



# Poised for Change

Stories of Personal and Organizational Transformation

THE BALL FOUNDATION  
EDUCATION INITIATIVES



**We have all been inspired, moved or touched by a story at some point in our lives.**

Stories have the power to communicate not just facts, but also context and emotions. In any complex system that is more than a sum of its parts, stories illuminate the underlying patterns, interactions and relationships that give the system its unique identity. Hence, as the Ball Foundation Education Initiatives (EI) team looked for powerful ways to communicate accomplishments, things learned, and reflections from its work—building systems capacity in school districts to improve literacy for all students—the medium of storytelling became a natural choice.

This unique project, *Poised for Change: Stories of Personal and Organizational Transformation*, is an attempt to capture patterns of change at the midway point of a five-year partnership between the Ball Foundation and Rowland Unified School District (RUSD). The stories are told by a diverse group of people: teachers, principals, district administrators and parents, among others. The stories are told from a variety of perspectives and relate to diverse experiences that the storytellers had of the Ball Foundation partnership. Taken together, however, a coherent message emerges from the various stories.

It is a message of growth, renewal, and courage to change in the face of increasing adversity. RUSD, like most school districts in the country, is going through a period of severe financial cuts. In addition, an era of increased accountability is calling upon school districts to dramatically improve student performance. The stories from RUSD demonstrate the system's increasing capacity to adapt and grow, a capacity that is allowing RUSD to face ongoing challenges while maintaining a sense of mission and purpose. The storytellers speak about new ways of thinking; these new ways of thinking are a precursor to changes in practice—what people and the system do in service to their students.

The work of building capacity is by no means complete. Since the time that

these stories were collected, the Ball Foundation partnership has deepened its focus on instructional, leadership and organizational practices that lead to positive results for students. Sustainability measures are also being put into action to ensure that the impact of the work continues after the formal partnership ends. Another round of stories with a specific sustainability focus is planned for 2010-2011.

In the meantime, please enjoy this treasure trove of nuggets. Although this booklet includes only thirteen stories, over fifty people contributed their stories. The complete compilation of stories can be found at the Poised for Change web site, [www.poisedforchange.org](http://www.poisedforchange.org). We at the Ball Foundation would love to hear your thoughts and comments as you read through the following stories of personal and organizational transformation.

Finally, I want to thank our thought partners in this journey, Vicki Zarkzewski and Hallie Preskill, who first brought the idea to us, tirelessly interviewed people (driving around a 24-foot RV, no less) and most importantly, helped to organize the stories in an accessible and easy-to-read format. We hope you have as much fun reading the stories as we had collecting them. Happy reading!

**Srik Gopalakrishnan**

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## **Sylvia Cadena**

Learning Director, Villacorta Elementary School

*Sylvia was a primary literacy coach at the time of this story.*

My most memorable experience is an awareness of a personal transformation that happened to me just this past Wednesday at a meeting that Ball Foundation staff facilitated. I was in a big group working on the district strategic plan, and there were a lot of what I consider to be very important people in the room: the superintendent, our school leaders, our principals. Because the district is going through a huge restructuring, we were talking about ourselves as a system and the great changes that will have to be made due to budget cuts. We talked about what these changes might look and feel like and the consequences that would befall our students.

We were given a question to discuss with our small groups and then we had to share out. Now, when I'm surrounded by a lot of people, I can be shy by nature. I usually sit back and listen to what other people have to say before I make comments or share my ideas and thoughts. But I did something I have never done before. When the question, "Who has something to say?" was asked, no one raised their hand. No one raised their hand. And then I did.

I got up, and I talked about how if there's danger within a system, in order to survive, systems have to be able to change, adapt, and modify themselves so that they can renew themselves. I equated it to my experience as a third grade teacher when I was teaching ecosystems. I felt that it was important to express that we're in the emerging phase, and we have to change and adapt so that we can renew ourselves. It was the first time I had ever done that, and I did it for two possible reasons: I had made a personal connection with the ideas and the process, and I had been doing reading that my Ball mentors recommended. So I wasn't just thinking out of the box anymore—I was acting out of the box. Consequently, a couple of principals came up to me and thanked me for having said that.

I find myself in a place of great passion and that I am realizing my voice. In my experience with Ball from my first Immersion Day to this last meeting a few days ago, I find myself realizing that, for the first time ever, every person in this district is going to be given an opportunity to voice what they feel in their heart. And a heart voice is as valued as a logical voice. That's why I'm so excited and not afraid of the changes we're going to be facing. I think it's even more exciting because the voices we are going to

hear will be a combination of heart and mind, and what a better connection that will be for the children.

I've always felt this passion as a teacher, but the more I go through this process with Ball, the more I'm not afraid to have it and to share it. This passion is more courageous. I'm able to walk away and be okay with anything I say because my passion is very focused and also open-minded. I will allow my passion to be guided along a different path if I believe that path is better than the one I may be following. I'm open to allowing my passion to emerge, to adapt, and to change along with the entire district.

