

2011 National Blue Ribbon Schools Awards Ceremony



Teaching Ambassador Fellows and National Blue Ribbon School Representatives Take on Key Education Issues

Four of the U.S. Department of Education's Washington Teaching Ambassador Fellows facilitated roundtable discussions on four issues of current interest in education, selected in advance by conference participants:

- [Measuring Student Achievement](#);
- [Preparing for the Common Core Standards](#);
- [Creating a Voice for Educators in School Improvement and Policy](#); and
- [Engaging Families and Communities in the Education Dialogue](#).

Three of the four Fellows used a modified Kiva process, adapted from a Native American practice to ensure broad participation in the discussion of important issues. The process allows participants to learn from each other, to speak and have their ideas considered, and to listen before they offer critiques. A major tenet of the Kiva process is the Rule of Six: six randomly selected group members are likely to provide a full range of opinions, backgrounds, and perspectives on the topic at hand.

In a typical Kiva process, the six volunteers face the audience and open the discussion by providing short answers to a major question or series of questions. After each volunteer speaks, the others respond, one by one, to what they heard. When this cycle completes, volunteers join the rest of the participants in small groups. Within those groups, participants record a key word or phrase from the volunteers' comments that captured their attention and share their key words or phrases. Once everyone has spoken, group members discuss the topics based on what they heard. At the end of the discussion period, everyone writes their proposed answers to the major question(s). These responses become a record of the group's attempt to address the major question(s) and each participant receives a copy of all responses.

The U.S. Department of Education's Teaching Ambassador Fellowship program enables outstanding teachers to bring their classroom expertise to the national dialogue on education. Fellows facilitate conversations with educators across the country, provide outreach and communication about federal initiatives and engage teachers in understanding, developing, and implementing these efforts; and share what they learn from the field with the Department. To learn more about the Teaching Ambassador Fellowship or the Fellows who facilitated the discussions at the National Blue Ribbon Schools Ceremony, please visit <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/teacherfellowship/index.html>

Measuring Student Achievement
Led by Washington Teaching Ambassador Fellow
Maryann Woods-Murphy
Northern Highlands Regional High School, Allendale, NJ

Using a modified Kiva Process, Ms. Woods-Murphy posed a series of questions to session attendees about student achievement, asking the six randomly chosen volunteers to describe their top way to measure student achievement, aside from standardized tests. Each volunteer responded and had an opportunity to respond to others. After volunteers returned to the audience, all attendees discussed the question in small groups, which then had the opportunity to report out.

Four themes emerged from the discussion.

1. Assessment should be student-focused.

- Students should have the opportunity to reflect on what achievement looks like and instruction should be tailored to their needs.
- Teachers and students should set goals based on teacher-determined standards.
- Assessment should be based on an instructional growth model because not all students start at the same place.
- Schools should backtrack standards and skills from third grade to kindergarten, so students who need intervention get it immediately.
- A balance between standardized and individual testing is needed.

2. Formative assessment is crucial.

- Student understanding should be assessed via cold-calling during class.
- The focus should shift from measuring performance to measuring learning.
- Assessment should direct instruction.
- Professional learning communities are a good resource for creating classroom-based questions that stir critical thinking and gather timely information.

3. Assessment does not only mean tests.

- Assessments should be project-based and cut across curriculum areas.
- Assessments should be authentic and collaborative.
- Portfolios are valuable, as is deep questioning and creativity.

4. Technology is helpful but must be used correctly.

- An over-reliance on technology limits student thinking.

- Teaching technology is important, but so is teaching global understanding and environmental issues, and these skills should all be integrated.

Respondents also raised several questions:

- How do you best reach students who are capable but choose not to perform?
- Collaborative data analysis and professional learning communities are good, but do they stifle ingenuity? How do you balance creativity with what students need to know?
- The grading system triggers the type of assessment used because schools need to justify grades to parents. But do those grades truly reflect what students can do, or do they show effort or perception of skills?
- There are two ways to measure achievement: mastery and growth. How do you decide which you're going to measure?

**Preparing for the Common Core Standards
Led by Washington Teaching Ambassador Fellow
Gregory Mullenholz
Twinbrook Elementary School, Rockville, MD**

Mr. Mullenholz posed two questions two questions: 1) How does your school ensure high-quality professional development related to implementing the Common Core or other college- and career-ready standards? And 2) What impacts, both positive and negative, have the training, implementation, and assessment of the Common Core or other college- and career-ready standards had on your school? Attendees shared their thoughts in pairs or triads, and then each pair reported out to the table where they sat. Table representatives then reported out to the whole group.

For the question about ensuring high quality professional development, attendees discussed the following ideas:

- State departments, administrators, and teachers must be involved.
- Funding is required.
- Team leaders should be trained so they can train teachers.
- Network specialists should meet with teams.
- Leaders need to learn about standards and work with teachers to promote understanding.
- Workshops should be held for administrators.
- Teachers must have copies of the curriculum.
- The present curricula should be aligned with the common core.
- Teachers must be aware of the common core while still working on the present curricula.
- Professional development should take place during school days.

- Curriculum-based assessments should be given, and students evaluated on a regular basis.
- State departments of education should provide teacher training.

