

# One Nation INDIVISIBLE

Stories From the Field

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## Upstream People

### *Can Nebraska Show a Separate, Unequal Nation a Better Way?*

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY GINA CHIRICHIGNO

*"There are kids from all over, which is one of the cool things about our school. And I mean, all over. Everywhere. That kid, there, he lives right in Omaha, like near downtown Omaha and him, over there, well, I don't remember, but, oh, he lives in another town near here, but not in Omaha. I, myself, I do not live in Omaha. And we have Diverse City, which is awesome — it's like a mini-society that our class made with all the things of a society. We have businesses. And it's diverse like the name, or like the world, I guess. Oh, and there's a bank. But the best things in my opinion are the reptiles. Do you like snakes? I love snakes. Mr. Mitchell, he's our teacher. He also loves reptiles. He lets me take out the reptiles and if you want I can show you. I know you want to see Diverse City, our society, but we can do that later. First I'll show you the blue-tongued skink..."*

— Alyx, 5th grade, The Wilson Focus School, Omaha, Nebraska



Like at most elementary schools, the adults in charge at Omaha, Nebraska's Wilson Focus School provide basic training to students who show visitors around. Quite unlike the standard school tour, though, ours proceeds unscripted and fails to follow a demarcated route. This is not to suggest that fifth graders Alyx and Nolan are not competent transmitters of facts.

"It's kids in Douglas and Sarpy Counties—it's 11 different towns or some-

thing—that can come to our school," Nolan accurately informs us. He explains: "Our school specializes in using technology and in helping us be leaders."

Further down the hall, he stops and points: "That's the men's bathroom where men go to the bathroom." He pauses, it seems, to allow me a moment of contemplation. Her blonde ponytail swishing, Alyx

indulges numerous tangents: “Oh! We have to show you the potato garden!...Wait, wait, stop. Let’s see if we can find me in one of these pictures.”

Like the Focus School itself and the ambitious regional education model that came after it, today’s tour is shaped by the passion of its leaders and the idiosyncrasies of this place. Tucked into an uninspiring industrial park just beyond the Latino neighborhoods of Omaha’s south side, this little school is an inspiring showcase for what’s possible when children cross man-made borders that separate different races, ethnicities and economic classes. Educational leaders here are hoping to replicate both the Focus School’s educational approach and its diversity, which is uncommon in this extremely segregated region and is now engendered by an ambitious regional model called the Learning Community. The only structure of its type in the nation, Nebraska’s Learning Community financially links urban Omaha’s public schools with 10 neighboring districts and allows students to transfer out of their assigned school districts.

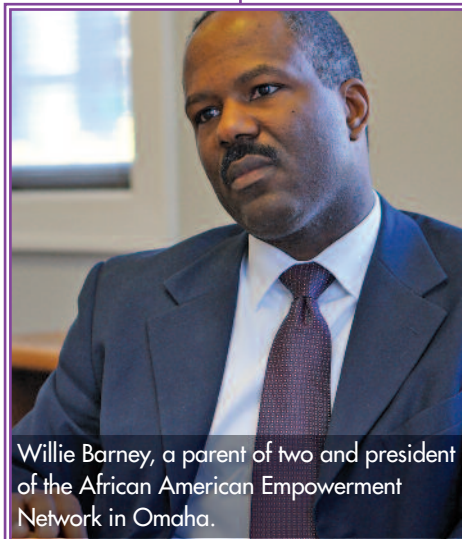
The Learning Community emerged after anguished but ultimately productive debate about big, messy issues that most public leaders even in our most progressive metropolitan areas tend to avoid—things like segregation, righting the wrongs of past discrimination, social cohesion and fairness. This is how the Learning Community works and how schools like the Wilson Focus School are sustained: Member school districts pool money, that is then redistributed via a needs-based formula. The Learning Community also provides free transportation for students from low-income families and/or to students whose transfer

would contribute to socioeconomic diversity. Students whose presence would help create such diversity—say, a middle class student going to a predominantly poor urban high school—are given priority in the limited number of interdistrict transfers funded each year. Learning Community dollars also help pay for the Focus School, where Alyx and Nolan go. The money also helps pay for the Lewis and Clark Focus Pathway program, so students can continue with Wilson’s leadership and technology curriculum in middle school. The idea is that, in the coming years, the Learning Community will help support additional regional schools with similar levels of diversity. The Learning Community legislation also provides funding for a vast array of education-related services and programs—family literacy, preschool and parenting workshops—

for children and their families in Omaha’s poorest neighborhoods. There are two centers that house these programs: one in Omaha’s predominantly black neighborhood, the near North Side and another, more recently, in South Omaha’s Latino neighborhood.

“This was really exactly what we were going for,” says Willie Barney, whose son attends the Focus School. “If you want your child to go to a school that is diverse and that is high performing, then that should exist.” Similarly, Barney stresses, people who live in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty should not have to wait around for seg-

regation and poverty to be eradicated but should have access to programs and services like preschools and job counseling that can “lift them up and empower them today.” After a successful career in publishing and marketing, Barney now is executive director of the Empowerment Network, a group of



Willie Barney, a parent of two and president of the African American Empowerment Network in Omaha.

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African American parents, and business, civic and educational leaders, who are, among many varied initiatives, reimagining and renovating Omaha’s historically black neighborhood in the north.

In the Omaha region, there is still a lot of optimism and energy around the Learning Community. But five years after its enabling legislation passed, it is unclear whether this Great Plains outlier can survive in a place where longstanding segregation and man-made fragmentation have come to seem like the natural order of things. This month, a group of state legislators filed a bill that would abolish the Learning Community. Even though he signed the bill that created it, the state’s Governor David Heineman has in recent years expressed opposition to the Learning Community.

“You know, we’ve seen a lot of folks from all over express a lot of support for something different, for the Learning Community,” Barney says. “Plenty of folks from lots of [economic backgrounds] support what we are doing....And then, well, you have others who maybe liked things the way they were and aren’t quite ready for a change. But you look around this region and it’s obvious that there is enough here for everyone. We could keep building a community where everyone can win. That’s a case we need to make, that this is about recognizing our common interests, about lifting all of us higher.”



People from Omaha will tell you that the farther west you go, the whiter and richer it gets. Driving out

from the central city, modest postwar ranch houses give way to bigger, newer McMansions, which give way to sprawling estates. Iron gates circle the more imperious homes, their implausibly green lawns, and sculpted bushes.

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—Willie Barney,  
Civic leader and  
Focus School parent

There are things to brag about on the other side of town, too. Historically black North Omaha, among the poorest of the city’s neighborhoods, is the site of an ambitious \$12.2 million renovation project launched in the fall of 2012. The plan calls for elderly housing, mixed income developments, and commercial investment. It will build upon North 24th Street’s history as the center for jazz and African American culture that had once been anchored by the storied Dreamland Ballroom. A confluence of negative factors contributed to the evisceration of the formerly prosperous, festive North Omaha, where jazz clubs once lined the streets and plentiful jobs in meatpacking and the Union Pacific railroad helped support a vibrant African American community. Job loss following the restructuring of the meatpacking and railroad industries, commercial disinvestment, police targeting of African Americans and the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. contributed to three riots in the 1960s. By the 1980s, the North Freeway had split the neighborhood laterally and cut it off further from the rest of Omaha. The more promising changes here now include a newish, prosperous and fully occupied cul-de-sac where home prices start at

\$250,000. But near the shiny newer construction and the signs of progress sit blocks upon blocks of worn-down single-family homes, lifeless, empty streets, and former businesses boarded up with plywood where windows are supposed to be. Several of the empty lots that dot the north side had once been home to

grocery stores and other local businesses destroyed in the riots and never replaced.

