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James Madison High

A School at the Crossroads

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This case tells the story of James Madison High School, which became the epicenter of a debate over the future reorganization and control of large secondary schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). The LAUSD, recently taken over by the newly elected mayor, was fighting for control of this 3,000-student high school with a charter school company. Both entities offered plans for restructuring James Madison, which amid this larger debate was dealing with racial tension and poor academic performance. Students must analyze the political climate and determine how the school's new principal should approach the situation and what actions should be taken.

Keywords: *organizational change; charter schools; leadership; principals; diversity*

Case Narrative

Remember that about a year and a half ago, in October of 2004, the Los Angeles Board of Education approved a plan to scale down all the sprawling district's secondary schools and even smaller schools from 350 to 500 students ideally. The policy was intent on breaking down the bigger schools and creating more manageable schools and almost starting from scratch, educationally, academically and logistically. Well, that hasn't happened. It's a very expensive proposition, and the fact is that this is a system that itself is too big. We're talking about a huge school system, a centralized bureaucracy that is slow to respond to a lot of the problems that schools like Madison have.

—National Public Radio news report (National Public Radio,
Morning Edition interview, June 3, 2005)

As James Madison High School's faculty and staff prepared for the 2005 winter break, they reflected on the past 18 months at their school. In early 2004, one of the school's most beloved teachers unexpectedly died of a heart attack. Soon after, a group of James Madison students traveled to the Los Angeles School Board to ask

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for teachers who would push them academically. Then, in the spring of 2005, the school was plagued by three major fights that brought media scrutiny on the school. After the mayor of Los Angeles suggested that the school was “out of control,” its frustrated principal announced his retirement. Amid these circumstances several groups began to battle over James Madison’s organizational structure. School employees wondered what could possibly happen next. More important, they wondered when the debate over the school’s future finally would be resolved.

James Madison High School

Historically at Madison, there were more blacks than Latinos. Now there are more Latinos than blacks. This was probably one of the reasons why the fights happened. Probably the blacks didn’t like that the Latinos were invading Madison. We also think the fight happened because they were trying to see who was tougher. Another reason is that maybe the blacks were jealous that Latinos were dressing better than they were. We don’t say this because we are racist, it’s just that you always hear black people telling Latinos, “Why are you trying to dress like a black person?” There are certain brands of clothes that black people think only they should wear, like Rocawear and Fubu.

—James Madison student (*LA Youth*, May-June 2005 Issue)

James Madison High School was a neighborhood school in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). Though the neighborhood was historically Black, the school’s demographics were representative of recent changes in the surrounding community. The student body was now 92% Hispanic, 8% Black, and 88% low-income. The school opened in the early 1900s as a 9-to-12 building with a maximum capacity of 1,500 students. At the start of the 2004-2005 school year, this year-round school was home to nearly 3,900 students. The student–teacher ratio was 28 to 1 (compared to 21.5 to 1 in LAUSD and 21 to 1 in California); although the number of students increased by 426 from 2002 to 2004, the number of teachers at James Madison decreased from 148 to 137 during that same period.

Because the school did not achieve Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as required by No Child Left Behind (NCLB), it was considered academically low performing. Based on state standardized tests, only 30% of James Madison’s 10th-grade students were proficient in math (compared to 58% in LAUSD overall and 74% in California), and just 37% were proficient in English/language arts (compared to 62% in LAUSD and 75% in California). A little more than 63% of James Madison’s seniors completed the necessary requirements for graduation in 2004 (compared to 68% in LAUSD and 75% in California).

In 2001, James Madison High School was awarded a “Smaller Learning Communities” grant by the U.S. Department of Education. The school planned to implement an organizational structure that would create three small schools (1,300

students in each), with one administrator overseeing each “school-within-a-school.” At Madison, faculty committees and the school administration developed career academies within the school to push students toward classes with vocational themes. The school also planned to implement 9th- and 10th-grade houses with 125 students and five teachers per house. However, the district did not follow through with its plan, causing substantial disruption. Madison’s 2004 student body president remarked that “some kids were in the small learning communities and some weren’t, and some didn’t even know where they were supposed to be.”

