

Connections

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Spring 2009

Director's Report Steven Strull, Director

NSRF has been making rapid progress on our restructuring. After all the struggle and advancement we have made and continue to make, I decided to turn my attention to our future - not our present. I began to imagine NSRF's future using the Futures Protocol. In doing so, I was able to let go of the present and remember that, together, we can do anything we imagine to be possible. Below are my thoughts from my personal Futures Protocol.

Eighteen months from now

NSRF has maintained a small national center that continues to learn how to best serve our membership. Whether a coach, facilitative leader, National Facilitator and/or Center of Activity, we are all members of NSRF. Our National Center continues to take responsibility for convening and connecting NSRF through our membership, our annual meetings, our communication avenues and our protocols, linking with work in the field in collaboration with our Centers of Activity, research and documentation and the ongoing publication of *Connections*.

NSRF Centers of Activity have expanded our work in ways big and small that a National Center never could do. With and among National Facilitators, our Centers have the capacity to transform learning and teaching within their local contexts. Whether situated inside a school district, a school, an independent organization and/or a collection of NSRF members, local Centers are crucial to the continuing success of our mission.

NSRF has a membership council that is democratic and representative of our membership and serves as an advisory structure for our re-imagined governance council. Our membership council represents our mission statement and helps us answer the perennial questions of attributes and standards for National Facilitators and Centers of Activity that seem to vex our organization. Our membership council is the heart of our organization and the guardian of our mission and vision as referenced below.

We have a strong governance council that



serves as a board of directors to our organization. We have codified some of our understandings of how we operate and re-affirmed that we are accountable to one another. We have an able and healthy structure that provides for checks and balances, as is appropriate for an organization based on democratic principals of equity and participation, and we experience a strong, more formal governance structure that serves us well.

Our membership has discretionary resources to seed work in the field and research and document what we learn together – working in local contexts along-side Centers of Activity. Our membership is well on it's way to amassing those resources through what we have dubbed "Ten in Ten." We have thought deeply and made commitments about what we will accomplish if we are able to achieve the goal of 10,000 dues-paying members in 10 years – we, the membership, have imagined our future.

Back to the present

I am quite optimistic that some version of my musings above, once tuned and re-tuned using the tools and processes at our disposal, will be accomplished. We will get to our future with deliberation and by accessing our stakeholders; by imagining what we want to be and what we want to stand for; and then by practicing locally, regionally and

nationally, in person (continued on page 11)

learning conversations. Like the V-8 commercials in which people slap themselves in the heads, I realized that my diverse group of students had critical information to share with me, their white teacher, about what they didn't understand about my content, and whether my directions, which were clear to me and to my similarly educated colleagues, were in fact clear as mud to them. Looking back this seems like an obvious step, but in my experience, sharing power with students was relatively unusual, especially between white teachers and their students of color, who were generally treated as disinterested parties in their own education.

Along similar lines, I have been involved with teams of urban educators in CFGs across the country, teams in which predominantly white teachers describe their problems with "hard to reach parents." Recently, a CFG in Oregon recognized this framing of parents as the problem as Discourse I and flipped the script to Discourse II, reframing the problem as one of "hard to access schools." Changing the discourse led to a host of new possibilities and responsibilities for welcoming parents into the schools. Discourse II challenges mostly white, middle-class participants to surface and examine both their assumptions and the power dynamics parents and families face in meetings and spaces that we organize and control. Reframing the problem challenges us to ensure that invitations to parents and other family members are more than one-sided requests for homework support, or disciplinary backup. Discourse II calls for "The Essential Conversation(s)" (2003) that Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot describes where both parents' ghosts of former experiences with schooling and the inherent power of home and school partnerships are acknowledged, allowing alliances based on mutual respect to be forged on behalf of students. Conversely, staying stuck in Discourse I means more of the status quo, an ongoing search for the right prize or bribe to get bodies into the seats at the next parent or family night, without launching or sustaining a partnership in any true sense of the word.

