Debbie Bambino, Pennsylvania

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

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 talk, Now They’re Wet: Hurricane Katrina as Metaphor for Social and Educational Neglect, challenged 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 chose 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 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 adorns 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)

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Tuning for Equity (continued from page 14)
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Director’s Report (continued from page 1)

Camilla Greene, Connecticut

Daniel Baron and I co-facilitated a CFG Coaches training for the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) network schools in the CES Gates Small Schools Project along with Frank Honts and Greg Peters. The Co-Directors of the CES Gates Small School Project wanted clear that they wanted equity and the 10th Common Principle of CES to be the center of the CFG training. Daniel, Greg and myself were part of the Sonoma Coaching for Educational Equity Group last July. In crafting this CES CFG training, which was structured to be 2 1/2 days followed by another 2 1/2 days, we intentionally incorporated a lot of the strategies, readings and processes in the first block of the training.

In keeping with Coaching for Educational Equity (CFG) orientation, we, initially, as facilitators and later with the participants, made a commitment to using Discourse II and using an equity lens to look at student work and in our practice of the protocol: We also committed to opening a space and a place for the participants in the CFG training to do both the emotional and intellectual work required when you make a commitment to take up issues of equity.

This participant letter follows on the heels of the equity work we did during the first 2 1/2 days. It also is the result of a close collaboration with the Co-Directors of the CES Gates Small Schools Project and Daniel, Frank, Greg and myself. We offer this letter to you as one example of what it might look like and sound like to intentionally placed equity at the center of our work in new coaches training. We welcome your feedback.

Dear Colleagues,

It is hard to believe it has been almost two months since we began building our equity-centered learning community. As we prepare for our time together in Minnesota we hope that you have found many opportunities to reflect on and put into practice some of the learning that we did together in San Francisco.

As you know, creating equitable schools is the heart and soul of our work. In an equitable society test scores, graduation rates, average incomes, and fair elections would not be pre-determined by race, class, or gender. Educational institutions mirror our society’s inequities. Schools are used to reproduce a culture of inequity where many of the assumptions, values, and practices of the dominant culture serve to disadvantage the students of non-dominant cultures.

If we do not intentionally and meaningfully interrupt the inequitable sorting practices that exist in our schools and replace them with equitable practices, relationships and learning conditions we will continue to deny children of color and poor children a quality education. The 10th Common Principle of CES declares “that schools should model democratic practices honor diversity, and deliberately and explicitly challenge all forms of inequity.” Through our work together in the CES Small Schools Network we have the power to create equitable new small schools (start-ups and conversions) and to deliberately improve our existing small schools to reflect democratic and equitable practices.

In our CES Small Schools we have accepted the challenge to be the change we want to see. As Gandhi once said, “We must become the change we wish to see in the world.” Consequently, we, as teachers, administrators, and other educators must end the inequitable practices in our classrooms, schools, and districts and re-invent these institutions with equity for outcomes for all students. To do this work wholeheartedly we must ask ourselves: What are the moral issues and the sense of urgency that drives this work? How can we, as teachers, administrators, and other educators in our context see and understand the current inequities in the cultural, economic, political, and social communities of our nation and our schools and an understanding of oppression, power, privilege, and hegemony.

Creating the space for intellectual, emotional, and spiritual growth to break the bonds of these inequities and reflecting privately and/or communally about our own complicity without fear or rushing to judgment.

Empowering educators to ally themselves within and across racial, gender, and class boundaries.

Interrupting and responding to denial, hostility, and other inequities in real time. Highlighting how these inequities are.

As the first Co-Directors. As time passed, the membership and configuration changed, but the model of part-time Co-Directors remained. NSF-NSRF Co-Directors have dedicated extraordinary amounts of time, expertise, and passion to assure that NSF-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, 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 the second half of the Coaching for Educational Equity training we will continue to develop the will, skill, knowledge, capacity, and emotional intelligence to teach, coach, and lead for educational equity. The seminar develops these traits by:

- Defining educational equity
- Sharing an understanding of the historical and current inequities in the cultural, economic, political, and social communities of our nation and our schools and an understanding of oppression, power, privilege, and hegemony.
- Creating the space for intellectual, emotional, and spiritual growth to break the bonds of these inequities and reflecting privately and/or communally about our own complicity without fear or rushing to judgment.
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- Interrupting and responding to denial, hostility, and other inequities in real time.

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I pay attention “with” others, recognizing that it’s fundamentally disempowering and inequitable 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, dbarnbim@earthlink.net, and we’ll share your thoughts and experiences in Connections.

“Aggressive Neglect”...

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