



Morris Jeff Community School: Elevating Diversity and Teacher Voice

MAY 15, 2018 – KIMBERLY QUICK

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When Jennifer Weishaupt's family applied for pre-K programs in 2010, her four-year-old son was accepted into two schools: the gifted pre-K program in the New Orleans at Hynes Charter School (the only such program in New Orleans), and Morris Jeff Community School, a brand-new, ability-inclusive, intentionally diverse charter in the Mid-City area.

As president of the Mid-City Neighborhood Association, Weishaupt and other community activists had set their sights on reopening shuttered schools in the post-Katrina planning district, which lacked schools but was full of families with school-aged children. Morris Jeff was birthed from this advocacy, envisioned as an independent charter "community school"—one established, organized, and run by a diverse group of locals.

Now Weishaupt, a white business owner and former Shell executive, was faced with a choice: should she send her child, who had tested as "gifted," to an established, exclusive program—or should she take a chance on the new school for which she had publicly advocated? "I had a tough decision to make as a parent," she remembers.¹

Ultimately, Weishaupt chose to send her child to Morris Jeff. "We chose MJCS because we felt that until we were willing to take a leap on a new school that was helping to rebuild the neighborhood, we weren't ever going to see the changes that we wanted to see in the city as far as equity," she explains. "Any kid can go to Hynes and that school will be fine. But if my kid doesn't go to MJCS, why am I going to care if that school does well? . . . Now, the success of this school is the success of my child."

Today, all three of Jennifer's children are enrolled in MJCS, and Jennifer remains an active parent and fundraiser for the school. In her opinion, Morris Jeff's International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum has proved academically rigorous, and she is grateful for the school's strong arts and foreign-language programs as well. Primarily, though, Weishaupt is most proud of the kindness and acceptance she observes in her children and their classmates. "Kids don't judge humans on the same basis as adults judge humans. It's all of us [adults] who need to learn how to change ourselves to make our children's experience in a diverse environment successful."

This report can be found online at: <https://tcf.org/content/report/morris-jeff-community-school/>

The Exceptionalism of Morris Jeff Community School

In a city where the educational landscape is dominated by other charter schools, Morris Jeff Community School stands out for its International Baccalaureate curriculum, dedication to ability inclusion and diversity, commitment to teacher voice, and academic consistency. The school articulated these principles at its founding, committing to being an institution that not only serves the surrounding community, but also involves and reflects it. At Morris Jeff, this looks like a student body that reflects the racial and economic demographics of New Orleans, and a teachers collective bargaining contract that recognizes that the voices of teachers, parents, and administrators are all necessary to maximize success.

History and Demographics of the School

Morris Jeff Community School opened in the fall 2010, after two years of persistent pressure by a coalition of parents, educators, and community leaders in the Mid-City and St. John neighborhoods of New Orleans.

Chartered by Community

Originally, community leaders rallied together to save a local public school, Morris F. X. Jeff Elementary School, a high-poverty, well-respected school which primarily served African-American students. Like most of the city's public schools, Morris F. X. Jeff was closed in 2005 after Hurricane Katrina. The state-run Recovery School District (RSD), led by a state-appointed superintendent and explicitly established to wrest control of New Orleans schools from the locally elected school board, took control of the old Morris F. X. Jeff building but decided not to reopen the school.² By March 2007, the building remained empty, as cleanup contractors entered and discarded all of the items inside the building, including what appeared to be useful books and supplies, classifying them as “storm debris.”

“Regardless of the soundness of this cleanup decision, something about the sight of work crews coming unannounced into the neighborhood and removing scarce supplies inspired a reaction,” writes Brian Beabout, professor of education at University of New Orleans (and current Morris Jeff parent) in his book chapter, “Community Leadership: Seeking Social Justice while Re-creating Public Schools.”³

During a January 2008 meeting hosted by the Recovery School District to gather public input about their school facilities master plan, some attendees asked questions about the Morris Jeff building. Several gathered after the event to share their thoughts and concerns. These citizens met again in advance of the next public RSD meeting, where they decided to formally organize, making flyers, arranging rides to public meetings, and drafting a petition. Critically, the group, calling itself “Neighbors for Morris F. X. Jeff School,” reflected the diversity of the Mid-City neighborhood, cutting across lines of race, class, and generation. As the group grew in number, they settled on its ultimate goal—to create a community school that was as racially and economically diverse as the neighborhoods that surrounded it.

When it became clear that Neighbors would not be able to save the old Morris F. X. Jeff School at its current site, organizers turned their attention to designing a new school. Forming standing committees to handle finance, fundraising, community outreach, curriculum, and leadership, the community decided to create a different type of charter school—one that was created through community, and emphasizing democratic citizenship as well as academic accountability. As a part of that commitment, MJCS's board sanctioned a teachers union, a rarity in the charter world. The board hired its founding principal, Patricia Perkins, prior to opening in 2009.

With its dual commitment to a unionized teaching force and its commitment to diversity, Morris Jeff is swimming against the charter school tide. One observer called Morris Jeff “an anti-charter charter.”

