

The Hardest Test

Sarah Stodder | Photo: Carson Lancaster. Illustration: Daniel Zalkus | August 17, 2015

Lift up the neediest. Attract the brightest. Atone for the past. Can one Bayview school really do all this?



As Willie L. Brown Jr. Middle School opens its doors, excitement and anticipation are running high. But there is also reason for skepticism.

“I have some issues about my education in San Francisco,” the fifth grader began, barely pausing for breath as she faced the packed meeting room of the Board of Education one evening in March 2011. With just a minute to speak, she rapidly explained her situation: Though she lived in the Bayview and attended elementary school there, she had been assigned to middle school at A.P. Giannini in the Sunset. Her new commute would take her from the bay to the ocean—over an hour each way—but she had no choice. The only public middle school in her neighborhood, Willie L. Brown Jr. College Preparatory Academy, was to be demolished that summer. Once it was reduced to dust, hundreds of kids in the Bayview—home of the highest concentration of children in the city—would be scattered to the winds.

As the buzzer sounded 60 seconds, the girl swiftly added one last request: “I ask that you take the time to make changes, so that one day I will have the opportunity to walk to school—to a great school in my neighborhood.” Following a round of applause, a Willie Brown teacher took the stand to hammer the board members further: “My school is closing,” she said, her exasperation rising. “But do you have a vision for the Bayview? Do you have a plan?”

Four and a half years later, the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) does indeed have a plan—and it’s a doozy. Since that meeting, the district has pulled out all the stops to bolster student performance in the perennially underachieving Bayview and its cousin to the east, Hunters Point. It spent \$55 million on a shiny state-of-the-art middle school; implemented a rigorous STEM curriculum; signed up a charismatic new principal and an elite crew of teachers; allocated hundreds of thousands of dollars a year for a Wellness

Center to assist poor families; and tapped organizations like Salesforce, Ideo, and the Golden State Warriors for millions in contributions. And to lure students throughout the city to the finished product, the district is offering them guaranteed admission to the high school of their choice.

As Willie L. Brown Jr. Middle School (named, like its predecessor, after the former state assembly speaker and mayor) prepares to open its doors on August 17, excitement and anticipation are running high. But there's also reason for skepticism. This is not the first, or the second, time that the SFUSD has rolled out a big campaign to raise student achievement in Bayview–Hunters Point. The heavily African-American neighborhood, five miles from downtown in the city's southeastern corner, has long been known for the poor performance of its schools. For almost 50 years, San Francisco has been desperately trying to resolve the educational crisis afflicting Bayview students and their African-American counterparts throughout the city. Nevertheless, generation after generation of these children, many from impoverished and broken homes, have received an education far inferior to that enjoyed by more fortunate children. Despite the best of intentions, political support at the highest levels, millions of dollars in funding, special offers to parents, and a revolving door of ambitious plans, test scores in the neighborhood remain among the lowest in the state. Graduation and attendance rates are deplorable, and a disproportionate number of students are suspended or expelled.



So last March, when S.F. schools superintendent Richard Carranza promised that the new Willie Brown would be one of the best middle schools in the state, if not the country, parents in the Bayview could be forgiven for a wait-and-see attitude. This time, however, there are tangible reasons to believe that the SFUSD has gotten it right—and, if so, the ramifications could be considerable. A thriving, integrated middle school in the heart of this blighted neighborhood could give beleaguered African-American families a reason to stay in San Francisco. It could slow the destructive, decades-old middle-class exodus from the public school system and provide a model for other struggling urban public schools (although its high cost may be a deterrent). With the SFUSD focused like a laser on raising the achievement level of African-American and Latino students (who constitute 66 percent of the population at Willie Brown), and a long-suffering neighborhood praying that its children finally receive the education they deserve, much is at stake inside the gleaming new building at Revere and Silver Avenues.