Among large metropolitan areas, the Omaha region reports some of the highest rates of inequality between whites and blacks and between whites and Latinos, particularly in jobs and income. According to the Urban Institute, Omaha ranks 91st of 100 metros (100 represents the largest gap) on these two measures. Similarly, the Omaha region's high rates of residential segregation earn it a "D" on the Washington-based Urban Institute's *Metrotrends* report card.

The culture of fragmentation here is probably best exemplified by the way public education is organized. Within this city of 415,000 people, a mix of quirky local custom and legislation allows for four of Omaha's neighborhoods to maintain stand-alone, middle-class sovereign school districts, all of them well within the city limits. The city itself oversees the fifth district, the Omaha Public Schools, referred to locally as "the urban district." Folks in Omaha say the place offers up a classic tale of two cities. Just as much, though, it offers a tragic story of five school districts.



The Learning Community's "we are all in this together" implication makes it an anomaly in divided Omaha, in red Nebraska and nationally. A 2012 Pew Research Center report shows that people are more likely to live in economically segregated neighborhoods today than they were 30 years ago. The UCLA's Civil Rights Project reports that school segregation rates for black and Latino students have been rising steadily for twenty years.

In the national civil rights world, Nebraska's Learning Community venture piqued curiosity in part because it happened so far away from the New York–D.C. radar screens. But it was equally surprising because it materialized without a court order at exactly the time other districts were scaling back, even abandoning, integration efforts. Courts in recent years had made it

easier for school districts to let go of their court-ordered desegregation plans and the shrinking share of white students in many urban districts during that period was making desegregation efforts futile. In 2007, the U.S. Supreme Court made it ever more challenging for educators to maintain diverse schools through student assignment and transfer policies that considered a student's race. Amid this retrenchment, though, seven other so-termed "voluntary cross-district desegregation programs" similar in spirit to Omaha's have managed to survive in pockets of the United States. Some have roots in the civil rights movement and others emerged as remedies in court settlements. A few struggle every year for financial and political survival. Others manage to retain support and popularity. Each pursues "school diversity" either in socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, or both. All provide transportation, and in some cases tutoring and other services, for students to attend schools outside the typically racially and economically homogeneous communities where they live. In Connecticut, not only do students from urban communities attend suburban schools, but students from several regions can choose from increasingly popular magnet schools that draw diverse enrollments from multiple municipalities. About 3,000 students from Boston each year attend suburban schools through one of the nation's oldest cross-district programs, established in 1966. In St. Louis, officials oversee transfer of about 5,300 students out of the city to suburban schools.

Last year, 2,246 students transferred through Nebraska's Learning Community, with about half of those increasing diversity in the schools they attended. About 180 students attended Wilson Focus School, though this number is projected to grow to 250 in a few years. Another few dozen students attend the Focus School program in middle school, which offers a continuation of the leadership and technology curriculum used at the elementary school. This is still a miniscule number, considering that there are about 111,000 students scattered among the 11 Learning Community school districts. Meanwhile, as is true in the rest of the nation, more and more Latino and black families are moving out-

side of the city of Omaha, though that movement is still too slow to make much of a dent in the region's segregation rates.

"The Learning Community is a work in progress. We have here a structure that provides a beginning, a foundation," says Ben Gray, a city councilor in Omaha. "We need to give this a fighting chance." It would be unrealistic, Gray says, to think that this effort could create diverse schools in every district in just a few years, that it alone could fight back the forces of racial and economic segregation. It may be a light counterweight, Gray says, but it is a "crucial" one.

The Native American word "Omaha" translates from the Hokan-Siouan language to "the upstream people" or a tribe that travels "against the current." There is something of that against-the-grain mentality in this contemporary effort. It also reflects a kind of pragmatism in which Nebraskans pride themselves.

"I love telling people that 30 percent of Nebraska's children under the age of five are Latino. I love saying that because people just don't believe it and it makes them pay attention," the Learning Community's CEO Ted Stilwill says. "People have their image and their stereotypes about Nebraska, that it's cornfields and white people. But of course the data is right there. It tells the story about the fact that we are changing, that we really need to provide ways for all children to prepare for that diverse world, to be part of that world."



At the Focus School, our convivial guides Alyx and Nolan, their classmates, and Glenn Mitchell, their teacher, are not only preparing for a diverse world: They've created one.

"Diverse City" is the name students have given the mini-society, also known as "Mr. Mitchell's 5th

grade." On a recent Monday, nearly everyone is too preoccupied, either with making slides for PowerPoint presentations about planets, or thinking up questions for an all-class trivia game, to pay the ringing phone any mind. Maya, though, in her role as Diverse City's administrative assistant, pushes her laptop aside, stands and tilts her body forward, leg in the air, yoga-like, and picks up the phone.

"Hello, Diverse City," she tells the caller. "We are all equal."

Maya covers the mouthpiece with her hand. "Mr. Mitchell! Mr. Mitchell!" she shouts. Glenn Mitchell, a burly, warm African American man, is occupied with

quizzing two boys about Saturn's position in relationship to the sun. Somehow Maya's whispers cut through classroom chatter.

"Umm...it's for you."

"Thank you," Mr. Mitchell tells her, nodding. "Now, please take a message in a professional manner."

As Alyx notes, Diverse City keeps an impressive collection of reptiles, including her beloved Australian lizard, the blue-tongued skink. Fifth grade offers a standard diet of mandatory reading time, science reports, math drills and oral presentations. Its leadership theme and its constructed society also nudge children into constant negotiations with each other to collectively solve problems and to balance individual desires with community needs.

In Diverse City, a messy desk can get you a citation from the police. It's not something the rest of the community should have to look at, after all. And if you are always rifling through papers in search of a missing assignment, your disorganization wastes everyone's time.

"You can sue people," explains student Nicholas Vollmer. In hushed tones, Nicholas details the contentious charges leveled against a Diverse City graphic

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— Ben Gray, Omaha city councilor

design company over an “alleged” copyright violation. “But you don’t want to overdo that because suing takes time and money and there are other things that are more productive for people to be focusing on, you know, things that benefit other people. Usually, the goal is to get to some peaceful kind of resolution.”

If you get cited—say, for an overflowing desk—or sued, you can hire a lawyer to defend you. A socially concerned student thought this arrangement unfair to people who

didn’t have money to throw around on defense against frivolous lawsuits. So, Diverse City’s town mothers and fathers established a public defender’s office of sorts. Kids alternate jobs, though they have to interview and get hired for each one. Nolan, a cop one week, may next week defend an accused messy desk keeper. Next month, Maya, Diverse City’s administrative assistant, might be elevated to city councilor.

Mr. Mitchell is proud of the students for having come up with the classroom name, “Diverse City.” “They really get it,” he says, “That having that diversity—be it racial, socioeconomic, cultural, in learning style, whatever it is—is a reality of life and that our diversity that we have here is going to help them learn how to be leaders. More than that, they can’t really be great leaders if they can’t communicate and interact successfully in a diverse setting. Isn’t that obvious? I mean, it seems pretty obvious to me.”