As our experiences with CFGs evolve, many of us, both white teachers and teachers of color, are struggling to reframe the process and our conversations into Discourse II. Working together as a Consortium for Educational Equity (CFEE), some of us are embracing the fact that we, either as educators in isolation, or as CFG members stuck in Discourse I, especially in schools where we teach

across differences of race and class, don't have all the answers, and that we often aren't asking the right questions. We are working in alliances across difference to extend the collaborative process to include the voices of students and their families. In our individual practice and in our schools and systems, we are moving beyond the shallow Discourse I, the familiar, surface level of school reform into the deeper Discourse II, the uncomfortable, waters of transformation. While we are still committed to educating other people's children, we recognize the importance of naming and reframing the culture of power (Delpit 1995) in order to support the access of each student, regardless of their race, socioeconomic status, national origin or special needs, to academic and social success in our schools and communities. We are no longer content to simply revise our practice, or restructure our schools, the critical outside work of school reform: instead we are committed to doing the inside work as well, in order to transform our relationships and our teaching to meet the needs of each student in our care. ■

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Coaching Whole School Change: Lessons In Practice From a Small High School

Book Review by Peggy Silva, New Hampshire

David Allen and his colleagues have done much to demystify the concept of school coaching with their new book, *Coaching Whole School Change, Lessons in Practice from a Small High School*, published in 2008 by Teachers College Press. This book evolved from a pilot study on school coaching at New York City's Park East High School as it transitioned from an alternative school to a four-year high school. The early stages of this transition focused on school safety and shifting roles within the school, but it also became apparent that there was little consistency of instruction and insufficient focus on complex thinking and/or extended reading and writing. A new principal built on an already-existing relationship with the Institute for Student Achievement (ISA) by accepting Suzanne Ort, who had recently completed her doctorate at Columbia, to be Park East's part-time coach.

Allen tracks Suzy's interactions at the school over two years. Suzy is an inside-outside coach, working first one day, then two days each week at Park East. Allen and his writing colleagues observe Suzy's work in order to extract the habits of an effective school coach. Their goal is not to write a comprehensive account of school coaching or of a specific school's work, but to "illuminate the nature of coaching practice." Allen states that, "Coaching is not only complex, but intensely context-bound." Suzy keeps her eye on the long-term goals of elevating discourse, improving teacher collaboration, and deepening instruction through her constant communication with a wide range of school practitioners. Often these communications take place in hallways or in "drive-by" moments of post-it note exchanges; at other times, Suzy is shown collaborating with individuals, connecting colleagues and assisting in the facilitation of school committees. She participates in meetings, acknowledges human barriers to change and forges onward. Her days are varied, as she seizes small moments to create opportunities to boost teachers' good intentions. Suzy spends time enhancing curriculum, solving problems, easing burdens, supporting teachers, providing tips and

offering a new perspective on teaching and learning. No one moment is magic or transformative, but each successful encounter slowly shifts the school's focus.

As in any complex social system, Park East experiences administrative shifts, diminishing resources and a range of social politics. Allen keeps his lens focused sharply on Suzy's emerging coaching habits, in spite of typical distractions. He provides administrators, teachers and organizations with a template of how to build a collaborative school culture through the dedicated time of one individual charged with building positive connections that transform daily practice. Through an

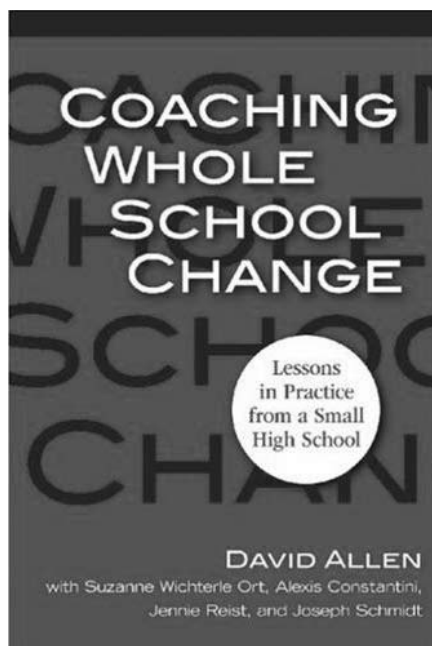
extended study of one coach from multiple perspectives and multiple roles, Allen provides a research methodology for analyzing the complexity of coaching.

