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Future Search in School District Change

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Rita Schweitz and Kim Martens (Eds), Future Search in School District Change. Lanham, Md: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005.

“Future Search” is one of many of the innovative ways of incorporating deliberation and dialogue into important policy making and planning processes that evolved during the latter part of the 20th century. Despite being frequently used, with a great deal of success, it, along with its brethren, are not popularized by the mass media and the American public is pretty much ignorant of their theory, designs, and many success stories. Despite this, they grow in use and efficacy.

This book is a collection of essays written by the designers and experimenters of 16 “future search” projects that were all devoted to improving various aspects of school systems in the United States and Canada from the early 1990s to date. So, what exactly is a “future search?”

In essence, it is a “D+D” style planning process that involves many “stakeholders” and experts in a conference or conferences that run anywhere from a day to several days...and there may be two or so at a time. It’s flexible. The underlying theory is that fundamental to mediation and conflict resolution. The goal is to focus on future solutions to present problems and to assume responsibility for implementing agreements, not continues to lay blame for the problems, crises, and/or problems that led to hiring the “Future Search” consulting team in the first place. The real key to success is adroit facilitators and professional consensus builders.

Each of the case studies follows a format explaining how each phase of the “Future Search” went in each of the school districts involved, ranging from small ones like Lawrence, Kansas to large ones like Toronto, Canada. Each of them makes a persuasive case that the process, although overcoming many difficulties, ultimately succeeded in “institutionalizing” and “transforming” the educational system from one rife with conflict and a wide variety of problems and failures to one of collaborative and positive decision making involving political, educational, and community leaders and participants. From the illustrations, quotes from participants, and knowing how well mediation works anyway, I remain convinced that this process would be well worth using in any school district and if used universally, would greatly improve the educational experience of students and the satisfaction of their parents....and would truly "leave no student behind."

That being said, and this being the Journal of Public Deliberation, I kept on asking myself, where’s the “public” in the “future search” process? For starters, “future search” does not use random sampling techniques, nor even an stratified sampling to get a “representative” sample of the public to the table. Cutting to the chase, those who attend are a self-selected group of the elites and counter-elites of the school district and/or “community.” In all candor, even getting these folks to an open discussion is a major improvement over most educational (and just about any other public function) planning-where the inside elite is very, shall we say, incestuous.

So how do they do it? They get school superintendents, mayors, other officials, some teachers, some parents, some students to come and “represent” a wide array of interests. How? They rarely say and then only generally. How do they involve the rest of the “public” in their continuing efforts at implementation and further planning in the future? They make public announcements; they send out newsletters, they send out emails, etc., keeping everyone in the loop. I know what I do when I get such “information” via snail mail where I’m supposedly represented in some process. It goes into the circular file. I know what I do with such emails, when I’ve not been personally involved in the process. I delete. However, this seems to satisfy the “future search” participants that “the community” is involved and is generally satisfied. Perhaps.

There is no doubt in my mind that the “future search” process is a great improvement over the same old, same old way of doing things in most American and Western governmental decision making. There is no doubt that the results are far more “representative” of the public’s views on such matters. It’s just that the “public” and the “community” are not really involved...and if they were...well....it would probably lead to greater expense, more problems, more time taken, and be messier. But that’s what “public deliberation” is all about....because the final result would much more genuinely reflect the “deliberated public opinion” than the results of “future searches.”

What future “future searches” could really use is what the Journal of Public Deliberation was established to do: merge professional academic, scientific research with the ongoing work of practitioners in the field of public dialogue and deliberation. This book is a great example of how the practitioners and experimenters of “Future Search” could have greatly benefited by having some good social scientists around to help measure validly and reliably the process and the results. Then, instead of just believing the plaudits from those involved, we could have some good, hard data and rigorous analysis to support them.

Ted Becker