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ACADEMY FELLOWS
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Commonwealth Leadership Academy
Chapter 188
Massachusetts Department of Education

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A C A D E M Y F E L L O W R E F L E C T I O N S

Each year the Commonwealth Leadership Academy invites proven educational leaders to apply for a small number of fellowships. These fellowships provide an opportunity for principals and other supervisory personnel to gain a statewide perspective on education, to develop skills in providing assistance to their peers, and to play a role in the governance of the Leadership Academy. In working with the Academy, fellows are encouraged to pursue interests of their own and those of their sending school districts. The fellows' responsibilities include program planning, technical assistance to school personnel, and the generation of recommendations for the further development of the Leadership Academy.

We have been fortunate in having the following educators serve as Academy Fellows in the first two years of the program and are pleased to present these reflections on their individual experiences.

1986-87

Laurence Aronstein
Principal
John Glenn Middle School
Bedford

Kenneth L. DeBenedictis
Principal
Colonel John Robinson School
Westford

Michael P. Jones
Assistant Principal
Algonquin Regional High School
Northboro

1987-88

Judith N. Hunt
Principal
Thomas Prince Elementary School
Princeton

Norman C. Najimy
Principal
Richmond Consolidated School
Richmond

Charles T. Orloff
Principal
Mattacheese Middle School
West Yarmouth

Mary L. Sapienza
Mathematics Department Head
Newton North High School
Newtonville

Ron Reynolds, Pat Brown, Carnegie Schools, Board of Education, "Conditions on Teaching," Al Shanker, Nancy Finklestein, Faneuil Hall, Quincy, Springfield, West Boylston, Peer Assisted Leadership, October Conference, Guido and all the other principals, and most of all, Ken and Mike--this is a collage of my reflections.

I guess I came to the Academy Fellows Program anticipating what it was going to be and, looking back, I think to a small extent I have left a mark on what it is now. The opportunity certainly exposed me to a close-up look at the movers and shakers of public educational policy in the Commonwealth. Titles and names became real people. I was able to crawl to the edge of the horizon and steal a look, a preview, of what was next. Not too many school principals who are committed to just running their own shop and doing the best they can on a day-to-day basis ever get the opportunity to meet with the Governor of their state in the Governor's office and two hours later appear on stage at Faneuil Hall and share that stage with the Governor, the Commissioner, and an idol from one's more formative days--"Big" Al Shanker. That makes me a pretty fortunate guy!

What I've learned is that the movers and the shakers are not much different than I. The types of obstacles, frustrations, mundane problems, and conflicts are the same--the difference is that of magnitude. One of the goals of the Academy was to provide us with a statewide perspective. Certainly, this has been achieved. My eyes have been opened wider; I have had an opportunity to apply my assumptions against the realities and to make adjustments. What do I have to show for it? To sum it all up, I have a few new close friends, many new ideas, and am looking forward to the opportunity to share them with others.

- Laurence Aronstein

As one of the first Fellows in the Leadership Academy, I enjoyed the unique opportunity of assisting the State Department of Education in establishing programs to provide professional growth experiences for school leaders. Close work with Commissioner Ron Raynolds, Director of the Office of Professional Development Pat Brown, and coordination with the other two Fellows, Mike Jones and Larry Aronstein, resulted in several initiatives that communicated to others the intent of the Academy and provided us a broader perspective of education in Massachusetts.

With the enactment of Chapter 188 and the appointment of a new Commissioner, interest in education was at an all time high. Participation in the Educational Forums, panel presentations in each of the six Department of Education regions, meetings with the legislative leadership, discussions with representatives of many of the state professional organizations, sharing sessions with Department of Education leaders, and visits to a number of school systems provided many opportunities to exchange ideas, learn about the concerns of others and develop an understanding and appreciation for the commitment to education that exists in this state.