When Morris Jeff Community School welcomed its first class in 2010, its commitment to diversity was evident in the composition of the student body. Fifty-eight percent of new students were from low-income families, 55 percent were black, 36 percent white, and 9 percent Hispanic, Asian, or other races and ethnicities.⁴

Building and Maintaining Diversity

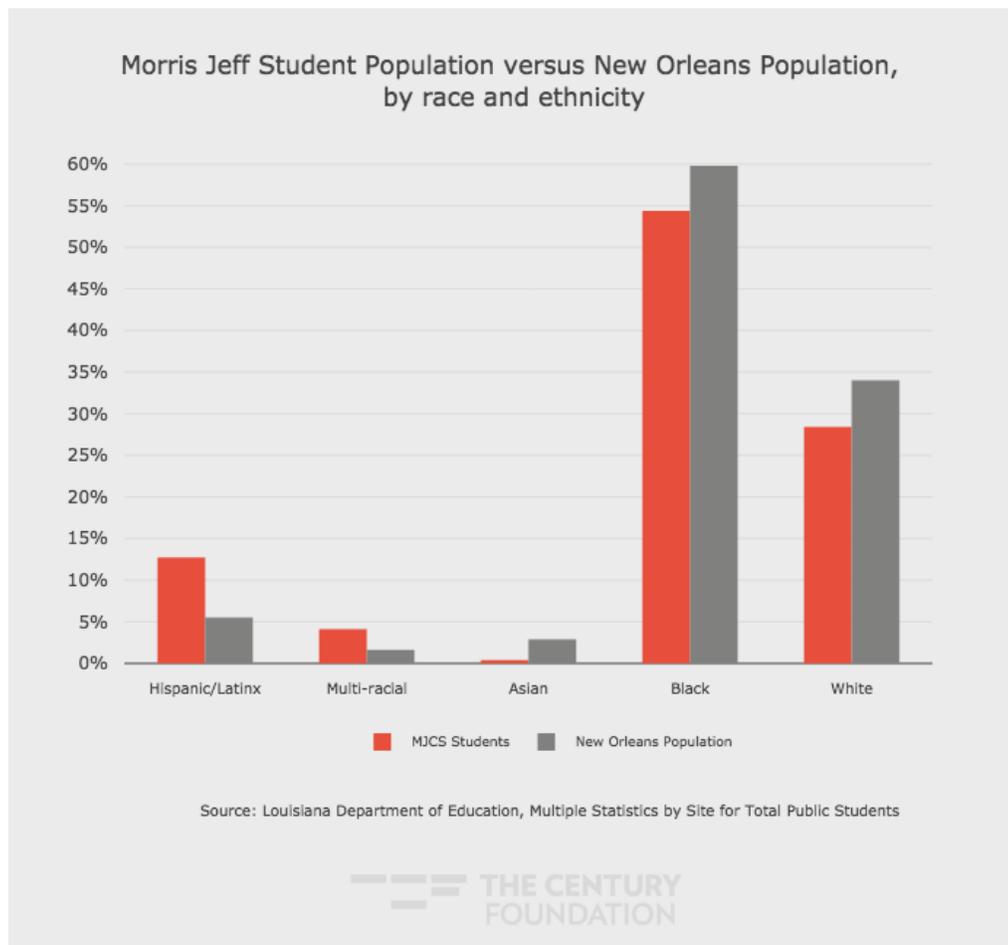
Today, Morris Jeff Community School enrolls students from pre-kindergarten through ninth grade in a large, brightly-lit building on South Lopez Street in Mid-City. As of fall 2017, it serves 826 students: just over 58 percent are considered “at risk,” 54 percent are black, 13 percent are Hispanic, 28 percent white, 4.5 percent are Asian or multiracial, and just over 5 percent have Limited English Proficiency.⁵

Teachers and administrators emphasize that this diversity, in an otherwise highly segregated city and educational system,

is a source of both pride and strength. Spanish teacher Camille Galanes-O’Neill came to Morris Jeff in part due to the school’s racial and economic heterogeneity. “I wanted to look for schools where there was more diversity,” she explains. Prior to moving to New Orleans, she taught at a wealthy public school in Fairfax County, Virginia. While she remembers that school fondly, she felt more connected to Morris Jeff’s mission. “I am from Puerto Rico, so I connect with diverse populations. I’ve known that I enjoy diverse groups more than homogenous ones. I feel that if the students have that same opportunity, then we can all start to build a different world where everyone looks at everyone else as a full person.”

Dawne Forrest, a twenty-three-year teaching veteran and pre-K teacher at Morris Jeff, agrees. “I was attracted to Morris Jeff because of the premise that it’s based on. They want the students to think about other people’s point of view, and it was interesting to me that they were trying to create a diverse student body.”

FIGURE 1



Much of this demographic diversity is rooted in the school's pre-K program enrollment mechanism.⁶ Morris Jeff enrolls most of its new students in preschool, which participates in a statewide program. The school receives state funding to run a mixed-income preschool program. In the upcoming academic year, Morris Jeff plans to enroll fifty students from low-income families for free pre-K, and will enroll another twenty-nine from non-eligible families (who will pay tuition). Their pre-K program also gives priority to children who have an Individualized Education Program learning disability (an IEP) and to children residing in the ZIP codes surrounding the school site. Morris Jeff guarantees all students attending pre-K admission to their kindergarten program. Understanding that the pre-K admissions model encourages socioeconomic integration, school leadership works hard to retain its pre-K students and move them into higher grades.

But Morris Jeff does not solely rely on its built-in pre-K diversity to ensure that its student body stays representative. Because MJCS is under the guidelines of New Orleans's OneApp office, which runs school choice and enrollment in the district's nearly all-charter system, it is not allowed to use a lottery that is weighted to achieve socioeconomic and racial diversity. In response, it's gotten creative.

