



Social Justice Leader

By Margaret Paladino

There is an issue with social justice and equity within our schools. According to Bell (2013), “The goal of social justice is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs” (p. 21). One such social justice leader whose philosophy is “Equal education and resources for all students,” is William G. Ferguson, principal of St. Elizabeth Catholic Academy in Ozone Park, New York (personal communication, October 6, 2015).

Mr. Ferguson was educated in St. Elizabeth Catholic School before it turned into an academy in 2011. In 1970, Mr. Ferguson started his teaching career at St. Elizabeth Catholic School in a fourth grade classroom. In 1974, he became the Assistant Principal for part of his day and teaching math for the other part of his day. In 2002, he became “acting” principal and continued as an administrator and teacher until 2003 when he became principal and has been for thirteen years.

St. Elizabeth Catholic Academy (SECA) has a population of 393 students predominately Hispanic or Latino¹ and houses Universal Pre-Kindergarten classes to the eighth grade. There are 266 students who participate in the hot lunch program with 110 of those students receiving free

¹ Option C Diocesan Management System 2015-2016 Census.

lunch.² Also, SECA provides academic support services in the form of an ESL teacher, Title I Math and ELA services, and for students with Individual Education Plans (IEP), Special Education Teacher Support Services (SETSS).

Mr. Ferguson wants *all* children to have a good education and for *all* students to have the option of a Catholic education without financial hardships. In his belief of equity for all, he applied to the George and Mary Kremer Foundation whose mission is to provide tuition grants for Catholic education for children from “financially challenged families” (Kremer Foundation, 1985). Mr. Ferguson also set up an endowment with Archbishop Molloy High School, his alma mater, for seventy-five thousand dollars.

When examining social justice and equity within our schools, we immediately turn to the teachers and administrators of the school. In doing so, “Teachers must be challenged to avoid seeing diversity as a deficit” (de Oliveira, 2013, pp.1-2). Mr. Ferguson creates opportunities for his teachers to attend professional development classes that will bridge any gaps between the teacher and the students and between school and home. It is further asserted that “students of color, low-income students, and English language learners (ELLs) need high quality opportunities to learn from teachers who are equipped with knowledge, skills, and dispositions to improve their educational opportunities and who can see and address structural inequities” (de Oliveira, 2013, p.2). The mission statement of SECA is “To empower self-reliant Catholic Leaders.” Leadership is the mantra of the school.

At 7:30 A.M., Mr. Ferguson teaches an intermediate algebra class. Students in this class take the New York State Math Regents. In addition, Mr. Ferguson also setup a preparatory program for the Earth Science Regents. As a strong leader for equity and social justice, Mr.

² School Food sponsored by the New York City Department of Education.

Ferguson has a plethora of programs that offer his students opportunities to advance in their academics. One program is NBA Math Hoops, which teaches math in a fun environment. A goal of the program is “to eliminate racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps” (NBA Math Hoops, 2013). Another academic program that Mr. Ferguson has in place is The Ivy Key tutoring program. This program, founded by two Harvard University graduates, offers tutoring and test preparation twice a week (The Ivy Key, 2014). In addition, SECA participates in the REACH program from Regis High School whose mission is to “serve middle school boys in the New York City area who are Catholic, who are academically gifted and have leadership potential and whose families have significant financial need” (Regis High School, n.d.).

Moving his school into the twenty-first century, Mr. Ferguson obtained Smart Boards for every classroom and laptop computers for the computer lab. SECA utilizes their technology via Teaching Garage a SySTEM program. Teaching Garage’s “Design SySTEM fits into the school day and inspires elementary students to see themselves as future leaders in the engineering and technology industries” (Teaching Garage, 2015).

Mr. Ferguson’s mission for equity also provides opportunities to be competitive in the business world. His students participate in the Social Entrepreneurship Club and Association through the Middy Fund. The Mission statement of the Middy Fund is “to empower middleschoolers to find innovative solutions, learn business skills, and validate their projects by sourcing funding with college mentors” (Middy Fund, n.d.). Students work to address real world issues, mentors from local high schools come to SECA to work with the students, and their final project is presented at local prestigious universities.

In June of 2016, William G. Ferguson will retire as principal. In order to be a social justice leader, one needs to have a clear definition and vision of social justice. Mr. Ferguson is in

line with the definition of Miller and Syalayeva (2013): “social justice in education strives to provide equal opportunities to all students, in spite of race, class, gender, ability, or language” (p.20). William G. Ferguson manifests this definition with the many programs and opportunities he offers to the students and families of St. Elizabeth Catholic Academy. I know he will be profoundly missed, but his legacy, through his program agenda, will live on.

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