

*Resistance at Renaissance: A Discussion About Education Policies With Teachers at
Renaissance Middle School in Montclair, New Jersey*

An Honors Thesis for the Department of American Studies

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To All of My Teachers, Especially Those at Renaissance who spoke with me, For Demonstrating the Power and Importance of Education, Thank You.

To Bernadette Anand and Michelle Fine – Whose Tireless Commitment to Education and Social Justice is Inspiring, Thank You.

To Professor Cohen and Professor Oeur, Thank You.

Also, Thanks Mom and Dad.

Abstract

In the last two decades, the US federal government has passed two major education initiatives, No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top/Common Core, designed to eliminate, or at least, narrow the achievement gap and help all students become proficient in core subjects.

Policymakers, and not teachers, played the largest part in designing these initiatives. The policies have brought a major increase in national education standards, high-stakes standardized tests, and outcries from many parents and educators across the country. Renaissance, a public middle school in Montclair, New Jersey, that was founded just before No Child Left Behind was passed, offers a unique perspective on the ways the different policies have affected public schools, and is a school whose founders were dead set against any standardization of education. Through interviews with teachers and administrators at the school, as well as an analysis of a community that is deeply involved in its public school system, I will demonstrate the power and importance of community engagement in public schooling, and will offer suggestions for improving current standards and policies. This thesis aims to elevate the voice of teachers whose opinions have been largely ignored in recent debates around policies, and to offer a critique of high-stakes testing as the most effective method of student assessment.

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Chapter 1: Introduction, Methodology, and Purpose

When I was in fifth grade at the Rand elementary school in my hometown of Montclair, New Jersey, I was an expert on the differences between the town's three middle schools. I knew that Glenfield was for the black kids, Mt. Hebron was for the white kids, and Renaissance was for the weird kids. Glenfield was for theater and artistic kids, Mt. Hebron was for students who liked science and technology, and Renaissance was for kids who fit both and neither of those molds, and who liked to walk. Glenfield was in the south end of town, which is majority black, Mt. Hebron was in the north end of town, which is majority white, and Renaissance was in the middle of town, deliberately so.

I toured each one, getting the opportunity to follow students through their school days, and met teachers. At age eleven, I was in awe of the bigger school buildings, the older looking students, and the whispers of harder classes and mountains of homework. I heard stories of cold teachers, hard tests, and bullies. Over the summer before my first year at Renaissance, my parents sat me down and talked with me about their "hellish" middle school experiences, and tried to prepare me for the ruthless teasing and the difficult coalescence of a changing social life and mean preteens that they experienced. Needless to say, I was scared. Glenfield and Mt. Hebron were large buildings on opposite ends of town, the former boasting a planetarium and the latter touting an extensive library. Renaissance, by comparison, shared a small building with Immaculate Conception High School, a private Catholic school, and used the YMCA down the street for gym class. Ultimately, I decided to go to Renaissance, expecting the worst. What I found when I got there, however, was an empowering group of teachers and peers who did things differently than I had expected.

I owe a tremendous amount of gratitude and credit to the teachers, administrators, parents, and volunteers at Renaissance for allowing me to grow and develop in a supporting, caring, lively environment. Renaissance was where I felt ok to be a braces and glasses wearing kid with a squeaky voice, where my passion for public service and social justice was ignited, and where many of my currently held beliefs about education were born.

I did not realize how profoundly Renaissance had influenced me until I got to Montclair High School and spoke with friends who went to other middle schools. I told them about advisories, morning meetings before classes started to check in with teachers and students, and was met with blank stares. I spoke about walking to the Pre-K down the road on Fridays and spending half the day playing with students with learning disabilities as part of a required class and received skeptical looks. I fondly recalled walking to the YMCA to go swimming for gym class, and to a local dance studio for dance class, and was told that was because Renaissance was “too poor” to be able to afford a gym, or really any other facility. Kids from other schools jokingly referred to it as “Rent-a-school.” Still, despite the dismissal I encountered from my high school peers, I still felt as though I had just undergone something special. I had a more difficult time transitioning to the monolithic high school, where I was one of 2,000 instead of 75, and where classes were structured the same as the other two middle schools. Classes were tracked, there were many elective options, more tests, teachers who didn’t know me by name, textbooks that were ancient, and, other than a 45 minute lunch period, no time to walk anywhere outside. I eventually got the hang of high school, but always had warm memories of my middle school days, something that I only found in peers who had also gone to Renaissance.

This thesis will investigate those qualities of Renaissance that made it so special, including its location within the history of Montclair. My sister is currently in her third and final

year at Renaissance, and in talking with her about her experience, it has become quite clear that the school has changed significantly since I was there. For one thing, it is no longer in its original building. An increase in federal oversight, a crippling recession that sapped the district of resources, and a Governor who is unabashedly anti-teacher, have come together to cause the school to undergo major changes. It is these last two points that are the driving forces behind this thesis – I want to tell the story of a unique public school that was founded in a town whose residents fought for school desegregation. It was a school that dared to do things differently, and now finds itself in a constant struggle of resistance against much greater forces. Is the school’s current state a product of change that happens naturally over time, or is it the result of recent education policies and ideologies? Could such a public school be founded presently? In searching for answers to these questions I combine interviews with current and former teachers, administrators, and the founders of the school with descriptions of recent education policies to attempt to understand why my sister is not enjoying her education at Renaissance nearly as much as I did.

I will make three arguments throughout this paper – the first that a community school model is the best approach for a new public school to take, the second that high stakes standardized tests are not effective in measuring student and teacher performance, and actually do more harm than good to school districts, and the third, that teachers should be involved in crafting policies that affect them most. Recurring questions and themes that I address are the role that the federal government should play in public education, how to best measure student achievement, and how to encourage school districts to improve.

No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and the Common Core will be the policies examined. While I am conducting a case study on Renaissance, and cannot expect to reach

conclusions that apply to every public school in the country, I urge readers to take the conclusions and findings of this paper and apply them to the current state of schools in their communities.

This is a story about resistance, and the struggle between teachers and policymakers, school districts and state governments, and pushing back against efforts to think and act differently that began over 60 years ago. A Renaissance teacher who was interviewed for this thesis put it bluntly as he spoke of his son who is a current student at the school, “Is he getting [the Renaissance experience] like you got it? No. Are we fighting for it? Yeah. All the time” (Khan). This fight in Montclair began in the mid-20th century, during a time when civil rights were being debated on a national stage.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Dr. Bernadette Anand is a lifelong educator. She taught at Montclair High School, where she chaired the English Department and served as a curriculum developer, and served as the Principal of Mt. Hebron Middle School, and Renaissance, where she also taught. Along with Dr. Michelle Fine, a Montclair resident and parent, and Professor of Psychology and Urban Education at the CUNY Graduate Center, Anand led the community-based effort to found Renaissance. Anand was adamant that “no school can be replicated, because... every community is different, every group of people is different, every set of conditions is different (Anand).” It is with this in mind that I will lay out the main themes in existing literature regarding community schools. My paper will primarily draw from the voices, thoughts, and ideas of teachers, administrators, and educators associated with the Renaissance Middle School, and although there is not much literature available specifically regarding the Renaissance school itself, one book in particular written by Fine, Anand, and the Renaissance eighth grade class of the year 2000, provides important insights into the school (Anand *et al*).

In recounting the history of Montclair’s public school system, I rely on three main sources – one that describes the battle over crosstown busing (Manners), another that outlines the specific history of Montclair’s road to school desegregation (Anand *et al*), and a pamphlet distributed to all new Montclair residents in the late 1980s describing the town (LWV). These sources offer different perspectives of what the town was like at different points in its history.

This literature review is small in terms of quantity of sources, because my goal is to use the voices and ideas of teachers in crafting my argument rather than educational theorists. Theories influenced me before I started the interviews, and once I started having conversations with subjects, I realized their voices were the ones I wanted to amplify. Theorists influenced the

questions I asked and the direction of the discussions. I read Paulo Freire because his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* heavily influenced the founders original teachers of Renaissance. In eighth grade, we read an excerpt in social studies class. There is value, however, in offering an academic space to amplify the voices of teachers that are so often lost in discussions of education reform. While teachers wrote much of the existing literature on community schools, they are rarely asked to offer input when it comes to major policy decisions, such as NCLB (Sunderman *et. Al* 6) The purpose of this literature review is to allow readers to familiarize themselves with the information, theories, and ideas necessary to understand where many of the interview subjects are coming from in their responses.

Relational trust is a core component of community school theory (Meier 130) and was noted by many interview subjects as an important aspect of the school's success. Its importance among those involved with Renaissance played a huge role in the school's ability to achieve its goals. Strong relationships between teachers, students, administrators, and parents were the foundation for much of the school's programming. Relational trust allows teachers to have more autonomy in the classroom, and to take risks knowing that they have the support of their peers and administrators, as well as parents. It allows for the closer involvement of parents in the education of their children, and gives students a larger and more stable support network. At Renaissance, the same group of teachers has taught seventh grade core subjects for the last nine years, and others have been teaching at the school since its creation, which according to Anand is unusual. The fact that Renaissance has created an environment that teachers enjoy is due in no small part to the existence of the trust in the building.

While there is no single perfect incarnation of a community school, as schools in different communities are different, one common trait shared by all community schools is some

form of purposeful involvement with their communities. This community involvement can take many forms – from staying open as a public community recreation center after school hours are over, to inviting community members to teach classes to students, to literally using resources in a community, such as a gymnasium or music studio, to function (Harkavay 1). Anand credits Montclair’s community as a part of Renaissance’s success, because, rather than a committee coming to the planning meetings with a fully fleshed out model in mind, Renaissance grew from conversations with community members. The model “started with the parents, it started with the teachers, taking that charge and developing [the curriculum] and constantly being in communication with parents” (Anand). Without this communication between the founding parents, teachers, and administrators, Anand said, you could not have a community school. Renaissance utilized community resources to supplement its curriculum, and engaged local organizations, businesses, and parents in its actions.

Some “non-negotiables” were agreed upon by the planning committee, including the omission of tracking from Renaissance. The debate over the efficacy of tracking, the separation of students into classes of different difficulty levels, has existed for many years (Burriss 3). Proponents of tracking claim that classes organized by the learning abilities of students make for more effective teachers, because they can tailor their lessons to the speed of the whole class as opposed to “teaching to the middle” (Yee). Opponents of tracking claim it contributes to segregated classrooms, unfair treatment of “lower level” students, and other injustices (Burriss 5). Tracking originated in the early 20th century as a way to prepare students for different roles in society (Burriss 4). Schools strove to ensure that students would only learn at the level appropriate for them, which greatly advantaged those students, usually wealthy, who were able to demonstrate an ability to learn more difficult subjects more quickly. This system disadvantaged

students, predominantly of lower socioeconomic classes, who, as a result of tracking, did not have access to the more advanced curricula (Burris 4). Tracking had steadily been on the decline in public schools, and its advocates grew smaller in numbers in the years before NCLB, but the momentum to get rid of it was reversed with the law (Yee). Many scholars believe that No Child Left Behind is at least partially responsible for the recent reemergence of tracking in schools, because it has compelled teachers to group students together in their classrooms based on their achievement levels on tests (Yee).