When Morris Jeff first opened, Principal Patricia Perkins and organizers pulled out all the stops to spread the word that a new school was coming to the neighborhood. "We had trick or treating booths at Halloween where we gave out Morris Jeff flyers. We participated in a Mardi Gras parade on one of the biggest parade days," Perkins says. "We went into churches in the community and spoke. We held meetings at coffee shops; [we did] anything and everything that we could do to get the word out."

According to Perkins, about 35 percent of Morris Jeff students live in the surrounding neighborhood. The city or district will not pay for transportation for non-neighborhood students, forcing Morris Jeff to pay out-of-pocket for buses. The financial burden is frustrating. "No one who runs a single-site charter school thinks that we should have to bear the entire costs of transportation. We aren't a CMO [charter

management organization] with twenty charter schools," laments Perkins. This year, Morris Jeff runs seven buses, which they have planned "conservatively," and estimates that they are spending about \$450,000 per year on that alone. But transportation access, however cumbersome, is crucial for maintaining an equitable and diverse school. "It's in our charter, but more than that, it's the right thing to do."

Today, the school's reputation for nurture and inclusion does a significant portion of the recruitment work for them. "Most people say that they come to the school because they want their child educated in a diverse setting," Perkins explains.

"Luckily, we haven't had to do a lot of recruiting, but we still do significant outreach," she adds. Each year the school hosts a massive open house and organizes information nights to acquaint both current and potential parents with the school's culture and curriculum. Prior to school selection lottery season, Morris Jeff yard signs pop up in neighborhoods and streets, and commuters hear Morris Jeff radio spots. The school offers parent and family tours every Tuesday throughout the academic year, and plans several informal community get-togethers, such as holding fish fries and other neighborhood gatherings. Ferria, a large, schoolwide fair hosted every spring, has become a big recruiting event that draws in families to see the community.

Together, Morris Jeff leadership hopes that the variety of events and outreach attract people from a wide range of backgrounds. "Some people love to hang out casually at a fish fry, and others love to get dressed up and come to a formal gala. So it's an attempt to reach out as far as we can within our limitations." Still, the OneApp office handles most of the marketing. "It's very expensive and we can't afford it," explains Perkins. "We need to spend that money on educating our kids."

Morris Jeff's Unique Approach: Creating a Culture of Equity

Every school day at Morris Jeff begins with morning meeting. The entire Primary Years Program (PYP), or elementary

school, gathers for a twenty-minute ritual in which they explore the things that bind them together. While most schools make announcements via intercom, Morris Jeff uses this time to distribute information and, sometimes, receive feedback on it. Morning meeting can be a time to recognize the outstanding accomplishments of classmates, make class presentations, or talk through schoolwide concerns. But mainly, morning meeting is the time when MJCS's inclusive community seems to shine the brightest. As the children break for their classes, all exiting the gymnasium together, a Hispanic girl and a white boy hold hands. A little white girl fixes a barrette that had fallen from her black friend's braids. A gangly boy pushes his classmate's wheelchair down the hall; another pair of students, one of whom has Down syndrome, walk arm in arm. The carefree nature of childhood compassion is on full display. However, for the adults in the building, addressing issues of race, identity, and education is much more complex.

Academic Performance

Marketing, community outreach, transportation, and admissions practices all support the school's ability to attract and retain diverse parents, but its status as the first elementary school in Louisiana to be authorized as an International Baccalaureate World School helps to distinguish it from other options. The IB distinction, while not officially authorized until fall 2013, became a part of MJCS's charter in 2010 when interested parents began to research engaging educational curricula. (In 2017, Morris Jeff earned IB certification for grades six through ten.)⁷ Now, IB's "learner profile"—a group of ten attributes that seek to produce engaged and productive thinkers—is the core of the school. Pasted on walls across the building, the IB attributes are imbued into every part of the student and staff experience—and serve as a selling point to potential new families.

Internationally recognized for its rigor, the IB program's philosophies fit perfectly with the character of the school. In a 2013 article in the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, fifth-grade teacher Matt Tuttle tied together the school's diversity

