

“The New Neighborhood School: A Review of the Robinson Community Learning Center”

As the demand for a more educated populace continues to grow, cities and towns across the United States constantly search for more effective ways to help their children learn. While commentators and courts have rightly focused on the activities that occur during the standard school day, this emphasis misses an important part of the educational process. The example of the Robinson Community Learning Center of South Bend, Indiana illustrates the importance of taking a more holistic view. The Center’s willingness to incorporate conventional aspects of education combines with its innovative approach--enriching the lives of its students and supplementing the instruction they receive in schools. Although the Robinson Center fits imperfectly into the traditional scope of educational law, it poses important questions concerning the goals of education; the Center challenges policymakers to aim for more than minimum standards. Just as the Robinson Center teaches its students every day, it also proves instructive for anyone seeking to better understand possible educational solutions in America.

Introducing South Bend: History and Demographics

Without first referring to the city of South Bend, it is impossible to properly examine the Robinson Center. Indiana’s fourth-largest city, South Bend was incorporated in 1865. The St. Joseph River powered industries in the city proper while the surrounding region remained heavily rural.¹ Over the decades that followed, South Bend continued to grow and became a center of manufacturing; large employers including Singer Sewing, South Bend Watch

¹ <http://historymuseumsb.org/early-south-bend> Accessed April 27, 2015

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Company, and most famously, Studebaker Motors all became mainstays of the local economy.² By 1960, the population of the city numbered over 132,000.³ It would never again reach this level.

As manufacturing declined across the Upper Midwest in the later decades of the 20th century, South Bend endured the difficulties that many similarly-situated cities faced. In 1963, the Studebaker plant shut its doors.⁴ While other industries still remained, the closure marked a symbolic and literal turning point in the city's history. Mirroring the region as a whole, South Bend has steadily lost population since the 1960's. According to the most recent census estimates, slightly more than 100,000 people call the city home today.⁵

Demographically, the city is significantly more diverse than most Indiana communities. The latest census figures report that 61% of South Bend residents identified as “white”, while 26% identified as “African-American”, and 13% identified as “Latino”.⁶ A continuing effect of the decline of manufacturing, 28% of South Bend residents live below the poverty line—nearly twice as many than the rate for Hoosiers statewide.⁷ On a related note, only 23% of residents over the age of 25 had attained a college degree, according to the most recent data.⁸

Both South Bend's historical background and recent census figures help illustrate the environment in which students growing up in the city learn. They also provide an insight into the need for offerings such as those put forth by the Robinson Center. The Center's mission and practices take on a greater significance when viewed in this proper context.

² <http://www.ci.south-bend.in.us/> Accessed April 27, 2015

³ <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html> Accessed April 27, 2015

⁴ <http://www.studebakerhistory.com/dnn/Timeline/tabid/65/Default.aspx> Accessed April 27, 2015

⁵ <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/18/1871000.html> Accessed April 27, 2015

⁶ Ibid, Accessed April 27, 2015

⁷ Ibid, Accessed April 27, 2015

⁸ Ibid, Accessed April 27, 2015

Putting Principles into Practice: The Robinson Community Learning Center

Located at the corner of Eddy Street and South Bend Avenue, the Robinson Community Learning Center lies in the heart of South Bend’s Northeast neighborhood. The Center has occupied the same site since its founding in 2001, allowing it to establish roots within the area. During its fourteen years of existence, the Center has grown to offer services to all ages; it currently offers programs as varied as an English as a New Language (ENL) preschool to a computer literacy class for senior citizens. One of its largest and most developed programs is the after-school offering for students in first through twelfth grade.