As an internal school literacy and writing coach, I found tremendous value in reading this study. District colleagues who hold similar positions in their schools often feel pressured to define exactly what a coach is/does on a minute by minute basis in a typical school day. A mere listing of daily time spent does not provide a thoughtful overview of the complexity of the work nor the small increments of change embedded in every collaboration. Allen's study of Suzy's interactions demonstrates that the definition of a school coach includes elements of cheerleading,

problem-solving, facilitation, making connections, sharing strengths, clarifying, pushing, empathizing, setting achievable targets, nailing down the details, making agendas, persevering, celebrating success, closing gaps, identifying future goals and noting the work of others. This last point is a significant one. Suzy thanks a teacher for her work in the school-wide Thanksgiving feast. The teacher replies that such an expression of appreciation is something never offered by other staff members after events. A simple acknowledgement and thank you made a colleague feel valued for her effort.

Readers see the slow but steady progress towards the transformation of a school

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you to look at how you are perceived by people of color.

RoLesia: Yeah! To some extent I believe these to be true for all/most whites. I believe they would agree for the most part. I also think some people of color feel likewise after assimilating to a certain level of status. Internalized oppression is what comes to mind.

Debbie: Getting it in one instance doesn't necessarily mean getting it in the next instance. There's always that tension of trying to understand but trying to be vigilant and not feeling like my progress is the responsibility of my colleagues of color but wanting to make sure that we have the kind of honesty where people don't feel that they have to continually make the choice of whether we are worth telling the truth to, because we may come back with "oh no it was something else" or "oh no you misunderstood."

Quote: *Microaggressions are often unconsciously delivered in the form of subtle snubs or dismissive looks, gestures and tones. These exchanges are so pervasive and automatic in daily conversations and interactions that they are often dismissed and glossed over as being innocent and innocuous. Yet, as indicated previously, microaggressions are detrimental to persons of color because they impair performance in a multitude of settings by sapping the psychic and spiritual energy of recipients and by creating inequities.*

Discussion

Camilla: I think about sitting in meetings, often when you're the only person of color and someone from the dominant culture will roll their eyes at you and say something. That is an image I have in my mind of when I've touched the nerve of someone in the dominant culture. People may not even be aware that they have that kind of reaction. I think an ally is someone who has stopped not knowing and someone who is on guard and is trying to reverse a lot of this.

RoLesia: Attending to our intellectual, physical, spiritual and emotional selves. This education is necessary to consciously, deliberately, intentionally interrupt derogatory comments and behaviors. We must interrupt them whenever we can. Important that we do it in tandem with others. If not, it is overwhelming to have to carry this burden alone. This is some of the reason our students check out and behave in non-productive ways in our schools

and communities.

Debbie: I think all of us have been in situations where people of color get quiet and we know people have something to say. Or where one of you said something and it doesn't get followed up on and then becomes our idea or some other white person's idea a few moments later, as if you didn't say something in the first place. I think it's our responsibility not to let that go and not to always make it the responsibility of the person who's being given the look or being passed over.

Mary: I just saw myself in this quote. I saw it loud and clear and it's not that I'm that much better at it but it is something I feel I'm getting more conscious of; and I agree with Kim, it is something we have to be in together and be conscious of it all the time.

Quote: *In essence, the catch-22 means you are 'damned if you do, and damned if you don't.'*

Discussion

Wendy: This takes me back to how much power silence has. We give the power to the person who has launched the microaggression and for me it becomes more difficult if I choose to ignore it.

Camilla: I also see from this point in my life and throw caution to the wind more often than not and just do...for all the people who cannot find their voices, for all the people who are not at the table, and so I think I can take whatever's going to be handed or dished out in certain environments. However, I think in our allyship it's not an either or. That it's an understanding, I don't know how to explain it, so that I can actually say I don't choose to address this right now and that would be okay.

Kim: How are we pushing that for ourselves, how can we at least, for ourselves, create the space where we're not damned if we do and damned if we don't? Some way that we can begin to unpack this for ourselves in a way that provides a different way to work together and a different level of honesty about the work that we're doing? ■

¹ Wing Sue, Derald et al. "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life, Implications for Clinical Practice." *American Psychologist*. May-June 2007.

