Brandon Cosby: the new principal of Shortridge High School. For the last four years, Brandon has served as the Center of Excellence in Leadership of Learning (CELL) Senior Fellow for high school transformation and worked directly with Indianapolis Public Schools on high school conversions. Brandon joined CELL after serving nine years in the Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation, where he worked as a principal, assistant principal and high school teacher. Additionally, Brandon is an anti-racist activist and works in numerous communities and schools around the country. A New Castle, Indiana, native, Brandon is pursuing his Ed.D. in education administration at Oakland City University. He holds an M.A. in education administration from Oakland City University and a B.S. in speech communications and theatre teaching from the University of Indianapolis.

Brandon has two children: his son Zion (5) and his nephew Storm (17).

Who is Brandon Cosby?

I am a man who goes to work every day and tries to fix the system that I live in fear is going to claim my kids – when I say my kids, I mean my own boys.

What do you mean by “claim them”?

Kill them, incarcerate them, break their spirits, then go off-line, that is, interrupting it and putting something new in its place. Sometimes it means forcing the conversations.

How does this thinking – who you are – relate to your work with NSRF and its network of school reformers across the country?

Before my introduction to NSRF as a whole, this was work I was doing by myself. It was me in isolation with some ideas and using my own strong feelings I had from my own experiences as a student. My work was as an advocate for students whom I saw having similar experiences. I was a lone wolf.

When I interviewed for Center of Excellence in Leadership of Learning (CELL) in Indianapolis, I was interviewed by Camilla Greener, Lois Butler, Daniel Baron, Virginia Hardy, Tom Gregory, Wendy Brannen and Kevin Horton; to hear a whole room of people having dialogue around stuff that was sitting in my head... it was overwhelming. I didn’t fully sit in this room – in the middle of an interview – and wept because it was beyond what I thought was within the realm of possibility in Indiana.

That was my initial intro to NSRF, so I assumed NSRF as a national organization looked very much like my experience in Indianapolis. I assumed NSRF was about 70 percent African-American; I thought they were bringing people in the room proportionately. When I went to my first Winter Meeting, I nearly passed out as I realized that the folks they brought in for the interview made up about 70 percent of all the people of color.

So a lot of that initial CELL conversation, which drilled into this thing we call equity, became a real thing for me when we were having our national conversation about whether or not every CEF was equity-based. My question was, “How can they not be?” CEF work that is done in the absence of explicitly named inequities will only continue to get us what we have always gotten, off-line in hopes of putting different methods in place. When battling a machine, it comes down to taking it off-line, that is, interrupting it and putting something new in its place. Sometimes it means forcing the conversations.

Any inquiries regarding Vladimir should be directed to his teacher, Michaelann Kelley, at mkelley@aldine.k12.tx.us.

Students at the Center

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and we already know that’s unacceptable. Anyone who has done anti-racist work knows you cannot fight racism and “back equity” if you cannot first name the issue of race and what your goals are. It does not happen by accident.

What was your experience in being trained as a CFG coach?

I was trained in Indianapolis by Daniel Baron. I was in charge of bringing in the training prior to being trained myself. I was being trained along with all the school leaders I was responsible for. It was awkward to go with my role as a senior fellow, switch to participant at the table with teachers and new principals for whom the work was new, and then debrief each night to assess the quality of work. It was a huge dance of stepping in and out of the role of being trained vs. worrying about quality assurance and making sure coaches had the resources and materials they needed. Then, I had to go to the next level of discourse when considering the political implications and consequences for our district, our center and our university partner. I was wearing many different hats. It was beneficial in that it enabled me to talk of the power and significance of CFG work through the varied lenses of teacher, central office, university partner and even board for relevant decisions. (As a side note, I think we are missing a lot of important work by not preparing pre-service teachers in CFG.)

How has being part of a larger – albeit not as large as you originally thought – national effort impacted your original journey to interrupt the system?

More than anything, I have greater resolve and confidence in my work when I know that I have colleagues who are doing the same work, the same way, in other parts of the country. At times, it was giving a lecture and someone said to him afterwards, “Thank you for just letting me know that I am not crazy.” When Tim asked what was your original journey to interrupt the work that we are, what we do, and the significance of it all.