“Things in the Bayview don’t just happen,” says longtime resident and former school board member Kim-Shree Maufas. “You have to think about the precursors.” The slow-arcing tragedy of Bayview–Hunters Point started after World War II, when the naval shipyards, which were responsible for bringing most African Americans to San Francisco, closed down. Cut off by job discrimination, bigoted housing policies, and geographical isolation, the increasingly black neighborhood became plagued by sadly familiar inner-city ills: high crime, unemployment, drug use, incarceration, single-parent families, traumatized children, and, of course, segregated, low-achieving schools. In 1959, five years after the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision outlawed state-segregated schools, Governor Pat Brown sent an envoy to evaluate the SFUSD’s compliance with the new law—and found that its schools were indeed segregated. After years of frustration with the district’s weak voluntary desegregation program, in 1970 the NAACP successfully sued it. The courts ordered the city to immediately desegregate its schools. It proved to be a losing battle.

From the beginning, the SFUSD’s biggest challenge in complying with that order was Bayview–Hunters Point. The only effective way to integrate the schools was to bus students. The problem (which persists even now) was that few outside the Bayview were willing to send their kids into the neighborhood, with the result that black kids were disproportionately bused out. In 1977, the SFUSD proposed a more drastic fix:

busing 1,600 mostly white students from military families on Treasure Island to Bayview schools, and busing African-American students from the Bayview to Treasure Island. Fierce resistance from white parents and the navy was immediate, however, and the district dropped the plan like a hot potato—leaving the Bayview schools mostly African-American and excluded from the district's desegregation plan.

The NAACP accused the SFUSD of “warehousing black students at Hunters Point” and in 1978 filed another lawsuit, which was settled in a 1983 consent decree. As part of that settlement, the SFUSD implemented—in a striking parallel to its current course of action—an ambitious plan to lure non-Bayview students by academically beefing up four neighborhood schools. Bayview students, for their part, were offered the opportunity to attend school in Glen Park. In another parallel with today, the district sought private foundation grants: Between 1978 and 1982, it received \$400,000 in donations to support three of the four Bayview schools that were targeted for improvement.

Despite these and other attempted reforms, schools in the Bayview remained segregated—and among the worst in the city. In 2000, new superintendent Arlene Ackerman, the district's first African-American head, proposed an ambitious new fix: the Dream Schools initiative. Modeled on an acclaimed public school in Harlem, it aimed to transform the Bayview's dismal public schools into the equivalent of high-quality private schools. There would be rigorous classes, mandatory uniforms, longer school days, and a required parental pledge. Afterschool programming would be provided through partnerships with organizations like the San Francisco Symphony and San Francisco Ballet.

Ackerman spent the spring of 2004 drumming up support in community meetings and persuading local African-American leaders that the Dream Schools would be college preparatory academies, demos of a model that could one day be adopted around the district; indeed, around the country. At a time when large numbers of Bayview students attended schools outside their neighborhood, the Dream Schools promised a quality education within walking distance of home.

Three Bayview schools volunteered to pilot the program. Over the bitter objections of the teachers' union, all three were reconstituted; that is, their staff members were required to apply for their former jobs—a highly controversial way of starting afresh. On August 30, 2004, 21st Century Academy (renamed Willie L. Brown Jr. College Preparatory Academy the following year) and the two other Dream Schools opened their doors to great hoopla and positive press coverage.

Just two years later, Ackerman had left the district and the Dream Schools initiative was dying. The SFUSD has never officially investigated the program's failure, but a 2010 UC Berkeley PhD thesis by Matthew Livingston, principal of one of the Dream Schools from 2004 to 2006, provides a thoroughly dispiriting autopsy. Livingston primarily blames Ackerman and the SFUSD for the debacle, though the teachers' union and, to a lesser degree, the Bayview community also come in for criticism. In her zeal to sell the project to black leaders in the Bayview, Livingston asserts, Ackerman unduly politicized the issue and alienated school board and community members. She overreached by expanding too soon, adding seven more Dream Schools after just one year. Latino parents fumed about the lack of transparency regarding planned Dream Schools in the Mission. Asian parents were infuriated when the superintendent announced a plan to diversify Lowell, the city's elite, heavily Asian public high school, by altering the admissions process. Ackerman's insistence on faculty reconstitution led to a toxic relationship with the teachers' union, which claimed that the district was using teachers as scapegoats. And the district itself ultimately failed to do the hard day-to-day work of implementing the ambitious Dream agenda (which, given that the Harlem program cherry-picked its students and the Dream Schools did not, may have been an exercise in futility from the outset).