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Forming Learning Communities is Just the Beginning ...and Can Be a Dead End

Debbie Bambino, Pennsylvania

I felt affirmed in this space where both my questions and expertise counted, amazed by the potential learning from a long, deep, collaborative discussion of just one piece of student or teacher work, ...However, once the novelty began to wear off... dissatisfaction grew. - Ellen Key Ballock (2007)

Many report being rejuvenated by the opportunity to work with each other in collaborative ways. But often after a good experience with other teachers, after learning what a learning community is, after learning some protocols to look at student work, very little happens when they return to their urban classrooms. - Camilla Greene (2003)

These quotes, the first from a relatively new CFG coach and educational researcher, the second from a seasoned veteran teacher and National Facilitator of CFG seminars, point out both the possibilities and the pitfalls involved in this potentially powerful school reform model.

CFGs are at the heart of the work of the National School Reform Faculty. I have been in a CFG since being trained as a coach in 1996, and I cannot imagine a return to teaching in isolation or facilitating school change without this collaborative support. But while learning and working in community with others is more productive and powerful, it is not a foolproof recipe for student success. Collaborating with teachers and other stakeholders to create the schools our children need and deserve is an essential nonnegotiable for me, but in order to really tap into the potential power of a CFG, a foundation of trust and a commitment to the struggle around issues that really matter must be nurtured and built. Simply dividing up staff members and labeling them teams, houses, CFGs or Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) won't do it. Attending a summer seminar and dividing into family groups won't do it either. In other words, as my colleague, Daniel Baron, often says, "CFGs are necessary but not sufficient," if we are committed to transformational change in our schools. In order to really learn together and translate that learning into meaningful changes for students, individuals must be willing to change themselves, or as Margaret

Wheatley (2002) says, we must be "willing to be disturbed." Without an explicit focus on disturbing the status quo, CFG structures can become mired in the shallows. If participants don't have the will, skill and access to the multiple perspectives needed to dig deep and reframe some of our own deeply held beliefs and practices, teacher communities can become little more than teacher support groups. Dennis Sparks of the National Staff Development Council recently defined reframing as "providing other ways to think about a situation" (2008). It is precisely this reframing coupled with changes in practice and consistent internal group accountability (what I like to call "closing the loop") that is needed to ensure that adults are thinking about what really matters for students and that our thinking and "talk" as adults gets translated into the "walk" or practice of real, changed learning experiences for students.

Talking about common problems and dilemmas is a big first step against teacher isolation, and our CFG protocols require that presenting teachers focus on changes we can make in our own practice, potentially flipping the script of deficit-based models that blame students and their communities for the gaps in our practice. This focus on teacher responsibility is significant. Nevertheless, many CFGs are made up almost exclusively of white, middle-class teachers, and in elementary settings, the groups tend to be disproportionately female as well. In these homogenous groups of dominant culture adults the practice of reframing does not come easily. For example, if the teachers recognize the need to address gaps in achievement scores between their white students and their students of color but are pursuing supposedly "colorblind," equal support to all of their students, these teachers are unlikely to monitor their own teaching for biased practices. Lacking diversity themselves, the teachers' perspectives are necessarily limited by their own experiences, despite their best intentions. Without the benefit of diversity, teachers can use protocols and work hard at collaboration, but our results will be akin to rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. In order to plot a new course

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hesitant and afraid, so I answered with what some might call my catch phrase, "I don't know." That's when I was given a choice, either you do it or you don't, and that was when everything became so clear to me. I could no longer wait for success— I had to work for success. I responded "yes," and from there I was thrown into a jungle full of mysteries that I knew I had to be a part of. That decision changed my life: I found myself learning and working, not because I had to, but because I wanted to. I realized that in order to catch the dream you have to chase it first. Now I challenge and hold myself to higher standards because I have more confidence in what I can do, and that is how Ms. Kelley kept me from falling through the cracks. ■

Any inquiries regarding Vladimir should be directed to his teacher, Michaelann Kelley, at mkelley@aldine.k12.tx.us.

Students at the Center

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tor and professor has impacted a student's life. The students don't always realize the effect an adult educator has had until much later in their lives, by which time making contact to let them know may be impossible. Think of the Vladimirs and De'Vontas in your life. How are you going to make sure that they do not fall through the cracks in your classroom, your school and your community? Reach out and make a difference and a student will thank you someday.