The suburban students who pile onto buses bound for the Focus School in South Omaha are accustomed to the ride by now. But they are new pioneers of a sort, taking the exact reverse course of scores of children and families who for decades had headed out

of the increasingly black and brown city to develop and settle in sprawling suburbs.



The diminishment of Omaha’s schools and concomitant rise of suburban ones follows a story line much like those of America’s other formerly grand urban centers. Unlike most other states, though, Nebraska permits so-called “metropolitan class” cities—in this case,

only Omaha is considered “metropolitan class”—to “annex” or take over land so as to capture the growth, sprawl and the tax dollars that come with it. Thus, in the years before about 1940, as the city’s limits expanded, so did the enrollment and the tax base of Omaha’s public school system.

Custom began to change in 1947, though, when several then still rural and semi-suburban districts in the city’s west side got together and formed their own mostly white, middle and upper-middle class educational enclave, District 66, also known as “Westside Community Schools.” The state Legislature even passed a law expressly preventing the Omaha Public Schools from ever taking over District 66. As suburban housing kept expanding through the 1950s, people continued to move their families west, both in the city of Omaha and in other less populated places such as Millard and Gretna. Over 20 years, from 1950 to 1970, the number of people living in Omaha’s expanded city limits rose by almost 40 percent—from about 250,000 to nearly 350,000.

“It’s a little confusing,” says Sheri Vollmer, who lives smack dab in the middle of Omaha *and* within the

borders of District 66, which means her kids would not attend the city's public schools. She chose to send her kids to the Focus School in South Omaha instead. "We are right in Omaha but not part of the school district? So, why is that? I'm not sure people really know why at this point."

District 66's website, boasting a "tradition of excellence" in "the heart of Omaha," explains its formation in 1947 as an expression of residents' desire to "maintain quality education." That vague justification may very well be true. But it's also true that in 1951, the year that the state Legislature granted District 66 special protection from Omaha, school desegregation was being pursued in earnest throughout the nation, including within the former Border States. In 1949, lawyers had filed the desegregation case, *Briggs v. Elliot*, from South Carolina. It would be consolidated into *Brown v. Board of Education*, which was filed in 1951, with a plaintiff from Topeka, Kansas, which sits a mere 180 miles south of Omaha.

For decades already, African American residents had been attracted to Omaha by jobs in the city's railroad and meatpacking industries. (Union Pacific Railroad, still headquartered in Omaha, had built the first transcontinental railroad in the 1860s. Many porters, cooks and waiters were African Americans who lived in Omaha.) By the late 1950s, about 5 percent of Omaha's population was African American and growing. According to census figures about 90 percent of African Americans still lived in the city's north side.

During this period, racial covenants, discriminatory lending practices, redlining and zoning regulations worked in tandem to prevent African Americans from buying homes in the prosperous neighborhoods of Omaha's western section, where District 66 was located. Government loan programs encouraged the purchase of new homes, which were most often found beyond urban areas. And these were precisely the places where African Americans were rarely able to buy, even if they had the means. Omaha's immigrants, however, did move over time. Polish, Italians and other immigrant groups often settled first in

South Omaha near the meatpacking plants and then moved on to other sections of the city, especially as development ramped up to the west.

By the late 1960s, with suburbia still sprawling, the city of Omaha looked to annex the neighboring city of Millard. Once a sleepy little village settled in the 1880s, Millard began to grow soon after Western Electric opened a manufacturing plant there. Millard's local government leaders resisted annexation with more indignation than had been seen in previous towns. Millard officials even annexed a cemetery in neighboring Sarpy County with the hope that the court would not allow Omaha to annex a municipality that had property outside Douglas County. Things were different in Omaha now. As Steve Marantz chronicles in his book, *The Rhythm Boys of Omaha Central: High School Basketball at the '68 Racial Divide*, tensions between whites and blacks were intense during this period. North Omaha, once a fairly prosperous place, had hit hard times. Between 1955 and 1969, Marantz shows, the meatpacking industry alone accounted for the loss of 6,500 jobs, many of them held by African Americans. In 1964, a survey had shown that had it not been for restrictive real estate covenants, 29 percent of north side residents would move out. Worse, 48 percent said they wanted to move but did not have enough money to do so. That year, half of the city's "deteriorated housing" was in the black neighborhoods of the north side. (Until 1963, Nebraska law forbade whites and blacks and whites and Asians from marrying each other.) Marantz notes that in 1965, a census survey showed that Omaha and Birmingham, Alabama had identical levels of residential segregation.

In 1968, the Alabama segregationist and candidate for U.S. president, George Wallace, stepped into the city's racial tinderbox. On an afternoon in March, Wallace landed at Omaha's airport to the tune of "Dixie." A group of protesters responded with the ballad, "We Shall Overcome." Wallace spoke at Omaha's Civic Auditorium right near Central High School. A racially mixed group of protesters heckled and yelled. A fight broke out. Police chased down protesters running from the melee.

“[Wallace] had come to Omaha to campaign for president. He brought the Deep South—‘segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever’ and the jackboots of Selma—and set it down two blocks from Omaha Central High School,” Marantz writes. Marantz’s affectionate portrait of Omaha Central High School during that period depicts a place where white and black teens, through much struggle and tension, and gaping inequalities, quite often bonded, formed friendships and even fell in love.

It was within this larger context of social upheaval that, after a protracted legal battle, Omaha did finally annex Millard in 1971. Unlike previous annexations, though, under the terms of this agreement, Millard’s public schools would not be folded into Omaha’s. So, as black student enrollment continued to rise in Omaha, Millard’s school district — like District 66 — would remain wholly independent.

In interviews she conducted for her 2009 case study of the Learning Community’s genesis, University of Texas Assistant Professor Jennifer Holme found a “general consensus” that Omaha officials stayed quiet about the maintenance of Millard as a sovereign school district “due to political pressure to keep the predominantly white and middle class district separate” from the Omaha Public Schools. In the coming years, Millard’s sovereignty would exacerbate the racial polarization that began with the post-World War II suburban housing boom.

Several years later, in 1975, a federal court found the Omaha Public Schools guilty of intentional segregation. Evidence showed administrators had purposefully assigned students to schools based on race and allowed for transfers of white students out of more racially diverse schools. Implementation of the desegregation order, in 1976, no doubt sped up white flight out of Omaha and into the sovereign white districts around it. In 1971, the Omaha Public Schools had enrolled about 64,000 students. By 1976, Omaha’s schools had lost more than 10,000 kids with most moving to schools in the suburbs. During the same period, Millard’s schools gained

4,000 students with overall enrollment up to 9,100 students by 1976.

Suburbs like Millard were exempt from the kinds of desegregation-related challenges that Omaha faced for the obvious reason that there were hardly any African American children in places like Millard and District 66. And by then, it was clear that the U.S. Supreme Court had the suburbs’ backs. Just two years before, in the 1974 case, *Milliken v. Bradley*, the High Court had ruled that cities could not include suburban districts in their desegregation plans even if a dwindling share of white students in urban schools would make court-ordered desegregation impossible to achieve over the long term.

“In the short run, it may seem to be the easier course to allow our great metropolitan areas to be divided up. . . one white, the other black,” Justice Thurgood Marshall wrote in his dissent in *Milliken*, “but it is a course, I predict, our people will ultimately regret.”