The year long experience was particularly significant because my frame of reference extended beyond the walls of the school and borders of the community. I could see first hand the struggles of inner city educators trying to provide for the wide range of student needs while coping with severe financial limitations and, at the same time, observe similar difficulties in suburban communities where educators at one time thought they were insulated from these demands.

It was, additionally, a year of professional growth because I had the opportunity to work collaboratively with Larry Aronstein in completing a study of exemplary principals engaged in creating curriculum change. The fourteen schools we visited and the behaviors that we observed resulted in the creation

of two models that school administrators could use to bring about improved learning opportunities for children.

Structured learning opportunities were additional benefits. The School Executive Assessment and Development program (SEAD), an effort designed to assess the strengths and need areas of aspiring school administrators, and the Leadership Institute were two well organized and significant activities that contributed to my observational, human dynamics and organizational skills. These programs helped me with my job responsibilities by providing collegial discussion and time for self-reflection.

How has the Academy program affected my personal growth? The impact was enormous. Having an opportunity to share ideas with key political and educational leaders in this state was exhilarating. To be a part of the effort to develop programs designed to fine tune the skills of school leaders was additionally rewarding. I've enjoyed a unique experience few others have had: the opportunity to observe education across Massachusetts and to use in the daily operations of my school what I have learned in the visits, conversations and analytical activities of my fellowship. I'm invigorated with new ideas and enthusiastic about the benefits of collegiality. I have a broader perspective of education and realize that networking, peer involvement, and coordination are viable processes that will contribute to educational change. I'm excited about the future and believe that with the commitment to education that I observed many times, Massachusetts is designing a blue print of initiatives that will significantly impact on the way children learn.

- Kenneth L. DeBenedictis

Looking back on my experience as an Academy Fellow, I can say without question that it was a major turning point in my professional growth and in my career. From being a practitioner whose interests were confined to one school, I became a learner whose curiosity was given license to range across the entire state and beyond. From being a member of an audience at conferences and professional workshops, I became a presenter at those work-shops. From being an observer of the state educational scene, I became part of the process wherein statewide programs were planned, discussed, and carried out.

For me, the highlights of my year as an Academy Fellow were many. Above all, I remember the people whose ideas are shaping the future of education in Massachusetts: the Commissioner, the Board members, the legislators, the superintendents and principals, the Lucretia Crocker teachers, and the wonderful, inspiring people I met in my study of Massachusetts high schools. I remember most among the particular events the October Conference in the White Mountains, the dinner that the Board of Education sponsored for the Lucretia Crocker and Leadership Academy Fellows, the forums on the Conditions of Teaching, my site visits to Massachusetts high schools, the National Principals' Center Conversation in California, and the Fellows reception at which Larry, Ken, and I presented the results of our projects.

In a way, the Fellowship experience still continues. I continue to be in contact with many of the people whom I met during the year of the Fellowship, I am still asked to talk about that experience, and above all I have acquired a new perspective on education that is a source of continued growth for me and a resource that others in this profession have been able to draw upon.

In my view, the Commonwealth Leadership Academy, its Institutes and its Fellows program, is making a major contribution to the development of educational leadership in Massachusetts. I feel privileged to have been part of its inception.

The highlight of the Fellowship was the planning for the year. The low point was realizing I couldn't possibly begin to carry through on my design and serve my school adequately. The entire Fellowship year will be remembered by me as one of incredible highs and lows.

The highlights included being part of the Fellowship group. The three other Fellows were outstanding educators and I enjoyed meeting with them and hearing about their projects. I regret that we never had time set aside when we could get to know one another personally. Our monthly meetings were always centered around brief discussions of our projects and Academy business. I thoroughly enjoyed our two hour long meetings with the Commissioner. Watching the progress of the Carnegie Schools evolve in his mind was fascinating. I truly felt like an "insider" during those two meetings. I wish we had been able to observe more State Department workings at this level.

Getting to know and meeting with the staff of the Early Childhood Bureau and their director Carole Thomson was a high point. This group significantly influenced my thinking on Early Childhood issues. I felt I grew most through my readings in the Early Childhood field. I put myself on a stiff self-imposed library schedule in the evenings and programmed myself to read widely in the field.

