



THE MODEL SCHOOLS INITIATIVE
Phase One: Closeout Report

Chronicling Five Years of Community-Based Work
in the US Virgin Islands Public Education System

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CHAPTER 1

Public Education Reform: “Whatever It Takes”

In the fall of 2005, St. Croix Foundation officially launched our *Model Schools Initiative* (MSI) at one of our community’s junior high schools with the ultimate goal of developing a strategic and collaborative approach to improve public education. In the years since, we have supported replicable models of literacy-based academic programs and instructional best practices in our local schools. Today, our Model Schools Initiative represents a targeted, community-based educational venture through which the Foundation has sought to address systemic problems in the Territory’s public education system.

While much of our work was done behind the scenes, from the very first day of our Initiative, the Foundation was given considerable access to our schools, to our educators, and to our students. We spent four consecutive years witnessing up-close and personal what so many in our community sit on the sidelines and pontificate about. The end result of our on-the-ground efforts has ultimately been extraordinary insight into what is working in our schools as well as what is plaguing them, based on both experiential and quantitative data. In truth, as objective “outsiders,” the Foundation began its journey into public education with no other agenda than to better understand some of the root causes of the “failures” in our public schools and to, in turn, develop ways to support them toward success.

Overall, our Model Schools Initiative has afforded us entrée into some of the complex challenges that make far too many of our schools ineffectual and inadequate in the 21st Century. On the flip side, however, we have also been wonderfully enlightened and encouraged by the untold stories of success, which illustrate the potential our public schools have to be truly innovative and highly effective¹ in preparing our students for successful lives beyond graduation.

As we now conclude the first stage of our Model Schools Initiative, the Foundation has drafted this comprehensive close-out report that summarizes what we have identified as our schools’ greatest assets as well as the most critical impediments to large-scale reform. Our work has also uncovered unique opportunities for all

¹ Sue Shannon and Pete Byslma (2007) of the Washington State’s Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) describe highly effective and high performing schools as those with the following 9 characteristics: “(1) Clear and Shared Vision and Purpose, (2) High Standards and Expectations for all students, (3) Effective School Leadership, (4) High Levels of Collaboration and Communication, (5) Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment Aligned with State Standards, (6) Frequent Monitoring of Teaching and Learning, (7) Focused Professional Development, (8) Supportive Learning Environment, (9) High Level of Family and Community Involvement” (Executive Summary, p. 6).

community stakeholders to collaboratively partner with our schools in ways that will have maximum impact.

But, the most important message we want to leave behind is this: systemic public educational excellence is within our reach, and rapid improvement is more readily attainable than most people think. The caveat is that the pathway to *real* reform here in the Virgin Islands is unquestionably more a matter of *will* and *commitment* than anything else, and it is going to take great focus and fidelity on the part of every stakeholder to make it a reality.

Why We Dared to Try

The surface answer for why the St. Croix Foundation even dared to delve into the public education arena is quite simple: as a community foundation, we have always believed that we must be responsive to emerging crises in our community. Today, the current state of our public schools and of the young people they serve can be considered nothing if not a crisis! The deeper draw for us, however, was that after almost 20 years in existence and with a record of countless successful initiatives in the areas of Community Revitalization, Economic Development, Public Safety, and Fiscal Management, we realized with greater clarity that almost all roads surrounding our community's most pressing socio-economic problems lead back to Education.

That, of course explains the "why" behind our educational Initiative, but the "how" to go about supporting our schools has been much more complicated. In actuality, our foray into public education began and was sustained by a very basic yet nebulous "whatever it takes" approach, wherein we supported our schools in any and all ways necessary to achieve success. *Whatever It Takes* has indeed characterized how many challenges are being overcome every day in chronically disadvantaged communities all over the country. It is also the title of one of the most inspirational stories about public education reform in Harlem, New York where Geoffrey Canada, CEO of the Harlem Children's Zone (also known as the Harlem Miracle), is pioneering a groundbreaking roadmap for public education.

But, "whatever it takes" is more than a motto, or the title of an inspirational story. In our work, our research, and throughout our network of educational partners, we have found that real systemic-based public education reform is often the result of an approach that accepts no excuses, expects only excellence, and does *whatever it takes* to achieve the end goal of high academic achievement *for all students*.

As President Obama stated in his first speech to the nation, "Despite resources that are unmatched anywhere in the world, we've let our grades slip, our schools

crumble, our teacher quality fall short, and other nations outpace us. What's at stake is nothing less than the American dream."² We could not agree more.

The Stark Realities of Public Education in the Virgin Islands

Prior to launching our Initiative, the Foundation spent several years sorting through a mountain of data on our public school system as well as on “high-performing” and “rapidly improving” public school models around the country. We also evaluated empirical data regarding the flow of local donor dollars to our public schools and the level of community-based support.

What we first noted was that most of our corporate donors were almost exclusively contributing funds and resources to our elementary schools, believing (with good reason) that the primary levels were the least overwhelming and the easiest places to implement change. We also found that some of our largest corporations had longstanding partnerships with our local high schools, providing them extraordinary private sector resources. This left a huge gap in the support system, as St. Croix's three middle schools—plagued with a multitude of social and academic challenges—remained undesirable to most donors.

The hard data we examined painted an even more compelling picture about the academic and social realities of public school students. Some of our most gripping findings were as follows:

- According to the 2004 *USVI Kids Count Data Book*, in 2002, **93% of VI 8th graders scored below proficient (grade level) in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Only 4% of VI 8th graders scored proficient in reading** (p. 25).
- From 2004-2005, trends for student dropout rates pointed to junior high school as the gateway to success *or failure* with 7% of students dropping out in the 7th grade, 9% dropping out in the 8th grade, 36% dropping out in the 9th grade, and 22% in the 10th grade (USVI Kids Count, 2006, p. 29).
- 44.6% of adults in our community over the age of 25 have no high school diploma³.

² President Barack Obama spoke to the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce in March of 2009. This specific quote and the context in which it appears can be found on page two of his speech in the *New York Times*.

³ The *U.S. Census of Population and Housing* (2000) reports that 20% of adults over 25 have less than a 9th grade education; another 22.6% have attained a 9-12 grade education but have not graduated from high school (p. 8).

- And, from 2004-2005, 458 VI youth (per 100,000) were arrested for juvenile crimes versus the US average of 276 (USVI Kids Count, p. 25)⁴.

Armed with data, we decided to do something distinctly different from what we were seeing in our community and had ourselves done in the past. We first deduced that poor reading skills equated to poor learning skills, which directly contributes to students falling through the cracks and out of the system.

We also made some critical decisions about our objectives and our target population, opting to direct our focus and resources on the “neediest” schools in the St. Croix District. We defined “neediest” as those schools with the most challenging student demographics and lowest academic performance. Then we took a deep breath and chose to hone in on what has historically been known as the most difficult student population—middle school students—as our target group, with the goal of creating a safety net for those students who were pouring out of our elementary schools academically unprepared. Finally, we decided to keep our focus concentrated by selecting one school at which to pilot our Initiative for a multi-year period. Our overall strategy sought to *not* dilute our efforts and to capture as much useful data that would support future plans to replicate our most successful programs.

Elena Christian Junior High (ECJH), on the island of St. Croix, became our pilot school and the launchpad for our Model Schools Initiative. As one of three public junior high schools on-island, historically known as “Little Vietnam,” ECJH was one of our community’s most troubled schools. As reported in the school’s *An Integrated School Improvement Plan* (2004), while Elena Christian had a seasoned faculty of approximately 40 teachers and professional staff, as well as 23 support staff, it served approximately 400 7th and 8th grade students, the majority of whom resided in public housing communities (p. 3). Literacy diagnostics for the 2003-2004 school year also indicated that greater than 85% of seventh graders at ECJH were reading below the 50th percentile on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS), an exam used for national comparisons and benchmarks (p. 6).

⁴ While the Foundation focused on the most current data available, reports from previous years indicate that our students have not been achieving their potential for many years. Student dropout rates are a chronic issue as well: from 2002-2003, “Nearly half of youth age 18-19 do not have a high-school diploma (1,294 youth or 46.4%), an increase of 290 youth over 2002. There was also a two thirds increase in the number of youth age 18-19 who had not attained 9th grade: 189 in 2003, up from 113 youth in 2002” (USVI Kids Count, 2005, p. 32).

Model Schools Initiative Overview

With our research complete and having already established Literacy as the Foundation's primary educational focus area in years prior, we drafted a comprehensive strategic plan with the goal of supporting literacy-based academic needs at ECJH. That strategic plan outlined the following supports:

1. Literacy Remediation and Reinforcement Resources, chosen based on their proven success in producing high-performing students, with the goal of significantly increasing reading scores on annual VITAL⁵ exams;
2. Literacy-based Assessment Tools, to measure students' performance in reading in order to arm teachers with valuable data on their students, while also allowing the Foundation to evaluate the efficacy of our programs;
3. Standardized Test Preparatory Resources in such content areas as: reading comprehension, critical thinking, writing styles, IOWA test-prep, and general test-taking skills;
4. Relevant, Educational Best Practices from successful national models that are proven to enhance instructional strategies and organizational management.

In September of the 2005-2006 school year, we officially introduced our Initiative to Elena Christian administrators. We knew we were taking a huge gamble by offering to provide direct services to a public school—a path not commonly traversed in the world of community foundations.

While we did consider more traditional (and safer) alternatives in our philanthropic pursuits, such as writing checks and donating pencils and books, we rolled up our sleeves instead and jumped into the trenches with teachers and students. We then got to work to understand their challenges and to identify the most strategic approaches to support the school, while also fulfilling the Foundation's programmatic goals.

Over time, the Foundation expanded our Model Schools Initiative⁶ to address the needs of the whole child (as well as the needs of beleaguered teachers) with targeted incentive and professional development programs. We also committed a great deal of time and effort to the issues of discipline and classroom management, in an attempt to create a school culture that was truly conducive to teaching and learning.

⁵ VITAL stands for the Virgin Islands Territorial Assessment of Learning and is a standardized test designed specifically for students in the US Virgin Islands. It is administered to students at the end of every academic year.

⁶ For a comprehensive program history and overview on our MSI, contact the St. Croix Foundation at 340-773-9898.

While singularly focused on ECJH, we also soon came to understand that the school did not exist in a vacuum. In 2006, at the urging of ECJHS’s principal and in an effort to create a continuum of success, we made the crucial decision to reach back and capture the 5th and 6th graders at Juanita Gardine Elementary School (JGES), Elena Christian’s primary and lowest performing feeder school. The Foundation also made the commitment to dedicate a significant amount of resources to district-level initiatives, as we sought to deepen local community engagement on the topic of public education transformation.

At the start of each school year, as well as at year’s end, we worked with both ECJH and Juanita Gardine to ascertain their programmatic priorities and goals and to evaluate our programs. We also tirelessly worked to build a sense of trust and accountability between our organization and our school partners, which at times meant that we had to have some difficult conversations in order to find middle ground and clarify our own priorities. We developed a “Quid Pro Quo / Memorandum of Understanding” that established high standards of accountability for both the school and for ourselves, while also formalizing the Foundation’s multi-year commitment to ECJH.

Each year, we made ongoing adjustments to our strategic plan to remain flexible and responsive to emerging needs and shifting priorities; ensuring that at all times the Foundation was addressing critical issues that were germane to Elena Christian.

With real collaboration and a great deal of day-to-day communication between the Foundation and our pilot school (coupled with frequent updates and meetings with district personnel), over the course of our Initiative, ECJH students made measurable, steady gains on their VITAL tests. There were also shifts in school culture, as Elena Christian transformed from an unstructured, wild, and sometimes violent campus to a calmer and safer learning environment.

