

Manchester Bidwell Corporation, Pittsburgh



THE ENTRY POINT

A set of community-based organizations, under the umbrella of the Manchester Bidwell Corporation, creating pathways through education to employment in a neighborhood in need, using arts programming to inspire urban youth and innovative career training to support struggling adults

THE CHALLENGE

How can a city use the arts to inspire and educate urban youth and to change the lives of adults in transition through innovative career training?

THE PARTNERS

Manchester Bidwell Corporation
Manchester Craftsmen's Guild
Bidwell Training Center
Pittsburgh Public Schools

The Story

The inner-city Manchester neighborhood of Pittsburgh, like much of the rest of the region, has a history of economic and social upheaval. After riots in the late 1960s, an even more destructive force swept through Pittsburgh – the decline of the steel industry created widespread unemployment and a palpable loss of spirit among the people.

In 1968, Bill Strickland, inspired by his experiences with an artist/mentor as a teenager and partly in response to riots and burning that he had seen in the neighborhood, established the Manchester Craftsmen's Guild (MCG) to help combat the effects of the devastation experienced by the youth of that neighborhood. MCG was originally located in the basement of a row house and offered an informal, neighborhood-based art program and exhibition space.

In 1972, Strickland was asked to lead the Bidwell Training Center, an established vocational training organization that specialized in construction-trade skills. Strickland argued that if Pittsburgh were to enter a renaissance, the workforce needed technical and service-industry skills and that the transition Pittsburgh workers faced demanded time and a place for retraining. He convinced corporate and industry leaders to support Bidwell as an innovative training center for people in transition.

As the template of social change took shape, Strickland led a capital campaign to create a new home for MCG and the Bidwell Training Center that would reflect the beauty and level of excellence he believed poor people deserved. In 1984, the two organizations opened a new

62,000 square-foot center for arts and learning, including a 350-seat auditorium, which also serves the award-winning MCG Jazz label. MCG Jazz presents live performances, related educational programs, master classes, mentorship opportunities for students, who are able to attend the performances at low or no cost, and recordings that are distributed nationally and internationally.

In 1999, Manchester Bidwell Corporation (MBC) was incorporated as the parent organization of MCG, the Bidwell Training Center, and the Manchester Bidwell Development Trust. The creation of a parent organization promoted organizational stability through support for each subsidiary in management, administration, communications, and technology and provided a model for an effective and influential community educational center.

MBC has applied a strategy of consistent growth and a multifaceted approach to invigorating and supporting a local community in need. It has been cited as a unique example of what

It's hard to achieve success when you never leave the neighborhood. Manchester Craftsmen's Guild distinguished me from the footsteps of my eleven brothers and sisters. Until I came to the Guild, I was a reclusive minority kid and did not speak to White people outside of school. Now I was working side by side with an artist all day long, sharing his experiences. We'd pack up art, build a crate, and make things together. Art creates a commonality that breaks down the power structure found in conventional classrooms. I started to construct a social environment at the Guild, and suddenly I was caught up in a strategy that pushed me to become something.

— Sharif Bey, Manchester Craftsmen's Guild graduate

a pathway toward a smart education system might look like, with its joint focus on using the arts to inspire urban youth and changing the lives of adults in transition through innovative career training. At its core is an organizational culture that privileges respect for youth, adults, and communities with a focus on relationships as a foundation for learning and a dedication to providing the students and adults in its programs with access to the highest-quality educational opportunities, materials, and environments.

Using Learner-Centered, Relationship-Based Arts Education to Inspire Urban Youth

For hundreds of Pittsburgh's youth, MCG is a unique haven that fosters a sense of belonging and interconnectedness within the urban community. MCG programs offer students opportunities to create with their hands, hearts, and minds. From the dedication and discipline of craftsmanship, steered by a cadre of twenty full-time staff artists, students gain experiences that lead to social, emotional, intellectual, and artistic growth. MCG offers a variety of year-round school-day and after-school programming, including specialized experiential activities and opportunities for students in grades K–12. Most programs are free for Pittsburgh teens, and transportation is provided. MCG also provides professional development training for teachers and adults.

MCG's original after-school ceramics classes have grown into the nationally recognized enterprise MCG Youth, which offers programs for middle and high school students and their teachers during the school day, after school, and during the summer. The Apprenticeship Training

Program (ATP) is an after-school program that offers a variety of courses in the studio areas of ceramics, photography, digital arts, and design. Over four hundred students enroll each year. In 1998, the ATP received the Coming Up Taller Award from the President's Committee on Arts and Humanities and, in 2000, the U.S. Conference of Mayors and Americans for the Arts choose MCG to receive the award for exemplary youth programming. Artists-In-Schools (AIS), another MCG program, is a unique residency program that brings MCG staff artists into middle and high schools. The duration and scope of an AIS residency is subject to the curricular needs of the specific classroom. The Art Explorers program enables middle school students to critically examine artwork by contemporary artists and create exciting works of their own. Students are challenged to closely observe the artwork to discover meaning within context.

