

# Our Schools and School Systems: Working as a Collaborative Learning Community



BCSSA Spring Forum April 26-27, 2007

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*“To advocate human conversation as the means to restore hope to the future is as simple as I can get. But I have seen there is no more powerful way to initiate significant change than to convene a conversation...It is always like this. Real change begins with the simple act of people talking about what they care about.”*

--Margaret Wheatley  
Author of Leadership and the New Science

*“By creating systems that foster dialogue about possible actions and initiatives, appreciative learning cultures encourage members to think creatively, question commonly accepted definitions, and go beyond previous conceptions. By legitimizing conversations about organizational vision and direction, appreciative learning cultures allow for joint discovery.”*

-Frank J. Barrett  
“Creating Appreciative Learning Cultures”

*“Contemporary society is not only profoundly shaped by organizations but also can be shaped for the better by them, through the leadership of great organizations. To an extent unimaginable a decade ago, the ideals of building a healthy, prosperous, and sustainable world future are taking on form and substance. Obstacles to cooperation and human enterprise that long seemed immovable have collapsed....organizations are increasingly stepping forward to wrestle with complex issues that affect not only their shareholders, employees, and customers but also the quality of life in the world’s communities and cities, the world’s ecosystems, and countries around the globe. The best path to the good society, we believe, is the construction of great organizations that nurture and magnify the best in human beings.”*

-- David Cooperrider and Suresh Srivastva  
Authors of Organizational Wisdom and Executive Courage

*“The central task of Leadership is to create an alignment of strengths such that weaknesses are no longer relevant.”*

-Peter Drucker

## What Is An “AI” Organizational Summit?

The **WHOLE SYSTEM** participates — a cross-section of as many interested parties as is practical. That means more diversity and less hierarchy than is usual in a working meeting, and a chance for each person to be heard and to learn other ways of looking at the task at hand.

Future scenarios – for an organization, community or issue - are put into **HISTORICAL** and **GLOBAL** perspective. That means thinking globally together before acting locally. This enhances shared understanding and greater commitment to act. It also increases the range of potential actions.

People **SELF-MANAGE** their work, and use **DIALOGUE** – not “problem-solving” - as the main tool. That means helping each other do the tasks and taking responsibility for our perceptions and actions.

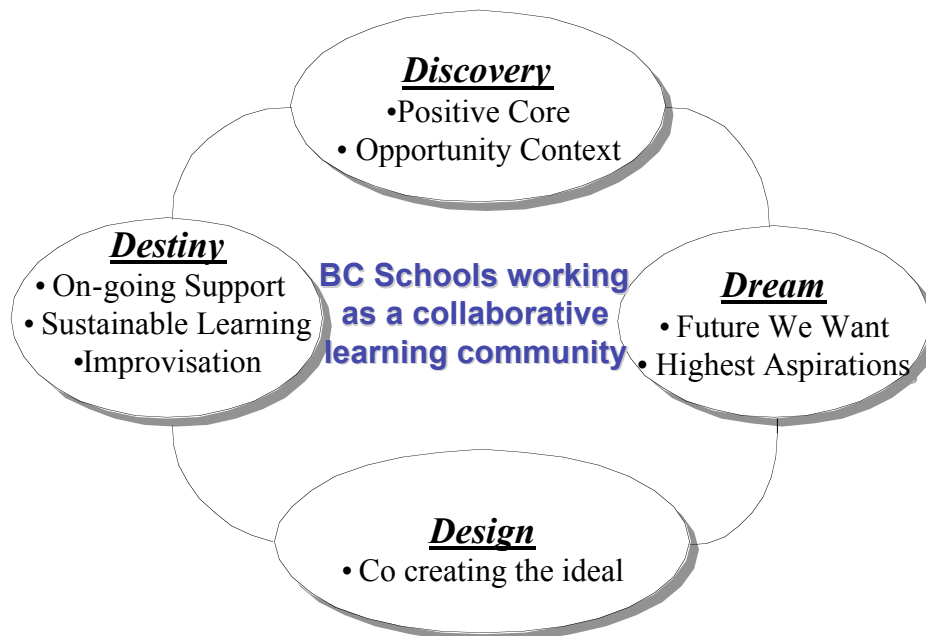
**COMMON GROUND** and **NARRATIVE RICH INTERACTION** rather than “conflict management,” or negotiation as the frame of reference. That means honoring our differences rather than having to reconcile them, and searching for meaning, and direction in stories that honor and connect us to our “history as positive possibility”.

**APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY (AI)** — To **appreciate** means to value—to understand those things of value worth supporting and sustaining. To **inquire** means to study, to ask questions, to search. **AI** is, therefore, a collaborative search to identify and understand the organization’s strengths, its potentials, the greatest opportunities, and people’s hopes for the future.

**INSPIRED ACTION ON BEHALF OF THE WHOLE** — Because the “whole system” is involved it is easier to make more rapid decisions, and to make commitments to action in a public way—in an open way that everyone can support and help make happen. The movement to action is guided by internal inspiration, shared leadership, and voluntary initiative. People work on what they share a passion about, what they most care about and believe will make the difference. Real change begins with the simple act of people acting on what they care about, in the context of shared vision that matters

# Appreciative Inquiry “4-D” Cycle

## AI “4-D” Summit Process



## **Appreciative Inquiry: An Approach for Faster and Deeper Change**

Schools, like all other organizations, can survive and thrive if they become change capable organizations. Schools are now facing more difficult social challenges, a need to compete globally on achievement, and accelerating introduction of new technologies. This environment of unprecedented change can prove to be an opportunity if schools are able to respond effectively. Changing effectively means pursuing the right changes and accomplishing these changes rapidly. In order to change effectively, schools must develop an organizational capability of constant inquiry and aligned action of the whole system.

Utilizing a strength based approach such as Appreciative Inquiry (AI) could bring schools a new level of change capability.

### **Appreciative Inquiry**

*Ap-pre'ci-ate*, v., 1. Valuing; the act of recognizing the best in people or the world around us; affirming past and present strengths, successes, and potentials; to perceive those things that give life to living systems. 2. To increase in value

*In-quire'*, v., 1. The act of exploration and discovery. 2. To ask questions; to be open to seeing new potentials and possibilities.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) operates from the following assumptions:

- ❑ In every organization, group, or individual something works and can be valued
- ❑ What we focus on becomes the reality we create
- ❑ The language we use creates our reality
- ❑ The act of asking a question begins the change
- ❑ People have more confidence to journey to the future when they carry forward the best parts of the past

These assumptions lead to the five principles of AI. AI is not a tool but a principle based methodology. The five principles of AI are:

1. **Constructionist Principle** - Our language and capacity for imagination and creation of the future allows organizations to be altered or reconstructed.
2. **Anticipatory Principle** – An image of the future precedes the actual change.
3. **Simultaneity Principle** – Seeds of change are planted in the first question asked. Inquiry and intervention are simultaneous.
4. **Positive Principle** – The more positive the inquiry, the more powerful and deeper the change and the data gathered. Systems move in the direction of the questions asked.
5. **Open Book Principle** – Organizations are like an open book. The book is open to multiple interpretations and conclusions.
6. **Narrative principle**: Storytelling connects people and transfers values.

(See Barrett, F. and R. Fry, 2005. Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Approach to Building Cooperative Capacity. Taos, NM: Taos Institute Publications)

## Exercise #1

### **Discovery: Articulating the Positive Core of our Schools**

#### Appreciative Inquiry—Opening Conversation in Pairs

##### **Question # 1 Initial attraction to the field of education**

We'd like to learn about your beginnings with the field of education. When did you first become part of, or connected to, the field of education? Can you remember the moment of decision? The moment you decided to become part of this school or school system? What first attracted you? What is the most important factor that your involvement in this school or school system has contributed to your life?

##### **Question #2 High Point Experience / Pride of working in your school or school system:**

As you look over your experience within your school or school system -- (whether as a student, teacher, administrator, etc) -- there have been many ups and downs, peaks and valleys. We'd like you to reflect on one of the peaks, *one of the high points*. Can you remember a time that most stands out as a "high point" for you—a time when you felt most effective, alive, most engaged, or really proud to be involved with your school or your school system?

A. Please share the story...what happened? When? Where? Feelings? Challenges? How were they overcome? Insights?

B. What was it about you and others around you that made it a high point experience?

C. Based on this story and others like it, if we now had a conversation with people that know you the very best and asked them to share: *what are the 3 best qualities they see in you, the best capabilities or qualities that you bring to your work and your role — what would they say?*

### **Question #3 Continuity and Change**

Thinking today about the larger context of change and purpose of your school system in the world, there are many **trends, events, and developments** that indicate your school system will likewise change, develop, and perhaps be called to play an even more significant role in the future. Think about the most important events, trends, and developments and what these trends suggest for your school system's future.

- What are most important trends, events, or developments? Why?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- What do these trends, events, developments imply for you're the future of your school or school system —its larger purposes, or future opportunities to grow, to change, to aim higher, to lead in new ways?