Scores from the *Department of Education’s VITAL Report Card (2008)*, illustrate the extraordinary gains ECJH students made in math and the steady, yet incremental gains made in reading over the course of our Initiative (see Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1: 2005 -2009 7th Grade VITAL Exam Scores

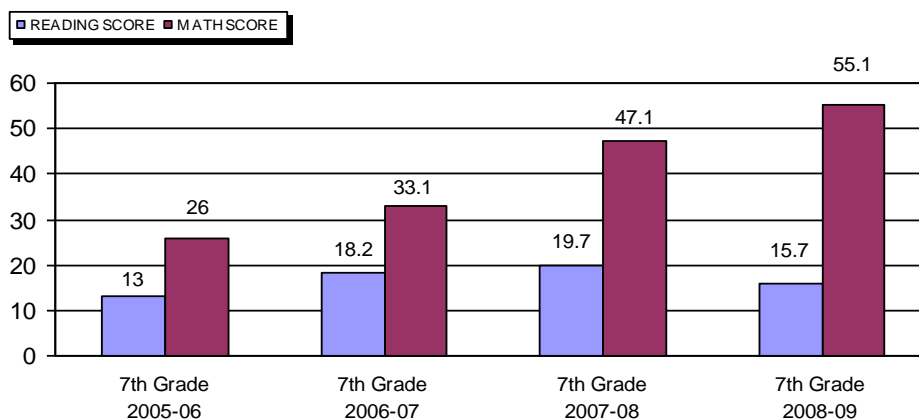
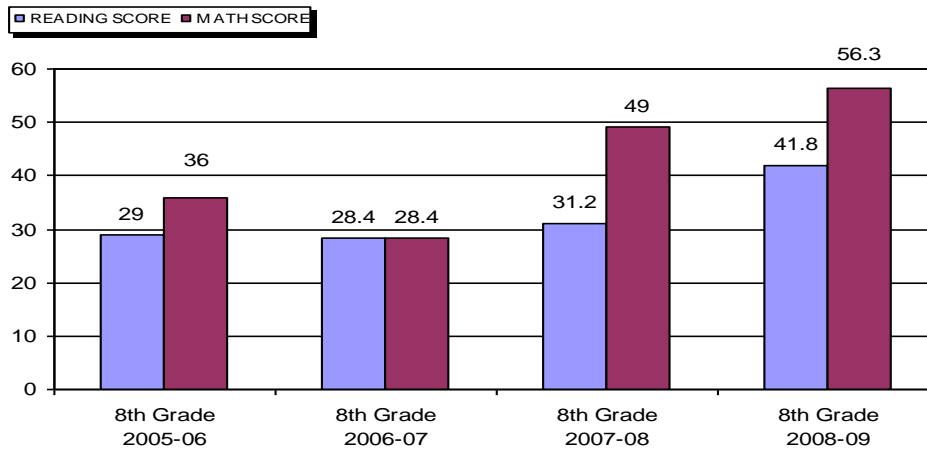
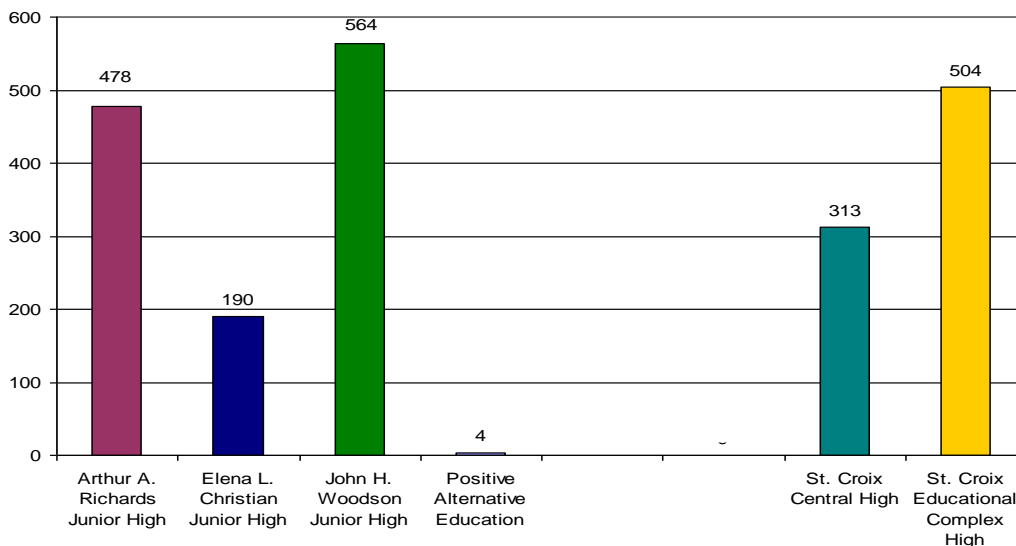


Figure 2: 2005 -2009 8th Grade VITAL Exam Scores⁷



In addition to the academic gains, Elena Christian also saw dramatic reductions in discipline infractions over the course of our Initiative, as students and faculty became more focused on the business of teaching and learning. These gains are reflected in data from the *USVI Department of Education Public School Discipline Report (2008)* below:

Figure 3: 2008 Number of Incidents among St. Croix Junior High and High Schools⁸



⁷ Figures 1 and 2 were developed by the St. Croix Foundation from data in the Department of Education’s 2008 *VITAL Report Card*.

⁸ Figure 3 was developed by the St. Croix Foundation from graphed data in the Department of Education’s 2008 *Public School Discipline Report* (p. 5).

Transitioning Out of ECJH

At the beginning of the 2008-09 school year, after assessing the progress of our Initiative and with many of our initial goals achieved, the Foundation decided to fulfill one of our most important programmatic milestones. This ultimately entailed transitioning out of our direct presence at ECJH. Knowing with certainty that our pilot school had transformed from where we found it four years prior, at the end of that school year we ended our on-the-ground work at Elena Christian. We remain optimistic that it will remain on track to becoming the high-performing school we believe it can be.

As we close out the first phase of our Model Schools Initiative, the Foundation is extraordinarily proud of all the accomplishments we have made at ECJH and at the district-level⁹ as well. Having dedicated a large portion of our budget to fund district and Territory-wide professional development activities, (a component of our Initiative we had not initially planned for), we are deeply encouraged by the results. Most notable was the success of our efforts at brokering a high impact partnership between the Department of Education (DOE) and the International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE)—one that continues to this day.

As a leading organization committed to the issue of public education transformation in the United States and worldwide, ICLE is currently exposing teachers and district leaders throughout the Virgin Islands to real-life models of high-performing schools, many of which have faced far greater socio-economic challenges than we are facing here in the Virgin Islands.

In addition to our success with ICLE, our Model Schools Initiative also has led to a special (and quite unexpected) national recognition when we were invited by the National School Boards Association in 2009 to present our MSI story at their Annual Conference in San Diego, California.

Of course, in addition to the many successes we have achieved, there were also a great number of challenges faced throughout our MSI including, but not limited to: 1) striving to forge a genuine partnership with the DOE; 2) maintaining our focus and achieving our strategic objectives in the face of numerous district decisions which directly impacted our Initiative and our pilot school, like the proposed closure of ECJH; 3) attempting to (re)build critical relationships following countless administrative overhauls and; 4) building the necessary community awareness and support to finance the Initiative's programming.

⁹ References to the Foundation's expanded work at the "District level" and with the "District" refer to wide-scale, Territorial efforts to engage the Virgin Islands Department of Education's *administrative bodies* (e.g. the Office of the Superintendent, Office of the Commissioner, Office of Curriculum and Assessment, and etc.) in community – based public education reform.

Those were just some of our major challenges. There were indeed many more obstacles that we faced on a daily basis. However, in our own assessment, none of the uncomfortable experiences with which we contended altered our focus or our commitment to support our public education system in meaningful ways that have long-term impact. In our final analysis, it has been the challenges as much as our successes that have solidified our resolve and our will to forge ahead and make a real difference.

The Cost of Reform

As we now reflect on the first four years of the MSI, so much of what the Foundation has brought to the table, beyond money, has served to fill real voids and skill gaps in our schools. Things like strategic planning and strategic implementation; building and nurturing effective private-public partnerships; leveraging resources and; encouraging meaningful community engagement were, in many ways, the most important contributions we made. But, access to the flexible funding which the Foundation provided was unquestionably an important value-added component of the Initiative for our public school partners.

In total, throughout our Model Schools Initiative to date, **the St. Croix Foundation expended in excess of \$300,000, exclusive of staff time, to support our public schools.** Although we did reach out to numerous entities in the public sector, it is important to note that *all dollars raised and expended for this Initiative came from the private sector*¹⁰.

It must also be noted that the final tally on our expenditures do not include many of the donations which some members of our very generous corporate stakeholder community made directly to Elena Christian and other schools in the district, including a \$100,000 state-of-the-art computer lab and technology center, donated to ECJH by HOVENSA oil refinery.

We are also incredibly proud to report that because of a growing level of support from private donors, who believe deeply in the mission of our MSI (and our community-based, collaborative approach to reform), we are in the very early stages of building a million dollar educational endowment in support of public school students. That single

¹⁰ As a small, un-endowed community foundation, our donor-derived contributions have ultimately represented a significant investment in our community. In reality though, it is a small sum, taking into consideration the tremendous successes we achieved in relation to how much most people think it costs to achieve large-scale reform in our schools.

accomplishment is a monumental one for our organization and represents the amazing amount of faith our donors have placed in the Foundation and the work we are doing.

On the whole, we have learned some valuable lessons through our Model Schools Initiative that will inform all of our future decisions. But as we move forward, we must first ensure that our programming and our partnerships meet the highest standards of accountability in respect for all of our donors, who continue to entrust us with their money and their philanthropic goals.

As we put the finishing touches on the next phase of our Initiative, the Foundation is, today, admittedly impatient about the pace of educational reform in our community and contends daily with a self-imposed sense of urgency to spur more rapid change in our public schools. But, we are also increasingly assured that we, along with all other community stakeholders, have a rightful place at the table in the Territory's pursuit of a high-quality public education system. This will ultimately require the kind of major paradigm shift that is a critical part of real reform and involves the mobilization and coalescing of a critical mass of stakeholders in a groundswell push for change.

Now, more than ever before, we know that the success and well-being of our young people is the single greatest insurance for the economic and social welfare of our entire community. It is with this understanding that the Foundation's Model Schools Initiative was conceived over five years ago. Today, we have prepared this document with the goal of building a general community-based road-map to show how average citizens and corporate stakeholders can advocate for and collectively support our public schools to success—*whatever it takes!*

CHAPTER 2

Our Children—Who are They, Who Can They Be?

There should be no doubt that at the core of the St. Croix Foundation's commitment to supporting our public education system is, of course, our children. Having provided enrichment opportunities to youth for many years through targeted scholarship programs, the Foundation has become acutely aware of the amazing potential that lies in every child. But the reality for today's young people, when one makes a holistic assessment of their lives, is that every day in the Territory our social services and public safety agencies are forced to deal with many of the failures of our educational system.

Those realities initially led us to naively presume that all of the children being served by our public schools could be easily lumped into one statistical grouping. Instead, what we found was that our public school students were incredibly diverse, spanning a vast range of individual competencies and family backgrounds. In truth, one can only stand in awe of what our schools are asked to accomplish in the way of educating (and nurturing) them all and doing so effectively—indeed a daunting and high-stakes task. It is the single most important aspect of our public schools that make them so incredibly special; they must take *every* child, regardless of their competency or capability!

Overall, what we have learned about our students was very positive—that many of them are extremely talented and curious. They are gregarious and charismatic. They have an amazing capacity to move from one completely unrelated subject to the next—and they can do it faster and remember more than most adults do on our best day. Also, just like most children of their generation (known as Millennials), our students of today were born and raised in the Digital Age and have never known a time without computers or cell phones. Yet, one major consequence of our young people's gift for navigating the Digital Age is our educators' most significant challenge: keeping students motivated and engaged by the same chalkboards, textbooks, and teaching strategies of twenty or even ten years ago.

Even beyond the impact of the Digital Age, the average child today has an enormously different home life than those of just one generation past. According to the *2000 Census of Population and Housing* (2003), 54% of our children under the age of 18 are living in households headed by a single mother, and the majority of those are living in poverty (p. 3). The statistics for how our children are faring inside our schools is equally distressing. Based on 2005-06 data from the Virgin Islands Department of Education (DOE), the USVI Kids Count Data Book (2006) reports that 82% of 7th

graders were reading below grade level; and less than 30% of 11th graders were proficient in reading (p. 27).

Moreover, while the DOE admittedly does not have reliable data collection methods in place to capture dropout rates accurately, the 2000 Census reported that in the Virgin Islands, of our 16-19 year olds, 32.2% of young people were not enrolled in school, were not graduates, and were not employed¹¹. Some believe the statistics to be much grimmer with close to 50% of our public school students not graduating from school.

Whatever the real numbers, every day we spent at our pilot school, Elena Christian Junior High School, the Foundation remained acutely aware that approximately half of the students we met and interacted with would potentially not make it past the 10th grade. We were, as a result, constantly grappling with a self-imposed sense of urgency and obligation to try to stem the tide and turn the trend around.