Even if we really dig in together and if we name it, educational equity, as we an organization still forget to tell the rest of the world who we are and what we are doing. People will remember the work getting done but will forget who did the work. We have to become better “PR” for ourselves – especially in these tight economic times when people are being very thoughtful of how they bring in. We will work ourselves out of existence because others will pick up the credit.

Don’t we also want to be clear about what we are doing and who the “we” are, in part so that people who do the work are the one’s doing it? Are we afraid to say who that is…who can lead equity work?

It can be done – but it has to be done across racial difference. As we really dig in, we need to create the cultures of schools, we have to look at this work across difference – all differences. We have to make sure that as a team of facilitators, we are representative of the population we intend to serve. And, even if everyone looks like you – not everybody is like you. There is a deeper conversation that needs to happen amongst those that don’t know this. No single, homogeneous group of people can do this work without a cross section. Well-intentioned as we are doing and who the “we” are, in part so that people who do the work are the one’s doing it? Are we afraid to say who that is…who can lead equity work?

I felt affirmed in this space where both my questions and expertise counted, amazed by the potential learning from a long, deep, collaborative discussion of just one piece of student or teacher work. …However, once the novelty began to wear off… dissatisfaction grew. - Ellen Key Ballock (2007)

Many report being rejuvenated by the opportunity to work with each other in collaborative ways. But often after a good experience with other teachers, after learning what a learning community is, after learning some protocols to look at student work, very little happens when they return to their urban classrooms. - Camilla Greene (2003)

These quotes, the first from a relatively new CFG coach and educational researcher, the second from a seasoned veteran teacher and National Facilitator of CFG seminars, point out both the possibilities and the pitfalls involved in this potentially powerful school reform model.

CFGs are at the heart of the work of the National School Reform Faculty. I have been in a CFG since being trained as a coach in 1996, and I cannot imagine a return to teaching in isolation or facilitating school change without this collaborative support. While learning and working in communities with other CFGs is more productive and powerful, it is not a foolproof recipe for student success.

Collaborating with teachers and other leaders, and I saw most of us do this, to create and the potential power of a CFG, a foundation of trust and a commitment to the struggle around issues that really matter must be nurtured and built. Simply dividing up staff members and labeling them teams, houses, CFGs or Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) won’t do it. Attending a summer seminar and dividing into family groups does not help either. In other words, as my colleague, Daniel Baron, often says, “CFGs are necessary but not sufficient,” if we are committed to transformational change in our schools. In order to really transform the learning into meaningful changes for students, individuals must be willing to change themselves, or as Margaret Wheatley (2002) says, we must be “willing to be disturbed.” Without an explicit focus on disturbing the status quo, CFG structures can become mired in the shallows. If participants don’t have the will, skill and access to the multiple perspectives needed to dig deep into the cross-section of our own deeply held beliefs and practices, teacher communities can become little more than teacher support groups. Dennis Sparks of the National Staff Development Council recently defined reframing as “providing other ways to think about a situation” (2008). It is precisely this reframing coupled with changes in practice and consistent internal group accountability (what I like to call “closing the loop”) that is needed to ensure that adults are thinking about what really matters for students and that our thinking and “talk” as adults gets translated into the “walk” or practice of real, changed learning experiences for students. Talking about common problems and dilemmas is a big first step against teacher isolation, and our CFG protocols require that presenting teachers focus on changes we can make in our own practice, potentially flipping the script of deficit-based models that blames students and their communities for the gaps in our practice. This focus on teacher responsibility is significant. Nevertheless, many CFGs are made up almost exclusively of white, middle-class teachers, and in elementary settings, the groups tend to be dis- tinctly male and white. In these homogeneous groups of dominant culture adults the practice of reframing does not come easily. For example, if the teachers recognize the need to address gaps in achievement scores between their white students and their students of color but are pursuing supposedly “colorblind,” equal support to all of their students, these teachers are unlikely to monitor their own teaching for biased practices. Lacking diversity themselves, the teachers’ perspectives are necessarily limited by their own experiences, despite their best intentions. Without the benefit of diversity, teachers can use protocols and work hard at collaboration, but our results will be akin to rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. In order to plot a new course (continued on page 14)