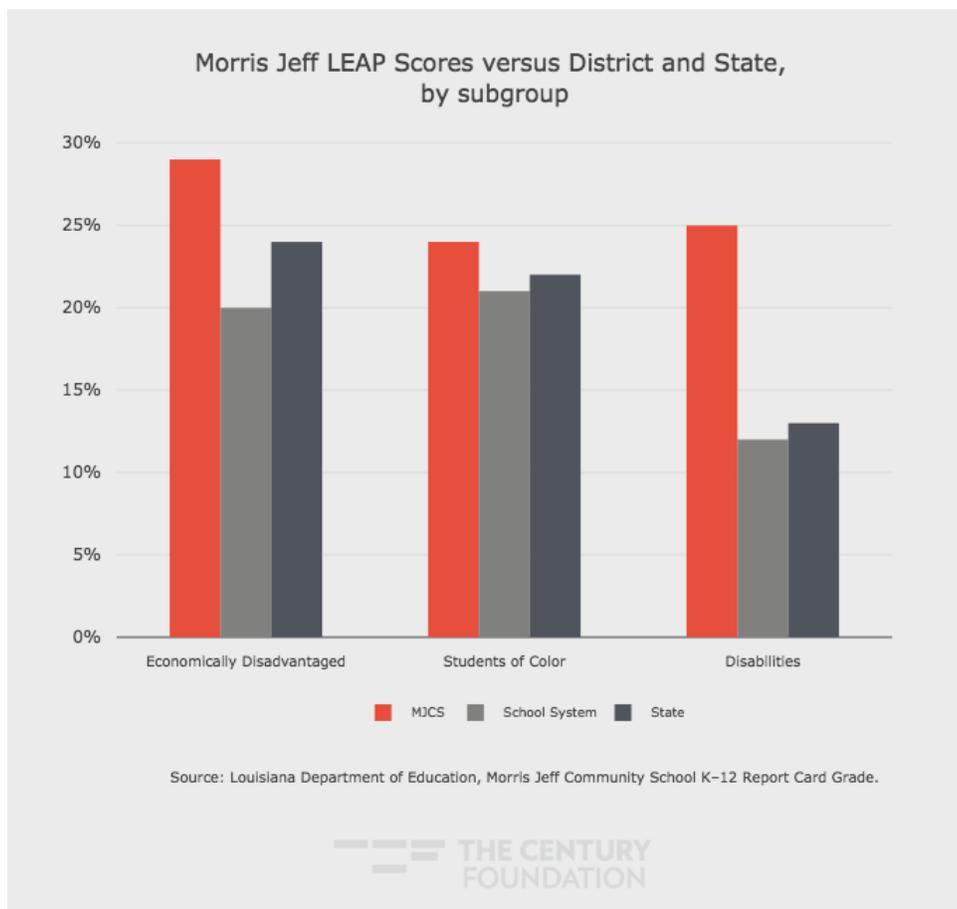
with IB's global, interdisciplinary approach. "The world is not a monochromatic place, it is a diverse place, and by having a diverse curriculum it prepares [students] for the real world—so when they are there they can celebrate it and excel in it."⁸ In fact, many of the ten IB learner profile attributes—caring, principled, knowledgeable, open-minded, inquirer, communicator, reflective, thinker, risk-taker, and balanced—align with the outcomes well-documented in research about the benefits of diversity. Evidence shows that integrated classrooms encourage critical thinking, problem solving, and creativity (inquirer, reflective, thinker), reduce bias and counter stereotypes (caring, open-minded), spur a willingness to seek out diverse spaces later in life (principled, balanced), and can improve student satisfaction and leadership skills (communicator).⁹

Morris Jeff's test scores demonstrate that the school's academic and cultural approaches are generally successful. Based on the most recently available LEAP scores, which measure "student proficiency of grade-level content and true readiness for the next level of study," Morris Jeff students performed better than the Orleans Parish/RSD school system average and the Louisiana state average.¹⁰ Subgroups of students, including economically disadvantaged students, students of color, and students with disabilities, also outperformed their peers across the district and the state.

Despite these successes, however, there remains significant room for improvement: the school earned a C rating from the state during this academic year. (It should be noted, however, that their overall score—an 80.8—was a full ten points ahead of the overall score for its host district.)¹¹

Simply assembling students of different backgrounds is insufficient. Achievement of positive outcomes requires an infrastructure for not only racial and socioeconomic diversity, but also for equity within a diverse space. From its founding, Morris Jeff has sought to build up this infrastructure, but it remains a work in progress.¹²

FIGURE 2



Identifying and Closing Disparities in Academic Achievement

When structured well, integrated schools help reduce racial achievement gaps on standardized tests. Research indicates that black and Latinx students had smaller achievement gaps on the 2007 and 2009 NAEP assessment when they were not in high-poverty schools, and gaps between black and white students on college readiness exams are more pronounced in segregated districts. At the same time, all students attending integrated schools tend to have higher average test scores than their peers in more-segregated districts.¹³

In many ways, Morris Jeff fits into this narrative by producing scores above RSD averages. Despite this, MJCS struggles with a persistent black–white achievement gap, and with the underperformance of English Language Learners. MJCS measures their student performance using three main types of assessments: STAR, LEAP, and STEP. STAR

is a benchmark test that is assessed quarterly, intended to give teachers information about the grade level work that students can do; LEAP is the state standardized test that is administered every spring; and STEP, Strategies for Teaching and Evaluation of Progress, is given to pre-K students through third graders to determine specific skills for reading readiness.¹⁴

In the last quarter of the 2016–17 school year, 60 percent of all third- through fifth-grade MJCS students performed at or above grade level on the STAR tests—but there was a 31 percent average gap between white and black students. In the same year’s math STAR, 58 percent of students met or exceeded the benchmark, with the same 31 percent racial achievement gap. On LEAP’s grades-three-through-five ELA exam last year, three-quarters of students achieved at or above the Basic level, but certain grades saw significant score disparities between black and white students (third grade: 27 percent gap; fourth grade: 9 percent gap; fifth grade: 5 percent gap). The Math LEAP grades-three-

through-five results were even more concerning, with a 34-percentage-point gap between black and white students in the third and fourth grades, and a 27-percentage-point gap in the fifth grade.¹⁵

Morris Jeff's leadership is alarmed by these disparities. Before the beginning of this academic year, school officials constructed a detailed strategic plan with specific benchmarks for improvement. "We are keenly aware of our shortcomings and continue to push forward to improve everything that we do," says Perkins. To combat its students' achievement gap, the school intends to approach the issue from multiple angles.

To start, the strategic plan mandates improved data collection and review of student subgroup performance. Perkins admits that the school has not always paid enough attention to how different groups of students comparatively perform. The new plan calls for a quarterly review of student assessment data, involving grade-level teacher teams, administrators, and Response to Intervention (Rtl)-team members. From here, not only will the school determine which interventions should work for different issue areas, but it will also contact the families of lower-performing students to inform them of these interventions and their necessity. Additionally, the school invested in some added research-based interventions, and now has a full-time Rtl coordinator.

