Protocols in Practice: The Power of the Circle in Community Conversations about Equity

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Juneau, Alaska, located along Southeast Alaska's Inside Passage, is surrounded by glaciers, majestic mountains, and rainforest. A sense of isolation results from the lack of roads into Juneau, as the only way in is by plane or boat. Even with this isolation, it remains the capital of Alaska and represents a diverse population. The residents of Juneau take great pride in how they support their schools and the many sports and activities available to students. Since many of their sports programs are not school-funded, community groups raise millions of dollars to finance the travel of sports teams in and out of Juneau to insure high quality competition and participation. A great emphasis is placed on student involvement in the arts and other activities as well. A richness of cultural diversity, represented by Alaska Natives as well as people from areas throughout the world, exists in the community. After spending a significant amount of time there, one comes to realize that Juneau is a very special place to live, with its awe-inspiring natural beauty, strong sense of community, and cultural diversity.

Even in this special place, however, the cloud of racism and poverty thrives and impacts a significant number of people in the community. The Juneau-Douglas High School program has traditionally not served all students well, especially Alaska Natives and students of poverty. After a comprehensive look at the data, the grim facts show that the overall graduation rate is only 65%, and significantly lower

for Alaska Natives and students of poverty. Alaska Natives and students of poverty also achieve at lower levels, drop out more, participate less in activities, and are grossly underrepresented in upper-level classes offered by the high school.

In 1998, the School District and community members began advocating for another high school that would help to reduce the size of the current high school, in order to better meet the needs of more students. Not everyone in Juneau agreed with this approach, and it took eight years and seven different votes before the community finally approved another high school. Even after the vote of approval, there remained an air of anger and divisiveness over the building of the new school. The traditions of a one-high-school community remained a strong voice, and any change to move to two high schools was very hard for many people to accept. They feared that their strong sports program, as well as the entire tradition of a large comprehensive high school, would be compromised with the building of an additional school.

When the bond election finally passed in 2005, the Juneau School District made a bold move; instead of simply planning for the new school, they decided to develop an all-encompassing high school educational plan to address the protracted lack of student success and issues around equity. They realized that to make any significant change, they needed to go public with their data and actually create a process where all members of this diverse community would be heard. At this point, we were hired as facilitators, representing the Colorado Critical Friends Group, because we proposed a process that would utilize structures and protocols to create different types of conversations than had been previously used in community meetings. Working with school district leaders, we created a formal process called *The Next Generation: Our Kids, Our Community* that would include:

- forming an Advisory Committee,
- facilitating community forums,
- developing a website,
- creating and publicizing proposals, and
- submitting a final recommendation for a high school educational plan.

School district leaders realized that they faced several challenges. The community divided, not only on the need for a new high school, but also on the type of changes needed to address their lack of student success. Even some high school staff members were resistant to any type of change. Our challenge was to incorporate com-

(continued on page 18)

(continued from page 4)

munity voice and the best practices in high school reform with a focus on improving learning success for *all* students. Having used protocols and structures successfully with educators and students, we believed that these same structures for creating conversations would help us find common ground around tough issues with community groups. We were told that previous activities to gather community input had often resulted in only the same few voices being heard, with no follow up, after these meetings. We wanted to make sure that all the voices were heard and would be represented in any plan that was developed. We believed that protocols and similar structures could work to allow people to feel safe and would allow the community to heal the rift that the many years of debate over the need for a new high school had created. We were reminded that this process was not only about changing a high school, but a step in changing an entire community and its culture.

During the summer of 2006, a voluntary two-day workshop was held for the high school staff, in which a majority of teachers participated. The focus was on collaboration and learning how to work together to see what was possible for their school. Protocols were used to help them look at texts on school change, examine student work, and build greater awareness of equity issues within the school. The Futures Protocol led to a powerful description of what their school could be. In order to help the school district build capacity to continue such conversations and promote Critical Friends Groups, we facilitated training for district staff during the school year.

