrics from Miley Cyrus' "Party in The U.S.A.," boys taunt each other, and the normally quiet students hold loud conversations.

"I guess you don't want to eat!" Ms. Woodson yells.

A silence closes in on the room and she nods her head. "That's better."

The cafeteria staff lays out the food. The lunch for the day is Tony's Galaxy Pizza— half of a personal pan cheese pizza wrapped in a plastic bag, milk, and a choice between a pear, applesauce, and a small bag of carrots. Ms. Woodson calls the tables one by one to line up and walk through the line.

A bell rings. It's 12:30.

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The students walk to Ms. Iwanonkiw's class for reading. They will return to Mr. Muchow for seventh and eighth period. Ms. Iwanonkiw shuts the door and says, "Turn to page 156 in your hardback readers. TEN SECONDS! TEN, NINE, EIGHT! I've got one group ready! SEVEN! SIX! Turn to the right page. You have now wasted two minutes, fifth grade! Let's review. What did we learn yesterday? Cameron, what was the name of the story?"

"Shiloh."

"What is Shiloh?"

“A dog.”

“What kind of dog?”

“A beagle.”

A boy laughs and shakes his head.

“Troy! I don’t want to have to keep telling you to sit down and be quiet! My cell phone is coming out next and I will call your parents if you don’t learn how to be quiet! What grade are you in, Troy? Stop acting like you’re in preschool!”

Troy rolls his eyes and continues to talk. The other students become quiet.

“You can stay in with me during recess for the rest of the week, Troy.”

“I don’t care.”

“I’m glad you don’t care because I *do* care. I’m not here to babysit you; I’m here to teach you. I did not go to school for *six years* to babysit.”

She continues to ask questions. Students answer them each time. They seem to be locked into the lesson.

An object flies over and hits Nina.

“Hey! Who threw that at me?” Nina shouts. “That’s not funny!”

“Troy, what’s your mom’s cell phone number?” Ms. I asks as she walks over to his desk. “Don’t waste my time giving me a fake one because you know I can go right over to my desk and pull out her information. Everyone please read pages 156 and 157 by yourself.

I’m going to call Troy’s mom.”

Troy recites the number aloud and Ms. I presses the digits into her cell phone. She steps over to the corner of the room. There’s no answer. She leaves a voicemail.

“Hello, this is Ms. I, the fifth-grade reading teacher at Vann. I’m calling you on behalf of Troy because he’s having a bit of a problem behaving in class today.”

Ms. I returns to the front of the classroom and asked the students to take turns reading aloud for the next ten minutes.

“Put up your hardback readers and pull out your grammar practice book. Open up to page thirty-four and thirty-three. Just rip out pages thirty-three and thirty-four.”

“Is this a test?” a girl whispers.

“It’s a quiz,” Ms. I answers. “I am counting this as a quiz grade. These are common and proper nouns. These are things we went over—well, yesterday but we talked about them last week too. On page thirty-three at the top underline every common noun and for the proper nouns you’re going to write—TROY!”

“We’re going to write Troy?” a student asks.

“No, you’re going to circle the proper nouns. And I will walk around and write minus one on your paper if I see you talking.”

The students begin to take the quiz. For the first time the room is completely silent.

“Okay, four minutes left! Finish it up!”

“I did not get to the back yet,” a girl complains.

“I’m not finished,” another says.

“Okay well, I’ll give you a few extra minutes the next time we have class so you can finish up.”

It’s 1:15. Reading is over.

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The students are back in Mr. Muchow's class, sitting in their desks, awaiting instructions. They continue to talk as he approaches the front of the room.

"Today, we're going to work on some science. It's going to be fun. We're going to make planes—"

"Could you tell Richard to stop messing with my desk, please?" a boy yells.

"Stop it! I'm here to *teach* you—stop fussing and acting like kindergarteners! Stop complaining about every little thing!"

The students are silent.

"We're going to make a plane out of Popsicle sticks, rubber bands, straws, rubber bands, and fishing line," he continues. This is a variable investigation and since we've been discussing that lately, can anyone tell me some variables that might affect how far the plane will fly?"

Hands go up.

"The top straw?" a student offers.

"Maybe. Anyone else?"

"The air?"

"Try again," Mr. Muchow prods.

