

May 2016


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Recommended Citation

Leland, C. H., Wackerly, A., & Collier, C. F. (2016). The Center for Inquiry: Anatomy of a Successful Progressive School. *Occasional Paper Series*, 2016 (35). Retrieved from <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series/vol2016/iss35/4>

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The Center for Inquiry: Anatomy of a Successful Progressive School

Christine Leland, Amy Wackerly, & Christine Collier

In an essay for *Bank Street Occasional Paper Series 27*, Gil Schmerler observed, “Looking for rays of sunshine against an educational landscape that has taken a particularly horrific beating in the last decade or two is a difficult—maybe quixotic—undertaking” (2012, p. 30). As educators who have witnessed that metaphorical beating “up close and personal,” we concur. But during the same time period, we have also experienced the inception, growth and undeniable success of a progressive public school in an urban district. While we cannot credit a single factor for this result, we can show how a combination of factors has supported its success over time. First, teachers at the school have remained committed to their touchstone belief that creative, holistic learning environments produce effective opportunities for learning. Second, the school has maintained a strong partnership with teacher educators at a local university. And third, parents have actively participated in making decisions about the direction of the school. It is our hope that the story behind this school will provide a glimpse of sunlight—as well as some lessons for advocates of public education who see vibrant democratic learning communities as one way to support both equity and excellence.

The Center for Inquiry (CFI) in Indianapolis opened as a magnet program in 1993. It was the product of a collaborative effort between a group of Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) teachers and several faculty members from the School of Education at Indiana University, Bloomington (IUB) and Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis (IUPUI). The teachers and professors obtained a grant to spend time over two years learning about holistic inquiry-based teaching (Short & Harste, with Burke, 1996) and critical literacy (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2015). The teachers then went back to their classrooms and kept meeting and planning a new magnet program focused on what they had learned about the power of constructivist teaching and learning. After a series of discussions that included their university collaborators, the teachers submitted a proposal that was selected for funding.

The IPS district in the early 1990s was dealing with large losses in student population and the superintendent was looking for ways to keep families from moving to the suburbs for better educational opportunities. Magnet schools were seen as a way to make the large urban district more attractive. They were public schools but they were given some freedom to plan curriculum

and choose instructional materials appropriate to their themes. However, the superintendent made it clear that the magnet programs would be operational only as long as there was parental support and the students got acceptable test scores. Furthermore, it was up to the schools to “sell” their programs to prospective parents at annual school fairs.

The original CFI magnet program opened in fall, 1993. It was housed in one wing of a larger IPS school and included five classroom teachers, one inclusion teacher, and about 100 K-5 children. The role of the inclusion teacher was to push into classrooms and co-teach with classroom teachers to serve learners with special education needs. She also served as a resource to the students and teachers. Like most of the schools in the district, this one had a high percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunches. A professor from IUPUI who had been working with the teachers started teaching literacy classes onsite as soon as the school opened. By the following fall, a cohort of 20 college students took up residence on a full-time basis. These teacher education interns worked with IUPUI faculty members and attended classes onsite in a university classroom designated for their use. When the interns were not in class, they were working with children and teachers in the classrooms. All of the teachers, interns, and professors met after school once a week to debrief, plan curriculum, and share observations of children who were struggling. The group generated ideas for trying alternative pedagogies to support these learners and for collecting data to monitor progress.

Parents also played a role in setting the agenda for the new program. They were invited to a series of evening meetings to talk with staff and university partners about what they wanted for their children. One memory from an early meeting is of a parent who said she had a complaint. As we (teachers and professors) exchanged nervous glances, she went on to say that her daughter was so anxious to be in school that she had to fight with her to stay home when she was sick. She found this unsettling, as it had never happened before. We all took it as an auspicious start.