Having made the deliberate decision to focus on the middle school level, we knew that with each 7th grade class that entered ECJH we had only two years to support administrators and teachers in making the kind of positive impact that could potentially transform a student's' life and encourage them to stay in school.

But first, we felt compelled to gain some first-hand insight into how our children were fairing beyond the statistics. During the first year of our Initiative, the Foundation actually spent a considerable amount of time visiting many schools within the district (something we strongly recommend for every committed education stakeholder) seeking to translate the data we had researched into real insight about who our students were.

Some of the observations we made on the surface served to illuminate actual skill gaps, which we believe make educational reform here in the Virgin Islands a particularly daunting challenge. In general, we found that a large number of students exhibited the following:

- Painfully poor communication skills (i.e. limited vocabulary as well as poor grammar, speech, and writing skills);
- Disconnectedness from learning and achievement;

¹¹ The *2000 U.S. Census of Population and Housing: Summary Population and Housing Characteristics for the U.S. Virgin Islands* (2003) indicates that 18.1% of our 16-19 year olds are neither enrolled in school or graduates; and 14.1% of our 16-19 year olds are not employed or in the labor force (p. 10).

- Fearlessness of failure;
- Extraordinary confidence even in the face of their academic deficiencies;
- Limited exposure to the world beyond their immediate environments;
- Limited understanding of the concept or importance of college as a viable option after graduation.

Engaging Students in Learning by Building Relationships

With all of our empirical and statistical data in hand, the Foundation immediately sought to prioritize the complex challenges facing our public school students. We soon realized that in order for schools to teach students effectively, educators first had to gain their attention and their trust—by engaging them and by building meaningful relationships with them. Relying on guidance from organizations like the International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE), we quickly came to understand the degree to which the students of today require different structure, guidance, and skills than students of the past.

According to ICLE, the 3 new R's in 21st Century education are Rigor, Relevance and Relationships¹², with significant emphasis placed on the latter. Based on data collected from hundreds of successful public schools, ICLE contends that while the relevance of academic curriculum to the real world is the vehicle for greater rigor in 21st Century instruction, relationships are oftentimes the spark that enables students to become (and stay) engaged and motivated to learn.

ICLE's data is supported by numerous other academic resources. Authors and educators Skinner and Belmont (1993) report in *Motivation in the Classroom: Reciprocal Effects of Teacher Behavior and Student Engagement Across the School Year*, that “children who are more engaged in school do in fact earn higher grades, score higher on standardized tests of achievement, and show better personal adjustment to school” (p. 2).

¹² ICLE's Rigor and Relevance Framework, based on Bloom's Taxonomy, lists the characteristics students show as they acquire and master knowledge necessary in the 21st Century. Through this Framework, ICLE illustrates that knowledge acquisition requires rigorous, relevant (to the modern world) instruction. But, to achieve a high level of student success, there must first be a strong and nurturing student-teacher Relationship. For more information on ICLE 3 R's visit their website at <http://www.leadered.com>. An overview on the theory, practice and success of the three new Rs can also be found at www.lvbep.org/Portals/0/McNulty%20aasa%20feb%2009.pdf.

Establishing relationship building as one of our initial priorities, the Foundation attempted to support teachers and administrators in meeting the challenge of student engagement. We accomplished this, in large part, by connecting ECJH with our stateside public school partners, who guided them in developing innovative programs and strategies for motivating students and keeping them excited about school.

One of those partners, Principal Clara Sale-Davis, from Freeport Intermediate Middle School, located in a small border town of Texas, reported that one of her most important questions when interviewing prospective middle school teachers was, “Can you sing or dance?” The answer was, not surprisingly, most often a resounding ‘no,’ to which she always replied, “Will you try?” Clara’s reasoning, while unconventional, was that in order to reach middle school students (in particular), teachers had to build meaningful relationships with them—and that sometimes meant letting down their hair and loosening their ties to reach those hardest-to-reach students.

ECJH teachers responded well to Freeport’s example, immediately organizing Monday morning assemblies, wherein teachers would conduct somber funeral processions, carrying cardboard cut-outs of illegal (overused) words that could no longer be spoken or written on campus, such as “nice” or “good.” Upon placing the illegal words in a make-shift coffin where they were to remain “buried” for the rest of the school year, a jubilant musical celebration would usher in a large-screen video presentation of alternative words that could be used instead. ECJH’s weekly assemblies were also accompanied by audio-visual PowerPoint presentations of the week in review that were created, in part, by students.

While such strategies may seem slightly unconventional to some, there was an amazing response from students as they became increasingly engaged and looked forward to seeing what their teachers had in store for them at the start of each school week. Students’ immediate response to their innovative efforts turned out to be all the proof ECJH teachers needed to understand the real impact of engagement. And, students, in turn, became more focused on learning as they started correcting their teachers and peers throughout the day for accidentally uttering illegal words: proof positive that out-of-the-box strategies are not only effective, but are a pre-requisite for 21st Century students in 21st Century schools.

Later on in our Initiative, when teachers raised the issue of the chronic numbers of students who were failing to complete homework assignments, the Foundation worked with school administrators to introduce a comprehensive Rewards Program. Instead of developing a solely punitive response to this mounting problem, we offered students incentives for positive behaviors, both individually, as well as for the collective success of their respective teams and grades.

Once again, the model came from a stateside public school partner in Louisiana (Plain Dealing Middle School) that was designated as a nationally recognized “Rapidly Improving School” in 2008. Quite interestingly, Plain Dealing realized soaring academic gains in one school year after implementing a comprehensive incentive program, called “PAWS” that is named after the school’s mascot, the Lion (ironically akin to ECJH’s “Simba” mascot). As one of several highly successful model programs the Foundation introduced at Elena Christian, “PAWS” is proving each day that our schools have to be innovative to keep students engaged and interested in school and academic achievement¹³.

Reading Counts: But So Does Speech and Writing, Too...

Although student engagement became an important part of our Initiative, literacy was, from the start, our programmatic focus. Always mindful of the critical reading deficiencies in our public school students, the Foundation committed the largest part of its budget and efforts to supporting proven reading enrichment resources for students. But, first we had to navigate around one major obstacle—getting on the same page with some faculty members about the gravity of the language deficiencies students were exhibiting.

In actuality, throughout our Initiative, the Foundation continued to stress to our education partners the importance of preparing students for the real workforce. Being acutely aware of the ongoing burden our business community contends with every day because of the skill gaps of employees and prospective employees, we placed considerable focus on speech and writing as a critical extension of literacy skill development.

Recognizing that far too many in our local employment pool do not have the basic communication skills to be considered employable, one specific recommendation we made on an ongoing basis was the need for a school-wide commitment to literacy, both inside and out of every classroom, amongst teachers, staff, administrators, in addition to students. We felt certain then, and continue to believe today, that without significant attention placed on how students *and faculty* communicate (i.e. speak and write), it will be impossible to significantly increase reading scores and prepare students for the world beyond our schools.

¹³ For more details on the original PAWS program from Plain Dealing Middle School or our modified PAWS Program for ECJH, contact the St. Croix Foundation.

Today, at ECJH, a comprehensive school-wide commitment to literacy is still *in the process* of being institutionalized, and there are earnest plans in place and actionable steps being taken in the right direction. The Foundation is also optimistic about a growing focus by the district toward comprehensive and strategic literacy skill development. Our hope is that this focus will be multi-dimensional, occurring across curriculums and always connected to the real world skills our students will need to master in order to succeed after school and in life.

Who Can They Become?

Overall, the Foundation has been struck by the degree to which all of the data, and the stories, and the statistics we came across in our research indicated what was happening to our young people—but it did not paint a true picture of who they *are*. We now clearly understand that no matter what adjective we use to describe our children or the data source we use to group them... they are our future. Their potential is our potential. The bottom line for every one of our students is very simple: they have an untold amount of talent and intellect that we, as a community, have failed to tap into—to their (and our own) detriment.

Our children are our community's future, and it is for this reason that we have employed a "whatever it takes" approach to all of our programming. We recognize that the stakes are so incredibly high and the task before us so very urgent. In essence, if our community continues to "discuss" and to "plan" without real fidelity to implement, we risk losing yet another generation of children.

For our part, the Foundation's next steps will include ongoing development of targeted programs and initiatives in support of our young people. This past summer, we fulfilled one long-term goal by launching our first Youth Advisory Council (YAC), which is comprised of junior high and high school students from our public schools. Presently, our YAC members are researching some of the root causes of the challenges facing youth in our local community. The overarching goal of their research is to arm them with the necessary data they need to inform their plans when developing grantmaking programs that will address those issues.

YAC members will work closely with the Foundation's Education Committee to solicit funding proposals from youth-inspired programs or projects in our community. They will also play an active role in evaluating the success of each funded project, while developing critical real-world skill-sets by designing their programmatic agendas, budgets, timelines, benchmarks, and media strategies for reporting to the community on their efforts.

In one of their first major assignments, YAC members had to survey their peers and then compile a list of the most pressing issues facing young people in our community as well as possible solutions for addressing those needs. Some of their responses actually made us pause for a long moment, not because we hadn't identified the same issues on our own, but because we realized how profoundly naïve we had been in underestimating the degree of self-awareness that our young people possess.

Among the expected responses, like violence and peer pressure, students also identified issues like, "the need for self-confidence; a lack of mentors and positive influences; not being encouraged on the right decisions; not being steered in the right direction; lack of motivation; and a corrupt society," as major issues they and their peers contend with.

Overwhelmingly, YAC peers identified the need for mentoring, encouragement, and motivation as what they need from us most! The Foundation is committed to meeting that need, while also empowering our young people to become active participants in our community's collective efforts to secure successful and productive futures for them.

CHAPTER 3

Teachers: Our Greatest Assets and Impending Liabilities

Unlike other well-intended community-based educational endeavors, the St. Croix Foundation's Model Schools Initiative (MSI) has afforded us incredible access to many of our community's schools and to its teachers. For over four years, we worked inside classrooms, side-by-side with teachers. We sat in on teacher team meetings, and we walked hallways and lunched with teachers. We also traveled with them to educational conferences and wept with them through trying times and in times of great triumph. With every step we have taken, we have been astounded by what we have found, both the good and the bad, and we have come to understand why teachers are the single greatest assets *and impending liabilities* in our public schools.

Before delving into the incredibly sensitive issue of our community's public school teachers, we must first admit that the St. Croix Foundation approached this aspect of our Model Schools Initiative with a great number of prejudices and assumptions, believing we would find large-scale apathy and, sadly, ineptitude. Then, with all of those biases in tow, we strategically structured our Initiative in such a way that we would have limited contact with teachers. In truth, the Foundation entered into our partnership with Elena Christian Junior High School (ECJH) with one primary objective: to introduce and support *programs* that would improve student literacy skills.

While prepared to meet many challenges, like insufficient textbooks and inadequate technological resources, we never fully calculated how greatly the success of our Initiative would hinge on teachers. Very quickly, however, we learned that we could have offered ECJH access to the best resources and all the funding in the world, and in the end we would have made no true and lasting difference without the knowledge, passion, commitment, and partnership of teachers.

In order to provide some context to our first real introduction to public school teachers, it helps to draw a picture of what the first year of our MSI was like. Indeed, after the very first week of the launch of our Initiative, the Foundation's programming was jolted off-schedule, where it remained for the duration of the 2005-06 school year, following the announcement that John H. Woodson Junior High School would have to be closed due to mold.

By St. Croix school district mandate, both Woodson and ECJH were subsequently forced to share Elena Christian's campus in an oppressive double-session, which reduced the school day by approximately two hours and often times much more. For ECJH teachers, the academic impact of the double-session meant that quality instructional time was a premium when it existed at all.

The social implications of the merge bordered on inhumane, with teachers and administrators forced to give up their desks, their classrooms, and their parking spaces—in essence, they gave up their school in a rigid rotating schedule of musical chairs that would have challenged the most tolerant and patient of individuals.

Throughout that year, in the midst of the disruption, ECJH teachers showed up every day, went to their classrooms, and did their best to support their students. Despite numerous promises that Woodson would be re-opened before the school year was out, teachers persevered and spent an entire year trying to cram into half a day the instruction and tutelage of a full day.

In an age where an increasing number of school districts are expanding their school days and academic year, our pilot school saw a dramatic reduction in theirs. Yet, teachers kept coming to school, struggling each day to keep warring factions of Woodson and Elena students separate from each other during transition periods, while also trying to meet local and federal academic mandates.

Then, in full climax to the tumultuous year they had endured, at the very end of the school year, ECJH teachers had to suffer through an all out campus-wide riot that left over 30 students in police custody and the campus looking like it had weathered a category 4 cyclone.

