

# **Growing Effective Leaders through an Original Curriculum Design that is Stewarded by Innovation, Persistence, and Self-Determination: The Old Main STREAM Academy Educational Model**

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<https://doi.org/10.46767/kfp.2016-0041>

## **Abstract**

Using a perspective analysis of curriculum design, we advance the conversation on ways underrepresented and underserved communities can rethink educational design. From an original educational model, we interrupt traditional pedagogy to grow effective community leaders. In this paper, we blend Science, Technology, Reading, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics (STREAM), Place-Based Education (PBE), the North Carolina Standard Course of Study (NCSCOS), and Connectivity Movements to prepare students who are innovative, persistent, and self-determined. Moreover, the Old Main STREAM Academy educational model represents an approach that blends learning and community. It is important for community researchers to apply ancestral educational best practices within their own communities and homelands. From an ethnographic account, our perspective analysis reveals the need for grassroots folks to design and apply an original, comprehensive curriculum that supports the advancement and instructional well-being of underrepresented and underserved communities.

*Keywords:* Curriculum Design, Educational Model, STREAM, Place-Based Education, Charter, American Indian, Connectivity Movements, Collective Academic Responsibility

Sometimes, realism strikes, like a cutting wind on a chafed face. Reality settles that the circle of family and community should be honored, and reform is not always defined as present-day progress or banishing past practices. Southeastern Robeson County, and specifically, in the upper southwest corner of the southeastern county is rural and secluded. Historically, it is described as 'different'. It is described as poor in finances, limited opportunities, and restricted exposure juxtaposed against rich culture, earthy knowings, and ancient connections to the land. This is where this particular narrative begins. Just a while back, in 2018, a grassroots group acknowledged our communities and homes as poverty-based, steeped in complex social impacts with large populations of diverse people and a despairing need for educational choice. The grassroots group studied the prospect of pursuing a charter school. But, make no mistake, it was understood from the onset that the decision to pursue educational choice would be confronted head-on with struggle and barriers.....after all complacency is often a goal in the status quo of political and social issues (Moe, 2003). This grassroots group studying educational options, consisted of a small group of American Indian scholars who were willing to take academic responsibility for their own community; it is well understood by local community people and Natives that the southeastern community lands that the grassroots group reside on has been home to Native ancestors since before colonization (Kenny Clark, Lumbee Historian, Personal Communication, July 2017).

For this grassroots group, as individuals, pursuing higher educational opportunities and professional career success, conflict was inherited and encountered often through the amalgamation of moving forward and challenging deficits and

inequities. Consequently, problem-solving and persistence were familiar and well-known practices. A lesson that we all learned from pursuing higher education and navigating double-edged politics is that the balance is often fastidious and finicky. But there was an esteemed common stronghold in the grassroots group's lives that we shared from memories as children and that was the security of a safe haven and positive experiences in our community schools. The grassroots group believed our educational, lived experiences as youngsters were protected, deep, and engaging. This group wanted to recreate belonging, high academic expectations, and caring relationships established in our childhood schools. We believed those elements could be recaptured and children would flourish in the setting. Core priorities must include appropriate developmental stages aligned to grade-levels, quality academics and trust values influenced by holistic connections and leadership. So, purpose, mission and vision were crafted.

The purpose of the OMSA educational model is to offer multiple ongoing opportunities to develop cognitive real estate in dual learning systems for every learner. The learner uses all of their life domains, such as academic, personal, and cultural, to engage the holistic brain to learn, think, and problem-solve. This approach synthesizes the comprehensive world view of the learner. It is also a fancy way of the elders' saying, 'make sure you tell all the good parts of the story'. The mission of the model hierarchies children in a safe and orderly climate and identifies their gifts and skills to establish expectations for growth in all areas. Critically, the mission also aligns relevant cultural practices of learning and doing in our homes and communities to education standards (Ladson-Billings, 1995). We believed that this lens expounded necessary learning

applications and actions to grow leaders. The foundation of the model is that relationship defines trust and trust in teachers and school-building adults encourages the child's natural curiosity to explore, collaborate, engage, and learn. This is how resilience, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills are developed in students that may not use mainstream practices in daily life and are educated in our schools (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2019).

