The Power of Key:
Celebrating 20 Years of Innovation At the Key Learning Community

The Key Learning Community in Indianapolis was the first school in the world to base its approach on the theory of multiple intelligences. Ms. Kunkel, Key's principal, reflects on the school's continuing growth and success — even in the face of pressures to standardize — and shares the history of its founding.

By Christine Kunkel

> We know the truth, not only by the reason, but also by the heart.
>
> — Blaise Pascal

IN THE EARLY 1980s, eight teachers from Indianapolis Public School #113 decided that they were not happy with the direction in which education was then heading. So they began sharing books and articles in a formal effort to inform and improve their practice.

In the course of their study, they came upon *Frames of Mind*, Howard Gardner's groundbreaking work in which he introduced the notion of multiple intelligences. Kathy Sahm, one of the eight teachers, recalls: "Each of us had a story of a child who was successful in the classroom, but when you looked at standardized tests or the progress report, you did not see the success. When Pat [Bolaños] brought us Howard's work, it just made sense." It seemed obvious to these educators that students were smart in many different ways and that standardized tests just weren't giving the whole picture.

While *Frames of Mind* was written for psychologists, not educators, the book nonetheless struck a chord with this group. Structuring a school around this theory, they hoped, would solve some of the problems created by the traditional practice of teaching to weaknesses, rather than strengths. The teachers wanted to broaden the narrow focus on standardized test scores in reading and math that had warped a healthy educational process.

Six of the eight Key Founders. Back row: *Kathleen Sahm;* front row, left to right: *Beverly Hoeltke, Sharon Smith, Patricia Bolaños, Jean Eltzroth, and Gail Harmon.*

In October of 1984, the teachers learned that Howard Gardner was scheduled to give a talk in Kutztown, Pennsylvania, and they decided they needed to see what he thought of the idea of designing a school around his theory. They piled into their cars and drove from Indianapolis to northeastern Pennsylvania. When they met him and told him of their idea, Gardner said that he had never thought of using the multiple intelligences in the context of a school. "I remember thinking," he recalls in 2007, "these folks are serious. Pat [Bolaños]

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Photo: Tom Strickland/NEA Today

is like a force of nature. I will learn a lot more from them than vice versa. And I have."

CREATING A SCHOOL

The rest is history. The teachers returned to Indiana and began their work of developing a new theory-based school in earnest. They wrote a grant that allowed them to travel and visit progressive schools, talk to educational researchers, continue with their reading, and collaborate with administrators in the school district. They found the work of starting a school from scratch to be exciting and enriching, and they were energized by it. During the course of their study, they came upon the name "Key School" in John Goodlad's book *A Place Called School*. According to Goodlad, these "key" schools could be found in China. They are experimental schools "charged with the responsibility of developing exemplary practices extending beyond mere refinement of the conventional."[1]

Beverly Hoeltke, one of the teachers now known as the Key Founders, recalls that the development of the school was always a team effort, and the job was certainly big enough that it needed eight people. Gardner had suggested that they contact Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. "So we went on a quest to connect to him and other theorists," Hoeltke recalls. "We also went out into the community and sought businesspeople, cultural leaders, heads of neighborhoods. We asked lots of people what they thought [of our ideas]. I think that was a very important process."

After their initial explorations, important pieces of the Key Founders' thinking began to come together. Right from the start, there was a strong commitment to build this new kind of educational opportunity within the public schools and to offer it to all children in Indianapolis. By the same token, it would be important for parents and students to make a commitment of their own. The original design thus included a promise from parents to attend three conferences each year and a promise from students to produce two high-quality projects per year. This essential element, which came to be known as the "Key Compact," remains a foundation of the school today.

Project work, the Key Founders decided, must be a central part of instruction. While the idea of project work wasn't new in itself, wrapping the multiple intelligences around a theme-based program that used projects as an important mode of instruction and assessment was a very new concept.

When the Key School opened in the fall of 1987, there was a flurry of attention from the media — the school was featured on the ABC News, NPR, and CBS Sunday Morning. Education writers from places like the *New York Times* and *Life* magazine sought out Key staff members, and visitors came from across the country (41 states to date) and around the world (28 countries to date). This intense interest and attention was not only unexpected, it was nearly continuous. Though the staff members were surprised at all the attention and at the opportunities for them to travel around the country and even abroad, it was clear that what was emerging at the Key School was important. It was the world's first school to create and implement a multiple intelligences (MI) curriculum.

