

Creating a ‘Common Geography’: A Long-Term Partnership in Pittsburgh

Bill Strickland

By his own admission, Bill Strickland’s life turned around in 1963, when he was in high school and a teacher introduced him to ceramics. Five years later, while a student at the University of Pittsburgh, Strickland sought to provide other young people with similar experiences when he opened the Manchester Craftsman’s Guild (MCG), which offered informal, after-school arts programs and an exhibition space in a neighborhood devastated by economic decline and urban strife.

Nearly forty years later, MCG has grown into a nationally recognized enterprise, MCG Youth, which offers programs for middle and high-school students and teachers during the school day, after school, and in summers. The Apprenticeship Training Program (ATP) is an after-school program that offers a variety of courses in ceramics, photography, visual arts, and design; more than 400 students enroll each year. An evaluation of an MCG program for middle school students found that suspensions and referrals for behavioral problems plummeted among participating students. The organization has created similar programs, through partnerships with public school systems, in Cincinnati, Grand Rapids, Michigan, and San Francisco.

Strickland also operates the Bidwell Training Center, a vocational training organization originally created for displaced steel workers. The center now includes programs in gourmet food preparation; chemical, office, and medical technologies; and the arts; and runs a national label, MCG Jazz, that has won four Grammy awards.

The programs of the combined Manchester Bidwell Corporation have won numerous awards, and in 1996 Strickland was named a MacArthur Fellow by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

In 2006, MCG’s partnership with the Pittsburgh Public Schools expanded when the organization was asked to implement a whole-school reform model, Learner Centered Arts Integration, in the Helen S. Faison K-8 Arts Academy.

Strickland spoke of the capacities needed to build and sustain partnerships with the school system with Editor Robert Rothman.

How would you characterize your partnership with the Pittsburgh Public Schools?

Our partnership with the public schools is a good one. The superintendent and the board of ed are actively engaged in this partnership. We actually have an agreement--a legal agreement--that outlines the expectations and the hoped-for accomplishments.

So it's a situation where we have pledged assets--some of our own money, some of our staff, some of our ideas--to this collaboration with the board. That's resulted in both the after-school program and this relationship with the Faison school where we are helping to co-manage the program.

Has that relationship developed over time?

We've had a fifteen-year relationship with the Pittsburgh public school system. So it didn't start yesterday. But the Faison program, we're going into our second year, where we actually have faculty at that school every day working with their faculty on behalf of the kids.

That's a two-year relationship. But Manchester has had a fifteen-year relationship with the Pittsburgh Public Schools--a very successful one.

Do you have similar relationships with other organizations that work with the schools?

No. We have an exclusive relationship with the Pittsburgh Public Schools.

So it's a bilateral relationship.

Yes.

How would you say you've built that partnership? What skills did you have to develop in order to make it effective?

I think spending a lot of time with the public school system itself, and the administrators at the local school level, to understand what their needs and opportunities were, to make sure that our faculty and their faculty had time to get to know each other, and that there were activities that were conducted in both locations. That is, we've done teacher inservice training here at Manchester, physically on our property. We of course have the after-school kids who come here to our property. But we've also had opportunities to do exhibits of student work from the public school system here at our facility.

So it's really a two-way street. It's very important that staff from the public schools come to your facility, in addition to our folks going to theirs. So it becomes part of a common geography.

Have you developed new capacities in order to operate this Faison arrangement?

We've had to deepen the number of staff people that we have. And we've had to learn how to translate more of our work into more of an academic setting. So we've increased our capacity to work on curriculum as a part of this capacity-building.

How have you done that?

By getting experts in the field to help us develop the curriculum, like Dr. Bruce Jones, who's a nationally renowned expert in curriculum and evaluation. And working, of course, with the curriculum people at the district itself, who are pretty good.

How do you go about building partnerships in the new cities with which you're working?

Going to talk with people in the school districts in partnership with the people who are running the centers in those cities. So we really take the Pittsburgh experience and translate it into Cincinnati, for example, where the woman who runs the Cincinnati center used to work for the Cincinnati public schools. She was a principal.

We got a chance to meet the school superintendent when we were beginning the conversation. We met the president of the school board there. And we actually made a presentation to the school board itself. And there were community leaders in Cincinnati, for example, who helped us set up meetings with the school district. Because they were more familiar than we were.

So we have used that as the way of building relationships. We did the same thing in Grand Rapids, where the corporate sector, in this case, Steelcase in particular, was able to get us to meet the new school superintendent in Grand Rapids, brought him to Pittsburgh, had him see our center, so that we began to form a partnership on the basis of mutual familiarity. It was local people in Grand Rapids who actually set this thing up. And it worked out very successfully.

And in San Francisco, the director of the center initiated the relationship with a middle school program in her neighborhood. And that's literally how the program got started.

So we've all learned from each other in terms of how to approach the public school system to ensure that they are full and active partners in these relationships. And there's just no substitute for doing that.

After all this time, what are the lessons you've learned about the role of community organizations in education?

I think that they're fundamental. To the extent that we're going to have an educational system that is effective in this country, I think community organizations are going to play a vital role in the rebuilding of our educational system. And they have much to contribute by way of expertise, knowledge, familiarity, and community and relationship-building.

I think it just makes good practical sense for any school system to take advantage of these built-in partnership opportunities in their community. And I think the future of school systems is going to be a function of the ability to form relationships in the community, where they are, with both corporations and community-based organizations. I think both are essential to the rebuilding of our educational system.