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## Mirrors and Prisms: Refractions of Privilege in a Public School's Fight for a Voice

**Erin Connors**

**Asheville School**

### **Abstract**

In the fall of 2015, the Asheville City Board of Education announced plans to undertake a restructuring initiative to accommodate recent significant growth in district enrollment, which is predicted to tax the district's current physical capacity in the next three to six years. This paper explores the implications and manifestations of privilege in the unfolding of the restructuring conversation in Asheville, where progressive prioritization of equity and a liberal social justice mindset meet entrenched systems of racial and class privilege. Ultimately, the examination reveals the privilege of access to information that comes with membership in the dominant group, and in the conclusion I reflect on my own role in this system.

*Keywords:* Board of education; Public school districts; Information access; Parent teacher organizations; District restructuring; Privilege

Erin Connors is the Academic Dean and a teacher in the Humanities Department at Asheville School in Asheville, North Carolina, where she also writes occasionally for local publications. Recently, she has worked to develop of Global Issues elective, offering students the opportunity to explore issues of privilege, social justice, and activism in their school and wider communities.

## Mirrors and Prisms: Refractions of Privilege in a Public School's Fight for a Voice

In the fall of 2015, the Board of Education in a progressive Southern town announced plans to undertake a restructuring initiative to accommodate recent significant growth in district enrollment, which is predicted to tax the district's current physical capacity in the next three to six years. This paper explores the implications and manifestations of privilege in the unfolding of the restructuring conversation in Asheville, North Carolina, where progressive prioritization of equity and a liberal social justice mindset meet entrenched systems of racial and class privilege. Ultimately, the examination reveals the privilege of access to information that comes with membership in the dominant group. I am a member of that group; I identify as White, college-educated, and middle- to upper-middle-class. I am married to a man of Color, and we have two biracial children. Our involvement in the following events resulted from our opting out of our assigned school district and into the neighboring city district through the city's open-enrollment option, which families may pursue with substantial paperwork and a fee of \$300.

### Background: Seeking Equity

In 2010, the Programme for International Student Assessment survey conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), ranked Finland's educational system among the top in the world. Education experts and policymakers in the United States clamored to hear what wisdom Finnish authorities would impart. In 2011 Pasi Sahlberg,

director of the Finnish Ministry of Education's Center for International Mobility, promptly wrote the book *Finnish Lessons: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland?* and embarked on a speaking tour. But the American fervor over Finnish education appeared to Sahlberg as perpetually misdirected. His audiences wanted answers to questions such as, "How can you keep track of students' performance if you don't test them constantly? How can you improve teaching if you have no accountability for bad teachers or merit pay for good teachers? How do you foster competition and engage the private sector? How do you provide school choice?" (Partanen, 2011). These kinds of questions, Sahlberg (2011, 2012) maintains, miss the point (not to mention that they reveal a philosophy of education that runs completely counter to Finland's minimal hours of homework, emphasis on creative play, and eschewing of competition); in fact, he notes, "[T]here are certain things nobody in America really wants to talk about" (Partanen, 2011).

Partanen (2011) highlights the irony of U.S. interest in Finland's high ranking, noting that test scores were never what the Finnish were after. Rather, he writes, "Decades ago, when the Finnish school system was badly in need of reform, the goal of the program that Finland instituted, resulting in so much success today, was never excellence. It was equity." A scan of research topics from the Ministry of Education and Culture in Finland reveals this bias, in paper titles such as "Projects in Developing Regional Know-How..." and "Young People at Risk of Social Exclusion ..." "Towards Inclusion ...", and "Slowly but Surely? Progress in the Accessibility of University and Polytechnic Education in the

2000s” (Manninen, 2008; Penttila, 2012; Ritsila & Haukka, 2005; Veijola, 2005). In the strategic plan for 2020, the ministry recommends the development of two additional core courses: drama and ethics.