These ideas birthed Old Main STREAM Academy (OMSA) as an educational revival, springing forth with a stronger mission to engage students in Science, Technology, Reading, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics (STREAM) disciplines to prepare future leaders who are innovative, persistent, and self-determined (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2019). Student opportunities are at the forefront, using a synthesis of pedagogies and approaches to meet the targeted needs of the situated communities. Our communities identified as a significant minority, including more than thirty-three tribal nations represented, living in a range of socio-economic strata, while most people live in lower income households. Smart and determined, our actions declared, 'don't count us out!' We carry blood memories of survival and are willing to create new platforms for learning to level equity fields.

**Figure 1**

*Old Main STREAM Academy (Lindsay Hall)*



All American Indian board members were raised and nurtured on the east side of Interstate 95; Pembroke, Prospect, and Maxton. We all believed in the call for an educational reckoning and collective action. Each member demonstrated honed skills and were willing to apply those strengths. We would need these intellectual and lived depths to sustain each other in strategy and the forthcoming battles. Dr. Rose Marie Lowry-Townsend is the OMSA board chair, a figurehead and leader with 35 years of experience in roles to include educator, administrator, assistant superintendent, and superintendent. Vice chair and co-curricular designer is Dr. Brenda Dial-Deese, a practitioner with more than 30 years in education that include mental health and school counseling, supervision, tribal and non-tribal consulting, student services, and grant writing. Dr. Tiffany M. Locklear is an action-based administrator, co-curricular designer, an educator, and current university-level professor; teaching includes high-quality mathematics and science developmentally appropriate curriculum theory and practice.

Dr. Denise Hunt is a proven leader with state-of-the-art expertise in teaching, mentoring, and instructional coaching alongside a robust understanding for teaching reading.

Polishing the educational alliance is Mr. John Lowery, a manager in political and social movements with experienced operational economic development to include a teaching background and relationship building skills.

## Figure 2

*Old Main STREAM Board of Directors*



*Note:* From left to right: Mr. John Lowery, Dr. Brenda Dial-Deese, Dr. Tiffany M. Locklear, Dr. Rose Marie Lowry-Townsend, and Dr. Denise Hunt.

The hard focus and intent of this Board of Directors was to offer capacity as a means of community service, and to do so without compromise in response to the educational urgency that is distinct to the county. The local school system ranks approximately as the second lowest in the state of North Carolina (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021). The Board of Directors saw the need and advocated that all children deserve educational opportunities. Essentially, the Board of

Directors, as individual community members, are particularly invested in the well-being of our surrounding community members; additionally, it was believed that the establishment of this educational model would implement a more intuitive design for learning that naturally nourishes learning curiosity. The idea heightened that this work would represent a single blueprint to reconstruct hope in teaching, learning, and excelling. Moreover, the board members recognized the responsibilities this venture presented and carried the internal awareness of how to manage the complexities of processes, operations, academics, and the social and emotional needs of the community effectively and efficiently. Therefore, the board did not hire an outsourcing company. The board's expertise and professional community service was the impetus to confront the compelling, educational need in a distressed Robeson County. Six logistics for compelling need are listed in the North Carolina Department of Instruction (2019) state application:

- 1) the urgency for innovating across the school program;
- 2) to establish a pipeline for college and career readiness for the purpose to improve community economic growth;
- 3) urgency for educational accountability-students are leaving the county to pursue school choice; many are crossing the state line, into South Carolina
- 4) the need to establish a foundation for continuous learning;
- 5) location and support for OMSA is available, evident, and ready; and
- 6) innovating demonstrates greater autonomy in exchange for increased accountability.

The descriptive word.....urgent.....is indeed, most appropriate.