After losing the support of the school board and clashing with the union and parents, Ackerman was sent packing in 2006 with a \$375,000 severance payment. Her departure left the already beleaguered Dream Schools orphaned—and over the next five years, they degenerated into nightmares. In 2011, despite its

status as the Bayview's only public middle school and its 500-student capacity, Willie Brown enrolled only 160 children. Even parents who lived down the street were put off by the school's test scores, among the worst in the state, and the school's unorthodox fourth-through-eighth-grade configuration, a legacy of the Dream initiative. The building, a former police academy without safe drinking water that needed \$8 million in repairs, looked like a "scabby sore," in the words of one longtime resident. Demolishing the school and starting from scratch, the district decided, would be easier than salvaging Willie Brown Academy.

The school's final year was a disaster. The impending teardown meant that broken clocks and bells went unfixed. Teacher attrition skyrocketed: For most of the year, recalls one educator, the sixth-through-eighth-grade science classes were taught by a series of substitutes who couldn't control the students. As kids ran unchecked through the halls, a last-ditch attempt by the faculty to create a temporary behavioral management system was denied funding. "Parents were very frustrated," recalls Lyslynn Lacoste, a community leader. "When you're put in a school where you feel like nobody cares, in a community that feels like no one cares about it, it's a recipe for disaster."

Nestled into the eastern slope of Silver Terrace hillside, the new Willie Brown Middle School faces the Bayview like the prow of a ship. Through the floor-to-ceiling windows of the prominent second-floor library, one can see homes, church spires, the gray snake of 280, and even the distant span of the Willie Brown Bridge (a visual tie that undoubtedly delights the school's egomaniacal namesake). Each spacious classroom has the bright, ergonomic feel of a tech startup, equipped with cabinets of bamboo, sinks, and short-throw projectors. Sixth graders (the only grade the school will enroll its first year) will sit in curvy lime-green chairs at two-person tables that by seventh grade will be mounted on casters to encourage group work. By eighth grade, each student will have her own desk-chair, to create, in principal Demetrius Hobson's words, "more of a collegiate feel." Bayview residents suggested the Parents' Center, located next to the library, and the school's main outdoor gathering area, a series of concentric grass circles that descend into a central gathering space. The Golden State Warriors contributed \$20,000 to an outdoor court, and SFJazz kicked in \$25,000 for musical instruments.

The campus, comprising two classroom buildings and the Wellness Center, communicates intentionality, deliberation, and—a rarity for the Bayview—serious capital investment. The campus blueprint is intimately tied to its STEM curriculum, which represents a new wave of thinking in the SFUSD. "Science, technology, engineering, and math proficiency will be keys to success in the Bay Area job market," states the district's current manifesto, Vision 2025. "We need to make sure all our students, particularly those of poverty and color, are ready for them."

While some SFUSD schools have STEM tracks, Willie Brown will be the district's first entirely STEM-focused campus. A typical student schedule will begin with two morning lab periods—integrated STEM, health, college prep, or a visual or performing art—followed by a block schedule of math, science, language arts, and social studies classes. Teacher collaboration is built into the day: During the morning labs, unoccupied staff will meet for several hours to confer on student progress. Hobson characterizes the school's STEM curriculum as "design-inspired." To that end, the main building features a maker space (developed in consultation with the innovation firm Ideo) where students will experiment with hands-on projects like designing robots and building their own desks. From day one, the school will be piloting personalized learning plans that include a Chromebook for every student.

