

It did not take long for me to realize that a wide range of academic levels were present within my Kindergarten through 8th grade classes. Test scores corroborated what I already intuitively knew: I am teaching students in the 1st percentile and the 99th percentile. To make things even more challenging, I am teaching students in 50% English and 50% Spanish because I teach in a dual language school. It can be overwhelming for one teacher to try to meet the diverse needs of students. My colleagues have consistently been the ones to collaborate with me to address student needs— school leadership has been intermittently helpful. Four years of teaching in this context has endeared me to the mission of excellence and equity in public elementary schools. It has also shown me that we need better school leadership in order to organize that excellence and equity. I am applying to the Harvard Graduate School of Education's School Leadership Program (SLP) in order to become an elementary school administrator and to pursue my academic interests of bilingual education, gifted education, and school finances.

Objectives for Graduate Study

Simply put, my objective for graduate study is to become the principal of a public elementary school. I want to be an elementary school principal in order to be a consistent, unifying force in a school community that might otherwise be in flux. In four years of teaching in Chicago Public Schools, I have had four CEOs, three principals, four assistant principals, and two Chicago Teachers Union strikes. Even in my first year, I was sought out by principals, teachers, parents, and students to help solve challenging problems. I was asked to coach sports, teach difficult subjects, serve on committees, work with rebellious students, and finally to join the Instructional Leadership Team. My mentor teacher was the first person to ask about me becoming a principal. Since that validating moment, I have been preparing myself for principalship by reading research and policy, learning from veteran teachers, and

meeting with my former professors. Now that I have four years of rigorous teaching experience in an urban public school, I am confident that I am on track to becoming a great principal who unites parents, faculty, outside organizations, and students in a common mission. I want to become the principal of a Title I elementary school and stay there for decades of collaborative, equitable, excellent education. But first, I still have more to learn.

I see studying full-time at HGSE as a strategic continuation of what I have already learned from the conversations taking place on Appian Way. I have listened to every Askwith Forum dating back to 2009. My favorites from recent years include Jose Antonio Vargas' courageous questions about immigration, Chancellor Carmen Fariña's tremendous example of school leadership, and Dr. Noam Chomsky's visit to HGSE on the 45th anniversary of Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Additionally, in preparation for graduate school, I completed two Mass Open Online Courses (MOOCs) from Dr. Paul E. Peterson of the Program on Education Policy and Governance. While some may consider it counterproductive to take a hiatus from teaching, I want to spend a year of intense scholarship at HGSE because I have already been a student of HGSE for several years now.

I want to study in SLP because of its flexible curriculum and the opportunity it provides for collaboration. A principal earns his or her title by being the *principal teacher* of the school. To prepare for my vocation as a principal teacher, I would like to become an expert in education. As I noted before, my academic interests are varied: bilingual education, gifted education, and school finance. After consulting the core curriculum and SLP alumni, I am most looking forward to these relevant courses: Dr. Paola Uccelli's H-813 Bilingual Learners and Dr. Lee Teitel's A-397 Leading for Equity and Diversity in Integrated Schools. My favorite aspect of SLP's flexible curriculum is the opportunity to cross-register in another graduate school. For many educators, our focus is only on collaborating with other educators.

I want to cross-register in another graduate school in order to invite future leaders of business or law into the mission of education. Dr. Rosabeth Moss Kanter of the Harvard Business School often quotes the African adage “it takes a village to raise a child,” but reworks it for our contemporary challenges by saying “it takes a cross-sector, multi-stakeholder coalition to raise a child” (Kanter, 2014). Cross-sector collaboration starts with relationships. One of my main goals in taking a business or law class would be to befriend a classmate and start that cross-sector collaboration. Another opportunity for collaboration within SLP is, of course, with other educators. I think it is a natural tendency for students to focus on camaraderie in the present: start together, study together, and graduate together. But what happens when the SLP cohort is no longer together? My focus within the SLP cohort would be to find a way to bind us together for life after graduation. This long-term focus would undergird every relationship I have during the nine brief months on-campus.

Background

In order to communicate the background of my commitment to work in education, please allow me to return to the introduction in which I described my teaching context. What did I do with such a wide range of academic achievement in one classroom? First of all, I had to address the students at either end of the spectrum. I started documenting academic and behavioral accommodations in order to improve Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), 504 Plans, and Behavioral Plans. Simultaneously, I started a gifted program to focus on accelerated math and reading in each student’s second language. Students in the middle percentiles were able to benefit from the mainstream curricula, but more resources were always needed. To make up for this lack of resources, I recruited parent volunteers, visited students’ homes, fundraised to buy materials, and invited guest speakers into the classroom.

Through the process of responding to student needs, I discovered my main academic interests: bilingual education, gifted education, and equitable school finance.

I am a bilingual educator because I speak two languages and believe that more American students should too. We are at a juncture where many of our country's schools are still learning best practices for teaching English Language Learners (ELLs). Latino Americans just surpassed Black Americans as the largest minority group (U.S. Census, 2013). Census data also shows that more and more Americans born outside of the United States speak a language other than English (U.S. Census, 2012). Here in Chicago, the public school system has responded to the burgeoning need for bilingual education by creating 15 dual language programs. Nationwide, the number of dual language Mandarin programs tripled from 1995 to 2005 (Padilla, 2013). These facts, pregnant with political repercussions, help to convey the increasing importance of bilingual education in the USA. I see opportunities for growth in bilingual education towards two population demographics: continuing to improve our instruction of ELLs and drastically improving our instruction of foreign languages to monolingual (i.e. English-only) students. I see great potential within SLP to continue my preparation to lead a linguistically diverse, 21st Century American school.

I empathize with students who are bored by the scope and pace of their classroom's learning because that was my experience as an elementary school student. Dr. James Borland of Teachers College, Columbia University greatly impacted my thinking with his contention that gifted education is a form of special education. When the mainstream curriculum does not meet a student's needs, it must be tailored as a matter of human rights (Gifted Children's Bill of Rights, 2009). While it saddens me to not see a single HGSE course on gifted

education, I hope to pursue gifted education through the internship component of the School Leadership Program.

Why do I want to study school finance at HGSE? In short, because money greatly influences educational outcomes. My first day as a teacher, I was expected to report to the picket lines to protest for a fair contract in the 2012 Chicago Teacher's Union Strike. Nothing proves that money influences education quite like watching more than 50 schools get shut down, two labor strikes, and \$200,000 cut from your school budget. I see school funding as a means to change the Opportunity Gap, which exacerbates the well-documented Achievement Gap. As a school principal, I will need to understand the finances of our increasingly-indebted public school systems. In SLP, I hope to brainstorm with colleagues about equitable school funding strategies to compensate for schools being asked to do more with less.

Thank you for your time!

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