

## LEARNING COMMUNITIES FOR STAFF AND PARENTS

WEDJ offered a full array of professional and parent development opportunities for our community members. Apart from the ten days of preparation in the first summer, the staff took part in numerous professional growth experiences throughout the year. Teacher participation in PD (Professional Development) was consistently at or near 100%. We aimed to keep the momentum of the summer PD going throughout staff meetings, PD days and at PTA meetings. We built learning communities for staff by bringing in education experts, took part in PD activities at other schools, and sent staff to conferences. In October 2012, we brought in David Booth, a world expert on arts and literacy. In addition to authoring the highly-acclaimed *Impressions* Language Arts Series, and more recently: *Literary Techniques*, *Caught in the Middle*, *It's Critical*, *Exploding the Reading*, *Guiding the Reading Process*, and *The Arts Go to School*, Dr. Booth spent two days with staff in their classrooms, meeting with novice teachers and participating on an education panel following a PTA meeting. We only had a dozen parents turn up for the meeting and presentation, but there were two teachers from Two Rivers Charter School who joined us. In a letter following David's visit, he shared his observations about the positive spirit of the community and the quality of 'arts' instruction:

*Dear Barb,*

*It is now a week since I visited your school, and the memories of this significant experience are resonating in my teacher's mind. It is still wondrous for me after these many years to spend time with excited students, powerful teachers and helpful support staff, alongside such a knowledgeable administrative team. As I visited classrooms, chatted with teachers and students, joined in mentoring conversations with new faculty, and engaged in extensive conversations with you and your colleagues, I found myself immersed inside your school's culture, and recognized this as a place filled with commitment and promise, centering around a focus of caring and responsibility, where everything about education matters.*

*Perhaps the highlight was the panel and the ensuing discussion: the student's insightful words began a spirited conversation about such significant educational issues, and the comments from the audience reflected the professional inquiry that we need as fuel for our own growth as teachers. We*

*should have taped it for parents to demonstrate their school at its shining best, but we never seem to capture those magic events.*

*As you as a school continue to explore your philosophy and practice, to hone your curriculum, to build relevant resources, to modify spaces and engage with the community, your students will benefit from being among educators who truly believe in their mandate of professional excellence. As you move forward with technology, become involved with inquiries, develop further print resources, integrate community arts groups, find a space for physical education, continue to deepen and intensify the curriculum, while maintaining your passionate yet rigorous approach to supporting your students, this school will be a place where everyone will have a voice and yet want to listen to others. The children will grow and flourish as they become an educated citizenry, and if my son and his family decide to move to Washington, I know just the school for my grandchildren.*

*Gratefully,*

*David*

*David Booth, Professor Emeritus*

*Department: Curriculum, Teaching and Learning, OISE, University of Toronto*

The joy of learning is what David Booth shared in his musings. It was clear to him that we had a strong team of wonderful professionals under one roof. I noted to staff:

*I was really pleased with the quality of the questions and respect shared for such a legend in our midst on Monday. Thanks to all for being such wonderful and welcoming hosts.*

We deliberately coordinated some professional development activities so our parents and staff could engage in learning together. I was thrilled when the school and the PTA joined forces to bring in Michael Thompson, a featured guest on *Oprah Winfrey*, *60 Minutes*, *20/20* and multiple morning television programs. Dr. Thompson volunteered his time in April 2013 for a full day visiting classrooms and meeting with the WEDJ staff. In addition to writing the best seller, *Raising Cain*, Michael Thompson had written many books including: *Speaking of Boys*; *The Pressured Child*; and *Mom They're Teasing Me*. We chartered a bus on the PD day when Michael visited and joined the staff at IDEA Charter School, where Goldman, now WEDJ Board Chair, was on staff as the Executive Director. The intent of the collaborative professional development (PD) was to listen to Michael's message and then mix with teachers from the other school to discuss issues about boys and learning. The lecture hall type seating arrangement did not permit for interaction. We simply participated in a Q and A format after Michael's afternoon presentation. There were only a few teachers from IDEA who opted in to the session and while I

was hoping our Board Chair might have joined us, he returned to his office to attend to business.