Existing literature on the No Child Left Behind Act largely consists of Bush administration government reports and statistics praising its effectiveness (*No Child Left Behind Act is Working*), and critical books and articles lambasting its failures (Ravitch 6). Race to the Top and Common Core are similarly treated in existing literature. Since they are newer programs, not much has been written about them in books, although plenty of articles and government reports detail the origins and effects of the two policies.

Finally, regarding statistics on the racial composition of students in New Jersey schools from 1989 to 2010, which was the most recent year for this data that I could find, I will turn to a report published in the Civil Rights Project's 2013 newsletter (Orfield), as well as a guide published by the New Jersey League of Women Voters that was distributed to every Montclair household in 1989. The former provides useful information regarding the efficacy of New Jersey state education policies, as well as the history and trends of demographics of students in New Jersey's schools, while the latter offers a glimpse into the rhetoric and language that Montclair used to discuss its school system in the years after the desegregation plan was implemented.

Chapter 3: 1954-1989 – From *Brown* to Busing to Magnets

The history that is presented in this paper was chosen quite deliberately. It is important to be grounded in the history of the racism and segregation that existed in Montclair when considering Renaissance's geographical and historical location in the town. Additionally, Renaissance's founders had the town's history very much in mind when designing the curriculum and the operation of the school. The location of the school in the middle of Montclair, right between the majority-white and majority-black sections was a deliberate choice by the founders as well. Just as Anand and Fine integrated Montclair's history with Renaissance's initial curriculum to ensure that each student understood why they had classmates who lived at the opposite end of town, so too will I present a condensed history of the struggle for school desegregation in Montclair to help readers better understand why the school was founded as it was, at the time it was.

This history may surprise some readers, as it is a history that is often glanced over in many high school, elementary school, and even university curricula. Speaking from personal experience, it was not until college that I critically examined the legacy of segregation in the northern United States. Prior to college, I had learned extensively about the Little Rock Nine, Ruby Bridges, and Governor Wallace's impassioned speeches against school integration in the southern states, but not about the vicious racism and explosive race riots that rocked the northern part of the country, some of which occurred mere minutes from Montclair, in Newark, NJ¹. Because this history is a bit less well known, and because northerners do not tend to associate their geographical location with legacies of racism and oppression, in many places it took much

¹ Save from a personal story about the Newark Riots from a Renaissance teacher in seventh grade.

more convincing that racial imbalances in northern public schools even necessitated correcting. James Baldwin addressed this phenomenon in a 1960 article published in *Esquire* magazine, “Northerners indulge in an extremely dangerous luxury. They seem to feel that because they fought on the right side during the Civil War, and won...they can ignore what is happening in Northern cities because what is happening in Little Rock or Birmingham is ‘worse’...” (Baldwin). It was easy for Montclair residents to be oblivious to the way racism influenced the racial composition of the town’s schools, and to look at the brutal images coming out of Birmingham in 1963, for example, as a reality far removed from their own. Because of this, many Montclair residents did not expect to be largely affected by one of the most significant civil rights Supreme Court cases in the history of the country.

A seminal moment in the history of school desegregation in both the United States and in Montclair, New Jersey was the landmark Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which mandated that public schools could not be segregated by law. The decision, in addition to outlawing separate educational facilities for white students and students of color, forced Boards of Education across the country to make their schools more racially balanced. Though the majority of the post-*Brown* violence and anger was loudest in the South, many towns in the North had schools that were just as racially segregated, and residents who were just as fiercely opposed to integration. Before discussing the implications of *Brown* as they pertain to Montclair, it is important to note that Montclair was a racially segregated community for much of the 20th century, both due to laws and policies, and the personally held racist beliefs by white residents and business owners. In a 1983 speech reported in Montclair’s local newspaper, the *Montclair Times*, Dr. D.C. Rice, a civil rights activist in the early 20th century, described Montclair as he remembered it from 1929 as “a community with segregated hospitals,

housing, and theaters, and a segregated school system with all-White teachers. This progressive northern community had a ‘colored YMCA...’ colored churches; a colored dance hall; and colored barbershops” (Anand *et al.* 20). Though Montclair became slightly more diverse (but not integrated) in the time between Dr. Rice’s observations and *Brown*, tensions were still high between white and black residents in the years after the decision.

This is not to say that *Brown* was the first time New Jersey dealt with issues of race in its school systems. A New Jersey statute passed in 1884 made it illegal to deny a child an education because of “his” race (Orfield 7). In 1947, New Jersey became the first state to constitutionally ban racial segregation in its public schools (McLaughlin 4). The fact that these measures were on the books in New Jersey for does not matter. New Jersey still saw rampant discrimination based on race against students and teachers in its public schools. In New Jersey in the 1940s and 1950s, black teachers were not hired at the same rate as white teachers, if hired at all (McLaughlin 6). *Brown* did little to help solve this crisis as after the decision, the hiring of black teachers in Trenton, the state capital of New Jersey, was actually at a lower rate than previously. I choose to begin with *Brown* because it established an educational environment that lead to a state order that would ultimately force Montclair to desegregate its schools.

To describe what life was like in Montclair post-*Brown*, I turn to an oral history project-turned book published by Fine, Anand, and the eighth grade class at Renaissance in the year 2000, in which Montclair residents were interviewed and asked about their experience with school integration in the 1970s. In the book, a black Montclair resident describes playing with white Jewish friends as an elementary school student in the 1950s, and not being allowed inside their houses as per the request of their mother (Anand *et al.* 20). Dr. Renée Baskerville, the current Councilor of Montclair’s Fourth Ward, described what life was like as a black resident in

Montclair before schools were integrated in the 1960s and 1970s, “We realized that education made us seem like outsiders to other Blacks and to Whites” (Anand *et al.* 21). Others described many instances of *de facto* segregation in the town’s schools and neighborhoods. The racism felt by many of Montclair’s black residents and families led to protests in the town that focused mainly on inequalities in the town’s school system.

The first public town-wide protest against these inequalities in Montclair’s schools was in 1961, and sparked the creation of a coalition of parents who called themselves the “Parents’ Emergency Committee (PEC).” The protest was led by Harris Davis, a black resident of Montclair whose daughter Lydia had been top of her class at Glenfield Middle School, but had received D’s as a freshman at Montclair High School (Manners 58). Davis concluded after Lydia’s performance did not improve after her second marking period that the preparation she had received at Glenfield was inferior to that of her white peers from Mt. Hebron, the town’s only other public middle school. He further asserted that Glenfield students’ worse preparation stemmed from the racial makeup of the school. He gathered other like-minded parents and formed the PEC. The PEC presented their claims to the Board of Education, and, unhappy with the languor with which the Board and superintendent wanted to act, collaborated with Montclair’s branch of the NAACP to conduct their own independent study of the matter.

What they found was distressing. “Their investigation turned up disparities similar to those found in ‘separate but equal’ systems in the South. The schools in Montclair’s white neighborhoods had newer supplies, more rigorous curricula, better facilities and more experienced teachers than Glenfield and Montclair’s other black schools. The predominantly white schools received new textbooks and furniture on a regular basis, while Glenfield had to be content with hand-me-downs...Where white schools had new science laboratories, extensive

libraries, and fully-equipped gymnasiums and cafeterias, Glenfield had exposed and leaky pipes, faulty toilets... Davis and others believed these [new teachers] were sent first to Glenfield and then promoted to a school in a whiter part of town once they had passed Glenfield's test" (Manners 60). When faced with these findings, the Board reacted slowly and unconvincingly in discussing potential plans. The lack of a forceful response resulted in a boycott of the first week of the 1961-1962 school year by parents of Glenfield students. The fact that the student population at Glenfield was almost entirely black, and that the population at Mt. Hebron was almost entirely white was no coincidence, but rather the effects of years of racist attitudes and behaviors by white people towards people of color in Montclair.

A 1965 study by the Montclair Fair Housing Committee revealed that realtors and white homeowners would lie to black families about the availability of properties in white neighborhoods, a practice that was very prevalent in northern United States communities Anand *et al.* 22). This resulted in the southeastern part of Montclair, where Glenfield was located, becoming the only neighborhood in which realtors sold to black buyers. Because of Montclair's "neighborhood school" policy, which was simply that students attended whichever school was closest to their home, the racial composition of the two schools was not surprising. In November of 1965, Charles Baskerville, Renée's father, who served as Chairman of the Montclair Civil Rights Commission, said about Montclair, "White racial discrimination and Negro racial magnetism have combined to produce the great ghetto we have today" (Anand *et al.* 24). Citing statistics to back up these assertions of discrimination and manufactured segregation, Baskerville and many other Montclair residents again began to protest, march, and rally for structural changes within the town. In the decade after *Brown*, schools in the town's southern neighborhoods became more segregated than they had been prior to the decision (Anand *et al.*

28). This increase in segregation alarmed many Montclair residents, heightened racial tensions in the town, and ultimately brought about a directive from the New Jersey Commissioner of Education to forcibly desegregate the town's schools.

On November 8, 1967, the Commissioner issued an edict to the Montclair Board of Education that stated, "The Commissioner directs the Montclair Board of Education to formulate a plan which will effectively achieve the goal of racial dispersal enunciated by the Courts as the law of New Jersey" (Anand *et al.* 32). The Montclair Board of Education scrambled to come up with a plan that satisfied the demands of this order, which was a result of the *Brown* decision. Many impassioned parents and community members wrote to the local paper, the *Montclair Times*, expressing their fears, concerns, and opinions regarding potential plans, and the Board of Education members were stymied as they deliberated about various proposals. While the Board of Education was ultimately successful in devising a plan to comply with the imposed requirements, aggressive campaigns, protests, multiple failed plans, and another order from the state Commissioner made the path to the final plan very rocky.

In the summer of 1968, race riots in Newark, NJ exploded and spilled over into Montclair. A group of young black men broke some windows of stores in Montclair's south end, and, though riots never really fully developed, the town was sufficiently shaken. The Montclair High School Black Student Union held a four and a half hour sit-in on campus that September, and "initiated a series of reportedly unprovoked attacks...upon white students." (Manners 73) Later in that month, leaders at the predominantly black Head Start Program at Glenfield Middle School marched and sat-in at Central Office to protest the fact that they were operating out of the dilapidated basement of the school. Parents, both white and black, participated on both sides of these protests, which heightened racial tensions in Montclair and increased pressure on the Board

of Education from whites to keep schools segregated in order to avoid any further conflicts (Manners 74). Meanwhile, the Board was still deliberating how best to follow the Commissioner's 1968 mandate and continue desegregating the schools.

