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Perspectives from the field: Two views

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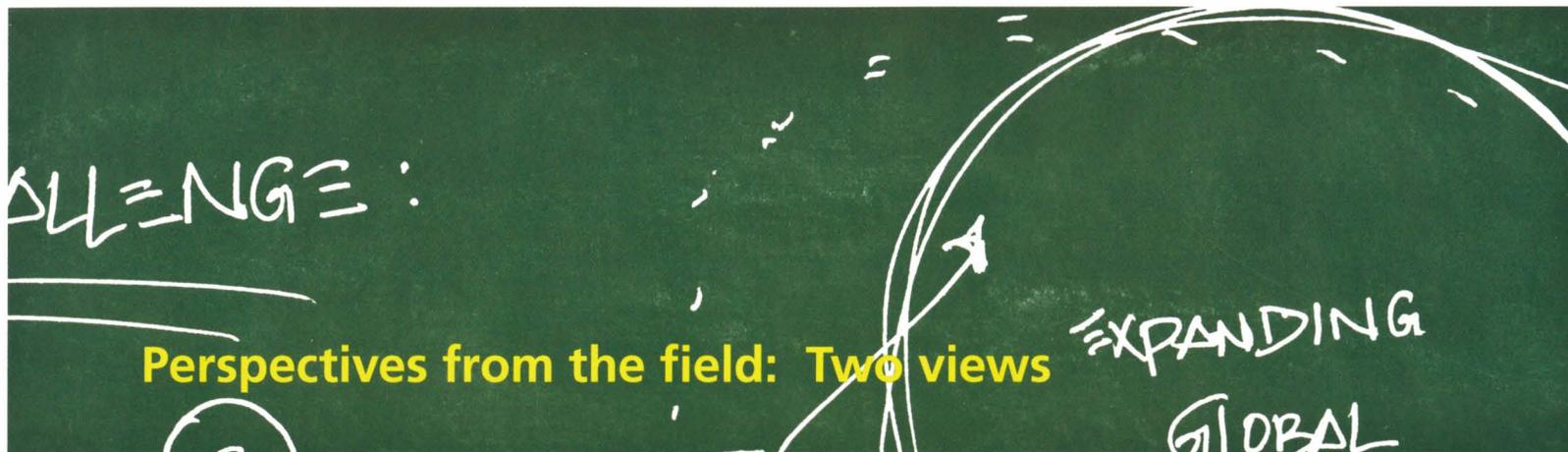
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SMALL-TOWN PASSIONS

My most telling moment during my time with the Riley Institute/Hewlett education study came at a stakeholder meeting Cathy Stevens and I conducted with teachers at the Hampton Inn in Yemassee, S.C.

Usually, when people conceptualize the actual process of a stakeholder meeting on public education, they conjure scenes reminiscent of “Twelve Angry Men” or the PTA meeting in “Field of Dreams.” However, those kinds of fiery moments never came to pass.

Although on occasion we did have to contend with moments of barely checked contempt from our stakeholders, what struck me most was that even in the tiny, rural Hampton County town of Yemassee, a place that might easily be forgotten or overlooked, passion for public education shone through.

The teachers loved their jobs, and they were thunderstruck and moved (but not intimidated) that someone was interested in their opinion about public education in South Carolina. They seemed thrilled to have the opportunity to offer their thoughts on what could be done to improve public education in the state.

In another session in Yemassee, parents were equally passionate about their suggestions and opinions. At the end of the day, I took great pride in knowing that I was part of a process that ensured that the voices of the people of Yemassee were included in our dialogue on education.

Just because a child does not live in the “big cities” of Greenville, Columbia or Charleston does not mean that we as a state and as a society should treat them any differently. Discovering that so many parents and educators felt the way I did, regardless of their political affiliation or past experiences, was an inspiring experience.

— SCOTT McPHERSON '05

The author attends graduate school at the University of Florida.

INTEGRAL VOICES

My role in the Riley Institute/Hewlett project was to record the comments by teachers and students at stakeholder meetings. Although I was impressed by the dedication and commitment to public education that the teachers exhibited, it is one student meeting I attended that was the most memorable.

The idea of having student meetings was inherently risky. We were inviting a diverse group of 17- and 18-year-olds to reflect on their experiences in South Carolina’s public schools, with only slightly older Furman graduates organizing and running the meeting. We were dependent on the collective efforts of the students, their parents, hotel staff and caterers to ensure the meeting’s success.

At this particular meeting, Murphy’s Law hit hard, as we encountered obstacles we didn’t anticipate. Somehow, our list of 10 participants grew to 15. We ran out of name placards, chairs, and the typed consent forms that made it possible for the students to receive their small stipend for participating.

We sheepishly scribbled out placards and consent forms on the spot. We reshuffled our lists to keep the students anonymous in our records, then packed the students at tables with barely enough elbow room to write. Fortunately, most were already used to overcrowded classrooms.

Given the extra participants, we didn’t have enough catered lunches. Who could sit through the four hours without eating? In the end, one student, the meeting moderator and I volunteered to go without lunch.

It is said, however, that when you perform, you’re the only one that notices your mistakes. True enough in this case.

The students could have cared less about handwritten name cards or cramped quarters. They were more impressed with our efforts to learn their names and make room for all the unexpected arrivals. As for the lunches, they shared with the boy who’d declined one and even ate late because their discussion was so stimulating.

They weren’t there for the food or the money. They were visibly grateful that others wanted to listen to, record and discuss their comments about South Carolina’s public schools. And although one might expect that, given the chance to comment on their school years, graduating seniors would tend to complain or simply to reminisce, these students took their roles seriously. They were constructive, insightful and thoughtful.

Our bumpy student meeting made it evident how integral the student voice was to the project — and illustrated the strength and value of collective, grassroots discussion.

— LAUREN WOOD '05

The author has done graduate work at McGill University in Montreal.