Willie Brown's third building houses its Wellness Center—the embodiment of its commitment to providing nonacademic support to students who may lack access to essential services. Staffed by the Department of Public Health at an annual cost of \$300,000, the center plans to offer vision, dental, medical, and behavioral care. The school's campus is open longer hours than most—7:30 a.m. to 6 p.m.—to allow students to access the Wellness Center and the extended after-school programming. Because Willie Brown has been designated by the SFUSD as one of nine Beacon Centers—facilities in low-income neighborhoods that provide support for students and their families—the \$350,000 cost of the after-school program is being

underwritten by the city.

But that state-of-the-art curriculum and those high-tech facilities won't be worth anything if city families aren't convinced to enroll. Willie Brown's future hinges largely on how well it relates to its community, attracts quality teachers, and fosters an exciting, optimistic, learning-conducive environment. To build relationships in the community, principal Hobson has been working the Bayview since last winter like a politician trailing in the polls. The native of Chicago's South Side, who holds a master's degree from Harvard's Graduate School of Education, spent months knocking on doors throughout the neighborhood, visiting community organizations, and speaking at elementary schools all over the city. The purpose of the appearances, Hobson explains, was as much to create a sense of ownership among future parents as to publicize the school's opening. Amid the general excitement, he admits, there were plenty of skeptics. Wendy Lee, a local nonprofit coordinator who was on the receiving end of those early pitches, echoes the thoughts of many when she recalls that despite her positive impression of Hobson, she initially had some doubts: "I thought, OK, how is this time really going to be different?"

The answer can be found in Hobson himself—an Ivy League-educated African-American man sporting a sharp suit and a bow tie who comes off as humble, caring, and intensely smart. A former principal at two elementary schools in Chicago, one of them STEM-focused, Hobson likes to tell parents that he didn't always have both feet on the path to excellence. He earned Ds and Fs on his report cards in third and fourth grades, he says, and continued to struggle until an observant sixth-grade teacher helped him turn things around. His own experience in middle school, he says, taught him that "the chaos around you isn't indicative of who you are—you can transform the environment you're in."

To ensure the type of environment he envisions, Hobson and the SFUSD subjected would-be teachers to the most intensive hiring process in the district. Many of the 20 teachers who made the cut know the Bayview well, having taught at summer programs and elementary schools in the neighborhood. Those who aren't so local bring years of experience at similar high-need schools: Gary Cruz, the peer resources teacher, taught for 11 years at underperforming John O'Connell High School, whose student body is 58 percent Latino, among the highest in the district. His elective class, Cruz says, will start out with community-building and communication skills and then move on to tough topics like racism and sexism. Cruz describes himself as more than ready to guide discussions of traumatic events like the Charleston church shootings. "It would be my responsibility to bring that up in class," he says. "We need to discuss that and process that; otherwise, the students won't be ready to learn anything else."

On a sunny morning in June, several rising sixth graders gather around a table at their former school, the Bayview's Dr. Charles R. Drew Alternative Elementary, to chat with cautious optimism about their new school, Willie Brown. De'Vontay Lewis, a vivacious 11-year-old who aspires to one day run a tech company, looks forward to more challenging math lessons; his calm and thoughtful classmate Elijah Brown hopes the school will have a drum line—he wants to play the snare drum. Their excitement, however, is tempered by concern that behavioral issues at their elementary school—one of Ackerman's first Dream Schools—will persist at Willie Brown. "I wish to see no fights—no fights," says Brown. "I know there's gonna be fights," interjects a classmate as others nod in agreement. Several worry about potential misbehavior on the part of future classmates from another Bayview elementary school: "They're ghetto!" one exclaims. As for Lewis, he hopes to stay focused and make the honor roll for the first time: "I want to have discipline so I won't get distracted," he says.

