

McGowan News

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The Ways and Means of Collaboration

Three salutes to smart partnering—in workforce development, education, and our communities.

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“And that’s how I learned the difference between collaborator and co-conspirator.”

Where the Mismatch Ends

The poverty rate is 28 percent. But thousands of jobs are open. Enter a new coalition with a new model.

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A Key to Character and More

Why teaching kids to think critically should top the education agenda—an interview with William Hughes.

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The Ways and Means of Collaboration

*A letter from Executive Director
Diana Spencer*

Dear Friends,

Collaboration comes in all forms—in the creation of a new workforce development program, in a teaching method that engages by helping students raise questions and formulate answers, and in the many partnerships we have with grantees as they serve people in need. Today, we're celebrating all three.

First is RISE, Readiness In Skilled Employment, a comprehensive workforce development initiative, which launched last month. However, the collaboration behind the initiative began over a year ago. With an eye to solving problems for those living at or below the poverty line, the William G. McGowan Charitable Fund reached out to highly respected nonprofits in our northeastern Pennsylvania region. We hoped to co-design a program that could enable participants to attend classes, coaching sessions, and other activities by removing barriers such as housing instability, lack of transportation, a dearth of quality childcare, and more. The goal: a viable pathway for people to earn certificates in a trade of their choosing and, ultimately, a living-wage job with benefits.

The collaboration eventually involved Johnson College, United Neighborhood Centers of Northeastern Pennsylvania, The Institute for Public Policy & Economic Development, and McGowan. Our concerns ranged from eligibility to metrics, and included onboarding, curriculum design, coaching and mentoring, and a public relations campaign, as well as opportunities to celebrate every success along the way. The team met for hours each month and gradually a very special program emerged.



Needless to say, we are all very excited about the program, knowing of course that there will be challenges and that we will tackle them together.

Meanwhile, as the McGowan Fund works on its strategic plan, we're exploring the common threads that weave across our grant making programs. This month, with the generous help of William Hughes of The Kern Family Foundation, we explore how critical thinking and character development are linked and how they might be taught. Interestingly, Hughes's recommendation—Socratic teaching—is another kind of collaboration. It gives voice to student thought, hones questions and answers, fosters mutual respect, and leverages all the minds in the room in productive give-and-take. We thank Bill for his time and expertise and encourage you to reach out with your thoughts on Socratic teaching.

The third collaboration is of course our partnership with grantees. Our work cannot be done without our nonprofit partners, those we know and those we look forward to meeting. It's through grantees that we reach people in critical need—neighbors, citizens, parents looking for work, children learning how to read amid disruption. We want to hear your ideas about how to effect sustainable change in McGowan's program areas. We want to see powerful partnerships emerge demonstrating "the whole is always greater than the sum of the parts." 📖

Sincerely,

Diana Spencer
Executive Director

Readiness In Skilled Employment (RISE) Launches

Tackling the mismatch between available jobs and the people who need them



The poverty rate in Scranton, a city of 77,000 in northeastern Pennsylvania, is 24 percent. Yet thousands of jobs are unfilled. One reason: There's a mismatch between the people who need jobs and the jobs that are open.

Enter a new coalition with a new model, which launched in January. The program, called Readiness In Skilled Employment (RISE) has been developed by a collaborative including Johnson College, United Neighborhood Centers of Northeastern Pennsylvania, The Institute for Public Policy & Economic Development, and the William G. McGowan Charitable Fund. Participants are unemployed and underemployed adults living 250 percent below the federal poverty level. Cohorts are comprised of 20 people and run for 9–12 months.

Combining education and job training in a coordinated, comprehensive, and evidence-based ecosystem, the program offers executive skills coaching and wraparound services that remove the kind of barriers that low-wage and disadvantaged workers face, such as poor transportation; housing instability; lack of affordable, quality childcare; and, crucially, a dearth of accessible training for living-wage jobs. Add to that a bewildering array of nearly one million credentials available in the U.S., including certificates, licenses, and industry certifications, some more costly and less usable than others.

In contrast, Johnson's record of teaching and the research that underpins RISE are solid. In 2020, graduates of Johnson's vet nursing program achieved a 100 percent pass rate on the national licensing exam; grads of the radiologic tech program scored a pass rate of 95 percent on the national registry exam. Programs available to RISE participants include building and property maintenance, diesel preventative maintenance, welding technology, industrial technology, clinical medical assistant, and computer support specialist—all of which address gaps in the current and future job market. "These jobs require all different levels of education, training, and skills. There is opportunity!" Teri Ooms, executive director of The Institute, says. For instance, demand for welders in northeastern Pennsylvania will increase 8 percent in the next eight years. Demand for industrial technology employees will grow 19 percent.

