In your letter to NSRF members when you first became director, you said that you began your educative journey as a classroom teacher at DuSable High School in Chicago, where you learned about the Coalition of Essential Schools and the Annenberg Institute. Can you talk a little bit about how those organizations shaped your career and your thoughts on education?

Absolutely. Two things happened simultaneously when I was a first-year classroom teacher in Chicago. The first was that Bill Ayers and Bill Schubert, who were professors at the University of Illinois at Chicago, came to DuSable High School to begin a series of conversations with us (the teachers) about small schools. DuSable had been a Coalition of Essential Schools school back when there were only Nine Common Principles, and that was the lens we used to frame some of our work. Our principal had introduced us to the notion, as Ted Sizer would say, that “schooling and school reform ought to be a conversation among friends.”

So Bill and Bill came to DuSable and started talking about small schools, and I thought, “Well, that’s just about the silliest thing I ever heard of. Ten schools inside of one school? What does that mean, who goes where, who does what?” It just wasn’t a natural fit. My image - in fact the collective image of schooling - was that a school was a building, and a building was a school. Anything else was kind of silly.

The second thing that happened was that Ambassador Walter Annenberg gave the challenge grant to public education. The Annenberg Institute was set up at Brown University alongside the Coalition of Essential Schools. As a CES school, DuSable received the invitation for faculty members to apply to become Critical Friends Group Coaches with the newly formed National School Reform Faculty at Annenberg. My assistant principal gave me the packet and said she thought that this was something I should apply for, and the community came around and coached me through the application process. Looking back on it now, it was a very respectful way to enter the work. We wrote the application, which was many, many, many pages long and contained many questions and scenarios. A couple of months later, we got word that I’d been chosen to receive the training. That was in 1996, so it was the second year of CFG Coaches training, and so the fact that I had been selected was a really, really big deal. I would be flown to Seattle, we would be put up at a very nice hotel, all of our expenses would be paid, and we would each receive a stipend to do this work. To be told that I was going to travel across the country, be treated like a professional, and receive a stipend for my work was big, big, big, stuff.

Those two occurrences together set the course for the career that either I’ve chosen, or (continued on page 9)
you heard were the voices of “if Obama, a BLACK MAN can be the president of the U.S. I know I can do anything,” ... to know that I witnessed history make my family, friends and people to achieve a goal and that I can make it happen if I want to. But it takes me can achieve them, without any walls between me to do anything? Obama being president only moti- vated me as a black female to go out and achieve all of these goals. I felt like our country, the U.S. ... the best county on planet earth is ready for change, if we weren’t.Obama wouldn’t be my president today.” - Female mixed-race junior

“I was at my house watching T.V. with my par- ents. It is such a HUGE change for our country and hopefully now we can have more great changes. To have an African-American president in a powerful historic event. I think this changes how our country is going to be viewed and for our future.” - Female mixed-race junior

“I was at home on my computer. When they announced that Obama won, my mom started crying. I was excited but I kept my cool. I hope in the future more things would be easier and rational.” - Latino senior

“I was at basketball practice and we all just started about how dangerous it is for him. When I heard the amount of options I saw as possible broadened. When I came home my mother was cry- ing and hit me why we came to the U.S.” - Male Bosnian junior, experienced civil immigrant

“When I saw that many Republican states switched to Democratic states, such as Pennsylvania and Florida, I knew what was going to happen. I was excited but I kept my cool. I hope Obama makes world peace attainable.” - Male African-American senior

“I felt like there is a wall between the USA, maybe we can get on the other countries good sides again. I will tell people that this day a spark went off that ignited the American people ablaze with hope and courage.” - Male Bosnian junior, experienced civil immigrant

“I will tell my children . . . don’t forget kids, anyone can be whatever they want.” - Latino senior, immigrant

“I will encourage my children try become presid- ent if they want to.” - Deaf male Chinese sophomore

“To talk about the future we must understand the past and our past has filled with injustice and racism, hatred and slavery. Yet that night was truly a small step for 2 men but a huge step for mankind. The future has always been there but now I feel that rather than trying to put it off I want to run towards it (and) when I look back at the fourth of November of 2008 I will do so with pride and I will tell my kids and friends civil immigration and the great- est moments of America, the world and the human race!” - Latino senior, spoken word poet

At the Fall Forum, Glenn Singleton asked, “What does it mean that our next president has the face of our most undeserved students?” These students have certainly shared their answers to that question; what is yours? For me, I now realize that my own schema must change. In my effort to meet students where they are, I now must recognize I am working with a new day - a new world for our youth - one with more promise and possibility, one with a renewed sense of hope. 

Note: while the data may appear biased, all of the voices of the students in Gary’s two classes are rep- resented. Greg Peters can be contacted at gpeters@sfcess.org.
permission to say “We don’t know.” It gives us per-
mission to open up our classroom doors and ask
our students, “Are you sure that you aren’t per-
fect?” For me, this is our defining moment, where we
question everything and give our students the op-
portunity to explore the world around us. I am on
the Planning Committee and I hope our Winter Meet-
ing will be a defining event.

That’s a great call to action to end on, and we’ll let
you get out to your next appointment.

Well, thank you very much. I hope that was
helpful.

Steven Strauss can be reached at
stevenstrua@optonline.net.

Interview with Ileana Liberatori

(continued from page 5)

Director’s Report

(continued from page 9)

I am torn about whether or not a real change in
classroom culture can be made simply through
Connections. While one of the major goals of the pro-
ject was for students to learn to respect and val-
ue each other, it seems that the process of doing
so is a slow and deliberate one. I am hopeful that
by the end of the year, we will have made some
progress, but I am not sure if we will reach the
level of understanding we had hoped for.

Reflections

I am still struggling with the idea of what is pos-
sible in a classroom setting. I know that we can
make some changes, but I am not sure if we can
make them quickly enough. I am also con-
templating the idea of creating a new class struc-
ture that would allow for a more relaxed and
open environment. I believe that this would help
students feel more comfortable and confident in
their ability to learn.

Connections: the Journal of the National School Reform Faculty

Winter 2009

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Protocols in Practice:
Structures Support Special Education Students’ Rigorous Practice
Debbie Bambino, Pennsylvania

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share how students learned new content and
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some basic tools I shared from our NSRF reper-
toire.

Using CFG Tools in a Grad Class
A few weeks into the class, I shared the
Connections protocol with my grad students. As
usual, the first experience was characterized by
a fair amount of silence and a little discomfort.

Reflective Practice
Grace Hall McEntee et al. The

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