

“Aggressive Neglect” in Urban Districts Calls for Unreasonable Action by Warriors of Justice!

Debbie Bambino, Pennsylvania

Dr. Maria Guajardo Lucero, the keynote speaker at NSRF’s 10th Annual Winter Meeting, issued a challenge. She urged us to be unreasonable as we define our sense of self, our sense of voice and our sense of vision. She reminded us that the realities of student failure and extreme poverty should not be accepted as reasonable in our nation and that we should consistently raise our voices about these inequities.

Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings in her essay, *Now They’re Wet: Hurricane Katrina as Metaphor for Social and Educational Neglect*, challenges us too. Dr. Ladson-Billings was in London when Katrina hit and after three days of horrific news coverage, she noted that the inequities being broadcast twenty-four seven were nothing new, it was just that our nation’s “aggressive neglect” was now on television for all the world to see. When asked about the disaster she said, “Actually, the only difference between the people you are seeing on television today and their status two weeks ago is now they’re wet!”

Along the same lines, Jonathan Kozol, when asked why the gaps between the haves and have-nots were hidden from so many before Katrina hit, said that the hurricane shelters were basically colonies of segregation that reflected the state of apartheid in our nation; colonies that the media chooses to ignore for the most part. And when asked why he doesn’t settle down now that he’s 69 and establish a network of slightly more innovative schools, he responded with an implicit challenge for the rest of us, saying, “...I don’t want to go to my grave helping to polish the apple of apartheid. I want to stir teachers and educators and decent academics to be more than technicians of innovative proficiencies—I want to stir them to be warriors of justice.”

So how will I be unreasonable? How will I respond to the aggressive neglect that is alive and well in my own city’s schools? How will I do my work as a Coach and a graduate student so that I am moving beyond polishing the apple of apartheid?

These questions serve as a reminder for me that my work as a Coach isn’t going far enough



Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings, Dr. Maria Guajardo Lucero, Jonathan Kozol

if it’s about developing better lessons here, or a personalized advisory program there, without engaging in the deeper collaborative discussions about the ways our schools reproduce the ongoing inequities of our society

In the same vein, my work as a graduate student needs to shed new light on the issues of power and inequity at play in the ways schools are failing kids, especially poor kids of color. In other words, my research needs to be participatory and action oriented, or it’s going to be just another dissertation that admires the problem of student failure, even though it might be looking at the crisis from a different angle.

The best way I know to push my thinking and my work beyond the safe, band-aid measures that I used to be content with, is to approach my work collaboratively across differences of race, class and position in the structures of our schools. If I continue to do my work mostly alone, or with other white teachers and grad students who look, and often think like me, chances are pretty good that I’ll stay locked-in to the status quo of my own thinking and practice. However, if I build bridges across differences and include teachers of color, students and members of their families in the mix, I can increase the likelihood for multiple perspectives and theories of action to emerge.

Dr. Ladson-Billings suggests that “aggressive attention” is needed before we forget the lessons of Katrina. Jonathan Kozol calls for an end to high stakes testing and full funding for universal, high quality education. And Dr. Lucero’s young son urged us, through her, “to pay attention.” My challenge is to keep these lenses in place as (continued on page 13)

as the first Co-Directors. As time passed, the membership and configuration changed, but the model of part-time Co-Directors remained.

NSRF Co-Directors have dedicated extraordinary amounts of time, expertise, and passion to assure that NSRF remained a vibrant organization. Under their leadership, we have grown to include 35 active Centers of Activity and more than 12,000 CFG Coaches. Our focus on equity has sharpened. We are widely recognized as a high quality professional development organization. Schools and districts throughout the country seek out our National Facilitators to lead school improvement efforts.

To lead us into the next decade of work, the Accountability Council members believe that the organization now needs a single full-time, paid leader; someone who is not encumbered by the demands of another full- or even part-time job at the same time. A person devoting full attention to NSRF will enable us to thrive in the coming years. Leadership by a single Director will allow the organization to respond to the current ebb and flow of changing priorities among traditional NSRF funding sources and help us to develop new sources of financial support. It will improve communication and coordination of efforts.

At the May 2006 Accountability Council meeting, the Council will create a process to select a new NSRF Director. The process will be announced on the NSRF listservs immediately following that meeting.

We are acutely aware that inherent in this decision is the loss of multiple perspectives and representation in decision making. The Accountability Council, the Centers of Activity Council, and the membership at large will be called upon to assure that NSRF continues to reflect the richness and complexity of its membership. To that end, the Accountability Council will also develop an explicit selection process and a tenure policy for its members. This action will also be shared with the community through the listserv.

Meanwhile, Daniel and Debbi will continue

to serve as Co-Directors, and I will continue as Interim Director with the aid and guidance of the Accountability Council and support of the National Office staff. We are dedicated to doing the hard work necessary to insure that NSRF continues as a vital organization that fosters educational and social equity. We are working with the National Office staff and CES Northwest, the Seattle Center of Activity, to plan the 2007 Winter Meeting. Efforts are underway in the National Office to offer new support to Centers of Activity. Grant writing and other fund raising efforts are receiving dedicated attention from the Co-Directors and the Accountability Council. New collaborations and partnerships are under development with the Co-Directors working with Centers of Activity around the country. As we continue these efforts and embark on others, we look forward to the next ten years working with all of you to create a national organization that fulfills its promise. ■

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"Aggressive Neglect"...
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I pay attention "with" others, recognizing that it's fundamentally disrespectful and ineffectual to pay attention "for" them. ■

To read more about the thoughts of Dr. Ladson Billings, Jonathan Kozol and others about Equity after Katrina, read the Annenberg Institute for School Reform's Winter 2006 issue of Voices in Urban Education.

To share the ways you are taking up the challenge to move beyond "polishing the apple of apartheid," contact me, dbambino@earthlink.net, and we'll share your thoughts and experiences in Connections.