

Schools as Centers of Community Life: A Conversation with Tony Smith

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Here at Connections we are always on the lookout for stories from colleagues who are “Walking the Talk” of school reform in ways that push the envelope around issues of social equity. Read on to learn about the ongoing campaign to “rebuild our schools as ‘Centers of Community Life’ in Emeryville, California.”

Recently, I had the opportunity to talk with Tony Smith of the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BayCES) about an exciting opportunity that he’s been involved with in Emeryville, a city located between Berkeley and Oakland in California. Tony had a lot to tell me about the ways the Emeryville community is working to build a broad-based coalition of support for youth. Members of the coalition are clear that without the unilateral support of all stakeholders for their restructuring initiative, their work will be doomed to just “tinkering around the edges” of school reform.

How did the Emeryville Campaign begin? Can you give us some idea of the major players?

BayCES involvement began with a proposal for a GATES grant to build a small demonstration school with a focus on Math, Science and Technology. The goal was the establishment of a school where math & science teachers would be trained and would serve students of color in a low-income setting. The Unified School District of Emeryville was in a state of fiscal crisis and its schools were facing state takeover. These factors and others set the stage for the development of a partnership to create not just one school, but an entire school District, and city, committed to full service community schools for all youth. Emeryville is currently a district with fewer than 1,000 students in three schools. Of those students, approximately 70% qualify for free and

reduced lunch. 70% of the student population is African-American, followed by 15% Latino students and 10% Asian with White, Pacific Islander and Filipino students comprising the rest of the population. The schools have a history of fiscal mismanagement and low performance on standardized measures, hence the recent state takeover. The Memorandum of Understanding that was agreed to by Emeryville Unified School District (EUSD), BayCES and the City of Emeryville (City), cites the following three goals: One, To redesign the educational programs of EUSD from K-12 so that students are proficient, or better, in core academic subjects and have many choices in postsecondary education and other endeavors; Two, To build strong partnerships across EUSD, the City and the community, so that powerful learning is a citywide experience and responsibility; Three, To create an exemplary program for educator training and professional development in math, science and technology.

Those are admirable goals; how has the coalition worked to include all stakeholders in the process and how will the group sustain the active engagement of such a diverse group over the long haul?

Forming the coalition has meant working on multiple fronts with whole school Councils, entire staff bodies, parent groups, business partners and community leaders. We continue to work to foster ongoing dialogue and healing in a community where the historic failures of the schools and social service agencies have left their mark. As Project Manager and a white male, I have needed to be especially mindful of the barriers of race and culture that have kept the conversations about what’s best for children separate and unequal. Working to facilitate joint conversations among all parties has required me to really listen to people’s experience, check my assumptions about what I understand and listen for “different paths.” Building relation-

ships with people in and across all layers of the project has been critical. Building the trust to allow for a frank discussion about “What’s good enough for our children?” has meant debunking the myth that the “experts” have all the answers. Concretely, it has also meant that I have had to work very hard to avoid the use of jargon and “educationese” as we pull back the layers of our system’s problems and work together to increase the pressure needed to sustain system-wide change.

You said you need to continually “listen for different paths”, can you tell us more about that?

When I think about “different paths” I’m talking about everything from different ideas to different ways of expressing similar ideas. I’m thinking that while I might assume I have a pretty good research-based idea about all of the services a child needs from birth to age 19, my idea isn’t relevant unless it meets the real needs that the parents and families are expressing. It means taking the time to listen actively, and constantly checking for understanding, while the project clock is ticking. If we want the transformation we’re working for to last, and we do, then building relationships with parents and community members can’t be put off until later. Understanding that the trust required for authenticity takes time and that everyone always has to be included is a lesson I have to remind myself of on more than one occasion. This requires being very conscious of the planning process and doing the preparation work necessary before each meeting. And sometimes, it has meant reminding ourselves of what parents and community members have shared when they aren’t present during a particular conversation, and often it has meant postponing decisions until parents are present.