Through it all, Foundation staff went to school every day (along with a handful of other community groups) to support Elena Christian the best way we could, fully cognizant that teachers were simply too exhausted from what they were being subjected to daily (outside of the classroom) to be truly effective inside. We made little headway in achieving our own goal of full programmatic implementation, but we hung in there with teachers while much of the entire community remained disturbingly quiet about the chaos teachers and students were enduring.

In many ways, we became one of the only connections teachers had to the community outside of the school and, in turn, those teachers became the foundation of our Initiative. Had it not been for them (and for the children) we most likely would have terminated the entire project that first year. Instead, we made the decision to work harder, to retool our strategic plan, and to allow for greater focus on, and support for *teachers*.

It's the Teacher, It's the Teacher, It's the Teacher

What we want the community to know is how many of our teachers spend each day in total isolation, dealing with disadvantaged, often times ill-mannered students (and parents), not to mention the crippling bureaucracy that can snuff out the motivation of the most energized professional.

In actuality, many of the educators we have met throughout our public schools have a real passion for pedagogy and for children. We witnessed many examples of that passion and purpose over the four years of our MSI: like the math teacher who wept when he learned he had led his students to a 20 point gain on their VITALs in one school year; or the entire group of ECJH faculty members who gathered, without pay, for nighttime professional development workshops to discuss curriculum, policy, and academic interventions. Administrators were there too, serving as babysitters for their children while faculty teams worked well into the night. We also heard stories of teachers who maintained small savings accounts to buy uniforms and new underwear for their most needy students at the beginning of each school year.

In total, there were many extraordinary teachers that we met at ECJH and at schools throughout the Territory—teachers who embody the nobility of the profession through their acts of selflessness and dedication. They are unquestionably the greatest assets in our public schools because they are the one *constant*. While administrators and students come and go, sometimes in rapid succession, teachers are the long-term caretakers, serving as griots of each school's history and culture, and the foundation upon which the success of our student's academic achievement rests.

Now, although our teachers have never been paid what they deserve (in our opinion), the sad fact is that to reach the student of today, our teachers must be experts (or at least be willing to be) at more than just their core subjects. They are expected to be adept at using a wide variety of new technologies; to keep up with popular culture; to understand changing language and ideals; and to be willing to spend many personal hours preparing new lessons and researching new teaching methods. On top of all of this, they must also contend with the pressures of a bad economy, "manic" students, and a general lack of meaningful support from their superiors and the community at-large, all the while being forced to be both parent and teacher for many students.

As President Obama (2009) stated in one of his first speeches on education, "It's time to start rewarding good teachers, and stop making excuses for bad ones" (p. 2). We also strongly believe that in order for our community to walk the talk about the importance of our children and of education, our teachers—our good teachers—must be elevated to higher stature and prominence matched with higher pay that is unequivocally married to the highest expectations.

The Impact of Bad Teachers

Of course, on the flip side of the tremendous contributions our teachers make in educating our children, there are also some critical deficiencies that require the diligent focus and attention of every public education stakeholder. From the very beginning of our Initiative, the Foundation quickly began to observe performance patterns and morale issues spread throughout most school faculties that we came into contact with, to include:

- A pervasive use of the Union Contract or “Blue Book” as a guard against new ideas or personal accountability;
- Extraordinarily low expectations (for administrators and most disturbingly for students);
- Resistance to the use of technology;
- A predisposition toward mediocrity;
- A propensity for blaming “others”, (i.e. administrators, parents, funding shortages, and etc.) for poor student performance;
- And a general, at times alarming, lack of professionalism and respect for authority.

The International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE), a nationally and internationally renowned institute focused on public school reform, reported the same national assessment of teachers that we observed locally. ICLE President, Dr. Willard Daggett, asserted in a 2007 presentation given on St. Croix that based on his research and experience, every school generally has three types of teachers:

1. *The Lunatic Fringe, who never heard an idea they didn't like;*
2. *The Skeptics, who first want to know where the support will come from and;*
3. *The Nay-Sayers, who say “this too shall pass,” believing no change is the best change¹⁴.*

¹⁴ Dr. Daggett has identified these three groups in many of his formal presentations at conferences and workshops throughout the nation and internationally. This includes three local conferences held in the US Virgin Islands in 2007 and 2008 that were sponsored by the St. Croix Foundation. For information on these presentations, you may contact the Foundation directly.

Although we only observed a few examples of the latter group, the Foundation was indeed privy to a few shocking, yet isolated, examples of gross incompetence and negligence. Armed with that insight, we now understand, first-hand, how bad teachers (many of whom have been in the system for decades) can ensure whole-scale collateral damage by de-motivating and demoralizing *generations* of students in our public schools.

Undoubtedly, ineffective teachers are a huge part of the challenge that lies before every effort to improve the quality of public schools. But, the arduous task of filtering them from the system is inextricably tied to the even greater challenge of building a sufficient pool of high-quality teachers, particularly here in the Territory.

In truth, the seldom discussed reality in our school system is that far too many of our teachers are indeed homegrown products of our own public education system. One need only consider that 84% of the University of the Virgin Islands' freshmen class is required to take remedial courses in language arts and math to understand how insidious and daunting the challenge before us is (La Fleur, 2009, p. 4).

Now, while it may be of no consolation, we are not alone. At present, states throughout the country are afflicted with the same powerlessness and costliness that our local district administrators experience when attempting to create a greater density of good teachers, while also removing bad ones from their schools.

In a 2008 article from the Center for Union Facts entitled *Protecting Bad Teachers*, the authors provided a list of states and cities confronted with the vexing issue of labor unions protecting bad teachers: in Dallas, only 0.78% of tenured teachers are terminated annually; in Illinois (not including Chicago), two of 95,000 teachers are terminated annually—where it costs \$219,504 to fire just one bad teacher. In Los Angeles, eleven out of 43,000 teachers are considered for termination, and in New York City only ten out of 55,000 (p. 1).

In the end, Dr. Willard Daggett's words ring most true on the matter of teacher accountability: in public education, "**When the interests of adults supersede the interests of children, our children always lose**" (2007). We sincerely hope that as our community moves closer toward real educational reform, in all cases wherein critical decisions have to be made about our public schools and the educators who serve them, *our children will always win.*

Mentor, Motivate, and Move Out of the Way: Leveraging Professional Development

Today, the Foundation is well aware that raising student achievement is a complicated issue with many variables at play as well as many key stakeholders involved (including policy makers, commissioners, principals, parents, and the students themselves). But, the bottom line is that whatever social, economic, or political changes occur around our schools, when the door closes, what happens inside each classroom is all about the teacher.

Even in the face of the grim realities about our public schools, and despite the bureaucracy that often times undermines efforts to demand greater accountability from all of our educators, the Foundation sincerely believes there is a solid core of great teachers and enough “okay” teachers who may simply need targeted, individualized professional development to get good.

As we now prepare for the next phase of our Initiative, we are actually quite optimistic about the future, as a majority of the teachers we came into contact with seemed to be right there in the middle: with the potential to be good, even great, yet not entirely meeting that potential.

Overall, what we have learned over the four years of our MSI is that without a teacher’s motivation to learn and to then pass on that knowledge to their students and colleagues, little long-term impact is generally gained from the conventional, cookie-cutter professional development (PD) training currently offered by the district. As we saw on so many occasions at ECJH, passion can be so powerful a force that it can inspire teachers throughout a school to truly own their school’s vision for reform and to pursue their *own* professional development training—without mandatory decrees from administrators. From our viewpoint, we believe that meaningful PD cannot be mandated. It must be inspired!

At a time when information is changing at warp speed and technological advances dominate our lives, most educators across the nation can travel by car and across state lines in order to observe innovative instructional strategies and models of success. Our teachers, however, are severely handicapped by the geographic isolation of our island community. More frequently than we had originally expected, we continually met local teachers throughout the district (some who have been in the system for over 20 years) who had never traveled off-island for training.

As we sought to provide local educators with first-hand models of public education success stories, the Foundation redirected funds toward professional

development, sponsoring ECJH faculty visits to stateside schools that are succeeding against great odds. In 2008, we funded two seasoned educators' week-long visit to a high-performing public school in Freeport, Texas. The impact of that single experience on those teachers (one of whom was a school administrator) was, in one word, profound.

By simply seeing a public school, which despite severe challenges had engaged its students with high-quality instructors and relevant educational curriculum, our educators returned invigorated, inspired—and *daunted* by the realization of how far we really have to go in the VI to attain a similar level of success. In follow-up discussions with both educators about their visit, they admitted that they had never seen such high-quality instruction before.

Now, it is important to keep in mind that the school our educators visited was located in a small, smelly, refinery-ridden border town, with predominantly minority (Mexican and Black) students. The school, in actuality, faced many more challenges than we have here in the Virgin Islands as they strived to close a vast achievement gap in a town rife with gang activity and pervasive poverty. Yet, students at Freeport were not just surviving, they were thriving. From the minute our educators walked through the gates of the school, all they observed from the beginning of the day until the end was structure; soaring expectations of excellence for all; high-quality instruction in every classroom; and at the helm, strong, competent leadership.

We continue to believe that by exposing teachers and administrators to real-life models of success like Freeport and by connecting them with a network of high-performing schools, our Territory can more effectively and *expeditiously* move their school improvement efforts forward.

The Foundation remains committed to bolstering its offerings to schools with more direct support for public school teachers. As part of our new MSI strategy, we also intend to provide more targeted professional development resources to teachers including some non-instructional based, business tracks with the goal of developing real world workplace skills—for both teachers and administrators.

Ultimately, by providing teachers with some of the tools they need to be effective in the classroom, by advocating on their behalf, and then by demanding the highest standards of them for educating our children, our community can collectively begin taking some decisive steps toward systemic reform.

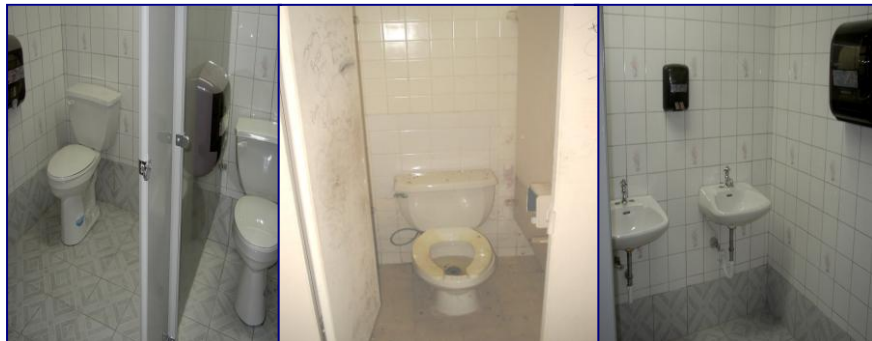
CHAPTER 4

The Real Deal about Infrastructure and Resources in our Public Schools

Because of the St. Croix Foundation's role as a conduit of donor funds, over the years, we have witnessed (and sadly, albeit infrequently, participated in) the expenditure of money and time in ineffective places and for ineffectual things in our public schools. It is an ongoing balancing act for most community foundations: how to keep donors happy, while also ensuring that their funds are being directed toward real needs in ways that will have real impact. In the very early stages of developing our Model Schools Initiative, we knew that sustaining just that balance would inevitably be one of our greatest challenges and an important goal.

An early test came in 2004, just one year prior to the launch of our Initiative, when a generous EDC firm agreed to partner with the Foundation to adopt one of our local high schools. We spent countless hours touring the campus and meeting with administrators to identify the most critical needs at the school. When all was said and done, the school pleaded and the donor conceded to repair... bathrooms!

Despite the vast academic needs of students and teachers, we agreed to utilize precious donor dollars to completely gut and retrofit one girls'



Dirty toilets and wasted opportunities: Old toilets and bathroom fixtures at a local high school (center) were refurbished (at left and right) at a cost of over \$25,000

bathroom to make it ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) compliant. At the request of the school's principal, the Foundation also agreed to acid-wash graffiti off the walls and stalls of 13 other bathrooms on the school's campus.

Needless to say, long before the project was completed we were all deeply troubled by what we had done by expending \$25,000 that could have been leveraged several times over to address immediate academic needs. To this day, we believe we led a donor down a path that, in essence, relieved our local Department of Education (DOE) from their obligatory responsibility— to address basic infrastructure needs. We were, nonetheless, relieved to learn that the project had ironically resolved one major issue (i.e. handicap accessibility), which Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, the Territory's accreditation body, had identified as one of many deficiencies prohibiting the school's full accreditation.