History of the emergence of the current Public Schools of Robeson County's educational system is warranted to better understand the momentous task of the OMSA conception and this board's idea smithing. In the mid to late 1980s, the local school district merged from six local school districts (N.C.G.S., 1987) with intentions of providing strengthened equity and educational opportunity to the thousands of students in a poor county. During that era Robeson County reported 60% minority (Mayfield et. al., 1981). However, decision-making in the educational system was (and still is) a political process; the 'norm' of operation and decision-making evolved quickly into a complex diabolized struggle, involving history, leadership, and people. The political process was known for the interactions between the more powerful social groups and policy that impacted education, educational resources, and support. The complexities of history, groups, and politics continue to impact education. Newcomers, such as those educational experts from NCDPI, consistently attempt to provide extensive support to the local school system. But, unfortunately, more often than not, it was an outright failure or a mediocre success. Subsequently, the OMSA Board of Directors determined that chartering was the viable option to use autonomy, transparency, and effective governance in the educational process and to establish educational policy.

Gaining energy and support for something new and innovative when bringing the proposition for school choice was paramount to gaining community leverage. The need was evident; multiple community stakeholders offered support and encouragement. Stakeholders included community members (local and out of the area), surrounding agencies, businesses, partnerships, organizations, Southeastern (SeA) Charter School Academy, and Communities In Schools (CIS) Charter School. SeA and CIS Boards of

Directors not only offered support, but recognized that together, as collaborators, we can better serve effectively as investors in the educational well-being of people.

Together, we can purposefully strengthen college and workforce preparedness in our students; these are contributions to the economic structure of Robeson County. By all accounts, educational value and proficiency must increase for healthy growth to occur in the economy.

Robeson County's economic status is grim. The per capita personal income (PCPI) in Robeson County in 2016 was documented at \$27,717 (Koirala, 2018). People in poverty remain very high, about 30.8%, which is more than double the national level (Koirala, 2018). In 2020, North Carolina Development Tier Designations assigned Robeson County as a dismal Tier I. Robeson County is designated as the state's second-poorest county (North Carolina Department of Commerce, 2019). Factually, when families are considering where to live, education is one of the top factors considered (Gruenewald, 2003). In an article by Dr. Terry Stoops published on June 6, 2019, it was noted that only four in ten students in Robeson County are proficient in reading and math, and local businesses justifiably worry that schools will not supply high school graduates with satisfactory skills and knowledge to be successful in the workplace. Currently, the largest demographic of poverty in Robeson County are ages 25-34 Deloitte (n.d.). And, as community citizens, we must acknowledge, these households are populated with school-age children.

The OMSA Board of Directors determined that our goal must be to execute intervention for our children. It was obvious to the grassroots group that community members were actively searching for school choice to provide opportunities, exposure,

instruction for preparedness, and a sound education for their children. Conclusive factors that community members were in search of increased quality in education included the decline of enrollment in the local school district; actually, the overall population for the county was in decline (and this trend continues); people are moving to more affluent communities. On the front, officials offered the rationale that the substantial decline in the local school district was directly adversely affected by recent natural disasters (Hurricane Matthew and Hurricane Florence) and currently, the ongoing pandemic.

It was obvious that an immediate and certain reaction to the challenges and growing dissatisfaction of the educational system was to move out of the county to seek quality work opportunities and school experiences for preparedness. And there was cause. The academic performance was in its worst slump. The NC School Report Card validated the struggling district with a statement on the 2018-2019 Report Card: "Public Schools of Robeson County have been designated as an NC Low Performing District." As required by North Carolina statute, a Low-Performing District, has greater than 50% of schools designated as low-performing schools. As an assigned low-performing school, a school has received a School Performance Grade of 'D' or 'F' and a growth status of 'Met' or 'Not Met'." The academic performance and ever-growing achievement gaps became unacceptable to many citizens in the Robeson communities, and parents acted in exercising the school choice option by finding educational opportunities in charter or private schools in the county, outside the county, and across state lines. It was clear as writing on the wall, it was past time for quality school choice in the upper

southwestern part of the 951 square mile radius county. (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, n.d.)

Fundamentally, the OMSA educational model would require specific and meaningful elements. The grassroots scholars were very aware of the perception of a blighted Robeson County - and in truth, our residents and students carry daily the traumas of past atrocities. In point of fact, this grassroots board carried personal ordeals with oppression, discrimination, and wounding acts. However, these individuals believed that the investment of caring adults and personal strength cultivation, the pairing of academic and cultural, purposefully developed mechanisms to navigate those landscapes. The board members developed coping skills that used consciousness to persevere by engaging dual learning systems (both traditional and mainstream) physically and mentally.