A vital component of this process was the formation of a thirty-five member Advisory Committee that was representative of parents, school staff, students, cultural, business, and university representatives, and other community members. The mission of the Advisory Committee was to create a secondary educational plan that was:

- Dedicated to high expectations and success for all students
- Reflective of the needs, values, and beliefs of the Juneau, Alaska community
- Based on current educational research and best practices
- Supportive of the goals of rigor, relevance, and relationships, and the strategic plan of the Juneau School District

Because our time with the Advisory Committee was limited and the issues so complex, we spent a great deal of time planning sessions to help build a sense of trust within the group and allow us to have the hard conversations. We worked exclusively out of a circle because we wanted to make sure that we distributed the power among all the members of the committee as we symbolically created a sense of community and equity within this group. The community agreements that we developed helped us listen to each other and respect the many different perspectives represented within the group.

We began with the Atlas Looking at Data Protocol. It was a powerful moment as the group began to realize the implications of this data. It became obvious that Alaska Natives and students of poverty were being failed by the current school system. The impact of this data remained with us throughout the entire process and created many opportunities for the group to discuss issues of equity within the school and community. From this session, we came away excited that both school and community people appreciated the use of a protocol that promoted honest conversation and forced us to be more thoughtful.

To achieve our goal of hearing the community's voice, we scheduled over twenty-five community forums. The forums were scheduled purposely to ensure that all voices in the community be heard, especially those of different cultural groups. We worked hard to make sure that people of color and people representing the dominant culture sat next to each other in the same circles to hear each other's comments and concerns. All forum participants responded to the following questions:

(continued on page 19)

(continued from page 18)

1. Describe the learning environment in a high school that you do not want to see.
2. Describe the learning environment in a high school that you want to see.
3. Describe your student when he/she graduates from high school.
4. What advice do you have for us as we develop a high school educational plan?

Participants wrote their responses on 3x5 note cards and went around the circle as each person shared what he/she wrote. The power of this process was the opportunity for all people to speak and truly be listened to as they presented their different perspectives and hopes and dreams for their students and the school district. Not everyone appreciated this process, especially some from the dominant culture. However, a majority felt like their time spent was much more than token feedback and that it would truly make a difference in any plan that was presented. We collected every 3x5 card and published comments verbatim on the website that was created to make the entire process public and transparent. Advisory Committee members then read every comment from every forum before they began creating proposals for the educational plan.

Several proposals were created, and a second round of community forums was held to enable the public to respond to the proposals. Four themes emerged at these forums and became the guiding principles for our work: *Unity, Equity, Personalization,* and *Choice*. Taking the themes from the community forums and what they learned about best practices and high school reform, the Advisory Committee recommended three smaller high schools that included the following key components:

- 9th Grade Learning Communities
- Small Learning Communities Based on Themes in Grades 10-12
- Advisory Program for All
- Flexibility to Move Among Themed Academies
- Core Content/State Standards in All Academies
- Multicultural and Anti-Racist Teaching
- Post-Secondary Preparation for All Students
- Improved Access to and Participation in Expanded Extracurricular Opportunities
- Enrollment Based on Choice and Equity
- Secondary Planning Team

Reaching consensus on this educational plan was a long and difficult process. We were constantly asking ourselves, *Will this plan truly make a difference for all students, and especially for Alaska Natives and students of poverty?* Confronting issues of equity and racism resulted in some hard and arduous conversations. Based on these conversations it was agreed that the key component of multicultural and antiracist teaching should remain at the forefront of the educational plan. After the Advisory Committee came to consensus on the proposal for a high school educational plan, it was unanimously approved by the School Board. The Juneau School District is currently working to implement the plan for the fall of 2008.

We believe that the educational plan that was created has the potential for improving learning for all students in the Juneau community. After working with this process for over a year, we've gained the following insights:

- Without addressing issues around equity, significant change in schools will not be possible.
- Protocols and other structured methods of conversation that we have used with educators and students for years can and do work in community settings.
- Protocols and other similar structures help people from different cultures engage in difficult and respectful conversations about race.
- Representative student voice is a perspective in school change that must be valued.
- Change, especially when it is focused on the high school, is difficult. Significant high school change, even when the shortcomings become evident and public, does not happen easily.
- Sharing data is a powerful approach to promoting change; however, one must dig deeply to find data that shows the entire picture.
- The community can and should be a powerful voice in creating significant change in schools. However, any opportunity for input must allow for all the voices to be heard, not just the most vocal.

For more information on *The Next Generation: Our Kids, Our Community*, please visit the website www.nextgenerationjuneau.com. ■

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