As Sahlberg (2012) could not ignore during his tour, this emphasis on equity and inclusion stands at odds with the discourse around public education in the United States, which focuses on standardized testing, teacher accountability, and promotion of school choice as a means to “healthy competition,” a Darwinesque approach to schooling in which the failures will simply fade away while the strongest strut their stuff. Paul Gorski, for one, has written extensively about the need to move away from talk of “achievement” and “diversity” and instead center concepts of equity, especially economic equity, in education reform. He and others underscore the choice confronting policymakers—what they call the “lie” of the achievement gap, which is, in reality, a gap in opportunity (Gorski & Zenkov, 2014; Gutierrez, 2014). Steele’s examination of stereotype threat has likewise produced evidence that reducing the risk of “identity predicaments”—meaning reminders of perceived deficits or shortcomings—also reduces group achievement gaps, raising the performance of Blacks to the same level as Whites and women to the level of men on several diagnostic measures that traditionally reveal difference (Steele, 2010).

Such scholars and reformers argue that it is not only possible but essential for

public education to shift its focus from the “achievement gap” to the “opportunity gap.” In this view, as in Finland, the goal of public education becomes creating a school-based atmosphere for learning in which “differences in educational outcomes are not the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions” (Sahlberg, 2012, p. 28).

The City School District, which serves approximately 4,200 students in 9 schools, has taken the equity call to heart, titling its most recent strategic plan “Excellence with Equity” (Asheville City Board of Education, 2015). The high school program offers a traditional program, as well as an alternative program and a school of inquiry under its auspices. A historic site that served as a full elementary school in the 1970s now houses the city preschool. Its five elementary schools operate on a magnet system and support significant out-of-district enrollment. It should be noted that many (though certainly not all) of the Buncombe County families who enroll as “out-of-district” are middle-class families with educated parents who see school choice as an important feature of this system. Of the nine schools in the district, none has made more, and more substantive, efforts to minimize difference than the one that also boasts one of the most diverse profiles. I will refer to this school as Isaac Walton Elementary (IWE).<sup>1</sup>

In the 2014–2015 school year, IWE served approximately 350 students in grades

<sup>1</sup> Some names have been changed to protect identities.

K-5. Of these students, approximately 80% qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. About 47% of families identified as White, 30% Black, 12% Hispanic, and 1% as two or more races. In 2015–2016, IWE added a pre-kindergarten class and a sixth grade that reflect similar demographics (National Center for Education Statistics Institute of Education Sciences, 2017). The Isaac Walton principal's goal for the school was simple: When visitors walk in, he wanted them to wonder, "I thought this was a Title I school. Where are all the poor kids?" The aptly named Dr. Grant relentlessly sought funding sources to support programs to this end: The school provides breakfast and a healthy morning snack to every student; they run a free coat-and-clothing service out of a spare closet; and the walls of the school are decorated with lively professional murals. All communications from Isaac Walton are in English and Spanish (the district as a whole does not uniformly provide bilingual materials). Grant embraced Paul Tough's 2012 book *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character*, which argued that character virtues such as self-control, curiosity, conscientiousness, grit, and self-confidence are more important to student success than smarts. The staff wears T-shirts that champion these virtues, and students receive reward tickets when they are "caught" displaying these characteristics. The school has developed programs such as chess, gardening, and music that lend themselves to demonstration of these traits specifically in order to give students more opportunities to demonstrate—and earn praise for demonstrating—their. In 2014, IWE adopted a balanced calendar, also known as "year-round" school, to further target achievement gaps by minimizing long periods away from school (Mitchell & Mitchell, 2005).

These moves toward equity have carried over into parent activity. Isaac Walton offers childcare and Spanish language translation at every single PTO meeting to maximize the potential for attendance across a wide parent base, and in 2014–2015, the PTO undertook an audit of its bylaws to make sure they used inclusive language. That same year, a significant portion of the IWE community voluntarily participated in a series of racial equity forums with one another; these forums, incidentally, were held in the community centers of the local public housing authorities, which house some 25% of IWE families. Finally, the PTO intentionally limits fundraising efforts to avoid marginalizing families who can't afford to participate.

At the same time, IWE's North Carolina "report card," based on its end-of-grade test scores, is somewhat dismal. Although IWE did meet growth standards for 2013–2014 with a score of 78.4, it earned C for math performance (with 53% of students at or above grade level) and a D in reading (47% of students at or above grade level). The report card explains that the formula for calculating this grade counts the "growth" score as 20% and achievement as 80%. Significantly, the report also states, "If a school has met expected growth and inclusion of the school's growth score reduces the school's performance score and grade, a school may choose to use the school achievement score solely to calculate the performance score and grade" (Department of Publication Instruction, 2014). Isaac Walton, then, earns a D for beginning with a population at a lower base level and demonstrating significant growth, while a school whose children start at higher levels of achievement and demonstrate *no growth at all* can ignore its lack of growth and earn a higher overall score. Isaac Walton may

have homed in on “the opportunity gap,” but in North Carolina, even as education legislation shifts from No Child Left Behind, achievement scores still carry the day.