In 2006, MCG expanded its partnership with the Pittsburgh Public Schools through the implementation of Learner Centered Arts Integration (LCAI), a whole-school reform model within the Helen S. Faison K-8 Arts Academy. MCG partners with Faison to employ the arts as a central instructional and curriculum mechanism across all subject areas and grade levels to develop active, interdisciplinary learning experiences. In addition to a focus on whole-school arts integration, LCAI is learner centered and focuses on creating an environment in which adults pay attention to the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that learners bring to the table, with teachers recognizing the importance of building on the conceptual and cultural knowledge that students possess. This model also emphasizes leadership teams, with opportunities for learning and enrichment permeating the experience of the adults in the building as well. MCG's presence at Faison Academy is the culmination of best practices and research projects MCG has undertaken since 1986 and represents an evolution both in the depth of the organization's arts-integration approach and its partnership with the Pittsburgh Public Schools. MCG programs reach 3,200 students a year.

MCG's approach to reform rests on two basic tenets: the preservation of art and music teachers in public education, elevating them to the status of agents of change, and the importance of establishing an environment in which the relational aspect of education is valued. Evaluation of a prior MCG program for middle-schoolers that focused on arts integration noted a striking change in student behavior, with suspensions and referrals plummeting as children became more engaged in the classroom and interested in the content of subject areas they were working in.

Most whole school approaches to reform fail because the students are seen as walking test scores. If you grab students around their interests and empower teachers and administrators to show a real interest in them, then you have established the foundation of learning.

— Bruce A. Jones, David C. Anchin
Endowed Professor of Education at
the University of South Florida and
independent evaluator

Supporting Adults in Transition through Innovative Career Training

Bidwell Training Center is an accredited career and academic school, with programs structured to fill the specific needs of area employers. For each of Bidwell's nine associate and diploma programs – including chemical laboratory technician, horticulture, culinary program, office technology, and five specific medical programs – academic advisory boards represent leadership of new and emerging business sectors throughout western Pennsylvania. Like MCG's

facilities, Bidwell's equipment, technology, and training are state-of-the-art. Many of Bidwell's training programs feature hands-on internships with various companies, and the organization works with local and national corporate partners to identify high-demand careers that will be sustainable. Bidwell believes that education offered in an intelligent, planned, and financially sound manner will bear real results both for students and the greater community.

Students enrolled in Bidwell programs are as diverse as those found in any workplace. Some attend Bidwell to prepare for their first job; others are learning new career skills or wishing to

advance in their current field. Bidwell also offers support in GED preparation, life-skill counseling, and remedial learning in math and reading to center students without a high school diploma or the necessary academic skills to excel in its programs.

First of all, the building was beautiful and I wanted to come in and learn. The instructors and advisors treated me with respect at all times and were there to guide me in the right direction if I needed any kind of help. My training at Bidwell opened the door to a major corporation that would have never looked at me otherwise.

— Nancy Hessler, Bidwell Training Center graduate

In 2000, the U.S. Department of Labor honored Bidwell Training Center with the Epic Award, its highest honor for exemplary work in service to the community. Five hundred adults attend annually and, as of 2004, Bidwell had graduated nearly 80 percent of its students and placed an average of 75 percent of its graduates in full-time jobs.

The Challenges and Successes of Scaling Up

As with many other school reforms, MBC has faced challenges resulting from significant changes in the school district, particularly in its start-up year working with Faison Academy. As a new superintendent entered the district, twenty-two schools – including the one slated for MBC's LCAI program – were closed. Both a new school for the arts-integrated model and a new demographically matched control school for the federally funded quasi-experimental program had to be identified. MBC also faced the challenge of acclimating both school and district staff to the learning-centered, arts-integrated model, given that this is the first time such a model has been attempted in Pittsburgh on a schoolwide, rather than voluntary or class-by-class basis.

With high stakes for Faison Academy, Bruce Jones, the project's independent evaluator, also notes that MBC has to learn the kind of infrastructure and expertise needed on an organizational level to support such a model. Influencing the curriculum for an entire school is a very different role than MBC has played in the past, and the monitoring of its own infrastructure is essential.

On the national level, MBC has become a model for career training, arts, and learning due to its key characteristics of innovation, creativity, responsibility, and integrity. Cities across the country are now working to replicate MBC. Currently, three sites are operating successful programs in the arts and technology. Sites in San Francisco, Cincinnati, and Grand Rapids, Michigan, are continuing the legacy of hope through arts, education, and career training.

Strickland’s long-term vision is to open 100 federally funded but locally owned and operated centers based on the Manchester Bidwell model of engaging at-risk teenagers with the arts while, at the same time, offering struggling adults job-training programs in collaboration with the region’s leading employers. To bring about success, each center is expected to have the assets present in the Pittsburgh model – motivated faculty, a pleasant environment, state-of-the-art equipment, and an attitude that “values people as assets, not liabilities.”

Site Team Members

Joshua Green is director of education programs of the Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild.

Liz Hayes is director of human resources for the Manchester Bidwell Corporation.

Bruce Jones is an evaluator and David C. Anchin Endowed Professor of Education at the University of South Florida.

Gallina Naim is coordinator of the Learner Centered Arts Integration reform model.

Joanna Papada is vice president of operations of the Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild.

Bill Strickland is president of the Manchester Bidwell Corporation.

Jeffrey Thomas is president and chief executive officer of Burrell Foster.

For More Information

- Manchester Bidwell Corporation: <www.manchesterbidwell.org>
- Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild: <www.manchesterguild.org>
- Bidwell Training Center: <www.bidwell-training.org>
- MCG Jazz: <www.mcgjazz.org>
- Pittsburgh Public Schools: <www.pghboe.net>