Reflections on a Landmark Program

Over the last decade, Judi Fonzi and her colleagues in the Warner Center for Professional Development and Education Reform have been working in collaboration with community partners to use education as a vehicle for systemic reform. The Center, established in 2001 with a generous gift from the late William F. Scandling, has become a place where schools and organizations turn to when they want to foster and support significant change. This year the Center is celebrating its 10th anniversary. As founding director, Fonzi was able to use her extensive experience in promoting mathematics reform as a model for challenging the status quo in other fields. Fonzi has built diverse teams of educators who work with organizations to identify and implement research-based, innovative professional practices and engage in systemic change.

We invited Fonzi to reflect on the past decade and share her vision for the future of the Center. continued on page 2
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it became clear to us that in order to change systems one must engage the whole system. The Center was conceived of as a way to extend the Warner School’s mission to change lives and promote social justice to entire systems. The goal was to capitalize on the rich breadth and depth of knowledge and research of the Warner School community to collaborate with the larger community to foster and support systemic reform in line with our mission. Mr. Scambled, who was quite familiar with our work in mathematics education, believed that establishing a Center could provide the infrastructure to support systemic reform work in all fields, organizations, and locations. He didn’t make it easy though—he believed that the value the community placed on the Center would be demonstrated by the Center’s ability to be self-sufficient—so his gift came with the requirement that we raise matching funds. One month before the doors opened, we received another grant from NSF for almost $3 million—more than triple what we needed for the match.

Since the Center is still thriving, it seems the community values it. Can you talk about some ways the work of the Center has been able to impact systems?

Over the years, we have been involved in a variety of fields and attempted to develop sustainable services in a number of areas. Some have proven to be viable, others have not. We are always open to collaborating on promising initiatives to support systemic reform in new areas. Through a division, we call Emerging Areas, to support this work. In addition, we currently have three very solid divisions—Mathematics Outreach, Program Evaluation, Leadership and Organizational Development. Each of these divisions has had impact in a wide variety of organizations and through a number of diverse approaches. For example, our Mathematics Outreach team has had a dramatic impact on mathematics education across the region. Since 2001, we’ve secured over $12,000,000 in grants and contracts to bring together more than 20 districts to examine their mathematics programs and radically revise policies and instructional practices and materials. As a result of this, and our previous work, many districts in the region are now well prepared for the implementation of the new Common Core State Standards in mathematics. This work also fostered a regional system for continually supporting mathematics education, which was the catalyst for establishing the New York State Consortium for High Quality Mathematics Education for All which in turn inspired NYSED to establish their Mathematics Advisory Council. We held three of the seven seats on the planning committee for five years.

Our Program Evaluation team, established only five years ago, developed and now oversees the Program Evaluation Certificate and provides program evaluation services for projects across the country. Our collective expertise and experience allows us to work with a wide range of projects from examining alcohol use by college students to evaluating the efficacy of a project-based freshman course in imaging science. We believe that our work is impacting how and why folks at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) and University of Rochester think about program evaluation as we have been involved in 13 projects and proposals already. The team, which has grown from two to seven members (including three doctoral students), has been involved in more than 20 projects and proposals to date.

The Leadership and Organizational Development division, which has two teams, works with all levels of organizations to help them focus on fostering and supporting organizational change and was deeply involved in the recent blending of the University of Rochester’s Admissions–Financial Aid–College Enrollment offices; the integration of the University IT group; and the School of Nursing’s establishment of a new program. In addition, more than 40 local leaders from non-profit, for-profit, and education organizations are changing the way they do business as a result of our participation in the intensive year-long Leadership Coaching Certificate Program, developed and implemented in partnership with McAlte Rameran & Co.

The division’s other teams focus its attention on K-12 education and provides superintendent coaching, services, direction for policy and program planning, and long-term administrator coaching. Our clients are aware of our mission and understand that when they collaborate with us, they are taking steps toward systemic change. The impact of this team has been felt throughout 10 districts as we have engaged all constituencies in dialog and decision making about school organization and design. Ten years ago, at the urging of some of our clients, we began our superintendent search service. Our team had already played a role in hiring the top decision-makers in six local districts.

How can the Center help address the challenges of education in the 21st century?

