Letters to the Next President - What We Can Do About The Real Crisis in Public Education

A Book Review by Katy Kelly, Indiana

O ften when commuting or showering, those times when I have few mental distractions, I find myself composing mental letters to the editor of my local paper, to the school board, or, particularly in election years, to the president. This exercise helps me to focus my thinking around a particular subject. So when a copy of “Letters to the Next President” arrived on my desk early last summer it immediately caught my attention. In the words of its editor, Carl Glickman, this book is “...straight talk from experienced, caring, and intelligent citizens about what can be done to improve public education in America.”

Specifically, it is a collection of letters, written by a diverse group of people, at the invitation of Mr. Glickman, to the next president of the United States. The letters, written with passion and clarity, provide the reader (including the president, one hopes) with a deeper understanding of the complexity of significant issues facing educators in America today.

Some of the letters are familiar, comfortable, reaffirming: Ted Sizer gently guiding the president, suggesting that “you ponder fully what you want and hope for your own children and grandchildren.” Others opened my eyes to situations I was unaware of, like the one from Iris, writing from a Correctional Institution near the Canadian border: “...on behalf of the 2,000,000 women and men behind bars, I urge you to have the courage to reverse the trend of sending college-in-prison programs.” Jacqueline Irvine’s account of the young boy Darius still haunts me. When prompted by Ms. Irvine to “tell me about your dreams,” Darius replied, “Lady, I don’t see nothing and I don’t have no dreams.”

Dear Mr. President,

To educate is to develop attitudes and values needed to actively participate in the civic life of one’s local community, nation, and in the process and activities that the goals of education is to produce an effective citizen.

An effective citizen is one who can conceptualize, interpret, analyze, generalize, apply knowledge and evaluate knowledge. These are all critical thinking skills that in part are developed through education. Education provides opportunities for learners to participate in projects and activities that will develop their thinking skills. Through education, an individual can make reflective decisions and participate effectively in his or her society.

A school community’s teaching philosophy is one that promotes learning and meets the needs of ALL students. This is why it is important that colleges and universities train future teachers to teach the students of today and of the future and not those of 10 years ago. The students of today are more challenging and demanding due to the impact of globalization. Schools need to be a community of life-long learners with a common vision.

Our community of learners depends on our ability to develop relationships, especially our relationship with parents; this relationship needs to be fostered through the same strategies that we are implementing with students and staff. We need a re-alignment between the school and the family. I feel that families know what you want and hope for your own children and grandchildren.”

In his opening prologue, Bill Cosby uses a jazzy room as a metaphor for schools. In closing his letter to the next president he invites him “to look into this room. You have these letters to point the way, to keep you going as you sweep and mop and dust and even do some of the heavier work. You can say to our nation, ‘We must begin, we cannot wait for someone else to clear out the mess.’ My hope is that in 30 years from now this book will no longer matter because kids will have the public schools that they deserve.” I invite you to look into this book. It may inspire you, inform you and trouble you. You may even want to write a letter of your own. Here are a few letters from people who chose to do just that.

Phase 1 – Storytelling (approximately 1 hour)
1. Written Rememberings - Individually (15 minutes)
Participants have time to write in their journals – Think about times in your work life when you felt strong, when you felt your work was honored and you were living your true promise as an educator. List some of your most successful moments in your work. Select one of those moments to write or draw about. Where is the story for you in this successful experience?

2. Storytelling - Whole Group (Inside – Outside Circles) (30 minutes – 15 minutes each person)
Participants initiate the collaborative inquiry by sitting knee-to-knee within a circle facing out and a circle facing in.
Each pair shares stories of best practice based on their written reflections. Partners will take turns telling and documenting stories:
• the teller tells for 15 minutes.
• The listener records notes capturing important features of the story being shared.
• The partner pairs switch roles for the next 15 minutes.

3. Reviewing your partner’s story - Individually (10 minutes)
There is time now for each participant to review notes based on the story told to him or her. This is time to prepare for the responsibility of retelling the partner’s story in Phase 2 of the protocol.

Phase 2 – Retelling - Small Groups (approximately 1 hour)
Partner pairs regroup in small circle groupings of 4 (2 partner groups join together). THE FOLLOWING 3 STEPS ARE REPEATED FOR EACH PERSON IN THE GROUP: 10 minutes for each person = 40 minutes total for this section.

1. The partner (the one who listened to the story) introduces the storyteller to the group and retells the story that she heard. (4 minutes)
This process is often considered an especially meaningful aspect of the protocol experience. Participants feel supported and affirmed when they hear their stories told through someone else’s voice. There is a quick sense of linking story to story that begins to demonstrate giving life to quality work.

2. The owner of the original story has time to add to and/or clarify what their partner has shared. (2 minutes)
The original storyteller uses this time to confirm the highlights and add any other necessary details.

3. The group members now have time to ask clarifying questions. (4 minutes)
It is helpful to keep these questions focused on eliciting more information about what was “good.” This is not a time to make suggestions.

Phase 3 - Crafting and Claiming a Positive Inquiry Question - Individual Reflection and Whole Group Dialogue (flexible timing – group agrees on the amount of time needed)

1. Partners complete “Storytelling Summary Sheets” for one another based on the storytelling process and the questions that emerged from the group. Once the summary sheet is completed, it is given to the partner. Each person reviews her/ his notes from the storytelling experience and records responses on the summary sheet. The summary sheet is helpful in creating a shared data set based on the storytelling process and provides written documentation for the storyteller to use as a resource in crafting positive inquiry questions.