Christine Kunkel, principal of the Key Learning Community, shares the stage with Howard Gardner and David Henry Feldman at the school's 20th anniversary event.

EXPLORING THE MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES

Teachers and students alike revel in the various offerings of what we now call the Key Learning Community. Certainly, in classes such as math and music, for example, those specific multiple intelligences are addressed directly, but there are other opportunities to focus on students' strengths as well.

One example is the Pod class. A Pod class is an elective that students attend four days a week, where they can choose to explore an area of personal strength or any of the intelligences that spark their interest. Each staff member at Key is encouraged to teach a Pod class related to a strong personal interest. I taught a Pod class called "Planet Fitness." In this class we decided to train for a 13.1-mile mini-marathon that Indianapolis holds each May. While bodily kinesthetic intelligence might seem to be the predominant area to be explored in this Pod, there were also strong components of logical-mathematical intelligence as the students learned to take their

Photo: Sandy Sheets/Key Learning Community

Joshua, Avalyn, Shayna, and Armon exercise their naturalist intelligence.

heart rates, track their mileage and times, and compile the data in graphs. Linguistic and intrapersonal intelligences were also involved through reflective journaling and the always character-building experience of a grueling training regimen.

At first glance, some might see the Pod classes as fluff, distractions from the really important work of schools. But don't tell that to my students who crossed the finish line following a 13.1-mile race. These young people were equipped not just with physical strength and endurance but with a strong knowledge of exercise physiology and a strong sense of community as they shared an experience with the 25,000 other runners who took part in this race.

All the Pods are designed to give students an opportunity to engage in work that they enjoy and find challenging. Such efforts can take them into a "flow" experience.[2] Students face a challenge that is enriching, rigorous, and relevant, and they prove themselves capable of meeting that challenge. In the six years I taught this Pod, every student and I completed every step of that 13.1-mile race.

Besides "regular" classes and Pod electives, students have the opportunity to develop multiple intelligences through their project work and their evolving presentations. While students use the projects to showcase their strengths, and many of them enjoy making the presentations, what about those who lack confidence in their public speaking abilities? There is a story we tell each year at Key Institute[3] that shows how project presentations build self-confidence. One young lady, so incredibly terrified of presenting her project to her classmates, found herself unable to complete a presentation. Eventually, she solved her problem by introducing hand puppets to tell her story. A true Key success story, this young lady developed great poise during her 13-year career at Key. She went on to become president of her class all four years in college, and, having graduated from the university, she now finds herself ready for a career in education.

Another example of the impact of the multiple intelligences at Key occurred in the mid-1990s. The school district issued a directive that Key was to conduct afterschool remediation for students who faced challenges in reading and math. Key teachers felt that, if math and English were important enough to remediate, then, in this MI school, all of the intelligences were. So, for a year, the music teacher worked with students who were musically challenged, the art teacher helped the spatially challenged, and so on. Interestingly, test scores in the following year were so high that the state was suspicious. But there had been no cheating. Instead, we believe that all the intelligences can be made to work to bolster the two intelligences regularly tested. This is an interesting prospect to consider in these test-prep-happy days.

EXPANDING THE CULTURE

It is now 20 years since those heady times when the Key Founders first opened the doors to the Key School. The school has grown steadily over the years, but it has continued to follow its progressive path. In 1987, Key began as a K-6 school with 150 students. In 1993, a middle school was added; in 1999, a high school. In the fall of 2006, Key's latest expansion took place when a second elementary building was opened to accommodate the long waiting list of families seeking to enroll. Today, the Key Learning Community is a K-12 school on two campuses, enrolling more than 600 students.

Seeded with several teachers from the original campus, the staff at the new K-5 campus, veterans and new hires alike, sought to duplicate the Key program. It was not a simple or automatic process. Time and patience were clearly needed to enculturate 190 K-5 students who were new to the Key philosophy.