Change is difficult, but the experiences that we have had have caused a lot of people to step up and be interested. More of us are volunteering to learn and grow. I believe it's the example of Ball because they are unwavering and consistent in their practices. They model it, live it, and breathe it, and every time we participate in something that Ball has to offer, we know to expect integrity. When you live it, it's not fake. It's sincere and it's consistent. I think that consistency shows people that it's a valuable experience for us. Ball has taught me the importance of all of us needing to be at the top of our game. We need to build our capacity so that we can be better for the students. We can't build a child's capacity unless we build ours.

## **Kathie Connaughton**

ELD Teacher and Department Chair, Rowland High School

The work with the Ball Foundation has made quite an impression on me. I think that the change process that Ball is facilitating in the district is going in deep and changing things in a way that is going to stay with the district for a long time. I know it's changed my life in that it has brought me into a different kind of thinking.

Let me give you an example. At one of the Chicago meetings, one of my most powerful moments of learning was when Stephanie Pace Marshall said, "You need to take a look at the understory." The understory is the truth behind something. It's the flushing out of assumptions and really taking a look at what are you dealing with here.

Stephanie had all of us at this meeting (which included people from two other school districts) make a huge mind map. She said to us, "I want you to put down all of the things that you think the district deals with that are important." Everything that we put on this map were things that we recognized as problems, like no parent involvement, subgroups of students, just about every aspect that you could think of in an organizational structure. Then Stephanie said, "Well, what's the understory to all of these things?" And there was this huge leap of understanding that came from making us look at the organizational structure and our practices in a different way than we ever had before.

For example, we have a huge subgroup of students here at Rowland High School that is made up of Hispanic students, English-language learners, and Special Ed students. Many times teachers will say, "Hispanic students don't do very well because their parents don't care. They never come to conference meetings, or if they do, it's very sparingly." Well, what's the understory behind that? What are the real reasons they don't come? Or why does it appear that parents don't see education as a focal point? The truth of the matter is they do think education is important, but there are different reasons why they won't come. Sometimes it's because they're embarrassed because they themselves don't have a good education. They feel that if they go to a meeting, they may not understand what's going on because of the language difference. Even though we have translators, the parents don't understand the process or the words being used. So that can keep them away. Sometimes, if they come from a rural area in another country, they may not see education as a priority. Just coming over here to this country

is a big first step for them. They might have what would seem to us a very menial kind of job here, but for them it's a big deal because they're putting bread on the table. It's survival. It's like one leg up for them and they're satisfied. Many of these families will not change until the next generation. It's not that these kids aren't smart or that their parents aren't smart or don't care. It's just that they come from a different environment and culture that speak toward a different kind of achievement for their children.

Going back to the meeting—after we made the mind map, we discussed some of the things on it, including the commonalities that existed between the three districts that were participating in the meeting. The upshot of that discussion was that even though we all came from different parts of the country, the very same problems surfaced in all the districts. That was a big eye opener to us. It made us realize how large of a problem and how human of a problem some of those things were. Many of us tend to think of ourselves in such a provincial way. We're in our little boxes and we only think of things in one way. What this discussion did was open our scope of thinking and make us realize that these larger problems exist beyond our own demographic.

I have felt privileged to be a part of this process, and to be able to share my thinking, my talents, and my expertise. For me, this work with Ball has been tremendous because of the respect that is given, and I'm not saying that just for myself. I think that other people feel that way, too. Even the teachers in the networks make comments like, "You know, I'm not worried because I'm being asked what I think, and I'm dialoguing my ideas, my biases, and my concerns with other people." It's a new era of understanding that emerges when you respect people in the system. They then come forth with their best, and the system works better and is more coherent. It energizes the organization to have the kind of respect that says, "I value your work. I value your opinion." We then move forward together.



## **Sue Cook**

English and History Teacher, Alvarado Intermediate School

*An expanded version of this story is available online.*

I've been involved since the beginning. The Ball Foundation has directed our thinking somewhat, but ultimately has made us do the thinking. It's been quite a learning experience in that respect. I've learned a lot, and I've grown a lot. The Ball Foundation has given me opportunities that I might not otherwise have had. The experience has been invaluable, and I almost wish I had had this when I was younger.

I have also taken to heart the leaderful behavior that Ball has instilled in us. I feel more empowered and have a different level of confidence in myself both as a leader and a teacher in my classroom, in the school, and in the district.

I've incorporated some of the things that we've learned from the Ball Foundation—like the World Café—into my classroom and with the school staff.

Doing the World Café with a bunch of eighth graders is mind boggling. It's kind of a free for all, and you have to set down rules because you can't just say, "Move to a group without anybody who has been in your group before." So, I had to adjust it a little bit. But I thought that it was a good way to get the kids up and moving and talking to each other.