In the spring of 1970, nearly three years after the Commissioner's order, the Board of Education proposed two plans to achieve racially balanced schools: the "preferred plan" and the "alternate plan." The preferred plan called for the renovation of Hillside elementary school and Mt. Hebron middle school, still majority black and majority white, respectively, and their conversion into 5th grade through 8th grade middle schools. This plan was costly, but more importantly was unpopular with voters, as Montclair residents did not support any large-scale integration programs, and had to pass a voter referendum in order to be implemented (Manners 74). If this plan failed, the alternate plan would be implemented. This second plan would scatter Glenfield's elementary school students, 90% of whom were black, to two all-white schools and one 95% white school (Manners 74). Like earlier plans, the weight of desegregation was placed on black families, as white families did not have to send their students to other schools.

The town rejected the preferred plan, but the alternate plan was not implemented either. Instead, the Board modified the alternate plan and called it the "interim plan" (Manners 74). While technically complying with the Commissioner's mandate, the interim plan did little to desegregate schools in Montclair, and really was more of a way to buy more time until a more agreeable plan was decided upon. The interim plan called for the consolidation of fifth and sixth graders into three schools, while not altering grades K-4, and resulted in five elementary schools still being comprised of over 75% white students (Manners 74). As its name suggested, the interim plan functioned largely as a stalling technique, delaying substantial integration while ostensibly complying with the Commissioner's mandate. The Commissioner angrily sent another

order to Montclair, asking the town to figure out a plan as quickly as possible. The task of creating a better plan fell to Superintendent James Adams in the fall of 1971. Unlike previous plans which mostly focused on schools and students in the black part of town, the Adams plan stipulated that both black students and white students were to be bused to different schools. Because of time constraints, Montclair citizens were not allowed to vote on this plan. Adams deliberately grouped different elementary schools together into different “clusters” to mandate busing between schools that would result in each one being racially balanced. Because this was not a plan voted on by the public, and because it was the first time young white students (five to nine year-olds) were bused to majority-black schools in the town, many white community members were upset, and began a fierce campaign against this forced busing (Manners 75).

Many groups opposed to Adams' plan sprung up after its adoption in 1972. The most influential one was “Better Education for All Montclair” (BEAM). BEAM members felt that the Adams plan would negatively affect the educational achievement of Montclair’s students. While they never explicitly stated that they were against integration, BEAM members used coded language to imply that black students coming to white schools would hinder white students’ achievement. Words like “mediocrity, discipline problem, and de-emphasizing the basics” were all ways that BEAM’s president, Rosemarie Campana, spoke about her opposition to busing (Manners 76). BEAM successfully rounded up enough town-wide opposition to Adams’ Plan that four anti-busing candidates ousted four incumbents in the Montclair Town Council elections held three months after the plan’s adoption, and an anti-busing board member was elected mayor. The new administration pledged to return Montclair to its former neighborhood school ways, in defiance of the Commissioner’s orders, and did so by appointing four anti-busing townspeople to the Board of Education (Manners 76).

The primary reason for the return to neighborhood schools cited by the new Board members was Montclair's declining school enrollment by about 200 students per year following the implementation of the Adams Plan (Manners 55). This decline in enrollment, the Board argued, was due to white parents removing their children from Montclair's public school system and sending them to private and parochial schools instead of submitting to the plan and being bused to schools in the black part of town (Manners 77). By 1975, the Board was almost entirely comprised of anti-busing members, and tried to take action to stop the "white flight" that the town was experiencing by introducing a "freedom of choice" component to the public schools, essentially undermining the purpose of busing. Under this new policy, parents could send their children to a school other than those in their busing cluster, as long as the transfer did not upset the racial composition of the schools. The Board was pretty lenient with these transfer rules, however, and allowed twelve students to transfer schools despite upsetting the racial proportions of the clusters (Manners 78). The state Commissioner of Education issued another order to Montclair to stop this plan, because of its failure to adequately integrate schools, and charged the Board yet again to come up with a plan to ensure that the racial composition of each school reflected the proportions of the town² (Manners 78). The Board was forced to turn to Walter Marks, Montclair's Superintendent, to come up with another new plan. Marks came to Montclair in 1972 to serve as the town's curriculum development, and replaced Adams as Superintendent after Adams accepted a position in a Florida school district in 1974 (Manners 79).

Marks was given a chilly reception when he first proposed the magnet school plan to the Board in 1976, as one of five potential plans for their deliberation, which ranged from completely stopping busing, to expanding it for all students. In Marks' mind, the magnet school

² 40% black, 60% white

plan was more palatable to white parents, and would hopefully reduce the number of families leaving the district. In devising this plan, Marks had to balance both the desires of the local Board of Education and the mandate of the state Commissioner. Additionally, the New Jersey state legislature voted to cut Montclair's 1976-1977 school budget by \$1.8 million (Manners 79). Marks was left with the unenviable task of coming up with a plan that was acceptable to white families and the Board, strict enough to meet the demands of the Commissioner, and could function under the newly limited budget (Manners 79).

Magnet schools provide thematically focused programming and curricula such as arts and theater, biology, or technology, to students. They incentivized white families to send their children to public schools outside of white neighborhoods, because of these specific foci, and quickly became popular among other towns facing similar situations as Montclair. Although the first magnet school opened in 1968, they were still a relatively new concept in 1976. In 1968, McCarver Elementary in Tacoma, Washington allowed students from anywhere in the city to enroll, and in doing so, became the first school to shun the neighborhood model and introduce a model of school choice. What makes magnet schools a welcome alternative to other court-mandated desegregation plans is that they use incentives instead of coercion to try and attract students of all races and socioeconomic backgrounds to schools across a community (Rossell 43). Ideally, magnet schools would integrate schools *voluntarily*, instead of *forcibly*. What makes Montclair's magnet implementation plan unique is that it was imposed upon every school in the district. Most magnet programs only focused on schools that were predominantly comprised of students of color, because those were the schools that were considered to be of lower quality, and less desirable to white families, while many students of color would readily have transferred to predominantly white schools that were perceived to be better (Rossell 190). Ultimately,

Montclair's magnet program, coupled with a busing program, successfully retained white families in the district and achieved racially balanced schools. Today, there are seven elementary schools and three middle schools in all. The Montclair Board of Education's website proudly proclaims, "The term "neighborhood school" no longer exists in Montclair; the entire township is the neighborhood for every school" (Montclair Board of Education 2).

The plan's implementation was not easy, and was met with much criticism from Montclair residents as well as state officials. The plan was approved by the Montclair Board of Education and the New Jersey Commissioner of Education, but still required more than one year of work before it could be fully implemented. The Board of Education heard from parents, students, local organizations, and other groups as they considered various ideas regarding changes to the curricula and structures of the schools, and sent representatives to other magnet school districts to identify their most successful traits (Montclair Board of Education 2). The first two Montclair magnet schools started in the beginning of the 1977 school year, and their themes were based on the results of a poll of white parents and parents of color in the district (Paige 9). They were elementary schools, and the first was a "gifted and talented" magnet, desired by a majority of white parents, designed to attract white families to a school in the majority black part of town, while the other was a "fundamental back to basics program," (Montclair Board of Education 2) requested by a majority of parents of color, to be implemented at a majority white school. The gifted and talented program appealed to white parents for two reasons: their children would get individualized attention in areas in which they excelled, and the classes would be tracked. Students had to take a placement test to be part of the highest level of classes, which ensured that the "inferior" black students would not affect their learning (Manners 87). This also meant that schools were only desegregated in terms of total student population, but not

necessarily at the classroom level. The back to basics program emphasized reading and writing skills, and also offered individual attention to students who needed help. The plan worked, and within one year every student received their top choice of elementary school. Marks then took on reworking Glenfield and Mt. Hebron into magnet schools, and installed a new gym, planetarium, and auditorium in Glenfield to attract the students of white parents (Manners 88).

An informational handbook entitled “This is Montclair” published by the League of Women Voters in 1989 which was distributed to potential Montclair residents includes the town’s educational history, as well as detailed descriptions of each magnet school. The education history section begins with, “The Montclair public school system provides educational choices at every grade level in its effort to educate effectively a heterogeneous student body” (LWV 45). It continues by briefly mentioning, “some controversial compulsory busing occurred” (LWV 45). This cursory mention of the extreme resistance that surrounded the busing question in Montclair demonstrates, perhaps, that the town was attempting to ignore the brutal protests and fights that occurred in Board of Education meetings, and on the town’s streets. The handbook also discussed the racial makeup of Montclair’s schools, and how successful students were on a national standardized test. Additionally, the section includes short descriptions of each school and their magnet focus, though, interestingly, the schools’ addresses are not included in the handbook. Nishuane elementary school and Glenfield, both still located in the majority black part of Montclair, were listed as the “gifted and talented” magnets. Mt. Hebron, in the white neighborhood, was the “science and technology” magnet, which was described as “a structured school emphasizing achievement and discipline,” (LWV 52) being the only school with that specific addendum in the handbook.

Montclair's magnet system functioned for the next several years, ultimately becoming a model for other districts around the country despite continued debates and discussions about its efficacy. In the 1990s, however, parents of students at the Rand elementary school, the smallest public elementary school in Montclair, began clamoring for a third middle school option, one which offered a smaller, more personal learning environment for their children. Enter Dr. Bernadette Anand, Dr. Michelle Fine, and a bold vision to create a community school that took an active role in teaching social justice and tolerance to its students.

Chapter 4: 1996-1997 – A Community-Based School

Montclair's magnet school system had become so popular that it was one of the main selling points of the town entering the 1996 school year. In the two decades after the magnet program was implemented, Montclair experienced increased enrollment of both white students and students of color across every school in the district³. Though enrollment was not yet high enough to warrant the expansion of the town's middle schools, parents of students at the relatively small Rand elementary school were concerned that there was no middle school for students who preferred small class sizes – both Glenfield and Mt. Hebron were large. Some of these parents were so concerned that they sent their children to out-of-district private and independent schools. These parents spoke with the Board of Education, and their desire for a smaller school combined with the Superintendent's desire to retain these students in the district, led the Board to approve the development of a new school in 1996. Dr. Bill Librera, the Superintendent of Montclair at the time, reached out to Dr. Bernadette Anand, then a Principal at Mt. Hebron middle school to lead a team tasked with designing this new school.