Fast forward to 2016. A lot has happened in 23 years! Due largely to parent demand and good test scores, the original K-5 CFI program has grown into a K-8 program encompassing three IPS schools and serving over 1,000 students. A fourth CFI is scheduled to open at the start of the 2016-17 school year. The program, teachers, and principals have won recognition and numerous awards for excellence. CFI staff and university collaborators have presented and consulted nationally and internationally on inquiry-based education and critical literacy. As a thought collective, they have published numerous articles highlighting the work of CFI students and teachers (e.g. Leland, Ociepka, & Wackerly, 2015; Leland, Ociepka, & Kuonen, 2012; Leland, Harste, & Kuonen, 2008).

The teacher education connection with IUPUI has served as an excellent incubator for new teachers with a strong background in progressive pedagogies. Many CFI teachers (including fourth-grade teacher Amy Wackerly, one of the authors) are graduates of the program. This partnership has continued through the years and today all three CFI schools regularly host student teachers from IUPUI. Many students complete both semesters of their student teaching at a CFI school. Amy notes that now, just as in the past when she was in the program, student teachers become an integral part of the teaching team in each classroom. They work with teachers and other student teachers at their grade level to plan curriculum and instruct students daily. As they are immersed in this team-teaching, collaborative effort, they are also able to provide classroom supervision. This opens up opportunities for the veteran teachers to meet and discuss larger, school-wide issues.

To the district's credit, central office administrators have allowed the CFI leaders to hire personnel who support the school's progressive philosophy. Chris Collier, a teacher who was part of the group that created the school, serves as principal at one of the three CFI buildings and will be principal of the new CFI. She sees the university connection and the ability to hire like-minded professionals as playing essential roles in the school's success.

One significant change made to keep the program viable was the addition of the International Baccalaureate (IB) Primary Years and Middle Years Programmes. Amy Wackerly explains that the IB program was attractive to the CFI staff because it provided a clear framework to support the original inquiry/critical literacy focus of the school without challenging the teachers' goal of providing a creative, holistic learning environment. Elements of the IB Primary Years Program include six global themes: Who we are, Where we are in place and time, How we express ourselves, How the world works, How we organize ourselves, Sharing the planet (International Baccalaureate, 2010). As a result of the IB influence, teachers in the Primary Years Programme have moved from an interdisciplinary curriculum to a transdisciplinary curriculum.

A transdisciplinary curriculum focuses on concepts and contexts rather than on themes as traditionally imagined. Transdisciplinary skills are defined as those that situate students for learning, no matter the subject area. These include the skills of critical thinking, self-management, research, communication, and working productively with others. Many of these skills will sound familiar to readers, and indeed they have always been part of the tradition of progressive education. In many ways, transdisciplinary teaching reflects a return to progressive roots in a way that the superficiality of "interdisciplinary," with its topical themes, does not.

Although the school day is no longer segmented into different subject areas, the disciplines are still used to provide a unique lens on the concepts explored. Students are encouraged to focus on issues across, between, and beyond learning areas so that broader perspectives can emerge. The goal is to develop a deep understanding of the interrelationships among complex issues.

When teachers work together to plan units of study, they talk about how to include transdisciplinary concepts within a global perspective. They also keep track of how state standards are naturally incorporated into the units, as the school is held accountable to these measures. This expanded curricular focus has added an international dimension. Students in all three CFI schools now learn both Spanish and Mandarin and are challenged to think globally as well as locally.

Although the IB program has added depth to the curriculum, the school's core progressive values have remained constant. Amy explains that as teachers plan and write curriculum, they still put students at the center of their teaching. Students have a choice about what they read and write, and their *I Wonder* inquiry questions, which help to focus instruction on their interests within the concepts being taught, drive the curriculum.

For example, when Amy's class was learning about the concept of energy, many of the lessons focused on sound and light, following the science standards. However, some of the students' *I Wonder* questions required a deeper understanding than provided by the basic curriculum. Students were given time and support to research one of their questions in depth. Their questions included: How does sonar work? What animals use echolocation and how does it work? What are the different types of musical instruments from around the world? How do we see rainbows? Students developed research, note-taking and writing skills and published their findings in a classroom magazine.

