two years ago, Gregory Peters became the director of SF-CESS, the San Francisco Coalition of Essential Small Schools, a regional center of the Coalition of Essential Schools and a center of activity of the NSRF. Prior to this work, Greg served as principal of Leadership High School in San Francisco, a ten-year-old charter school in the southeast section of this city. Of the 140 students currently enrolled at Leadership, 95% are students of color, and 40% of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Greg remains coprincipal of Leadership High School, serving as a liaison between this laboratory school and the larger network of organizations focused on school change.

Greg notes that poor nutrition, gangs, and violence are major factors in his students’ daily lives. Leadership High School is a safe community for our students, but our students are victims and witnesses and even sometimes purveyors of the violence that surrounds them. We absolutely know our children well, and as a result are committed to serving them even though we know any one of them could exist on either side within the cycle of violence and oppression that plagues our urban youth.

How were you introduced to NSRF? What is this organization’s role in your work?

I was a member of a CFG just as they were introduced. The following year (1996) I trained with Juli Quinn as a coach, and coached a group from Oceana High School, where I was a math and art teacher for six years. CFGs became essential in my work as a new principal at Leadership High School.

Just in its third year, Leadership was not a good place for students or for their teachers. The school lacked a strong culture of professional development. CFGs were a natural fit in helping to shift the culture to that of a learning organization. The faculty of Leadership High School was firm in its commitment that I serve as an instructional leader, so we had to negotiate what that meant in the daily life of our school. We spent that first year learning how we needed to work together. CFGs provided a needed structure for our learning. We used that structure, but operated under a different name. At the time, NSRF did not have a presence in the Bay Area, so we chose to call our groups “I-Groups,” a combination of CFG principles and mini-research groups. We trained our department leaders as coaches, although we coached heterogeneous groups, not department members. Our I-Groups meet every three weeks in a rotation of collaborative spaces - departments, teams, and professional development.

We are very conscious in our school’s I-Groups and in our five-day training seminars about our focus on equity. While it is the challenge for every participant to keep equity at the center of our work, how do we do that? How do we ensure that our coaches’ responsibility to ensure this. Our school is located in a tough place, but we have a lot to be proud of. Following an independent audit of the San Francisco Unified School District, Leadership High School was one of only two schools cited for making progress in closing the achievement gap. I choke saying this out loud because our progress still is not even close to being enough. We need to share this information to help sustain the work, but in the larger context, our successes are merely a blip on the screen of an intense urban area such as San Francisco.

Greg, please describe the roots of your commitment to equity in your life and your work.

As an openly gay school leader, the concept of equity is an innate part of my individual profile. However, my greater sense of empathy comes from growing up as a gay and closeted member of a poor Rhode Island family on welfare. As a teenager I passed for straight because that is the face I was able to present in ignorance of what those who looked like me) said about me while I was in the very same room. I was hated in front of my classmates (those who looked like me) and feared by the teachers who looked like me) and feared by the teachers who looked like me) because I am white and educated. As a result, I believed the others were not in their presence. Out of fear, defense, anger and frustration - and in ignorance of what exactly to do - I learned...
To speak up for myself by speaking up for the others who actually represented me. Before long it was obvious that doing so was important to do - period. Somehow, somewhere along this journey, before I knew of the word “ally,” I learned deeply the importance of showing up across difference. My personal education taught me the impact of oppression and how it maintains a status quo of privilege and access. My work in leading for equity is to interrupt this pattern. This is my work. To be interruptive does not always make me a well-liked person. To take up the difficult conversation of what needs to happen to achieve equity is a commitment to relationship and a commitment to transformation - a different way of being. How can I hold this so passionately? This for me is not about choice. I cannot sit in a school on any given day and see an individual life that has not been impacted by inequities - inequities of poverty, violence, sexual identity, or educational achievement. I have seen enough of this - it is time for systemic interruptions. I never want anyone to feel the sense of unwant or unsafety that I experienced. If my passion for equity scares people away, my hope is that I have at the very least scared them away from hurting a child in our care. Truth be told, while there is a tremendous amount of work and transformation for us collectively, I have learned that tension is temporary and usually happens to achieve equity. LaShawn has helped me to understand the privilege of my position at the school and in life, and the connection between the two. She taught me to see that I had to step up and do or I had to step back. In our deepest, hardest, most visceral conversations, never, ever, ever did our discussions focus on anything other than what is best for young people and in particular, the young people who needed us most.