In the fall of 2015, the Board of Education announced plans to undertake a restructuring initiative to accommodate recent significant growth in enrollment. In November, the Board hosted three stakeholder forums to gather input on four proposed options. Each of these options prioritized putting a pre-kindergarten classroom at the three of five district elementary schools with capacity to do so, and proposed reconfiguring a newly constructed elementary school to accommodate the approaching bubble in the middle grades. These forums were held at the elementary school located furthest north of the city, the high school, and the district offices, respectively. The next steps were announced as follows: A Board retreat was scheduled for January 13 to review results from these forums. In the second half of January, the Board would “refine remaining options,” and in mid-February, they would “present the final draft of our restructuring plan” in community forums at each school (Asheville City Board of Education, 2015).

On January 24, 2016, staff at Isaac Walton received an email from a teacher at another school alerting them that, in the new iteration of restructuring options coming out of the Board retreat, in four of the five options presented, Isaac Walton Elementary was reconfigured (or, in the words of the Board) “re-envisioned,” making the building a grades 4–8 middle school and relocating grades PK–3 to the current preschool

building down the road. “Option 4” of these revised options was presented as the favored plan. This “leak” was the first that anyone at IWE, including the principal, learned of these options.

On January 25, 2016, the superintendent officially announced the new options in a meeting with Isaac Walton staff. In the segment that follows, I will analyze how aspects of privilege manifested throughout the events following that announcement.

### **Privilege Refracted**

The January 25, 2016, announcement shocked the Isaac Walton community. At the Community Forum on February 2, 2016, a chorus of voices eloquently decried the shortcomings of the proposed options as well as the process. The greatest shared concern was that the infamous “Option 4” (and all its sister options that would divide Isaac Walton) asked the city’s most vulnerable population to bear the burden of restructuring for the district. It smacked of irony that the district from the preceding fall, who had titled their strategic plan “Excellence with Equity” would split, of all the schools, the one making the greatest effort to center equity and inclusion. Furthermore, community members expressed that the process had failed to include the voices of those who would be most affected by the change. The three stakeholder forums had taken place at locations distant from where many of Isaac Walton’s families live, the travel imposing an added burden on parents who may already work multiple shifts and have limited access to transportation.

<sup>2</sup>The Board had kept their website up to date with restructuring options and communicated developments via email, but what population do these methods reach? Those who have (a) sight; (b) English language skills, as the communications are in English only; (c) a computer with dependable Internet access; (d) free time to surf websites; and (e) the educational level to read and process complex material. I was surprised—but should not have been—when, after having been immersed in the drama for over two weeks, another parent casually asked me what it was all about. Collective concerns about the restructuring process, then, revolved around privileging systems: the privilege of access to information that comes with membership in a dominant group, the privileging of participation, and the privileging of resources.

As the PTO began to organize its advocacy campaign—which focused, again, on inclusion of voices—it became clear that lenses of privilege refracted even our own efforts to get the word out to those at the margins of the IWE community. The PTO meeting on February 16, 2016, provides a perfect illustration. The meeting was called to order by the PTO presidents, whom I will call here Darrell and Cassandra. (Darrell and Cassandra are both African American, and were the only African Americans present at the meeting.) From there, the group dynamic

deteriorated. The meeting quickly lost order because so many people wanted to speak. This is not, of course, an uncommon development in meetings, but here, the result was that two former PTO leaders—two White women—essentially stepped in and took over. I waited my turn to speak and was interrupted mid-sentence by one of the women. I asked to finish my thought, and the other one gave me the nod. Why is she giving me permission to speak? I wondered. She isn't actually in charge of this meeting. The women then called in a community organizer—a White man—to give some tips as to how a school across town had organized in the face of a previous political crisis.