The Robinson Center’s after-school curriculum incorporates both individualized attention and group activities. For pedagogical purposes, the program consists of two divisions based on age. Students from first through fifth grade are placed in the lower level, while the upper level embraces students from sixth through twelfth grade. Participation tends to decline slightly once the students reach high school—by that age many of the students are committed to activities through their schools that conflict with the Robinson Center schedule. However, the program as a whole covers a wide age-range; high school participation at the Robinson Center is significantly higher than most similar after school programs.⁹

In the second of its five organizational goals, the Robinson Center explains its approach to education. It pledges to, “Create access to enrichment activities that develop academic and life skills, providing mentoring and support at all ages.”¹⁰ While educational regimes in the United States are as varied as the nation itself, a consensus exists regarding four critical factors for

⁹ Interview with author; April 26, 2015

¹⁰ <https://rclc.nd.edu/about-rclc/mission-statement/> Accessed April 27, 2015

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creating an ideal learning environment. Authorities on the subject agree that students benefit most from the interplay of (1) high quality teachers, (2) an intensely involved community of parents and guardians, (3) small class sizes, and (4) a broad, diverse array of differences among all members of the learning community.¹¹ In practice, the Robinson Center not only incorporates all four of these elements but also adds its own unique ingredient. The Center conducts a unique “My America” program, which invites its students to consider the contradictions embodied in the concept of the American Dream. By applying these four commonly accepted criteria for education to its daily operations, the Robinson Center lays a solid foundation for its students to learn necessary fundamentals. By supplementing these elements with “My America”, the Center helps its students grow in a way far beyond academics alone.

Although the Robinson Center does not employ full time teachers in the sense that a school does, its students receive instruction from dedicated educators both in groups and individually. In terms of group activities, first through fifth grade students begin their afternoons with a snack and assembly in which the group of roughly thirty children are supervised by at least three educators. While at least one is a full-time staff member of the Robinson Center, he or she is typically joined by two or three Americorps members; these assistants work at the Center on either a full-time or part-time basis. Together they set the tone for the afternoon and strive both to help the children interact with one another socially and to ensure they make progress on their homework assignments.

The centerpiece of individualized attention for both the younger and older students is the Tutoring Program. The Center recruits tutors primarily from three nearby schools: University of

¹¹ Michael J. Kaufman and Sheryln R. Kaufman, Education Law, Policy, and Practice: Cases and Materials, (Wolters Kluwer Law & Business: New York, 2013), 3-4.

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Notre Dame, St. Mary's College, and Holy Cross College. The majority of the tutors are unpaid, uncompensated volunteers. A significant minority receives either academic credit through a class or a small salary through federal work study programs. At the beginning of each semester, every student is paired with two personal tutors; one works on Monday and Wednesday afternoons while the other covers Tuesday and Thursday. The format of the one hour sessions varies slightly depending on the age of the student. Tutors working with younger students focus exclusively on reading comprehension and other literacy skills for the first half hour and proceed to homework help for the balance of the time. Meanwhile, those tutors working with older students generally offer homework help for the duration. If time allows, they often assist with standardized test practice; the Center works diligently to make college a natural "next step" for all its students rather than an exotic trip that "other people" take.¹² Equally important as any academic instruction is the Center's commitment to foster positive, healthy relationships between students and tutors. Tutors are trained to project a positive, affirming presence for their students. Likewise, students are encouraged to share their peaks and valleys with the tutors. So long as schedules and personalities permit, tutors will continue to work with the same students across many consecutive semesters. In fact, many pairs spend years working together.

Perhaps more than many educational institutions, the Robinson Center views parents not as obstacles or adversaries but instead as collaborators and teammates. Velshonna Luckey, the Center's Youth Development Program Director, pays special attention to the role of parents in the mission of the Robinson Center—particularly in the area of college applications and placement. Luckey views the college years and all that surround them as a time of great change for parents as much as students. In the context of the Robinson Center, this observation is

¹² Interview with author, April 26, 2015

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especially true; she notes that some students are the first in their families to graduate high school and many are the first to attend college.¹³ As Luckey describes, “The whole family is being elevated: kids and parents.”¹⁴ With this in mind, the Robinson Center seeks to involve parents at every step of their child’s education. By doing so, staffers establish relationships of trust and communication with parents that begin long before the children give a thought to college. Having planted these roots, all parties are better equipped to navigate the chaos of college applications and placement--a daunting task for anybody, let alone a young adult with no frame of reference. To use the terms of educational researchers, these efforts certainly cultivate an intensely involved parent community at the Robinson Center. As Luckey puts it, “we’re changing family trees.”¹⁵ Her words present a vision in which home and school merge together rather than stand apart.