Anand is a changer of schools and a fierce opponent of tracking. She fought relentlessly to detrack classrooms at Montclair High School, and for more inclusion of issues of race and social justice in the curricula of all of Montclair's public schools. After serving as chairperson of Montclair High School's English department, spearheading the campaign to detrack the high school's first-year English program, and teaching in the program for three years, she became Principal at Mt. Hebron middle school⁴. Upon beginning her tenure as Principal of Mt. Hebron, Anand discovered that the school's students were being tracked for the high school, as were

³ 721 students at Mt. Hebron, 621 students at Glenfield (up from 469 and 564, respectively, eight years prior) (National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Dept of Education)

⁴ Anand credits that new appointment to fears from the high school administration that she would try and detrack the English courses of the higher grades.

those at Glenfield. There was resistance among teachers and parents to any efforts to detrack the school. Mt. Hebron had science and mathematics courses that were tracked, which Anand dismantled. She received a grant from the town to improve the infrastructure of technology at the school, which, she noted, was the technology magnet. She removed the shop classes and special education classes that were “marginalizing students (Anand)” from the basement of the school, moved those students into the structured “houses,” and assisted in the development of teachers able to teach technology to all students. At the end of three years, Anand decided to go back into the classroom and resume teaching, though some teachers at Mt. Hebron tried to persuade her to continue to be a leader in the district.

The idea behind Anand’s anti-tracking mentality is one of equal opportunity for all students. In describing her efforts to de-track the English classroom at MHS, Anand said, “every time we educators would meet and try to change these [tracking procedures], the administration would say, “There will be White flight from the school...When we finally detracked ninth-grade English at the high school, people would come to the meetings and shout and scream at me (Fine 54).” White parents were concerned with the quality of their children’s education. They were worried at the prospect that Anand would make the curriculum easier to teach to the bottom of the class. Anand continued to fight this resistance, maintaining that every student had the right to an equitable quality education, and that tracking did more to segregate classrooms and lose students than it did to benefit anyone. Ultimately, Anand was successful in her effort to detrack MHS’s first-year English curriculum, which is now a world literature course taught to all students.

The parents of elementary school students who were complaining about the lack of a smaller school among Montclair's middle schools and sending their children to schools in surrounding towns, some of which required tuition and others that did not, then began to take action (Anand). That group, Anand said, was quite powerful. They were parents who were "really connected to the education of their kids (Anand)" and who wanted an alternative to the current school choices. In response to these voices, Anand and others led weekly community meetings on Saturday mornings at Mt. Hebron to discuss what a new school would look like. About twenty community members came forth each week, who wanted to be part of an "envisioning committee (Anand)" in the development of this new school. Anand listened to thoughts, ideas, and concerns from the group of parents and community members, and then moved quickly to pass along the information to the Board of Education. In Anand's words, "there's never one thing. It's always a confluence of different kinds of movements, ideas, patterns, *et cetera*" (Anand). Although the committee members were not always on the same page, it was the mixing of ideas that really strengthened the final plan. This mounting community pressure, along with high enrollment and some real estate luck, gave this vision the momentum it needed to transition from an idea into a physical reality, and ultimately, into Renaissance.

Two concerns that the Board of Education had were the location of the new school, and what its curriculum would look like. It was then noticed that the Immaculate Conception private school, located in the center of town, was experiencing lower enrollment than usual, and was looking to rent a part of their school building. There were two floors in this new building that could serve as classrooms for a school, and the Montclair Board pounced on it. Now that the physical aspects of the school were coming together, and the plan had the Board of Education's

support, the finer points needed to be addressed. It was time to focus more heavily on curriculum development, and Anand contacted other community members for extra input.

It was then that the committee reached out to Michelle Fine and asked her for some help with the creation of the school. All of this happened within a few weeks in the spring of 1997, near the end of the school year. The first class of Renaissance began in September of that same year, which required the newly assembled team to work tirelessly to meet their goal. It was agreed that Anand would serve as the school's first Principal.

Anand and Fine spent a great deal of time hammering out key elements of this new school that they were creating. Some of their initial concepts were a longer school day, and incorporating parents and community members with the school's curriculum. An important question that Anand and Fine considered during these deliberations was, in Fine's words, "how do you build a public school that would invite everybody into the mix, by race, ethnicity, class, and special education status, and expose them to [a] rigorous curriculum?" (Fine). This idea – the notion of an equitable education for all students in the same classroom, regardless of race, class, or where one lived in Montclair, was one that guided Anand and Fine throughout their work. Anand began reaching out to former colleagues asking if they were interested in becoming teachers at this new school. At the time, Renaissance was no more than an idea and a building, so Anand really made it clear that teachers would be able to influence the operation of the school. Teachers soon fell into place, and included a few who switched schools within the district – one an English teacher at Montclair High School, and another who taught at Mt. Hebron. As the search for a social studies teacher began, Anand decided to be a Principal-teacher and teach the class herself.

Anand and Fine met with this small group of initial faculty and generated a list of “non-negotiables.” These were what would become the most integral components of Renaissance, and would exist no matter what reservations the Board or Superintendent had. This list would make up the foundation of the school, and was generated out of the founders’ ambitious goal, “the expectation was that we would build the most diverse, engaging school one could, without separating children by perverse distinctions around what would be thought to be ability” (Fine).

The first on the list was the deliberate absence of tracked classrooms and courses, for philosophical reasons previously mentioned.

The second non-negotiable was an interdisciplinary curriculum, with common themes and units that appeared in English, social studies, math, and science. Fine elaborated on the importance of the necessity of an interdisciplinary curriculum, remarking that students who are able to draw connections between disciplines are better able to think critically about other aspects of their lives. This is a point that Renaissance teachers still appreciate, as does its current Principal. The interdisciplinary curriculum as it exists currently will be further examined later in Chapter 6.

The third item was an extended school day, which differed greatly from Glenfield and Mt. Hebron. Whereas the Glenfield and Mt. Hebron school days started at 7:30am and ended at 2:30pm, the Renaissance school day would start at 8:05am and end at 4:05pm. This would ensure, Fine said, that the students could get the extra class time and help they needed in order to master the more complex material. Fine noted that at the other two middle schools, only the kids who submitted an application and passed an entrance test got access to more difficult classes such as algebra and geometry. Sure enough, Fine said, these tracked classes which were only available to the kids who supposedly could handle them tended to be filled up by “wealthier kids,

whiter kids...but Bernadette wanted everybody in her school to have access to a rigorous curriculum⁵ (Fine).

Renaissance's extended school day⁶ stems from Anand's philosophies on education and tracking. More time during the school day in a detracked program would allow all students to receive extra help in class with whatever they needed, instead of having to stay after school. The longer day offered more time for students to take advantage of resources available to them – afternoon classes would include writing and math workshops, to offer structured, in-class support to supplement the math and English curricula. These workshops would serve as extra help sessions available to all students. The teachers could tailor activities to the individual needs of each student, and also allowing students the opportunity to work together and peer edit papers. While the writing workshop allowed students to get essay-writing support from trained writing instructors who would come in specifically for the class, the math workshop curriculum was aimed at teaching problem solving skills rather than the same math problems students were getting in the morning (Anand). While morning math classes were more focused on traditional equations and computation problems, math workshop focused on word problems, and multi-step solutions.

The fourth item was that the faculty would work cooperatively on curriculum development, so that each teacher would not be teaching their subject independently from others. This collaboration was key to building trust between teachers, and reinforcing the importance of the interdisciplinary curriculum to the students. What drew Anand to the teaching job on top of being Principal was the chance to be more intimately involved in curriculum development.

⁵ The fact that Fine kept repeating the phrase “rigorous curriculum” gave me pause. Shouldn't every school's goal be to give its students access to a rigorous curriculum?

⁶ 8:00am-4:05pm compared to 7:30am-2:30pm

Renaissance was to have a heavy emphasis on interdisciplinary education, and would feature overlaps between the core four subjects. This required many meetings and workshops run by teachers, and Anand wanted to be a part of this critical part of Renaissance's identity. In Anand's words, "Curriculum development is the heart and the soul of any school. It is not scheduling, it is not all this other stuff (Anand)." If Renaissance's founders wanted the school to achieve its goals, the curriculum had to be right. Once they secured a math teacher from Montclair High School, they had their starting team of four core teachers, including Anand, which was the staff of the entire school at the time. This presented a new challenge: 75 students were coming in a few weeks, and the team still needed to find a music teacher, an art teacher, and a physical education teacher. This last position posed an especially difficult situation, because the school did not have a gymnasium. New Jersey mandates 150 minutes of physical education for public school students per week, so this was quite the conundrum. The resolution to this problem was the fifth and final non-negotiable – Renaissance was to be a "community based school" (Anand).

In Fine's words, a community school meant that "the school was deeply nested in the community so that the walls were relatively porous" (Fine). It was decided that library, dance, art, and physical education would take place in the community. The local YMCA located a block away from Renaissance offered its swimming pools and basketball courts to the students. An indoor soccer complex opened its doors to the school. This could not have happened without the deep involvement of parents and community volunteers at the school, to help walk students from school to site, and also to help teach classes. A jazz musician and Montclair resident taught a class on music composition and jazz to students, which related to the unit on the Harlem Renaissance that the students were studying. Another Montclair community member came in and taught students about the time periods in history they were studying through original

songwriting. Instead of being administered a traditional test at the end of the marking period, students of these community members were asked to produce original content – to compose and perform their own pieces. Fine herself taught an oral history class that educated students about their place in the history of education in Montclair, and let them learn from older Montclair residents about the explosive fights and turbulent discussions that paved the way for Renaissance to exist and for their ability to attend school with peers from across town. Students discovered how neighborhood schools perpetuated segregation, and learned the coded language that boards of education and lawmakers used to discuss school integration. This project resulted in the publication of the book used in this thesis. Lawyers came in and taught courses on law, and other parents would transport students to and from various activities during the day. Anand, along with fellow teachers and volunteers, devised a volunteer questionnaire to distribute to all parents. Every parent in the school had to be involved in some way, and the questionnaire was sent out with more than thirty ways to help out with the school, including coming in and offering reading help, organizing a bake sale, driving students to their community service sites, and, if none of those were possible, an option to help out however the parent could (Anand).

The geographic location of the school also helped connect it with Montclair. According to Anand, “We were in the middle of Montclair, not being on the South side, nor the upper Montclair section, so therefore we felt integratively, with race and class and gender and so on, we could be that symbol for the community, to draw people from all these areas (Anand).” Anand wanted to create a strong and respectful relationship between students and community members, so that the latter would “not walk across the street because they saw kids that they had biases against, prejudices against (Anand),” and store owners would know the students and not

feel as compelled to follow students whom they knew around in convenience stores. It was after this decision was made that the name “Renaissance” was chosen.