I remember the day clearly as it was the same day as the Boston Marathon bombing. When Mr. Carter and I took Michael out for lunch, he began receiving dozens of messages on his cell phone. Given his home and practice was in the Boston area, he was especially shocked by the information streaming in. He shared that this incident triggered his memory of 911. He had been on a flight from Boston to New York to speak on the *Today Show*. He explained how his flight was re-routed and had to rent a car and drive 14 hours to his destination. In spite of all the chaos of the day in his hometown, Dr. Thompson didn't skip a beat. His messages and insights shared with the WEDJ community were inspiring and his generosity was deeply appreciated.

That evening Michael presented *'Eight Things You Cannot Do For Children'* to staff and families at WEDJ. We also invited educators from other charter schools; several staff members joined us from Two Rivers, again. The presentation was free and was introduced by the *Sons of Freedom* dance troop, led by Mr. Harris. Mr. Carter also volunteered to cook for a family barbecue that night. While I was pleased to see that most of the staff turned out for this event, we unfortunately only had a dozen parents there to hear a powerful message about how boys learn differently. Even when parents were informed through multiple avenues about the opportunity, they were underrepresented in the group. I was, however, thrilled to see our staff embrace lifelong learning that evening long after their workday had ended. As part of their professional development I also purchased enough personal copies of Michael's bestseller for each teacher's personal professional library. Most staff members lined up after his presentation to have him autograph their individual copies of *Raising Cain*.

I was delighted when treasures like Dr. Thompson and Dr. Booth donated their time to come to WEDJ, and while there was no Board presence during their visits, I did write letters on behalf of WEDJ thanking our guests for their generosity. No Board member contacted these experts to thank them directly for their time.

As a follow-up to Dr. Thompson's presentation, we looked into the piloting of a single-gender class, but before moving in this direction, we researched existing programs and took a team of 4 staff members to visit DeMatha Catholic High School. We shared our findings and recommendations with families at four focus groups set up in May. The team was eager to pilot single gender classes in grade 3, providing we had the support from families. The presentation highlighted the following reasons for introducing a single gender class:

- To see if single-gender classes improve student achievement
- To reduce suspension rates
- To see if males might be more willing to dance and participate in other arts
- To promote a sense of brotherhood or sisterhood with fewer distractions from the opposite sex
- To promote greater confidence/self-awareness
- To help girls build more positive relationships with each other

Ms. Palmer also shared what a positive experience it had been for her sons in a single gender school. The few charter schools offering single gender programs indicated they had enormous wait lists, giving us the sense that many families, outside of WEDJ, were interested in the single-gender offer. Not many parents, however, attended the focus group sessions, so we decided to wait a year before moving forward with this initiative, to give the masses more time to reflect on the possibility.

At monthly staff meetings and in-house PD events, I asked everyone to bring their PD binders, so that all the professional development materials could be housed in one place for future reference. Everyone who brought a binder could enter into a raffle for a gift card. We began our meetings with this ritual to encourage prompt starts and ending times. I was aware that time was precious and we did not want to waste anyone's energy! The next year when Ms. Palmer took on the role of Dean of Staff Development, she added more magic to the mix. During the summer PD preparation days, we coordinated a 'Cinema Time at WEDJ' theme, and everyone had tickets, popcorn and front row seats to view a series of fun film clips to reflect on how we were re-building our school.

In terms of professional development, we also worked hard to develop talent within our ranks. We approached teachers to see if they would give up a week of their summer break to go to Boston to learn more about teaching and learning through Harvard's *Project Zero* courses. We supported a dozen staff members to the tune of over \$35,000 that covered travel, accommodation and course expenses. We were serious about professional development and serious about developing solid teachers and strong teacher leaders. We asked all staff, who were generously supported by WEDJ, to sign an agreement stating they would not transfer to another school the next year. We felt this money was an investment in the students of WEDJ. Of the 12 teachers who went to Boston, one teacher did not return to WEDJ in September, and one teacher left in December. Such changes of hearts, however, did not dampen the spirit of the remaining staff who did return with a wonderful sense of confidence, initiative and drive. While this was a risk to send so many staff members, it is one I would take over again, given the transforming returns gained by the staff, who stayed and added talent depth to our school.

We also sent three staff members to the CODE (Council of Ontario Drama and Dance Educators) Conference in Canada. Ms. Lawson stayed up late to find inexpensive flights; we arranged with David Booth to pick up the WEDJ team and transport them to the event three hours north of Toronto. The team was made up of Ms. Palmer, and two teaching assistants, Ms. Burrill and Mr. McKeiver, who also taught dance classes at WEDJ. How often does a school send teaching assistants to conferences in another country? The next year Ms. Palmer took on the drama specialty course and contributed significantly as did Ms. Burrill and Mr. McKeiver to improving the quality of our art programming and school productions.