Regardless of ongoing reforms, the school’s demographics, overcrowding, and poor academic performance were thrust into the spotlight in the spring of 2005. During a 6-week period, three racially motivated fights occurred, each involving more than 100 Black and Latino students. When students were told to return to class after one brawl, they pelted police officers with bottles and rocks. An NPR news report gave one explanation for the chaos:

It does lead to tension, but for all kinds of reasons, not just because of the racial makeup. I would say that it’s the concentration of poverty. It’s the fact that too many kids—I mean, this is a system of about 780,000 kids. Too many kids attend schools where everybody’s poor. Too many students don’t speak English and can’t read or write at grade level, and the overcrowding has complicated matters.

LAUSD

We do not want to look at Madison out there by itself. We need to look at what we have to do to bring in some bold reform for all our troubled schools.

—LAUSD Superintendent (*Los Angeles Times*, November 16, 2005)

At the time of the fights, 8 of the 10 largest public schools in the country were located in the LAUSD. Most of these schools comprised students from poor and minority families and were overcrowded. Given this situation, the district set specific reform plans designed to remedy not only the overcrowding, safety, and academic concerns at James Madison but also the needs of all the secondary schools in the district. The district superintendent remarked at a November 2005 rally, “We intend that there be choice by the parents and the students, not just in Madison but in schools around the district.”

Of the more than 6 million students educated in the State of California, nearly 750,000, or 12%, were educated by LAUSD teachers in 2004. Although the LAUSD had not reached Adequate Yearly Progress requirements as a school district, and more than half of the district’s high schools were failing to meet these standards, it was the district’s drop-out rate that fueled political debates about future control of the school district. According to the district superintendent, LAUSD’s high school

drop-out rate hovered around 24% annually. The superintendent observed, "Anytime you have 24 percent, that's a big problem; you want to reduce that. It is kind of like you're producing something and you had 24 percent of your product that you can't use, and that's not good." The State of California put the drop-out rate at 33%, whereas a study from Harvard University's Civil Rights Project showed LAUSD losing more than 50% of its students prior to graduation.

Using these numbers and the publicity from the massive brawls at Madison High School and five other LAUSD high schools, Los Angeles's first Latino mayor won control of the schools after a long political battle. After poor public support and fierce public opposition by the LAUSD teachers union (United Teachers Los Angeles) and school board, control of the district came to rest in the mayor's hands. Despite approval from Sacramento and the current governor, the Los Angeles mayor would not secure permanent and unified control of the school board, the superintendent, or the schools.

The board retained partial control, in part, because of two major political successes driven by a unique collaboration between the teachers union and the school board. First, the LAUSD and the United Teachers Los Angeles agreed to a 2.5% pay increase for all teachers. Second, the citizens of Los Angeles voted by 66% to pass a property tax bond measure (bond measure Y) to add more than \$4 billion dollars to the schools' coffers 1 week after the bargaining agreement was reached. In addition to these successes, the LAUSD also secured \$7.4 million dollars from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to fund small learning communities at four district high schools. Although James Madison was not one of these schools, the LAUSD received much-needed positive publicity from the Gates Foundation investment.

The new administrative arrangement located managerial, budgetary, and curricular authority throughout the Los Angeles political spectrum. The Los Angeles mayoral office shared authority with the 26 mayors of incorporated cities within the LAUSD. The superintendent's office retained control of the contracting, budgeting, and hiring processes for the district, and the school board maintained authority to set school policy and negotiate with union members on collective bargaining agreements.

Furthermore, complicating the issue, a three-judge panel on the 2nd District Court of Appeal in Los Angeles halted all efforts to transfer control of the District to the Mayor. The Court unanimously found that the California Constitution prohibits transferring public schools governance to organizations or people outside the system.