### **Question 4a: Teacher or learning situation you admire.**

Teachers can make profound differences in peoples' lives. Inspired teaching brings out the best in people; they create opportunities that draw out students' potential, empower and challenge people, help them to see in new and generative ways. Think about a teacher you have experienced or witnessed that made a difference in your life or someone else's life. Tell a story about this teacher, one that exemplifies the kind of personal qualities all teachers should aim for.

What is it about this teacher that you value most in this story?

What—based on this story—is *inspired and passionate teaching*? What does it involve in your view? Key Qualities?

What are the factors that support excellent teaching (facilities, resources, education, cooperation of others, etc)?

### **Question 4b: School leaders you admire.**

Leadership within schools and school districts is central and indispensable in creating excellent schools and supportive learning environment. Think of leader in education who you admire. Tell a story that exhibits this person's most admirable qualities. What is it you admire about this person?

**Question #5a Practices that create supportive learning environments**

There are already creative practices, experiments, projects and bold innovations happening in our classrooms and throughout our schools. Some of the innovations or improvement efforts are small and not known, some are large. But small or large, the initiatives need to be singled out.

What initiatives, pilots, practices, or innovations stand out to you as most noteworthy--things that have potential for helping us create a healthy community and a collaborative learning environment?

- Please name the innovation or change, describe its strengths and potentials, and share where it is happening.

**Question #5b Collaboration to achieve excellence in our schools**

Successful practices, education projects, and innovations within schools require collaboration between multiple parties – parents, teachers, administrators, ministers, staff, and students need to work together to initiate innovations. Can you think of a time when you witnessed collaboration between different groups that benefited your school or school system? Tell the story of the collaboration process. Who was involved? What made it possible for this collaboration to be successful?

**Question # 6 Images of the future – your school or school system in 2012**

Let's assume that tonight we each fall into a sound sleep and it lasts 5 years. During these 5 years your school or school system has realized many positive innovations and changes. In fact it has become the organization you always wished it would be. The school's reputation in the community is outstanding.

**6a.** You wake up and get a panoramic view of the system – the students, the buildings, the classrooms, the parents, teachers, administrators, community. What does it look like? What do you see that is new, different, changed, or better? Please describe specifically what you see.

**6b.** If you could change your school or school system in three ways, what would you do to heighten its overall health and vitality?

## Self-Management and Group Leadership Roles

Each small group manages its own discussion, data, time, and reports. Here are useful roles for self-managing this work. **Leadership roles can be rotated.** Divide up the work as you wish:

- **DISCUSSION LEADER** – Assures that each person who wants to speak is heard within time available. Keeps group on track to finish on time.
- **TIMEKEEPER** – Keeps group aware of time left. Monitors report-outs and signals time remaining to person talking.
- **RECORDER** – Writes group's output on flip charts, using speaker's words. Asks person to restate long ideas briefly.
- **REPORTER** – Delivers report to large group in time allotted.

## Exercise #2

### Discovering the Resources in Our Community

**Purpose:** To appreciate and welcome each other, and to learn about special experiences, visions, capabilities, and resources people bring to this summit.

**Self-Manage:** Select a Discussion Leader, Timekeeper, Recorder and Reporter

#### Steps:

1. Share highlights from what you learned about the person *you interviewed*.  
**Focus on questions 1, 2 and 3.**

Go around the table. Introduce your interview partner—focus on their initial attraction to education (#1), highlights from their “high point” story (question # 2a) and the key trends, events, and opportunities affecting the future of the school (question # 3). Everyone gets introduced.

2. Assign a recorder to listen for patterns and common themes from questions 2 and 3 for the high point stories and trends/events/opportunities affecting the future of your schools or school systems.

Recorder makes two lists—and reporter is ready for 3-minute report-out.  
*Make notes on next page.*

## Exercise #2 (continued)

### Discovering the Resources in Our Community

#### Common Themes and/or Unique Patterns

##### High Points Analysis—Discovery of Patterns and Themes (Q2)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

##### Events, Trends, and Developments→Discovery of Opportunities (Q3)

From the perspective of serving the needs of our communities , stakeholders in the future and realizing our mission, what are the key trends, events, or developments affecting our future and how can we **translate these into opportunities or challenges to aim higher, to serve better, to lead?**

**What are, in your view, the schools' five highest opportunities for innovation, change, or leadership based on the trends, events or developments?**

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

## Exercise #3

### Discovering and Articulating the “Positive Core” of our Schools and School Systems

When *are* we at Our Best, when we are supporting exemplary education, when we are creating collaborative learning environments, what is going on. . . and Why?