In the end, that singular experience taught the Foundation some profound lessons that have subsequently informed how we guide and advise donors who are interested in providing resources and other supports to our public schools. In fact, we may be one of only a handful of small non-profits in the Territory that consistently steers donors (and their dollars) away from projects which we believe will not have lasting impact or the level of accountability necessary for success. We simply feel too strongly about the urgency of the most critical, *instructional-based* needs and the importance of synergy in how private sector resources are used to address them.

In 2005, as we were putting the finishing touches on our MSI strategic plan, the Foundation drew upon our “bathroom experience” a year earlier as we made the firm commitment to not direct any funds toward infrastructure projects. Admittedly, the facility that houses our pilot school, Elena Christian Junior High (ECJH), was built in 1989 and is one of the newest school plants in the Territory (relatively speaking), although the structure is under constant assault from sea blast and a general lack of maintenance.

Still, at no time since the inception of our Initiative did we ever give more than a moment’s mention to structural issues at Elena Christian, or at any other school we partnered with. Though much of the discussion about public schools in our community almost always begins and ends with the poor physical condition of our school facilities, very little of the research we have done and the experiences we have had point to infrastructure as an inhibitor to student achievement.

In fact, according to the Alliance for Excellent Education, in their report *How Does the United States Stack Up?* (2008), **“In some of the countries that are now surpassing the U.S. in academic performance, students don’t have even a fraction of the basic resources and amenities we often take for granted”** (p. 1-2). This is, of course, no excuse for the lack of performance of our school districts in ensuring that our students are provided with safe and clean facilities in which to learn. But, it should not (and we believe it cannot) be an excuse for what is happening (or not happening) inside our classrooms in the way of quality instruction.

Either way one looks at it, we believe the responsibility for what our schools look like aesthetically, as well as how well they serve the basic needs of students and educators, must become the primary function of *someone other than our school Principals*.

Our experience has shown us that district and executive-level leaders must find more effective, economical, and long-term solutions to address the crumbling infrastructure of our public schools. One plausible step toward effectively meeting this challenge collaboratively and as a community, may be to ask those in the private sector, who tend to be more adept at managing and maintaining assets, for guidance and

support in developing practical, tactical plans of action. We believe that stronger partnerships between our schools and the private sector may ultimately provide real solutions to this longstanding problem, by offering the flexibility and bold innovation that is not typically inherent in highly bureaucratic systems.

Instructional Resource Gaps: Myth vs. Reality

Once again, based on our high school bathroom experience and after listening to all of the discourse on the airwaves and in legislative sessions about the instructional deficiencies in our schools, when we launched our Initiative we fully expected to find significant *resource* deficiencies at our pilot school. Instead, what we found was quite to the contrary: the glaring shortages we had heard about were simply not there! In fact, we were shocked by how many resources were actually available to teachers and students.

Not only were there more computers and white boards, along with a whole host of other technological resources than we could have ever imagined, but we also found many of the same relevant academic programs that were already in use at some of the high-performing stateside schools we had researched. In direct refutation of what we had heard “on the street,” the DOE had indeed been utilizing a large share of the federal dollars that pour into the Territory to equip teachers and school administrators with high-quality instructional resources.

But there is a catch: while the DOE had procured some proven and effective resources for our schools, we found countless examples of poor follow-through in ensuring that those resources were actually being introduced and then implemented effectively. It must be noted that the DOE does dedicate significant funding toward teacher training in the utility of these programs, but not always accompanied by strategic plans for implementation, or the requisite oversight of instructional integration *and evaluation*. There are, ultimately, numerous failure points and performance gaps along the way. But the plus side is, very simply, most of the resources our schools need to be successful are already there.

Upon making the surprising discovery of the wealth of resources available in our schools, the Foundation quickly realized that the most effective way to support our pilot school was to assist by leveraging existing resources for maximum impact—something we do exceptionally well as a small, un-endowed non-profit organization. We spent the duration of our Initiative working with administrators and teachers to establish strategic ‘game-plans’ for ensuring that existing resources had the broadest impact on academic instruction.

One of our first tests on how to maximize resources arose in the early part of our Initiative upon identifying the Scholastic Reading Counts (SRC) and Reading Inventory (SRI) Programs as the core pieces of our literacy offerings to the school¹⁵. As individual components of a more comprehensive (and highly acclaimed) Read 180 Program, the SRC and SRI Programs were expensive resources that the Foundation knew could cost upwards of \$25,000—money we did not have at the time. But, we believed so strongly in the program, based on its proven success at other schools, that we were committed to finding the funding.

First, however, we met with every member of ECJH’s Language Arts Department to determine their interest and commitment to utilizing the SRI and SRC programs as part of their Language Arts curriculum. All expressed their interest. To our surprise and encouragement, we immediately learned that Elena Christian had already fully implemented the Read 180 Program in one remedial resource classroom serving 40 “struggling readers” (even though the program was comprised of individual components with the capacity and design to serve all 400 students at the school.)

Assuming the school had procured a modified edition of the program, we decided to do some investigation to determine if we could purchase an expanded version for the school. Several days later, during a routine call to Scholastic, Inc. to cost out the product, we soon learned that our school district had already purchased the entire expanded program for several St. Croix schools, including ECJH—a detail that had never been mentioned in any of our meetings.

The following week, we made yet another revealing discovery when we located the SRC software package, still in its plastic wrapping, stored away in the school’s library. We soon learned it had sat for almost two years unopened and unused. The Foundation immediately took on the task of installing all components of the SRI and SRC programs in addition to purchasing the necessary user licenses (at a relatively low cost), which allowed every single student at the school to fully participate in the program.

The following school year, during the second year of our Initiative, we hired a site coordinator to support teachers in the full implementation of this program, as we sought to not overburden them with yet another “new” resource. Then, in concert with school administrators, we began planning for the purchase of the necessary books and quizzes

¹⁵ SRI and SRC are computer-based reading intervention programs that are meant to diagnose student reading levels and then monitor progress through a comprehensive reading program that provides recommendations for teachers, rewards programs, parental reports, and etc. The programs use the highly effective “Lexile” system that is used to accurately assess a student’s reading skills. For more information contact the Scholastic website at: <http://teacher.scholastic.com/products/readingcounts/index.htm>.

for the Reading Counts Program—yet another costly requirement. Luckily, before we expended a single dollar for books, our site coordinator made another fortuitous discovery, in an unused classroom...over one hundred boxes of soft-cover Scholastic books, still in their boxes! Intended to establish individual classroom libraries at the school, the Foundation proposed a more utilitarian use for those books; the creation of a secondary, stand alone Scholastic library that would entirely support the Reading Counts Program.

At the end of the 2006-2007 school year, ECJH unveiled a true, model Scholastic Reading Counts Library Annex, complete with comprehensive program policies and procedures. That single accomplishment was made possible due, in large part, to the incredible commitment and hard work of our MSI Site Coordinator, Magali Roldan, who unpacked, processed, and shelved over 4000 books, with support from a Language Arts teacher at the school.



St. Croix Foundation's MSI Site Coordinator, Magali Roldan

By the start of the 2009-10 school year, ECJH's ongoing commitment to sustain this program beyond the Foundation's direct presence at the school resulted in the school's Reading Counts Library boasting close to 7,500 books. Paid for with federal dollars, ECJH's library is a true testament of how leveraging limited resources can create enrichment opportunities that benefit *every* child.

Filling Resource Gaps: Partnerships with a Purpose

Beyond the SRC Library and as our Initiative progressed, the Foundation continued to look for the ways and means to maximize resources at ECJH. But, of course, because of our firm commitment to *literacy*, much of our focus remained on how to ensure the sustainability of the Reading Counts program. During the second year of our Initiative, upon evaluating the program, we quickly realized that the school's very limited computer resources were not effectively serving students. Because both the SRC and SRI programs required regular computer-based testing, the school was forced to test anywhere from 300 to 400 students on 7-15 computers in two separate locations—a laborious process that could take anywhere from three weeks to one month.

The Foundation knew ECJH needed a fully equipped computer lab with enough computers to accommodate one entire class at a time (approximately 30 students). We immediately reached out to the *HOVENSA* oil refinery to assist us with addressing this problem. And, *HOVENSA* generously responded, stepping up to the plate in a big way by donating a state of the art computer lab and technology center, complete with 30 flat screen computers, furniture, commercial air conditioning, and new window and door enclosures.

HOVENSA also provided architectural and construction personnel to transform an underutilized classroom into a modern, high-tech resource center at a cost of over \$100,000. In demonstration of our appreciation to them, the Foundation donated a new security system and paid for a year of monitoring to protect *HOVENSA*'s costly investment.



ECJH's state-of-the-art Technology Center provides hands on learning opportunities to over 400 public school students and is also used for District-level training workshops.

The partnership that created ECJH's brand new Technology Center turned out to be a perfect representation of the Foundation's educational policy: brokering strategic private-public partnerships in order to provide public school students with the high-quality educational curriculum, resources and community-based support they need to be globally competitive.

HOVENSA's generous contribution to ECJH also demonstrated that although some in our private sector are indeed skeptical about donating to our public education system, many businesses are actually eager to support our public schools, recognizing them to be the biggest pool of potential workers in our community. The challenge is, of course, finding just the right balance of trust and accountability to create strong, meaningful, and high-impact private-public partnerships.

While the Foundation remains committed to brokering stronger relationships between all educational stakeholders, based on our experience, we have concluded that meaningful partnerships are not happening with ease here in the Territory—at least, not yet. But once again, we're not alone. According to Gary Funk and David Brown (1994) in their article *Reaching a Business/Education Equilibrium*, "The sharing of expertise [between private and public sectors] is the bedrock for effective relationships. Despite their complementary knowledge and shared ideals, however, business and education have yet to establish a successful symbiotic relationship." This is clearly a

universal challenge for all of us seeking to make a difference in public education from the outside, but it is one we are committed to meeting head on.

Moving forward, we hope that the lessons we have learned thus far through our Model Schools Initiative will serve to guide more of our community stakeholders to work with greater fidelity to build effective, high impact partnerships that will create bridges to success for our schools and the students that they serve. It is the Foundation's mission to fulfill our role as a community broker and convener as we collectively construct and reinforce those bridges.

CHAPTER 6

Discipline and Structure—First and Always

Undoubtedly, the issue of discipline and structure is a highly sensitive one in our community today, taking into consideration the fact that few campuses in the Territory are spared the ravages of violence and chronic disciplinary infractions. According to the 2008 USVI Department of Education *St. Croix District Discipline Report*, there were 1,232 discipline infractions among our junior high schools and 814 in our high schools during the 2007-2008 school year. Combine this with the total number of days junior high and high school students were suspended, 3187, and two things become very clear: 1) our teachers and administrators are being distracted from the business of teaching and learning as focus continues to shift from instruction to behavioral management and; 2) far too many of our students are spending too much time out of the classroom (p. 3-4).

In the summer of 2008, as the Foundation began planning for the end of almost four years of our direct presence at Elena Christian Junior High, we began reviewing the wealth of data we had compiled over the course of our Model Schools Initiative. We also began creating a list that prioritized the most critical components of successful schools, based on our research and our experience. The issue of discipline and structure¹⁶ was at the top of that list, right behind teachers and teaching quality. In our final assessment, we now believe that creating a structured learning environment is, for many, if not all of our public schools, one of the single most critical first steps toward success and high achievement.

Not surprisingly, what we learned through our work at ECJH was substantiated by data from successful schools throughout the country. Community stakeholders and district leaders can offer all of the most innovative, well-intentioned academic-based programs. And, our teachers and principals can have all resources and all the money needed to implement them. But chances are, the programs simple won't raise academic achievement—not without significant and ceaseless focus on first creating an environment that is conducive to learning!

Strangely enough though, this lesson was not that obvious to the Foundation during the early stages of our MSI. We initially made a conscious decision at the inception of our Initiative to focus our effort solely on *academic-based* supports. We

¹⁶ Researchers and educators advise that schools should first concentrate on classroom instruction *before* attempting to change the school's structure. Disciplinary structure, however, is not *organizational* change or great modifications in a school's mission and vision. In this segment, structure refers only to a practiced and understood set of disciplinary policies and procedures that create the necessary environment for quality instruction to take place.

placed all warnings and advice we received about the importance of structure on a backburner out of an abundance of caution not to overstep boundaries by getting involved in what we perceived to be strictly administrative matters.