At Madison, the district had already implemented some new reforms aimed at getting the school back under control. In the fall of 2005, LAUSD opened its first completely new high school campus in nearly 30 years. Although the school almost never opened because of environmental contamination and earthquake concerns that plague almost all new development in the Los Angeles area, the opening of Overbay High School reduced James Madison's overcrowding by 800 students. Because the school enrollment now rested at a little more than 3,000 students, the district would return students to the traditional two-semester schedule rather than the multitrack,

year-round calendar used to shift students through the school day and the school year. A veteran teacher and administrator at James Madison explained that most of Madison's problems seemed to be related to its year-round schedule. In addition to the opening of new schools and restructuring of the school calendar, district and school officials implemented a "Safe School Zone." Focusing on the punishment of crimes committed near schools, the policy stated that any criminal activity within Madison's or any other school's "Safe School Zone" would be punished with an additional \$500 fine and up to 6 more months in jail.

Finally, LAUSD planned to focus the majority of its reform efforts on creating smaller learning communities within James Madison. In a closed door meeting with the school board, the superintendent outlined a plan to turn Madison High School into six smaller units: Four would be administered by outside education companies, another by Millennium Charter or another charter group, and one by a joint committee between LAUSD and the teachers union. The superintendent explained that these small learning communities would be bolstered by

- more personalized student attention, where at least one adult on campus tracked each student's progress;
- increased partnerships with Los Angeles area business, technology, and financial communities to bring "real-world" experiences to the students; and
- improved instruction by including local administrators and teachers in the process of determining what curriculum would be selected and how it would be taught.

Ultimately, the superintendent and the LAUSD wanted to maintain organizational control of the six units at Madison High School. To maintain this control, the district planned to use funds obtained with the recent passage of bond measure Y to implement these changes at James Madison High School. Of the \$4 billion in new funds, about \$90 million was earmarked to help reconfigure secondary campuses like Madison High into small learning communities.

A majority of Madison High faculty favored remaining within the LAUSD. However, this majority ebbed during the violent outbreaks. The school faculty had invested considerable hours in the planning of the small learning communities and requested that the principal support their site-based management of this process.

Millennium Charter

I've only been in Los Angeles for 2.5 years, and I don't know the history of how long the district has been singing the same song, but I know a change needs to come and this is my stand: These kids are drowning and they need a lifeline. Whoever throws them the line, I'm with it.

—Parent of a James Madison student
(*Los Angeles Times*, August 17, 2005)

Millennium Charter, a nonprofit organization located in Los Angeles, pursued a mission of creating a consortium of outstanding charter high schools to transform education throughout the Los Angeles metropolitan area. Millennium Charter further wanted to “alter the landscape of secondary education throughout California.” Specifically, the organization wanted to open more than 500 small schools in the LAUSD by 2014, focusing on what it called the “6 Tenets of High Performing Public Schools”:

1. Small schools—no more than 525 students with a student/teacher ratio of, at most, 21:1
2. High expectations—college preparatory curriculum for all students
3. Local control—principals and teachers lead decision making
4. Lower costs for administration should lead to more money for spending on classes
5. Parent participation—parents are required to spend at least 30 hours per year on their children’s education
6. Schools stay open later—until at least 5 p.m. to accommodate working parents

Part of the concept of Millennium Charter was that a flatter organizational structure would help empower teachers and administrators at the school level. Teachers at Millennium Charter formed their own bargaining unit to negotiate contracts instead of using United Teachers Los Angeles. Key elements of their new contracts included no tenure, performance reviews, the removal of the definition of the number of minutes a teacher must work in favor of a number of “professional days,” and a general 10% pay increase for school faculty members. Millennium Charter, in its mission and structure, wanted to fundamentally change the way schools were run in the Los Angeles metropolitan area.