"How big the rubber band is?"

"Yes, good! The size of the rubber band is definitely a variable. How fat or skinny it is will affect the weight of the plane and how far it will go. Does anyone else have a variable that could affect the distance of the plane?"

He calls on another student.

“Are we going to pull the string through the clear straw?”

“Yes. Do you have a variable?”

“No.”

“Oh, I thought you did. Who else has a variable that might affect the plane and how far it would go?”

“How far apart the straws are?”

“Well, no. The directions on how we make the plane are going to be consistent. Each plane is going to have the same distance between the straws. The main variables are the number of times that you wind the propeller the size of your particular rubber band.”

He goes over the plane-making instructions for ten minutes, going over each step two or three times. He passes out the materials amid chatter that grows louder and louder.

The students take turns using the hole-puncher to poke holes in the center of the jumbo straw. Another teacher, Ms. Tillman, comes in to help a few of the students.

When the directions call for the stapling of the Popsicle sticks to the straw there is a problem: the staples aren’t long enough to go through the wood. The students start complaining.

“The stapler isn’t working, Mr. Muchow!”

“This is whack!”

“Is it time to go home yet?”

“Okay, everyone, let’s use tape instead,” Mr. Muchow insists. “Give me a second to look for some duct tape.”

He disappears into the coat closet for a couple of minutes. Students begin to talk. Some of them don't want to make the planes anymore; they sit them down on their desks and continue talking to their neighbors.

A group of boys gather towards the back of the room, taking turns to see if they can "make the stapler work" by taking a few steps back, running forward, and lunging onto the stapler. A girl on the other side of the room fumes, "I wish she would staple me. Stop before I punch you."

When Mr. Muchow reappears, he walks around the room, giving each student a strip of duct tape. The students are in their own worlds now, preoccupied with other thoughts and conversations. His attempts to get them quiet by asking for silence are futile.

"Okay, everyone. Put your names on the planes and make sure you write large enough so no one else will be able to claim it as theirs. Tomorrow we will finish these and for homework—I am talking to the class, Do you mind?" He looks at Tanayshia. "Get that smirk off your face! Don't you ever smirk at me!"

Reddened, he bangs on her desk. "That's the biggest problem some of you have! Don't you dare smirk at an adult who is correcting you! You're lucky you're not *my daughter*! I'd pull you out of this room and show you the meaning of respect! What you did was rude, disrespectful, and low! You are better than that! And that goes for the rest of you! I work my butt off to teach you math, science, and social studies. I am trying to teach you! Inappropriate behavior is something you look up to! That is another problem that you all have."



The room falls silent. The students don't dare to begin talking. Mr. Muchow shakes his head and puts away the plane supplies. When he has put away the last plane he stands near the door and sighs.

"Are there any bus riders?" he asks.

Students raise their hands. Troy gets up from his seat and heads for the door. Mr. Muchow shakes his head.

"Okay, all the bus riders may go to the room and get your coats to get ready to leave. Troy, where are you going?"

"Right here."

"No, you're not. Stay at your desk until they call for the bus riders."

"Ugh," Troy says, but he takes a seat.

Bells sound and the voice of principal Shemeca Crenshaw is heard throughout the school: "Teachers, there will be a meeting at three o'clock. Bring the student progress monitoring booklet."

Mr. Muchow walks his students outside. The school day is over.

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Reading counselor and school interventionist Ms. Gibson is one of a few teachers at Vann who is familiar with the glory days of Wallace and Doris Brevard. Although she aspires to one day be a principal, she has often been turned down from principal training academies.

"It's disappointing and sometimes I feel like it's because of my age, but I have the experience and I know what it takes," she says.

She insists that Vann is a good school, but it needs more support. She believes that the scores don't truly reflect how smart the students are.

"These kids are great. They get on my nerves," she says, laughing. "But honestly, they're good kids. They do need more structure, though."

When asked if current Principal Crenshaw provides that structure, Gibson looks down and shakes her head no.

"She's gotten better but she's used to leading high school students. To make that change and within months be prepared to lead younger children is a challenge, and I don't think she was prepared enough. You have to set the tone as principal and we don't see her around enough. We teachers are a team and the principal is like our coach. She needs to be more of a disciplinarian and more encouraging when it comes to achievement. We can't do it alone. The principal really is the mainstay. I would like to see her around in the classrooms more often, checking on the students and making sure we're doing all that we can do."