While I was able to visit some Early Childhood programs, I was disappointed that my time was so limited. Initially, I had planned to devote one day a week out of the building to the Fellowship Program and found that often the day was used doing Academy business, obligations to my professional organization's board (MESPA), and Fellows meetings. Little time, other than evenings, was left to visit programs. I feel strongly that the Fellowship cannot be given justice by a full-time working Principal--even a well-organized one. Four days a month is not enough time to really do in-depth research, and a school does not run well with a Principal who is out two out

of five days a week. I would like to see the Fellowship broadened financially to include at least a half year sabbatical. With this structure the first half of the school year could be spent designing the individual Fellowship Program and doing the necessary readings, and the second half could be spent visiting programs, planning the project, taking courses, and implementing the individual's Fellowship goals. For me it would have been ideal.

Without doubt the highlight of the year was the state-wide conference I organized with the help of MESPA on March 30th. My dream was to do a project --the conference--that would showcase some of the state's outstanding Early Childhood programs, and bring together teams of people who shared similar interests. The conference exceeded my greatest expectations. There were one-hundred-seventy participants representing sixty-six towns--Superintendents, Principals, and Teachers. Without the cooperation of MESPA, who handled all the mechanics, and the Central Massachusetts Regional Office staff, who allowed us to use their facility, it would never have happened.

Professionally, there is no doubt that I have grown. My perspective on the field of Early Childhood has expanded and I have been enriched tremendously. The consultation services offered by the Fellows Program benefitted not only the schools who sought help, but me as well, because it gave me a chance to put into practice some of what I have learned. My hope is that I can continue to help school systems develop programs in the future and follow through on my own dreams in the area of Early Childhood within my own district.

- Judith N. Hunt

A recent "Dear Abby" column compared major problems of schools in the 1950's and in the 1980's. The comparison lists surprised neither those who have been teaching for thirty years nor those who were students then and are students now. Almost daily we who teach deal with--or at least talk about--those changes.

We in the public schools have witnessed the changes, have tried to keep abreast of them, to understand them and adapt curriculum and teaching styles to them. Were I a correspondent of Dear Abby, I would write her to emphasize that the changes are of even broader scope, greater depth, more reverberating impact than those listed in her column. They are fundamental changes in our society; radical changes in our economic systems; quantum leaps in technological developments. We have observed the changes--and tried to deal with them.

Our effort to deal with change has been a reactive process. If we are to be fully effective as educators in an era of accelerating change, we need to become proactive. We need to anticipate the nature and direction and intensity of changes that affect our students and their futures. Only through a proactive process may we help a changing population prepare for a changing world.

Reading about the Leadership Academy Fellowship Program and listening to one of the charter fellows speak, I saw a unique, dual opportunity: to learn from experts information and ideas that may help us educators to prepare ourselves and our schools for the future; and, simultaneously, to vitalize my own long career in education.

Being a Leadership Academy Fellow has been an invigorating experience. As a fellow I have met with people devoted to observing and interpreting sociological, economic, and technological changes, and with some who are effecting some of those changes. I have learned of new ways to open doors for

children and youths who have been or may be alienated by current education systems. I have grown keenly aware of both the promises and the hazards that the changes can bring.

My fellowship experience has been enhanced and enriched by many people who have shown the keen interest and lent the necessary support to make the experience a stimulating one. The Richmond School Committee supplemented the \$3,000 grant from the Massachusetts Department of Education with additional funds to adjust the schedule of a teacher who is acting principal in my frequent absences. The superintendent has fully endorsed my activities, even when they require postponement or reassignment of my regular duties. Almost every person that I have contacted in higher education, in private business and industry, and in other sectors has favorably responded to my requests for information, time, or help. People of the Massachusetts Department of Education, at both the central and regional offices, have readily given support in my search for resources.