The first time I did it was right after we came back from summer vacation. I wanted the students to write about what they did on their vacation, so I had three groups, each with a different question: "What did you do with your family?", "What did you learn in the summer?", and I can't remember the third one. Anyway, I split the class in half and had them rotate through the three questions, writing answers in circle maps. Then, after we were done with the chaos, I had them go back to their seats and make their own tree map of some of the things they did during the summer. Finally, they wrote the standard, "What I did during my summer vacation," but they had their three paragraph topics. Usually they say, "I can't remember what I did," or "What I did wasn't any fun." But after they did the World Café and talked to their friends, they could remember, "Oh yeah. I did this and this. I went to the beach." They fed off each other which gave them more things to write about.

We also did the World Café with the school staff. Last year we were having issues with discipline, but nobody liked the school's discipline plan. Everybody was complaining

about it. So, as a team leader, I suggested to the principal and vice principal that we use the World Café process to discuss the discipline issues with the staff. The three team leaders came up with the topics for the circles. The principal and vice principal were involved, but they were not running the meeting. They could give their input, but they were just the same as everybody else. For most of the teachers, it was their first time doing a World Café. Everybody felt like they had their say. There wasn't anybody who was left out or said, "So and so always dominates the conversation." After, we created a discipline committee made up of about ten teachers, administrators, guidance assistants and counselors who made up a new discipline plan that everybody could live with.

It was a great experience as professionals. Everybody walked away saying, "I feel better about the issue now because I had a chance to say what I wanted to say."



## **Lydia Dzama**

Third Grade Teacher, La Seda Elementary School

*An expanded version of this story is available online.*

When I received the invitation from the Ball Foundation partnership to participate in a conversation about literacy, I wasn't quite sure what it was about. I was somewhat confused because I wasn't sure what my role was. I've had a lot of training with second language learners, and I'm considered an expert and lead teacher in the district on working with second language learners—and now here was a discussion on literacy.

For me, the experience of coming in and sitting down, the way they had set up the room with these tables, the expectation that everybody will have a voice, everyone will be speaking—it was completely different. I was very much used to sitting and being talked to, never having an opportunity to express my opinion.

As I was sitting there, I was looking around wondering, "I don't know most of the people in here. Is this an elementary school function?" I'm seeing office managers, PTA people, junior high teachers, high school teachers. This is not the way we do things in the district. We're normally very separated: my compartment, your compartment. This was unique.

I had the opportunity to have a long conversation with secondary teachers, and hear them express their frustrations about students. Mind you, I'm not saying they were negative; it wasn't "the teachers before didn't do their jobs." These teachers just felt like, "We're trying so hard to help these students and we don't feel we have the strategies in place."

So in the conversation, I told them about my GLAD training. GLAD is Guided Language Acquisition Design. It's a program that is specially designed to help second language learners acquire vocabulary, while at the same time learning their academic content in a way that is fun and easy for them to remember: poems, chants, songs, pictures. It's a lot of work, but it's a lot of fun. The secondary teachers were saying, "How come we can't have that?" And I told them that I thought the person who had trained me in GLAD also trained high school teachers.

Then the secondary teachers shared a program at Giano Intermediate where second language learners get pulled out and really focused on in order to help them. I was thinking, "That's also a really nice thing that you're doing that I wasn't aware of."

This articulation between me as an elementary teacher and them as secondary teachers made me realize that we have the same problems, same concerns, and same passion about our students. It wasn't negative. We all wanted to know, "What else can I do?" I love being in a group that is proactive and not negative, where we're putting our heads together to share ideas and strategies and there's more openness. There was bonding going on. People were saying, "You can come visit or e-mail me or just call if you want more information." This kind of meeting was something that had never happened in this district on such a huge scale.

I walked away from the meeting still not sure exactly what was going to happen, wondering if this was going to continue. You know how some things develop, and then they're dropped. At least I came away with an appreciation for conversation with others and the realization that we're so separated in this district. But we did continue the conversations. And now it is such a natural thing to be mixed up. You've got your high school teacher, your office manager, and there is no awkwardness. Everybody is confident that what they have to say is important, that it's valued, and that everybody is listening to what we have to say. The biggest outcome of all this work is the collaboration.

With the restructuring that the district is doing, we're going to have a loss of resources and we've got to be willing to share our expertise. I don't think this happened prior to the Ball Partnership because we had never taken the time to sit and talk. I have a lot of confidence that we can withstand this restructuring trajectory. I would like to think that every school site will tap into their teacher experts. There is now this sense of respect of each other as colleagues, along with the respect to listen to each other. What Ball has done has really taken people from behind closed doors. That closed-door classroom that is across the nation could become a more open door, more transparent—to start having conversations about changing our belief system to truly believe that all children can succeed.

## **Chris Ericson**

Assistant Superintendent of Schools

The district's partnership with the Ball Foundation has really had an impact not only on the district, but also on me personally. On a district level, working with Stephanie Pace Marshall has helped us to appreciate this district as a living, dynamic system. She has made us aware of the process of transformation and the power of story. Story helps us translate our vision from something abstract to what it will look like when realized. It also helps us to honor our past and appreciate what we do not want to lose.