During the first week of school, students who had previously become accustomed to sitting in straight rows in teacher-centered classrooms acted out and seized moments to bully classmates when the teachers tried to let out the rope and begin to foster a collaborative learning environment. The educational atmosphere at Key cannot be absorbed in a day; it takes time. And for kids experiencing the "Key Way" for the first time, their evolution had only just begun.

This point was driven home for me when I gave my annual opening convocation on the first day of school

Photos: Sandy Sheets/Key Learning Community

Students face a challenge that is enriching, rigorous, and relevant, and they prove themselves capable of meeting that challenge.

at the new campus. Usually, I speak to the kids for 10 minutes and then invite the staff to introduce themselves. These introductions can take an additional 20 to 30 minutes. We take it for granted that the kids will sit quietly, listen politely, and cheer their teachers during the course of the program. It is not unusual for Key students to sit politely and engaged for programs that run over two hours. We consider this kind of mature behavior just one more indicator of a successful program.

However, when I began the convocation at the new campus, I could see within a few seconds that I was going to have to keep it short. The students were clearly not ready to be a good audience yet. This, too, would take time.

And so the process began. Teachers and other staff members at the new school embraced the challenge. Small and large successes are already evident. Four months after the start of school, both schools came together for the annual "harvest festival." The performance set, including musical performances, dance, circus tricks, and dramatic performances, lasted more than an hour, but all the kids were great the entire time. They were attentive, and their new ways of attending were already becoming noticeable.

What was missing on the first day of school with the students on the new Key campus was the "community" that had yet to be established. Community means lots of things at Key, but the biggest reason for putting the word "community" into the name of the school was our belief in the power of collaboration. We teach students how to work with others on projects, how to network with people out in the neighborhoods, and how to talk to one another when there is a dispute. Key students routinely acquire these community skills, and these are qualities that can't be measured by any standardized test.

A FEW OF OUR FAVORITE THINGS

Kathy Sahm noted that the collaboration and the support of the staff members for one another is her favorite thing about the Key program. Beverly Hoeltke is partial to the projects and enjoys her job in the Flow Room — as its name implies, a place where students explore challenging interests in all the intelligences and seek to experience Csikszentmihalyi's "flow" firsthand. The Pods are popular with many teachers, of course. "Being able to work with a group of children and develop a project and all be happy together," says Hoeltke, "it's wonderful."

Howard Gardner notes, "I especially like the video portfolios, which allow one to see how the child develops over the years in terms of project competence and interests; and the Pods, where kids of different ages work together to learn about something that interests them. And, of course, the fact that the arts are foregrounded and that there is a Flow Room."

As principal of Key, I must say that my favorite part of the program is the deliberate development of intrapersonal intelligence. I believe this is the most profound experience we provide for our students.

Although all teachers work to help students find their strengths, there are three teachers who focus specifically on intrapersonal intelligence at every level of Key. At the K-5 level, developing intrapersonal intelligence is the focus of the Flow Class. In Flow Class, as students choose activities ranging over all of the multiple intelligences, their strengths begin to emerge, and a dialogue about personal strengths opens between student, teacher, and parents.

Jared presents his theme project on the "Voyage of Humans."

At the middle school level, each student participates in the Mentor Program. The student identifies an interest and is then placed for a few hours a week with a

Jamal celebrates his work on the life of Jack Johnson.

Facing page, top: *Every student at Key plays the violin.* Middle: *For the "Environments" theme, Sally built a cage for her pet bunny.* Bottom: *Jerome and Adam get into the flow.*

professional who is actively involved in that field. The student ends the year with a project and reflects on whether he or she still wants to move forward in preparation for this particular career.

Finally, in high school, each student ends his or her work at Key by participating in an Apprenticeship Program. Seniors spend the entire morning, four days a week, with a practitioner in their potential college major or career interest. During this experience, students either confirm their enthusiasm or learn that they should pursue other interests.

Recent interviews with alumni suggest that the majority most appreciated the Mentor and Apprenticeship programs they experienced while at Key.

FUTURE LEADERS: ONWARD AND UPWARD

Since the first high school class graduated in 2003, the Key Learning Community boasts the highest graduation rate in its 38,000-student district and is above the state average. Last year, 89% of Key graduates pursued a college education.