## VII.

### **“Putting Together the Pieces of the Achievement Gap Puzzle”**

Trying to solve the achievement gap issue is like battling a wildfire. Each year more trees are pulled into the fire—more failing teachers, more failing schools, more failing districts. The flames continue to burn, growing higher and heavier, until no solution seems to be enough to put them out.

Some argue that incompetent teachers who are safe within the realms of tenure don't have to challenge the students; they don't have to try. They won't be reprimanded for their students' low scores or made to address their teaching methods. The teachers who don't produce high achievement scores aren't fired. They aren't dismissed. They remain in the system.

Some blame the parents, claiming that they don't put in enough time and effort into their children's education. They don't show up in droves to parent-teacher conferences or open house events. They don't send their children to school with the right supplies. They don't discipline them at home and expect the teachers and staff to serve as both educators and disciplinarians.

Some blame the entire educational system, denouncing it as a racist and oppressive institution that facilitates the lack of black student achievement. The better educational programs and opportunities are given to the white schools. The best teachers flock to the suburban schools with the best achievement records, parental support, and educational equipment. The black schools seem to be the schools with the inexperienced teachers and decrepit facilities.

CNN's *Black in America 2* took on the subject in 2009, crafting a news piece around Principal Steve Perry of Capitol Preparatory School in Hartford, Connecticut. The achievement

gap in the state is one of the highest in the country; the average black student is three grade levels behind his white peers. Yet Capitol Preparatory boasts a 100 percent graduation rate; each graduate goes on to a four-year college.

Most of the students deal with serious socioeconomic problems—one student deals with a drug-using mother and an alcoholic father—and without Capitol Prep, they would more than likely be learning in an ill-equipped school that suffered from the typical ailments of a low-achieving minority school. However, Capitol Prep is a magnet school. Although it is still regarded as a public institution, its enrollment process and its focus on college preparatory classes separate it from its non-magnet counterparts. Whereas public schools have an open registration for any students that live within the neighborhood's boundaries, Capitol Prep has an enrollment process that leaves it open to students from all neighborhoods, with a limited capacity; there's an extensive waiting list every year.

Perry is often praised for his strict rules about students' decorum, his insistence that all of his students must be trained and prepared, and his demand for high-quality teaching. He is an educational correspondent for CNN and he is sought after as a consultant and motivational speaker.

Schools and universities are amazed at how well his school works, how motivated the students are, and how his students avoid being a part of the achievement gap. But what Perry is doing is nothing new. It was done before in a traditional public school. It was done before in a public school where there was no lottery system or application process, where all students were poor and faced similar challenges. It was done before: years ago, decades ago.

## VIII.

### **“Attempting to Fix a Broken Community without any Trust”**

In the University of Pittsburgh’s School of Education, in a large office fit with an elephant-print rug and bookshelves that touch the ceiling, sits the dean of the school, Alan Lesgold. His department is a financial investor in University Prep, the only middle and high school in the Hill.

“I just feel that the kids at Vann—well, a lot of inner-city kids get mixed signals a lot, you know? No matter how well you teach, and how much you want the students to work harder, you’ve got to send the right signals.”

Lesgold intertwines his hands and leans forward. “For example, let’s take my school, University Prep. We’re investing half a million dollars into this school because I believe that these kids can learn and I want them to believe in themselves and learn as well. But you know what happened yesterday? The water fountains stopped working. I can’t call a plumber because the plumber has to be from the union that works with the school board and I have to wait for them to hire a new plumber for this area of schools. So, although I support the union and the school board, who ends up getting screwed? The kids. The water fountains not working is just another signal that the education system does not care about them.”

When discussing education Lesgold is careful to never blame one part of the system for failure. He knows that there are several elements that determine why a school is successful.

“The mystery of why these schools achieve less than other schools is like peeling an onion to figure out what the problem is. But since I’m in the education field, one of the main

problems is the preparation of the teachers. If you go to school for education, and you teach right after college, or even graduate school in some cases, you don't have ample time to learn how to teach, and you don't have ample time to teach more than a few subjects. When it comes to math, especially, you have to be well-trained to get that across to students. And a lot of these students have parents that aren't comfortable with math, so the majority of the instruction and help is coming from the teacher. If the teacher cannot properly teach it, the students won't learn."

