

Principal's Report to the Board of Trustees

New Roots Charter School

Wednesday, May 27, 2009

The focus of our activity during May has been finalizing our facility arrangements and hiring faculty members. On May 5, we announced that our home base in downtown Ithaca would be the Clinton House in a joint press conference with Historic Clinton House LLC. Many thanks to the Historic Clinton House group for supporting us in thinking creatively about how to use existing space in downtown Ithaca, using our public resources to serve the dual function of providing a beautiful, historic building for our school while providing a flow of resources to support that building's on-going care and maintenance. We are also pleased to have finalized arrangements with the Women's Community Building for use of their kitchen and auditorium. This downtown "campus" model is optimal for our school concept—we're close to the heart of downtown, using our resources in ways that benefit the wider community by supporting organizations that provide affordable downtown office space and venues to nonprofits and small businesses. I have initiated conversations with City Engineers and the police department to ensure a smooth transition with as minimal an impact as possible on downtown traffic patterns.

One of the many benefits of using this space is that we minimize expenditures for construction costs. This has involved thinking creatively about how to reuse the space, rather than transforming it to meet our preconceived idea of what a "school" should be. For example, the Mural Lounge is in a space that originally had windows that were closed off when the Lounge was created. We are exploring using that space as a multi-media flexible classroom for presentations and special media projects, which would allow us to keep the room unchanged while taking advantage of the lighting. Looking "outside the box" in this way not only preserves an historical space, it also allows us to channel our resources to enhancing student learning.

Program development is also well underway. This month I have worked closely with Expeditionary Learning School designers to plan professional development for our faculty and staff, beginning with what they call a "slice" of a learning expedition in June. We are designing this experience to include board members, and hope that you will be able to join us!

I am also working with the State Education and Environment Roundtable and the Cloud Institute for Sustainability Education to plan and organize two week-long curriculum writing workshops for core subject-area faculty in July. Sarah Rubenstein-Gillis, MSW, is planning our Wellness program, and GreenStar deli manager and long-time Ithaca resident Allyn Rosenbaum is coordinating our Farm to School Program planning. Our Farm to School planning team, which includes Allyn, our outreach coordinator and prospective faculty member Becca Rodomsky-Bish, West Haven Farm manager Todd McLane, and Groundswell Executive Director Joanna Green, recently traveled to Vermont to attend the first annual Northeast Farm to School Conference. They returned energized and ready to work with Dr. Jennifer Wilkins of Cornell to create a model program based on best practices across the Northeast.

We also have begun our first Talking Circle on Race and Class, Racism and Classism through the Multicultural Resource Center, facilitated by Kirby Edmonds, Laura Branca, and Krishna Ramanujan. This talking circle, which includes diverse members of the New Roots team including staff, board, and parents, will lay the foundation for our efforts to support students and adults alike in engaging in conversations that will allow us to realize our vision of being a diverse, inclusive school community that supports all students and families in being full and equal participants in our school. We are grateful to MRC for providing programming that supports us in developing the capacity to succeed in this endeavor.

The most exciting developments in May, however, have been the result of our hiring process for core area faculty, in which members of all New Roots stakeholder groups were invited to participate. As reported at our last board meeting, we were blessed with over 150 faculty applications! Parents, teens, board members, staff, and community members met with candidates multiple times to explore their subject-area knowledge, their teaching experience, and their reflections on core issues related to the New Roots mission and goals. Four finalists from each of the four primary subject areas were invited to participate in a cross-disciplinary interview process that included teaching a lesson to a group of our students, designing a lesson or unit with a colleague from another discipline, and participating in a conversation with colleagues exploring major themes related to sustainability education and how they relate to classroom practice. Members of all stakeholder groups participated in this experience, providing excellent reflections and insights that have shaped my recommendations to the board for our founding faculty.

On May 15, our growing New Roots community gathered at Stewart Park to celebrate our progress towards our September 9 opening date. Over 100 people came together for great food and conversation, including kabobs made with grassfed beef raised by a New Roots family from Trumansburg. I introduced our first wave of new faculty and staff members, and we unveiled our new t-shirts, which proudly proclaim, "Ithaca Has New Roots!" We are offering these organic t-shirts on a sliding scale of \$8 to \$16, beginning at cost, with proceeds going to fund student activities. Many thanks are in order to Becca, Melissa, and our parent organization, the Shoots, for organizing such a great event for our families.

Enrollment continues to grow steadily. To date, exactly 100 teens have submitted enrollment forms. About 60% of our students are enrolling from the ICSD, making us much more of a regional school than we originally anticipated. Considering that most new schools tend to enroll the majority of their students in the summer prior to opening, we are especially pleased to be in such a strong position now. We are now planning a new series of Parent and Teen Information Night sessions to provide opportunities for families to learn more about New Roots, beginning in June.

In short, I am pleased to report that we are moving smoothly into the next stages of our school planning and development process as anticipated.