Recently, Morris Jeff received funding for LEAP Saturday tutoring, and plans to implement a free fifty-five-day after-school tutoring program that will run simultaneously. Both programs are primarily for students whom Perkins calls "on the bubble"—those who are not yet meeting standards but may require only a relatively small push. Program leaders will place students into learning clusters to provide more targeted lesson plans and interventions. While teachers can determine the eligibility of individual students for the tutoring program, Perkins anticipates that—based on preliminary STAR and STEP data—most participants will be English Language Learners or black students. Ideally, all of the tutors will be certified teachers. Although MJCS teachers are not required to participate, the school highly encourages them to do so and compensates them for their time.

Morris Jeff releases students one hour early on Wednesdays so that every teacher in the building can participate in professional development. Moving forward, much of this time will focus on giving teachers the tools and skills to screen their students for academic challenges and recognize patterns in growth and other outcomes. This type of professional development seeks to prepare teachers to ask and answer questions around outcomes (Where is/isn't student progress on pace and what habits are contributing to that?), causes (What teacher actions are contributing to which aspects of student performance?), and solutions (How will I change my behavior in order to change student outcomes?). School leaders are brainstorming how changes in teacher evaluations could support this type of inquiry.

Early information indicates that some of these interventions have been effective. At a Wednesday professional development session, Director of Middle Years Program Ryan Ruyle reviewed mid-year data for students grades six through nine. "There's been some good movement," Ruyle began. On the STAR assessments, middle schoolers appeared to be making progress. In math, sixth graders had seen a seven-percentage-point increase in the number of students at or above grade level, and critically, black sixth graders had also shown a 7 percent rise. In seventh-grade STAR math and reading, black students made double-digit percentage point gains, and low-income students improved as well.¹⁶

But while improving test scores through targeted academic interventions remains important, the Morris Jeff community acknowledges that equity does not begin and end with narrowed achievement gaps. In its quest to build a multicultural community within a segregated educational system, the school is looking honestly and critically at ways to eliminate feelings of marginalization amongst its faculty and students.

Fair Discipline and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Compared to state and school system averages, the percentage of Morris Jeff students who have received an

out-of-school suspension appears commendably low. In the 2016–17 academic year, 95 percent of MCJS never received an out-of-school suspension as punishment, compared to 89 percent in the school system.¹⁷ But when MJCS looked at their internal data several years ago, they were unpleasantly surprised that black boys in particular comprised a disproportionate number of students subject to exclusionary discipline. “I honestly thought that we were going to beat [the odds],” recalls Perkins, referring to national data exposing racial discipline disparities.

In response, MJCS expanded their counseling staff and established tighter protocols to determine how to respond to behavioral infractions. Kenneth Schmitt, director of counseling at Morris Jeff, leads a small team that both nurtures students and prepares teachers to deal with challenging behavioral situations. “I’m very aware of when there is a black kid getting pulled out of class for having a meltdown, and when a white student is doing the same thing but is allowed to stay,” he points out. Partially in response to this, MJCS contacted Matthew Kincaid of Overcoming Racism, an organization which seeks to build more equitable institutions through race and equity training, to conduct four mandatory full-day training sessions for all staff. His program seeks to attack educational equity concerns at their source by improving staff’s ability to identify personal and systematic bias and giving them tools to alter their behavior. To further involve the school community in policy change, the school established the Student Support Committee—a team of teachers, parents, administrators, and board members charged with monitoring and improving discipline policy and special-education staffing. One such change requires that staff who write two or more behavior referrals in one week meet with the deans of students to determine underlying causes, including but not limited to possible bias. The teacher and deans then brainstorm action steps that might reduce the number of student send-outs.

To supplement this work, Schmitt and his team run professional development workshops that address how to identify and respond to children experiencing trauma. “I’m trying to inform teachers about how trauma affects students.

We want to help each other be proactive before we get to the [disciplinary] referral process,” Schmitt explains.

Schmitt points out that the context of New Orleans is critical to recognize in direct work with students. “Post-Katrina, we are dealing with an extra trauma here. A lot of research has been done that shows that even if a child wasn’t born before Katrina, the trauma from the mother or father is still affecting them.” In light of this, “sometimes the intervention is more complicated than just telling a child to sit down, be quiet, and listen to the teacher.”

The school’s counseling teams coordinate school-wide programs on issues like teen dating safety and internet awareness, but it also spends time thinking about therapeutic responses to more extreme student behaviors. Detention and in-school and out-of-school suspensions are not off the table at Morris Jeff, but they are not the initial solution. Counselors work with teachers and administrators to perform functional behavior assessments and develop personalized behavior plans. In quarterly meetings with the Rtl team, behavioral goals are discussed alongside academic ones. “If a student is low on reading, we put them in a reading intervention group. If they are low on social skills, we put them in a social skills group,” Schmitt explains.

Morris Jeff’s work on reducing racial discipline disparities led the school to ask difficult questions about its curriculum as well. Three years ago, when MJCS began to take a deeper dive into student send-outs, they found that certain teachers and subjects had higher rates than others. School leadership wondered if boredom or lack of connection to the material prompted some students to act out in the classroom. Patricia Perkins remembers: “That caused us to think, ‘I wonder what the curriculum is? What books are these teachers choosing? Does the learning feel relevant to all students?’”