With the advent of No Child Left Behind and its narrow focus on subject area content, Lesgold feels that it has failed both teachers and students.

"No Child Left Behind has failed dramatically. It allowed states to rely upon examinations that would make them look good on the lower grades but not good in the higher grades. The students really haven't learned math because the teachers are drilling them on the superficial stuff. We need to redesign No Child Left Behind so that students are really learning the concepts, not just trying to pass a test tomorrow morning."

Tests are not Lesgold's top priority. It's all about teacher preparation: One good or bad teacher can make or break a student. One teacher's impact can affect the outlook a student has as he moves on to the next grade. One teacher can shape how a student sees the world.

"It's more than just being demanding of teachers. It's about building a community of *trust*. Not every teacher is successful every year. Not every principal is successful every year. A lot of what fails is that the building of a community takes a lot.

"What we're asking someone to do, if you think about it, is asking every parent and every kid to come around to trusting the school system. It's kind of like going into a community and

saying, everyone who has a spouse that cheated on you, trust them right now. The odds of that happening all at once, magically? Zero. That's basically the same thing."

Lesgold has read countless studies about educational advancement and the role that poverty and race play in the educational system. But he isn't keen on accepting the notion that race is the biggest factor. To him, race, while definitely a factor, isn't a major one.

"I've read Sizemore's *Abashing Anomaly* and I think that high-achieving schools in communities that have been impoverished financially for an extended period of time are anomalies because the erosion of trust is very difficult to reverse. I don't think it has anything explicitly to do with race except to the extent that race allows you to build a mental model of why everybody around you is as messed up as you are. It takes a long time to trust somebody."

The time it takes to trust someone is what he hopes to build at University Prep. The institution is considered a city school and the education department at Pitt has an agreement with the school system that gives it certain responsibilities.

"We provide a lot of coaching for the teachers," Lesgold says. "We have a program in the technology area. We actually offer a technology course, but in addition we're trying to help the teachers learn to use the information technologies to do a better job in teaching. Get the kids to do more writing, more numbers. When you're in school, you can get more work done if you have access to programs like Microsoft Word and Excel compared to if you had no tools at all. We're also trying to do what we can to create a better, more supportive out of school environment and to help the kids here get caught up."

Yet the issue of trust pervades the department's every move. It's not just the lack of trust between the community and the school—it's the lack of trust within the school system.

Lesgold wants to give the students access to technology, but the school's union contracts that are related to computer technology have not made it easy. It's an apparent issue of trust. None of the teachers at University Prep have the passwords to be able to reconnect the computers to the network. Every time the computer has trouble connecting to the network, they have to wait until a computer technician comes out from the central office.

Lesgold is aware that Vann could potentially close at the end of spring, but he can't find many reasons as to why it should remain open.

"The question is, Do buildings teach kids or do teachers teach kids?" says Lesgold. "If you figure out which teachers and what type of leadership produces success, it shouldn't matter what building it's in—except for that element of community trust that does matter. Did somebody take a hard look at what the community component was in Vann? Was that attributed to the success? But what we're looking at is three groups of teachers and three principals spread out in three large buildings with very few kids in each building. I'd rather see the money going into teacher support than paying all the extra costs. Did they look deeply enough at why Vann was successful? The one place where I would look beyond—are the schools being successful because of different levels of involvement with the community? If they are, you better keep those. Beyond that, buildings are just buildings. School is about the people in the end."

"That's not an unreasonable thing for the board to consider how they are spending the money," he continues. "The only place where it gets unreasonable is if they're not thinking about the important factors when deciding which schools are open and which ones close and that's really hard. When trust exists, it exists over very small units. I don't think we pay enough attention to that—what really makes a school successful? It's also, how much is the community



supporting you? How often are the parents in that building? Do they trust the system enough to come into that building?”

In addition to trying to build trust to bolster achievement, a major problem that Lesgold faces at University Prep is the laptop program. The department wants every student in the upper grades to have a computer. However, for a student to receive a laptop at least one parent has to come into the school for a brief orientation session. Only small numbers of the parents have done that—and as a result more than half of the students cannot take the laptops home.