At the height of Omaha’s desegregation struggle, a young Omaha native named John Mackiel was teaching English at the city’s Burke High School. Not long out of the University of Nebraska, he wasn’t paying rapt attention to the details of desegregation. He needed to focus instead, “on the challenge of trying to get teenagers interested in *Beowulf*.” Mackiel, a product of Omaha’s working class Midtown neighborhood, taught at Burke for a few years, went on to work as a guidance counselor and then in the late 70s, began his career as an administrator in the system, initially recruiting high school teachers. In the 80s, while Mackiel was in law school, he was the district’s chief labor negotiator. (He would earn his law degree in 1984 from Antioch.) In 1997, after Mackiel had worked in the system for a quarter century, the Omaha school board voted unanimously to hire him as the school superintendent.



Scholars who study educational leadership blame long hours, the stress of having many bosses and unstable political contexts for the rapid turnover of urban school leaders, who stay in their positions an average of about 3 years. Undoubtedly, this revolving-door leadership contributes to the instability that characterizes urban school districts. John Mackiel, though, would for four decades remain utterly devoted to Omaha's public schools. He and his wife Debi, a schoolteacher turned university administrator, and their two daughters were settled and perfectly happy in the city. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Mackiel had no interest in using his first superintendent's job as a springboard to a bigger system. He was content. But by the early 2000s, Mackiel and his colleagues in Omaha found themselves up against a complex mix of forces that threatened the health, and perhaps even the survival, of Omaha's "urban" district.

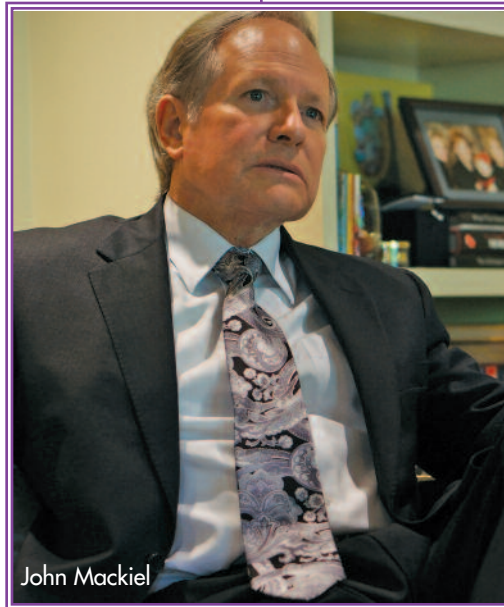
The share of middle class students in Omaha continued to shrink over the years and, the share of the district's students who lived in poverty kept growing. The social problems related to poverty—instability, stress, exposure to violence, even hunger—seeped into classrooms and hallways. Research on the detrimental effects of high poverty schools—teacher instability, constricted curriculum, low relative achievement—was clear by then and would only mount in the years to come. As research by Professor Douglas Harris at the University of Wisconsin demonstrated, there were certainly some high-poverty, racially isolated schools that beat long odds. But there were not many of them. (Harris found just .3 percent of such schools registered higher than typical test scores for three years in a row). On the other hand, at predominantly middle class, racially diverse schools, research told a different story. Educators

tended to be better able to mitigate the negative effects of poverty. Graduation rates tended to be higher for all students. As the years went on, numerous studies would show a strong association between attendance at socioeconomically or racially diverse schools and higher relative test scores in math, science and reading.

As poverty increased in Omaha's public schools, by the mid-2000s, the already small share of lower-income students in some nearby suburban districts, such as Elkhorn and Bennington, got even smaller. A state program initiated in 1989 permitting students to attend school outside of the districts where they lived intensified disparities like this. Because transportation was not provided, the plan further advantaged children whose family

incomes and flexible schedules allowed them to provide such transportation. Since Omaha was under court order to desegregate, administrators there had initially been allowed to deny transfers that would exacerbate racial segregation. Once the school district ended its mandatory desegregation order in 1998, though, officials no longer had the power to deny such transfers. Policymakers paid no heed to the fact that the transfer program was creating more socioeconomic isolation. Of the 2,700 students who left Omaha's public schools under open enrollment in 2005, Jennifer Holme and her colleagues report, three-quarters were white and came from families who earned "higher incomes."

The tax base of Omaha's schools also continued to erode. Unlike the city of Omaha whose borders (and tax base) had expanded through annexation, remember that the school district's borders had been frozen. Omaha's public schools, thus, received no tax money from highly appraised property, including homes and commercial buildings, sitting within the city lines but



John Mackiel

outside the school district borders. To add to the problem, when city officials set about developing the downtown area, they provided tax breaks to entice businesses and corporations to renovate urban buildings and move there. The deal was that new corporations and businesses would pay greatly reduced taxes in the first few years with payments increasing gradually. This meant that for several years, the city's schools would receive no benefit even from development within the downtown area. In rapidly developing western Omaha, in contrast, new businesses paid their taxes in full. Accordingly, school districts out that way reaped the benefits.



A classroom in Omaha's Central High School

The long road that placed John Mackiel at this dead end had been decades in the making. The son of a Polish immigrant father, Mackiel had grown up hanging drywall alongside immigrants from all over the world and African Americans from the north side who'd worked for his father's small business. He could still remember Omaha as a small city, ringed by farms and woods that were now tamed into suburban sameness. Omaha had, too, morphed into a corporate community, with the headquarters of five Fortune 500 companies within its borders. John Mackiel knew that he wasn't going anywhere and he refused to quietly preside over the schools' devolution into what he portended: "Just another hollowed out, abandoned, isolated urban school district." Mackiel had no sustained work experience outside Omaha. But he was an informed observer of urban education across the country. He saw Omaha headed down the same road as Newark, New Jersey, or Hartford, Connecticut, where the rise of suburbia had rendered the city schools places of last resort, places that teachers wished to avoid, places dubbed "troubled" and "fail-

ing," places where educators had been left alone, without adequate support, to try to reverse the corrosive effects of poverty, family instability, isolation and growing social inequality.

So, in 2003, Mackiel was eager to sign on with other "higher-poverty" school districts that had filed a lawsuit in state court claiming that Nebraska's funding mechanisms discriminated against them. As tends to happen with lawsuits, this one would barely move in the years that followed. Mackiel's hope that there might be a court-ordered resolution to the well-documented fiscal inequities began to fade in the months and then

years that followed the lawsuit's filing. It was around this time that the city of Omaha was trying to annex nearby Elkhorn. If Omaha succeeded, it would be its first annexation in more than three decades.

John Mackiel picked up the newspaper one morning. An article about the proposed annexation fueled his frustration.

"So, the article says that if the city annexes Elkhorn, the Elkhorn Fire Department will become...the Omaha Fire Department. The Omaha Police Department, the Omaha library system...the Omaha Parks and Rec system will take over the Elkhorn departments," Mackiel remembers reading. "But. But!" Mackiel's voice rises. "It then says the Elkhorn Public Schools will remain the Elkhorn Public Schools. And that started the conversations internally where the question became, well: 'Why? Why? Why?' What would warrant five separate school districts in a city the size of Omaha? Five superintendents? Five boards of education?" He did the math. If one were

to combine all the students in the five separate school districts within the city of Omaha, that number would be smaller than the number of students who had been enrolled in the one “urban” Omaha public school district in the 1970s. And, Mackiel points out, there has long been a history of consolidation in Nebraska. The state Legislature had, not many years back, joined together rural school districts suffering similar enrollment declines, with the goal being to streamline operations and reduce costs. But among the 11 school districts in Douglas and Sarpy counties, there were just about 111,000 kids, or roughly 10,000 kids for each district.

