

NSRF's Living History: An Interview with Greg Peters

Peggy Silva, New Hampshire

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 340 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.



Greg Peters

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 they coach heterogeneous groups, not department members. Our I-Groups meet every three weeks in a rotation of collaborative groups - 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 and discussions, it is the 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 first assumption of others, and for middle-class because I am white and educated. As a result, I was able to hear what my own oppressors (those who looked like me) said about me while I was in the very same room. I was hated in front of my face without a filter because they didn't know I was their target. I learned quickly what those with power and prejudice said of others when they 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 (continued on page 20)

to speak up for myself by feigning to speak 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 alliances 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 - to 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 unwanted 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 has to do more with our individual journeys and less with our collective one.

Who has taught you the most about school leadership?

Most of the leaders I have worked under have been strong women. My own mother, my Lebanese grandmother Sitto, and my Italian grandmother have all been strong women leading with solid, value-laden visions of what family means and looks like. They did this in the company of the strong men who are my father, grandfathers and three brothers.

Donna Christy, my professor in my student-teaching days, trusted and pushed me to trust my instinct before I stepped into a classroom. Lois Jones from Oceana gave me a vision of what it means to lead a class and to lead a school. The woman who has been my strongest inspiration for professional leadership and transformation is LaShawn Routé-Chatmon, the new Executive Director of BayCES. I had the immeasurable fortune to have her as my BayCES school

coach for five years. Our alliance formed across difference. LaShawn is a strong woman of color, a mother of three boys, and an educational leader who was supporting the work of a strong-willed, white, gay man, a high school principal. I am still unpacking the power behind our relationship. 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 most but actually serves 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 I am part of a movement in our society in which our students and their families will achieve equitably and not 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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