You’ve talked a fair amount about difference and barriers. How do you engage folks in the hard conversations, the dialogue we often ignore in an effort to keep the peace

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and make sure things are comfortable?

We're really trying to have a changed discourse where problems are named and hard truths are heard from all sides. By creating relationships across what have been traditional boundaries I think we've been able to create a new sense of credibility by avoiding the blame game trap while simultaneously staying focused on the real problems. The understanding that "educating every child well means supporting the families who care for them" is at the heart of the social justice platform that is supporting this initiative. As long as we are all committed to that outcome, I think we will continue to trust each other enough to sometimes be uncomfortable in specific conversations.

Are there any tools you've found especially helpful as a coach in this trust-building process?

The first thing the staff of the elementary school agreed to do was to form cross-grade Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) that would Look at Student Work in order to deepen their inquiry into effective teaching and learning. The use of CFGs and protocols has spread in light of their effectiveness at the elementary school. We are actively using protocols to change the ways we relate to each other as adults and we hope to begin using these tools as part of our efforts to increase student voice in this work.

Do you have any closing comments or questions you'd like to share with our readers?

I'd be remiss if I didn't mention the powerful support I've received from my colleagues in BayCES. As an organization we have made a commitment to leading for equity and we are continually reflecting on our progress toward that end. The opportunity to reflect on my practice with colleagues who share a similar commitment and represent vastly different experiences of the world both fortifies and challenges me as I do this work. Reflecting and questioning in affinity groups of white colleagues

and being vulnerable and taking risks in our larger cross-race group provides me with an extraordinary community of practice. I know that I can't do this work if I'm paralyzed by the fear that I might make a mistake, or if I'm falsely humble and leave the job for the next person. Holding myself accountable to a collaborative where we unpack our assumptions and mistakes in order to move forward with the work is the key to my growth as an aspiring leader for equity.

After my conversation with Tony, I visited the Emeryville Education Network's website (www.emeryednet.org/publiccontent/get_involved.php) to look for further insights into this ground breaking initiative. I was impressed with the user-friendly nature of the site and was pleased to read the welcoming invitation to parents and community members. All concerned adults are asked to join in the efforts to support their young people. The site goes on to list seven different ways that adults can mentor students, from acting as tutors to acting as companions, or challengers. This approach is clearly a break from the usual "one size fits all" tutoring model of adult support. I will be following the progress of this project throughout the next period as I think it offers many lessons for all of us as we work to unite our communities in support of our kids. ■

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were different. I want to work on getting past "tag-team" facilitation and put in the hard work that true partnering means. I think that means not short changing our own self-reflections; starting to ask how could we as a team have been more effective, not what either of us separately could have done differently. And not over-planning, but maybe planning differently. The plan needs to be more about *how* we are going to work together, and less about the precise details of the agenda—in fact, ironically, the more detailed and well-timed the agenda, the less the opportunity to imagine that the partners are entitled to "think on their feet." Planning well also means respecting our respective strengths but not falling into the habit of always doing what each of us does well, instead stretching ourselves to a place where our work is more seamless. And finally, it means paying attention to one another—why are they doing what they're doing, and where are they on the court?

Another important aspect of working with a partner is that there is more than one person to keep an eye on what is going on within the group. That can't be useful unless people are able to make use of what they see—in the moment. That requires a high degree of transparency and a high tolerance for change. While it is helpful to know that one member of the team is perhaps the "lead" in an activity, a highly developed partnership would not just tolerate, but would require that either partner could speak up and say, out loud, *Let's take a moment here to take stock of the group/go around/take a break*—something that will allow for course corrections without fear of upstaging/being out of turn/being rude/embarrassing one another.

So what does this all mean? I'm not entirely sure, but in the meantime, I'll keep working on remembering that when Alan says *I've got it*, I still need to be backing him up. ■

Farewell, Nancy, and thanks.