

ENGAGEMENT PHASE WITH NEW PARTNERS BEGINS

Bob Hill

This school year, the Ball Foundation has engaged three new partner school systems — Allentown School District (PA), Rowland Unified School District (CA), and San Miguel Schools (IL). As a first step in this engagement phase, the foundation hosted teams from each site in a series of meetings in August. The agendas for these meetings were developed by design teams composed of teachers, principals, district-level leaders, teacher union representatives, and members of the Education Initiatives (EI) staff. (See *Design Teams Honor the Wisdom in the System*, p. 5).

During these meetings the partners began collaborative conversations to lay the foundation for future partnership plans focused on student literacy, steeped in professional learning, and grounded in explicit change strategies. The plans will be unique to each school system. Participant feedback indicated that the meetings met the intended outcomes. (See detailed outcomes on page 2.)

What follows are stories from the meetings around the outcomes of defining “literacy,” broadening the scope of the partnership to reach many more stakeholders, and developing asset profiles of these districts. Dialogue relating to each of these three outcomes occurred in “World Café” groups, in which educators from different job roles rotated among conversation groups to bring all voices and diverse opinions into a consideration of what is possible in the new partnerships.

Defining Literacy

The dialogue regarding literacy was spirited and enthusiastic. One interesting observation was

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New Partnerships Meetings, August 2006 Intended Outcomes

Outcome 1---Have Fun Learning With and From One Another

- Share and honor the moral purpose, passion, commitment and knowledge that we collectively bring to the work.
- Share common issues about challenges faced in the partnership.
- Set loose creativity, passion, and a sense of awe and adventure in creating a vision of what is possible in the work.

Outcome 2---Explore the Ball Principles and How They Might Appear in the Work

- Reach a clear understanding of what we mean by “partnership” and “shared learning.”
- Move toward a commonly held view of the “theory of action” from which the partners will operate in the work.
- Co-create a clearer shared understanding of the strands of the Ball Approach.
- Develop a better sense of important concepts such as adaptive change processes and systems transformation (trying to merge theory and practice in authentic work).

Outcome 3---Develop Next Steps in the Partnership Work

- Begin developing a plan and framework for introducing the partnership to a wider audience in each school district.
- Explore the definition of “literacy” and determine if, and to what degree, there is a systemic view of “literacy” across each school district.
- Lay the groundwork for developing a work plan based on explicit outcomes.
- Start planning how to create an asset inventory.
- Do the work in a way that allows participants to inquire about, and reflect on, processes that can be shared with others in their schools and districts.

The Ball Foundation

The Ball Foundation is a 30-year-old non-profit operating foundation that conducts programs in two areas, Career Vision and Education Initiatives. The foundation also undertakes research to ensure the continuous improvement of its programs and practices. The foundation's mission is to help individuals recognize and develop their potential.

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ENGAGEMENT PHASE BEGINS

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that regardless of the job role composition of the World Café groups, the working definitions of the term “literacy” were very similar from table to table. Almost without exception each work group identified literacy as *making or constructing meaning within the domains of acquiring, speaking, reading, and writing a language.*

Spreading the Word

During the planning that occurred near the end of each day’s work, the enthusiasm that showed up in the earlier literacy conversations reemerged as the teams brainstormed ideas on how to broaden the reach of partnership. There was a strong collective desire to engage stakeholders “back home” in conversations similar to those in which they had just participated.

Each team departed Illinois with the beginning stages of a plan to extend the reach of partnership planning. Those plans led to invitations to EI staff to join the work of expanding the conversations in Allentown and Rowland during October.

Taking an Asset-Based Approach

Traditional approaches to school reform are based upon a deficit model in which participants identify existing component parts of school programs to be fixed or improved, typically in a continuous improvement model. However, EI works from a theory of change that requires an asset-based, rather than a deficit-based, approach. Informed by the writing of Michael Fullan, EI accepts the premise that deficit models of change inherently have built-in upper limits of improvement that are unacceptable to a vision of

schooling that includes academic success for *all* students.