Millennium Charter sought to bring its governance and structure directly to James Madison High School. To make this transformation real, Millennium Charter launched a formal and informal marketing campaign to gain the support of teachers, parents, students, politicians, and LAUSD administrators. Beginning in February 2005, Millennium Charter announced the formation of the Small Schools Alliance. This coalition of Los Angeles area business leaders, educators, and politicians vowed

to achieve an agreement between the LAUSD Board of Education, LAUSD Superintendent, Mayor of the City of Los Angeles and other key appointed/elected officials and stakeholders called for the transformation of LAUSD into the best school district in the country within 10 years by utilizing the Small Schools Alliance’s “Six Tenets of High Performing Public Schools.”

The Small Schools Alliance announced its intention to seek a vote by the LAUSD board of education for support of its plan to divide James Madison and its 3,000 students into eight independently run charter schools. Immediately after the announcement, the Small Schools Alliance also began seeking parental support of its “Campaign to Transform Madison High School.” This campaign asked teachers, administrators,

and parents to sign a petition supporting Millennium Charter's charter school proposal. The Small Schools Alliance began a \$2 million television and radio campaign for support, and in November they organized a parent rally—La Marcha de Los Padres—that garnered national media attention by ending outside the LAUSD's Board of Education headquarters.

At Madison, numerous parents attended these rallies, calling on the school board and the principal to support transferring Madison High School into a Millennium Charter governed school.

Facing the Future

The school is built for 1,500. I have 3,800 kids. I put 2,000 on a bus. When I came here I was told, "Well, it's not about education, it's about seats." And I'm saying, "That is absurd." These are systemic issues LAUSD needs to look at and not blame the principal. They need to say, "You know what? Those issues were addressed by the present principal and he's here to help the kids."

—Ron Rose, former Principal of James Madison
(National Public Radio, *Morning Edition* interview, June 3, 2005)

Though James Madison had changed (the campus was less crowded, the curriculum had been revised, and students now wore uniforms), some parents and teachers feared that LAUSD officials did not have the faith of frustrated parents or a recipe for more fundamental change. They feared that the nascent reforms at Madison High were cosmetic and would fade once another school became the "poster campus of the month." The president of Millennium Charter claimed his organization held the only plan for a timely and thorough transformation of Madison High observing, "The small learning communities will likely fail because they are not small schools. They are just a smaller version of what was there before." Though there was no track record for a company to successfully turn a large comprehensive high school around (in Philadelphia, the Edison Company was considered unsuccessful in its attempts), some teachers seemed ready to take help from wherever they could get it. According to California law, converting an existing school into a charter school required a majority of the school's teachers to be "on board," and in the fall of 2005 approximately 20% of teachers had already expressed support for Millennium Charter's prospective takeover.

In July 2005, the superintendent asked for more charter schools to be opened in the district so that some of the overcrowding could be eliminated. The school board president agreed, calling a partnership with Millennium Charter a top strategy to reform secondary schools. In addition, a permanent chief administrative officer was appointed to oversee a new charter schools division. United Teachers Los Angeles, however, was strongly opposed to turning James Madison into a charter school, claiming that the community would be hurt, with classified workers, office workers, and janitors losing their jobs and benefits. In a radio debate, the LAUSD school

board president said she looked forward to working with Millennium Charter and the Small School Alliance. The United Teachers Los Angeles president, however, was much more skeptical of the Millennium Charter program and described Madison as a school that had begun to fix some of its problems. Although generally supportive of charter schools in the District, the superintendent noted that he did not support Millennium Charter's desire to take over the whole school.

Principal Rose's replacement, David Martinez, understood that challenges and accusations would come along with this high-profile position but believed he could effect substantive change and avoid the frustration and fate of his predecessor. The key, in his opinion, was resolving the Millennium Charter versus LAUSD debate. Given that both the LAUSD and Millennium Charter were recent recipients of Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation grants for creating small schools, he would need to publicly ally himself with one side and then rally support for his choice. But which plan was more suitable for the school? How should James Madison be transformed for its students and community? A local community activist had opined that students needed "something to sink their teeth into. The fights began because of a lack of purpose. The kids didn't feel a connection to the school, or to each other." What organizational structure would give rise to a renewed sense of purpose and community (and perhaps even facilitate racial harmony) in the student body? Was the transformation of James Madison High School even possible?