Our focus is on transforming teaching and learning but we have broadened that concept in that we are transforming the system as a whole. We're creating how we are "going to be" in that system, how we're going to evolve, and how we're going to work. We have a frame of reference for how we've operated in the past and how we are now living into a new reality.

How we talk to each other has been impacted. We talk about the work that we're doing, but just as importantly, how we work and interact with each other, including the relationships that we're forming. We've all come to value process to a greater degree. That was an "aha" for me; I knew as a district that we've always valued process and relationships, but we are now more conscious of being genuinely more inclusive.

Our Ball partnership work has made us better thinkers. In the past, when we've talked about work, it has often been from ground level. But one thing Stephanie talked to us about was taking different perspectives, from the 50,000 foot level down to the ground. To really make a difference for students, we have to be able to strike a balance. While we need to address what's in front of us every day, we also need to be able to take a more comprehensive, in-depth approach to transforming teaching and learning. This concept has really impacted how we approach major initiatives including the strategic plan and the redesign work. We try to take that higher, broader perspective, and yet, appreciate the rigor and complexity of our work. It takes us away somewhat from being mired in the mundane. There are those days where you feel like all you're doing is putting out fires, but the partnership is elevating.

On a personal level, this work has helped me to be more patient and more reflective. I've always valued relationships, process and true collaboration. But now I try to use

my time differently. I am outcome-driven, and while I know the value of giving time toward goals, I didn't always spend my time aligned to my values. I gave what I thought I should or could give, and then I'd move on. Now I am more reflective about how my time is aligning to what I value as important rather than urgent.

I'm also trying to be more cognizant of distributing leadership. Sometimes it's hard for me to delegate. And yet, I've started to see that with an investment of time with people — maybe by putting more time into the beginning of a project or spending more time on mutual reflection— that we're all in a better place to continue the work and do what we need to do. It's really made me appreciate how we can sometimes impact the work that we think is so important by letting go and sharing responsibility.

In my meetings, I've also tried very hard to eliminate strictly informational kinds of items. I try to create open space to work more on instruction and learning issues to have greater impact on student achievement.

Our partners from the Ball Foundation have been, in every sense of the word, true partners. They are critical friends who raise our sense of self-efficacy and professionalism. They share with us specific information and expertise, but their questions are what are most impactful to helping us move our work forward. They challenge us. There will be a tremendous void once the formal partnership comes to an end but I feel confident that the culture of the district has been impacted for the better related to both what our work is and how we work together.



## **Debbie Gatti**

Registered Nurse, Coordinator of district nutrition project

I've always thought of literacy as reading words and being able to explain them back. But now, after spending a couple of days with the Ball Foundation, I understand it to be much more than that. That understanding has made me look at how I communicate with the children who are dealing with chronic illness.

For example, when students with chronic asthma come in every day to use their inhalers or get a breathing treatment, I sit right next to the students and ask them questions about what they are doing. I also started drawing pictures for them because at one of the Ball trainings I learned that a lot of kids don't have very good reading ability but are still visual learners. So, we draw pictures of the lungs and talk about how the medication that they're using actually works in their lungs. Then, when they're done with the treatment, we do landmarks on their bodies to show where their lungs really are. Most kids think the lungs are two little sacks right here on top of their chests.

So, the kids are learning more about their illness and why they take the medication and how it benefits them. I try to give the older kids more vocabulary so when they are trying to communicate their needs to another caretaker, they are understood. It's an empowerment. The kids actually know, "This is my illness. This is what I deal with. This is what I need." They can become advocates for themselves.

Before my experience with Ball, the students would come into the health office and use their inhalers but I didn't take the time to explain why they were doing it or how to explain to someone else why they were doing it. As someone who has dealt with chronic illness all my life and who grew up with doctors, I was able to learn the vocabulary and explain myself quite well. These kids don't necessarily have that benefit.

It's amazing how I've taken a different focus on my work with these students. If I were to sum up what this experience with Ball has so far done for me personally, I would say it is true enlightenment of what literacy is. It's not just reading and writing, but all aspects of communicating with the outside world.



## **George Herrera**

Cotsen Mentor, Northam Elementary School

*An expanded version of this story is available online.*

One memorable experience completely changed the way I interact with people both on an individual basis and in group settings. It was at a meeting facilitated by Ball Foundation staff, and someone disagreed with what the majority of the group was saying. As that person spoke on and on and on, everybody in the group gradually changed their thinking and agreed with that person. Then, something else was brought up and a different person disagreed with what the majority of the group was saying. As that person spoke on and on, everybody disagreed with that person more and more.

Ordinarily I would not have thought anything of it, but Bob Hill, from the Ball Foundation, brought it to the group's attention. He said, "I'm going to take advantage of a teachable moment. Pay close attention to what just happened. In the first case, somebody disagreed. As a result of listening to this person, everybody changed their mind. In the second instance, somebody disagreed. Then everybody decided that they felt even stronger about the position they held." He explained that the reason to pay attention to this incident is because in both instances greater clarity was brought to the group by the willingness of the individuals to share. That's why it's so important for people who have a different opinion to voice it. It's critical to the overall work of the group.