As insiders, we understand the relations within our community and are willing to “address the issues in a manner that shows integrity and awareness of some of the complicated issues facing us” (Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000, p. 166). Therein, building an educational model for diverse people must distinctly recognize the significance of culture, identity, education processes, learning engagement, belonging, and what the meaning of these words signaled to students. It is not always possible to blend these meanings in the learning process, but it is necessary to find the intersection that encourages the best practice of interrelating mainstream concepts to the action and application of cultural practices. Brayboy and Deyhle (2000) asserts that “Indigenous people, both as researchers and participants, hold the keys to getting, analyzing, and reporting ‘good data’ in qualitative and ethnographic studies examining lived

experiences” (p. 168). How do you project this in a standard curriculum that can embrace heritage, ways of knowing, and present those dual learning experiences?

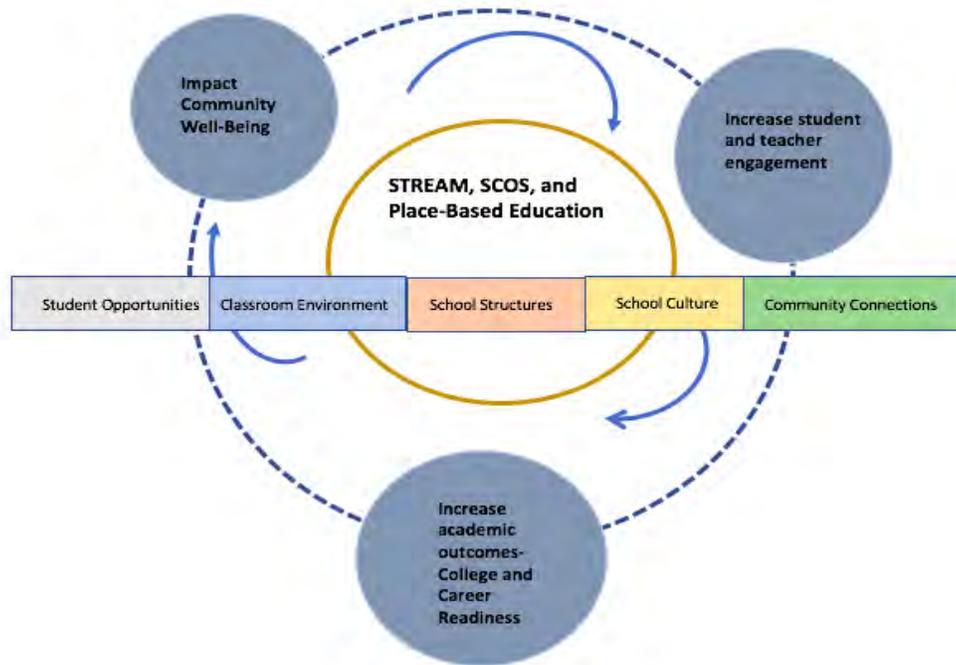
In research, we acknowledge, note, analyze, and offer implications. And....in some cases, ACTION must take place. The students of Robeson County desperately need educational trail blazers that are willing to oppose simplicity, mediocrity, and defeatism. Therefore, OMSA collaborated with stakeholders and community members to garner support for the charter school to be located in the Pembroke community. OMSA Board of Directors presented growth plan projections based on community discussions, surveys for interest, and virtual sessions to multiple interested groups. The growth plan was met with resonating support. It was frequently reiterated by board members that the OMSA mission and intent aligned perfectly with the educational well-being and economic development for prosperity. Priorities included teaching about the protection and wise use of our natural environment—air, land, and water resources—which are essential to support the economic growth and development of the region now and for future generations. Conclusively, if the communities demonstrated support and advocated for educational choice, the Board of Directors provided explicit expectations and standards to embed in the OMSA mission, and the OMSA educational model. The reckoning and influences of these stakeholders and board members articulated the compelling need for educational choice. Prior to this action, the compelling need was validated through passive outrage and apathy. But the formed alliances, alongside the proposed location, were not to be dismissed by the state board.

