Connections: the Journal of the National School Reform Faculty 2007 Winter

Brookline’s Equity Project, we step back and consider the courage required to undertake this effort. First of all, it takes courage for a school system like Brookline’s to publicly acknowledge this glaring area of weakness. We continue to collect data that is nearly unbelievable. In the movie An Inconvenient Truth, Al Gore reminds us that political will is a renewable resource; we will need to tap into this resource to develop the momentum required to create sustainable change.

Dr. James A. Williams, Superintendent of Schools in Buffalo, New York, suggests that we must ask four essential questions to help us close the gap: 1) What do students need to know and be able to do? That will guide our instruction. 2) How do we know when they have learned it? That will guide our assessment. 3) What will we do when they have not learned it? That will determine whether we interrupt business as usual to help us close the gap or whether we continue to accept the results we have now. 4) What will we do when they already know it? That is our call for appropriate differentiation that is so crucial to sustaining support for this effort.

If this were an easy task, teachers in schools like ours would have solved it long ago. Only if we are willing to face down a deeply entrenched problem and go at it with a resource and the persistence it requires will we get different results than we have been able to get in the past.

The challenges that face us today as educators do not lend themselves to quick fixes or isolated workshops. They require us to deepen our understanding as we develop new ways to build upon and expand the successes of the past. Whether we are working on closing the achievement gap, reaching out to include children who are on the autism spectrum, ensuring a safe and respectful learning environment for all of our students, or using the tools of technology to improve instruction and learning, we need to be willing to learn from each other in order to grow and to improve our practice.

We will continue to open our doors to all students, and we will continue to support the staff in acquiring the skills needed to teach all children effectively. We will work hard to ensure that we all have the training and resources necessary to do our jobs well.

M any of us understand the power of collaboration and reflective practice within Critical Friends Groups. However, we need to ask ourselves the question, do teachers informally create networks to support their teaching?

Teaching is a characteristically lonely vocation, offering the practitioner only limited opportunities for adult-to-adult interaction in the course of the average workday. Once the classroom door is closed at the start of the day, each teacher becomes separated from the rest of the school, a characteristic which has created an isolationist and alienating culture (Little, 1990; Rogers & Babyinski, 2002) endemic to the teaching profession (Court, 1999).

The individualistic nature of our educational system (Hargreaves, 1980) and the rigidity of the academic structure and schedule (Court, 1999) hinder teacher interaction during the workday. Moreover, current educational reforms and new curricula have added to the teacher workload, leaving even less time for professional interaction on a daily basis. I decided to explore this idea of informal support networks in an ethnography that I conducted for the last two years in another city’s K-8 school. I wanted to explore if, where, and how teachers informally support each other’s teaching. The teachers at John E. Farmer School were interviewed over two years in an inner city K-8 school. I wanted to explore if, where, and how teachers informally support each other’s teaching. The teachers at John E. Farmer School were interviewed once a week for two years in an inner city K-8 school.

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Fear, Mistrust, and Misunderstanding in the Teachers’ Lounge: An Ethnography
Lynnette Mawhinney, Pennsylvania

Interrupting Business as Usual...

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Interrupting Business as Usual...

What does it mean that teachers feel they cannot relax around parents? required to provide a formal space for teachers to interact (i.e., the teachers’ lounge). At many schools in the district, lack of space is a constant issue. Farmer School is no exception, as it is a school built for a capacity of 500 students, but actually holds 900. Due to this overcrowding, Farmer School combined its teachers’ lounge and Home and School Office at the start of the 2005-2006 school year. The Home and School Office is run by volunteer parents. As a result, many of the teachers indicated that they no longer view this space as a place for teachers to informally interact and to have open and honest conversations about their practice. For example, Cindy, a thirty-year veteran teacher, has been working at Farmer for twenty-five years. In an interview, she indicated her feelings about a teachers’ lounge filled with volunteer parents.

“To speak for myself, it’s not that I don’t want to socialize with the extra staff members who are not professional teachers, it’s not a snobby issue, but I don’t want to chill out. I don’t want parents looking at me like, oh look, she’s never working . . . I like those people and everybody and I do schmooze with them when I see them in the hallway, but to do it all the time, you know, to kick back and relax all the time in one specific place, I never really want it to look like I’m never working.”

Cindy’s feelings reflected that of other teachers as well, that the new designated teachers’ lounge is actually a space for parents. Thus, it is not a space conducive to the informal social interactions observed during their lunch periods, and completed a survey. Although the objective of this project was to look at social interactions, an interesting picture of how teachers design safe congregational spaces started to emerge. At Farmer School, the lunch hour is the only consistent time in the day when the teachers can connect with other adults. Many teachers discussed during their interview how lunch-time was important because it helped to alleviate the isolation of the teaching profession. What became an important basis for informal interactions between teachers was the space where the interactions took place.

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**References:**


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**Critical Pedagogy**

Camilla Greene, Connecticut

I have a T-shirt from a Coalition of Essential Schools Fall Forum. On it is the question: *What is Essential?* This is a question asked by a number of people. I believe that in our urban high school classrooms, what is essential is not being addressed, questioned or taught. We ask the wrong questions. We ask how we can close the achievement gap. We ask how can we get reluctant high school students to read or, at the very least, we ask how can we get the reluctant learners engaged in learning. The real question is: what does each high school student in America need to know and be able to do to live in a racially and economically divided global society? We need as educators to focus the learning of poor teens and teens of color on the dynamics of their realities of their lives. We need to be critical friends who engage in critical pedagogy with our urban, and I would venture, suburban youth.

At this point in my journey as an educator, facilitator, school coach, and technical assistance provider, I work in a variety of contexts. My most rewarding work is working and interacting with high school students from around the country. Whether I am working with or interacting with Matt Brown, a student at The High School for the Recording Arts in St. Paul, Minnesota, or Jermina, Ashley or Batelle, students at CEO Leadership Academy in Detroit, there are consistent practices that engage each of these students in critical and crucial ways. The educators who engage, teach, transform, support and help to develop these students are not the parents or the students themselves. It is not worth their attention. The challenge for us is to beat the odds and, with your help, achieve the markers of success set forth by the dominant culture in the game of education. But first they have to want to take on the challenge.

Caring is not enough to help urban high school students beat the odds. Beyond caring, our challenge as educators is to be conscious adults who can analyze our own belief systems and assumptions and critically about the purpose of public education in a democratic society. Once we have gotten a clear picture of the realities of public education in America, our job is then to help each student think and look critically at their lives and begin to craft their personal agenda on how each is going to define excellence, use their education to further their own development as individuals, and how each is going to use the knowledge, will and skills to strengthen his or her community. The question is not “how do we close the achievement gap.” Underlying that question is the assumption that if urban kids scored at or above the scores of white suburban kids, everything would be all right. The question is, how do I build a relationship with each individual person, and historically oppressed teen so that he or she gives me permission to...