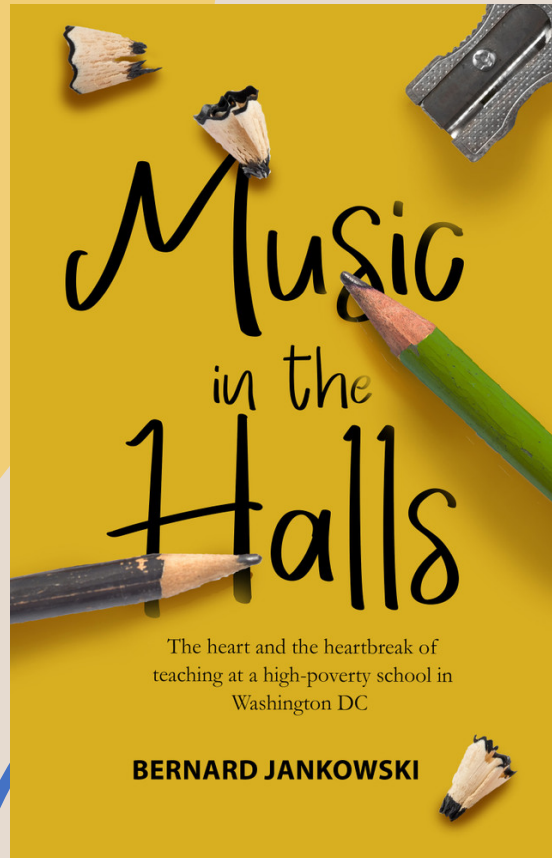


# *Music in the Halls* Study Guide



by Bernard Jankowski  
Foreword by Dwayne E. Ham, Sr., Ed. D.  
Epilogue by Marja Humphrey, PhD, NCC, LGPC

# Introduction

*Music in the Halls* is, as Dr. Humphrey notes in the Epilogue, “a memoir, documentary, and wakeup call neatly packaged into one text.” This creative nonfiction book tears the cover off the inner-workings of a high-poverty District of Columbia Public School (DCPS) eight blocks from the U.S. Capitol. By using various styles (vignettes, essays, snap shots, portraits, and poems), Jankowski explores the interweaving worlds of children, parents, teachers, administrators, and the DCPS bureaucracy with all their raw, hopeful, desperate, and unforgiving energies. The book also scrutinizes the effects of the teacher evaluation system (IMPACT) that focuses on the results of observations and “high stakes” testing. The book shows how this system places a stressful and often unfair lens on the lives of teachers and their students.

What makes this book essential is the deep exploration of the emotional side of poverty and how it effects the whole system. Jankowski brings the vitality, despair, and trauma of the children in DCPS into the light. Jankowski delves into the visceral nature of this world and how trauma impacts not only a student's ability to learn, but their ability to live a full life. Hardly a tale of only hard knocks, it is an exploration of how a person's understanding and compassion can be transformed and expanded to encompass this world. This story elevates the children’s needs and highlights how they are getting the short shrift in this educational system.



## from **Ground Zero**

As I enter this world, I know that this is ground zero of the educational experiment. Under the microscope, the lowest of the low, you know them as high-poverty, low-performing schools. Smack dab in the middle of the nationwide debate on education, these are tales from within those walls. Our job? To improve the kids' reading and math levels—not tomorrow, not over a reasonable amount of time, but NOW.

Connecting the building and all of us—students, teachers, administrators, janitors, clerical staff—is a high-tension wire. Everyone is on high alert; all are under constant observation (sometimes by multiple parties). We are measured, prodded, poked, analyzed, observed—everyone knows and has internalized the importance of the task: to educate these kids. No one is exactly sure what to do or what should be done to make the urgency productive and viable. Ideas are thrown at us left and right.

In this environment, you teach a group of students, many academically below grade level, who, if properly evaluated, would qualify for special education interventions. Resource poor, mission driven, fragmented, incoherent, idealistic, unrealistic, hyper-focused, unfocused: DCPS.

## **Ground Zero: Introductory Discussion**

1. What prior knowledge do you have about the environment at High Poverty Schools and the surrounding neighborhoods? Is this personal experience or what you have read or heard it in the news?
2. What prior knowledge do you have about Special Education programs?
3. Before reading this book, what do you think are the main problems at high poverty schools?
4. Why do you think these conditions exist?