The OMSA educational model embodies Greek conceptualizations of ethos (character and ethics) and pathos (passion from the gut- Bryan Loritts, 2014). The

educational model is designed and birthed by our people, for our people; a curriculum stewarded in innovation, persistence, and self-determination. As a body of grassroots folks from Robeson County, North Carolina, we believe that we can grow effective leaders within our community through an original educational blueprint. As integral community members, the educational inheritance, lived accounts, connections to the land and expertise are eminent for potential growth. Therefore, the vision was constructed for Old Main STREAM Academy (OMSA) to provide authentic and novel learning experiences for students that do not have accessibility to attend high-achieving and/or successful schools. Through the educational model, students at OMSA will engage in school experiences from diverse educational perspectives; students will observe, learn and do from multiple worldviews and curriculums, contextualizing diverse pedagogies, and global studies integrated in meaningful ways (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2019).

**Figure 3**

*Old Main STREAM Academy Educational Model*



The OMSA educational model is designed to support students in cognitive, social, and emotional connectionist systems, employing the well-known systems dynamic STEM design (Friday Institute for Educational Innovation, 2019) to advance and operate as a STREAM and Place Based model (Vander et. al, 2020) in a rural diverse community. The OMSA educational model provides expectation, inclusion, and relevance in the classroom environment. STEM is the course-structure of the OMSA educational model with the added disciplines of R and A, Reading and the Arts. The OMSA Educational Model transforms STEM pedagogy to STREAM pedagogy for teaching and learning, anchoring content in the areas of science, technology, reading, engineering, arts, and mathematics. Daily instruction and practices are a social science strategy to establish a workforce that includes female students, students of color and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The evaluative framework, the North

Carolina STEM School Progress Rubric (Friday Institute for Educational Innovation, 2019), is documented as not being overly prescriptive and invites schools to explain conception and processes. The rubric points toward a vision in which North Carolina schools provide bountiful learning environments that enrich student life and give knowledge, experiences, and skills that propel them to become independent and thriving young people. Therefore, the model blends NC STEM principles with innovation and pedagogies to develop an educational model that is ‘the right fit’ for student populations that are diverse and underrepresented (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2019).

The OMSA educational model is designed to confront existing challenges and foster many substantial strengths, expanding STEM to STREAM. The “R” confirms a need to increase reading/literacy developing a reading brain. Reading is identified as a persistent challenge for students in the Robeson County community; the reading proficiency score is established at 25% (versus 46% North Carolina statewide average). Therefore, the OMSA Educational Model places priority on reading and literacy during early instruction. The “A” illuminates the significance of the arts, a cultural and visual enrichment, through traditional and contemporary forms of color, in both balance and perspective displays. Arts and humanities celebrate and encourage the power of high-quality education. Arts are a conduit to celebrate individual and collective human experiences, which is a precept of traditional science. The local community people are gifted in aesthetics. The facilitating core and framework of the educational model, horizontally extends toward connectivity movements. Connectivity movements provide space for relationships and communication within the learning process, externally in the environment, and real world (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2019).

#### **Figure 4**

Old Main STREAM Academy Overarching Principles as Connectivity Movements.

Student Opportunities	Classroom Environment	School Structures	School Culture	Community Connections
Key Elements	Key Elements	Key Elements	Key Elements	Key Elements
Students Designing (take the lead in solving a problem or answering a question)	Instruction Integrating Content	Professional Learning Focus	Old Main STREAM Academy Educational Model	STREAM-PBE Schools Network
Students Working in Teams	Varied Learning Approaches	Professional Learning Format and Structure	Data Informed and Continuous Improvement	OMSA Board of Directors and Advisory Council
Students Using Digital Technology	Multiple Assessment Types	Strategic Staffing for STREAM	Vibrant STREAM/PBE Culture	Parent Engagement Partnership
Opportunities with STREAM and PBE Stakeholders/Organizations	Teacher Collaboration	STREAM Disciplines, PBE Pedagogy	Serving Underrepresented Students	Community Strategy
	Professional Learning Communities	Integration of NCSOS and CCR Standards in STREAM and PBE Disciplines		