One of the White women asked him about the difference in demographics between the two schools. “There’s a perception,” she ventured, “that [the other school], with a wealthier, Whiter parent body, has a stronger voice with the School Board.” The organizer wasn’t sure how to respond, though her comment met with nods around the room. Even with this willing acknowledgment within our own ranks of the possible privileging systems at play, however, it took until the very end of the meeting for Cassandra to gain the floor long enough to step in and point out that we hadn’t actually spent any time talking about “our community” (and by this point I think I could actually see steam coming out of her

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<sup>2</sup> As in most cities across the United States, the structures of privilege in the city have a long history. The Big Humanities Data project recently released a stunning piece that overlaid a map of those areas in Asheville currently slated for “urban renewal,” i.e., these public housing communities, with the districts

that were redlined by the Home Owners Loan Corporation during the New Deal. See “Mapping Inequality,” *Bighumanities.net* (accessed March 8, 2016).

head). “In the housing projects, in *my* community,” she said, “people there don’t even know what’s going on. If we’re talking about getting the voices of the community, we need to be talking about how to get the word out to those people.”

Appropriately chastised, the talkers quieted down, and the meeting broke up soon after. On the way home I vented to my husband, “Is all White people do at stuff like this just interrupt?” “Yup,” he responded, somewhat amused. “Pretty much.” Despite our intentions, despite our racial equity training, despite the fact that we were all there because we have embraced IWE’s efforts for equity and inclusion, we could not see that amongst ourselves we maintained a problematic power dynamic, and furthermore, that this dynamic continued to prevent us from reaching the most marginalized in the “community” we so valued.

During the week that followed, the advocacy group created an email list to exchange information and make plans for upcoming events. These events included meetings with City Council members and the mayor, and a protest at the February 22, 2016, Board Work Session to call for a more inclusive process. At the risk of becoming redundant, I will point out the limited scope of the organizing methods. Who was on the email list? Mostly members of the PTO and their friends and acquaintances. Who can attend meetings with the City Council members and the mayor? People with some flexibility in their work schedules, reliable transportation, and the educational wherewithal to feel comfortable in such situations. Who can and will attend a protest that begins at 4 o’clock in the afternoon? It is probably not shocking to report that the answer is approximately six people.

After the “protest” and the Board Work Session, the advocacy group did feel heard. The Board had identified four key issues they had deemed as pressing for the 2016–2017 school year and had slowed the timeline for other more significant restructuring decisions in order to give schools an opportunity (albeit still short) to collect feedback from the IWE community about the issues. By that time, the local newspaper had published an opinion piece I wrote about the issue and the community forum, and the School Review Team invited me to join them as someone who could pen communications as necessary.

We worked to develop a survey that would go out to Isaac Walton families and staff, but our real work was to consider, finally, how to get a high response rate, given the communication challenges we knew to exist. We developed the following plans: We would make the survey available in both English and Spanish, and online as well as on paper. We would ask the principal to send an “all call” to all families alerting them, in both English and Spanish, to the survey. We would set up laptops for staff members to complete the survey in an easy location, so they didn’t need to create a lot of extra time to complete it; we would set up a table in front of the school to solicit participation from those who might not read information sent home in student folders; and we would invite drivers in the carpool line to participate. We also needed to schedule time to get into the public housing communities. These families largely use bus transportation, so we would not have the opportunity to catch them at school. They may not have attended the forum or PTO meetings, and many have unreliable phone numbers. As with the racial equity programs the previous year, the best way to reach this population was clearly to go to them. So we made contact with the president of each

community, set up tables in the community centers of each, posted flyers, and coordinated to combine giving information about the restructuring with the 2016–2017 enrollment drive already scheduled. The principal sent out another “all call,” this one directed specifically to families in public housing

The efforts had disparate results. In the first community, no one visited us in the three hours we were there—not one survey completed. In the second (which coincided with the enrollment drive), many people said they had already completed the survey, either from their child’s folder or online. In the end, 180 people responded to the survey, at least half of the school community. I was gratified to see that someone wrote their comments in Spanish, demonstrating that at least one person felt empowered to share their voice through our efforts to offer the survey in both languages.

