



Preparing the Nest: The Story of the Eagle's Nest Academy

by Cathy Albro

“I remember Miss Curtis like it was yesterday,” says Dr. Reggie Flynn, pastor at Foss Avenue Baptist Church in Flint, MI. “I’m sure she did what she thought was in my best interest. She said, ‘Reggie has some serious emotional issues.’” He laughs. “You know what I’m glad about? At nearly 50 years of age, I still remember what my mother said like it was yesterday. She said, ‘He will not be placed on medicine.’”

By his own admission, Dr. Flynn was a “troubled child,” and he is grateful that his mother was there to advocate for him. Years later, as a pastor in a community that is struggling, with 68% of children living below the poverty line, he recognizes that he is in a position to help Flint’s failing schools. So, when asked by district officials to provide suggestions, he jumped at the chance to identify mentors for children in his congregation who were struggling in school.

First, he observed classrooms, and what he observed helped him to understand why these boys were not thriving

in school. “Rather than the child failing school,” he says, “the school was failing the child.”

He explains that students were expected to sit quietly for long periods, filling out worksheets and reading books about people who were not like them. The atmosphere was punitive and controlling. “Do you know what I saw? I saw security guards, bars on the windows, chains on the doors. At an elementary school!” he emphasizes. “I found a ‘zero-tolerance’ policy and a zero-tolerance attitude, especially toward the boys.”

This attitude, he says, leads to special ed referrals and kneejerk drug therapy. Worse, it results in children, especially boys, who dislike school from a very young age.

Pastor Flynn is not a teacher. But he remembers his own experiences in school, and they’re similar to the ones he witnessed in the classrooms he observed. So Dr. Flynn and his wife, Deloris, decided to start from a new foundation. “We felt like we could create

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Learning to teach, teaching to learn

All the research on what boys need to be successful learners confirmed what he had suspected all along: Boys learn differently. They need to have opportunities to move and tend to favor kinesthetic experiences. At the same time, they too benefit from strategies employed in more successful school districts, but seldom found in the classrooms he observed — like offering books that are of interest to students, building their self-regulation skills and independence,

Principal Carlita Earl and Dr. Reggie Flynn celebrate at an inaugural event marking the opening of the Eagle's Nest Academy in Flint, MI.



WATCH THESE CLIPS

1. Dr. Flynn discusses zero tolerance

2. Dr. Flynn discusses how to engage boys in the classroom



The mission of Eagle's Nest Academy is to provide students with access to quality education that nurtures and enables them to develop their fullest potential academically, physically, emotionally, artistically, and socially.

providing opportunities to learn with others, creating meaningful real-life connections to learning, and building respectful personal relationships.

Pastor Flynn was energized to find the education model that would lead to his boys' success in school. One day

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in 2013, I received an e-mail from Reggie, expressing his interest in learning more about HighScope's elementary program. I invited Reggie to the HighScope International Conference and my pre-conference workshop, which introduced the major components of the HighScope Elementary approach. After a week of learning about HighScope from presenters and attendees, Reggie and Deloris realized that HighScope was the program they were looking for. Pastor Flynn pro-

posed that HighScope become a partner to develop a charter school. Within months, Eagle's Nest Academy (ENA) was authorized by Grand Valley State University and plans were made to open in Flint in September of 2015.

The planning process has been intense and very rewarding. In addition to Reggie, Deloris and me, our school planning team includes Shirley Henderson (a former Flint teacher and principal) and Jeff Beal (a senior research associate at HighScope). We have studied Reggie's concerns about the prospective ENA students and the environment and pedagogy that are needed for optimal learning and understanding to occur. Our plans for this prekindergarten-third grade school include:

- Active Learning
 - Engagement with materials, people, events, and ideas
 - Choice
 - Learner communication of thinking
 - Adult scaffolding of learning and understanding
- Positive relationship building and frequent communication with students and their families
- Ongoing assessment of learning and understanding
 - Evidence (data) used to plan for each student's learning needs and interests
- Timely feedback to support new learning and understanding and a growth mindset
- Focus on developing student self-regulation and independence
- A flexible physical environment that meets the needs for individual, small-group, and large-group activities; a variety of organized materials accessible to students; an aesthetically inviting environment
- A daily schedule that provides time for adults to meet with individual students and small groups, and hold short, interactive whole-group sessions
- An hour each day for Plan-Do-Review — a time for students to plan their own learning, carry out the plan, and reflect, all with adult support
- Shared control and a restorative practices approach to conflict resolution

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