It forced an obvious question. Why *not* operate just one school district?

“Oh, everyone knows why,” Mackiel answers. “They just won’t say it. But I’ll say it. Race and class are why.”



Well past regular working hours in the spring of 2005, Mackiel and a few colleagues sat around a conference table reviewing the proposed bills up for consideration in the Omaha Legislature. They’d ordered some pizza to keep themselves energized. One bill perplexed them—a “technical clean-up bill” would have struck several unused laws from the books, including one referred to as 79-409, which had been enacted in 1890.

A little research revealed that the law slated for removal had not been used in several decades. But this hardly rendered it useless. It said: “Each incorporated city of the metropolitan class in the State of Nebraska shall constitute one...school district.” In other words, as the city of Omaha expanded, this law said, the school district was supposed to grow, too. So, as it turned out, if officials had simply complied with this clearly stated law during the period that Omaha was swallowing towns to capture revenue, the public schools would not have lost huge swaths of students. Neither would the city’s schools be locked

into an eroding tax base. And certainly, it would have a far more racially, ethnically and socioeconomically diverse student body.

The very next morning, Mackiel and his school board appealed to the Legislature to delay removing the newly discovered 79-409 from the books. With the law still technically in effect for the time being, Mackiel and his colleagues decided to go further.

In June 2005, the Omaha school board voted to begin annexation of 25 schools within the Omaha city limits, per Nebraska State Law 79-409. In other words, Omaha would be taking over what people long assumed were the sovereign districts of Elkhorn, Millard and Ralston. This plan, dubbed “One City, One School District,” Mackiel and his board members reasoned, would be the first step toward racially, ethnically and economically diverse schools, a fairer distribution of money and a shared responsibility for overcoming educational challenges that grow from poverty. Annexation, the data showed, would increase the city schools’ enrollment from about 46,500 to about 60,500. The Omaha schools’ tax base would increase about 35 percent, adding affluent neighborhoods and hundreds of prosperous businesses, shopping centers and strip malls to the rolls.

“Multiple school districts in Omaha land lock the Omaha Public Schools,” Mackiel told an *Omaha World Herald* reporter after the board’s vote. “They stratify our community, they create inequity, and they compromise the opportunity for a genuine sense of community.”



Just a few days after John Mackiel’s clarion call for community building, people began threatening to kill him. The anonymous threats came by telephone to his house in Omaha, to his office and via mail. Meanwhile, superintendents in Westside (District 66), Elkhorn, Millard and Ralston created an anti-One City, One School District coalition, which sponsored public meetings and organized opponents to the

plan. At the suburban gatherings, parents and suburban school board members streamed to microphones and expressed outrage over One City, One School District. At the time, the Republican candidate for governor, David Heineman, had been trailing in the polls against the far more popular former U.S. Congressman and University of Nebraska football coach, Tom Osborne. Soon after Heineman expressed support for the suburban battle against One City, One School District, his popularity surged. He ultimately beat Tom Osborne who had publicly supported One City, One School District.

In the leafy residential sections of Omaha, including Millard and Elkhorn and Ralston, signs popped up reading, “No Thanks!” In the territory of Omaha where kids went to the city’s public schools, many parents, educators and community leaders affixed “One City, One School District” bumper stickers to their cars. As Osborne had, several prominent civic and business leaders in Omaha, including the billionaire investor Warren Buffett, endorsed the One City, One School District plan. The story of suburban rage, however, dominated most news outlets. John Mackiel, full of hope and ever the dutiful citizen, continued to show up at public forums in the suburbs. He came ready to answer questions, he recalls, to “engage in productive dialogue with folks.” Mostly, though, people yelled at him.

Rage, death threats and political wrangling eclipsed the values undergirding Omaha’s One City, One School District. Words like cohesion, fairness, efficiency and integration were quickly erased from most public conversation. As is true of most heated controversies, where you stood on the matter of One City, One School District depended on where you sat. Or in this case, it depended upon what school you attended, in which community you taught or what school district you had been hired to oversee. So, among people in that ostensible “community” John Mackiel had hoped to build and cohere, he became both villain and hero. He had acted rashly or just in the nick of time. He was impolitic. Or, he was sensible. He was foolish; he was discerning. However

one’s position and vantage point led them to see John Mackiel, though, his One City, One School District plan rendered previously invisible school boundary lines suddenly, starkly visible by acknowledging their role in creating separate and unequal schools. John Mackiel forced matters of race, class, inequality and fairness onto the political agenda in his city, the region, the state and briefly, even the nation. Love him or hate him, he had at least done that.



State legislators immediately stepped into the border battle. They rushed to write two bills aimed at appeasing Omaha and quelling suburban anxiety. It was during this time that Education Committee Chairman Ron Raikes, a farmer and economics Ph.D. from rural Waverly, first introduced the Learning Community concept. The law of his imagination would have created a common levy, along with mechanisms to increase economic diversity in schools through regional magnets called “Focus Schools.” But it would not have required nor would it have even encouraged socioeconomic diversity outside of those Focus Schools. The bill also would have cemented suburban borders in place, similar to what legislators had done for District 66 years ago.

Then things got complicated. A longtime community activist and African American state senator from Omaha named Ernie Chambers came out in opposition to Raikes’ bill and to another similar one. He’d argued that his African American constituents should have more control of schools within their neighborhoods. Raikes tried to satisfy Chambers and worked with him to amend his “Learning Community” bill. The new bill that emerged still froze the suburban district borders and allowed for establishment of Focus Schools and a common levy. But now it created even *more* fragmentation and racial and class segregation by splitting the Omaha Public Schools’ current district into three smaller, separate ones. Under the bill, each of these districts would have “attendance areas which are contiguous and whose

student populations share a community of interest.” The only way to make the plan work to that specification, though, would be to purposefully draw school borders along racially and ethnically segregated neighborhood boundaries. This meant a disproportionately white school district would sit to the west, a nearly all Latino district would be established in the south and finally, an almost exclusively African American district would enroll students from the northern part of the city. In April 2006, on a vote of 31 to 16, the Nebraska State Legislature passed this bill. Governor Dave Heineman signed it into law just hours afterward. Then the national spotlight shone harshly on Nebraska.

“My first tip of the hat goes to Nebraska State Legislature which voted to split Omaha...schools into 3 proposed new districts—one predominately white, another predominately black, and a third predominately Hispanic—a veritable Neapolitan race-cream...”

comedian Stephen Colbert of *The Colbert Report*, told a cackling studio audience. “All the Nebraska legislators are saying is, ‘we don’t see whites, blacks, and Hispanics. We see children; children who would be a lot happier sticking with their own kind.’”

