

Dear Potential Participant,

To give you a sense of the North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation meetings, the planning committee has prepared a brief description of the group's history and how the group works.

HISTORY OF THE NDSG

The NDSG began in 1972, when Vito Perrone, then Dean of the University of North Dakota, brought together educators from many parts of the U.S. to discuss common concerns about accountability of schools and assessment of children. Many in what became the North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation were concerned about the narrowness of the visions of accountability and assessment that were becoming popular with policy makers and reformers; they wanted to share what they believed were more useful, fair, and democratic ways to document and assess children's learning. They also held a closely related vision of what constituted good classroom practice. Since then, the group has amounted to an ongoing seminar on democratic possibilities in U.S. and world education, branching out to include related issues such as racial tensions in schools and classrooms, issues of culture, class and gender, social justice and activism, but always returning to the themes of accountability and assessment. In effect, the NDSG has been a kind of informed democratic conscience of U.S. education, constantly reminding the mainstream of alternatives and possibilities, and offering a criticism of educational reform and practice in the light of its enduring concerns with democracy and the state of childhood. In some reform periods, the ideas of the group have met with and profoundly influenced the educational mainstream—its progressive, democratic ideas have had what the Chinese call “the mandate of heaven.” In other periods, the group has been a voice for thoughtful criticism of mainstream trends, and a supporter of alternative paths and thinking.

In its way, the NDSG has been a mirror of the changing mind and practice of U.S. education. It still meets yearly. Before it found a home at Wingspread, in the Frank Lloyd Wright meeting space provided by the Johnson Foundation in the 1980's, the NDSG met at various locations such as the University of North Dakota, the University of Chicago or Lesley College in Cambridge, MA. When the group became too large for Wingspread, we reluctantly moved the yearly meeting rather than limit the membership. For the last 18 years, except for one year when we met in Cambridge, MA, the NDSG has met each February at the Resurrection Center in Woodstock, Illinois, approximately one hour by yellow school bus from O'Hare.

Vito Perrone often reminded the group to serve “Large purposes”, and it has. Over the years, members have provided ideas and materials for researchers, teachers, parents, school administrators, and policy makers (within state education agencies and within the U.S. Office of Education, for example). Members have linked educational thought to many wider currents of democratic activism. Over the years, the NDSG has encouraged many people to re-examine a range of issues about schools and schooling and childhood and race and ethnicity. Meetings and publications and informal conversations within its

networks ranged over issues of children's thinking, children's language, curriculum, support systems for teachers, inservice education, teacher education, the school's relationship to a wider community, and, increasingly, issues relating to the diversity of America's schoolchildren, immigration, and the problems of racism in U.S. society.

The roster of names linked with the group reads like a Who's Who of democratic thinkers and activists: Vito Perrone, Lillian Weber, Deborah Meier, Patricia Carini, Eleanor Duckworth, Joseph Featherstone, Bill Ayers, Hubert Dyasi, Mara Sapon-Shevin, Joe Suina among others. The written records of the group reflect an extraordinarily thoughtful, passionate, ongoing conversation about the possibilities of democracy in education, and the changing climate of three decades of turbulent educational history. In particular, the group has germinated and published a monograph series; authors from diverse perspectives write about evaluation, observation, equity, reading tests, documentation, and teachers write about their own classrooms.

Those listed above have been to many meetings in the course of 30 years. Over time, the group has also invited speakers to link the agenda to important currents not generated within the group. Among others, Lisa Delpit, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Howard Fuller, Francisco Guajardo, Richard Gray, and Louise Derman-Sparks have addressed the group on racial issues. Activists and organizers such as Monty Neil of FairTest have discussed their organizing efforts. Richard Rothstein has shared his work on class and schools while school, board members from California and Vermont have connected education and the public sector. Francisco Guajardo and Miguel Guajardo from the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development have raised issues of the relationship of media and education. These meetings are not just about the past; in many ways the NDSG is livelier now than ever as we attempt to deepen and broaden the national dialogue on education and social justice in our classrooms, schools, and communities.

HOW THE MEETINGS WORK

In the early years, Vito Perrone organized the meetings and they took basic shape under his leadership—arising out of his choices of who to bring together and the opening talk he gave each year. In the last several years, the planning has been generated by the group. In early August at the Buxton School in Williamstown, MA, a planning committee organizes the themes, discussed possible speakers and assigns the jobs necessary to put the meeting together. This summer meeting is open to anyone who wants to attend. Those August plans are refined over email right up until the February meeting, often shifting to accommodate last minute changes and new opportunities.

The tone is serious, intense—we often address a particular text or question—and yet informal. The network of friendships and professional connections are strong and grow stronger each year for those who attend regularly. Home groups welcome and create a place for newcomers, often young teachers. The meetings began in the early 70's with about 30 attendees. Now about 100 people attend. Not only the size changed, but the composition of the group. Classroom teachers were few until the early 80's, when invited teacher panels became a feature each year. Until the early 80's, the group was primarily White. The group has struggled and continues to struggle as it tries to deepen

understanding of race and ethnicity and to solidify the connections with attendees of color. Those who participate currently include new teachers, veteran teachers, university professors, community activists, independent scholar undergraduates, deans, foundations' program officers, principals. Shared rooms which have no keys and cafeteria style meals add to the experience of informal mixing.

We hope this brief account helps you to know what to expect.

Sincerely,
Jay Featherstone
Kathe Jervis