This experience changed my perspective and work as a teacher, mentor, and leader. In the past, sometimes when somebody didn't agree with something I perceived to be positive, instead of allowing that voice to be heard, I would focus on trying to make sure that they understood how positive and important the particular matter or issue was. Now, when somebody needs to say something, I make sure that person has a safe respectful forum to say it. As a result of that experience, I have developed a deep appreciation for individual voices no matter their position. Every individual voice brings greater clarity to the group. By hearing all the voices, we enter a new reality that would not have been possible without all voices in the group being heard.

This experience also revalidated the speaking of my own mind. It's so important for each of us to share what we think and feel, regardless of whether we agree or disagree, or if we think we're going to be standing alone. Our integrity and candor is critical to the collective understanding of any group we belong to.



## **Brian Huff**

ELD Teacher, Title I Program Specialist,  
Alvarado Intermediate School

My first interaction with the Ball Foundation happened at the beginning of this school year (2008-2009). It seems like there's always something new in education—new programs and new curriculum. So when we first heard about the Ball Foundation, I was skeptical and wondered if this was just one more thing. However, when Carla and Barbara [from the foundation] met with us one morning to share their work, they used words like “networks” and “dialogue” and “making space” for teacher collaboration to happen. I realized it wasn't just another program and breathed a sigh of relief. I thought, “This is really what we should be about. Giving teachers the space and time to collaborate is what will make a difference in student learning.” It was exciting.

As the year went on, we began to meet with Ball. I always left invigorated and challenged, but in the back of my mind, I had the thought, “Where is the product? Where and when is this going to happen?”

Then, a couple of months ago, I attended a meeting with a cross-section of district members—teachers, classified staff, leadership. It was clear through the conversations and decisions being made that we were all on the same page—valuing collaboration, believing that expertise is within all of us as teachers and leaders and support staff. You could tell from every area of the district that the value of collaboration had become real.

Now I'm starting to see deeper collaboration and dialogue evolve and take root at the site level. Ball has done an excellent job of modeling ways to make this kind of interaction happen, and our Community of Practice has already been an important place for in-house wisdom to be shared. It is dynamic and models the kind of workplace I want to be part of, where everyone's valued and there's a free flow of creativity.

It's taken us a while to get to this point—we don't learn just by hearing about something. Instead, Ball has taken us through a process of experiencing this space to collaborate. Once we experience it, the idea catches on. I understand the longevity of the process now. It takes time because everyone must experience it in order to become a reality.

## **Sandy Johnson**

Principal, Rowland Elementary School

When we started the work with the Ball Foundation, I sensed that it would be a different way of working. I would often hear from individuals involved in the partnership that there were always questions asked and no answers given. For me, it was a good thing because I think public education isn't known for its regenerative nature. We're working hard on the job, but there is not time to think in new ways.

The experience with Ball has been one of affirmation, frustration, discomfort and hope. We had to shift our focus from the negatives and barriers of our work to why we do what we do. We had to decide if what we do truly accomplishes our goals. It was a chance to look at things differently, an opportunity to hear many voices (both positive and negative), to see old patterns and realize this was a chance to interact with each other in new ways. We've clarified our mission and goals. My hope is the system will make time to grow the interpersonal skills of the group so we can fulfill our goals despite the challenging times.

The major eye-opener for me was realizing that you have to look at the organization as a system, and that we must work to understand and honor everyone for who they are and where they are. Through the partnership events, I was able to see, hear and feel the frustration, the complaining, the fear of change, but also the hope and joy regarding teaching that people still had within. I was glad to see that feelings of hope came up in almost every situation. It was a little shaky at times, but people really did want to talk to each other, have their say, and be acknowledged as members of the group.

I've tried to differentiate how I work with my own staff. I have had to work hard to understand and honor people's perspectives. I've tried to coach more and direct less—not an easy task. But a major goal of a coach is interacting, so the process is not the coach giving or even knowing all the answers, but building relationships so people feel safe to think for themselves.

Overall, this process has given me hope that we can create a self-sustaining district system that can sustain the process and give people the skills needed to enable the organization to naturally grow and regenerate.

## **Erika Krohn**

Principal, Yorbita Elementary School

*An expanded version of this story is available online.*

When I think about the work I've done with the Ball Foundation, I feel like I'm a different person in many ways. For the past year and a half, I've been bringing a different kind of leadership to my school. Our staff meetings look very different. We don't have any "administrivia" anymore. All that goes out in e-mail now. Our staff meetings are instead about learning. Just this past fall, we spent two sessions developing and articulating our values and beliefs here at the school. We now repeat those beliefs at the beginning of every staff meeting. And we're not just going through the motions. When we have a difficult situation with a parent or a student, we always bring those beliefs to the forefront.