Furthermore, Principal Martinez was pressured by community members, including Madison High parents, to side with the charter school plan although his staff still favored remaining under the LAUSD control. With Mayoral control locked up indefinitely in a legal battle, how should the principal negotiate these two interests?

Teaching Notes

This case is a teaching tool for graduate-level students in both administration and policy programs, especially in courses dealing with organization change or theory. Students of education administration could examine how choosing a structural or political organizational frame (Bolman & Deal, 1997) could lead to different reactions by a principal or a superintendent charged with managing the James Madison situation. Questions to be considered for discussion may include

- What is the best way for James Madison to be organized or reorganized?
- With which reorganization plan should the new principal align himself? How should he go about supporting either LAUSD or Millennium Charter?
- What sort of causal story should the new principal employ to create support for the LAUSD or Millennium Charter (Stone, 1989, 2001)?
- What are the barriers to and essential strategies for change when using the political frame of organizations?

- What are the barriers to and essential strategies for change when using the structural frame of organizations?

Finally, compare the reform taking place within the LAUSD to its neighbor's to the south, the San Diego City Schools. What are the political and structural differences of the educational reform taking place within these two large urban school districts (Milliken, 2003)? Which will be most successful and why?

Students of education policy could examine the benefits and drawbacks of school bureaucracy at the district and state levels. Questions to be considered for discussion may include

- What is the difference between enabling and coercive bureaucracy (Adler & Borys, 1996)?
- How can schools be designed so that formal and hierarchical bureaucratic structures can help rather than hinder school reform and student learning (Hoy & Sweetland, 2001)?
- Are large school districts too mired in bureaucracy to quickly turn around schools with long histories of poor performance, organizational dysfunction, and weak leadership?
- Do we need a new model of educational management, where decisions can be made by ground-level administrators and employees? Is it possible to deal with the complexity of schools, large or small, without a large bureaucracy?

For school leaders, the concepts of confidence and trust could be a focal point for students in both administration and policy. James Madison is on a losing streak. Teachers, students, and parents lack self-confidence to control outcomes, and lack trust in one another and in the system. In addition, they have no networks through which to secure resources. To explore these issues, the following questions might be discussed:

- How might the new principal instill in James Madison and the surrounding community a feeling of confidence (Kanter, 2004)?
- How might a school leader promote Kanter's (2004) three stones of accountability, collaboration, and initiative?
- How might a school leader deal with early problems, manage difficult first choices, establish tangible signs of success, and hold off a feeling of early false recovery?

According to Putnam (2007), both inter and intraracial trust are lower in heterogeneous areas like Los Angeles. At James Madison, teachers and students have little confidence that school administrators, regardless of the structure of the school, can manage conflict and build cohesion within the school community.

- Using the framework of trust building set out by Tschannen-Moran (2004), how could the new principal begin to heal some of the racial divisions among students as well as in the larger community? More specifically, what can James Madison's Hispanic principal do to reach out to Black students, who make up a minority of the school's population and appear to feel alienated?

- In their study of urban schools, Gardiner and Enomoto (2006) found that principals displayed multicultural leadership practices in the following 12 areas:
 - High expectations for all
 - Changing the cultural deficiency perspective
 - Understanding through communication
 - Socializing new immigrants into U.S. schools
 - Hiring practices
 - Multicultural display
 - Peer tutoring and inclusive educational practices
 - Multiculturally proficient instruction
 - Early educational opportunities and intervention
 - Parent involvement
 - Community involvement
 - Partnerships with social service agencies (pp. 569-577)

Assuming that it would be impossible to tackle all these areas simultaneously, which three should be David Martinez's top priorities? Students should prepare a rationale for their choices.

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