To help ensure that the curriculum resonated with students, the school hired Dr. Adrienne Dixon, a professor of education at University of Illinois and an expert in socially responsive pedagogy. Dixon worked at Morris Jeff as a consultant for two years, observing classes, working with

teachers, recommending new literature, and developing a teacher toolkit to help teachers design lesson plans for different types of learners. In particular, she stressed the importance of using books and examples that square with the lived experiences of students from underrepresented backgrounds and underserved communities. After she left, the school continued to tweak elements of its program, including using its IB foundation to introduce more international and globally themed literature into its classrooms.

Ability Inclusion as a Fundamental Principle

When a visitor walks around Morris Jeff, she will undoubtedly see children of different physical and cognitive ability levels meaningfully interacting with each other. In a fourth-grade class, when a medically fragile child with verbal limitations suddenly shrieks in pain and frustration during a lesson, her classmate quietly approaches, sits next to her, and grabs her hand in comfort. In another class, several students share a laugh with a boy with Down syndrome. Like its commitment to racial and socioeconomic integration, this high level of inclusion of special needs students is by design. Perkins says the philosophy behind this inclusion ties back to Morris Jeff's mission to mold a community across difference. "Why are we still isolating children from our society just because they are different?" she asks. "And what is it about us as a society that we can't yet fully embrace and accept and share ourselves with others who might learn and look differently—beyond just racially and economically?"

Morris Jeff dedicates a great deal of time and staff resources to ensure that the school serves special needs students well. About 13 percent of Morris Jeff students have special needs (excluding those students classified as gifted and talented); academic results for these students are far above state and district averages.¹⁸ Special education students are not separated into different classrooms at any point, but instead sit next to cognitively typical students in the classroom. Ginger Woodall, a special educator focusing on speech therapy, describes their full inclusion model as the philosophy that "every student is a general education student first." Each classroom has multiple adults, including student aides

or special educators. Throughout the day, when the lead teacher presents the lesson and works with small groups, specialists "push in" to general education classes to help students who require additional learning supports.

"Pushing into the classrooms is the most natural form of intervention," Woodall explains. Special educators share a common planning time with teachers in order to coordinate lesson plans and decide when and what types of interventions might be most effective, she says. "We also assist lead teachers with training and understanding disabilities and trauma."

Of course, such an approach is not without its challenges. Fifth-year teacher Kristen Weddle appreciates the full inclusion model but admits that it's challenging. The common planning time and amount of intervention, while helpful, "never feels like enough," she says. But the structure of the classes themselves lends itself to more collaborative teaching experiences and student breakout groups. "My team uses a lot of workshop models and small grouping within classrooms," Weddle explains, which helps provide times when specialists can discreetly push in without interrupting a lesson.

As a result, the inclusion model seems to have led to positive changes for all students. "We've embraced personalized learning for all of our kids," Perkins points out. Newly purchased technology allows teachers to give additional time face-to-face with one group of students, while classmates in the same room can work on a curriculum-unit-aligned program on a tablet or laptop that is more closely tailored to their needs. "It could be an intervention, it could be an extension, it could be practice, but it is aligned to what the teacher is teaching."

Morris Jeff is willing to make adjustments to its full inclusion program, but remains committed to its existence. According to Perkins: "It's beautiful, but it's hard because we always have to ask ourselves—are we doing the very best thing for this child? But every parent that brings their child here does so because they want an inclusive environment. And we are constantly trying to form and shape how to best educate every single child."

Respecting and Honoring Teacher Input

Within the charter sector, Morris Jeff's level of commitment to elevating teacher voice is rare.¹⁹ Before the school even opened, its founders wanted MJCS teachers to have the option to form a union.²⁰

In 2013, teachers decided to unionize in an effort to preserve the school's collaborative character as it continued to expand. The charter's board formally recognized the union without a formal vote after receiving the faculty petition. This amiable recognition process contrasts the damaging post-Katrina narratives that plagued the formerly powerful United Teachers of New Orleans union. As New Orleans public schools atomized into charters after the storm, the UTNO emerged as a popular scapegoat for the city's educational ills, causing Orleans Parish School Board to lay off all teachers and refuse to bargain with the union. So when Morris Jeff's teachers union established itself in 2013, it was the first in the post-Katrina city to do so. To this day, it is only one of three unionized charters in the city.²¹

After a three-year negotiation (during which union representation changed), the teachers and governing board ratified a contract in June 2016. The thirty-page document provides an uncharacteristic degree of job and salary security in a state where such assurances are tenuous at best. (Even at traditional public schools in the state of Louisiana, school boards are not required to bargain with unions, and the legislature removed most tenure protections in 2012.) It ensures that teachers employed at Morris Jeff for more than two years cannot be disciplined without just cause, establishes a ninety-minute daily planning period, offers help to struggling teachers prior to reevaluation, and freezes or increases salaries for teachers and teaching assistants.²²

The union contract also establishes policy and governance committees that mandate the inclusion of teachers. The Student Support Committee, for example, consists of four teachers designated by the union, three administrators, the special education director, one board member, and two parents. Provisions approved by this committee become official school policies.

Steven Kennedy, the primary-years-program music teacher, is the current co-chair of the Student Support Committee. "I've never been in a situation as a teacher where I've felt like I've had this much power," observes Kennedy. It's not a role he takes lightly. "It's a lot of responsibility but I'm happy it's there. Teachers are in the trenches; we see the day-to-day. That perspective is important for good policy." Kennedy also commends the contract for making room for parent voices as well, calling their committee input "amazing."