Each of us can think of teachers who have made impressions on our lives. Make contact if you can, and let that person know (if you haven't already) how thankful you are that they crossed your path on your educational journey and maybe prevented you from falling through the cracks. ■

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and electronically, in the passionate pursuit of our mission.

Every day now our membership council task force is learning and imagining. One of the members of the task force, Kevin Fahey from Massachusetts, when asked to respond to an on-line Charette question about the role of a membership council had this to offer:

In general, I would use Sergiovanni's model of "head, hand and heart" to think about this question. I believe that the new Accountability Council would be the head of the organization (tasked with governance), the Executive Director the "hand" (making things work) and the Membership Council the "heart" (guarding the vision and mission of the organization). As such, it would be tasked with clarifying things like the work of a National Facilitator and Centers of Activity, and it would address such questions as what is facilitative leadership, critical friendship, etc.

I believe we are unique as a movement and an organization. There are many worthy school reform and professional development collectives and companies serving schools, teachers and children in multiple ways. Some of their methods we would find encouraging; others would cause us some concern – and my guess is we probably wouldn't all agree on the lens we put on this or that entity or program.

But we are different – we are a FACULTY – our name says as much. And as a faculty, we all believe in a common vision as practiced through our mission. It doesn't matter if we work independently as consultants or in the company of dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of colleagues, students and parents. Many of us are in classrooms every day; a window on the world of schooling and education that reinforces our understanding of the need for our faculty to be successful.

Whether past, present or future – in whatever iteration we imagine ourselves to be in – NSRF was, is and will be a strong voice for collaborative practice, critical friendship and facilitative leadership as adult learners in the service of every single child and teacher we encounter and influence. In turn, our faculty will be influenced by those we touch; those we work with and those we engage with at the deepest critical levels. Our democracy deserves nothing less. ■

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Center of Activity Report: New Center Established in New York

William J. Pollock, New Jersey and Deven Horne, New York

The state of New York established 37 Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) to support local school districts and meet their educational and financial goals. The BOCES model provides accountability, municipal sharing, efficiency and equity. This type organization assists local districts with many facets of professional development, as well as a myriad of other services, recently expanded to include CFG support at the Capital Region BOCES.

In the fall of 2006, William Pollock from Rutgers University Center for Effective School Practices (CESP) presented a new coaches institute to 13 people from the Capital Region BOCES and Schenectady City School District. That seminar was the spark that began a continued inquiry into the resources and professional development offered by the National School Reform Faculty. The original group of participants included special education professional developers, principals of special education programs, a director of special education and principals of regular education elementary schools. A relationship was ignited and a bond formed between those who participated; that bond has grown and touched countless individuals statewide as well as in the Capital Region BOCES. The new coaches immediately created a coaches support group (their own CFG) to help each other as they practiced their newfound craft and to continue learning. The coaches support group has met quarterly since that time and each individual has continued to learn and grow with new skills. What they have learned has been embedded in many school districts' professional development opportunities, in the local BOCES classrooms, and in the leadership activities of the BOCES. The BOCES special education leadership continued its relationship with Bill Pollock over two summer retreats in 2007 and 2008. The leadership utilized the tools of the CFGs to assist them in analyzing their data and developing plans for school improvement and future initiatives.

Out of the new work in the Capital Region, two experienced coaches, Deven Horne and Renee Beaulieu, were inspired to set their sights on becoming National Facilitators and creating an upstate Center of Activity. A need had been recognized to offer another new coaches institute with the emphasis on building and supporting professional learning communities. Deven and Renee asked Bill Pollock to mentor them in a new coaches seminar, which was offered in the late fall of 2008.



Sixteen participants registered and the BOCES supported the offering so that its component districts could receive continuing aid from the BOCES to participate. Deven and Renee's personal growth in providing this seminar and the local coaches' support and encouragement led the pair to become National Facilitators as part of the process. The new coaches five-day institute was completed in early March. The 16 participants came from three school districts, the BOCES and the National School Leaders Network. The three-day introductory part of the new coaches institute in the fall was used to get folks started on the process in their schools. Three months later, the group reconvened to complete the process of growth and complete the five-day seminar.