“Why don’t the other parents come in?” Lesgold says. “Well, maybe they work during school hours. Or do they not trust coming into the building? Since the African-American middle class have fled the Hill and become dead set on placing their children in high achieving magnet schools, the neighborhood has continued to suffer and some parents just don’t understand the value of an education. And that, to me, is unfortunate because the way our system is built is all about results. It’s all about how well the students score on the tests, not about how much potential we believe they have. We’re telling parents about scores and not promise.”

“We started to see that when No Child Left Behind began. Instead of the focus being on excellence, it was: ‘Find the kids that are just below proficient level and push them up a little bit.’ If you’re doing badly there’s no point in wasting time on you because you’re not gonna get your score high enough to help the school system make AYP. If you’re already doing pretty decent then there’s no purpose on wasting time on you because the only thing that matters is if you’re proficient.”

## IX.

### **“It’s all About the Principal, Brevard’s Words Prove True”**

The achievement gap jumps from state to state, county to county, city to city. It feeds off teachers’ negative attitudes, school board members’ ulterior motives, parents’ lack of concern for their children’s education, and community leaders who deny the significance its existence. It is stoppable, but those who are the most capable of watering down the flames would prefer to waste time arguing over who is at fault.

Every year, hundreds of studies are released about the gap—why it exists, how to close it, why it will never close. Thousands of newspaper articles lend ink to the topic, questioning it, proposing methods to eradicate it. Countless books—*After Brown, Achievement Gap and How it Can Be Closed*, *The Black-White Achievement Gap*, *No Excuses: Closing the Achievement Gap*, *Getting Rid of The Achievement Gap* line themselves on library and book store shelves, reporting the newest findings. Magazines address the issue as well: *The New Yorker*’s Steven Brill wrote “The Rubber Room” about the system’s incompetent teachers. Katherine Boo wrote “Expectations: Can the Students who Became a Symbol of Failed Reform be Rescued?” to highlight the struggles of a group of underprivileged students. The March 15, 2010, edition of *Newsweek* featured a cover with a school’s blackboard and the words “We Must Fire Bad Teachers” in white chalk. *Essence* reported an educational piece entitled “The Middle Class Achievement Gap.”

There were even large-scale movements across the country decades earlier, in attempts to close the gap all at once. The most popular, Effective Schools Movement, was headed by

educational scholar Ronald Edmonds. The movement's main priority was to find the elements for an effective school and implement it in other schools. According to Edmonds, the qualities for such a school were "the principal's leadership and attention to the quality of instruction, a pervasive and broadly understood instructional focus, and orderly safe climate conducive to teaching and learning, teacher behaviors that convey the expectation that all students are expected to obtain at least minimum mastery and the use of measures of pupil achievement as the basis for program evaluation."

In other words, the principal was exceedingly important. He needed to have the ability to be an effective leader and to oversee the elements of the school that were both helpful and detrimental. He needed to be able to make change. The curriculum and goals needed to be set and understood by all teachers. Everyone involved needed to have high expectations for every student. The tests needed to accurately judge students weaknesses and strength so that they could both be improved.

Yet, despite the popularity and success of the movement, it soon faded away. With the changes in education, educators felt that some of the methods and ideologies were too outdated to accommodate to the newer system.

The most current educational movement, besides the influx of charter schools, is the Harlem Children's Zone in Harlem, New York. What's different about the Children's Zone, however, is that it targets all aspects of the achievement gap. It's more than just a group of charter schools. It's more than a training ground for effective teachers. It's more than a parent-help initiative. It's an initiative to eradicate poverty, along with the mindsets and behaviors that

often foster its continuity. It's an initiative to help blacks become excited about education—excited about achieving high marks in all grade levels, and excited about the pursuit of attaining a college degree.

The founder, Geoffrey Canada, designed a program to help poor blacks achieve from the time they are born to the time they graduate from high school. The Zone is a combination of academic charter schools, daycare centers, health care centers, physical fitness gyms, and social welfare centers. It encompasses ninety-seven blocks in Harlem and serves thousands of students, all from difficult socioeconomic backgrounds.

The Harlem Children's Zone is so effective that President Obama frequently mentions the movement's success and wishes to implement the program in other cities. The hope behind the movement is that, if children are nurtured while they are still in the womb and raised well once they are born, their chances for a better life will increase.