Due in large part to Americorps members and tutors, the Robinson Center provides a nearly ideal student-to-teacher ratio in its programs. The realities of classroom management often saddle teachers with more students in their classrooms than they can help effectively. Luckey believes this pattern holds true in the South Bend Community School Corporation (the district in which most Robinson Center students attend school).¹⁶ “If we could somehow get back to smaller classroom settings, a lot of troubles would be solved.”¹⁷ The troubles Luckey speaks of include not only academic needs going unmet but also emotional development slipping through the cracks.

¹³ Interview with author, April 26, 2015

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

Thanks to the sheer number of personnel and their dedication to the students, the Robinson Center largely avoids such difficulties. As Luckey points out, the Center relies on concerned adults to ensure the children understand that they have found a safe place in which they can find support for anything that might upset them. “We notice things that a lot of times teachers don’t get to address or notice,” explains Luckey.¹⁸ The kind, concerned, and caring tone set by adults at the Center does not fall on deaf ears. The students themselves model the behavior they see from the adult role models; empathy and considerate behavior govern their interactions with one another. This nurturing approach leads to two significant benefits: increased student confidence and a total lack of bullying problem.¹⁹ Given the remarkably wide age range of students at the Robinson Center, the absence of bullying and intimidation speaks volumes about its character.

An exchange I witnessed helps illustrate the caring environment that grows out of small class sizes staffed by concerned adults. The younger grades (1st through 5th) were having a book club discussion. Each student needed to share the group what he or she thought about the book they had read. Naturally, some were more willing to express themselves than others. In order to encourage a small, timid third grader, a rather large, boisterous fifth grader put his arm around the younger child’s shoulder and quoted the popular movie *The Help*. Complete with a staged Southern accent, the fifth grader told the third grader, “You is kind, you is special, and you is important!” About a minute later, the third grader managed to speak to the group. The episode showed very clearly what benefits can flow from the marriage of small class sizes to caring, concerned adults.

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

The Robinson Center also offers a diverse learning environment. Both students and contributors to the Center come from a variety of backgrounds. In the academic year 2013-2014, students from every major racial group in this country participated at the Robinson Center.²⁰ A number of students were either foreign-born or first-generation Americans; their countries of origin included destinations as far-flung as Chile, Bosnia, Sudan, and Kenya. The tutors did not cover quite as broad a swath of the map, but every corner of the United States was represented (this stems largely from the geographical diversity of Notre Dame, St. Mary's, and Holy Cross—the schools where most of the tutors study).

As a result of the ethnic diversity of South Bend and the geographic diversity of the student bodies of the local universities, the Robinson Center enjoys a fruitful exchange of ideas, stories, and cultures not just among the students themselves, but between the students and their tutors as well. The Center prizes the diversity of its students and, more broadly, all who pass through its doors. On a bulletin board in the reception area of the building hangs a sign which reads, “America is not a quilt woven from just one thread.” Its placement suggests the hospitality shown by the Center to people of all backgrounds and its collective embrace of diversity. This priority resonates with the students. Luckey takes pride in recalling the thoughts of a high school senior named “Nathan” on diversity at the Robinson Center.²¹ He told her, “In school, we learn knowledge. At church, we learn faith. At the Robinson Center, we learn about people. We learn to appreciate diversity and how to ask questions of one another.”²²

Undoubtedly, the Robinson Center embodies four of the commonly-accepted attributes of an effective learning environment: high quality instructors, involved parents, small class sizes,

²⁰ This and the following statements in this paragraph and the next stem from the author's personal observations and experiences while working at the Robinson Center.

²¹ The names of all children referred to in this paper have been changed.

²² Interview with author, April 26, 2015

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and a diverse community. In addition to these characteristics, the Center adds its own ingredient in the form of its innovative “My America” program. By leading older students through a fresh view of American history and civic culture, the program encourages the teenagers it reaches to write their own narratives as they grow older. While its other traits illustrate how the Robinson Center has learned from conventional wisdom, “My America” demonstrates how conventional wisdom could learn from the Robinson Center.

