A Field of Dreams and an Army of Volunteers: Lakewood, Colorado

BY MICHAEL MCGRATH

Go to the website of the Lakewood Church of Christ in the Green Mountain neighborhood of Lakewood, Colorado, and you'll see a slogan, "Committed to Christ, Committed to Community." It's more than a slogan. The church's energetic senior pastor, Reg Cox, has become a driving force in local efforts to unite the city, the school district, parents, businesses, homeowners, and neighborhood groups and what he hopes will one day be "an army of volunteers" in a communitywide crusade to improve the educational opportunities of young people in this older, "inner-ring" suburb of Denver.

A few blocks down the road from the church is Foothills Elementary School, where the pastor spends about two afternoons a week coordinating a faith-based volunteer-tutoring program known as Whiz Kids. When we visited him recently, he was in the principal's office, duct taping the boot of one of the students. The kid was from a home so financially strapped that he was wearing boots two sizes too small, not to mention the fact that that there was a hole in the bottom of one of them, and there was fifteen inches of snow on the ground, at the moment.

Whiz Kids is a collaborative effort of local churches, community members, school officials, and business leaders. It began in 1990 in Denver as an effort to partner suburban and urban churches with urban schools. Today, the organization boasts of having more than 50 sites serving 800 elementary schools throughout the metro area. Cox was instrumental in bringing the program to Foothills Elementary, a struggling school in a transitional part of the city where half the residents live in the spacious Green Mountain subdivision and half in a section of the city where most of the houses have been carved up into affordable, multifamily residences.

"The principal says we've had a pretty profound impact," Reg Cox says.

> In two academic years scores have gone up dramatically. The school has moved from like a C level to a B level. I met with one of the school board members recently, and asked her: Is that possible? Can an underperforming school move up that much in two years? And she said, "No, that can't be done. To take a school of that level of underperforming to that level of performing would be pretty heady." So we're excited. Whiz Kids is only part of that. Teacher morale, creating an environment where learning is valued—all of those things kind of build on each other. Whiz kids is just one factor.

Asked if all the volunteers were from Lakewood Church of Christ, "It could be 10 or 20 different churches, all kinds of churches," he says.

> And we have folks from the community. The president of the Neighborhood Homeowners Association here on Green Mountain is one of the tutors, and she has recruited a bunch of neighbors, so there is a significant number of volunteers who don't go to church at all, they just want to serve the kids. One of the tutors here today is a real estate agent. He would tell you that tutoring affects his bottom line. If the school is strong, then the property values in the neighborhood are strong, and he makes more money selling houses on Green Mountain. If the school is way under-performing, it's harder for him to sell homes. This is simplistic, but there's two primary groups that look at homes—young families and investors. And when a young family looks at a home, their first questions is, how are the schools?

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"Neighborhoods age out," says Cox, referring to the fact that generations of homeowners grow old and move away, which can lead to a major change in the demographics of a neighborhood. He cites the example of another Lakewood neighborhood. where the original owners of the houses moved out years ago. Many were replaced by renters.

Cox fears that a similar aging out process is in the offing for Green Mountain neighborhood near Foothills Elementary. "Time is of the essence on Green Mountain," he says. "We have to turn around the school right now, because whenever these houses go up for sale, you need a strong elementary school and you need great property values and low crime to be the great attracter. My church is in this neighborhood. So if the neighborhood tanks, guess who's going with it? Me and all the businesses around here."

Lakewood, Colorado, is not really a city in the classic sense, but more a collection of neighborhoods and commercial districts that banded together to incorporate in the 1960s. An older, "inner ring" suburb, the community was entering a state of decline when it struck a new kind of gold in the early 2000s. The voters of the Denver metro area approved a tax increase to extend the area's light rail system west from downtown Denver along West Colfax. Civic and business leaders have done a savvy and environmentally sound job of exploiting the rail line, focusing on high density commercial and residential development at the light rail stations. They were assisted by a large group of citizens who attended workshops, taskforce meetings, and open house events to help with the job of restoring the dying commercial district. Matt Leighninger (2006, pp. 1–10) devotes ten pages telling the story of Lakewood's various experiments in deliberative planning, in his book, the *Next Form of Democracy*.

When it comes to retrofitting buildings to be more energy efficient or rail-centric smart growth, Lakewood, is way ahead of the curve, but education is a more complicated community challenge. The city is just one of a number of communities that fall under the jurisdiction of the Jeffco (Jefferson County) Schools, the second largest district in the state. The size and diversity of the district (from very urban and culturally liberal to very rural and conservative) makes it difficult for a single community to have an impact, much less a coherent plan for improving education.

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Reg Cox tells a story about how he and a group of fellow Lakewood pastors began to focus on improving the local schools. For about 10 years his pastors group, the Lakewood Church Network, has been meeting monthly for prayer and discussion. The local police chief, Kevin Paletta, told the pastors during a lunch meeting, if they wanted to make a difference in Lakewood, they should look at elementary schools. "You could work with the homeless, the hungry, aging populations, there were needs in all of those areas, but if you worked with an elementary school, you have an impact on a range of issues, crime, poverty, homelessness, you name it," says Cox.

> If you asked Chief Paletta, he doesn't even remember the conversation, but it really made an impact on me and the pastors. That was a very catalytic conversation. It just inspired us. We began to talk about partnering with schools, and the effect that elementary schools can have on the strength and the health of the neighborhood, and then the Lakewood Church Network began to have conversations with principals, just trying to fish around, well, what would it look like if churches were to help schools? What works, what doesn't work, and then what's going on in schools, what are the needs?