Anand made it very clear in the interview that the school was not called “The” Renaissance School, but just “Renaissance” (Anand). The idea behind this, Anand said, was that there were many different Renaissances in different cultures. Mentioning the Native American Renaissance and the Harlem Renaissance specifically, Anand told me that the team did not want the school to be exclusively Euro-centric, which is often implied when discussing “The Renaissance period.” That was at the core of the interdisciplinary curriculum.

The name of the school was also reflected in the compulsory electives the school offered. Every student had to take band or chorus, and either dance or drama, so that they “remembered to be a Renaissance person, meaning well-rounded (Anand),” and everybody had to take three years of a non-English language. French and Spanish were the original languages offered, with Latin becoming an option in subsequent years. Additionally, every student took art, which was integrated with the Montclair Art Museum. Students would tour the museum, return to class, create art pieces in the style of what they saw at the museum, then serve as the docents for their own art show at the museum, where their creations would be prominently displayed alongside the other art. When students would perform at the school, whether in dance, band, or chorus, everyone had to participate at the same time, not in groups based on skill level. The reasoning behind this move, Anand said, was to allow students who had never had special lessons in their lives the opportunity to dance with students who had been training since they were five years old. In Anand’s words, “If you’re going to do excellence in equity, you’ve got to make sure that the school affords all students the opportunities to be the best that they can be (Anand).”

This concept, “excellence in equity” is what drove many of the decisions Anand and her team made. The symbol of the school, a lotus blossom, was selected because of its connection to this idea. The lotus can survive in extremely varied conditions – dirty water, droughts, and monsoons. It was chosen because it is able to adapt to a rapidly changing environment, and is a symbol of beauty and resilience, qualities that Anand believed were possessed by Renaissance students, and faculty (Anand). Students, obviously, did not take to the idea of a lotus blossom that enthusiastically, especially when other middle schools were panthers, cougars, and lions, but Anand said students did see the beauty in the blossom’s meaning. It was decided that in its first year, the school would start with a single sixth grade class of 75 students. The building was not large enough to hold many more students at the time, and there were really only a few classrooms that were initially useable. Resources were not widely available at the time, and it was decided to simultaneously work on hiring and expanding while also teaching this first group of students.

The team made all of these decisions during the summer before Renaissance’s first day. In addition to the interdisciplinary curriculum and community engagement, test preparation was included on some Fridays, to reassure parents who were worried about their students’ performances on the standardized tests that did not really have much of a hold in the district at the time. Anand made it clear that “during the week we were not going to be driven by standardized test scores, but we felt that our students would ace them (Anand).” This assuredness came from the depth of learning that would be encouraged by the curriculum, including the math and writing workshops that built critical thinking skills. For one Friday each month, students would go on an off-campus excursion to apply what they had learned outside of their classrooms.

This was part of the school's "inquiry based curriculum," that led students to ask questions about their learning, and to better understand the practical application of much of their learning.

In order to have an environment like this in which teachers can hold each other accountable, Anand said, a supportive community is vital. Connections with the community were made, classrooms and hallways were cleaned, and textbooks were ordered. The teachers were excited to begin their lessons, and parents were excited to send their children to this new school. After the whirlwind surrounding the founding of the school, Anand, Fine, and the team of teachers could not pause to take a breath – it was time to go.

In its first few years, Renaissance functioned well, and challenges were met with enthusiasm by the school's staff. After the first year, Renaissance grew from one grade of students to two, as a new crop of sixth grade students entered the school in addition to the returning seventh graders. Teachers constantly came up with new Friday classes, the community service class was expanded with the school's ever-growing collection of community connections, and the school's popularity steadily rose among Montclair parents. Students were producing art projects, plays, dance pieces, and were enjoying frequent excursions to supplement their in-class learning. All in all, Renaissance was off to a good start.

The Friday curriculum at Renaissance won awards for excellence in education. In 1999, the New Jersey School Boards Association recognized the Friday curriculum with the "School Leaders Award," and Renaissance received the NJ Service Learning Leaders Award in 2001 for "innovative service to the community" (The Renaissance Model of Teaching and Learning 1). Fridays were developed to be different and non-traditional in their curriculum, and offered students the ability to choose elective classes designed to expand their classroom work. Classes included community service, in which students volunteered in a variety of service activities

including volunteering at local elementary schools, maintaining a public garden, cleaning parks and other public spaces, and helping Montclair Town Council members with their work. Another Friday class was Strategy and Logic, in which students learned the theories and strategies behind various board games, with the end goal of creating a game of their own. There was a drama class that guided students through the process of writing and performing original plays, teaching public speaking and writing skills along the way. In an architecture class, students studied different buildings and human-made structures throughout history, and created scale models for a final project. A kite-making class was taught in conjunction with a book about young Pakistani girls who made kites for fun. On the seventh grade floor of Renaissance, teachers would bring in amps and electric guitars, and start Fridays with a rock and roll concert in the hallway for every student. Fridays at Renaissance had a distinct energy – they were most definitely different, and were special days beloved by teachers and students alike. Until an increase in high stakes standardized testing, these classes remained intact.

Chapter 5: 2001 and No Child Left Behind

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) was a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, a component of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. NCLB received bipartisan support in the United States Congress, where it passed with little opposition. It was born out of the campaign rhetoric of George W. Bush's "Texas miracle," (Ravitch 11) in which he touted the way Texas' education reforms of the 1990s narrowed the achievement gap, and raised graduation rates and test scores of its students. Because of this, an increase in standardized testing was a critical component of the law, and is one that has subsequently received much criticism from many educators.

The law's goals were articulated in the March 6, 2002 edition of the *Federal Register*. The law aimed to have every student in America attain a level of "proficiency or better" in math and reading by the 2013-2014 school year, and to be proficient in reading by the end of third grade (Register 10167). It would use high stakes standardized testing to ensure that only the best teachers would be in classrooms, all limited English proficient students were to become proficient in English by the time they graduated high school, students would be educated in environments that were "safe, drug free, and conducive to learning," (Register 10167) and, finally, all students would graduate from high school.

A 2006 press release from the U.S. Department of Education praised the successes of NCLB. Obviously, the Bush Administration presented a very one-sided view of the Act, but it is important to include here because it gives insight into the federal government's perspective five years into its implementation. The press release focused on the fact that the academic achievement of elementary school students improved over the first five years of the Act, and used data from the 2005 NAEP study to back up this assertion (*No Child Left Behind Act is*

Working) (Spellings). The press release also stated that science achievement among African American and Hispanic students increased at a significant rate, which had the result of “narrowing the achievement gap” (*No Child Left Behind Act is Working*). From 2001-2005, fourth-grade reading levels improved more than in the previous twenty-eight years combined. The report provided encouraging statistics regarding student achievement that was directly connected to NCLB, and concluded with President Bush promising to increase federal education funding. While these benchmarks were reached, its reliance on high stakes testing as a means of assessing students and teachers was highly criticized by teachers and policymakers alike⁷.

The tests primarily focus on math and reading comprehension, and are administered annually to students in grades three through eight (Ravitch 11). The results are measured and reported out by “race, ethnicity, low-income status, disability status, and limited-English proficiency (Ravitch 11), and were designed to concretely quantify the seemingly nebulous “achievement gap.” By 2014, no student was supposed to score below “proficient” on any state test, and the law laid out provisions to ensure that this goal would be met, through measures both punitive and supportive. States were able to decide their own scoring system. Schools whose students failed to meet these standards were marked as needing improvement, or “failing,” and schools that failed consistently to meet these standards became in danger of forced closure, or “any other major restructuring (Ravitch 11).” Ravitch writes that most schools ended up being

⁷ Diane Ravitch served in the administration of President George H.W. Bush as the Assistant Secretary of Education. She is an outspoken critic of NCLB, and of other similar programs that employ standardized testing to measure student success. I am using her book, *Reign of Error*, in this thesis, because it is both useful in presenting the facts of the law, and in offering the perspective of a former government official on the policy implementation aspect of the law. To present an opposing argument on the efficacy of the law, I will use a combination of statistics, government reports, and anecdotal evidence.

labeled as failures, the majority being schools that were comprised of mostly disabled students, and schools that had a high number of poor students of color.

Ravitch argued that NCLB linked money with testing programs. Similar to testing companies that offer SAT and ACT tutoring, companies were created to offer teachers and schools workshops and trainings on how best to prepare for the new tests, as well as how to resurrect failing schools. In many cases, because the tests literally indicated whether a school would survive another year, states began spending larger parts of their budgets on test preparation, and on hiring private tutoring companies. A stark divergence between the philosophies of Renaissance and NCLB is apparent when considering methods of assessing students. Anand and the rest of Renaissance's team saw test scores and data as effective in identifying problems, but not solving them.

Another consequence of increased high stakes standardized testing is the return of tracking of students in classrooms, which also inevitably leads to classrooms segregated by race and class (McNeil xviii). When Anand began her teaching career at Montclair High School in the early 1990s, she encountered tracking in almost every classroom and discipline. She taught high honors English to ninth grade students, the most advanced available English class at the time, and saw that only two students out of thirty three were black (Fine 54). She then went to observe a "regular" level class, the least advanced English class available to first-year students, and found that the large class had only two white students. Why were the highest-level classes full of white students, and the lowest level filled with students of color?

When I was a student at MHS from 2007-2011, the same patterns existed. Students were all in the same level of English and history classes in ninth grade, but math, science, and languages were tracked. A student would be placed in these tracked classes based on the

recommendation of their middle school teachers. It was very easy to “drop down” class levels at Montclair High School, that is to say, if you were in an Advanced Placement or High Honors class, you could, at any time, switch into a honors or regular level class. The opposite was not as easy. Upward mobility was very difficult, and a student switching to a higher-level track rarely occurred. When I attended MHS, the AP and high honors classes were made up pretty much exclusively of white students, at a ratio that is not consistent with the demographics of the school. Additionally, the students in “regular” classes, or classes at a lower level than high honors and honors, were made up of a majority of black students and other students of color. The AP and high honors classes were taught on the third floor of the three-story main building, and the regular and honors level classes were taught in the basement of the building, which was not an environment conducive to education. Many windows in the basement looked out onto dirt, as it was below ground. The bathrooms contained old sinks, broken toilets, and mildew. The hallways were water-damaged and it seemed like every other fluorescent light was out. I cannot imagine that teachers enjoy teaching in that space, and I know that it was tough on the students.

When Renaissance was founded, the decision was explicitly made not to track students based on academic abilities. Tracking has become more prevalent in recent years in middle schools in Montclair, and even Renaissance now offers an advanced geometry course for students who want to get a leg up on high school math.