In their recent book *Breakthrough* (2006), Michael Fullan, Peter Hill, and Carmel Crévola make the point that after decades of work and the expenditure of billions of dollars the progress of school reform is best described as “inching forward.” The explanation for the shortfall of performance to intended outcomes, they conclude, is based on the failure of reform efforts to transform instructional practice at levels of the large system of schooling (classroom, school, district, state or province, and nation).

That is the bad news. The authors also offer the good news, which is that there are numerous examples in schools and districts throughout North America of powerful practices in which desired student achievement targets are attained. The foundation believes that this point amplifies the wisdom of building the work of school transformation on the types of assets that are identified in *Breakthrough*.

The Next Steps

Next steps in the engagement phase of the work of Education Initiatives with its Allentown and Rowland school district partners include developing a profile of existing organizational assets on which to build the partnerships. The profile of assets, along with the development of descriptive, measurable indicators of partnership performance, will enable the partners to create an assessment baseline as the next step of goal-setting and program evaluation. ■

SUPPORTING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT THROUGH FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Janice Crawford

Family engagement is one of the four domains that comprise the Ball Approach to school transformation. The developmental work around this domain is taking place in the partnership with Springfield (IL) Public Schools. Engaging families to support the academic achievement of all students is one of the five goals in the Springfield strategic plan; so this area of the foundation's work and the identified needs of the district dovetail perfectly.

A district family engagement team spent much of last year developing an implementation plan for this school year. A community of practice composed of 16 elementary, middle, and high schools are working together this year to identify, design, and implement promising family engagement practices that

- support the school-wide instructional focus and/or academic goal;
- support the school-wide instructional practices;
- are based on student learning needs as evidenced by multiple data sources;
- touch the whole school community—every staff member, every classroom, every family;
- hold families and school staff mutually accountable;
- do not accept excuses of low performance of students and non-engagement of families based on race/ethnicity, gender, family configuration, language, socioeconomic or class factors.

Each school has a five-to-seven-member family engagement team that includes the principal and various combinations of literacy support staff, school improvement coaches, classroom teachers, parent educators, parents, and central support staff. The teams have already met three times this

school year to plan and share their family engagement work. They will meet three more times before the end of the school year.

In anticipation of the conclusion of the partnership in 2007, the district has organized a Family Engagement Sustainability Team that is preparing to carry the work forward in subsequent years. "The Family Engagement Sustainability Team will design the work to engage the remaining Springfield schools in identifying and implementing effective family engagement practices that support students' academic achievement," said Springfield partnership coordinator, Barbara Iversen. "The team will also provide the vision and leadership necessary for the district's continued commitment to the full engagement of all families as equal partners in their children's learning."

The plan further calls for three Family and Community Engagement (FACE) sessions to be held throughout the year. The FACE sessions are intended to strengthen public understanding and support of the district's family engagement work through open conversation and full participation. The first FACE session was held October 17. Others will be held in February and April.

"We are also working with the district's parent educators," said Iversen, "to ensure coherence in philosophy and practice among all staff that provide service and support to families. The family educators definitely feel that they and their work are more connected to their peers, the school staff, and the instructional program of the school. We have a long way to go, but we are definitely on the right track." ■

DESIGN TEAMS HONOR THE WISDOM IN THE SYSTEM

Rex Babiera

The Ball Foundation uses **design teams** to engage with its school district partners in creating and implementing all elements of partnership work. A design team is a small, representative group of people from an organization who come together as peers to design opportunities for members to work and learn together. When designing a meeting, process, or learning event, they determine both content and process. They serve to build a community of learners. On behalf of the community, they create the space and set the conditions for collaborative work. In other words, they pay attention to the questions “What will we be doing?” and “How will we engage each other to do it?”

The use of design teams is central to the work of the foundation because it believes that people own the learning that they create. Design teams, then, are mechanisms for a community to participate in creating its own learning agenda rather than having work imposed on it. They honor the wisdom in the system; they strengthen and expand networks in the system. (See box below for a description of how design teams work.)

Design teams are a way to engage people at all levels by tapping into their own energy and enthusiasm. Furthermore, design teams provide an opportunity for members to deepen understanding of what the community is trying to do and how it is doing it. They build a cadre of people who work together and can network learning. As more people participate in design teams, capacity is built across the community.