## From **Sharpening Pencils**

Already, I was impressed with the beauty of Anacostia, the rolling hills, and the tree-lined streets. Through the lens of the news and stories from friends, I had imagined it some Bronx-like landscape of gutted-out buildings and empty warehouses.

Quite the contrary, the area looked green and friendly. Why this disjunct? What was going on? What had happened here? Here I was, among the stories of Anacostia, the roughest place in DC, notorious for drive-bys, murders, robberies, and drugs. Here, in the middle of it, soon there would be thirty kids surrounding me, all Black, and me, white. Divides, divides, what divides us? Myths of pencils. Myths of DC. Myths of Anacostia. Of white and Black, rich and poor, powerful and powerless. From the other side of the river, my new education was about to begin. I was being sharpened, clarified.

## **Chapter One: Across the Great Divide**

1. What do you think are the challenges Mr. J faces being a white teacher in a predominately black environment?
2. How would you describe his first experiences?
3. What are your thoughts/feelings about the wealth and equity disparities presented in the First Chapter?
4. What does Mr. J learn about children in poverty?



## Lavon by the Water Fountain

He hasn't spoken to any adult in months. A *selective mute* is how they classify his condition. He's a big kid and I work for months at building a relationship with him. I bring him to my room, give him a cookie. He speaks! "Thanks," he says in a surprisingly high and squeaky voice. That's all for conversation today. I want to ask him why he won't speak to anyone, but I don't want to stretch my luck.

He won't go to class, refuses to do any work. He stands at the water fountain for hours. Kids come up and he nods, turns it on for them, gives them their water. He refuses some, the bullies, or those who have done him wrong. This is all he can offer for now, this water.

## The Anger

The little boy is mad. Really mad. Again.

"Kalil, why are you always upset? What's bothering you?"

Kalil spits back, "I'm angry. Whatcha think?"

"Angry at what?"

He turned and looked me in the eye,

"Damn, Mr. J.!" his voice squeaked. "Angry at everything!"

## Chapter Two: The Children The Children

1. What is your reaction to reading the vignettes, poems, and stories about the children at Amidon?
2. What would you define as the main problems associated with the children in school and in their home environments?
3. What are examples of the trauma the students are experiencing?
4. What are some possible solutions to working with children in poverty?

## **This Job**

This job will get you, smack you down, make you cry, make you beg the kids for mercy. The sheer intensity takes its toll. In-your-face from the moment you walk in the door. The school year—a long, drawn-out baseball season, a marathon, not a sprint. This job makes you feel inadequate. You have to learn how to lose. You can’t “mail” this in. The maladies keep coming: headaches, indigestion, chest pains, chronic coughs, colds, flu, bronchitis; and leg, wrist, elbow, foot, and knee injuries.

Take a day off to pull yourself together, the administration is on your back, threatening your job. You’re trapped: Pressure from above, pressure from below, caught in this purgatory, losing years off your life. Teachers leave in droves. Some hold it together on pins and needles; others take a long, slow descent into sleepless nights and tortuous, thankless days.

## **Chapter Three: This Job**

1. What did you think about the working conditions of teachers at Amidon?
2. What do you think can be done to improve those conditions?
3. What are examples of trauma that the teachers are experiencing?
4. What are effective ways of evaluating a teacher’s performance?
5. What professional development can be provided that will assist teachers in being productive at their jobs?

## Choices

Mr. Dean, the assistant principal, strode into the room and read the kids the riot act. “You can’t *afford* to waste this time and lose your education. You can’t *afford* to not take advantage of your teachers. You have good teachers here. Mr. J. knows his stuff. Ms. Blulette is an educated person. They have college degrees. You do not have any privilege in this world. You have to scrap and claw for anything you can get. If you want anything in this world, you need to get ready to work for it. You have to do more than other people. Take advantage of this opportunity. You are black, you are black kids, do you understand me?” You could hear a pin drop.

“You are not like Mr. J., here. He’s white; he has privilege in this world. He can do what he wants.” The kids’ eyes swept to me sitting in the back of the room and *bam!* the whole argument of white privilege hit me. I did have choices in this world. I did have a good education, opportunities, a good chance to succeed, not a crooked, gamed-up chance like these children. I saw in stark terms the split between our two worlds and how blind someone can be to the magnitude of something—even when it’s right in front of your face.