As you transition from being a school leader to a coach of other school leaders, Greg, what is your next challenge?

When I consider what challenges I have in my future, I have to say that the one that means most to me is the challenge of ensuring that my work is meaningful and relevant. While leadership seems to pull me further from the classroom, I never want to be so far removed that my work is not informed by what is happening in the classroom that day. One of the ways I strive to maintain this sense of humility and purpose is by ensuring the democratic practices that always encourage and support the diverse voices of those whom our educational system is supposed to serve not just but across schools and least and least well. In particular, we must involve our youth in all of our conversations. None of this work can be done without the presence and leadership of our students. We must consciously educate and support our kids to be able to participate in creating and meeting extraordinarily high expectations and outcomes. Our students need to be active participants in shifting their own culture. I want to believe that I am part of a movement in our society in which our students and their families will achieve equity and not be based on social predictors, and will experience less pain and more joy than currently is our reality.

Read Talking Back: What Students Know About Teaching by the students of Leadership High School in conjunction with 826 Valencia to hear Greg’s students’ voices.

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Taking Responsibility for Anti-Muslim Discrimination in our Schools

Sarah Childers, Indiana

Amir is in fifth grade. Today is the day of his family history report, which he must give in front of the rest of his class at Skyline Elementary in Daly City, California. He’s nervous because his family is from Iraq, and some of his family has been affected by the war in Iraq. Once he finishes his report, he asks if anyone has questions. Amir’s teacher asks him if his family in Iraq supports the war. Amir doesn’t know, his family has been here for many years and he doesn’t even know any of his family that’s in Iraq. The teacher asks, “So do you know if they are terrorists?” Amir shakes his head.

In Minnesota, a Muslim girl who wears the traditional Islamic head-scarf, or hijab (heeb-johb), is repeatedly taunted by a schoolmate, called “terrorist,” told to “go back to your country” and “the Quran is full of lies.” She tells her school counselor, but no action is taken.

A guest has been invited to speak to Mr. Earnardo’s science class, on what is anti-Muslim bias. The Enloe High School social studies department chair writes to Mr. Solomon, “It is our responsibility as educators to help our students understand diversity in San Bernardino and throughout the world.”

Enloe High School in North Carolina, Kamil Solomon, the head of a group dedicated to “helping Christians share Jesus with Muslims,” promologizes to the class and distributes pamphlets describing the prophet Muhammad as a “criminal” and “demon-possessed.”

The Enloe High School social studies department chair writes to Mr. Solomon, “It is our responsibility as educators to teach our students to respect diversity in San Bernardino and throughout the world.”

Given the frequency of instances of discrimination at the hands of teachers and students, what is our responsibility to students who are Muslim, or who are perceived to be Muslim? How can we gain understanding and compassion for what these children are going through? What is our responsibility to those who are not in this society? What support can we give them? And how can we pursue adult and student learning in an effort to eliminate these biases and support our mission for social and educational equity?

To begin to understand and gain compassion for Muslim and Arab students, we have to look at ourselves in the mirror to reflect on our own beliefs and practices. As a nation, we generally do not know very much about Islam, Muslims, or Middle-Eastern cultures. In CAR’s 2006 American poll about Islam and Muslims, only 2% responded that they considered themselves “very knowledgeable” about Islam and Muslims, and only 13% described themselves “somewhat knowledgeable.” Additionally, only 20% had Muslim friends, and only 13% had Muslim colleagues. Only one-fourth considered themselves to be tolerant and accepting of Muslims. For many Americans, our primary exposure to Islam and Muslims comes through the media. However, according to a study conducted by California State University at San Bernardino, “the American media has been a primary agent responsible for creating racist stereotypes, images and viewpoints of Arab Muslims before and after September 11, 2001.” The media exposure, for the majority of Americans, is the number one information source about nearly one-third of the world’s population.

Bringing perspective into the classroom about Islam, Muslims, terrorism and the war is crucial. As part of NSRF’s mission to foster social and educational equity, it’s our responsibility to further educate ourselves, and to provide unbiased information to students and teachers alike, whether or not Muslim or Arab students are a part of our schools or classrooms.

Given the wide variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds of Muslims, each individual’s customs and practices vary. (Only 15% of all Arabs are Muslim; the countries with the largest Muslim population (continued on page 23)