In the Children's Zone, the work begins before the student is born. Mothers attend classes for nine weeks where they learn proper care for newborns, the proper activities to engage the newborn in, and the importance of the relationship that is developed between the child and the parents.

After the baby becomes a toddler, he is placed in a preschool where he will be exposed to foreign languages, art, and play. Once the student has matured there's elementary school and high school. Both feature a healthy breakfast, lunch, and snacks, along with productive interactions with peers and instructors. Once the students graduate from the high school level of the Children's Zone they are more than prepared to attend college, more than prepared to succeed in the world.

Although the model of the Children's Zone seems to be the perfect solution to the achievement gap and the starting ground for the end of inner city poverty, the costs are too expensive for every school district to be able to implement the model: It cost a little over seventy million dollars for Canada to run the program.

According to *Newsweek*, President Obama has placed ten million dollars away in hopes of creating more than twenty other Harlem children's Zones in other American cities. He hopes that the implementation of such programs will eventually leave the words "achievement gap" in the past.

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In *The Black-White Achievement Gap*, authors Ron Paige and Elaine Witty argue that the achievement gap can be closed based on their fifth reason: "There are great schools closing the gap even now." Of the schools that are listed—SEED public charter school, YES Prep Public Schools, Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) and Mabel Wesley Elementary School—all are magnet schools except one: Mabel Wesley.

The fact that they only list one traditionally public school indicates what society has come to see as superior education. Magnet schools are too often portrayed as the achievement gap's savior, and as schools that can and do better than the traditionally public schools. The faith in the public schools has been diminished to a size of dismal proportions: Parents trust that the charter schools will educate their children better than the neighborhood public schools. Even if a charter school is miles away, most parents are willing to send their children away. More saddening though, is the fact that most texts praise the charter schools instead of focusing on

how the public schools can be made better. Although the books don't always focus on the magnet schools (Karin Chenoweth's *It's Being Done in Unexpected Schools* and Samuel Casey Carter's *Lessons From 21 High Performing, High Poverty Schools*), the mere mention of a public school exudes disdain from those who are all too familiar with the system.

Public schools seem to have failed to earn the trust of the parents. Most continue to hope that when the lottery winners are announced at the magnet schools that their child's name will be on the list.

Paige and Witty also argue, "African-American leaders have for too long been absent from the battle front of the black/white achievement gap." In Pittsburgh, the city chapter of the NAACP marched around the school board in the winter of 2009, demanding equity for black students and the closing of the achievement gap.

In cities all over America, the NAACP has been relatively silent about blacks and education. They continue the dialogue for desegregation and decentralization, but they fail to push for achievement. They fail to see the larger issue.

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In *Moving Every Child Ahead*, authors Rebell and Wolff report, "The Education Trust (2006) has estimated that nationwide, on average, spending on children in high-poverty districts is \$825 less per student than spending on students in low-poverty districts."

Many studies mirror these same facts, these same ideas, but none question the glitches in the system. If a poor urban school is given less money and still achieves high scores, would the extra money make a significant difference? Sure, the new technology would help, but does extra

money, aside from what's needed for the basic learning, always result in better opportunities for students?

In Memphis, the Memphis City School board has had a long history of mismanaging the funds that it receives for the education of students. One year, in the midst of a school board meeting, a board member complained that her back was hurting. Another admitted that she had been seeing her doctor for back pains recently. The board conducted a vote and agreed that they needed to buy more comfortable, back-supporting chairs for their five-hour meetings. The original proposed cost for the chairs was seven thousand dollars.

The scores for the Memphis City Schools as a whole were low; few urban schools stood out. But those that did didn't have access to the technological opportunities that the larger schools had. Seven thousand dollars would have been enough to purchase more advanced books, but the teachers organized weekly field trips to the local libraries. The students didn't need an excuse like lack of educational funding to succeed.

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In Rhode Island, Central Falls High School was among the lowest achieving schools in the district. Seven percent of the students were up to standards and the graduation rate was lower than twenty percent. Since the school had failed to achieve AYP for several consecutive years, the superintendent was forced to make plans to reform the school.