Well, that was embarrassing. *PBS NewsHour* and *The New York Times* ran unflattering accounts of Nebraska’s legislation. Nebraska’s lawmakers had forced national journalists to review basic American history. In 1954, they reminded readers, a unanimous Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* outlawed intentional racial segregation in public education. The local NAACP chapter appeared in federal court asking for an injunction against splitting Omaha’s system into racially identifiable districts. The Chicano Awareness Center filed a lawsuit in state court. The state court ordered a stay on the legislation, preventing it from going forward. The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights convened hearings on

the law. The Council of Great City Schools, a member association of the nation’s largest urban districts, had been scheduled to hold its annual conference in

Omaha. It boycotted and went to Atlanta instead. Warren Buffett, Omaha’s favorite son, whose children and grandchildren either had been or were currently enrolled in the city’s public schools, expressed dismay. David Sokol, CEO of the major regional employer, MidAmerican Energy Holdings, told *The New York Times*: “This is going to make our state a laughingstock.”



Within a few days, the national media was mostly finished writing and laughing about Nebraska. But at the *Omaha World-Herald*, reporters continued to cover the developing story and its larger significance with a rigor and depth that is unusual for small metros. The One

City, One School District debate had helped inspire local journalists to chronicle not only the day-to-day controversy, but also to explore the myriad factors that led to such stark inequality and segregation in the first place. For the paper’s publisher, John Gottschalk, this was no joke. He’d felt “personally humiliated” by the national coverage. Reporters at the paper he oversaw would take this quite seriously and they would “not write about any of this as if it were just an argument that someone was going to win or lose. This was a matter that brought all of our most important questions to the table. It was going to express our values and whether we were capable of solving big problems.”

Gottschalk believed he knew a Nebraska that the national media did not have the patience to try to understand. Big name journalists would not be present for the next stage of discussion and negotiation, but the role of the local media, he believed, was to

*“Multiple school districts in Omaha land lock the Omaha Public Schools,” Mackiel told an Omaha World Herald reporter after the board’s vote. “They stratify our community, they create inequity, and they compromise the opportunity for a genuine sense of community.”*

contribute to a discussion in good faith. Gottschalk, a respected, civic-minded leader locally, is also former national president of the Boy Scouts of America and was a key player in George W. Bush's America 2000 initiative, which engaged the nation's governors and civic leaders in setting high standards for public education. A registered Republican who cares little for ideology, Gottschalk had many neighbors and friends who were upset by Mackiel's One City, One School District campaign. But Gottschalk viewed Mackiel's move as "born entirely from frustration." He'd thought of it "mostly as a good thing, a necessary thing." A true Nebraskan, Gottschalk likened it to football.

"I figured, well, at least now, the ball is in the air," he remembers thinking. There was going to be a play. Whether it would be intercepted, fail or be completed, "we just didn't know." The potential benefit post-One City, One School District, Gottschalk thought, was that people from across the region might finally be forced to talk about how to create a more equitable, cohesive region, a conversation he saw as "way, way, way overdue."

Just days after the bill splitting up Omaha passed, Gottschalk reached out to his longtime friend, Ken Bird, then the superintendent of District 66. Next, he reached out to John Mackiel. He liked and respected both men enormously and believed that if he could just get them to sit down and talk, a solution to "this awful mess might come into being."

Bird and Mackiel came into the serene office space Gottschalk was developing in west Omaha. It was a quiet place surrounded by tall cedar trees and walking paths. Gottschalk dropped the keys to the meeting space on the table. They could come and go as they pleased, he told Bird and Mackiel. And they could sit and talk or walk and talk or a combination. No one would know they were here, not even the reporters at his newspaper. The only requirement, Gottschalk said, was that eventually, they'd have every school leader from the 11 districts in Douglas and Sarpy Counties sitting around the table working toward a

solution that was fair, equitable and aimed at bringing people together. If suburban leaders weren't interested in cooperating out of goodwill, they knew that Omaha still had that One City, One School District law that Mackiel and his board were willing to put right back into play.

Gottschalk was uniquely situated to see both sides. He admired Mackiel's leadership abilities, his "true courage," and understood him to be in a "real bind not of his making." On the other hand, he could imagine being in charge of a school district that does not enroll many students who live in poverty, or where educators have no experience with kids who do not speak English, or where administrators have never had to work their way through racial tensions and sorting out cultural differences. He knew a lot of these educators had to answer to constituents "who unfortunately" are people who want to be isolated "from those kinds of challenges." It should come as no surprise that this set up might lead a suburban superintendent to "pray that those challenges do not come over the border to my district." As Gottschalk saw it, the fragmented structure, coupled with the long-standing concentration of poverty and racial diversity in the city, was causing otherwise reasonable people to dig in their heels. What folks needed, Gottschalk believed, was "a space, an opportunity" to see that they were not only representatives of one entity but "members of a larger community."

Gottschalk's optimism turned out to be well-founded.

"You know, it really was not that hard to do this," Mackiel recalls, still sounding astounded years later. "I don't know how it started, who threw this idea out, but we agreed somehow that we would let ourselves imagine for a moment that we aren't working for particular boards of education, that we aren't located in a particular place, with particular prejudices about the way things are supposed to be.... We all agreed that just for the moment, let's just pretend that we are working together to do what's best for kids."

Mackiel continues, “We agreed very early on that in this scenario, of course, absolutely, the schools would be integrated. There were other things, of course. There would need to be enough money and it would be distributed based on how much each school needed. And yeah, it went without saying that a school district with more children from low income families, more English Language learners, would need more money than the white middle class districts where nearly everyone came from an English-speaking family.” And while Mackiel wasn’t thrilled with this part of the deal, the group reached consensus that local schools would remain local. District 66 would remain District 66 and the same was true of the other districts. In other words, the boundary lines would not change. The borders just would not be so powerful, so determinative of educational opportunity, of exposure and experience. There would be a structure now that encouraged cohesion, collaboration, sharing and fairness.

“You know, I never really saw this as related to school desegregation,” Gottschalk recalls. “I saw this as a situation where the city was facing all these educational challenges, where the teachers in OPS were just overwhelmed and where, well, these inequalities in our region were rooted in these disparities in education and this was not good for anyone. Not for the kids in the public schools and not for people who were interested in building a prosperous, competitive state, for people thinking about investing here. It just was not practical. We had to come up with something better, fairer and that had the future in mind.”

A former Speaker of the Nebraska Legislature, Kermit Brashear, also took part in the discussions. At Gottschalk’s urging, he helped translate the educators’ principles into the particular language of legislative proposals. The resulting bill was introduced by and strongly supported by Education Committee Chair Ron Raikes and had also won key support from Senator Ernie Chambers. It passed 42-0 in January 2007. The Learning Community accepted its first students two years later, in 2009. All the lawsuits against the state were dropped.

Now, a 18-member Learning Community Coordinating Council collects taxes and redistributes those dollars based on a formula that accounts for a range of variables including the number of students from low-income families and students who are still learning English enrolled in a district. The common tax levy is designed to reduce funding disparities between wealthier, property-rich suburbs and Omaha, where 72 percent of students come from families who live below the federal poverty line. In Omaha, 30 percent of students are Latino and 26 percent are African American. Omaha’s schools have the largest population of Sudanese refugee students in the United States and Swahili is one of the most common of the 100 different languages students speak. As is true of many metro areas in the United States, some nearby suburban districts are growing more diverse, especially as poverty increases everywhere. However, even the “suburban” districts sitting within Omaha’s city limits remain solidly middle-class and predominantly white.