There are enormous challenges for education these days. The entire system, including urban, rural, suburban, public, charter, private, and home-based schools are all being challenged to meet the demands of a world that is changing faster than ever before. We are all struggling to figure out what we need to learn and how to hold our systems accountable to meeting students’ learning needs. In the past couple decades, brain and cognitive science research has provided us with new information about how the brain and how people learn. Technology innovation has provided us with heretofore inconceivable opportunities for information sharing. The volume and quality of education research has grown by leaps and bounds. And yet, we are still challenged to meet the needs of all students. We are not providing children the opportunities to learn that they deserve and should expect in a country as rich in resources as the U.S. I think we need to rethink the entire system. Like the bridge that you keep patching and patching until eventually it needs to be torn down and replaced with an entirely new structure, I think our system is in need of replacement. I don’t know we know exactly what a 21st century system should look like or include, but we do have a lot of research and wisdom of practice we need to consider. In his new book, Deep Change, Robert Quinn says that transformational change requires that you have to be willing to “walk naked into the land of uncertainty” and that you have to be confident that you can “build the bridge as you are walking over it”—I think we will all need to shed our armor and pick up our tools!

How can the Center help? By continuing to push against the status quo and challenge our own assumptions, by continuing to challenge educators to examine their assumptions, to find their voices through education and push against the status quo. We need to continue to be conscious of the research and be willing to say the hard stuff and do the hard work of being different and not succumbing to the pressures to fall in line. There are a lot of people who provide professional development, but they are providing the same old stuff, the same way, for the same old reasons, and the Center is not willing to do that. As long as we keep pushing the envelope, staying on top of things, staying current, pushing our thinking, and asking a million questions, I believe that the Center will continue to play an important role in education reform.

Where do you see the Center going?

I imagine that we will continue to grow in the areas that we are already working in—Mathematics Outreach, Program Evaluation, and Leadership and Organizational Development—and even expand into new areas. I also believe that our work in science and literacy education will continue to grow and eventually become new divisions with the adoption of both the Common Core State Standards in mathematics and English language arts, and the science standards forthcoming. It is crucial that the Center be involved in this movement toward national curricula and assessment. In light of the broad and deep knowledge and research of Warner School folks, I see us playing a role in the design and implementation of the newly legislated Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) for classroom teachers and administrators.

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Warner Center

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• Support Team—Kathy Ritchie and Mary Beyer

Warner Center Highlights
Establishment: Launched in 2001 with a generous gift from the late William F. Scandling.
Mission: To foster and support systemic change in organizations through education and professional development.
Divisions: Mathematics Outreach; Program Evaluation; Leadership and Organizational Development; and Emerging Areas.
Emerging Programs/New Initiatives: Superintendent Searches; Monitoring Program Design; Writing Programs; Science Education; and Literacy.
Funding: More than $11.5 million in grants and $2.2 million in contracts.
Services: Co-creating reform initiatives in mathematics, literacy, and science education; conducting superintendent searches; evaluating innovative programs of all types; providing leadership coaching programs/courses for executives and school administrators; and providing consulting services for research, designing, and implementing reform.
New Book Shows Environmental Health Belongs in the Classroom

In a world of human-produced and natural environmental hazards, the need for environmental education has never been greater. Yet, schools rarely teach school-age children about these toxins in the environment and the associated health risks, according to a new book, *Teaching Environmental Health to Children: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, co-authored by Professor David Hursh and alumnus Camille Martina '05 (PhD) and Hillary Davis '84 (EdD) of the Warner School of Education, in collaboration with Professor Michael Rush of Johns Hopkins Center in Urban Environmental Health.

“Given the pervasiveness and enormity of these environmental problems, it is inexcusable that schools rarely teach students to evaluate their risks and reduce their exposure to toxicants in our environment,” say the book’s co-authors. “Examining our relationships with our environment is central not only to our health, but also to the health of all living species. It is a crucial topic that must become an essential part of the curriculum.”

The book, released this fall from Springer Publications, provides an interdisciplinary look at how schools can educate children about everyday toxic materials that pollute our air, water, land, and food and how students can reduce their own health risk and the risk of those in their family, school, and community. By highlighting activities and curricula developed at nine U.S. universities, which were funded by a grant from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS), the authors seek to extend these lessons to classroom teachers of all subjects and grade levels to include environmental health in their own teaching.

Together, the environmental health project sites developed hundreds of lessons, all of which are available on the NIEHS website. *Teaching Environmental Health to Children* provides an overview of some of these lessons, including the rationale, methods, and resources, so that educators have a basis for creating lessons appropriate for their students, schools, and communities. Some of these lessons look at health issues, including lead poisoning, the connection between air pollution and asthma, and food preparation and safety, among many more.