Another constant element is the critical literacy perspective that encourages students and teachers to consider the role of language and its impact on social justice. As Janks (2014) has argued, language in any context is never neutral. It is always used to support a particular perspective or worldview. Critically literate people are aware of this and ask questions like the following: How does a text (or a movie, advertisement, or video game) "position" people? Who benefits from the portrayal and who is marginalized by it? What kind of social action might be taken to achieve a more equitable resolution? How can we work together to make a difference? Amy describes what social action looks like at the elementary level:

Action can range from students going home and on their own looking something up on the web or in a book about a concept, to a student working to bring about some type of change. When our class was studying communities, we not only looked at our Indianapolis community, but at communities around the world. We learned how communities were formed, how they change over time, and how to take an active part in different communities. Students spent time identifying the various communities they were each involved in (e.g., school, city, world, neighborhood, religious) and then developed a plan to take action to help one of them. Projects they designed included neighborhood clean-ups, making dinner for friends who did not have enough to eat, making and selling soup and donating the money for Ebola research, and collecting items for homeless people. One of the projects a student proposed as a third grader, building a play area in her neighborhood, is being carried out this year. After we read the book *A Long Walk to Water* by Linda Sue Park [2011], four students went to the principal and asked if they could do a fundraiser to help raise money to build wells. Giving students agency to take steps to make the world a better place is one way CFI helps students become globally minded citizens of the world.

Taking a critical literacy perspective also means that educators recognize the right of all children to see themselves in the books they read (Bishop, 1992). Because of this, CFI teachers make a conscious effort to introduce books that address tough social issues like racism, poverty, and homophobia. Even in the primary grades, children hear their teachers read social issues books (e.g., Leland & Harste with Huber, 2005) about families with single-sex parents, kids visiting relatives in prison, and stories with characters who are challenged by racism, poverty, or war. These books open up conversations as students relate them to their own lives and, as Amy explains, “One goal of the school is to not shut down conversations.”

When students or teachers identify problems within the school community, the problems themselves become the focus of inquiry and everyone becomes a researcher. Students read books about other people who have been in similar situations, collect survey data, and make observations about how and when the problem seems to show up. This prepares them to take a proactive role in resolving it.

While most of the social issues books end on a hopeful note, difficult situations are not simply wished away. Chris Leland, an IUPUI professor who worked with the original group of teachers to design and launch the school, finds that her adult students are sometimes shocked by the painful reality of some of the social issues books. Some students initially argue for preserving what they

call “the innocence of childhood,” but quickly become advocates for addressing difficult topics after they see the meaningful conversations the children engage in (Leland & Harste, 2005). This connects to the teachers’ practice of not talking down to kids or assuming that they won’t understand complex issues. Quite the contrary, they have found that students want to “keep it real” and talk about issues they are facing in their own lives. At the end of the Primary Years Programme in grade 5, students choose an issue and develop a project to address it. Over the years students have taken on issues such as teen pregnancy, domestic violence, and sustainability. They research the issue, share their findings, and take some sort of social action.

These factors help explain the longevity of a program that has grown significantly without sacrificing any of its major tenets. In this age of school-bashing and corporate takeovers, survival is no small accomplishment. However, there are also areas of concern. One is the ever-encroaching shadow of standards. While the IB programs have given staff some space in which to maneuver, they are still required to meet state and national accountability measures. Fortunately, teachers have found that many standards are general enough to interpret and include in the concept-based unit studies. When asked about the state standards, Amy explained it this way:

We looked at them and thought about how what we were already doing fit in with them. We had to do some tweaking but the big concepts stayed intact. We had to negotiate where the various units went—and some of them had to move into different grade levels.

Amy pointed out that finding time for this kind of work is challenging since it requires time for reflection and cannot be done alone: “If teachers don’t have opportunities to think and collaborate, they can become ‘activity gatherers’ who don’t ground their practice in anything.”