Implementing the Common Core standards was seen as having both positive and negative impacts.

Positives impacts included:

- Open communication.
- Helpful training provided.
- Common language.
- Students can move between states more easily.
- Critical thinking skills.
- Bringing teachers together as a team.
- Better preparing students for the future.

Negative impacts included:

- Lack of time.
- One foot in new/one foot in old.
- Funding.
- Lack of technology.
- Teachers struggling with place/ value.
- Teachers aren't ready.
- Trust factor—so many changes linking teacher evaluation with testing.
- Convincing teachers to allow for deeper thinking.
- Concern about national or state assessments.

Creating a Voice for Educators in School Improvement and Policy
Led by Washington Teaching Ambassador Fellow
Geneviève DeBose
Bronx Charter School for the Arts, Bronx, NY

Using a modified Kiva Process, Ms. DeBose posed questions about how to better create a voice for educators in school improvement and policy. In this process, six volunteers were randomly chosen to speak for the group. Each volunteer provided a response, and then had an opportunity to respond to each other. After they finished, the volunteers returned to the audience and all attendees discussed the question in small groups, which then had the opportunity to report out.

The chief barrier identified by attendees was lack of time—time to experiment, to deliberate, to collaborate, and to advocate. Other barriers included:

- Top-down culture of compliance.
- Lack of access to decision-makers or vehicles for educator input.
- Lack of transparency in information sharing.
- Reactive, risk-avoidant culture of the teaching profession.
- Educators' self-perceptions as insignificant and their beliefs don't matter.
- Right questions are not asked.
- Lack of consensus (among any group).
- No one asks educators.
- Lack of clarity about what is essential.
- Too many initiatives and mandates coming at educators.
- Lack of community support.
- Lack of trust in educators.
- School boards and politics generally.

With regard to opportunities, a strong consensus emerged about the importance of taking risks—in speaking out, in opening schools to the larger community, and in creating new cultures. Other opportunities included:

- Use protocols (such as Kiva) in classroom, board, and policy meetings to ensure representation of all.
- Better marketing and public relations on what educators do—improve public perception of schools and educators—be intentional and relentless in getting the word out.
- Listen to teachers—listen to students.
- Move from local to state level involvement.
- Involve the community—invite the public and policymakers into schools and invite students to address school boards and state legislatures.
- Have teachers sit on school boards.
- Remind decision-makers that children are the priority.
- Empower teachers to give voice to best practices.
- Speak up through local professional organizations.
- Clarify stakeholder roles.
- Gain access to policymakers.
- Take risks to boost our school district's image.
- Work with peers to develop consensus, then appeal to administrators, board members, and the public for change.
- Connect with business interests.
- Increase school autonomy.

- Do a study of Blue Ribbon Schools related to their levels of autonomy.
- Create a network of Blue Ribbon Schools.
- Eliminate high-stakes testing rewards.
- Create a culture of creativity and innovation at all levels.

Engaging Families and Communities in the Education Dialogue
Led by Washington Teaching Ambassador Fellow
Claire Jellinek
South Valley Academy, Albuquerque, NM

Ms. Jellinek used a modified Kiva Process, randomly choosing six volunteers and asking them how to strengthen family and community engagement and to describe challenges their schools face in striving to engage families and the community. Each volunteer responded and had an opportunity to respond to others, then the volunteers returned to the audience and all attendees discussed the question in small groups, which then had the opportunity to report out.

Three themes emerged for strengthening family and community engagement.

1. Create a positive atmosphere.

- All family activities at school should be free.
- Principal should hold regular coffee chats with parents.
- Make sure the principal is visible.
- Teachers should hold break-out sessions for parents.
- Provide classes for parents.
- Make sure parents know the school cares about their child.
- Hold parent focus groups.
- Invite parents to spirit nights.
- Make sure parents are involved in all committees for school events.

2. Be Direct.

- Provide parents with a list of things they can do to help the school.
- Set expectations for parent involvement.
- Directly ask parents to help with an activity.
- Create the expectation of 100% parent-teacher conference attendance.

3. Use a variety of methods to reach families.

- Send home newsletters.
- Make regular, positive phone calls.
- Use Facebook or other social media to connect with parents.
- Hold meetings outside of school, such as at parent homes, community centers or Wal-Mart.
- Use the local media.
- Provide incentives to staff to reach out to parents.
- Provide incentives to students to get their parents involved.

Attendees also identified two types of challenges in striving to engage families and the community.

1. Direct barriers to parent participation.

- Parents lack motivation.
- Parents lack time to get involved because of multiple jobs or other commitments.
- Distance or lack of transportation make parent involvement difficult.
- Parents don't speak English or aren't comfortable speaking English.
- Parents are illiterate.
- Finding times that work for both teachers and parents is difficult.
- The school population is transient.
- Parents lack phones or do not have computers or computer skills.
- Some parents are uninvolved in raising their children.

2. Expectations about education are at odds with participation.

- High school parents don't see value in being involved or believe students should be autonomous by high school age.
- Parents have low expectations about education.
- Parents are unhappy because their children are struggling or are not in advanced classes.
- Parents come from a cultural background that does not expect parents to be involved.