I was going through some boxes the other day and ran across my “office stuff” from my days at the Small Schools Workshop in Chicago. For me, office stuff is that assortment of paper, knick knacks, pictures, calling cards, and assorted paraphernalia that doesn’t fit neatly into a stack of files. After a very pleasant trip down memory lane, what caught my attention was a cartoon that once hung on the wall just next to my desk and that I looked at several times a day.

The cartoon depicts a student approaching a teacher’s desk with the simple but surprisingly complex statement, said in a bit of frustration, “yes, but it’s all a metaphor!” (emphasis added). The reader is left to wonder what prompted this exchange, as we don’t know what came before nor what occurred afterwards. The cartoon has special meaning for me, as this was how I was introduced to the small schools movement. While I was teaching at DuSable High School in Chicago, the “Bills” from the University of Illinois at Chicago - Bill Ayers, Bill Schubert, and Mike Klonsky - would come by the school from time to time and meet with teachers and administrators about ideas related to small schools and, specifically, how we might think about restructuring our rather typical urban comprehensive academic neighborhood high school. This was in the early days of Annenberg, well before the Gates Foundation was even an idea, so this was all pretty new and powerful stuff for a group of teachers struggling to make sense of their students’ near total lack of achievement as evidenced on just about any metric.

Those early conversations were about learning and teaching. We struggled and fumbled through the organizational questions, but in those days, we didn’t know enough to know that those things would consume the conversa-
Interrupting Business as Usual: A Principal’s Reflection on the Equity Project in His District and School

David Summergrad, Massachusetts

There’s an old saying: “If we keep doing things the way we have always done them, then we will keep getting the same results we have always had!”

And that is fine, if the results we have always had are what we want them to be. But— if they are not what we want them to be, then we have to be willing to change our way of doing business; in the words of educator Victor Cary, we need to interrupt business as usual, to create change and to achieve a different kind of result.

The issue of racial equity and achievement is simply too important for us to push aside, even if we have talked about it before; even if it makes others uncomfortable.

So what are we to do about it in Brookline School District and at Runkle School?

In the three years since Brookline began its equity project, with a goal of eliminates the racial achievement gap, we have looked at clear and compelling data that tells us that not all of our students are making a successful academic journey through school. By and large, African American and Latino children are disproportionately underrepresented in the upper tiers of our classes whether it is on measures like MCAS, DRAs, or classroom-based teacher-developed assessments. So these same groups of students are over-represented in special education programs, and they are under-represented in advanced courses. The result of this is that the so-called “subgroup” that teachers acknowledge that there are differences based on gender, race, economic status, and language, then we will never admit that there is a problem.

Call it “Educational 12-step” – the first step is admitting, “I’m Doug, and even though I’m not a lightweight community approach. NAF has been at this for quite some time and has learned and grown along with the larger school reform community. The founders, while not without their imperfections, are well thought out, well researched and resourced, and delivered respectfully with their school and school district partners.

The president of NAF is John Ferrandino, an accomplished urban educator working on his second retirement. John previously held a senior superintendent position in New York where he was responsible for supervising and evaluating scores of high schools and high school teachers and principals. By experience and stature, John Ferrandino is a qualified expert on the modern high school. At the opening of the NAF conference after the usual preamble, niceties, and thank-yous, John began speaking of the modern high school with passion and personal experience. Partway through his informal talk he declared with full emotion, that “high school sucks for kids – they survive, not thrive.” The room was silent – awed but silent – and John continued with his talk and the program, as naturally as if nothing had been said. But it was said and the truth was out. There was a palpable and collective nod, the unspoken word spoken of publicly and the charge was to take note and take responsibility for change. It was a simple statement, placed openly and honestly in front of a friendly audience who saw their work as responsive to the conditions they face.

In that one sentence, John framed the conversation for a group of co-competitors for change.

We interpret this as a universal, not universally reject- ing the high school construct wholesale, this group of educators knew they were seat-in that ballroom and that at least some change was necessary. And I was encouraged.

For as we all know, the current schooling conditions, whether large or small, for most poor children and children of color are akin to what Deborah Meier has recently described as “Dickensian drudge mills.”

