

THE CHALLENGE FOR EDUCATORS

SEATTLE'S SUPERINTENDENT OUTLINES SOCIAL JUSTICE PRIORITIES AND THEIR IMPORTANCE IN EFFORTS TO CLOSE THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

Seattle Superintendent Maria Goodloe-Johnson spoke at NSDC's 2010 Summer Conference in Seattle in July. Goodloe-Johnson shared her insights on the role of professional learning in reaching all students in a diverse urban district. Below are selected excerpts. Listen to her entire speech online at www.nsd.org/opportunities/summerconference.cfm.

WHAT WILL IT TAKE?

We all are so familiar with the impact that culture, race, and language have on all of us. The literature is so clear on the development of language in preschool-age children, the impact of race and white privilege on how children are treated by middle-class adults, who make up the majority of our teaching force. Culture, race, and language are now the global keys to our children's future and success. Our children need to be biliterate and bicultural when they graduate from our public schools, yet we still don't seamlessly integrate culture, race, and language into our professional development expectations for all children. In Seattle, we are trying and will continue. What will it take?

In Seattle, we have already done at least three disproportionality studies in six years. We don't need any more data. What don't we understand or what are we continuing to ignore? As educators, we must be attuned to diversity in all its forms as part of closing the achievement gap and preparing all our students to be successful.

BRINGING OURSELVES TO OUR TEACHING

I remember as a young high school teacher in Colorado in the '80s, I had some of the very best professional development any new teacher could hope for. Support for differentiation, acceleration, pedagogy, and cultural competence was professional development support for all teachers. To this day, I remember TESA and GESA training, which taught teachers to pay attention to gender and cultural issues.

I often wonder if the reason I remember the trainings on race and gender so well was because of who I am, an African-American woman, and where and how I grew up: In a single-parent family, yet an extended family where both my grandmother and my uncle lived with us for a short time. I wonder if I pay attention to students who struggle and are unsuccessful because school came so easy to me and I chose to teach those who were limited or challenged in some way, because I was committed to those who needed the additional help and attention. And my mother taught us to always help others and give back.

WORKING TOGETHER FOR SUCCESS

Collaboration is key to success. This is the only way we guarantee consistently better results for all children. Attention to diversity in all its manifestations (language, culture, special needs, sexual orientation, poverty, race, and class) is a social justice priority, one that we have struggled with for way too long. We are engaged in school reform today because we are not and have not been successful with all children. It is not an accusation targeted at anyone, but a challenge to all of us today, including myself, to hold up the mirror and answer the question: "What do we need to do differently to improve the academic achievement of all students? What do we need to do differently to challenge all students? And what do we need to do differently to close the achievement gap, the opportunity gap, any gap that exists that inhibits learning?"



Photo by JOEL REYNOLDS

WE KNOW WHAT TO DO

This Ron Edmonds quote is as powerful to me today as a superintendent as it was in 1990, when I was a high school principal: "We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us. We already know more than we need in order to do this. Whether we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far."

ADJUSTING FRAMES OF REFERENCE

Jack Mezirow from Columbia Teachers College is a theorist who writes about transformative adult learning. Transformative learning is the process of effecting change in a frame of reference. I like to describe frame of reference as your current place in life and what helped develop and form your beliefs. I often refer to it as "peeling back the onion." There are many layers that have influenced and formed who we are today. The lenses of family, community, race, ethnicity, religion, demographics, and tradition all create our frame of reference.

Adults have acquired a coherent body of experience, associations, concepts, values, feelings, conditioned responses, and frames of reference that define their world. Frames of reference are the structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences. They selectively shape and delimit expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings. They set our line of action. A simple example: I recently completed the Aspen Entrepreneurial Leadership program, a two-year opportunity to meet with other leaders from across the nation and world to tackle the issue of education reform. One night, walking back from dinner, two African-American males and a white female were passing a car that was stopped but had its lights on. My female white colleague went to the car, opened the door, and got in to try and turn off the lights. The two African-American males kept walking. Why? What would have happened if either one of them walked over and got in the car and tried to find a way to turn off the lights? The frame of reference and line of action was very different for my colleagues. The same applies in the classroom.

Once our frame of reference is set, we automatically move from one specific activity to another. We have a strong tendency to reject ideas that fail to fit our preconceptions, labeling those ideas as unworthy of consideration – aberrations, nonsense, irrelevant, weird, or mistaken. When circumstances permit, transformative learners move toward a frame of reference that is more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative of experience.

Extend summer learning into fall

Even if you didn't attend NSDC's Summer Conference in Seattle, you and your

colleagues can listen to all five keynote addresses. Milton Chen, Jennifer James, Vicki Phillips, Taylor Mali, and Maria Goodloe-Johnson shared their insights and

innovations. Audio files from each speech are available at

www.nsd.org/opportunities/summerconference.cfm.