Anand criticized the Obama administration for calling in “experts” to create policy on behalf of teachers. She said, “If the curriculum is not in the hands of teachers, who need to be held accountable for the very highest of standards, which I believe they have themselves, then what happens is, people come in and they tell you what you should develop, what you should teach, what you should do, and it’s no longer an empowering piece. Teachers have been reduced

to what the whole country has said about them – that they’re responsible for everything that’s wrong in this country...they are the easiest targets (Anand).” While Anand believes that there are many bad teachers who should not be in classrooms, she decried NCLB’s methods for weeding them out. What should happen, Anand said, is that teachers should hold each other accountable for the highest quality of work towards the development of students. Teachers, curriculum developers, and other staff need to hold each other accountable for the whole school. Currently, Anand said, this is not the case in the majority of public schools. The curriculum developed by the experts of Race to the Top and Common Core, and the standardized tests proliferated by NCLB, have resulted in less collaboration between teachers, and less accountability for each other’s performance (Anand). Dr. Barbara Weller, the current Principal of Renaissance, had similar thoughts about NCLB.

Weller has been involved with Renaissance since its founding, and is currently the school’s Principal, a position she has held for the last three years. She was an elementary school teacher, a staff developer (she trained and led workshops for teachers), and a supervisor in the Montclair school district, and contributed to the discussions that surrounded the founding of the school. She served as a staff developer for middle school, and worked in classrooms at Renaissance with the first group of teachers at the school, providing guidance and training for them. She then became the math and science coordinator for the district, and worked with math and science teachers in the area of curriculum development. These positions led Weller to describe her relationship with Renaissance as “sort of odd and unusual and perhaps unique” (Weller). She has witnessed firsthand the changes that have affected the school over the years, and spoke about the ways in which she is trying to protect her teachers from some of the more extreme new policies. When I asked her about the changes she has observed over her many years

in the district and at Renaissance, she replied that not all change is bad, especially at a school that is a “living organization. Some ideas work, some do not, and others are discarded, only to reappear again many years later” (Weller).

Renaissance was especially susceptible to the demands of the No Child Left Behind Act, Weller said, because the school was geared toward “maximizing individual achievement of kids, and less focused on the aggregate achievement (Weller).” This is the same idea that Ridwan Khan, the seventh-grade math teacher at Renaissance discussed – that of tailoring education to each individual child’s strengths and weaknesses, and of paying close attention to the needs of each student, something that Renaissance could do because of its small size. Just as Khan and other teachers are aware of what works and what doesn’t in their classrooms, so too was Weller as a staff developer. In Weller’s mind, if Renaissance could demonstrate that kids were learning and growing, through means both conventional and unconventional, then the staff was doing their jobs. By making it more difficult for teachers to tailor their lesson plans to individual students, NCLB reversed this essential piece of Renaissance’s founding philosophy, Weller said.

Through deliberately small class sizes and more autonomy for teachers to assess students as they saw fit, Fine and Anand had placed the task of educating and caring for students squarely on the shoulders of teachers, who knew their students best and interacted with them every day. When NCLB started mandating specific performance benchmarks tied to test results, Renaissance teachers lost some of their ability to assess the growth and progress of their students. These demands, Weller says, have grown tougher since the law’s passage in 2001. While President Obama has reformed certain aspects of NCLB, and has granted waivers from the law to many states, New Jersey included, its effects are still felt at schools across the state, including at Renaissance. Weller said that, despite some reforms brought about by President

Obama, his Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, is a proponent of the notion that “government has to be the gatekeeper for what is deemed appropriate educational progress” (Weller). That is a notion that Weller, and many at Renaissance do not agree with. This was made clear to me through her simple response to my question, “As a Principal and administrator, do you find that data collected from standardized testing is useful?” “No,” she answered (Weller).

I asked Weller to elaborate on this point, speaking as an educator. Standardized testing, she said, ignores an individual student’s natural strengths and weaknesses. She compared standardized testing to driving a car, in saying that the most effective assessment is immediate and lets one adjust on the fly, “You can’t drive your car down the Garden State Parkway and stick to the speed limit as a law abiding citizen when there’s a traffic jam, and expect to be successful” (Weller). Standardized testing does not afford teachers the ability to identify areas in which their students are struggling as quickly as in-class assessments.

Weller added that the time between a test’s administration and the release of its results has grown so long that there is nothing meaningful that can be learned from the data because teachers have a new group of students by the time they get last year’s results. When a test is administered in December, and the results are not returned until the start of the next school year, teachers, administrators, and students have no time to adjust accordingly to prepare for the next wave of tests. The new testing standards proposed by President Obama will reduce the amount of time between the administration of tests and the results, but not by enough to potentially be worthwhile. A question that Weller has is whether younger, newer teachers perceive standardized testing as she does. Do teachers that start in the standardized testing system know of any other way to teach?

Weller offers a unique perspective on NCLB high stakes testing, not only as the current Principal of Renaissance, but also as someone who has been involved in education long enough to see the evolution of standardized testing in New Jersey. In the 1990s, standardized tests were also administered to elementary school students (grades 3-5), but were under local control. They were not as terrible as the current wave of tests, Weller said. Since they were the same every year, schools generally saw improved scores as teachers figured out how best to teach students the material on the tests. So they really measured nothing. Another difference between those tests and current tests is that the results of the former were more compartmentalized. They were not published in the state's newspapers, nor on the state's education website, nor were they used to give "grades" to different districts. Weller recalls one school year in the 1990s, when the district tried to incorporate standardized tests into second grade classrooms. This proposal was met with heavy resistance and protests from the teachers in her building who were successful in preventing the tests from being administered. There was more local control back then, Weller said. As an administrator, Weller does not find the data from standardized tests to be useful, nor does she think they belong in schools.

Rodney Jackson, the eighth grade social studies teacher, and Khan offered similar thoughts on the NCLB testing. As a math teacher, Khan is responsible for some of the most specifically outlined state standards to prepare his students for the standardized tests. In addition to his regularly scheduled math class, he has had to take on a "test prep" class that has replaced "social action" in his course load, due to time constraints. While he expressed much discontentment at this new reality, he told me that the only way to progress was to continue to push back against the new regulations, and that parents and students would quickly see how ridiculous the tests are. He explained that he continues to teach social action and social justice in

his classroom. While not as much as before, however, he believes it is just as important as math. He drew from his child development background in further explaining that his goal as an educator is to grow and stimulate many areas of his students' brains by teaching them different ways of thinking about subjects. Additionally, he added, teaching just one subject all the time is not how teachers at the school work.

Jackson agrees. He reiterated the new test prep classes that came into being in the last decade because there is too much material to cover in just four days of the week. Because math teachers have to teach more math, language arts teachers have to teach more language arts, and science teachers have to teach more science, Fridays have become more like any other day, he said, and have lost much of what made them so special. Though Jackson has remained relatively unscathed in his ability to teach social studies, because the standards for social studies were not as extensive as math and English, he said that Khan's having to focus on the higher volume of math material was shameful. Jackson added that if Khan had been a social studies teacher, he would still be teaching social action, but because evaluations of math teachers are more heavily based on their students' performance on standardized tests, he had no choice but to drop any extra work because it was too time consuming.

The teachers with whom I spoke wholeheartedly denounced high stakes standardized testing. Anand and Fine made sure to give teachers the freedom they had to assess students as they saw fit, not only because they believe that teachers know what methods work best and what do not, but also because they felt as though students were more than just data points, and that standardized tests cannot possibly take into account other aspects of students' lives that might inhibit their performance on a test. Renaissance tried valiantly to withstand the increase in standardized testing, and though the school was more successful than others in New Jersey in

limiting the amount of class time taken up by test preparation, the changes to the school were significant.

Chapter 6: 2009 – The Great Recession and the Common Core

The Common Core State Standards Initiative began in April of 2009, driven by the mission to “provide clear and consistent learning goals to help prepare students for college, career, and life...[the standards] demonstrate what students are expected to learn at each grade level, so that every parent and teacher can understand and support their learning” (*Read the Standards*). Essentially, the Common Core was a redesigning of national standards in education. They outlined specific skills and information that had to be taught to students for each grade level K-12. Although teachers had a part in designing these standards, many are still upset at the reliance on standardized testing to assess student and teacher performance. Opinions on the Common Core were split among those I interviewed. Khan is an opponent of the program, both for philosophical reasons and reasons specific to Renaissance. Weller, on the other hand, does not dislike the Common Core as much as others do, she still, however, decries its use of standardized testing.

In Khan’s words, “Common Core is clearly not about quality education.” (Khan) He expounded this idea, offering both personal opinions as well as Renaissance’s perspective. To Khan, students are not all alike – each is unique in their interests, talents, and life stories. To assume that all students should learn the same things the same way would be to “whittle away all other aspects of a human being” (Khan) and transform living, breathing, students into data points. It ignores the diversity in personalities, behaviors, emotions, personal upbringings, and developments of students, and makes it difficult for teachers to tailor their instruction to students who have different needs. A byproduct of the new standards, Khan says, is that veteran teachers are leaving the classrooms and are being replaced with younger, more inexperienced teachers who do not have experience with any other curriculum than the Common Core. The lack of

experience, combined with the tenuous status of a new teacher does not bode well for the future. It leads to a future in which new teachers will not have the mentoring of older teachers.

Renaissance, Khan said, was a place where parents advocated on behalf of the teachers. There were pasta nights and other events designed to foster a connection between parents, teachers, and students outside of a classroom setting, and for parents and teachers to talk about different curriculum ideas and upcoming lessons. Renaissance is a shining example of how a school can thrive when it uses its local history to teach its students about their roots. Khan lamented that, before the new Common Core standards, Renaissance was on a good path despite the prevalence of high stakes testing. All students in math were achieving at a higher level, parents felt as though they had a say in the education of their children, teachers felt as though they had a say in the curriculum decisions, and there was cooperation between the staff at the school. The Common Core represents a shift away from this localized mentality. He said the new regulations and standards imposed on teachers make it very difficult to teach effectively. Tying tenure to student performance on tests, among other things, changes a teacher's focus in a negative way. "How is that going to want to make me teach better?" (Khan) Khan said. "You always felt that Montclair is a little corner of the world where this stuff doesn't happen, but then they come for you there, too" (Khan).

Speaking specifically about Renaissance, Jackson noted the importance of pushing back against certain reforms that would alter key components of the school's DNA. In order to successfully push back, Jackson said, some difficult choices and compromises had to be made. One such compromise was the continued existence of the Friday community service projects, but they came at the loss of the aforementioned teacher autonomy to teach other elective subjects, such as a board-game designing class, or an architecture class. Jackson said that the most

significant change regarding his own autonomy to teach material that interests him outside of the curriculum came, not from the recession, not from the increase in standardized tests, but moving to the new Common Core curriculum standards.