The stated goal of the Learning Community’s cross-district transfer program is to achieve an equal distribution of students from families with low incomes in every school in Douglas and Sarpy Counties. Ideally, each school’s “low-income” population would roughly mirror the average found in the two counties. In 2012, that share was about 41 percent, up from about 36 percent just a few years ago. The legislation’s power, though, is extremely limited. It sets no mandates. It does not sanction school districts that don’t actively try to or fail to increase socioeconomic diversity.

Looking out from a hill just beyond a suburban elementary school playground, other obstacles to regional cohesion come into clear relief. Unvaried single-family houses and monotonous condo developments snake for miles toward a limitless horizon. On the street below, a billboard advertises a new subdivision. Amenities include a swimming pool and 24-hour security. In the upper right corner, large, bold print screams: “Gretna Schools.”

“That sign is a kind of code for: ‘white children,’” John Mackiel says, shaking his head. “Everyone has learned to read that code.”

Still, there is, at least for now, a Learning Community. There is a Focus School and one diverse Focus program each at the middle and high school levels. All these creations appeal to people who don’t buy into that code—people who not only imagine something better than status quo segregation, but who live it.



Take the Vollmer family—Sheri, Greg and their three sons, Nicholas, Joey and Shawn. They live on a quiet, tree- and mailbox-lined street in a spacious, modernized ranch house on Omaha’s west side. Birds chirp; maple tree branches blow in the breeze. You can just barely hear the whir of traffic from the highway beyond. Sheri is a dance instructor. Greg, a registered nurse, works at the same local hospital where Sheri’s father is a research scientist and doctor. When Sheri was a child, her father’s job required lots of moving and long visits to different places around the country and the world. The Vollmers, though, chose to settle in Omaha for several reasons. It’s affordable, for one, and also, they feel lucky that their boys were selected by lottery to attend the Focus School.

The Vollmer’s street sits within Omaha’s borders. But it is part of “Westside Community School District”—that sovereign entity created in the 1940s and immunized against takeover by the Omaha’s urban

district. Nicholas was in second grade at the sought-after Oakdale Elementary, just down the street, when a flyer with an application to the Focus School arrived in the mail. Sheri and Nicholas filled it out, Sheri

recalls, “not really knowing anything about the Focus School.” They figured they’d take a chance on it, though, because Nicholas had not been terribly happy at his neighborhood school, in spite of its stellar reputation. Westside’s race and class homogeneity—“It’s very white, basically,” as Sheri describes it—did not appeal to her and Greg.

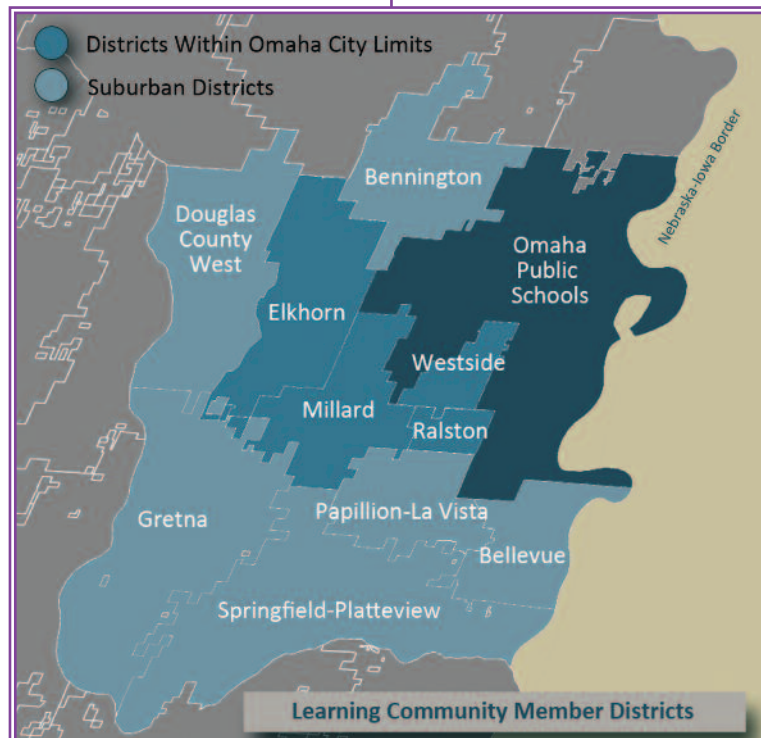
After the Vollmers opted to send their boys into South

Omaha to attend the Focus School, Sheri commonly faced a rhetorical question from friends and neighbors: “You are giving up Westside?” This “getting into Westside,” is a familiar middle class aspiration in Omaha.

“A lot of people will move into this neighborhood just so they can go to Oakdale [Elementary School],” Sheri explains. But, Sheri counters, “[The Focus School] gives you more of real life. You have kids from all over, every creed and from every socioeconomic setting and they need to come together...”

It is not primarily the diversity that attracted Sheri and her kids to the Focus School, however.

“The teachers are just awesome, they really, really get to know our kids,” she says. The array of after-school activities reflects the fact that “the teachers aren’t trying to force kids into these little boxes. They really





nurture kids' individual interests and then put it on the kids to have solid relationships, work out issues if they have them."

Nicholas focuses on less weighty matters. He likes his school where "everyone pretty much gets along and kind of cheers each other on." At recess, he plays football or, he says, "just punts a football around and I kicked it into the basketball hoop by accident and I was the first person to kick it into the basketball hoop that we know of! People were amazed."

The lack of controls and oversight around the Learning Community's cross-district transfers probably means that it will not anytime soon dramatically alter the racial, ethnic and economic segregation that characterizes the region. Prior to the Learning Community, remember that the state did offer an open enrollment program. But because the Learning Community provides free transportation for students from low-income families and/or to students whose transfer would contribute to socioeconomic diversity, it means that Omaha children who live in poor neighborhoods are now far less likely to be forced to attend high-poverty schools. It works in reverse, too. Suburban kids aren't trapped in schools that look nothing like the world beyond them.

Consider Elissa Wiener, a vivacious teenager who, after elementary and middle school, chose to leave her "way more elite" and "way more white" suburban district, Millard, and enroll in Central High School in downtown Omaha.

"Some of my friends were confused," she recalls. "But I don't care because I just know I'm getting a better education."



Sheri Vollmer

Similarly, Shannon Dillman, a self-described "math nerd," had visited Central as part of an academic competition. Walking up Central's main entrance, she'd been enchanted with the beautifully preserved, majestic building from the early 1900s. She was impressed, too, as she walked by the alumni Hall of Fame featuring photos and plaques honoring accomplished Central grads. Hall of Famers include the actor, Henry Fonda; the R & B singer, Wynonie Harris; two Nobel Prize winners and several professional athletes. Another Hall of Famer, and one

that students especially like to note, is Gerry Thomas, who invented the TV dinner in 1952. Finally, though, Shannon was swayed as much by the strong curriculum as by what she calls "the spirit" of the place.

"Everyone was just so friendly and welcoming and really nice," says Shannon, who would have attended the neighboring Papillion-La Vista school district, just southwest, had she not chosen Central. Central's students, "because of the diversity," Shannon says, have the

best chance to "break" stereotypes that exist in the larger society. Kids from beyond Omaha's school district boundaries have long transferred into Central through the state's previous open enrollment plan. Now, though, Learning Community supporters stress that the little-documented, generally positive experiences these students have demonstrate the potential of cross-district transfers under the Learning Community.