Helping Students Write their own Stories: The “My America” Program

Under the supervision of Velshonna Luckey, the Robinson Center has implemented a curriculum especially suited for the unique needs of its students. The “My America” Program aims fundamentally to help students understand this nation’s ideals, evaluate its failure to fully realize its principles, and apply this dynamic to their own lives. For the predominantly African-American student body of the Robinson Center, this history remains especially relevant.²³ As Luckey explains, “Oftentimes the American Dream hasn’t included African-Americans. The African-American story isn’t told. Here we try to make it a personal experience. We say to the children, ‘I get to choose my American Dream and what I’ll do about it.’”²⁴ With this mindset framed at the start of the program, the students then explore both the proud and shameful moments of their nation’s history.

Although “My America” uses history as a teaching instrument and guidepost, the program is not a history class in the traditional sense.²⁵ “It’s really a way to help students have a

²³ Interview with author, April 26, 2015

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ibid

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dream and believe it's possible," says Luckey.²⁶ At the beginning of the program, the students analyze the American story through five pillars: liberty, democracy, equality, opportunity, and rights.²⁷ Topical quotes that illustrate each pillar serve as constant reminders to the students of these general themes.²⁸ The students then apply the pillars to key events in the development of the American Dream. They begin with its origins in the Declaration of Independence and the symbolism of the Liberty Bell; both in their own way were meant to proclaim freedom throughout the land.²⁹ Next, the class examines the Constitution, paying attention both to its noble ideals and grim realities; the students can see for themselves that the nation accepted slavery in its most important founding document.³⁰

After taking note of the tensions apparent from America's earliest days, the students use this sharper lens to investigate subsequent developments. Looking at the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, the class evaluates the (relatively) warm welcome extended to millions of European immigrants that arrived in the latter decades of the 19th century. They contrast the sentiments found in "The New Colossus" with the horrible treatment endured by African-Americans.³¹ The students see how, after a generation or two, these new arrivals from Europe often were encouraged to participate fully in the American Dream. Meanwhile, the students are invited to question why, after centuries of living in America, African-Americans were largely denied the same dream. Against this backdrop, the students arrive at the modern Civil Rights Movement that began in the mid-20th century and continues today.³² In this context, the "I Have a Dream" speech becomes a more inclusive version of "The New Colossus"; it opens up the doors of the

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ "My America Pillars"; *Robinson Community Learning Center*: Accessed April 28, 2015

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ "My America 2011-2012"; *Robinson Community Learning Center*: Accessed April 28, 2015

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Ibid

³² Ibid

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American Dream to a group excluded from it for far too long. After tracing this often tortured history, Luckey challenges the students to use these lessons to pursue their own American Dreams. In spite of all the disappointments and shortfalls, she tells them, “We still can choose what our story will be. That’s unique to this country.”³³

Although the impact of “My America” cannot easily be quantified, the excitement and passion it creates in the students is beyond doubt. A short anecdote reinforces this point. Following a “My America” session one February day, a sixth-grader named “Cecilia” told me that she was working on a report about Dr. Ben Carson—a famous African-American neurosurgeon who would later seek the Republican Party’s presidential nomination. At the time, I had never heard of Dr. Carson; Cecilia soon fixed that when she exclaimed, “What! You don’t know who Dr. Ben Carson is?” She then began explaining to me in great detail all she had learned about him. Ten minutes later, I could have written a report on Dr. Carson myself.

The story illustrates two benefits of the “My America” program. First and most obviously, the program clearly captures students’ imagination. Second and more subtly, it demonstrates that for “My America” students, African-American history becomes simply American history. In their eyes, African-American history is not just one culture’s tradition, but instead a story meant to be shared with and appreciated by all their fellow citizens. To put it another way, it shows that these students have made the American Dream their own, and have added their own dreams to the American Dream.

In light of its commitment to both traditional and innovative facets of providing a quality education, the Robinson Center certainly has an important part to play in educating children. The

³³ Interview with author, April 26, 2015

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more difficult question, however, is where the Center fits into education as the law has traditionally understood it. While it performs and supplements many of the roles associated with a school, the Robinson Center cannot fairly be called one itself. Evaluating the Center's place in the educational system as viewed by the law proves difficult. Still, a few basic conclusions can be drawn.