We've been using those beliefs to have courageous conversations from colleague to colleague. There's a change going on. People are really changing their practice, and while they're not necessarily getting kudos or recognition, they are getting results. So people are talking about it. There's a buzz in the air, which can be scary for people. Change is scary. People are wondering, "Does that mean what I'm doing is not valued?" So it's been very helpful to articulate our beliefs and values, and have those courageous conversations with each other.

Another key learning for me came from the workshop called "Leading Meetings that Matter" that Ball sponsored in Fall 2008. It was such a powerful training. It illustrated where I was trying to go as a leader and gave me some more tools to use.

We have this beautiful staff learning room at my school with tables and chairs and where we can keep our charts and things. But now we've cleared out the tables and we're using Open Space Technology to pull the chairs out into the spaces in the room. In fact, we did that just this past Tuesday. We did a debrief from a learning walk that the teachers had just taken part in. A learning walk is when teachers get to see other teachers in their classrooms. Usually there are specific things that they're looking for in each classroom. We debriefed as a whole group in a big circle. Then we did "Open Space" so that the teachers could go deeper into their own areas of interest.

That whole concept of choice has been a big learning for me. I used to think that we had to do everything school-wide in order to be really effective. And now, we still do

some things school-wide, but I've also invited teachers to go into areas of study that they want to look at more deeply. As a result, there seems to be so much more buy-in. I think Ball has really helped me in handling complexity because it is more challenging when you have several different areas of research going on at your school. But it can work beautifully. You can identify the common themes between the different practices.

Because of all this change, there's more excitement with a large segment of the teachers around practice. And I'm connected to that excitement because I'm elbow-to-elbow with them learning, which has been fantastic. There have been bumps in the road. As you know, change is hard for people. Being asked to open their classrooms and share their practices can be really scary. There have been people who have just loved it, and some who've been a little more hesitant about it. But like I said before, the way we handled the learning walk and the debriefing has built trust with the staff. We used strategies from "Meetings that Matter," such as coming up with agreements before we could debrief. This type of learning is built so much on trust, and we're not there 100% yet, but we're getting there. We're bonding more every day.

People don't realize it, but I've seen a difference in people as a result of all the activities we've been doing throughout this year. A young and very talented teacher came up to me after a Literacy Network and said, "I'm learning new ways to think. And I just changed how I approach things in my lessons and my class." Because of what's been happening, she told me, "I've changed." So I told her, "You do understand how if we're all changing together, how much power we could release for our students?" And she said, "Oh, I'm starting to get it."



## **Yvonne Martini**

Kindergarten Teacher, Farjardo Elementary School

I came to the Ball Foundation partnership work just like anybody else, which is sort of unusual for me because I'm usually getting the background information and the answers to the "why" beforehand. I was really impressed by Carla Colmenarez of the Ball Foundation, the hostess for these general meetings, and her description of the purpose for them. The word "collaboration" came up over and over again.

This initial presentation got me excited, and I was hoping that people would really open up. As it turned out, our small group conversations that we had were great. One of the people I was with was a middle school teacher. Kindergarten and middle school teachers don't have a lot of opportunity to interact. I remember her saying that there is no excuse for children to fail, and if they do, it's the fault of the parents. She was very angry because as teachers, we try so hard to work with students, and they fail. My school site had just finished reading Ruby Payne's *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, and one of the things that we learned from it was that a characteristic of low-income families is that they don't do long-term planning; they don't set goals; they don't have that forward thinking.

So, the group was able to have a little bit of a debate. The middle school teacher said, "You know, I came from nothing and we still were able to make it." Then we debated, "Yeah, but your parents already knew the day you were born that you were going to college." It's a whole different mindset. Then we got to talking about the kids that we work with, and how the culture is very different, and how we deal with that. For me, I felt like it was such a healthy debate that we wouldn't have normally had. It was really good to be able to speak as a professional with other professionals. That, unfortunately, doesn't happen a whole lot.

After the meeting, I really believed that Ball was going to be sending our messages back to the administrators, taking all that expertise that teachers have and really valuing what teachers know. I wholeheartedly believed it. I spoke up in the meeting feeling very much like an individual, and not part of the group mentality. I felt like I was one who spoke up and said, "This is what we've been asking for. Speak up, say what you mean. Say what you want the district to hear." I felt like there was some resistance, a little bit of mistrust, but I think that we had to see this as an opportunity.

As a result of this process, I feel like I better recognize my responsibility to step up and not rely on those in leadership positions. It really does come down to the fact that we are involved and we are leaders. I've always recognized that everybody has strengths, and that we shouldn't focus on weaknesses. Instead, we should focus on each other's strengths, because I think sometimes we tend to tear ourselves and each other down. But I think it's become more clear in my mind that you can't rely on those in positions that can make larger decisions to do all the thinking for you. You really have to be the one to get the ball rolling if you want to change.