The Common Core standards affected Jackson's classroom in a few ways. Firstly, the time period that he teaches has changed. When I was a student in his class in 2007, he taught American history from the Civil War onward, usually ending at World War II, with a bit of time left at the end of the year of a cursory review of the 1950s to the present. This year, Jackson said, he is constrained to the years 1800-1876 as mandated by the Common Core. He has to focus his content on those 76 years, which is not a huge problem for him, because his background is in U.S. history, but could pose a problem for social studies teachers who are not as familiar with that time period. Students also miss out, Jackson said, on perhaps some more exciting and interesting historical points, as well as more contemporary information. Additionally, in ninth grade at the high school, students take World History, and do not study U.S. history again until tenth grade, in which they review the same time period that Jackson teaches.

In New Jersey, the United States history and social studies component of the Common Core curriculum is arranged chronologically, so that each year students progress a little further towards the present day. For 5th-8th grade, teachers are expected to cover the years 1585-1787 (Social Studies Timeframe Table 58), and 9th-12th grade teachers 1754-the present day (Social Studies Timeframe Table 58). Jackson enjoyed teaching a bit beyond these time constraints, to better prepare students for the material they would encounter in high school and also because he thought it was important for students to be aware of current events.

Dr. Weller offered a different take on the Common Core standards than Khan and Jackson. Though Weller conceded that the loss of some of the more creative Friday classes can

be attributed to new academic requirements including the Common Core, she maintained that two-hour classes are still unique to Renaissance, and allows students to study a subject, or receive test preparation more thoroughly. Because the Common Core delineates specific items that must be learned by the end of a grade, teachers who want to ensure that their students are the most prepared have moved away from the unique Friday afternoon classes, and have extended the time spent on teaching the core requirements. Weller's view of the Common Core differs from what I expected, and her criticism of it stems not from its purpose, but mostly with its implementation. She said, "Common Core really ups the level of academic rigor, and although there are a lot of people who rail against the Common Core, I don't know if it's to blame any more than new math was to blame back in the 1960s" (Weller). Because it was forcibly imposed rather than being phased in, it was more difficult for schools like Renaissance to quickly adjust their approach to meet the new requirements.

One such class that fell by the wayside was the seventh grade section of social action, taught by Khan. In discussing why this class was removed from the curriculum, Weller said that she made Khan give up the class because his students needed the extra time to spend on math. A compromise was struck, however, and Khan devoted his Friday afternoon class to "problem solving," a component of the math Common Core standards, but also a component of social action. Khan used real-world examples, both rooted in math as well as social justice issues to teach his students the necessary skills. Khan recognized the need for the extra class time, and the pain of losing the important social action class is not lost on Weller, herself a strong believer in social justice education. Upon reflection, Weller said, "It's sad. It's really sad (Weller)."

The new Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) tests, which assess how well students have met the Common Core standards, have dramatically

reduced the amount of social studies required for students of all grades. Weller was steadfast in her defense of Renaissance's own social studies curriculum, and told me that the school is, as much as it can, resisting the new PARCC standards. They have been able to do this, Weller said, by giving some of the responsibility for the language arts, math, and science Common Core to the social studies teachers, and vice-versa. Weller believes that learning similar material from different perspectives and disciplines really helps a student retain information. The Friday field study trips, Weller said, teach students the value of field research, data gathering, and synthesizing new discoveries through their curricula, valuable skills in the fields of science and social studies. When students leave Renaissance, Weller said, they enter the world with researcher's eyes – a key component of social studies education.

Before offering her thoughts about the responses of other schools to the Common Core standards, and why Renaissance might be unique in keeping its entire social studies curriculum, Weller made it clear that she was an outsider, and was not equipped to speak on behalf of another school. She again mentioned the importance of Renaissance's founding philosophy. Staff at other schools, Weller said, are not as united in their philosophies, so they have an easier time adjusting and changing pedagogical practices to meet new requirements. It is easy to assign just one more argumentative essay, in the hopes that it will raise test scores, but that is not the way Renaissance teachers think, Weller said. Simply spending more time on something does not enhance someone's skills, but depth and quality does. This is the rationale behind the off-campus excursions and the interdisciplinary curriculum. To Weller, a student who can memorize information and facts for a test only to forget them as soon as the test ends was not given a quality education. The student who remembers what they learned after they are assessed has a more thorough understanding of what they were taught.

Chapter 7: Moving Ahead – The Future of Renaissance and Public Education

Discussing the scope of education policies raises some difficult questions regarding the role of government in education. How far should schools go in efforts to achieve equal access to education? What is the role of schools in overcoming the many factors, including *de facto* and the legacy of *de jure* segregation that affect the achievement gap? Schools already offer breakfast and lunch to students, should dinner be included as well? Should schools house students overnight who do not have a safe place in which to live? Do schools have an obligation to teach the same material to all students at the same time, even those who cannot get extra help from their parents or guardians? Does the meaning of “success” change depending on where a student lives? These are a few of the questions that Fine and Anand took into consideration as they designed Renaissance. Twenty years ago, they had the freedom to mold the public school in a way that tried to address many of these issues. Would they be able to do the same today? I asked each interview subject the same two questions, “could Renaissance be founded in today’s educational climate?” and “If you had unlimited power and resources to create future education policies, what would you do?” The answers I received varied, but there were some common threads between them.

Hearing Fine speak about the energy and bold vision in the founding of the school made me wonder if its success was due just to being in the right place in the right time. The climate in Montclair was just right for such an idea – it was clear that the public middle schools that existed were not attractive enough to dissuade parents from sending their children to private schools, so the new school had to be markedly different than what existed. I mentioned these thoughts to Fine, and asked her if such an endeavor would be possible today, considering the political

climate of Montclair, and New Jersey, as well as the massive, sweeping federal education programs of the last few years.

Fine cut off the question to give her response, “I think it’s possible. I think it’s swimming upstream, but I think in a town like Montclair that has a long, powerful history of multiracial social struggle, in a town like Montclair that has prided itself on diverse schools...that gets and keeps really good educators, I think you can pull it off” (Fine). I pressed Fine further. Were the conditions in Montclair just right to make it possible for such a school to exist there, given its history, and that this same school could not have been founded in another town in New Jersey, or another state? She agreed, and reiterated how the unique history of Montclair made it possible to even entertain the thought of Renaissance. As to present-day Montclair, Fine remained optimistic, though still very realistic about the changed nature of Montclair. As she spoke she gestured around at the many people around us (I interviewed her after a community meeting in a Montclair firehouse about the PARCC test) to illustrate her point, “yeah, we had 120 people, and really diverse people [at this event]. I think it’s hard, Montclair’s gotten wealthier, we’ve got the direct train line, we’ve got a bunch of people here who don’t know why their kids got on the bus every day, there’s a strong [notion of] ... charity not justice, not challenging one’s own privilege, and I’ve never seen those lines as sharply drawn as I see them now” (Fine). As those who remember the fights and battles of the sixties and seventies over cross-town busing leave Montclair, new families moving in will not have as close of a connection to the reason Montclair’s school system exists as it does. This is all the more reason, in Fine’s mind, that schools should consciously teach this local history.

Regarding teacher autonomy in the face of standardized testing, Fine remarked, “To the extent that there is any school in Montclair that still thinks it has sovereignty, it’s Renaissance”

(Fine). When Montclair’s Superintendent McCormack⁸ initiated quarterly assessments for students from kindergarten through the twelfth grade a few years ago, Renaissance parents protested. The local movement to opt-out of the PARCC test is strongest at Renaissance. There are still some really strong teachers at Renaissance, which Fine attributes to Dr. Weller’s leadership, “Dr. Weller has given them a safe space, she has absolutely protected them. [She lets them] have the most deliberate integrity with their history of any of the schools” (Fine).

As previously stated, Anand believes that no school can be replicated. In her eyes, “Every school has a culture, every town has a culture, every educational institution has a culture and what has to happen is that you have to understand that and then begin to work from inside that culture to do what is best (Anand).” This includes educating and developing students and staff in the local history of their town and of the school, to ensure that the town’s culture is kept alive in schools.

Anand said that she hopes that Renaissance keeps alive its interdisciplinary curriculum, that it would constantly develop its curriculum to make it even better. Teachers need to constantly ask themselves if the curriculum is the best it can be, if it is working for students, and not afraid to raise their voices to seek a change. Teachers need to come up with alternative assessments to properly see the full scope of the abilities and brilliance of those students who do not test well. For Renaissance, Anand said, it is important to maintain the fostering of “critical literacy that is for the sake of dismantling power that comes through the things that we read, that comes through the classroom, and bring around more action for a socially just world (Anand).” These are the types of goals that NCLB and Race to the Top make very difficult to set with their testing-based standards, Anand said.

⁸ MacCormack served as Montclair’s Superintendent from 2012 until her resignation in February, 2015

Jackson, speaking about the possibility of a Renaissance School being founded in today's education environment, said, "it would have to be independent from standardized testing (Jackson)." Schools that are a part of the "system," Jackson said, are connected to state standards and testing, and therefore teachers are connected to it as well. The purpose of Renaissance, Jackson said, was to deliberately get away from tracking and state tests to help students become more well-rounded learners, not just specialists in one subject. Jackson said the importance placed on state tests have made it very difficult to maintain the lack of tracking in classrooms.

Section 1: What Would You Do Differently?

I asked Jackson and Weller to offer a quick summary of changes they would make to existing education policies, if they had unlimited resources and power. All of the interview subjects envisioned an educational system different than the present one.

Jackson began his answer to this question by remarking that he is not against all tests. He thinks that they can be effective in evaluating teachers, and as a diagnostic tool to help show teachers where their students are struggling, but he is more concerned with the way they dissuade new teachers from joining the profession. Jackson said given unlimited power, he would tackle issues of measuring teacher performance to ensure that only the highest quality teachers work in the profession. He said, "I don't think every teacher is a teacher," implying that it is currently too easy to coast by in the profession (Jackson). Standardized testing is one way, he said, of ensuring that teachers are teaching effectively, but is not effectively doing that in its current form. Jackson said tests should be more localized, and should take into account the different needs and realities of different communities. Curricula, he said should be more based on the local history of communities, and be tailored more to the students who are attending those schools, rather than applying the same measures throughout the state. His social action class follows this idea, and

has led to actual demonstrations, protests, and actions by students in and around Montclair. Jackson teaches his students how to organize, and as part of the class has students design and implement their own actions on an issue of their choice. With the new emphasis placed on standardized testing, however, this more localized education and curriculum vanishes, as does the place of activism in education. So what is the answer? What would a school look like in Jackson's future?