### **Reflection—A Stay of Execution**

At its monthly meeting on March 7, 2016, the City Board voted on the four topics that were deemed time-sensitive for 2016–2017. They voted to slate an unused building for secondary-age students (as opposed to elementary school age), to offer a sixth and seventh grade to families at Isaac Walton who wish to continue there, to offer a kindergarten and first grade to families of students currently at the city preschool, and to create pre-kindergarten classes at two of the remaining four elementary schools. The next steps for Isaac Walton remain unknown and undecided at this time. Perhaps the city preschool will be converted into an additional campus for the lower elementary grades while Isaac Walton retains its elementary school status. Perhaps the steps on which the Board voted last March presage a middle-school conversion after all.

This is a fitting conclusion, I think, because it reflects the realization at which I had arrived: The issue is not over. Perhaps the high pitch of my involvement is coming to a close, but questions of equitable education hang over the city, whether I choose to engage in them or not. In the coming years, the inequities between the more affluent city district and its neighbors will come to the fore, and I will have to reckon with the fact that the only reason I’m involved in this battle to begin with is that we had the knowledge, time, and resources to take advantage of the city’s open-enrollment program.

That March evening, Board member Leah Ferguson spoke in response to the public comment portion of the meeting. “We’re being asked to slow down,” she said, “but there are children being underserved right now. We are closer than we’ve ever been to achieving our goal of equity. We have heard your requests for inclusion and participation, but now is the time.” After the meeting, I learned that the city preschool wants to add grades to their program, because changing their classification from a day care to an elementary school will make them eligible for a variety of funding sources that are currently unavailable to them. In other words, they are already serving, with limited resources, children who could have access to much more if they were able to expand. In my rush to defend the marginalized and vulnerable at Isaac Walton Elementary, in my enthusiasm for “equity,” I had entirely overlooked the inequity facing another group—and another group right down the street, at that.

As a person of educational and class privilege in this scenario, I have learned that it is not enough to study privileging systems, to understand the part I play in those systems, and to try to build multiracial,

multiclass, multivoice coalitions. I think it is human nature—and not only the nature of privilege—that some things remain invisible to us; more than likely, I am overlooking someone or something. But as a student of privilege I must remain humble and open to this truth. I must be even more vigilant. I must look harder for what I am missing.

Moreover, I must continuously urge myself on. While we waited unsuccessfully for visitors at the table in the public housing community, my daughter's teacher told a story about how she had attempted to reach one of the mothers who lived in that community. Back when Option 4 was first announced, as part of the effort to inform parents, the teacher had offered a dinner and information session in her classroom. Knowing that access to transportation would limit many of the parents, she also offered to drive to the neighborhood and pick up anyone who wanted to come (not for nothing did this woman earn Teacher of the Year). The mother accepted, and the teacher called the family when she was on her way over. When she arrived, no one answered the door. She called again. Someone finally answered the phone, only to tell her that the mother had since left.

This anecdote illuminated the danger of becoming too self-congratulatory. While I believe we thought hard about how to include a large number of voices, and while my study of systems of privilege and oppression certainly helped me to brainstorm where some of those gaps might be, I was reminded of the limitations of my actions. Some people just aren't going to come to the table—and they aren't obligated to. It would be easy to let myself get frustrated or discouraged by that.

In fact, during that week, I came home one day and wrote in my notes a

diatribe about how exhausted I was. I felt as if I'd been hit by a bus. I couldn't wait for the week to be over, for the process to be "over"—by which, of course, I meant my involvement in the process. My privileged position within this system allows me to choose my level of involvement, so when the School Board holds its final vote and the decision is made, I will feel that "it" is over. But educational inequities, of course, will persist. Next steps for me include learning more about the relationship between the county and city school districts, and becoming a more informed voter so I can understand the legislation that is shaping North Carolina public education.

At some point about halfway through this process, I realized that no matter how things turned out, I was going to gain. Ultimately, if things go terribly wrong in the district, we have the option and resources to take our children out. Furthermore, through our involvement with the PTO advocacy group and the piece I wrote for the newspaper, I made contacts with others in the Asheville community that will serve me in the future, whether for career networking, future action projects, or just socially. I had to admit, that this, too, is the nature of privilege—that no matter how things unfold, the system will re-form and coalesce in a way that will, more than likely, benefit me. I must find a way to stoke what Mark Warren calls "the fire in the heart" that keeps White activists engaged with issues of racial justice (Warren, 2010), even in times when they don't directly touch my own family.

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