Perhaps as a result of these policies, the teacher retention rate in the school's primary years program is at its highest-ever level. "This is the first time ever in grades pre-K through five where we will only have to replace one teacher," Perkins said, adding that the departing teacher is moving out of state. She expects that a higher retention rate will also positively affect student performance.

As the school builds out its grade levels and faculty, it also seeks to develop a more diverse teaching and administrative staff. Currently, MJCS's teaching force is around 60 percent white, 33 percent black, and 6 percent Hispanic.²³ Ideally, school leaders would like the faculty to more closely reflect the demographics of the study body. School leadership hopes to recruit more staff from programs that serve as hubs for young educators of color, such as historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), Teach For America, and Teach NOLA programs. (The administration is currently forming a relationship with the student teaching internship program at Xavier University, a respected New Orleans HBCU.)

Growing Pains and Opportunities

Since its founding, Morris Jeff Community School has added a grade level each year. The 2017–18 academic year was the first time that the school included the ninth grade, which in the New Orleans system is the beginning of high school. But MJCS's status as an IB school means that, based on IB standards, its ninth-grade program and academic structure remains part of the Middle Years Program (grades six through ten).

As the school prepares to expand even further, decisions regarding space, culture, and curriculum have become more complex. First, Morris Jeff plans to move its high school to a new building, beginning in the 2018–19 school year. The new building, located near the border between the Mid-City and Treme neighborhoods, remains nearby and located in a diverse area. For one year, MJCS ninth and tenth graders will share the building with another charter school's class of seniors before MJCS takes over the space.

Second, the school anticipates receiving authorization to offer IB's Diploma Programme (DP) for the 2019–2020 academic year. The DP is only for juniors and seniors, and is known to be a rigorous, holistic program. This rigor, while exciting, has spurred the school to ask some tough questions regarding the role that academic tracking might play within the school. Noelle Reznik, the school's math curriculum coordinator, understands that this dilemma moves the school into a new, and potentially more stratified, direction. "It's tough because in the Middle School we are really devoted to inclusion and to the idea of not tracking students, but the reality of the DP program—or any high school program, really—is that if you want kids to accelerate or get college credit, then you have to start them on certain pathways."

During the 2016–17 year, this process of selective acceleration started with one class of eighth graders, who completed eighth-grade math and Algebra I concurrently. Several students also completed the first-year high school English course in the eighth grade, but this group was embedded within a standard eighth-grade English class. This year, several students throughout the middle school years are accelerating in math and English. Teachers and administrators want to make this an option for more students. "Our school-wide philosophy is more access, as much as possible," Reznik explains. "The eighth-grade class in Algebra I this year is really big, and I think that's a testament to how we are trying to push as many kids as possible into higher-level coursework."

Carmen Mack, MJCS's Diploma Program director and a high school science teacher, agrees, but points out the necessity of providing multiple pathways to high school

success for students who might not be ready for the full Diploma Program. For example, ninth graders must take biology to remain on track for the full IB diploma program, but the teaching team determined that not every child entering MJCS's high school was prepared to succeed in that course. "For biology," she explained, "we looked at how every student performed on the LEAP test. And we made a decision—a hard one but one we thought was right—to place students in courses based upon their test performance." Students scoring basic or above went straight into biology; those who scored unsatisfactory or approaching basic took physical science. Mack says that about fifty of eighty students are taking biology this year.

Ultimately, however, this choice means that students placed in physical science rather than biology will not have the option of graduating with an IB diploma. In response, the high school plans to offer multiple paths towards college credit and preparation. "Our hope is that every student will be able to take at least one IB course, and our second hope is that IB flavors all of our students' experiences whether they're in an IB class or not," says Mack. A student who does not graduate with the full IB diploma can still earn individual course certificates, which many universities apply to college course credit. Currently, the school is committed to graduating 20 percent of its first senior class with an IB Diploma and an additional 50 percent with IB certificates. If students, for whatever reasons, do not access IB coursework, Morris Jeff will offer additional college and career readiness programs, such as Jumpstart or Project Lead the Way, to provide students with more options.

Both Mack and Reznik point out that the advanced-, accelerating-, and Diploma Program-track students are racially and economically diverse. Mack notes that her biology classes are all racially mixed, and Reznik remembers that last year's class of accelerated eighth graders taking Algebra ended up evenly split between white children and children of color. But the physical science course remains mostly black and Latinx—a fact that is connected to academic achievement disparities at Morris Jeff and district wide. "We need to think about pulling more and more kids up," says Mack.

The high school team is also attempting to find ways to guarantee that all students can take courses with one another; one such option may be enrolling all students in IB's signature Theory of Knowledge course, a philosophical course that challenges students to consider how knowledge is formed and transmitted. They anticipate that the newly hired Theory of Knowledge coordinator will work with all faculty to incorporate the program's tenets into every high school classroom. Reznik points out that Morris Jeff's school-wide emphasis on IB principles makes this a natural consideration, and that all students, regardless of pathway, should be able to practice engaging in deeper learning and thinking. "The transition between the middle years program and the diploma program can be a bit rough, but one way it does prepare students is by training them how to think interdisciplinarily, and that rich background is in all of our students who have been with us for a while."

Conclusion

In its colorful school building in the heart of one of America's most colorful cities, Morris Jeff strives to remain a community-based, diverse, and effective school—while still growing in size and scope and tackling tough barriers to full equity. The administration and teaching staff struggle to close a stubborn achievement gap, eliminate racially disparate discipline practices, and cure growing pains that could lead to increased tracking. Although imperfect, the school has reasonable but ambitious plans to address its blemishes. Its investments in better learning interventions, tutoring programs, data collection tools and training, and anti-racist professional development are promising changes and additions to its model.