She asked the teachers to stay for twenty five minutes after school every day, to communicate with the students during lunch, and to attend summer workshops to improve their teaching skills. The teacher's union rejected the terms.

The superintendent had no choice. She fired them all. The media had a field day. The act was unprecedented; the move was almost too shocking to believe. The teachers were taken aback. The students were speechless.

The superintendent had sent a message: Teachers were integral to the education process and if they weren't on the same page with the NCLB regulations, then they would be let go.

According to the Effective Schools Movement, after principal leadership, teaching was the next top component of a quality education. If a student encounters teachers that are willing to successfully move students from point A to point B, then the student has a chance at continuing with a newly instilled can-do attitude throughout the rest of his education. But if the teacher is not committed, then the child is at a disadvantage from the first day of school and may not make it to the last.

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It's no secret that the high-achieving, minority-populated, and traditional public schools don't make the morning headlines. For Jerome Taylor of the University of Pittsburgh's Africana Studies department, this is a huge issue. To draw attention to the positive schools, Taylor started a program: Dame Dame Schools. He and his team examine the test scores and attendance from



minority populated schools all over the country. They pick out the schools with the most gains and the most success and invite them to Pittsburgh to give a lecture.

In Chicago, Illinois, Principal Loretta Brown sets the bar high for her Dame Dame qualified school, Leland Elementary. Every morning she gets to school at least a half hour before her teachers and students. She goes over her notes from the previous day, just in case she missed something when she was reading them the night before.

As the students quietly shuffle into the building, her work begins. She greets the children and the teachers. She asked them about what they did after school. She asks if they're ready to learn something new during the brand-new day.

The students beam, shaking their heads yes. They enjoy completing the challenging group projects; they want to do more of those. They especially enjoy the black history blocks that were parent-student assignments.

A few students wave to Ms. Brown as they head off to their classrooms. She stands in the hallway for a few seconds, watching them walk away. She then decides on what class she wants to watch for the day.

Leland's grade levels span from kindergarten through third grade. Eighty-four percent of the students are at or above the state standard. The remaining 16 percent of students account for the students who are in the special education program. Brown credits five fundamentals for her schools' success: instruction, instructional leadership, professional capacity, learning climate, and family and community involvement.

Each of her teachers is expected to hold high expectation for the students. The curriculum that she helps to design is built to be in line with the Illinois standards. Her students are expected to read every day. Instruction is rigorous, assignments are challenging.

Brown and a group of her teachers often examine the student data in after-school meetings to see what teaching methods are working and which ones need to be tweaked. Since her students must take the ISAT, the Iowa Standards Achievement Test, she ensures that her students complete ISAT-like tests every five weeks so that she can identify how they can improve.

In 2009, Leland Elementary was honored by the United States Department of Education by receiving the National Blue Ribbon Award. The award, given to schools that achieve the highest achievement scores, is the highest award that an American school can receive. Yet, despite all of Leland's success and Brown's impressive techniques, she receives little recognition from the school system. Her supervisor has praised her for her accomplishments, but representatives from the administration don't attempt to shadow the classrooms to learn her solution to black achievement.

A little more than a thousand miles away from Leland Elementary stands Dame qualified Alcott Elementary in Houston, Texas. The school's story is the same.

Principal Marshall Scott considers himself accountable for the performance of his students. He arrives to school early and leaves late. He uses incentives to get his students motivated: There's the 100 Percent Club for those students who receive perfect scores on assignments, there are rewards for making the honor roll, and there are promises.

Scott once promised his students that if they succeeded on the state exam that he would kiss a pig. They did. He kept his word.

Throughout the school day, the building is quiet—except for some of the classrooms when the students are completing group task, playing a game, or answering a teacher’s question. One thing the students or teachers never hear during the school day is an announcement over the school intercom. Scott doesn’t believe in that.

“A teacher could be on the brink of having a magical moment with the students and I wouldn’t want to interrupt that by announcing, ‘Miss Jones, you need to move your car.’ That would be unnecessary and distracting.”

He doesn’t spend a significant amount of time in his office completing paperwork during the school day; he wants to know everything that’s going on in his building. He sometimes disregards the board’s rules on educational matters if he feels that they will not lead to his students’ progress. Yet, just like Brown and just like Brevard, the administration’s attempts to replicate his schools success never happen.