Teachers tend to be very isolated. These meetings that Ball is having help teachers realize that we don't need to be isolated, and that there are opportunities. I'm not sure why this has to happen at such a formal level because I think things can happen informally if we really want them to. We can come together and we can share, but the feeling of isolation is a detriment to teachers. This process helps break that down.



## **Elaine McCauley**

Principal, Farjardo Elementary School

A key experience for me was working in conjunction with the Ball Foundation partnership on the strategic plan for the district. That experience didn't cause just a minor shift in my thinking, but more a seismic shift in my thoughts about what it means to really collaborate and center our focus on our students, and what we can do to make a difference for them.

It became evident early on that to support the focus on literacy, we needed to look at what we believe and how we work with each other and the students. The strategic plan was an attempt to align these things. It made me realize that the system does have to change in order to support the things we need to do.

We learned to work at a deeper level of collaboration with the Ball staff acting as our thought partners—asking the right questions and helping us to clarify our thinking. That was key. For myself, I saw the Ball partners as models. I observed how they worked with both large and small groups, and watched the way they asked questions. They helped people to think through things.

I felt like I came out of the process with a renewed excitement about the potential of the work that we do on a day-to-day basis, and a keen understanding of Ball's original statement—that the excellence we need is here. We just need to connect and tap into it for the benefit of everyone.

One of the key things that's happened for me as a result of my work with Ball is I spend much more time getting ready for staff meetings. I now see that the design and planning of those meetings is very critical. I no longer walk in and say, "Let's talk about the balls for the playground." That's something that can be handled on a piece of paper very quickly. What I've been working really hard to focus on with the staff is, "What do we believe about our work here at Farjardo? How do we build true collaboration?"

It's just like the district at large. We are a microcosm of the district, and I have some people who are highly involved and have been a part of many of these activities. And then there are others who reluctantly attended and are still in that "gaining awareness" stage. Maybe they're ready to jump into the collaborative process with their colleagues, or maybe they're not yet ready to say, "This is what we believe. As we look at our mis-

sion, this is who we are and who we want to be and where we want to go.” We’re all in the process somewhere. Sometimes that’s hard. I have a sense of urgency about where we need to go. So I have to stop and slow myself down sometimes, and realize that everybody is not there or, at least, not ready to go there yet.

What Ball is doing is getting us there. They are giving us a lot of experiences in working with each other. They are also making resources available to us like the facilitation training, which helps me with that sense of urgency. Instead of trying to move things along, I need to stand there and let the thinking and the process happen, which ultimately helps me be better at what it is I do in a leadership role. I feel like I’ve really tried to practice more courageous leadership. When my staff says, “We’re not sure about this,” then I may be trying too hard to go in a certain direction. So I respond by asking them to tell me what I can do to help us all move along better.

I’ve also learned that I do not need to and should not provide all the answers. I need to step back and let the people who ultimately have the problem to own the problem, to find the solutions themselves or with their colleagues. I think that’s hard because sometimes people expect you to have the answer and to give it to them. But then they don’t have ownership of anything, and we need to share both the ownership and the leadership. Even when we do the hard work around the restructuring of the district, which is scary, it’s still exhilarating and transformative because of the way we are approaching it and the ownership that everyone shares. We’re dealing with some major challenges, but we look at it in a positive way and say, “This is a chance for us to begin looking at the way we do business.”

Still, this has been a challenging year for us. I heard Bob Hill say that it’s difficult because we’re trying to create a new system while still working in the old system, and that’s always a struggle because the old system keeps tugging. But what a perfect time to try to make that leap into a new emerging system. Good stuff is going to come out of this, and that’s the seed of all these factors that are forcing us to do things we wouldn’t have ordinarily done. Ultimately, I would love to see us leading the way in changing education.



## **Ying Tsao**

Principal, Alvarado Intermediate School

In May 2008, four principals—Robbie Robinson, Erika Krohn, JoAnn Lawrence, and I—were invited to work with the Ball Foundation team to design a retreat for fifty-three Rowland management team members in June. Prior to this invitation, I had been involved with Rowland Unified’s partnership with the Ball Foundation at a very minimal level and had only superficial knowledge about the Ball Foundation and its practices. By the time we finished the retreat, I was completely inspired by the Ball “whole system” approach, which involved adaptive, asset-based, inquiry-driven, and stakeholder-engaged principles.

I still remember when we started the design process for the retreat. We were all stressed out from the time pressure and were struggling to figure out what intended outcomes we wanted to achieve at the retreat. As the design team, we knew we were responsible for the content of learning as well as the process. We also knew that we could not live into a new future given our current siloed structures. So how would we engage each other to deepen the relationships amongst everyone on the management team, and who did we want to be together?

