

Connections

the Journal of the National School Reform Faculty

Fall 2007

Director's Report Steven Strull, Director

The waves are crashing on the shore and the kids are in camp. It is a magnificent July day and our summer is in full swing. As I've thought about this *Connections* article for the past several days – my editor would say weeks – my thoughts have swung back and forth from the school year just passed to the one ahead of us. Before looking forward, though, I am taking the time to reflect on this past year's accomplishments, challenges, and considerable learnings.

My first trip as director was to Souhegan High School and our first-ever regional summit. We had never done a regional summit before and we didn't really know what to do or what to expect. What Heidi, our National Center coordinator, and I did know was that we would be among friends and that the conversations were going to be critical. We also figured if we spent half the time on local matters, learning from each other about how the work was taking shape in New England, and half the time tuning our thinking about the directions we thought the national organization should head, that we would all learn a great deal and folks would feel their time was well spent.

I remember driving to New Hampshire realizing how much I missed certain aspects of New England. I had never been to Souhegan before and I was looking forward to being in that space. Heidi and I met the night before and talked through our hopes and fears for the coming meeting. And I was nervous – this was new to me and I needed it to go well. I'm not so sure NSRF needed it to go well, but I certainly did. What happened was of course the only thing that could have, that is, a day-long NSRF meeting where we used our tools and processes to learn from each other and gain insight into our individual and collective practices. We pushed, prodded, challenged, and supported each other and spent a day in critical friendship working the best we knew how. And it felt great.

There were three additional summits this past year – two regional summits in Milwaukee and Denver followed by a membership summit in Houston. Each summit built on the one



prior, even though there were different people in the room. A real space of learning for me has been how deep and vast our knowledge base in NSRF is and how whoever comes are the right people. I know I'm borrowing from Open Space Technology, but as I think about the different experiences I've had, the four principles and the one law seem to have broad application.

The summits became significant because, along with the Centers Council meeting following the Winter Meeting, they informed and then defined our membership plan – the most significant piece of our restructuring effort. We learned from each meeting and refined our thinking and continued to tune it with trusted colleagues. By the time we issued the membership report, we had met with over a hundred and fifty National Facilitators in five or six separate meetings. I am very proud of the progress we made as a national organization toward our financial sustainability and I am clearer than ever that it will take our collective effort to realize our goals.

I think my greatest space of learning this year for my own practice was the BAEO conference this past spring. BAEO is the Black Association of Educational Options and I am a proud member. The leader is Howard Fuller- the former superintendent of the Milwaukee public schools- and he and the organization are "unapologetically" (continued on page 16)

black." They also run their organization unapologetically and neither you nor anyone else, including funders, have to like what they have to say, but neither Howard Fuller nor anyone else I met at the conference tailored their message based upon whom they were talking to.

BAEO believes in educational options for Black kids – period. And they mean all kinds of options: public school, private school, charter school, religious school, public vouchers for all kinds of schools, and home school, meeting the needs of each child as decided by the child's parents. There simply is nothing to defend in traditional public schools if those schools do not meet the needs of each child, and for poor black and brown kids in this country, public school is moderately fair at best and abusive and damaging to another generation of children at its worst – and there is plenty of the worst.

What I learned at the conference was that my privilege and access afford my children an OPTION that most urban kids don't have. My children, in practice, receive a voucher to attend school. The voucher is only good in the town I live in and its value – both monetarily and educationally – is largely based on the value of my home. The correlation between socioeconomic status and school success are striking. So, I think the real question is how to provide real OPTIONS for kids in all socioeconomic strata and not just my kids and other pretty-well-off kids. The realization hit me smack upside my head and I can no longer defend allowing politicians and bureaucrats to decide how best to educate other people's children. I didn't leave the conference with a whole lot of answers, but I certainly left with many questions that remain with me, and I know I don't look at schools in quite the same way.

One of my regrets this year was the opening at the Winter Meeting. We paraded one white person after the next onto the podium without intent and, worse, without thinking. After all the conversations and all the individual and collective work we've done around equity, our blindness was striking as we swam in the sea of white privilege.

I've been doing some motivational reading recently and one of the lessons is to learn from mistakes and not be afraid to make them. I learned a

great deal from that mistake and I believe our organization will become stronger if we unpack our mistakes publicly and hold ourselves accountable for changes in our practice. We cannot be afraid of making mistakes but we also need to stop making the same mistakes, time and time again.

As summer seminar agendas fade from planned to historic and we begin the new school year, I wonder what type of reflection I'll have after another year of struggle and accomplishment. What type of reflection might you have a year from now; what would the futures protocol have us understand about the school year ahead?

How many children will enter kindergarten this year; how many will learn to read? How many will drop out, get pushed out, or tune out; how many will graduate despite the odds? Who will enter college and who a spot on a street corner? What will we do this year to counter the destructive forces of racism and what steps will we take to recognize the hidden curriculum so we may struggle against it? How many new teachers will enter the profession and how many will leave? How many

new schools will we open and how many failed schools will we close? What will be different a year from now because of our involvement – because of who we are and what we bring to each situation? What will we each do toward our collective mission of educational and social equity? What will be our reflection?

A year ago I wrote that Isabella, our oldest, was entering first grade. We entered the experience with many questions and apprehensions, and despite my squabbling over the never-ending parade of homework dittos and the misuse of the developmental report card, in reality, I am grateful to Isabella's teacher, and for all she did this past year. Isabella learned how to read, mostly in school, an extraordinary process and, I think, a little bit of magic when coached by a parent. It's the magic that each child needs and deserves and it's our obligation to provide it. Have a wonderful and magical school year. ■

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