Another area of concern is the growing influence of standardized testing. The CFI was funded with the caveat that it would be closed if test scores were not acceptable and this specter remains. While test scores have not been a problem overall, the idea that the existence of the school depends on something so arbitrary and disconnected from the actual curriculum is both distracting and unnerving.

An even larger concern is the current national discourse of attacks on schools, teachers, and public education in general. When asked what worries her most, Principal Chris Collier talked about the status of public education. Given the battles that public schools have to fight, she wonders about the motives of so-called reformers and the future of public education: “Educators don’t have a

voice. They are perceived as not knowing much. The teaching shortage is not surprising given how teachers are paid and treated. Programs like Teach for America send the message that anyone can do this.” Shrinking enrollment numbers in many teacher education programs support this supposition.

Within the local Indianapolis context, Collier identifies the continued decrease in state funding as an additional challenge. School leaders are scrambling to find additional funding sources for IB fees, teacher training, and other so-called “extras” that are necessary to maintain strong programs. Additionally, the shrinking student population within the district means that funds to compete for high-quality teachers are scarce. The result, according to Collier, is that “We can’t offer the same salaries as some of our neighboring districts.”

Given all of these challenges, there is no guarantee that the school will continue to thrive. However, since it has survived in tough times for more than two decades, progressive educators can learn from the experience. One important lesson is that the voices and opinions of parents matter a lot. Parents know when their kids are happy and productive and will fight to keep them out of schools that silence and repress them. Parents have been crucial allies in keeping the CFI open and growing. When the waiting list at the first CFI became chronically long, parents voiced their unhappiness and the district enlisted Collier and CFI staff to replicate the program in another school. They did the same thing when there were two CFIs and still not enough spaces for families to enroll their children. As of November 2015, there were over 350 students on waiting lists to get into one of the existing CFI schools and the school board voted to add a fourth CFI, opening in the fall of 2016.

But growth is not simply a matter of putting a name on a building. As CFI continues to grow, teachers and university partners worry about maintaining the integrity of the program. Finding staff with shared philosophical beliefs and experience is crucial to the success of ongoing expansion.

Parents are also crucial allies in the fight to save public education at the national level. A case in point is the statement released by President Obama, acknowledging the view that standardized testing is out of control and changes need to be made (Doering, 2015). What might not be obvious is the significant role that parents have played by refusing to let their children participate in something they knew was not good for them or their schools. According to Valerie Strauss (2016), “The testing opt-out movement is growing, despite government efforts to kill it.”

The unique mix of factors that came together to make CFI successful during a difficult time for progressive educators might not be replicable in other situations. But the various pieces of the puzzle are instructive in their own right. First, partnerships between higher education faculty and K-12 teachers and administrators can be mutually beneficial. While each group has different needs and goals, there are also many points of intersection. Second, inviting parents into the process of designing and running schools brings unforeseen dividends. Parents learn to identify the characteristics of schools that truly support their children's learning, and once they have this knowledge, they lobby tirelessly to get the kind of schools they want. Third, and maybe most important, remaining true to our belief in the power of creative, holistic teaching is essential; indeed, we see it as the bottom line for what makes a program sustainable over time.

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Amy Wackerly is a 4th grade teacher at the Center for Inquiry (CFI) in Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS). She graduated from Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis and has been teaching at CFI for the past 16 years. Amy has presented at numerous conferences at the local, state, national and international levels. She was the 2015 IPS Teacher of the Year and a Top Ten Finalist for the Indiana State Teacher of the Year.



Christine Foxen Collier was a founding member of the Center for Inquiry (CFI) schools and has served as principal of the original school, leading its authorization as the first IB World School in Indiana to offer the Primary Years Program. She led the replication at CFI School 84 where she currently serves as principal. She will open the fourth CFI school in July of 2016. Ms. Collier was named a National Distinguished Principal in 2011.