## Chapter Four: Color Lines

1. What do you see as the challenges of a white teacher teaching in a predominately black school?
2. What does a white teacher have to know about themselves, the students, and the environment to teach effectively in a predominately black environment?
3. What are the privileges that Mr. J realizes he has that his students do not?
4. What does Mr. J realize about the equity of opportunities for his students?

## Dancing to Everybody's Beat

You know what's inclusive? Music is inclusive. This beat is inclusive. The big speakers are pulled out and the place is jumping as the beat echoes around the old gym. The special education kids can keep up with everybody now.

Chamika who can't read a lick, Bobby who can't add, Harold with his brittle bones and bottle-rimmed glasses—all are welcomed, none are bullied, none teased. The children swim in unison—all the kids together doing the Wobble. Coach and I smile to each other across the gym. Rhythm does this. The heartbeat does this. The fractured student body swoops together, weaves and claps as one, pulling together, whole.

## Chapter Five: Music in the Halls

1. What are the positive and joyous characteristics that Mr. J sees in his students?
2. What are the positive elements Mr. J sees in the school's neighborhood?
3. How does this realization help him with teaching and relating to his students?



## Chapter Six: Under the Thumb of Impact and High-Stakes Testing

### From “Massa” Educators

The master educators (or MEs) create a hyper culture of fear and paranoia. At any moment, someone might pop into a teacher’s room and slay them with their pen, until that teacher was out of a job. The teachers have little respect for these “experts,” believing that they do not fully understand or care about the issues facing high-poverty schools; the teachers know that these outsiders couldn’t survive ten minutes of actual teaching in their classrooms. To outlast the encounter and keep their jobs, most teachers put on a show. The whole process is often a charade, from the performance the teachers put on to the subjective and slap-dash evaluation that comes from the ME’s forty-five-minute classroom visits. People who work in the school day after day knew what went on in people’s classrooms; they knew who was doing a good job. To have a stranger briefly show up in a teacher’s room, unannounced, with the power to have that teacher fired is a bizarre, insulting, unproductive, and often cruel practice.

1. How would you describe the testing environment at Amidon?
2. Does testing help students progress academically or hinder their progress?
3. How does the IMPACT Evaluation system effect the teachers in the school?
4. What are the ways the teachers deal with the IMPACT system?
5. Are the teachers’ solutions reasonable? Ethical?

## **Violence in the Air**

A violence permeates the air. The students toward the teachers, the teachers toward the students, the administrators toward the teachers, the superintendent toward the administrators; a vicious thread that sets the tone for the whole school. Compassion comes in small doses. The whole staff is in hyper mode to help the kids, to keep their job, to stay out of trouble, and to stay on point, hoping not to be observed when the class is falling apart. Violence informs the language of emails, the language of dissent, the language of instruction. There is nowhere to hide.

## **Chapter Seven: The Pervading Violence**

1. Were you aware of the hardships that children endure in high-poverty environment? Did anything shock you? Surprise you?
2. What can be done about the notoriety and popularity that violence gives children?
3. Is future incarceration inevitable for some of these children? Why?
4. What steps can be taken to hack the school to prison pipeline?
5. What steps can a teacher take to create a caring culture within a violent and unpredictable environment?

## Spiral

The teachers came to a breaking point. So many seminars, speeches, and pep talks made to good people ready to run up any hill under any circumstance and yet without an overall coherent mission, it all fell apart. The school environment became raw, professional values were tossed to the wind, and adults yelled at each other, yelled at the administration, screamed at the kids. Desperately seeking some sense of control, the volume was raised, the tenor of the building escalated, everything became amplified, and everybody suffered. Everyone was searching for some semblance of order, some island in their storm, some way of addressing the world, only to be thrown back to the all-too-familiar world of chaos and distrust where possibility is truly lost. Grit and persistence can only last for so long. The desire to help kids can only be sustained over time if there is a clear plan, a plan that can be achieved, where the teachers and the students feel some degree of success. Otherwise, you spiral downward, which we did . . .