Jackson mentioned a trip he took to an "ideal school" in Washington Heights, New York. The school was based on the needs of the community, and was open until ten or eleven o'clock at night, with programming and space available for community members to congregate. During the day, workshops for parents of students were held to help them search and train for jobs. Different companies and organizations would send representatives to recruit gifted students to work either summer jobs or fulltime after high school, and a reading room for parents was open to encourage their physical interaction with the school and to let them check on their kids, among other things. Jackson said he wants to see schools that also function as a community center, as well as being a place of education. In its early stages, Renaissance served a similar function – while it was not a community center in the strictest definition of the word, parents were encouraged to participate in classroom activities, and partnerships were made with local organizations and groups. Jackson noted that it was difficult for every parent to be involved with the school during school hours because of their work and other commitments, which makes it more difficult for them to engage with the school. This is why keeping the school open after the work day would be a great way for parents, teachers, and students to interact with each other outside of a structured classroom setting.

Jackson said that the 2007 financial crash was an important moment in the direction of Renaissance. Montclair was thrown into a budget deficit, the school had to cut back on excursions and trips, and programs across the district were getting cut, including language classes and arts classes. This resulted in the cutting of many of the programs and curriculum items that made Renaissance unique, which really tore at the heart of the school (Jackson). The only holdovers from pre-recession Renaissance, Jackson said, are the Friday community service and social action classes, but Fridays still lack the uniqueness that once defined them. In the past, Jackson said, teachers could teach subjects and classes that drew from their own areas of interest, and not necessarily part of any state curriculum. This was where kite making, board game design, and social action classes were held. Fridays were special creative days for both teachers and students, and this autonomy that teachers had was sacred.

Presently, Fridays look much differently than they originally did in the first few years after the school was founded. Though community service and off-campus excursions still play an integral role in making Fridays unique, the day now consists of extra math, science, and English classes, rather than Strategy and Logic, kite making, and playwriting. This change also included the occasional addition to test prep, which ensured that teachers had enough time during the week to prepare their students for the standardized testing. For the teachers, Fridays have become “just like any other day” (Troy).

In terms of reforming the public school system, Jackson has many ideas. The first thing that has to be done, he said, is redefine our ideas about what effective teaching is. He said that people cannot just equate teaching with other jobs and professions, that teaching must be thought of as a fundamentally different career. There can be a mentality among new teachers, Jackson said, of “I need a job so I’ll go teach” (Jackson). There must be a way to weed out some of the

teachers who are not here to teach. Jackson suggested removing tenure as a way to begin weeding out these worse teachers. Tenure, he said, “allows for people who are not real teachers to slack and coast because they’re set” (Jackson). This is a start, he noted, but not the only solution.

Weller’s answer to the question was, “I would provide the teachers with a professional salary, and require of them continuous learning. The notion that we don’t support our teachers to get additional college credits or advanced degrees...that would drive a difference in the school system. You almost, almost wouldn’t have to do anything past that. You get highly qualified people, you support them, you honor them...you insist that they continue to be learners themselves, and they’ll drive the change. It will be a change in the direction of authentic learning that is accessible by kids at various ages and stages of development” (Weller).

Chapter 8: Conclusions

While acknowledging that debate and discussion surrounding them will rage on long after this paper is published, based on my discussions with the interview subjects, as well as my own experiences, I arrive at a few conclusions about public schooling in the United States. A school must be integrated with the community in which it is situated. Schools should not be passive organizations, they should be the centers of civic and community life in communities. Teachers' voices need to be heard in policy debates and discussions more so than they are now. Part of my motivation in writing this thesis and conducting interviews was to give teachers a platform in which to speak freely and openly about the current state of education, because they know first-hand what is working and what is not. We will never create successful policies if we do not listen to the opinions and voices of teachers when crafting them. High stakes standardized testing is not effective, and should be replaced with a different method of assessment. They are not effective in measuring student and teacher effectiveness, and do more harm than good to all who utilize them.

Incorporating a school within its larger community gives more people a vested interest in its success, creates relationships and familiarity between students and local business owners, and residents, and allows for more services provided by the school to its community. Such services can include a recreation center open later after the school day is over, the town using the resources of the school for its operation, parents and community members coming in to teach special lessons, or just to help out with the school. It doesn't matter. The community must be involved in some way. Each teacher I spoke with mentioned this aspect of community involvement in the school as something valuable and vital to their own professional success.

A driving force behind the writing of this thesis was the lack of teachers' voices in much of the existing literature surrounding No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and the Common Core. As I conducted research, I noticed that while public school teachers had very strong opinions about these policies, and about education in general, those were not nearly as prolifically published as the opinions, thoughts, and analyses of policymakers and government officials. It was difficult to find publications other than independent online blogs that were written by current teachers. This motivated me to talk with teachers firsthand, and get their candid opinions about the current state of education in the United States. Teachers must be at the table when writing education policies. It is foolish to think that effective education policy can be made without consulting those whom the policies most greatly affect. Public school teachers were underrepresented in the writing of NCLB and Race to the Top, yet they were the ones who were most affected by the programs.

It is here that I begin to find fault with the way NCLB incentivizes its schools and teachers to meet standards. Negative reinforcement vs. positive reinforcement aside, a school and a teacher can only do so much to improve the test scores of students. There are so many other mitigating factors that contribute to how well a student can perform on a test. If a poor student cannot eat breakfast at their home before school, for example, and went to bed hungry the night before, it is much more likely that they will not score as well on a test as their well-fed peers, regardless of how many hours of extra help they receive. There are plenty of data that back up this assertion, including studies cited by former Surgeon General David Satcher that found that an increase in participation of School Breakfast Programs result in better test scores (Pollitt *et al.* 1526).

Though I did not and do not expect to answer questions that have stumped educators for centuries, I thought when I began this thesis that I, at least, had one thing right – that federal education standards were bad for teachers and students, because they stripped teachers of their autonomy in the classroom. In talking with teachers, however, I realized that it is not the state and federal curriculum guidelines, but rather the standardized testing that is the target of their ire. Teaching is a wonderful profession because of the creativity it demands. Teachers must be able to think quickly, and communicate difficult concepts clearly to their students. At a school like Renaissance, where teachers were encouraged to think differently and teach unconventional Friday classes, this creative freedom was embraced. Khan and Jackson had complete control over the course of their social action classes, Troy (pseudonym used), a language teacher at Renaissance, was able to teach a playwriting and drama class outside of his language classes, and an English teacher was able to create kites with her students as did a character in a book they read. These classes were intellectually stimulating, and often fun. High-stakes testing makes classes like these more difficult to include in curricula, because in many cases, including at Renaissance, they are the first to be sacrificed for more test preparation time. If Renaissance was not founded with these special Friday classes in place, I am certain that they would not have been able to exist after the imposition of high-stakes testing.

Testing, in addition to making teachers' jobs less interesting and more stressful, also means that students miss out on class time. In New Jersey, the PARCC test, designed to test the Common Core standards, was administered for the first time in March 2015. The test was administered on computers over the course of twenty days, disrupting classes for that amount of time. Interestingly, PARCC and other tests have ignited nationwide protests and "opt-out" movements that aim to persuade parents to withdraw their children from these tests. Though

similar movements have existed in the past, this wave now seems to have more national attention. In Montclair, 42.6% of students did not take the PARCC test, and the school with the greatest percentage of students not taking the test was Renaissance, where 54.1% of students refused⁹. While it is good that parents are speaking out against these tests, again demonstrating the importance of the relationship between a community and its school system, students and teachers are losing time to teach and learn. Additionally, students who opt-out tend to be high-achieving students. This means that the students who are left taking the tests are those whose scores will be lower, which reflects poorly on teachers. This is not to say that all standardized testing is bad; standardized tests can be useful tools in comparing one class of students with another, in the same district, but when the stakes are raised and test results influence which teachers get fired, a problem emerges. As Troy discussed, testing can be an effective tool for a teacher to determine where to focus a class, but it should not be tied to a teacher's job security.

Troy, the language teacher, offers a great example of the benefits of a localized standardized test. He brought a standardized test to his classroom because it helps him identify areas where his students struggle. The test has no effect on the grades of his students; it simply is used to help him in the classroom. It is a diagnostic test, not an evaluative test, and Troy is quite set on keeping it that way. Because his job-security does not depend on this test, Troy said, he is able to relax around the students, and relieve some of the pressure they might be feeling. This is the way in which standardized testing should exist – as a diagnostic tool for teachers to see how to best help their class, and not as the universal metric by which teachers are judged.

What should students know by the time they graduate high school? Is knowing how to drive more important than knowing how to multiply? How can we expect a student who cannot

⁹ <http://patch.com/new-jersey/montclair/montclair-school-district-releases-final-parcc-refusal-totals-0>

eat breakfast, from a poor urban school district strapped for resources, to be able to perform as well on a test as a student who has had hours of private tutoring on top of school? These are questions that must be asked when considering different methods of assessment. It is not necessarily the Common Core *curriculum* that is the enemy of teachers and students; it is high stakes assessment by standardized testing. Assessment is more of the enforcement aspect of things, while curriculum guidelines are something of a road map. I am arguing against the stakes of standardized tests, not the utility. Perhaps the most troubling result of the increased testing measures and standards is the fact that schools like Renaissance are being threatened with a mentality of “conform or die.” When a school district is strapped for resources, the federal government has enormous financial leverage, and can influence decisions on a local level simply by waving a check in front of a district. Such was the way President Obama’s Race to the Top program worked. States that complied with the administration’s demands received points, and the states with the most points received large sums of money. In many cases, teachers and school districts lobbied against these new changes, but money is a powerful incentive.

Negative incentives do not motivate teachers and schools to perform more effectively. The threats of job loss and forcibly closing a school will not raise test scores. Instead, I think schools that are “underachieving” should be targeted with programs that will actually do something to help teachers raise scores. Maybe, instead of firing teachers and taking over a school after a few consecutive years of low achievement, teachers whose students do not meet standards should receive additional development and training during the year. Instead of getting rid of teachers, which has a negative impact on their school and students now having to scramble to find a replacement, this ensures that all teachers are trained, and well-equipped to be the most effective they can be.

The conclusions I present in this chapter are relevant to many more people than just residents of Montclair. Anyone who lives in a town with a public school system should be able to take something away from this thesis, even if it is something as simple as the importance of talking with a teacher for an hour or so. A school can and should be the central part of its community, and from there, other benefits will follow. The conclusions I reach in this paper are not groundbreaking, yet it is the manner in which I reach them that is important. This is the story of a public school that was created by a grassroots, community-driven effort, whose founders were deliberate about its curriculum, knowledgeable about its history, and cooperative with its teachers which, because of high stakes testing and financial constraints, had to drastically change its operation to survive. Though that school has changed, and will continue to change, its unwavering commitment to its founding principles, understanding of its place in its community, and strong relationship between faculty, community, parents, and students has created a special type of resilience that gives those involved a reason to fight for its existence.

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