Like any other neighborhood, the Bayview is not monolithic. It has the highest rate of home ownership in the city, and, despite a declining number of African Americans (the black population dropped from 15,922 in 2000 to 12,389 in 2010), it's home to a relatively large and stable black working and middle class. Yet the neighborhood is also home to Double Rock and other troubled public housing projects inhabited by impoverished, alienated, and deeply dysfunctional families. Because poverty and an unstable home life can lead, not surprisingly, to disruptive classroom behavior, the children of such families often present the most

difficult challenge for schools like Willie Brown. “Many kids here have toxic stress and go through a lot of trauma,” says Wendy Lee, the nonprofit coordinator. When students from troubled communities are acting up, points out Michelle Parker, a former staffer at the African American Arts and Culture Complex, educators need to resist the impulse to punish and ask deeper questions: “Did the student see someone get shot last night? Did the student have breakfast this morning?”

Whatever the causes, even one disruptive student can negatively affect a class—and too many can doom an unprepared or under-resourced school. Questions of how to handle student behavior are particularly salient in middle school: Studies show that the sixth-to-eighth-grade years can be a rough transition period, a time when test scores dip and racial achievement gaps widen. Like the rest of the country, San Francisco has struggled to create high-performing middle schools: In 2013, just three middle schools reached the district’s high-water mark of 75 percent STAR test proficiency in both math and reading (a vast majority of the schools that reached that level were elementary). In the same year, fewer than half of all SFUSD students scored proficiently in eighth-grade algebra, a percentage that has fallen since 2008. These distressing numbers are largely a function of San Francisco’s racial achievement gaps, which are as stark as anywhere in the United States: African-American, Latino, and Pacific Islander students in the 2nd through the 11th grades still test at about half the proficiency of their white and Asian counterparts.

To address the behavioral problems that are in part responsible for these outcomes, Willie Brown Middle School is emphasizing so-called restorative practices, an approach that discourages punitive actions like suspensions and encourages verbal de-escalation of conflicts (“Do things with [students], not to them,” the district’s informational video instructs teachers). In use by the district for the past five years, restorative practices are designed to help teachers, especially inexperienced ones, interact constructively with students who present behavioral challenges. A related change to the SFUSD’s disciplinary policies came in 2014, when a unanimous vote by the school board eliminated willful defiance as a basis for suspensions and expulsions. (In accordance with district policy, Willie Brown students with serious issues may be assigned to special education.) While the use of restorative practices is relatively new and unstudied, early reports are encouraging: Suspensions in 2013–14 were down 17 percent from the previous year. The biggest obstacle to the approach’s success may be the cost of the extra staff and training required, although the Wellness Center’s full-time behavioral health staff might give the school a leg up.

There remains, however, the dismal possibility that none of these efforts will work. What if the challenge is too great for any single school, even a politically and financially favored one? Is it fair to ask a school to give back to kids what society has taken away?

If Willie Brown succeeds, it will not only break a five-decade run of educational futility in the Bayview; it will also represent that rarest of anomalies in urban school districts nationwide: large-scale voluntary racial integration of a school in a gritty, mostly minority neighborhood. In fact, if history is any guide, the success of Willie Brown depends on that integration—a fact not lost on school board member Rachel Norton, who says flatly, “We know this school is going to fail if we can’t open it as an integrated school.” Which is why the district has been working feverishly to entice a diverse crop of families from all over San Francisco to send their kids to Willie Brown.

The most obvious carrot being dangled by the SFUSD, and likely the most attractive, is the school itself, with its brand-new building and impressive STEM curriculum. But the most intriguing and innovative offering is the so-called Golden Ticket, which gives every child who completes all three years at Willie Brown Middle School automatic entry into the San Francisco high school of his or her choice (with the exception of Lowell and School of the Arts, which have special admissions policies). While the competition for a high school spot is far less brutal than for an elementary school spot, the ticket is a nice perk. (The *Chronicle* described it as carrying “a whiff of desperation,” which might have stung more if Bayview schools had not been in a desperate situation for decades.)