Finally, the use of design teams engages partners in organizational learning. The multiple perspectives on a design team are a source of ongoing feedback about what is really happening in the community. Design teams also connect people to their shared purpose and invite them to participate in their own learning. Thus, design teams are an important part of the Ball Foundation’s transformational change process. As fourth-grade teacher George Herrera puts it, “The design experience has been a living quest to collectively give voice to a shared vision for what is yet to be.” ■

How do design teams work?

- Design team members should represent the many roles and perspectives within a system. In the design process, members bring what they know from their role or perspective.
- Design team membership is typically voluntary, drawing on an individual’s own energy and enthusiasm for the work.
- Design teams can work at multiple levels. For example, a design team may come together to design a single, specific learning event, or a design team may be responsible for an entire systemic change process.
- Design team membership is fluid; a dynamic mix of experienced and new members enlivens a team with new voices while maintaining continuity.
- Members of the design team facilitate and take leadership roles during meetings and learning events. They pay attention to what is showing up in order to make changes in design—in the moment—if necessary.

WHAT PARTNERS SAY ABOUT DESIGN TEAMS



Design teams set the conditions for collaborative conversations about instructional practices.

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Ellen Lahlum is a fifth and sixth grade teacher at Casillas Elementary School in Chula Vista (CA) Elementary School District. George Herrera is a fourth grade teacher at Northam Elementary School in Rowland (CA) Unified School District. Ellen has participated in partnership work for five years, while George is in the first year of partnership with the Ball Foundation. The foundation asked both to share their experiences of serving on design teams.

When asked about the importance of design teams in the work, Ellen responded, “By participating on design teams I have had a voice in what direction the community ... would navigate toward. This is important because in order for me to stay engaged, I need the work to be meaningful and constructive. All of us are at different places in the work. The more voices that are heard, the more meaningful the work will be for everyone involved.”

Though new to partnership work, George responded similarly, “Design teams are important because they allow stakeholders to participate in the creation of experiences that will impact them. It is the reciprocal experience that builds depth and respect for the process. Design teams are empowered by different voices articulating and moving forward the collective vision of the entire group. When group members participate in the design process, it raises their level of consciousness, thus expanding the depth and breadth of the work.”

COMMENTARY

DOES NEW LEARNING GUARANTEE CHANGE?

Bob Hill

I remember that when I first met Ball Foundation board member Paul Schneider he shared with me this opinion: *One reason that working for organizational change is so difficult is because we so often confuse learning with change.* Paul's perspective was largely informed by his years of practice as a partner in the consulting firm of A.T. Kearney and by his participation in the creation of the Ball Foundation's *20/20 Vision: A Strategy for Doubling America's Academic Achievement by the Year 2020* (1998).

Regardless of how various groups, such as the Ball Foundation's Education Initiatives (EI) division, define their work (school improvement, narrowing the achievement gap, school reform, school transformation, etc.), their opening conversations with grantees or partners invariably include the tacit notion on the part of both parties that the work will be based on *new learning*, which for most schools and school districts equates to professional development. This grounding notion about learning has the potential to be good news, bad news, or both as districts engage in fledgling efforts at school change.

The accuracy of Paul's premise shows up in most approaches to school change. Many external organizations that engage schools in the change process have developed a program that they are willing to fund in school systems in return for commitments to professional learning and program implementation. Sophisticated versions of the approach typically include on-site coaching and mentoring.

However, these approaches almost always lack two fundamental components that we believe are critical to actual change occurring in a system. Invariably missing from these plans is adequate attention to the actual *process* of change — how does change occur, who leads it and how, and how can it be sustained in an organization? And, even when these plans are customized to particular schools or districts, there is rarely an accurate, complete assessment of a school's or district's existing assets in which the change process can be grounded.

Plans that lack these two fundamental components are based on the incorrect notion that new learning alone will be so powerful for teachers, principals, and superintendents that meaningful, long-term, and lasting change will inevitably follow the learning. ■

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