Reg Cox organized a lunch meeting between the pastors and a group of Lakewood school principals. "I just opened up the floor to them and let them tell stories, and boy did they ever tell stories." He recalls.

> The principals shared for about an hour and half, and just story after story of need and struggle and underperformance. All of us were

> overwhelmed. Nobody was saying a word. It was like getting kicked in the stomach for an hour and half. At the end of the meeting, Mayor Bob Murphy, who had been invited to the meeting said, "Reg, I go to thousands of meetings, this is the most important meeting I've ever been too." I didn't really understand the significance of that statement, but it became a doorway to a relationship between the church network and the city working together on several projects.

Cox is a firm believer in the power of relationships, and keeping those relationships healthy is part of what he sees as his role in the community. "We have to keep building and fighting for the health of the relationship. The relationship is not a onetime thing. You've got to keep that relationship active. You've got to continue and build trust, and the relationship takes work. It's just a lot easier to say, 'Ah, schools are broken. Forget it.' Part of my role is to build more bridges, bring more people in."

The relationship between Cox's church and the neighborhood elementary school began with a successful, collaborative, community-based effort to reclaim an abandoned playing field, an effort known locally as the "Foothills Field of Dreams." The area surrounding Foothills Elementary used to be more affluent than it is today, but changes in the neighborhood, the community, and the school district have taken their toll. About 60 percent of the school population qualifies for the free or reduced-cost lunch program, and the students have a mobility rate of about 40–45 percent, which makes the task of educating kids more complicated. Adding to these demographic realities are budget cuts at the state and district levels. (Colorado's per capita spending on students ranks about 38th in the nation.)

Until quite recently, the kids at Foothills couldn't go outside to play. For as long as anyone can remember, the school's athletic field has been unusable. Poor maintenance and inadequate irrigation turned it into a rutted uneven playing field infested with a sharp, pernicious weed variously known as the "goat-head." Goat-heads have been known to put holes in soccer balls and to cling to the ankles and rip the clothes of the unfortunate kids who venture into the field. Physical education classes were held indoors in the gym. Field days were confined to a small area of blacktop on the side of the school. "The whole relationship with the school began with the broken sports field," says Cox. "We began to investigate, well what would it take to fix the sports field, so that began a conversation with the property management people of the city and the school district."

"I didn't know that sometimes different entities don't like to work together," says Cox with a sly smile. "Sometimes the county, and the school district and the city, the federal government don't work together, but the church was neutral ground, so we began to have a conversation. One of my cycling buddies, Hugh Duffy, is a project manager for the National Parks Service. I asked Hugh could you look at this field, so he put together a proposal like he was redoing a national park. He put together this 20-page dossier profile, the big three-dimensional drawing, which really got the ball rolling. We put together city leaders, civic leaders, business leaders, church leaders, PTA people and began the process of finding out what it would take to pursue a Greater Outdoors Colorado grant. We received a $350,000 grant. We raised another $148,000 and the field is done now, so our next phase. The principal, the homeowners' association president and myself, we're working on the next phase, a community garden, but we represent this whole group of people who were part of the field project."

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"There are two city councilmen who live here on Green Mountain," says Cox. "They would argue that stronger academics helps your elementary school, lowers crime, and raises property values in the neighborhood. Because of the field restoration, we now have an active sports facility where there was none. They had no outdoor sports when we started working with them. The field along with the academic melded together the potential transformation of the neighborhood, and you've got an active neighborhood leadership that wants to capitalize on those gains."

The success of the Field of Dreams project has been cited by local officials and civic leaders as a potential "template" for future school, neighborhood, community, and city initiatives. But Cox didn't stop with brokering the playing field deal. His next step was to focus on academics. The Whiz Kids program in Denver was already a proven success, so why not start a program at Foothills? "If you look at Whiz Kids, if you really simplify, well what's going on?" asked Cox. "Is there immense academic information transferred? No. The psychology of this really focuses on two things, I think. One of them is mentors. There's a power dynamic that goes on when the same adult works with the same student. It really is about 24, 25 Thursdays in the whole year, and it's only an hour every time you meet but the impact of the same tutor working with that same student is really important. I don't know what all is going on there, but there is an incredible dynamic of affirmation, consistency, relationship. That student really grows to feel comfortable with that tutor."

"The second is, this: what happens to a second grader and a third grader is exponentially more powerful than what happens to a fifth or sixth grader. Let's say that you've got a student that is struggling in math, a second grader. By the time they are a sixth grader, it's not twice as hard to get them up to speed, it's a hundred times as hard. You miss developmental growth stages. The bottom line is that we can work with kids that are really struggling academically, and you might say, 'Hey Reg, they're struggling because of their home situation or 50 other factors,' but if you can work with them at that sweet spot of second grade, third grade and get them back up to speed, self-esteem, academic motivation, all those things, social interaction, feeling comfortable with adults—all those things happen—boom! You're off to the races and so, you can just do so much more to a student at that sweet spot."

"My end goal," he adds, "is to have Whiz Kids in every single elementary in Lakewood, and to have an army of volunteers."

Reference

Leighninger, M. *The Next Form of Democracy: How Expert Rule Is Giving Way to Shared Governance—and Why Politics Will Never Be the Same*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006.

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