At the same time, the school holds fast to the elements that define its character: a community-centered experiment in racial, economic, and ability inclusion; a nurturing educational environment with universal access to music, art, and foreign language; and a commitment to hearing and respecting the voices of educators through its union.

Author

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Notes

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are from interviews or observations by the author.
- 2 Brian Beabout, "Community Leadership: Seeking Social Justice while Re-creating Public Schools in Post Katrina New Orleans," in *International Handbook of Educational Leadership and Social (In)Justice*, ed. Ira Bogotch and Carolyn Shields (New York: Springer, 2013), 547.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 548.
- 4 Richard D. Kahlenberg and Halley Potter, *A Smarter Charter: Finding What Works for Charter Schools and Public Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2014), 157.
- 5 Louisiana Department of Education, Multiple Statistics by Site for Total Public Students, October 1, 2017, <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/resources/library/enrollment-counts>; Pursuant to R.S. 17: 3973, "at-risk" students are defined as those who are eligible to participate in free and reduced-price lunch programs; are under twenty and withdrawn from school for not less than one semester; are under twenty and have failed to achieve the required score on any portion of the exam required for high school graduation; are in eighth grade or below and are reading two or more grade levels below their current grade level, as determined by LEAP scores; have an IEP, excluding gifted and talented students; or are the parent of a child.
- 6 Jeanne L. Reid, Sharon Lynn Kagan, Michael Hilton, and Halley Potter, "A Better Start: Why Classroom Diversity Matters in Early Education," The Century Foundation, April, 29, 2015, <https://tcf.org/content/report/a-better-start/>.
- 7 Jeanne L. Reid, Sharon Lynn Kagan, Michael Hilton, and Halley Potter, "A Better Start: Why Classroom Diversity Matters in Early Education," The Century Foundation, April, 29, 2015, <https://tcf.org/content/report/a-better-start/>.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Amy Stuart Wells, Lauren Fox, and Diana Cordova-Cobo, "How Racially Diverse Schools and Classrooms Can Benefit All Students," The Century Foundation, February 9, 2016, <https://tcf.org/content/report/how-racially-diverse-schools-and-classrooms-can-benefit-all-students/>.
- 10 Louisiana Department of Education, Morris Jeff Community School K-12 Report Card Grade, www.louisianaschools.com/schools/368001/academic-performance?#student_performance.
- 11 Louisiana Department of Education, 2017 School Performance Scores/Letter Grades, <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/resources/library/performance-scores>.
- 12 Kimberly Quick, "Testimony: More Than Integration Needed to Fight Racial Disparities in NYC Schools," The Century Foundation, December 19, 2017, <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/testimony-integration-needed-fight-racial-disparities-nyc-schools/>.
- 13 On the 2011 NAEP fourth-grade math exam, for example, low-income kids in more affluent schools scored nearly two years ahead of their low-income peers in high-poverty schools. Yet another study found that students in mixed-income schools demonstrated 30 percent more growth in test scores during high school that did peers with similar socioeconomic backgrounds in schools with concentrated poverty.
- 14 STAR assessments are designed by a company named Renaissance, and are used to provide teachers with learning data. They are not used broadly to assess schools. Louisiana uses state-administered LEAP testing to determine

school performance scores, to determine whether schools must participate in state-driven improvement efforts, and to determine promotion to certain grades for students. STEP is designed by UChicago Impact and is used internally by schools for literacy assessment.

- 15 Morris Jeff Community School internal data, January, 2018.
- 16 Morris Jeff Community School internal data, January, 2018.
- 17 Louisiana Department of Education, 2016–17 School-District-State Discipline Rates, <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/resources/library/district-state-data-reports>; Louisiana Department of Education, Morris Jeff Community School K–12 Report Card Grade, http://www.louisianaschools.com/schools/368001/academic-performance?#discipline_attendance.
- 18 Louisiana Department of Education, Morris Jeff Community School K–12 Report Card Grade, http://www.louisianaschools.com/schools/368001/academic-performance?#student_performance.
- 19 “Unionized Charter Schools 2016–2017,” National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, available at <https://www.scribd.com/document/371065071/Unionized-Charter-Schools-2016-17>. The report found that only 11.3 percent of the nation’s

charter schools were unionized during the 2016–17 academic year. Four states—California, Wisconsin, Maryland, and Ohio—had 62 percent of the unionized charters. In the state of Louisiana, 2.7 percent of charters have a union.

- 20 Jessica Williams and Della Hasselle, “Morris Jeff Charter School Board Embraces New Teachers Union,” *The Lens NOLA*, May 17, 2013, <https://thelensnola.org/2013/05/17/morris-jeff-charter-school-board-embraces-new-teachers-union/>.
- 21 Danielle Drelinger, “Morris Jeff teachers, board ratify union contract,” *Times-Picayune*, June 21, 2016, http://www.nola.com/education/index.ssf/2016/06/morris_jeff_union_contract_rat.html.
- 22 Collective Bargaining Agreement between Morris Jeff Community School and United Teachers of New Orleans, as of June 17, 2016, available at <https://www.scribd.com/doc/316477985/Collective-Bargaining-Agreement-between-Morris-Jeff-Community-School-And-United-Teachers-of-New-Orleans>.
- 23 Morris Jeff Community School internal data, 2018.