*"[The Focus School] gives you more of real life. You have kids from all over, every creed and from every socioeconomic setting and they need to come together..."*

—Parent Sheri Vollmer

In an English classroom at Central, a teacher wearing a deep purple Central Eagles windbreaker reads from Harper Lee's masterwork, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. She asks students to reflect on the quote: "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view...until you climb into his skin and walk around in it."

Listening in, Central's principal, Keith Bigsby, interrupts briefly to offer students in the class a hearty "Go Eagles" and a fist pump. He walks into the hallway, leaving students to ponder Harper Lee's words.

"Okay, so, did you hear that teacher's question?" Bigsby asks. "Well, I would argue that our kids here at Central, because of the diversity, because of their daily experiences in diversity are a lot better equipped not to just reflect on the meaning of that quote, but to really, truly understand that basic human experience, to develop that quality of empathy."



Over the past year, UT Austin Professor Jennifer Holme has interviewed suburban educators and local leaders whose districts are members of the Learning Community. Many of them have replaced the people who'd helped to work out the original Learning Community agreement at Gottschalk's property several years ago. Holme's findings reveal resentment and animosity over how the Learning Community is funded and governed. Several educators said they don't think it should even exist. Some school boards have even knowingly appointed Learning Community adversaries to the Learning Community Coordinating Council. This means that people who have been openly opposed to the Learning Community's very existence now sit on the board charged with overseeing the Learning Community and charting its future course. Administrators in the Papillion-La Vista school district, for example, southwest of Omaha, have in recent years been vocal in their opposition to the Learning Community, even though they are also members of it. "The District believes that resources generated in the PLSD need

to stay in the PLSD," the district declares on its website.

In February 2012, the Nebraska Supreme Court overruled a District Court judge and declared the Learning Community's common levy to be constitutional. The Sarpy County Farm Bureau, along with eight property owners, had filed a lawsuit claiming that the "scheme" directed money to some districts at the expense of others. The ruling came as a relief to Learning Community supporters. However, now that the lawsuit has been resolved, Learning Community supporters expect the state Legislature will take up the battle. Political observers predict that bills aimed at destroying the Learning Community will be up for debate during the legislative session that began in January 2013. The state senator Ron Raikes, who led the legislative effort to create a common levy, died in a farming accident in 2009, just after retiring from politics.

Even the lauded Focus School has struggled to keep its doors open. The school's test scores match, and in some areas outdo, far more affluent nearby schools. It recently won accreditation from a national organization that ranked the school a rare "exceptional" in seven out of seven categories, again outdoing many suburban neighbors. More and more families want to enroll their children there, as evidenced by the growing waiting list. But in 2010, Omaha's then partners in the venture, Westside Community Schools (District 66) and the school district of Elkhorn, pulled out of the project, leaving Omaha's already cash-strapped district as the only funder. Parents rallied. Students testified at the State Capitol. Then, Susie Buffett, philanthropist and daughter of Warren Buffett, put up the money to save the school. In 2012-2013, money for the Focus School comes from Omaha Public Schools' budget, from Susie Buffett's Sherwood Foundation and, since 2011, from funds allocated through the Learning Community.

In late August 2012, John Mackiel retired after 15 years as Omaha's school superintendent and nearly 40 years working for the school system. Some six

years after One City, One School District, he remained a controversial figure in the suburbs. In his home city of Omaha, though, Mackiel maintained consistent support from his school board, and among school principals and parents. Retirement is generally a time of perfunctory hopefulness, softening resentments, making peace and moving on. Television and newspapers even covered Mackiel's retirement party, where he and his wife Debi hugged and greeted hundreds of supporters during a spirited gathering at a city high school decorated with thank you cards created by Omaha students.

"I can honestly say every day was a high point," Mackiel said that night. "Whenever you're blessed to be able to work with young people, and you're constantly dealing with that element of hope, that hope for the future, there is no bad day."

After four decades, though, platitudes would take him only so far.

"I don't think we gave integration a chance in the 70s. And I don't think we are giving integration a chance in the 21st century," he says. After all that struggle, all that anguished debate and hard won compromise, he worries now that the Learning Community may be undermined by a lack of strong enforcement mechanisms for creating diversity, by a lack of public enthusiasm, or by more sinister forces.

"There are people who want us to fail," he says. "People who benefit from the status quo...I fear that as we demonstrate success, the sort of success so evident at the Focus School, that we will see things go backward—more borders, boundaries between communities and between people."



Mackiel keeps abundant faith, though, in kids like Nicholas Vollmer and in our Focus School guides, Nolan and Alyx, in parents and civic leaders like Willie Barney and the hundreds of others who, by virtue of the Learning Community, cross the lines, and travel against the current. Some of Omaha's suburban neighbors are slowly becoming more diverse, with the share of students living in poverty increasing in places where it had been uncommon just a decade

ago. Similarly, more Latinos have moved to nearby rural communities for jobs in the meatpacking and food processing industries. Diversity is coming one way or another, and Mackiel can only hope that schools in these changing communities don't become segregated and that adults will adopt some of the qualities found among kids in the Focus School or among suburban kids who've opted for urban Central High School.

"Sometimes I think that if we just get the adults out of the way and provide opportunities for the kids build to something different..." Mackiel says. "I think if we can do that, if it's through the Learning Community model, through the Focus School, then we will be all right."



Outside the realm of public education, there are other people in Omaha who see that moving forward in a demographically diverse society will require coming together and giving up the false security of isolation. On the site of a former country club in west Omaha, earthmovers level the ground. Men in hard hats secure steel girders to form the skeleton of the

nation's first "interfaith campus." By late 2013, this land will be home to a synagogue, a mosque, an Episcopalian congregation currently led by a Latino minister, and a fourth building that will welcome congregations and groups of any faith to gather. The fate of the Learning Community may be unclear, but the impulse that created it may prove immortal.

"What if Omaha, Nebraska could really become an example of how to create a truly diverse, healthy community?" Willie Barney, the parent and civic leader, asks. He turns his small SUV around in the interfaith complex's soon-to-be driveway. The region certainly has the demographics to make it happen. It has abundant wealth and an active philanthropic community. It has a large, deeply rooted African American community and an ever-growing Latino population. Refugee resettlement has brought Karen people from Burma, people from

*"It is all right here in front of us. If we get a fighting chance, maybe we will surprise everyone. Maybe Nebraska really will be the place showing the way."*

—Willie Barney

Somalia and the Sudan. Through his work with the Empowerment Network, Barney's strong sense is that families whose kids have experience with the Learning Community are more than satisfied.

They are thrilled. That's especially true of the Focus School, he reminds me, where parents of many racial, cultural and economic backgrounds rallied together to save a school that enabled their kids to learn in a rigorous, innovative environment that approximates the society kids will join as adults. If they have to, the parents will be back up at the Capitol in Lincoln to do it again this year, he assures me. They'll fight for the Focus School and for the structure that enables it, the Learning Community.

"It is all right here in front of us," Barney says. "If we get a fighting chance, maybe we will surprise everyone. Maybe Nebraska really will be the place showing the way."

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"Stories from the Field" is an occasional publication of One Nation Indivisible. To share a story from the field about efforts to create, sustain or improve racially, culturally or linguistically integrated schools, communities or social institutions, please visit our website and click on "Share Your Story."

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