## Chapter Eight: This is the End

1. How can school systems become more stable and productive in a high-poverty environment?
2. How can school systems help teachers to not only survive but thrive in high poverty schools?
3. How can administrators build a supportive culture within the school environment instead of a gotcha culture?
4. What are steps school systems can take to improve the socioemotional climate of schools?

## Have Seen Both Sides

It all blew up. Between the finger pointing, the accusations, the students' meager gains, the rumors about the principal's absences, and confusion surrounding my IMPACT score, it came time for me to leave. The principal and assistant principal were let go, the official end of our five-year journey. I didn't have the will to take on yet another valiant attempt at transforming the ravages of multigenerational poverty here at Amidon. No more miracles were expected to appear on the horizon. I couldn't pretend that my understanding of the trials that lay ahead and the resources and expectations that were needed to alleviate those challenges were going to significantly differ from the past.

## Chapter Nine: Moving On

1. The forces that caused Mr. J to leave are evident in most school systems. What are these forces and what can be done to alleviate the pressure that teachers face daily?
2. How can school systems create a system that values teachers and provides the resources they need?
3. How can school systems create a system that values all children and provides the services they need?
4. What are the concrete steps that school systems can take?

# Music in the Halls by Bernard Jankowski

<https://regal-house-publishing.mybigcommerce.com/music-in-the-halls/>

Using vivid portraits, *Music in the Halls* reveals in telling detail the trauma of high poverty children. Jankowski captures the cultural dissonance and stressors, the generational trauma and PTSD, and the challenges of teaching with striking scenes, character portraits and essays. For professionals and others working in this environment, this book will motivate you to bring your best self inside the school building each and every day. These children deserve nothing less.

- **Dr. Dwayne E. Ham, Sr. Adjunct Professor, Bowie State University**

*Music in the Halls* is filled with a symphony of children's stories. Jankowski has an ear and a heart for his students. It's impossible to read this book without swaying or shuckling with sadness. This book will make one pray for change in our school systems.

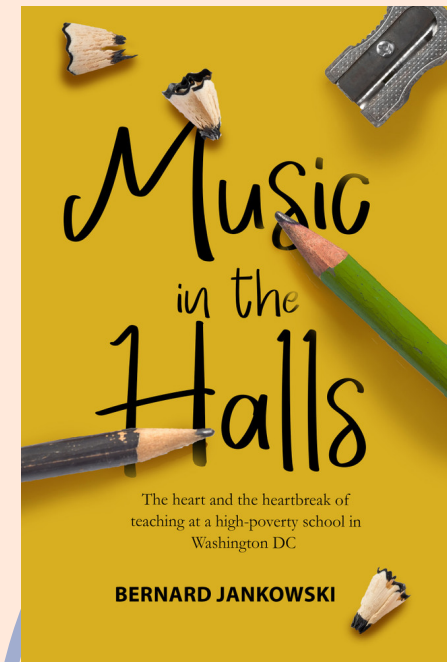
- **E. Ethebert Miller, Writer and Literary Activist**

I found myself riveted to every word on every paragraph through every page; the story is like a knife you hold in your hand that you can't let go and must be held carefully. How do we get every member of Congress to read this book? Nevertheless, I am confident that *Music in the Halls* will reach many readers who are passionate about children and education, not only for the profound statements, but for its emotional purity and rasp. *Music in the Halls* is a Masterwork.

- **Grace Cavalieri, Poet Laureate, Maryland**

*Music in the Halls* is a memoir, documentary, and wakeup call neatly packaged into one text. In turning the pages, *Lean on Me*, Spike Lee, and Abbott Elementary are pictured in my mind. Jankowski's book is one of intimacy, crying, violence, anger, animalistic desperation and isolation. Jankowski confronts us repeatedly, which education do we want? Which education do we value? Do not simply put down this book after you have read the last word. Decide in this moment how you will live with a focus on "social emotional needs more than strict education."

- **Marja Humphrey, Assistant Professor, School Counseling, Bowie State University**





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Available for purchase (paperback and hard cover) at:

<https://regal-house-publishing.mybigcommerce.com/music-in-the-halls/>

Kindle and Paperback versions available at Amazon.com. Audiobook available at Audible. Paperback also available at all major book distributors

Dr. Dwayne Ham and Bernard Jankowski presenting at the Maryland School Counselors Conference (Cambridge, MD)

