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Reagan High – Reflection

At the end of my field research on Reagan High's struggles with achievement and community perspective I found that there is still a good amount of hope for the school and countless people who are fighting for it. The entire process led me to feel like an investigative reporter the more I studied and wrote about the inner workings of the school along with the active community members that show their support every day. Each time I learned something new about the school or visited I wanted to know more about the situation - low achievement of students that was tied to the level of poverty in the community. Observations such as this lead me to clues that needed to be uncovered such as the evident language barrier, frequent absences of students, and a high mobility rate that also had a negative effect on achievement. Though I brought up the turmoil of what I was learning about Reagan as well as the school system as a whole in many conversations with my family and friends, mentioning it did not seem like enough to change anything. I wanted to return to my passion of film and make a documentary about what I was doing.

What I learned was that the concept of the "troubled school" which I had seen often in the media, movies, and documentary films is indeed very real in the community that I live. Thoughts of students who are unwilling learners, underachievers, and of low socioeconomic status such as those portrayed in the films *LEAN ON ME* and *HARD TIMES AT DOUGLAS HIGH* were reflected every step of the way through my research on Reagan. I saw that there was a high population of students of color, frustrated teachers, and community members who were trying to help the students overcome their struggles by giving them the best education possible. I felt the hardship and frustration of the faculty as I walked the halls of the school. I stepped into

the world of those who reside at the school including the students who knew the potential outcome of Reagan High if performance did not increase drastically. The most important outcome of the project was that I learned from the real world what I was up against in developing a curriculum that works with students.

When I arrived at the school, after much research from the web and the AEIS report, not a lot of what I came to find at the school was surprising. The look on the faces of the three volunteers that came into the classroom during the “rowdy class” said it all. They were young and probably had not done their research since everything that I found prior to visiting prepared me for the extent of what I might have seen there. Their perspective was not off the deep end since the community outlook of impoverished schools judge that most are low achieving and have a variety of discipline problems. This was the type of school that I was looking for and coincidentally it is in my own neighborhood. There are many great high schools in the Austin area and the majority of them are academically acceptable, but from the beginning I was looking for something that was off the spectrum. The news and stories leading up to the closure of Johnston High last summer had a profound effect on my recognition of the trials and tribulations in the local school districts to keep performance high. I was looking for a school that faces the same consequences which is how I found Reagan High.

At this school and in this community there is a high concentration of the racial and economic isolation which Orfield discusses on Issue 7 of *Taking Sides* as it pertains to the resegregation of schools today. “In just a little more than 30 years, the Latino share of public school enrollment has almost tripled . . . During the same period, African American proportion of total enrollment grew more modestly and now stands at about 8 million students,” (p 102). Reagan High reflected this large population of non-white students and a community that is

segregated by economics and social classes which have become more common in the nation. Orfield brings these topics to light since he uses their effects on education to stress the inequality of schools systems and the achievement gap between schools of color and those which are largely a white population. He notes that this concept is an important issue because “The racial and poverty composition of schools is strongly linked to test scores, graduation rates, the ability to attract and retain talented and experienced teachers [and] parental involvement,” (p 106). Michael Madison of Reagan High and Austin Stone Church noted that a major turning point for the school was when LBJ Academy opened and “took a large portion of the white population with it,” which is why the school became so segregated over the years following. It is schools like this that produce lower achievement because of the lack of resources and experienced teachers that bring quality into education.

A second boundary for these students and teachers was the language barrier between them since many students came from homes where English was a second language. This makes it difficult for teachers to not only communicate effectively with their students, but also with the parents and community. Chapter Two of *Foundations* was good preparation for understanding that things like socioeconomic status play a large role in the quality of education and communication barriers that teachers may face within the school system. The case study taken from an article in *The Columbus Dispatch* suggest that many more schools today are becoming responsible for teaching immigrant students English since many of them had moderate use of the language and were introduced to a formal school system for the first time. From talks with teachers and faculty at Reagan High, this problem was very similar to their situation due to the high mobility rate and presence of incoming students that do not speak English. Race, ethnicity,

language barriers, poverty, and culture are all issues that one must accept hold gravity toward achievement.

The process of getting involved in Reagan provoked an internal struggle that I have dealt with since beginning the MAT program: what kind of school do I want to work with? The list goes on for all too long on either side of the issue because I want to help students learn the value of science and education in a satisfying way at any school that I work, but the split between need and desire keeps me in check. I have no doubts that working at a school like Reagan would have its benefits and satisfactions though they would be very different than those of an academically exceptional school. There is this lurking myth that low income schools are populated by students who do not understand the value of education and have little desire to attend classes. This was not the case at Reagan. These kids were being cycled through the state legislature and school board system which introduced them to an educational realm; many for the first time. With this came the biggest challenge for the school since the reason that they are underachieving is not due lack of desire to learn, but the struggles of mobility and language.

Though I saw a number of students in my visits that they had no desire to be in class, these students were not receiving an adequate amount of attention from the teacher. This was perhaps the biggest lesson that I gained from the project. Students who receive positive attention often tended to want to involve themselves in the lesson while others felt bored and acted disruptively when the teacher was not involved. This reality highlighted the fact that though the school is in a community of poverty, the students can be guided to the desire of quality education.