As I continue traveling the country reaccounting myself with old friends and meeting new colleagues, I am increasingly encouraged by what I am noticing in the conversation toward instruction. There are decidedly encouraging and discouraging aspects of this shift, but I do believe, through understanding what is most important in the whole school reform conversation is the experience of the child, the quality of her experience, and the equity of outcome attached to meeting each child’s needs and interests. That is not to say that we have resolved structural issues nor that the increasing accountability demands will not come crashing down from their own weight, but perhaps, just perhaps, we are entering an era when we can finally stop tinkering with the construct of the modern high school toward inventing the next iteration of post-elementary schooling.

We have the power to decide what our schools ought to be. We can be a voice for play as the way children learn best, and as children learn through play in our system we can carefully guide them, as Dewey would argue, from the psychological to the logical.

We can embrace accountability as evidenced through the beating of locally devised, debated, and demonstrated standards, and as we did...
As facilitators of Critical Friends Group Seminars, we often hear feedback such as “This was the most powerful professional development of my career” and “CFGs have helped me examine my practice and collaborate in new ways with my colleagues.” The Washington State Center of Activity has been offering several Beginning and Continuing CFG Seminars for teachers in the region every year during the summer and school year. There are a great number of schools and organizations that have strong CFGs; many of the schools involved in transformation and school change attribute much of their success to their Critical Friends Groups and the collaborative and inquiry-based processes used. So as a region, we are very proud of our network, facilitators and participants.

But recently, one of our facilitation colleagues sent a letter to the area facilitation group, challenging us to go deeper in our learning together around issues of equity.

“As we continue to teach, coach, and lead in our schools, the evidence of the inequities speaks louder and louder. We need to work across difference to tune our ears to hear the screams in order to interrupt the inequities, as we shift our own practices in an effort to transition our schools to more equitable and proportionate institutions.”
—excerpt from Tanisha Davis Doss’s letter

Though we have discussed issues of equity and equity-centered activities, as I read this letter I still began to ask myself questions: Do we really understand what it means to focus on equity in our seminars and in our own work? Do we have the tools to engage in deep inquiry around issues of equity as a facilitation team and at the same time support our participants in doing so? What tools do we need to develop together? What does it look like to support colleagues from diverse backgrounds? How are we learning from each other? How do we keep creative and passionate with our CFG seminars so it does not become about the mechanics of a protocol but is truly about improving our schools (and our own practices) for each student? How am I modeling culturally competent pedagogy? The facilitation team in the Seattle area is (continued on page 13)

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when transforming our schools from an agrarian model to an industrial model, we can once again find the ability and passion to move from our current industrial model to a technological and knowledge model as yet to be invented.

We can decide to hold on to the metaphor of size for knowing each child well and taking responsibility for her experience and outcome. We can decide that instruction, pedagogy, and the very special relationship between child and teacher are the most important things we do. We can choose to educate most children well and to try our best with each child. We can and must find courage to face our fears and brace for change. We can choose equity over racism and the highest of locally devised standards and accountability metrics over standardization. And if we can and must, we will.

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Upcoming Events

February 7-9 & May 17-18, 2007 New Coaches Institute, Somerset, NJ

February 15, 2007 CFG Coaches Clinic, Los Angeles, CA

February 23, 2007 Creating & Sustaining Professional Learning Communities, Denver, CO

February 24, 2007 - March 31, 2007 Mondays and Saturdays New Coaches Institute, Houston, TX

February 26 - March 2, 2007 CFG New Coaches Institute, Pasadena, CA

March 3, 2007 NSRF San Antonio Spring Meeting, San Antonio, TX

March 26-30, 2007 CFG New Coaches Institute, Orange Co., CA

June 13-15, 2007 CFG Administrators Seminar, Denver, CO

June 18-22, 2007 CFG New Coaches Seminar, Denver, CO

June 25-29, 2007 CFG New Coaches Institute, Portland, OR

July 16-20, 2007 CFG Coaches Training for School Leaders, Keene, NH

July 30 - August 3, 2007 CFG New Coaches Institute, Portland, OR

For more information on these events, visit www.nsrfharmony.org and click Upcoming Events.

To list your event in Connections and/or on NSRF’s website, contact Chris Jones at 812.330.2702