The warnings we received were indeed many, and they came from very credible sources, including our primary stateside public school partner, Truett Abbott, who is the principal of the school after which most components of our own Initiative were modeled.

The Foundation was first introduced to Truett Abbott during a CNN news segment¹⁷ about schools that were succeeding against all the odds. In the interview, Mr. Abbott related to a CNN correspondent the details of how he had led his students, at Warren County Middle School (WCMS) in rural Georgia, to staggering academic success. Admittedly, through the lens of the television set, he seemed larger than life and his students' successes played more like fairytale than fact.

However, several weeks later, when we made direct contact with Mr. Abbott, he was not only accessible and willing to take our call, but he was eager to share his story—with amazing openness and transparency. He shared not only his successes, but was frank about his challenges and the sheer *will* that it took to turn his school around for the better.

Over the course of our Initiative, Mr. Abbott's partnership continued to be an invaluable asset as he advised and counseled us on everything from his "lessons learned," to his innovative instructional strategies. But, the single most consistent issue that he hammered home to us throughout our conversations was the importance of discipline and structure¹⁸.

During the first year of his reform efforts at WCMS, Mr. Abbott bravely and abruptly aborted a comprehensive push to institute large-scale academic reforms in order to first focus on discipline and structure. He spent an entire school year implementing rigid, almost military-style policies and procedures—not just for his students, but for his teachers and parents as well. His strategies included strict rules of conduct for students and a Seven Strike Discipline Policy¹⁹ that forced teachers to become more accountable for student behavior before involving administrators.

¹⁷ A copy of the CNN interview with Principal Truett Abbott can be found at the bottom of the transcript located at <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0607/10/ldt.01.html>.

¹⁸ Principal Abbott is not alone in his theory and practice. In their 2007 report, *Discipline as a Problem in Schools*, Martin and Angus state that, in fact, the "Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup public opinion poll has consistently rated *discipline* as the number one or two problem in response to the question: what is the biggest problem facing public schools?" (para. 2).

¹⁹ The Seven Strike Discipline Policy used by Truett Abbott outlines comprehensive, school-wide procedures for behavior management. For more information, contact the St. Croix Foundation.

Mr. Abbott also instituted policies that ensured teachers were always supervising *and interacting with* students beyond classroom instructional time, including during class transition periods, before school, after school, and at lunchtime. He took some aggressive (bordering on controversial) steps to create a more structured environment. This included such methods as installing glass panes in every classroom door so that he could conduct daily, regimented “walk-throughs.” By doing so, Mr. Abbott was able to monitor both teacher and student performance to ensure the highest quality of learning²⁰. It was only after Mr. Abbott had established the level of structure that he envisioned for his campus did he begin implementing comprehensive, literacy-based programs with stealth-like focus. Off-the-chart success soon followed.

Structure First, *Then* Programs

While Mr. Abbott’s style of supervision did raise a few eyebrows with his colleagues, time and time again, when analyzing common threads among high-performing schools all across the country, his message rang true: structure proved to be, above all else, one of the most critical factors for successful reform efforts²¹.

In the end, despite our early resistance to Mr. Abbott’s advice, his experience at WCMS proved to be too great a pull for us, as we began shifting our focus from programs to discipline. His message to us from day one, and now our message to all those who will listen, is this: schools must create a structured learning environment first and then implement the programs after—while always holding educators accountable for fulfilling their roles in educating, supervising, and nurturing children.

Of course, the Foundation wholly recognizes that the ultimate challenge for many school administrators is finding just the right balance as they strive to create an environment that is both structured *and nurturing*—something that requires great skill. At ECJH, that challenge was particularly daunting as the 2006-2007 school year ushered in an entirely new team of administrators to lead a bedraggled and wary faculty.

²⁰ Joan Gaustad (1994), author of *School Discipline*, noted that researchers find that those principals who are successful at implementing and maintaining an effective discipline program do not manage from their desks but instead “engage in... management by walking around” (p. 3).

²¹ Like Truett Abbott, Russ Thompson, a veteran teacher, principal, and author of *Out of Control and Failing: Improving Discipline and Learning at Two High Schools* believes that: “First, [administrators] must acknowledge that there is a discipline problem and be determined [to] do whatever is necessary to fix it. Second [they must] establish a clear set of rules with fair and consistent consequences” (p. 1).

The Foundation immediately coordinated a conference call between ECJH's new administrators and Truett Abbott to help guide and encourage them. During that call, Truett provided some last minute advice to administrators, explaining to them that at Warren County Middle School, his teachers had to "work, and they had to work *hard!*" He made it crystal clear that at his school there simply were no excuses! Barring all union obstacles, which he also has to contend with, he continued to place the greatest focus first on high expectations for his teachers to build and maintain a structured learning environment; and then on his students, as a close second, to live within those parameters.

Now, although much of what we learned from Mr. Abbott was indeed instructive, the Foundation was quietly unconvinced that his strategies were practical or that they could be applied in our schools, in *our* community. We nonetheless modified some of our programming to provide our pilot school with assistance in developing a more structured learning environment.

And, after our third year at ECJH, we too had documented proof of the merit of Mr. Abbott's advice of "discipline and structure first!" Following the first tumultuous and violent year at Elena Christian, which saw ongoing unrest and several all-out, school-wide riots, the Foundation quickly conceded that our initial plan to not focus on student discipline was indeed shortsighted.

Fortunately, under the leadership of Principal Willard John, who had heard Mr. Abbott's advice first-hand and took heed, ECJH made one of the most remarkable transformations—from a school in crisis to a budding educational model. As it turned out, Mr. John proved to be one of those rare breeds of middle school principals who had the will, the capacity, and the skill to balance, almost effortlessly, relationship building and discipline—essential leadership qualities for the challenging middle school student population.

We actually spent a great deal of time observing Mr. John, assessing his individual role in transforming ECJH from chaos to calm. In one instance, we would observe him confidently subduing a volatile, out-of-control student, and in the next, playing handball in the courtyard with others. Very few days went by when he failed to greet students at the gate at the start of each day. And he never backed down from the challenge of strictly enforcing disciplinary policies for most infractions.

In short order, we saw a clear shift take place as students began attending orderly assemblies that no longer descended into pandemonium. We walked through quieter hallways, and we felt a palpable change in the air as the culture of ECJH transformed. The Foundation also documented almost every step taken by teachers

and administrators to slowly and tirelessly build structure, discipline, and a culture of civility where there once was little.

Although we initially intended not to direct any focus or resources toward matters of discipline and structure, by the end of our Initiative, we had done just the opposite. We believe today that ECJH's decision to focus significant attention on discipline as a key component of their academic reform efforts, took great courage for administrators, and it paid off in a big way for students, faculty, and staff.

Supporting Schools to Create Discipline and Structure

Undoubtedly, finding the systemic solutions for disciplinary problems has become of prime importance for the Foundation. Based on our experience, we invariably have concluded that this problem is due, in large part, to a persistent and systemic lack of *firm* policies and procedures, as well as a pervasive lack of consistent enforcement in our schools.

At ECJH, as we sought to address some of its organizational deficiencies, we began assisting administrators with clarifying and communicating the school's expectations for students by posting signs listing appropriate behaviors on every wall of the school over one summer. We also helped ECJH replicate a model program we "borrowed" from another stateside model school partner by instituting Monday morning, school-wide assemblies in which academic goals and expectations were communicated and procedures like how to line up for the bus (a high-tension time for energetic middle school students) and how to file into the auditorium were practiced and reinforced.

Although to most adults it would seem obvious that running through a hallway or yelling at a friend is not appropriate behavior, the Foundation quickly recognized that many students simply did not have sufficient guidance and direction to know better. We continually reminded our school partners of the extent to which we, as adults, receive direction in our everyday life to help us navigate through our day: "No Parking", "No Loitering", "Stop", "Yield", and "Please Wait to be Seated." It is so much a part of our reality, and yet, if you traverse the halls of many of our schools, you will find little in the way of the same direction. We deduced that for many students, without clear boundaries, schools can be confusing, overwhelming and potentially hostile places.

Now, because of how intimately we worked each day with teachers, over time we also began to realize that no one had directly informed students how to ask for a pencil in the middle of a class lecture. What seemed like such an insignificant detail actually required many teachers to stop their lessons to deal with one student's small request. When the requests to go the restroom, to get a book, or turn in late homework were all

added up at the end of the school day, teachers found that they were spending more time on behavioral management than on actual teaching.

For two school years, the Foundation worked with administrators and faculty to institute detailed policies and procedures, including introducing large-scale classroom management strategies. We built comprehensive incentive programs that, yes, paid students for academic performance and rewarded them for positive behavior while also rewarding teachers for their successes. We researched national models for student and faculty handbooks and then partnered with school administrators and teachers to rewrite and print updated copies for the entire school. We also helped design and print signs for classroom doors throughout the school that informed students what to expect—and what was expected of them.

We collaborated with a network of model schools and ECJH faculty to build a comprehensive Classroom Management Resource Binder²², which outlined every procedure for every aspect of school routine—from how to walk between classrooms and assemble in the auditorium to how to turn in homework (and account for not doing homework). We compiled data on model programs from high-performing schools, providing sample forms on CDs for easy printing and modification, and then, at the request of ECJH administrators, we gave one comprehensive Classroom Management Resource Binder to every faculty member free of charge. Our resource binder ultimately represents one of the Foundation’s most successful projects—one that can be easily replicated at other schools committed to addressing discipline and structure.

By the third year of our Initiative, after two years of strong and consistent implementation and enforcement of disciplinary policies and procedures, academic scores at ECJH rose sharply. Coinciding with this success, Elena Christian Junior High School also recorded the fewest disciplinary infractions of all junior high *and high schools* in the St. Croix District during the 2007-08 school year²³.

²² For more information on the Classroom Management Resource Binder©, please feel free to contact the St. Croix Foundation directly.

²³ Graphed Data from the Department of Education’s 2008 *Discipline Report for the St. Croix District* can be found in Chapter One.

Providing Safe, Nurturing Environments for Student Achievement

Today, the single most important lesson we have learned about discipline and structure is this: before our schools can get really serious about instruction, they must first get serious about building disciplinary structure. Ultimately, schools work best when rules are consistent from classroom to classroom as well as outside of class, such that students are not playing guessing games or testing boundaries. Procedures have to be communicated, rehearsed, and reinforced from the very first day of school to the last, so that students know what is expected of them—always. Likewise, teachers must be given clear guidance on what is expected of *them* as well as how they will be held accountable for meeting (or not meeting) those expectations.

In more ways than not, when dealing with the issue of discipline, our schools have to be managed more like businesses in order to be successful, with clear policies and procedures, ongoing performance evaluations, and consistent enforcement. It is one of the most important roles that 21st Century schools must accept in order to prepare students for successful lives after school—with the overarching goal being that all will be “workplace ready.”

In the future, the Foundation will continue to do our part to support our educators in making our schools safer and more conducive for real learning. We are committed to providing more opportunities for our teachers to be exposed to innovative instructional strategies and resources through our targeted professional development speaker series. To date, the Foundation has already hosted five presentations including speakers like Dr. Willard Daggett, President of the International Center for Leadership in Education. We were also pleased to invite inspirational educator, Chelonnda Seroyer to speak to St. Croix teachers in 2008, and most recently, Dr. Harry Wong, author of the best-selling teaching resource of all time, entitled, *The First Days of School*²⁴.

We will also continue to build our educational resource library and our network of stateside model school partners as we stand ready to share best practices with willing schools here in the Territory. Ultimately, we hope more of our community stakeholders will likewise support the Foundation as we strive to support our schools in providing safe, nurturing, and structured learning environments for all of our students. Anything less is a failure on all our parts.

²⁴ For more information about Dr. Harry Wong and to access his vast network of teacher resources on-line, visit his website at <http://teachers.net/gazette/wong.html>. For details on the Foundation’s past speaker symposiums, contact the Foundation directly.

CHAPTER 7

Bold Action and Innovative Reforms

Since launching our Model Schools Initiative over four years ago, the Foundation has been both humbled and emboldened by what we have learned and what we have accomplished. We are, today, incredibly sensitized to the complex challenges facing our schools and our children and in turn are compelled to continue to advocate for the highest quality educational standards for our community. Most of all, however, we have come to recognize the incredible magnitude of this moment in our history when the call for *bold innovation* in public education has never been louder.