**Purpose:** 1.) To share the most powerful, future-relevant, and inspiring stories of **inspired and passionate teaching and leadership AND collaborative practices that support learning and education** and 2.) to discover all the factors in the stories contributing to excellence and collaboration in our schools

**Self-Manage:** Select a Discussion Leader, Timekeeper, Recorder, Reporter

#### Steps:

1. **First share key stories and discoveries from questions 4 and 5 of your interview.**
2. As stories are shared, **identify the factors— strengths, special practices and values, capacities, and root causes of success—things that make possible inspired and passionate teaching, inspired leadership, collaborative and supportive learning environments, and innovative practices within schools.** Record the stories and analysis on the next page. Everyone shares. Make note of common themes and unique patterns.
3. Now create a metaphor to map or picture your insights into “the positive core” of your schools’ strengths, special practices and values, capacities, and root causes of success—things that ignite excellent learning experiences at every level. For example the “positive core” might be pictured as a DNA double helix, a solar system, tree of life....etc.
4. Be prepared for a 2-3 minute report. **Reporter should be ready to share:**
  - Your metaphor and picture of your analysis of the positive core and causes of leadership at every level, AND
  - Re-tell one of the actual stories from Q 4 or 5 that illustrates or helped inspire your thinking. Feel free to re-tell the story before or after sharing your metaphor.

### Exercise #3 (continued)

#### Discovering and Articulating the “Positive Core” of our schools

<p><b><u>Stories about passionate teaching and leadership, innovative practices, creating a culture of collaborative learning (from Q 4a, 4b, 5a, 5b)</u></b></p>	<p><b><u>Root Causes of Success</u></b></p> <p><b>Factors that make possible a culture of innovative and collaborative learning environment in our schools</b></p> <p><b>These factors can be at the—</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• individual level</li><li>• school level</li><li>• classroom level</li><li>• school system level</li></ul>
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## Exercise #4

### Dreams and Visions of the Future

#### Ideal Future Scenario of “Collaborative Learning Cultures in our Schools”

PRESENTATIONS ARE DUE AT \_\_\_\_\_ O’CLOCK

**Purpose:** To imagine and visualize the ideal classrooms, schools, or school systems in the future—the future you want to work toward based on these background questions:

- What is the world calling for our schools and learning environments to be?
- What does our positive core indicate we can be—taking our schools to a new level?
- What are the most enlivening and exciting possibilities that ignite inspired and passionate leadership at all levels?
- I will be most proud of our school or school system in 2012 when...?

**Self-Manage:** Select a Discussion Leader, Recorder, Timekeeper and Reporter

1. First share stories and discoveries from question 6 of your interview/opening conversation. Each person shares response to Q 6.
2. Put yourself 5 years into the future—it is 2012. From the perspective of the group or department you are part of and the whole, visualize the school or school system you really want-- as if it exists now. What is happening that is new, better, different?
3. Many changes have happened in the 5 years that have passed. So now envision the positive changes, pilot projects and larger projects, innovations, and accomplishments since 2008, with possible reference to (you choose—these are simply examples):
  - Classroom design
  - Use of resources
  - Partnerships between government, administrators, teachers, parents, and students
  - HR policies that support teachers and school employees
  - Sharing of best practices in the classroom
  - New initiatives to meet special needs of students
  - Involvement of business community in supporting excellence in education
  - Etc.

## Exercise #4 (continued)

### Dreams and Visions of the Future

#### Ideal Future Scenario of “Collaborative Learning Cultures in Our Schools”

3. (Continued)

Spend enough time to imagine concretely the culture of excellence and collaborative learning you want to see in your schools. This is an exercise in imagination and dreaming – of the kind of school systems you want to work toward.

4. Now choose a **creative** way to present your images of the future as if they are happening now.

*Examples:* \* A TV Special      \* Magazine Cover Story      \* Drama  
                  \* A Day in the Life      \* Panel Presentation      \* A work of Art

5. Finally, after creating your presentation, on a flip chart, brainstorm the major **challenges** that you had to overcome on your way to your vision and the **opportunities** you worked with.

Additional resources:

## Future Learning Opportunity

- **Appreciative Inquiry: A Workshop for Leaders and Consultants Engaged in Organization Transformation**  
– With Frank Barrett and David Cooperrider
- **June 18-21, 2007**
- **Carmel, California**
- **For information contact:**
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- **(or Frank Barrett at 831 -656-2328 [fbarrett@cruzio.com](mailto:fbarrett@cruzio.com))**

## Reference:

- Barrett, F and R. Fry. (2005). Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Approach to Building Cooperative Capacity. Taos, New Mexico: Taos Institute Press.