## **X.**

### **“Vann’s Struggles come to an End”**

On March 24, 2010, the school board voted to close Pittsburgh Vann. All nine board members, with the exception of Vann’s representative Mark Brentley, voted yes. Vann was to close its doors indefinitely on June 30, 2010. Parents would need to enroll their students in Weil or Miller, or, if they were lucky enough, they would receive a seat in a magnet school in another part of the city, they could enroll there.

On June 15, 2010, parents and community members walked into Pittsburgh Vann, armed with cameras and batteries. Students dressed as newspaper carriers—donning white button down tops, felt hats, and khaki pants—dug into their satchels and passed out graduation programs as parents entered the doors. As homage to their school’s namesake, each program read, “Pittsburgh Vann Courier, Last Edition 1914-2010.”

Doris Brevard’s picture and biography were front-page news. Her three successors—Martin Slomberg, Derrick Hardy, and Shemeca Crenshaw—appeared at the bottom of the paper. Inside, the photos of the fifth-grade graduates were placed next to their favorite memories, teachers, and future plans.

In the auditorium, blue and white balloons floated high on stage and silver and crème crepe paper curled up alongside the railings. Outside the auditorium, on both sides of the hallway, massive graduation cakes waited to be eaten.

Kindergarteners, having graduated minutes before, smiled for photos with their families. Teachers stood against their doorways, taking in the scene, realizing that Vann’s final day had

come. As the last few parents took their seats for the graduation, the fifth graders eagerly awaited to enter the auditorium.

“Good morning, parents,” Principal Shemeca Crenshaw said as she stood onstage. “Before we begin I would like to say a few things. Parents, please do not rush out into the aisles when the graduates start coming in. We are running on a time limit and we need to get through everything on the program. I understand that you all want to take pictures of your graduates, The students have been instructed to stop near the side of the stage before they go to their seats so there’ll be plenty of opportunities for pictures.”

Dr. Crenshaw waited for the auditorium to quiet down, and signaled that the ceremony could begin. In their shiny blue caps and gowns, the graduates marched into the auditorium amidst cheers. Parents rushed out into the aisles and in front of the stage. Dr. Crenshaw shooed them away and shook her head.

The last few notes of “Pomp and Circumstance” arose from the piano, and the last fifth-grade graduation that Vann would ever host began. There was the Pledge of Allegiance. There were songs from the kindergarten class. There were speeches by each former principal, even Doris Brevard. Although the auditorium would never be completely quiet—murmurs and talking infiltrated each speaker and musical performance—there was a sense of loss in the air. Each moment that passed was a sore reminder of a moment that could never happen in Vann again.

As the names of graduates were called, parents crowded the stage’s side steps to take photos. “Yay!” “Go Anaya!” “Go Nina!” and “I see you, graduate!” punctured through the now noisy auditorium. Ms. Gibson wiped tears from under her eyes and clapped for each of her

students. The fourth-grade class looked on with envy, knowing that they would have to graduate in another building next year.

As the last graduate received her diploma, the fifth graders organized themselves on a set of risers and prepared to sing one final song. Barely audible over the clapping and cheering from parents, the students beamed with excitement as they swayed from left to right.

Once the song was over, they dispersed and took more photos with their friends and families. Recognizing his former principal, Marcus Green grabbed his daughter's hand and headed towards the stage.

"Mrs. Brevard! Mrs. Brevard!" he pushed his way onto the stage. "Do you remember me? Marcus Green?"

Brevard smiled. "Oh, yes. I remember you."

"This is my daughter," he held her shoulders. "She graduated from Vann, too. Could you take a picture with us?"

She obliged, and within seconds, other parents who remembered her asked to take photos with her as well. As she made her way out of the auditorium and neared the front door, an older woman tapped her on the back.

"Mrs. Brevard! You were my principal! I know you probably don't remember me but I remember you! What was it that you used to say? Line up against that wall, get that line straight, stand up tall!" she laughed. "I used to think you were so strict but now I know why you did that. We could use what you did in our schools today and I just wanted to tell you that I really appreciate what you did."

“You’re welcome,” Brevard smiled. She walked outside the doors, greeting people along the way to her car. When she was away from the crowd, she shook her head. “Things have changed. A lot has changed.”

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