Fitting the Robinson Center into Educational Law

Ever since the Supreme Court declined to include education among the implicit fundamental rights protected by the United States Constitution in *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*, efforts to educate children have largely focused on meeting minimum standards rather than striving for excellence. While the Court famously trained its sights on segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education* (and a subsequent line of cases continuing to the present), it has been less willing to remedy disparities in funding and resources. As a general rule, the Supreme Court and federal government have deferred to local decision-making; for better or worse education has historically been viewed as a local question.

At the state level, however, the debate takes on a slightly different character. While the language differs slightly, every state constitution makes some provision for education. In light of this explicit commitment, state courts have been more willing to take an active role in mandating remedies for failing schools. Here again, controversy swirls over whether the state is bound to ensure its children meet minimum standards of competency and self-sufficiency or whether it is called to implement a more extensive vision. The difficulties of crafting effective programs and the realities of funding shortfalls have generally resulted in a trend toward the former. Against

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this dominant trend, two cases raise interesting questions and shed some possible light on a role for the Robinson Center.

In 1997, the Ohio Supreme Court decided *DeRolph v. Ohio*. It held that the state had fundamentally failed to deliver the “thorough and efficient” system of education guaranteed in the Ohio Constitution.³⁴ While the Court allowed the Ohio Legislature to create the exact remedies, it mandated that lawmakers undertake a complete renovation of the school system. A year later, the New Jersey Supreme Court issued similar commands in *Abbott V*. In the culmination of decades of legal battles, the Court held that, in order to fulfill the obligations imposed by the New Jersey Constitution, certain districts would have to provide services and programs traditionally regarded as “supplemental.”³⁵ These included full day kindergarten, full day pre-kindergarten, and summer school offerings.

Together, *DeRolph* and *Abbott V* pose one basic question. They ask whether school districts should take a broader view of what constitutes the necessary components for delivering a quality education to children. As beneficial as institutions like the Robinson Center have proven to be, they would by any traditional measurement be considered supplemental. These two cases question that conclusion. Viewed through the lens of *DeRolph* and *Abbott V*, the Robinson Center no longer looks entirely supplemental; instead, it becomes an important part of delivering “a thorough and efficient system of education” to every child.

When one considers the gaps filled by organizations like the Robinson Center, one could hardly fail to appreciate their vital role. With its high quality instructors, involved parents, small class sizes, and diverse community, the Center has much to offer in the effort to educate the

³⁴ Michael J. Kaufman and Sheryl R. Kaufman, Education Law, Policy, and Practice: Cases and Materials, (Wolters Kluwer Law & Business: New York, 2013), 126.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 148.

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children of South Bend. Woven together, these factors establish and maintain an environment in which all the students feel comfortable and safe. By creating security in this fashion, the Center offers its students a launching pad; with their basic needs fulfilled, the children can more effectively commit themselves to the task of learning. The “My America” program builds on these basics and engenders in its participants a sense of identity and belonging that they otherwise might not easily find. Although the Robinson Center is not a fundamental part of a compulsory education as the term is traditionally understood, changing views on the subject—expressed by both educators and the courts—suggest the importance of such institutions will only grow in the years to come.

While I have enough stories from four years working at the Robinson Center to fill a much longer paper, one in particular summarizes the character of the place as I came to understand it. I tutored one student, “Jerome”, throughout those four years and when Jerome was in fifth grade, I told him I would “keep my fingers crossed” that a race I was planning to run would end well. He took a dim view of that plan, telling me that I should pray instead. Jerome (an African-American Protestant) then gave more specific advice when he told me in no uncertain terms that I (an Irish Catholic) needed to pray “not to Mary (but) straight to Jesus.” As one could imagine, I had trouble keeping a straight face the rest of the day. An exchange that in many times and places would have led to tension and anger here produced nothing but smiles and laughter. It demonstrates the level of comfort that develops between people of different backgrounds when they seek the same goal. Instead of separating people, differences become a subject of appreciation and gentle humor. In such an environment, learning—in every sense of the word—takes place every day in countless ways.

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Encouraging her students in “My America,” Velshonna Luckey reminds them that the Founding Fathers had no idea what they had helped to create in a stifling room in Philadelphia’s Independence Hall. She asks the children, “Who can tell where your hard work will lead?”³⁶ The same question—and the same open-ended response—captures the spirit of the Robinson Community Learning Center.

³⁶ Interview with author, April 26, 2015