Whether or not the Golden Ticket was the catalyst, Willie Brown received more than 350 applications for 200 spots for its inaugural sixth-grade class. Students in the Bayview's zip code, 94124, were given priority, but any student in San Francisco could rank Willie Brown as their top choice in the lottery. And many did: About 40 percent of the school's first batch of students live outside the Bayview, and a robust 20 percent will commute from outside the southeast quadrant.

The differing neighborhoods they come from are reflected in the students' racial and ethnic diversity. While the old Willie Brown Academy in its final year had 74 percent African-American students, 11 percent Pacific Islander, 5 percent Asian, 4 percent Latino, and 1 percent white, the new school is 43 percent African American, 23 percent Latino, 8 percent white, 6 percent Chinese, 5 percent Filipino, and 5 percent Pacific Islander, with small numbers of other ethnicities. (The drop-off in African-American students is partly explained by the fact that many middle-school children in the Bayview attend school in the Excelsior or Visitacion Valley, or go to a KIPP charter school in the Bayview.) Although Willie Brown has not yet succeeded in attracting significant numbers of Chinese (and down the line, the participation of this academically high-achieving group will be important), its student population is more integrated than that of most other schools in the Bayview, and indeed in the city at large.

Walker Whalen, an 11-year-old Portola resident with an insatiable curiosity for all things science, will join the school as one of its 17 white students. Though Willie Brown is neither her assigned school nor the destination of any of her friends, she ranked it first in her lottery application. Her father, Shawn, who works at San Francisco State University, says that although Willie Brown's STEM focus was the first enticement, feedback from friends employed by the district—whom he polled for any reason to be wary of Willie Brown—sealed the deal. "I was very impressed by the buy-in that everybody seems to have," he says. "It was not difficult to make the decision." The proffered first dibs on a high school was an added benefit, Shawn says, but not the deciding factor. "We probably would have chosen Willie Brown regardless of that promise."

Interestingly, Willie Brown's diverse student body reflects a new reality in the Bayview, which is going through its biggest demographic transformation since the shipyards brought thousands of blacks to San Francisco. It's no secret that over the last few decades, African Americans have been leaving the city in droves. The Bayview, which, with the Western Addition, has long been a locus of the city's black community, has experienced that exodus acutely—along with an associated influx of Asians, and Latinos and increasing numbers of whites. As of 2013, blacks, who in 1970 accounted for 70 percent of the Bayview, made up just 35 percent, with Asians at 28 percent, Latinos at 25 percent, and whites at 20 percent. (The numbers exceed 100 percent because some respondents claimed more than one category.) With the new Lennar development opening at Hunters Point and trendy Dogpatch just down the road, it's only a matter of time before even more whites move in.

In the long run, evolving demographics may integrate the Bayview schools naturally. In the meantime, Willie Brown must try to be two things at once: a community school that serves a disadvantaged and long-underachieving African-American student population; and a magnet school that attracts middle-class students from across the city. It makes for a challenging balancing act. School board members say that Bayview students will always have priority in the lottery for Willie Brown, but make no promises about the longevity of the Golden Ticket. If the SFUSD takes that off the table, will diversity decline? On the other hand, what if the school is a raging success and eventually attracts demand on a Lowell level? In a rapidly gentrifying city, might that prompt a flood of white and middle-class families to move into the Bayview, thereby pushing more minority families out?

But these are questions for a future time. Bayview residents have a more immediate concern: to see a good school flourish in their neighborhood. Despite the long years of disappointment, most in the community are cheered at the prospect of a fresh start. "To see something this innovative in our neighborhood is an opportunity," says Jodie Joubert, godmother of Elijah Brown, one of the students from Charles Drew. Her foster daughter attended Willie Brown Academy the year it closed, and Joubert recalls both the bittersweet

feeling of watching the old building go down and the excitement of seeing the new one go up. “Everything is new, and so everyone feels like we can do this,” she says. “Time will tell.”

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