



Energizing Our Workforce

by Margie Carter

This summer while flying home from the annual national Worthy Wage retreat, my colleague Deb Curtis and I found ourselves filled with excited discussion. In contrast to most conferences we have attended these past years, this gathering felt extraordinary. In no session, large or small, did we see anyone yawning, thumbing through the program, or cutting out to shop or nap. People were thoroughly animated and actively engaged with each other throughout each day and evening, visibly reluctant to have the time come to an end. They were continually dialoging, humming, and inventing next steps to take the ideas and inspiration into action back home. Rarely have we seen folks leave a conference with that kind of focused energy.

Our early childhood and after-school profession now has any number of conferences throughout the year. This indicates how we've come of age and are taking our professional development seriously. Putting on a conference requires enormous energy and organizational resources. Across the country I've found conference planners to be consistently remarkable — hard working and skilled at handling an

amazing array of logistical details, keeping a sense of humor and good nature while trying to respond to the wide-ranging interests and needs of participants. What I find disappointing at so many conferences is not a shortcoming or fault on the planners' part but rather conditions that plague the child care field as a whole. Our efforts and goals are confined by the status quo; there is a tendency to jump on the nearest bandwagon; our constant struggle for positive public recognition leaves us reluctant to acknowledge our internal shortcomings; overall, our experience with thinking outside the box is very limited.

These national Worthy Wage retreats I've been attending are planned from a very different premise. Though they know everyone is stretched and no immediate solutions are in sight, the planners openly recognize the severity of the child care staffing crisis and our tenuous ability to provide the quality we publicly promise. Participants come eager for a gathering which doesn't try to conduct business as usual but acknowledges the state of emergency we are approaching in our profession. I heard many say things like: "I foolishly thought someone out there was going to solve this staffing problem." "After

all these years of raising the issue, things have only gotten worse." "If I really want to stay in this profession, I'm going to have to find a solution to this wage issue."

Those who came were primarily teachers, directors, and family providers, with a handful of college instructors, R&R staff, and other ECE advocates. They were deeply concerned about children and their families, and intently focused on the link between quality care and their own working conditions and compensation.

At the first of these national Worthy Wage retreats, almost all attending were European American and were not primarily teachers, directors, or direct providers. This year, over a third of the group was African American, with Asian and Latin Americans in attendance as well. I mention these details because they signal something significantly different and positive for a professional development gathering. I call this retreat "professional development" because everyone in attendance evaluated it as enormously useful, energizing, and contributing to their understanding of what it takes to provide high quality child care. Participants said their vision and leadership skills were expanded,

and their commitment to our profession deepened. I rarely hear such comments in early childhood settings or feel this kind of energy among teachers and providers. Though this was very small for a national gathering (60-some people), I began to see what Margaret Mead had in mind when saying, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

There was no doubt that those attending were fierce in their desire to stay working with children. There were wonderful stories of ordinary moments with children and special triumphs in changing behaviors, and partnerships forged with parents. They talked of wanting to get better and better in their teaching, and many identified collaboration and conflict negotiation as learning goals for their work with families and teammates. Doesn't every director dream of having a staff like this? Beyond all the public lip service to "children as our future," these teachers were tying their boats to this future, seeking a lifeline to keep them from sinking.

Rather than continually burning out, what would it take for all of our providers and teachers to get on fire about their work like this? How did this energy and determination get sparked? What was the out-of-the-box thinking of this professional gathering that we need to replicate in our programs, organizations, and conferences around the country?

Gathering All the Voices

It felt remarkable to all of us to have teachers and providers in the majority at this gathering and to have them setting the tone. Everyone felt further stimulated by the cultural diversity that was present. These factors in and of themselves

indicated something new was underway, a sense of possibility was present. A structure and process was put in place by the planners, but the agenda called for shared leadership and collective development. It was not a superficial "let's feel good" gathering but rather a "let's roll up our sleeves and see what we can create together" work session. How does this translate to other early childhood settings?

Whether in a center, professional meeting, or conference, we have to be continually alert to who's missing at the table, who's setting the agenda, and, beyond the slogans, who's benefiting from how we are conducting business. It's hard to face the ways in which our profession has perpetuated the patterns of welcoming and making some visible while alienating or overlooking others; hard to see how we have limited the notion of professional development; difficult to face the way we create organizations which don't significantly represent teacher concerns or on-the-floor work issues; easy to overlook our tendency to patronize, marginalize, or convey a sense of inadequacy to those who don't match a certain level of education or fluency in our professional discourse.

National Worthy Wage retreats have always focused on teacher/provider issues, but the planners have had to be ever vigilant to avoid reproducing the power dynamics of racial, cultural, and economic privilege. Here are strategies any program, meeting, or organization could try toward that end.

STRATEGY **Create a climate which acknowledges and welcomes differences**

Even when a group appears to be homogeneous, from the beginning it

is important to make visible the different points of view and experiences in the group. At this year's retreat, one of the ways we did this was through a variation on the "True Confessions in Four Corners" training strategy I frequently use and write about. We read statements with four possible answers and asked everyone to go to the corner that best represented what was true for them. Once in a chosen corner, their job was to tell someone why they chose that corner. The large group debriefing which followed each question repeatedly pointed out our differences and how we had to create a respectful place for each person to bring his or her voice forward.

