

The Five Freedoms Project Leadership Academy

Kim Carter, New Hampshire

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or of the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

The First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States

“**M**y religion is very important to me. The school I used to go to had a lot of students, but I felt invisible. Religion wasn't something we could talk about there. When I went to a school that let me bring my religion to my work, I felt like I could be a whole person again.”

“At the school I went to before, kids would get detention for talking about religion. I'm glad to be at a school where I can ask the questions that I wonder about. I recently researched evolution and creationism, and presented what I found at a School Board meeting.”

“When we were new students at the school, the older students weren't being respectful to us. The new students got together, talked about it and called a community meeting to discuss respect. Things are better now.”

These are comments from students telling their stories in a fishbowl at the first inaugural Five Freedoms Project Leadership Academy, held July 7 – 11, 2008, at the newly opened Newseum in Washington, D.C. A total of forty principals from around the country, representing urban, suburban and rural schools, K – 12, gathered for a week to explore the Five Freedoms Project five-part framework for leading change and to delve into the implications of the five First Amendment liberties.

If there was ever a critical venue to explore the gap between beliefs and practices, how we live out the First Amendment freedoms in our schools is one of the most essential to our work of fostering educational and social equity.

Charles Haynes, scholar of religious liberty at the First Amendment Center in Washington, D.C., is emphatic: “The health of our democracy in the United States depends on the First Amendment. These five freedoms are the key to every advance in social justice. More importantly, these five freedoms

are essential if we hope to expand liberty and justice for more people in the twenty first century.”

From the Academy's initial Opening Moves to the final gathering on the last day, co-facilitators Sam Chaltain, Daniel Baron and I utilized a number of NSRF protocols and practices. We engaged participants in critical friendship and honed facilitative leadership skills while deepening our individual and shared understandings of the history, development and implications of the five freedoms guaranteed by the First Amendment.

Hailing from educational environments as diverse as Nanaikapono Elementary School in Hawaii, Davis Aerospace Technical High School in Michigan and School for the Creative and

Performing Arts in Kentucky and communities as varied as Florida, North Dakota, Washington, New Mexico, Texas and Pennsylvania, participating school leaders brought diverse experiences, perspectives and concerns. Their commitments to their students was immediately evident from their spirited responses and dialogue during the first day's Zones of Comfort, Risk and Danger protocol. As one might expect with a group of committed school leaders, dialogue was intense as the group considered scenarios such as the following:

A first year teacher comes into your office asking for help, saying, “I am uncomfortable teaching the remedial class, which is 90% students of color, and I don't know what to do to help them.”

In a faculty meeting, a faculty members raises a question about the amount of resource allocation to AP classes and notes that students in the AP classes are mostly white in a school with wide ethnic diversity.

A group of parents comes to your office asking to use the school auditorium to hold a public meeting to discuss racism in the school and the community.

Interspersed with protocols such as Success Analysis, Attributes of a Learning Community, Microlabs, Collaborative Assessment Conference, and Wagon Wheels were presentations and interactive case study explorations digging into the implications of religious liberty, freedom of speech and press, and the right to assembly and petition

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for public schools. Academy members also visited the Newseum's seven floors of exhibits (newseum.org) and the National Archives and attended Os Guinness's talk on his newly released book, *The Case for Civility*.

By the Academy's closing moves, this already passionate and committed group of educators had renewed their energy and enthusiasm for democratic practices in their schools, enlarged their repertoire of tools and strategies for leading change that ensures all voices are honored and valued and connected to a community of learners who share their commitments.

"I used to think I was listening to everyone, but now I know I was just listening to myself."

"I used to think the emphasis on testing limited the possibilities for student voice, but now I know student voice can and will be heard!"

"I used to think I was in a desert, but now I know I'm not."

"I used to think our issues were unique, but now I know we're all in this together."

The week of the Academy was just the beginning. The Five Freedoms Project aspires to support all those involved in democratic schooling and to build a network of people committed to ensuring all young people are seen and heard. I hope you'll consider joining us! ■

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The Five Freedoms Project: Entry Points

The Five Freedoms Project believes that America's young people need educators who can do more than raise test scores; they need leaders who spark student learning by creating schools in which everyone has voice, value and visibility. We also believe our democracy needs individuals with more than a vague awareness of the First Amendment's five freedoms (religion, speech, press, assembly and petition); it needs a new generation of citizens who utilize those rights in order to follow their consciences, speak out for justice and organize for change.

For more information visit fivefreedoms.org or nsrfharmony.org/connections.html

dance? Special Ed? ELL? Suspensions? Recess? Lunch? Breakfast? Grading? NCLB? Testing? Class rank? Reading groups? PD? NSRF? – yes, critical friendship – where's my group?

The new school year is an opportunity to renew our friendships – critical as well as collegial.

Those of us in NSRF enter the new school year looking for our groups, our peeps, our Critical Friends Groups. There is anticipation for the first meet-

ing – what text will we read? Which protocol will we use? Whose student will we learn more about? How will I become a better learner and teacher? How will I foster equity? Will I need to interrupt inequity? What will be different and what the same? What child will I reach? Who will reach me?

I always love the beginning of school – even though it's the end of summer and autumn is upon us, for school people, September feels like a new beginning. As I enter this school year I wonder if and hope that my practice will be different – more equitable, more aware. I continue to consider the role privilege plays in my life and in the lives of the people I work with. I wonder how NSRF will continue to critically examine the role of privilege and equity in our work and how we will work to achieve our mission through the joint constructs of critical friendship and facilitative leadership.

My mother always taught me that on the first day of school, for good luck, you were supposed to both leave the house and enter the schoolhouse with your right foot first. The consequences for disrespecting this superstition would be dire yet unnamed. I still do it every year, and by the time this edition of *Connections* hits your mailbox, I will have done it again. Good luck to all of you and to all of our children as we embark on another critical school year. ■

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