One of the protocols used in one session was reflection upon the meaning of a word. The word used was "courage," a prelude to a text rendering of a section of the book *The Courage to Teach* by Parker Palmer. The individuals' perspectives on that word were enlightening and encouraging. Palmer emphasizes "the growth of any craft depends on shared practice and honest dialogue among the people who do it." As a group of educators using the protocols, we have to call upon our own courage to move forward with our convictions and the value we hold for the CFG process. We are continually buoyed by the courage of the educators in the CFGs to share, to live up to the norms established by the group, to encourage each other and to examine deeply our missions as educators.

The Capital Region BOCES is now an established center of activity with two new National Facilitators leading a new direction in developing professional learning communities in the New York upstate geographic region. Plans are being

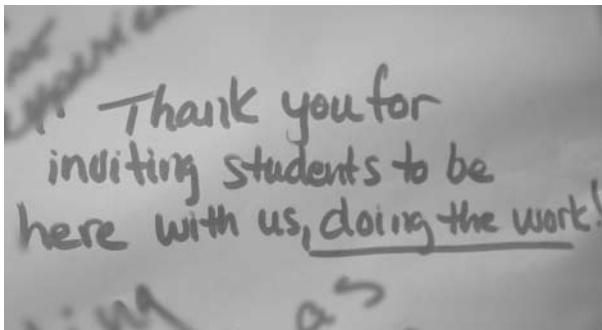
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“The conference was refreshing, insightful and enjoyable.” – Challenge student

The students, with guidance from their teachers, developed a presentation for the closing during their time at the Winter Meeting. The closing was inspired by the children’s book, *Through the Cracks* by Carolyn Sollman, Barbara Emmons, and Judith Paolini. Students were given homework (we know they were mad, too– at a conference and getting homework!) to either write about a time when they were prevented from falling through the cracks, write about their schools or edit their peers essays and practice with them. Each came in the next day with their homework complete and excited about the powerful closing. The following are excerpts from their presentation at the closing session.

“Unlike most schools in the district, Challenge creates a comfortable and almost unique atmosphere for not only its students, but for teachers as well. The school allows its teachers and students to have close-knit, trusting relationships. At this school falling through the cracks is difficult.” - Stephanie

“Eisenhower High School- what do you think when you hear this name? Do you know of the rigorous academic activities and programs that go on in the school? Or do you know the statistics that are posted in the newspaper? Do you recognize us for going to national competitions in history fair,



Reflection from a participant of the Winter Meeting

HOSA, speech and debate and band? Or do you know us as a Title 1 school with 71 percent of our students qualifying for free and reduced lunch? Do you see us for who we are, or do you just see the numbers printed in the newspaper?”- Alejandro

“I am a sophomore at Challenge and a straight-A student. I read, write and am an active member of my community. Though all this is true, I could have and may still fall through the cracks. *(continued on page 10)*

Vladimir’s Story

Michaelann Kelley, Houston, Texas

Vladimir, who read the poem at this year’s Winter Meeting opening session, is one of my students. Here is my perspective on a pivotal moment in Vladimir’s life. He shares his perspective on the same event later in this piece.

I first saw Vladimir in August of 2007. I am not sure when during the hustle and bustle of school and an Art 1 class of almost 40 students I really met Vladimir...or when I started seeking interactions with him.

There was a time when Vladimir never talked– not to me not to the other students, not to ask a question, not to answer a question. He never raised his hand, never asked for help, never even asked to go to the bathroom. I am going



Vladimir, junior at Eisenhower

to be open and honest: at first, I thought it was great. In a class of 40, one kid I hardly had to mess with...but if you know me even a little bit, you know I could not let that go. I made a deliberate effort to ask Vladimir more than yes or no questions but even then, it was a struggle to get answers. He was very tight-lipped about his home life, which made building that relationship even more difficult. I had made some progress by November, but at that point I didn’t even know if Vladimir was falling through the cracks or not.

I knew Vladimir was smart from grading his work, so when a colleague of mine, Mari Glamser, was talking in my room one day about the social studies department moving kids up to honors and Advanced Placement, I suggested moving Vladimir. She asked why his social studies teacher had not suggested moving him. I did not know. After *(continued on page 10)*