As a result of securing a substantial SOAR (Scholarships for Opportunity and Results) grant from OSSE (Office of the State Superintendent of Education), we

funded an expansion of our science programming. We were able to hire an additional science teacher and send Ms. Cummings to Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh for a week of robotics training in the summer of 2013. When she returned, she built up impressive robotics units by bringing *Mindstorms* to WEDJ. The students loved the program that helped us in our quest to enrich the arts through a STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, ARTS and Mathematics) focus.

We also had staff members submit to present at the National Charter School Conference in DC that summer. The leadership team was also invited to present at the NAESP (National Association of Elementary School Principals). Mr. Harris and Mr. Sessoms attended Harvard's '*New and Aspiring Leaders*' Program, offered by *The Principals' Center*. They returned inspired and full of rich ideas for moving forward with our plans for continuous improvement. I joined Ms. Lawson and Ms. Palmer at the *Disney Institute* in Florida to learn first-hand about the management, vision making and innovative side of the Disney operation. We wanted to make sure that the academic and operations side of the school could be influenced by some of the best examples in the business. The plan was to bring Disney facilitators to the school, after the 2014 DC-CAS tests, to help us co-design an innovative direction for the school – one that elevated the link between the arts and STEM. After my return, I shared with staff how we could learn from model organizations like Disney. The magic of Walt's work was all about creating something that was not just another amusement park; Likewise, we were committed at WEDJ to being much more than a typical arts school.

Locally many staff members took part in the *Washington International School Summer Institute for Teachers* (WISSIT) a group of professionals committed to connecting DC educators with Harvard *Project Zero* ideas. We also attended the 'Grapple' workshops at Two Rivers Charter School, as well as visited others schools to gain insight into other practices.

Apart from David Booth and Michael Thompson, we were able to attract the attention and support of Tony Upson from Howard University. Tony encouraged WEDJ to get involved in the *Capstone Project* – a grant that supported the development of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) in urban DC schools. Already committed to STEAM, with the large A for Arts, I was more than willing to bring WEDJ into the Capstone fold, that also added a \$2000 grant to the revenue side of our budget. Tony visited the school regularly and I was delighted to have an opportunity to talk with such a seasoned expert about education in DC. Tony had been an administrator in DC schools at the elementary and high schools level, in both public and charter schools, and was awarded a fellowship at Harvard School of Education. He met with me often, and offered mentorship support that was both affirming and wise. With his tremendous breadth of education experience in DC, I was able to tap into an exceptional resource. We were also fortunate to be invited to Howard's monthly *Brown Bag Lunches*, seminars that featured exceptional educators and experts from local school districts, the US Department of Education and university researchers. Ms. Bradshaw and Ms. Nugent

## CHAPTER 16

joined me at two of these events. The presenters and professional conversations that followed each seminar were some of the best professional growth experiences I had experienced in the DC area.

The Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) was eager to provide opportunities for parents to learn more about education as well. Their meetings, on average, attracted between 10 and 50 participants. The WEDJ Board had two members of the PTA to ensure that family voices were represented. At my first PTA meeting we had over a dozen teachers attend the afterschool event. I was proud to see folks step up and be part of this important organization.

I recall that at most meetings many parents brought their toddlers or had children playing in the background. At times, it was very difficult to hear anyone speak at the meetings. Not budgeting for childcare probably deterred participation, but with over 400 students, it would be difficult to find the funds and the people to supervise children on a monthly basis. The President also brought in food and interesting guest speakers (fitness, nutrition, and local farmer's market experts) to try and boost attendance, but the turnouts for most meetings was relatively low. The one time we boasted over 75 people was when the PTA combined the meeting with a Family Valentine Party. Food and fun was a trigger!

Probably one of my deepest regrets was not being able to find a way to bring more families to the school for PTA meetings or parent education programs. In order to help families to support learning in their homes, we needed to be able to make authentic connections between the school and home. We tried the conventional strategies of offering parent education nights linking them to PTA (Parent Teacher Association) functions, but the turnouts were low in comparison to events that featured our students participating in the performing arts. Despite the limited participation, there seemed to be overwhelming trust in the school. If there was criticism from families, it was rarely about academics; it tended to be about how we implemented the arts programming. Nevertheless, I was committed to trying to find a way to bring parents in as partners in learning, beyond the arts.