The Foundation is especially encouraged by the fact that today there are real roadmaps to assist community organizations like ours in charting a decisive course of action in support of our schools and our students. But the reality for us is that, before launching our Model Schools Initiative back in 2005, there really weren't many philanthropic organizations out there doing this kind of on-the-ground work. Early on, we spent a considerable amount of time reaching out to a number of community foundations for guidance and support, recognizing the risks and challenges inherent in our programmatic format. We ultimately knew that trying to establish collaborative partnerships with Local Education Agencies (LEAs) would undoubtedly test boundaries that most community foundations live comfortably within.

We found very few organizations that had done what we were planning to do: provide direct services to highly bureaucratic educational agencies in the quest to support *systemic* improvement. Fortunately, one of the national organizations that we learned was indeed playing a significant role in comprehensive public education reform was the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. We immediately reached out to them.

At the time we made contact with the Gates Foundation in early 2005, they had already spent more than one billion dollars over the course of six years in support of innovative public high school models—an extraordinary commitment of resources for any foundation. Their investment in education had also firmly established them as a shining example of the growing stake that the private sector now has in trying to prepare young people for the future.

As it turned out, through our outreach to the Gates Foundation, we were directed to Ray McNulty, who had just weeks prior, left an executive level position with Gates to join the International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE).

With funding support from the Gates Foundation, among other sources, ICLE has been studying high-performing and rapidly improving public schools across the country for over 18 years, seeking to identify the specific components and characteristics of success (and failure). They have, in turn, compiled an impressive catalogue of best practices that they are sharing with struggling schools across the country who are eager to move toward systemic reform.

As a dynamic partner of the Foundation, ICLE exposed us to a vast network of educational resources, which served to deepen our understanding of the challenges that all public schools face. Their data also illuminated the fact that the challenges facing *our* public education system here in the Virgin Islands are not unique.

We quickly realized that there really are no excuses for failure, as an increasing number of the poorest, most disadvantaged districts around our country now boast schools that are thriving with students who are closing the achievement gap through the guidance of passionate and skilled teachers and focused visionary leadership at every level.

With collaboration from ICLE, the Foundation accomplished a great deal, not just at Elena Christian, but throughout our local Department of Education (DOE). Our first major achievement came in 2007, when we invited ICLE's President, Dr. Willard Daggett, to St. Croix after almost a year of planning and fundraising²⁵.

Through the decisive actions of Dr. Lauren Larsen, then Acting Commissioner of the DOE, the Foundation convened an audience of St. Croix District Administrators as well as some community stakeholders to listen to Dr. Daggett's message of reform.



Dr. Daggett's speaks to key stakeholders on St. Croix in 2007.

²⁵ The St. Croix Foundation is an un-endowed community foundation that must raise funds each year to provide programs, grants, and scholarships in areas such as education, public safety, and community revitalization. To date, all funds expended during the course of the Model Schools Initiative have been raised through generous contributions.

It is important to clarify that, at the time of Dr. Daggett's visit, district-wide professional development was not a part of the Foundation's MSI strategic plan, or our budget. But, because of our growing understanding that many of our local educators (particularly our teachers) were not being exposed to the success stories of real models of educational excellence, the Foundation's Board of Directors made the strategic decision to expand our Initiative.

That expanded component of our programming involved moving beyond site-based school supports in order to initiate and facilitate meaningful community engagement. We felt confident that Dr. Daggett was a perfect vehicle for our new programmatic agenda, which entailed building the necessary critical mass to spur broad-scale reform efforts in the Territory.

Still, the Foundation was undeniably apprehensive about how Daggett and his message would be received by our local educators, because as anyone who has heard him speak knows, he does not wrap his message in politically correct platitudes that are easy to swallow. His message is blunt and his finger-pointing for public education failures spares no one (from educators to politicians to the media and to all of our fellow community stakeholders).

To our great relief however, Dr. Daggett's presentation received soaring high marks from all attendees at that March 2007 symposium. So much so, in fact, that the president of our local teachers' union (among others in attendance) asked us to invite Daggett back again—to share his message with St. Croix public school teachers who were unable to attend the first symposium.

The Foundation obliged by committing to host a second, larger event for St. Croix teachers less than a year later. But, even before Daggett's second visit, the Foundation responded to yet another DOE request to sponsor a delegation of local educators' attendance at ICLE's Annual Model Schools Conference in Washington, D.C. during the summer of 2007. Our Board of Directors once again courageously supported that DOE request, agreeing to commit money from the only endowed fund at the Foundation to sponsor a group of approximately 45 local educators from both school districts. Generous donors and corporate partners also dug deep to provide additional financial support for this endeavor.



St. Croix Foundation sponsored VI Delegation with Dr. Willard Daggett (second from left) at the 2007 Model Schools Conference.

Then, less than five months after ICLE's summer conference, as we were preparing for Daggett's return, the Foundation took yet another deep breath and decided to once again expand our plans by including the St. Thomas/ St. John District on Dr. Daggett's itinerary, in an effort to ensure the broadest impact on our educational system. We ultimately sponsored two symposiums: one in each school district open to every teacher and key education stakeholder in the Territory—a monumental milestone for the DOE and for the Foundation²⁶.

An even greater achievement came in the midst of Daggett's second visit, when we successfully coordinated a private meeting between Daggett and all high-level education leaders in the Territory, including both district superintendents, members of the Board of Education, the DOE Commissioner, and the Governor. What took place at that meeting undoubtedly fulfilled the core mission of our Initiative—to support systemic reform—when a commitment was made by the Department of Education to create a delegation of local educators from every public school in the Virgin Islands to attend ICLE's 2008 Model Schools Conference.

In return, Dr. Daggett committed to build a “conference within a conference” just for the VI, in a collaborative effort to launch a comprehensive, Territory-wide agenda for systemic reform. We believe that measurable gains are already being made in our public school system through ICLE's ongoing partnership with the DOE. And, while the Foundation is immensely proud of our role in brokering that relationship, we also believe we have come full circle from that first phone call to the Gates Foundation so many years ago.

As chance would have it, in January 2009, just as we were winding down our work at ECJH and beginning to sort through the mountain of data we had compiled, Bill Gates released his first *Annual Letter* to update the nation on his foundation's philanthropic work in education. There were many commonalities between his findings and ours. We now believe that Bill Gates' final conclusions, based on the wealth of data collected by his organization, are incredibly instructive for the St. Croix Foundation, and should also be for our entire community as well.

Having now spent over 2 billion dollars to attain the lofty mission of raising college ready graduation rates nationally, Bill Gates publicly (and very courageously) acknowledged in his 2009 *Annual Letter* that the Gates Foundation ultimately **did not** achieve the results they wanted (p. 11). After nine years of time and diligent effort

²⁶ The St. Croix Foundation's sponsorship of Dr. Daggett's Territory-wide presentations was made possible through the generous donations of Tropico Management and Marmurus Management.

dedicated to public education reform (and billions of dollars expended), Bill Gates released some stark findings. In his words:

1. Many of the small schools that we invested in did not improve student achievement in any significant way. These tended to be the schools that did not take radical steps to change the *culture* such as allowing the principal to pick their team of teachers or change the curriculum.
2. We had less success trying to change an existing school than helping to create a new school.
3. ...a few of the schools that we funded achieved something amazing. They replaced schools with low expectations and low results with ones that have high expectations and high results. Almost all of these schools were charter schools that have significantly longer school days than other schools.
4. There was only half as much variation in student achievement between schools as there [was] among classrooms in the same school... if [parents] want [children] to get the best education possible, it is actually more important to get [their children] assigned to a great teacher than to a great school. (p. 9-12)

At the end of his *Annual Letter*, Gates wrote, “Based on what the Foundation has learned so far, we have refined our strategy, and will continue to invest in replicating the school models that worked the best” (p. 12).

Today, after four and a half years of work in *our* public schools here in the Virgin Islands, the final conclusions we have drawn at the St. Croix Foundation about how to achieve public education excellence in our community are, in many ways, closely aligned with Gates’ and the rest of those who are pushing for reform (from the outside).

To be perfectly frank, based on everything we have learned and experienced to date, we have deduced that our Territory can continue to pour millions of dollars into our schools for years on end; and we can develop the most well intended strategic plans and hire all the right people; however, if key stakeholders do not have the resolve or the courage to make rapid, radical, and revolutionary changes that create a culture of accountability and the highest standards *for all* throughout our public education system, any claims of reform will be, very simply, rhetoric.

Chapter 8

Model Schools Initiative: Lessons Learned, Lessons Shared

Staying focused on solutions, there are some fundamental lessons, which the Foundation has learned through our Model Schools Initiative that we now believe can be instructive for our schools and community stakeholders. Our experience and our findings indicate that by working collectively to create a boldly innovative, *community inclusive* roadmap for educational reform, the Virgin Islands can indeed have high-performing schools that provide high-quality learning opportunities for *all* students. The St. Croix Foundation has identified five specific opportunities that we believe can lead to rapid, systemic change in our public education system:

1) Relevant Curriculum and *World-class* Standards

According to Cathleen Norris (2009), co-founder of GoKnow, a technology-based company committed to changing the way technology is used in the classroom, “Instead of teaching the ‘what’ style of content—children need to learn ‘how’: how to work in a team to solve a real problem in their community, how to frame that problem so it is actionable, how to research it, how to develop a plan of action, and finally how to enact that plan and actually build something” (What: The Vision, para. 1).

Norris’ position on relevant educational curriculum is echoed by the International Center for Leadership in Education, who developed an industry-wide educational tool called, “The Rigor/ Relevance Framework,” which is being used in schools across the country to make educational curriculum and instruction more rigorous and more relevant for all students. ICLE also developed several other innovative tools to assist communities with engaging a broad sector of their professional business stakeholders in *defining relevant curriculum from a real-world perspective*.

In 2007, at the request of the DOE, the Foundation launched the National Essential Skills Study (NESS) in partnership with ICLE, in an effort to introduce more relevant curriculum content into our public school classrooms. As a community-based survey, NESS asks businesses and other stakeholders to rank the most important skills they believe students should know and be able to do upon graduating from high school.

By providing a list of a broad range of current national curriculum standards in four core disciplines (language arts, math, science, and social studies) the surveys, when compiled, would reveal the most relevant curricular content necessary to prepare students for workplace realities, both locally (and nationally). The end goal for the NESS survey was ultimately to enable our school districts to compare local results against

national results, while also supporting faculty and community stakeholders in making informed decisions about possible changes to its curriculum.

Unfortunately, although the Foundation was able to engage a number of local businesses (both from the private and public sectors) in a wide array of industries²⁷, we failed to establish a strong enough partnership with the DOE to make the project successful. As a result, the effort fell short of collecting the requisite number of surveys necessary for a representative sample. Nonetheless, we still believe that completing NESS should be a critical part of broad-based educational reform efforts in the Territory²⁸.

We stand ready to not only support future efforts to compile such data, but to also ensure that the findings from the study are shared with the greater community in order to facilitate real community engagement and involvement in the reform process.

2) New Approaches to Leadership

As we delve into the sensitive issue of Public Education Leadership, we have opted to begin by simply stating a few facts about our personal experiences with Department of Education leadership. During the first **four (4)** years of our MSI, our pilot school, Elena Christian Junior High, saw three **(3)** Principals; six **(6)** Assistant Principals; three **(3)** Insular Superintendents; three **(3)** Acting Commissioners; and two **(2)** confirmed Commissioners—all with different (often times divergent) priorities, management styles, and degrees of commitment to maintaining and embracing our partnership and our programs. We firmly believe that nothing else we could say about leadership more adequately paints the picture of what's going on at the helm of each level of our public education system, from the state and district-levels, right down to our schools. *Plain and simple, in our opinion, revolving doors do not a stable or effective system make.*

Although we cannot quantify the full impact of the level of turnover in the DOE, we do know that most, if not all, of the successful schools that we partnered with or researched had several commonalities relative to leadership trends. The main parallel is

²⁷ The St. Croix Foundation formally thanks the Juan F. Louis Hospital, Hovensa LLC, the VI Department of Labor, Tropico Shipping, the teachers and administrators of the Department of Education 2007 VI Delegation, and many other individuals and businesses for their timely and wholehearted support in completing the National Essential Skills Study.

²⁸ The National Essential Skills study was created to ensure that the material teachers are asked to have students master is truly relevant to today's world. As it stands, public school teachers are required to cover more material than ever before, some of which is simply no longer relevant as the standards were created or added 10, 20, and sometimes 30 or more years ago.

that high-performing schools were consistently shepherded by *stable*, high-performing leaders. And most of those leaders were directly responsible for handpicking most of *their own* leadership team.