Here are the questions and choice of answers we used to get at our different points of view in coming to this gathering.

What keeps me in child care is:

- the amount of respect I get.
- the opportunities for collaborating and feeling part of a team.
- the amount of decision making power I have in my job.
- the opportunities for personal and professional growth.

What brought me to my Worthy Wages group was:

- I admired the people who were involved and wanted to learn from them.
- I felt I had something to offer that could make a difference.
- I was mad as hell and I wasn't going to be passive any more.
- I needed to be a part of a group that offered support and creative thinking.

When it comes to being an activist, this is the song you'll hear me singing:

- "What's Love Got to Do with It."
- "The Itsy Bitsy Spider."
- "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen."
- "If I Had a Hammer."

STRATEGY

Create a process for collaborative thinking

Rather than formulating a plan for the group, the retreat organizers formulated questions that seemed key for developing the next stage of the Worthy Wage movement. The questions ranged from exploring what issues are most critical to address, and what form of organization would best serve their needs, to what organizations to partner with, and the best ways to raise money to support the work before us.

Each question had a facilitator and note taker familiar with the history of what has been done to date. They stationed themselves around the large meeting hall. All participants were then divided into six groups, and each group joined a facilitator to explore that question. After a period of time, the groups physically moved to the next station, and with the new facilitator, took up the next question. Note takers not only kept a record of what was said but made notes on themes that emerged where there seemed to be consensus and/ or strong differences of opinion. This data was then consolidated into a single document for the next stage of collaborative thinking.

During the evaluation process, many people noted that this was both an empowering democratic process and an energizing opportunity to build on each others' thinking.

Expanding Power and Leadership

The majority of early childhood programs and organizations are shaped, if not run, by white people. The exceptions tend to be in settings serving specific populations. And, let's face it, few groups that start out in the hands of whites ever significantly shift the locus of power, perspective, leadership, or membership beyond this. To do so requires uncommon perseverance, commitment, and trust on the part of Euro-Americans, and bold, self-assured, trusting people of color — a tough combination to come by for all of us who've learned to live with racism and its partner, economic injustice. Our overall failure in this arena of our early childhood communities have segregated and diminished the potential of all of us.

On guard against tokenizing, patronizing, or just pretending to share power, the Center for the Childcare Workforce (CCW), the coordinating organization for local Worthy Wages groups, has supported the growth of the Worthy Wage movement with deliberate steps to eliminate patterns of racism and ensure expanded leadership and membership. This work is far from over, but there is clear evidence of building unity across cultural and racial divides. Any organization could learn from their strategies.

STRATEGY

Change the organizational culture, not just its color

Most organizations that start out with white leadership have unacknowledged Euro-centric ingrained ways of doing business which quickly establish the power dynamics and patterns of interactions. For this to be otherwise, there has to be

a genuine exploration of the organization's culture, and a willingness to shift the balance of power. How do people in this group want to be together, to communicate and take care of business? How will visions, goals, and agendas be developed so that they are truly inclusive? What forms of privilege are as yet unnamed and unacknowledged?

At each of the national Worthy Wage retreats, CCW began the practice of including specific training on overcoming patterns of racial and economic privilege. Over the years, this has taken different forms, from workshops, to fishbowl discussions, to speakouts. At this year's gathering, time was provided for people of color and whites to meet separately to sort out their own issues and come together again to speak with the strength and clarity that would continue to balance the power and organizational culture more equitably. The initial hesitancy and fear that some had in response to this activity faded away when it became clear that this was for the purpose of uniting, not dividing, us.

During the evaluation session of this year's retreat, several African American women spoke up about their initial reluctance to come to what they heard was a mostly white group trying to get more color in their faces. They expressed a feeling of relief and exhilaration to find how much their ideas, strength, and leadership were desired and welcome. A Latino woman said she felt more comfortable speaking in Spanish and thanked the group for not only allowing but welcoming that.

Unlocking the Longings

Our child care workforce needs to be stabilized and energized. The work is hard and rewards often intangible. Yet, just under the surface of every teacher who wants to make this a

career is a floodgate of personal stories about working with children and how important it is. I think we tap into this energy not through cheerleading or motivational raps encouraging staff to basically live with how things are but rather with an honest invitation to define the working conditions that enable teachers to serve children and their families well.

If you're tired of being a sounding board for frustrations, you may be tempted to sidestep this call to name how things should be. But frustrations are an indication of having deeper longings and bigger dreams, and without them, we'll never get beyond the status quo. What I saw at the Worthy Wage retreat was not a bunch of frustrated teachers but people who were infused with the importance of their work. These folks used their gathering to explore how to get what they need to stay in their jobs and do them well. Their goal of avoiding self-extinction is worthy in and of itself, but they went beyond that with longings to live without racism, shame, or guilt. It's hard to imagine a child care program not benefiting from this energy. This isn't just teacher professional development; it is the needed development of our profession.

Margie Carter lives in Seattle and travels widely to do staff training and collect stories of fabulous play, learning, and teaching in child care programs.