The most important things our students take away from Key, however, cannot be measured quantitatively. In the process of project-based learning in a school that values collaboration and community, Key students learn how to explore and research their options; they learn how to relate with co-workers, community members, and those in authority; and they learn how to present a point of view eloquently, articulately, and with confidence. You know this is true when you listen to the morning announcements (always delivered by students), take a tour of the campus with any student, or watch recorded presentations of student projects.

Sir Winston Churchill captured much of the Key philosophy of the adventure and satisfaction of learning:

> Every day you make progress. Every step may be fruitful. Yet there will stretch out before you an ever-lengthening, ever-ascending, ever-improving path. You know you will never get to the end of the journey. But this, so far from discouraging, only adds to the joy and the glory of the climb.

Is Key perfect? No. A utopia? Certainly not. As with all things, if you look for problems, you'll find them. But if you look for the good, Key offer lots of things to see. While Key does provide a theme-based and project-focused multiple intelligences curriculum, the jewel of the program must be the leadership development that emerges from the concentration on intrapersonal intelligence. Students learn what their strengths are, how to take charge of their own behavior, and how to navigate their academic journeys. All are critical aspects of leadership development.

The self-knowledge students gain from the focus on intrapersonal intelligence has been shown to be an important piece of leadership development.[4] At Key, teachers work hard to help the students learn their own strengths — and then learn how to nurture them. As a result, students are confident and comfortable, pursuing their interests or just being with classmates. This comfort level is manifest in the climate that permeates the building: it simply feels good to enter and see the students and the staff interacting in positive and productive ways.

Moreover, students learn to be comfortable when speaking in public through the project-based classrooms. Each student must also prepare and present two major projects each year based on their semesterlong theme. As students develop their presentation skills, their confidence grows, and they become more comfortable explaining their strengths and interests to one another. But the skills students learn that make them a good audience can also help make them good leaders. For a leader, learning to listen is every bit as important as being a good speaker. At Key, we believe that intrapersonal intelligence is an important link to successful life experiences. That is why we put such emphasis on the projects and presentations.[5]

Other aspects of the Key program also support leadership development. The staff at Key understands the importance of empowering students to become responsible for their own learning. Through making choices about their projects, through choosing Pod electives,

Photos: Sandy Sheets/Key Learning Community

and through exercising student voice in such vehicles as town halls and the site-based decision-making school committee, students are empowered. Of such strands is a truly democratic education made. Aristotle, Jefferson, and Dewey all knew that a true democracy requires an educated and responsible citizenry. At Key we try to do our part.

A final piece of the focus on leadership development — and one of the most unusual aspects of the Key program — is authentic assessment. Key makes use of a variety of ways to demonstrate that students are receiving a high-quality education without having to fall back on ordinary paper-and-pencil tests. Students review their own portfolios and use rubrics to assess everything from essays to theme projects. Key places a high value on reflection on one's work, and students and staff members alike engage in that process. Today, despite increasing pressure for Key to conform to more standard forms of assessment, the staff remains committed to working tirelessly to translate the Key methods into a language that the standardized minds can understand.

While public schools all around Key look to add curriculum designed explicitly to improve standardized test scores, Key has been looking to improve the quality of the work through the study of "understanding" and authentic assessment. While others drill, a renewed effort at Key focuses on student and staff reflection through the process of student portfolio assessment, which has proved to be a most fruitful way to make the educational environment more authentic.

Some may question Key's methods and philosophy. Yet the Key Learning Community has received continued national and international attention over its 20 years of existence. Although *Child* magazine called Key one of the best elementary schools in the country, and a South Korean news team once referred to Key as the best school in the world, the Key Learning Community continues to reflect on its progress and its path. But one thing remains clear: something special is going on here.

1. John I. Goodlad, *A Place Called School* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984), p. 300.

2. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1990).

3. The Key Institute is an annual staff training session for new Key teachers. We also invite other educators interested in the Key program to attend. Recently, we have had participants from India, Mexico, and South Korea.

4. Howard Gardner, *Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

5. Christine D. Kunkel, "A Study of Community Participation and Leadership Development in an Urban School" (Doctoral dissertation, Indiana University, 2003).