Of course, this does not mean that other districts do not, at times, employ some of the same rotation tactics that we see here in the Territory. In fact many of them do. But, once leaders began to perform with demonstrated results, many districts stepped back, got out of the way, and let successful leaders lead—even if it meant watching scores slip a bit early on as whole-scale, systemic reform efforts got under way.

Now, for the purpose of this report, the Foundation has chosen to focus primarily on our public school principals, recognizing their direct role in guiding our schools to success. Having worked closely with three different principals at ECJH, one of the most perplexing issues for us has been the degree to which the recruitment and selection process for principals at our public schools is *entirely insular*. In a world where global economics rule the day, it is wholly baffling that our principals continue to be drawn solely from the ranks of our local public school teacher pool.

The Foundation is not at all suggesting that there are no highly qualified leaders at the helms of some of our schools already. Quite the contrary, if one only takes a look at most of our highest performing public schools here in the Territory today, they need not look much further than the principal (and their team of teachers).

As authors Susan Gray and William Streshly (2008) conclude in the book *From Good Schools to Great Schools*, the data does indeed reflect that most great schools are led by great principals (p. 2-5). Yet, locally without sufficient “density” in the leadership pool within our public education system, the prospect of all of our schools being led by the brightest and the best remains slim.

Another issue, which adds to the complexity of the matter is the fact that principals (separate and apart from their title) are almost exclusively teachers. Plucked from their classrooms by legitimate promotion (or by appointment), they go from supervising approximately 30-50 students at a time to being charged with effectively managing 500-1000 member organizations *and crumbling facilities*.

The Foundation is mindful that this is certainly not a challenge unique to the V.I., but rather one with which most school districts across the nation struggle. And, it is undoubtedly easy to understand the complex challenge before our principals as they struggle to balance instructional leadership responsibilities with their management function. But fortunately, the Foundation believes that some plausible answers for how to address this issue can be found by looking at innovative model programs abroad.

In one example, several years ago, the Puerto Rico Community Foundation (PRCF) launched a highly successful educational initiative seeking to address this very issue of building their public education leadership pool. By pairing public school principals with high level corporate executives, PRCF provided local educators with one-on-one mentoring opportunities that they would otherwise not be privy to.

In evaluating that program, principals in Puerto Rico overwhelmingly concurred that their real-world mentors were one of the most valuable resources they had in developing their skill sets as managers. While PRCF's Initiative represents only one example of innovative solutions to systemic problems, the good news is that there exist many more models of how leadership development in public education can be achieved by employing innovative, collaborative, and cost-effective strategies.

Recognizing the incredible need for targeted leadership development opportunities for our educators here in the Virgin Islands, the Foundation will be dedicating a significant portion of our MSI programming and budget to support professional development resources for our administrators. Included in our offerings will be training in areas like human resources management, fiscal management, and strategic planning in order to build core management skill-sets in our public school leaders.

3) Charter Schools... a viable option?

As Bill Gates reported in his 2009 *Annual Letter*, ***of all the schools funded by the Gates Foundation, the ones that achieved the most significant gains were almost exclusively charter schools*** (p. 11). This single piece of data struck us as particularly interesting because, throughout our entire MSI, the Foundation did not dedicate focus or attention to the issue of charter schools as a viable pathway for achieving rapid educational reform in the Virgin Islands. Instead, we maintained our commitment to our local Department of Education and the potential we firmly believe it has to successfully close the achievement gap for our students.

Today, however, the Foundation is taking note of the growing body of evidence which is clearly pointing toward charter schools as one (of several) unique variables in almost every successful public school district.

For those who do not fully understand what charter schools are, or how they function, the United States Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences (2008) defines them as:

“Publicly funded schools that are typically governed by a group or organization under a contract or ‘charter’ with the state, which exempts the school from

selected state or local rules and regulations. In return for funding and autonomy, the charter school must meet accountability standards, [and is] reviewed (typically every 3 to 5 years) [at which time, the contract] can be revoked if guidelines on curriculum and management are not followed or the standards are not met” (para. 2).

In practical application, charter schools have historically been vehicles for creating innovative educational opportunities for parents and students such as science and arts academies, as well as same-sex and college preparatory schools. It is precisely because of innovative options of choice like these that many proponents believe so strongly in charters— that and the fact that they afford educators opportunities to bypass the chokehold bureaucracy that is commonplace in most departments of education.

But, the stark truth is that there really is no guarantee that charters will offer students anything better than conventional public schools do, as many have actually reported worse achievement results—a real conundrum for parents and community leaders. In a recent interview, Arne Duncan, Secretary of Education for the U.S. DOE summed the issue up like this, “I do not support charter schools. I support good charter schools”²⁹.

Fortunately for discriminating proponents like Arne Duncan, there are a growing number of exceptional charter schools that are producing rapid and *extraordinary* results. Those success stories are in turn presenting an almost iron-clad argument in support of comprehensive, structural innovation in education for an increasing body of stakeholders who were previously sitting on the fence about charter schools.

Still, despite the fact that more and more charters are popping up all over the country and despite the fact that they are, indeed, privately run public schools, there is (more often than not) incredible sensitivity and controversy that surrounds the mere mention of the word “charter.” The issue of charters is inevitably one which creates great chasms in many communities, primarily because at the core of the matter is *money*. As dollars that have been historically and faithfully dedicated to failing public schools are increasingly being re-directed to charters, huge political firestorms and major losses of critical federal funding are becoming commonplace in underperforming school districts across the country.

²⁹ Secretary of Education Arne Duncan appeared on the Tavis Smiley Show in early 2009 as a part of President Barack Obama’s nationwide focus on public education reform.

Either way one looks at it, the fact of the matter is that, at present, the Virgin Islands stands alone with a handful of other states (10 to be exact) that have not passed the requisite charter legislation that must be enacted prior to allowing for the creation of even *one* charter school in any school district. As such, the mere possibility of charter schools in the Territory is completely out of reach for our students, parents, and educators as an option.

Taking into consideration the fact that much of the research we came across affirms that great charter schools are often predicated by *strong charter legislation*, it would behoove stakeholders to become actively engaged in reviewing model legislation to fully understand all of the critical issues involved in the creation of effective charter schools.

Today, with the USDOE pledging billions of dollars in support of innovative public school models and promoting the expansion of charter schools nationwide, the Foundation believes the Virgin Islands would be remiss not to examine this option more closely. For our part, we simply recommend that every education stakeholder in our community begin doing research of their own on charter schools, particularly the likes of KIPP, Green Dot, Mastery, and the Harlem Children's Zone's Promise Academy- all exceptional models that are completely redefining public education. Ultimately, everyone even remotely passionate about the state of public education in the Territory must collectively determine if charter schools are a viable consideration for the Virgin Islands, post haste.

4) Private - Public Partnerships: Inviting Key Stakeholders to the Table

Over the course of our Model Schools Initiative, the Foundation has continually heard from local education stakeholders about the need for greater community engagement in addressing some of the complex issues facing our schools. Yet, our experience at times left us feeling unwelcome and unappreciated, in spite of our shared goals, time expended, and \$300,000-plus investment of scarce resources. As a consequence, we are, today, keenly sensitive to the enormous role which trust and fidelity play in building and sustaining meaningful private-public partnerships.

It is also abundantly clear to us that both schools *and* community stakeholders must find middle ground in order to develop the kinds of partnerships that produce meaningful outcomes for our students and our public schools. But, for that to happen, all stakeholders must first come to recognize that so long as the success of our children is central to everyone's agenda, then we are all on the same side.

Fortunately, the Foundation believes there are some very specific guidelines that can serve to foster more high-impact partnerships between our private and public sectors in support of a high-quality educational system including the following:

- Corporate and community-based organizations must strive to better balance our interests and priorities with individual school needs in order to find more mutually beneficial opportunities for collaboration. Businesses must also do a better job at dialoguing with educators about why reform is urgently necessary...from an economic perspective.
- Corporate donors must demand more from school partners (like detailed justifications for funding requests, implementation plans, and timelines) before donating resources to schools to ensure the highest degree of commitment and accountability.
- Schools and district-level management must be open to learning how to better leverage and manage existing resources for maximum impact in order to guard against duplication and waste of donated resources and federal dollars.
- By diversifying brokers and inviting the private sector to the table when important decisions need to be made, school and district leaders can, at times, marry strengths and overcome weaknesses—in turn, netting greater results for all.
- *Education stakeholders must learn to ask the private sector for more than just money because, sometimes, mentoring means more.*

The Foundation is committed to fulfilling our role as a community convener by sponsoring guided roundtable conversations with businesses and other community stakeholders with the goal of developing innovative strategies for providing our children with the highest quality public education opportunities.

Looking to national (and international) models of collaborative community-based efforts, all of our sponsored activities will be tied to very specific outcomes that are reliant upon broad-based community involvement. As always, we will strive to build strong, sturdy bridges between our private and public sector partners.

5) Strategic Grant Making

As we now look to the future, the Foundation will continue to focus our programmatic agenda on providing our public schools with relevant resources as we strive to sustain the original, overarching goal of our Model Schools Initiative—supporting systemic reform. We will also be aggressively working towards building our

public education endowment so that we may continue to serve generations of students in our schools.

Recognizing that many of our community's corporate and private-sector stakeholders are searching for meaningful opportunities to get involved and to support our public education system, the Foundation will launch a new and exciting component of our Initiative. This new Community Grants Program, will afford community stakeholders and businesses, opportunities to make the greatest impact on student achievement through *strategic* grant-making. Our program will consist of the following grants:

- Rigor & Relevance - Innovative Instruction *Teacher Grants*, which support innovative classroom instructional strategies and life skills curriculum.
- Professional Development Grants, which provide Teachers and Teacher Teams with opportunities to acquire additional educational training targeted to their specific needs—with the ultimate goal of enhancing instructional skills and promoting higher academic achievement of students.
- School Improvement Grants, which support facility improvements that directly impact *student performance*.
- Career & Technical Education Grants, which support innovative and relevant vocational education programs.
- Youth Philanthropy Grants, which promote youth philanthropy and civic engagement amongst our students.
- Youth Scholarships, which support students wishing to participate in targeted educational programs in areas such as math, science, and the arts.

FINAL THOUGHTS

“Make No Small Plans”

The issue of public education reform is unquestionably one that will be garnering national focus as the Obama Administration continues to dedicate more attention and resources to innovative programs and strategies than any other administration in recent history. Some organizations are actually predicting that 2010 will be one of the single most important years for public education, as community stakeholders (many of them from the private sector) play more pivotal roles in the push for reform.

At a recent symposium in Chicago, Illinois, sponsored by Grantmakers for Education and entitled *Make No Small Plans*, foundations from all over the country convened in an historic call to arms to collaboratively and resolutely advocate for public education reform. Keynote speakers at this momentous gathering included; U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan; Geoffrey Canada, visionary leader of the nationally recognized Harlem Children’s Zone; civil rights leader, Jesse Jackson; and Davis Guggenheim, director of the Oscar Award winning film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, who is set to release his newest project on the state of public education in America, entitled *Waiting For Superman*.

For three days, conference attendees heard about bold and innovative reform efforts taking place around the country, and for three days, we were all challenged and prodded to take some of the most courageous and aggressive steps in support of what many are now calling “the greatest civil rights issue of our time”³⁰. The St. Croix Foundation, today, publicly and unequivocally accepts that challenge.

Through our Model Schools Initiative, we will continue to support our public schools in preparing our students to be armed and ready to compete in a 21st Century global economy. We have drafted this document, which chronicles five years of our on-the-ground work in our public schools, in an earnest and urgent attempt to engage our entire community in informed and dynamic conversations about the future of our public education system.

While we acknowledge some significant efforts being undertaken by our local Department of Education to create a more strategic reform agenda, the pace of change

³⁰ In a 2009 news conference, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan stated that, “With high school drop-out rates unacceptably high and college completion rates far too low, education is clearly the civil rights issue of this generation...*Every child and adult deserves a quality education*. This is the only lasting way to fuel our economic recovery and end stubborn cycles of poverty and social failure” (Woodhead, para. 2-3).

is simply not ensuring that every child that graduates from our public schools will be workforce ready... today!

The Foundation is more committed than ever before to become a fierce, tireless advocate for our children's success and for their futures! In reality, *our children need every one of us* striving on their behalf. The St. Croix Foundation courageously leads that charge, and we invite all of our community stakeholders to join us in fulfillment of our motto—*Together We Can Make a Difference!*

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St. Croix Foundation

THE MODEL SCHOOLS INITIATIVE REPORT

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