Alongside hands-on job training, students will learn executive skills and receive case management, academic advising, career counseling, and other support services.

Not surprisingly, RISE has already been cited as a model for potential expansion into other locations.

Assessment will run throughout the program, which will fuel corrections **lif** necessary. At the course's end, evaluation continues, benchmarking at 6, 9, 12, and 24 months.

A Key to Character and More

Teaching kids to think critically can and should top the education agenda—an interview with William Hughes



William Hughes is a leader with a deep background in education and strong beliefs. “I believe in a science of thinking,” is one of them, he says. Others include: Leadership is learned, character can be taught, critical thinking is crucial to both, and the Socratic method is an accessible and invaluable tool. In fact, Hughes puts these topics at the top of his professional agenda at The Kern Family Foundation, and he’d love it if everyone else in education did too.

Hughes’s efforts and point of view align in large part with those of the McGowan Fund, which supports K–12 education, a range of job-training programs, and the McGowan Fellows Program, a scholarship and leadership development program that works with 10 top-tier MBA students each year. That’s why we sat down to ask him more about his ideas, especially those around character.

At first, the terms he uses—character development, critical thinking, leadership, virtues, and Socratic method—can all seem far afield from each other and the typical American classroom. But he’s patient about connecting the dots, much as they are connected in the Framework for Character Education in Schools (2017), a document developed by the interdisciplinary Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, located at the University of Birmingham in Great Britain. The Framework describes character education as equipping students with the intellectual tools to make wise choices of their own within a democratic society. Among the building blocks of character are the expected moral and civic virtues, but also intellectual virtues, such as critical thinking and reflection, and performance virtues, such as confidence and resilience. According to the Framework, the virtues should be reinforced everywhere in a school—on the playing field, in classrooms, staff training, special events.

“American education is in trouble,” Hughes says—and not just because these building virtues aren’t explicitly and appropriately taught. For instance, in 2019, in Wisconsin, where Hughes has served as a teacher, principal, and superintendent of schools, 39 percent of K–12 students were proficient in reading at grade level. That year—before the COVID disruption—34 percent of eighth graders were proficient nationally. This means that American kids can’t read for comprehension, for mastery over the subject matter at hand, Hughes says.

But it also means they can’t read critically, with an eye toward independent decision-making. Has the author made a good point? Does she have evidence to back her argument up? Has she cheated a bit in the way she draws conclusions from the evidence? What do I think about what she says and how do I think we should act on it?


“Critical thinking is a requirement for leadership ability,” Hughes says. The statement makes sense when the building blocks of character are laid out this way. But then he adds, “Everyone can be a leader of a kind in some setting,” which is bold, hopeful, and maybe a little hard to believe.

Hughes offers experience. “I’m a believer in the Socratic method,” he says. The Socratic method challenges students to master material and then answer probing questions from the teacher. Those questions and the subsequent discussion develop critical thinking, reflection, confidence, and more. “Most kids nine and ten can do this,” Hughes says. He’s seen it work in high-poverty schools. “It’s not going to be Day 1, but it works. If kids feel an attachment to a subject, then they’re engaged.”

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How can public schools do this? Hughes imagines a district portal that provides curriculum down to the lesson. The questions must be well designed. Teachers must be trained. It will take some doing: Some American schools are operating on a 20th-century model. “Education has been figured out,” he says, noting that methods around fostering character, identifying virtues, and promoting critical thinking have been known for years, “but the public school system is not ready to be dismantled.”

Meanwhile, in his work as program director at the Kern Foundation, he leads a team managing more than \$35 million in grants focusing on character education, leadership development, and preparation. One example is an \$8.6 million grant to Wake Forest University to develop programs that put character at the center of preparing students for work in the professions. Among the objectives: reframing the meaning and process of learning to “think like a lawyer” and integrating leadership and character into the medical school curriculum. 

Read more about critical thinking:

Recommended by William Hughes: a blueprint for character education that includes—guess what?—critical thinking. [The Jubilee Centre Framework for Character Education in Schools](#).

What teachers already know: Teaching critical thinking is hard. [This summary explains why](#).

How important is critical thinking? [A new study about the dynamics of misinformation](#) identifies the “lack of analytical thinking and/or deliberation” as a key driver of false beliefs. Plus, 90 percent of [employers say they value critical thinking](#) over a degree in a specific field.