This design process was the first time that I experienced the Ball Foundation’s Socratic way. I learned that they never tell us what to do, but keep asking critical questions that guide us to reflect on our own practices. They support us by facilitating the discussion process, but ultimately, we have to do the work. There were so many times during this design process that the four of us got frustrated and wondered, “What is this supposed to mean? Can’t you just tell us?” As we struggled together, we realized that this was the first time we had a chance to dialogue, plan and create the space, and set the conditions for collaborative work across K-12. In addition, we had the chance to share the challenges each of us faced at our site level, and to learn from each other ways to resolve these problems. The process strengthened our relationships as well as created a network for us to connect and learn from each other.

One of the Ball design principles is “adaptive approaches.” I remember at the end of the first day of the June retreat, we immediately held a debrief session. I was very impressed by the in-depth reflections we had. People involved in the design had paid attention to participants’ reactions and to what showed up in terms of process and

content. Hallie Preskill, who was observing the retreat, shared with us her observations and asked critical questions to help us modify our agenda for the second day of the retreat. I was impressed by the Ball Foundation's "walk the talk" practice, and learned a great deal about how to pay attention to what shows up in order to make adjustments as the meeting unfolds.

As a learning organization, this kind of reflection and learning has to come from ourselves. JoAnn Lawrence once said, "I personally thought I had changed, but when I encountered somebody challenging my idea, I realized that maybe I hadn't changed." It's so true that we often think we've learned new practices and have changed our habits, but the true test comes when we are challenged and we see if we react according to what we have learned. As someone once said, "knowing is not enough; we must apply."<sup>1</sup>

The Ball Foundation partnership has helped me become a better leader. I've learned that as a site administrator, I don't need to know everything or have all the answers. The most important job for me is to create the conditions that will allow teachers to engage in conversations, connecting them around work and practice that matters. Someone once said that "To thrive under the conditions of change, you have to be learning all the time."<sup>2</sup> I know that I wouldn't have the confidence that I have now if I hadn't stepped out my comfort zone and become involved in the work with Ball.

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<sup>1</sup>Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

<sup>2</sup>Mary Catherine Bateson

# Methodology

by Vicki Zakrzewski

The design of the Ball Partnership “Stories of Personal and Organizational Transformation” project began with the crafting of a single question that would best elicit a story of transformation from anyone in RUSD who had worked with the Ball Partnership. The Ball Education Initiatives (EI) Team along with its thought partners Hallie Preskill and Vicki Zakrzewski brainstormed possible questions, which were then put before a focus group made up of approximately ten RUSD employees and parents from various schools and the district office. After much discussion, the final question chosen for the project was, **“Tell me about one memorable experience you’ve had while working with the Ball Partnership that has affected your thinking, beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, teaching, and/or relationships.”**

The stories were originally scheduled to be gathered in March of 2009, but because of the challenges faced by the district due to massive financial cuts, the collection of stories was rescheduled for May. In April, personal invitations to participate in the project were sent to fifty teachers, administrators, and parents who had worked extensively with the Ball Partnership over the last three years. A general invitation was also sent via e-mail to every employee in the district. Principals were asked to encourage their staff to participate as well.

Each school and the district office received a sign-up sheet with the specific date and times that the “Ball Mobile” (the 24-foot RV that served as the story-collection site) would be at their school. A total of sixty-one people from eighteen schools and the district office signed up to be interviewed: these included teachers, principals and vice-principals, an administrative assistant, a district nurse, Cotsen Mentors, an account clerk, district office administrators, a parent academic advisor, Literacy

Coaches, Special Education teachers and administrators, and a parent of a third grader.

The majority of the stories were collected over a four-week period between May and June 2009. To collect the stories, Hallie or Vicki drove the Ball Mobile to the schools or district office where people had signed up to be interviewed. One-on-one interviews were conducted in the comfort and privacy of the Ball Mobile, away from the hustle and bustle of classrooms and offices. Each interview began with the question stated in the first paragraph, which was then followed up with clarifying questions that helped elicit more details and/or deeper insights.

The interviews, which lasted between ten and forty-five minutes, were audio recorded, transcribed, and edited into story form. The edited story was then e-mailed to the storyteller who made final corrections and gave his/her final approval to publish the story. A total of 52 stories were approved for publishing, thirteen of which are printed here.

The complete stories can be found at the Poised for Change website, [www.poisedforchange.org](http://www.poisedforchange.org).

Ball has taught me the importance of all of us needing to be at the top of our game. We need to build our capacity so that we can be better for the students. We can't build a child's capacity unless we build ours.

Sylvia Cadena, Learning director, Villacorta Elementary School

What Ball has done has really taken people from behind closed doors. That closed-door classroom that is across the nation could become a more open door, more transparent--to start having conversations about changing our belief system to truly believe that all children can succeed.

Lydia Dzama, Teacher, La Seda Elementary School

The experience with Ball has been one of affirmation, frustration, discomfort and hope. We had to shift our focus from the negatives and barriers of our work to why we do what we do. We had to decide if what we do truly accomplishes our goals. It was a chance to look at things differently, an opportunity to hear many voices (both positive and negative), to see old patterns and realize this was a chance to interact with each other in new ways.

Sandy Johnson, Principal, Rowland Elementary School

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