The grassroots collaboration served to develop the OMSA educational model to tap into a synergistic movement for accountability, resources, and strengths of the students and community. The connectivity movements are the energy/and motion among the pedagogies within the model (OMSA Charter Sections 8.1 & 9.1). Each connectivity movement has three to five key elements and are endorsed by the OMSA

educational model across the pedagogies as progressive delivery practices in day-to-day operations. The key elements describe particular characteristics that are embedded in the educational model. STREAM disciplines serve as the core of the educational model; these pathways establish a strong foundation for learning and are the course disciplines consistently applied across grade-levels with modification for student developmental levels. North Carolina Standard Course of Study (NCSCOS) and College and Career Readiness (CCR) Standards are internal and fully integrated in the STREAM pathways of study to develop literacy. These guidelines provide defined standards for the K-8 experience (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2019).

To personalize learning experiences, Place-Based Education (PBE) approaches are employed to frame STREAM disciplines as relative for relevance. PBE is characterized by student-driven, project-based explorations of local environmental issues, social questions, cultural heritage, or civic leadership. PBE has three active domains which represent increased student and teacher engagement, increased academic outcomes- college and career readiness, and impact community well-being. Students learn and build skills in PBE activities through interactions with local community members and investigations of their natural surroundings (Vander et. al, 2020). Students apply their practical knowledge and learn to help solve “real” problems, catalyze change, document history, and celebrate local identity. Moreover, research supports that underrepresented students benefit tremendously from ‘active learning’ (Smith, 2002).

Place-based education (PBE) helps students learn to take care of the world by understanding where they live and taking action in their own backyards and communities (Vander et. al. 2020). This promotes learning that is rooted in what is local—the unique history, environment, culture, economy, literature, and art of a

particular place and space. It is this relevance in learning that compliments quality norms and requirements; cultural memory actions become pertinent intrinsically to standard uniform learning goals. It is corroborated through research that PBE instruction and approaches improve environmental, social, and economic vitality. Relevancy, relativity, responsiveness, and cultural sensitivity are prerequisites for intrinsic reciprocity between self and learning in schools with diverse students. OMSA's educational model is committed to establishing and maturing this personal relationship. (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2019).

The OMSA educational model will assure engaged student opportunities to increase student performance, proficiency and classroom environments that require students to organize knowledge across disciplines, using varied learning approaches, and varied assessments such as performance-based assessments, projects, portfolios, and traditional quizzes and tests. OMSA recognizes the urgency in establishing standards and instructional practices that eradicate lack of progress and stagnancy in academic disciplines. Employing the educational model, OMSA commits momentum and energy in strategizing gains and improvement of academic performance and closing achievement gaps. This stamina is critical to the efforts for instituting OMSA and effective outcomes. The local school district continues to struggle with academic performance and closing achievement gaps (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021). OMSA proposes an innovative curriculum model that is relevant, rigorous, and reformative for students. With these educational understandings and community fellowship, OMSA hopes to move a distressed Robeson County forward.

It is appalling that particular folks avidly worked to disrupt this essential, frontline work. This is thought-provoking, when these particular folks live in Robeson County, and are adequately skilled and informed. Make no mistake....the statistics cannot be blurred, nor the certainty that we must prepare our children to compete outside of the Robeson County territory. Despite influential, societal, and political rifts, the OMSA Board of Directors have stayed the course, commencing the mission of being innovative, persistent, and self-determined themselves. With overflowing resilience, OMSA is progressively moving forward with community serviceability to advance good ole' Robeson County.

A whole slew of folks in Robeson County are ready to advocate for and ACT upon their educational inheritance. At birth, we inherit the right to a free, rigorous, relevant, and..... We add.....reformative education. And, it is good to know.....in this lifetime.....that inheritance can also be convenient. STREAM your way to OMSA, we are right off the banks of the Lumbee River.

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