2a. Individually - This is space/time to reconsider how your personal story can serve as a beginning point for crafting an inquiry question that builds on some aspect of your work that is good and strong. What really matters? What do you want to remember to hold dear in your work? What do you want to be more involved with? When you have crafted a question for yourself, write it in the center of a sheet of chart paper. Each chart paper will now be treated as an individual “chalk talk” (see protocol for Chalk Talk process). Participants move from chart to chart and silently participate in a written conversation around each proposed question. The chalk talk provides an opportunity to “talk around the proposed questions – exploring and expanding the possibilities of the inquiry. The intent is not to answer or propose ways to resolve questions but rather explore related assumptions and ideas. At the conclusion of the “chalk talk,” each person has time to revise their question and the protocol closes with a go-round in which each person simply states their question for beginning an inquiry. It is understood that this question may go through several revisions once the inquiry is in process.

2b. For a group inquiry - The facilitator reconvenes everyone in one whole group Inquiry Circle.
Each person adds the themes/core values that were identified in their story and recorded on their summary sheet to a shared paper that is posted for the group to see. The facilitator encourages the group to review the posted themes/core values and dialogue is encouraged for the purpose of identifying a shared inquiry.

Debrief
The full version of this protocol is available on our website, www.nsrfharmony.org/connections.html

Connections: a Journal of the National School Reform Faculty

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Connections: a Journal of the National School Reform Faculty

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Inquiry Circles
An Appreciative Approach to Professional Inquiry
Betty Bisplinghoff, Georgia

"In the long run, a people is known, not by its statements or its statistics, but by the stories it tells."
- Flannery O'Connor

“...inquiry can poke air holes in your life!” These were the words of a group member at a recent NSRF Inquiry Institute. The group consisted of experienced CPG coaches who worked together to explore the viability of inquiry in our work using the Inquiry Circles Protocol. By shaping inquiry questions as laid out in the protocol, the group succeeded in moving beyond their current work world—one characterized by recent, huge budget cuts, school closures and job losses—to a place that required better understandings of what was good and strong in their work.

The Inquiry Circles Protocol is intended as a way to refresh our professional lives through an asset-based approach to inquiry. By constructing this protocol, I was inspired by the Appreciative Inquiry model for organizational change generated by Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros (2003). They proposed that "organizations move toward what they study" (p. 29). This protocol recognizes the power of our questions to influence our actions. In essence, how we inquire influences the culture of our schools.

It is my hope that the Inquiry Circles Protocol will help us remember to be curious, to share and develop our stories of professional strength, and to rebuild a narrative culture around us that contributes to a healthy and enriched professional life.

The protocol intentionally asks us to focus on what is healthy about our life’s work, but also helps us unmask such gifts through specific acts of critical friendship. It is clear that the ‘goodness’ is fraught with contradictions and complications but by choosing to grab hold of and build on the positive - what is good and working for us - we can make a difference in the quality of our work experiences and in the public conversation about education. This information should be at least as prominent in our discourse on schooling as the problems that are more often highlighted.

It is interesting to consider, as a professional community, what our stories will tell us about the actions we should support in order to make a positive difference for professional educators as learners and for students as learners. The protocol supports time for participants to think for themselves and to think in collaboration with others. It is a reflexive and expansive process. This is the dance of professional inquiry—space to reflect alone—space to reconsider in the company of respected others—space to act and grow.

The title of the protocol, Inquiry Circles, was chosen for several reasons:
1. to highlight the cyclical nature of inquiry—questions lead to more questions
2. to denote the continuous connections of understanding that inquiry can support
3. to present a method for supporting inquiry that asks people to circle-up and share their stories of hope and promise

Overall Purpose:
To generate robust inquiry questions that can lead our work in support of teachers and students as power-based learners.

Supporting Goals:
• to place inquiry at the heart of our work
• to support reflective practice
• to encourage the development of an evidence-based, positive narrative culture
• to build on the good
• to develop a vision-based professional voice

This protocol may be used as an agenda for a day in the design of a CPG Institute.

<i>A summary of the protocol is reprinted on the opposite page, and the full version is available on our website, at www.nsrfharmony.org/connections.html. You can reach Betty Bisplinghoff at bettyb@arcges.uga.edu</i>

The Real Crisis in Public Education
Kevin Gallagher and Rise Reinier, Bloomington, IN. They can be reached through e-mail at kgallagh@mccsc.edu and rreinier@mccsc.edu

Dear Mr. President:

I am the parent of two children in the Texas public school system. I have a sixteen-year-old daughter in the traditional public school and a thirteen-year-old son in a charter school. My daughter is an exceptional student with a positive sense of direction. My son has a passion for the mechanics of how things work; he has been diagnosed as dyslexic.

I am writing this letter to ask for the reduction of classroom sizes in our schools. The average size of the traditional classroom in this country is about 22–40 students per class. Statistics show that 3 out of 5 students who attend college are not equipped to successfully complete college. In the classroom the teacher should have the opportunity to know the student that he or she is teaching. There should be a personal relationship established between student and teacher. The idea is that no child is left behind.

Mr. President, the reduction in student-teacher ratio will be paramount in improving the education process of our children. Please ensure that every student and teacher has a real opportunity to succeed.

Sincerely,
Jerry Stephenson
1811 Grand Cayman Way
Mesquite, Texas 75149

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Prologue by Bill Cosby
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