



## Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility

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### Opening Remarks from Tom Roderick

Courageous Schools: Putting SEL at the Heart of Education

Bank Street College, NYC

May 22, 2010

As we begin our day together, I'm going to take a few minutes to share some thoughts about today's conference: what it represents and what we're hoping it will do. I'll start with words from Rachel Bingman, a fourth grade special education teacher at P.S. 24 in Brooklyn. "Preparing my students for the tests is a constant thought in my mind," she says. "I want them to be prepared. I truly want them to do their best. However, the layers of learning needs underneath the haze of "test prep" are endless. My students are making progress—maybe in baby steps, but it is happening. But who would know that by looking at test scores? If the state looks at test scores, they'll see many 'ones' and 'twos.' What do those numbers represent? Not my students—and not their learning in my classroom." What's more, says Bingman, "After so much test prep in the classroom, my students start not to care. They start to think, enough is enough! It's hard to disagree with them. They're thinking about the time ticking away and how much longer it will be until recess begins. However, when we're doing project-based, hands-on learning—like creating the same corn-husk dolls that Native Americans once played with—my students want to come BACK to the classroom during recess to have extra time to finish. I've wracked my brain trying to think of creative ways to make test prep more project-based and hands-on. I haven't gotten very far."

I know that Rachel Bingman's anguish is shared by many of us assembled here and by many educators around the country. Education has been hijacked by the obsession with standardized tests. A tool that was supposed to help measure a narrow band of academic outcomes has morphed into the primary purpose of education in the United States these days. Talk about the tail wagging the dog! We are suffering under a terribly constricted view of education that is way off the mark. Education as test-prep doesn't support children's best development; it doesn't prepare them for the challenges they'll face as adults; and it doesn't prepare this generation of young people to meet the challenges humanity is facing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

As educators who work with kids on a daily basis, we know that that we don't have to choose between fostering young peoples' social and emotional learning and their academic development. Of course it's critical that students learn to read and write well, to think critically, to do well in math and science. That's one reason we're so passionate about social and emotional learning: We know that kids learn best when we address their social and emotional needs. What's more, we know that social and emotional skills are as important as academic skills if young people are to succeed in school, at home, at work, and as active participants in a democratic society. Yet, we are under tremendous pressure to push SEL (not to mention the arts, social studies, science, and physical education) to the side and focus on preparing kids for the tests.

So how do we decide what to do in this situation?. We know that current educational policies don't serve our students--but they are a reality we have to contend with. Not only are we as educators held accountable for raising test scores; our students must do well on the tests to succeed in school.

Too often we're being forced into what writer and educator Parker Palmer calls a "tragic gap"—the gap between what we know is good for kids and what we're being pressured to do as educators. We've faced gaps like this before. In the segregated South, African Americans had to sit in the back of the bus. They knew that was wrong; so did many whites. But for many years they complied. Like educators today, they were living divided lives—divided between what they knew was right and what they had to do to avoid being punished by the system. But one day, after many years of humiliation and frustration and fatigue, Rosa Parks decided to live divided no more. She refused to move to the back. You probably already know that Rosa Parks wasn't simply a tired seamstress. Oh, she was tired all right. She was tired of segregation, tired of injustice, tired of complying with rules she knew were wrong. She and her colleagues--including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.--had been working steadily for years to change things—in meetings of the NAACP, in churches, in beauty parlors, and in people's living rooms . The foundation having been laid, Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat triggered a movement, as many others took courage and joined her in living "divided no more."

We educators may not be risking fire hoses or murderous mobs by standing up for what we believe in. But it does take courage, and a willingness to challenge those in power. That's why we called this conference Courageous Schools.

The strong response to our call for this conference means that more and more educators are having the courage to say, "We're ultimately accountable to the kids, not to those who mandate the tests. We're going to get on the bus and find ways to stay up front with our kids. We're going to live divided no more."

In your packet you have a handout prepared by Parker Palmer, which describes four stages of building a movement. Palmer says Stage 1 of building a movement is when people begin deciding to bring their inner and outer lives together, to act on what they truly believe.. Stage 2 is when those courageous people find each other, share their ideas, listen to each others' stories, and give each other support. Sound familiar?. Look around you! For many years now we and colleagues around the country have been laying the groundwork for a movement to transform education. Now we're taking another important step toward building a powerful movement.

Social and emotional learning is striking a chord with educators. People are beginning to see that SEL is more than a learning process or a program; it's a vision of education. I describe that vision in two articles I've written for the issue of our *Action News* that is included in your packets. In the course of our discussions today, I hope everyone will vividly *experience* this vision in all its richness and complexity.

We also hope the conference will give you information you need to become more powerful advocates for social and emotional learning back in your schools. For instance—you should know that a growing body of scientific research shows that high-quality social and emotional learning programs not only improve young people's social and emotional development, but boost their academic performance. Second, recent brain research supports the importance of social and emotional learning. You'll be hearing more about that from Daniel Goleman later. Third, there's growing awareness that social and emotional skills are increasingly required in the workplace—at all levels. Dan Goleman will be speaking about that as well. Of course we already know that SEL curricula are fun and engaging for students and teachers alike. But we've also got strong evidence that by strengthening relationships, we not only make teachers' work more satisfying, we improve the climate for learning in ways that are measurable and that are associated with better academic performance for students.

And one other piece of evidence you might be interested in: The current focus on test-prep isn't even increasing test scores! People are beginning to acknowledge the bankruptcy of test mania and are considering new ideas.

I hope that at the end of this day you'll have a deeper understanding of the rigor and high standards required for implementing social and emotional learning well in classrooms and schools. Because the research not only documents the benefits of SEL programs; it documents the ingredients for success. Among other things, the research shows that "It's the lessons, damn it!" Kids don't develop their social and emotional competencies through osmosis, any more than you learn to play the violin by watching Itzak Perlman. You have provide instruction—and there are a number of evidence-based curricula out there you can choose from, including Morningside Center's 4Rs Program and Resolving Conflict Creatively Program.

Above all, this gathering aims to take the movement for SEL in New York City to a new level. We plan a monthly e-newsletter to keep you up to date on developments in the building of this movement—in NYC, NY State, nationally, and internationally--in policy, in research, and in classrooms. In each of your packets is feedback form. We really want these back – because they're not just about the past, they're about the future! On that form please tell us if you'd like us to keep in touch with you. And tell us what areas you most want to find out more about. Each of the topics addressed in the conference workshops deserves much more than the hour and a half we are able to allot today. Next school year we plan to present full-day workshops on the topics you're most interested in. So please do fill out that form at the end of your workshop this afternoon.

It takes courage to live divided no more. So hats off to all of us—and may you find inspiration and joy today among hundreds of people who share your dreams and convictions.