The Leadership Academy Fellowship experience has widened my view and deepened my involvement in the education reform movement. My next step is to try to bring some of the view into tomorrow and some of the excitement of today to other educators in the state.

- Norman C. Najimy

Working in schools is very often a lonely occupation. In a business where community is at the very core of what we are trying to do, the system encourages isolation and leaves us questioning our roles, our responsibilities and most importantly, our obligation to each other. This is why my year as an academy fellow was so important and why the opportunity to gain a statewide perspective on education couldn't have come at a more opportune time in my career.

I must confess that before this year began I had become more concerned with the problems of education than with the possibilities for change. Like so many school people who are burdened with the constraints of external policies and social demands, I had tabled my "vision" and redirected my energies to the mountains of administrative struggles that occupy our schools. Frustrated by a system that seldom rewards and often forgets, I was rapidly losing the excitement and enthusiasm that had characterized my work for the last twenty years.

There are many positive things that happen when you break out of the isolation and begin to hear other people's views. That's why the opportunity to visit schools and talk with colleagues around the state was a major turning point in my professional career. I was not surprised at the things I found. I have always suspected that answers to many of the major issues confronting education could probably be found in existing schools. It simply requires the energy to explore and the support of a system that recognizes the value of human interaction.

The Commonwealth Leadership Academy provided me with a rare opportunity to seek out ideas. What I found, and how I will use that information is much too large a subject for a paper of this length. But several powerful impressions are worthy of note:

1. Teachers and principals from different schools seldom if ever talk!

Addressing this alarming lack of communication should be our first order of business, and programs like the Leadership Institutes that promote dialogue and networking should be expanded.

2. The success of a school program seems to be directly related to the "ownership" the staff feels. The Carnegie School program, which is soon to be initiated across the state, will encourage teachers to make key decisions regarding their school program and will assure an ongoing commitment to change.
3. Many schools in the Commonwealth, regardless of their size, are working hard to provide a sense of intimacy. Recognizing the fact that young people must identify with the adults who are teaching them, they are actively exploring ways to encourage meaningful contact between teachers and students.
4. The burdensome layers of academic accountability, entitlement programs, state regulations and legal constraints must be eased. Local schools seem overwhelmed with paperwork and must be encouraged to concentrate on the business of teaching.
5. The leadership of Massachusetts schools is very strong. Administrators at the building and central office level are remarkably productive and should be given the authority to control the programs and students they are paid to supervise.
6. Education is once again a priority in our state. A clear message has been sent from the Commissioner and the legislature and practitioners throughout the Commonwealth are increasingly optimistic about the future.

- Charles T. Orloff

From the start, I viewed the Commonwealth Leadership Academy Fellowship as an opportunity to take some "quiet" time away from my regular teaching/administrative responsibilities at Newton North High School. In fact, the fellowship afforded me the impetus to pose some hard questions about mathematics teaching, its curriculum, and the school curriculum in general.

While in pursuit of some possible answers to my newly formulated questions, I found myself often either very exhilarated or quite confounded. The many ideas of philosophers, curriculum theorists, social scientists, artists, teachers, searchers and researchers I met along the way bumped-up against mine in less than "quiet" fashion. I was not the maker of the noise, I found myself listening more often than speaking. I listened to the voices of both women and men. I took special time listening to those who harbored strong and negative feelings about math. Though I have spent a significant part of my twenty-year teaching career working with the students who do not view math positively, this was the first time ever that I had listened carefully to my coevals. They helped me to understand how their experience of math had led them to conclude that mathematics is truly an inhuman activity.

I find it totally unacceptable that our educational system should cause any bright, intelligent and sensitive person to draw such a conclusion about mathematics. Fortunately, other educators think so too! Throughout this year, I have begun to seek them out and to plan future work towards the rethinking of mathematics as a human endeavor.

I applaud the Commonwealth for the creation of the Leadership Academy Fellowship program to provide school leaders the gift of "quiet" time.

- Mary L. Sapienza

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