

### **Organization Description for AI Summit**

More than 4,000 people attended the Bibb County School District AI summit meetings on September 19 and October 10, 2011. The group was a cross representational sample of Board members, parents of students, local dignitaries, staff, and community members. Student voices will also be incorporated, via a survey they participated in, at some point during the strategic planning process.

According to information gathered by a fellow AI facilitator (Trevor Warner), Bibb County covers 2,000 square miles, has a mixed ethnic demographic, a median income of just slightly over \$37,000, and approximately 22% of its population falls below the poverty level. Superintendent Romaine Dallemand was hired in February 2011 and is supported by an eight member leadership team as well as an eight member Board. More than 25,000 students attend Bibb County schools, which are supported by 1,800 teachers and 3,600 employees. There are 7 high schools, 7 middle schools, 25 elementary programs, and 3 specialty schools. Finally, the school system faces several challenges including: a 44% graduation rate, students not being prepared to enter school, a high dropout, suspension, and expulsion rate, and dangerously low student achievement rates. The goal of the AI strategic planning summit was to redesign the school system to foster student achievement and life-long success.

### **Core Group Information**

According to the Center for Appreciative Inquiry AI facilitators, the “Core group includes at least one person from each category: elementary, middle school and high school administrators, 2 elementary, 2 middle and 2 high school teachers, elementary, middle and high school paraprofessionals, clerical staff from the elementary, middle and high school, custodial staff and food service from elementary, middle and high school, elementary and high school counselor, middle school psychologist, elementary, middle and high school media staff, 6 community members, Superintendent, 5 cabinet members, 2 associate superintendents, human resources, fine arts, psychological services, campus police, maintenance, community affairs, assessment, professional development, risk management, parent training, transportation, CTAE (Career, Technical and Agricultural Education), media, school nutrition, After School program, Special Education, gifted education, account, Title I, Custodial, early childhood, instructional technology, technology support and 3 parent advocates.”

Before the AI summit on September 19, 2011, the 60-member Core group participated in a two-day AI summit to understand the process and get some additional information to be able to help facilitate during the September 19 and October 10, 2011 summit meetings. The Core group worked

with four experienced AI facilitators from the Center for Appreciative Inquiry to design the interview guide. Modifications were made to the interview guide to ensure that it would accurately capture the data Bibb County School District needed and assure they were able to use the data to develop their five year strategic plan.

### **Inquiry Topic**

Bibb County superintendent, Romain Dallemand, identified that the high school graduation rate was only 44%, so he sent a request for proposal out to several organizations specializing in using appreciative inquiry. The Center for Appreciative Inquiry was chosen as the company that would help Bibb County reinvent its school system so that all children graduated and had the opportunity to thrive.

To identify the inquiry topic, a cross-representation of 60 core members met for a two-day, appreciative inquiry summit. This meeting was facilitated by a couple of consultants contracted with the Center for Appreciative Inquiry. At the conclusion of that summit, a plan was developed to help Bibb County create a five-year strategic plan that would completely redesign their school system. They called this plan the “Macon Miracle.”

### **Interview Guide**

We stand at a crossroads in education in Bibb County, Georgia, and the United States. We can either continue down the path we are on now that has led us to a 44% graduation rate, or we can select a path that will ensure every child is receiving a high-quality education that prepares them for the possibility of a 4-year college degree and leads to a successful life.

This is your chance to express how we can meet the needs of our students and help them succeed and maximize their potential. Our children must be prepared not only for the world they live in now, but also the one they will enter in the future. It is up to every employee, every parent, and every member of the community to provide them with the education, tools, resources, and support to be lifelong learners and to be globally competitive.

Our education system is not currently designed to prepare them for a world that is changing on a daily basis. We need a different system altogether, and we have the wonderful opportunity to work together—with the students—to design a system that meets their needs today, tomorrow, and in the future.

With a new system, we will bring the best of what we do to help students discover their intelligence and their gifts to improve our community, our state, our nation, and our world.

You are part of something miraculous: creating a better future by improving the lives of children today.

### **Question 1: Exceptional Learning Experience**

Recall a time when you were part of an exceptional learning experience—a time when learning was inspiring, challenging, and exciting and even if it was hard, you and others seemed to be highly engaged and learning rapidly. Tell me that story. What made it exceptional?

### **Question 2: High Expectations**

Research has shown that the expectations we hold about one another influence our beliefs about what we can do. When someone holds high expectations, they try harder and achieve more. Recall a time when either:

- a) high expectations inspired you to be more than you thought possible, or
- b) your high expectations for another encouraged them to do something they did not think they could do

Tell me about that time and what happened. Why is this story important?

### **Question 3: Opportunity and Innovations**

Look beyond our traditional classroom and school year functions. What positive and novel things are happening in the world that could influence our thinking, so we can design an innovative and highly effective educational system to ensure the success of every student and to generate inspiration for everyone?

What opportunities do you see?

What innovations/possibilities might inspire us?

### **Question 4: Our Future**

Imagine it is 2020 and Bibb County Schools have become internationally known for their innovations in learning and teaching. Our students have made remarkable strides in learning and achievement, and the 2020 graduation class boasts 90% going on to further their education and 10% finding meaningful work or serving in the military.

Our innovative strategies have resulted in students who love coming to school; teachers are inspired by their students, and vice-versa. In fact, teachers report greater energy at the end of every term. Our drop rate has been eliminated; only those students moving out of the area generate the small numbers that show as non-completers.

You have met someone from another state who has heard about our progressive school district, and they want to know more. Describe our new system and what makes it effective.

What role did you play in designing the innovative system and making it a reality?

### **Interviewing Method**

Face-to-face, two-person interviews were used to inquire into the extraordinary moments. Upon completion of the interviews, participants returned to their small group of eight and shared the highlights of the stories they heard during the interview. After reflecting on the highlights, each group of eight generated a list of the three core strengths and factors they heard. These positive core items were posted to the wall for everyone to be able to see.

### **Life-Giving Forces**

The group I supported during day 1 of the AI summit wants:

- To be globally competitive
- To have high expectations for all students and staff
- To offer courses that teach trades
- To have technology that fosters learning for every student
- To be bilingual
- To have parent involvement
- To motivate and involve students to reach their highest potential
- To embrace change
- To have community support
- To offer socialization and other innovative ideas for students
- To increase literacy rates
- To teach beyond the test; to teach what is important
- To use creative methods to teach math, reading, and science (technology)
- To have unity among students, teachers, and community members
- To have effective instructional delivery
- To make a community impact

### **Provocative Proposition**

During day 2 of the AI summit, I co-facilitated a 1,000 member group. Together, the group developed over 100 provocative propositions, which Bibb County refers to as strategic proposals. Five of their proposals are listed below:

1. Students engage in student-led, differentiated facilitation of instruction in order to make significant growth and personal achievement in learning academically and in life.
2. All Bibb County students are fulfilling their commitment to learning by focusing each school day on mastering their learning goals.
3. Students are successful. From K-12, students are engaged in process-oriented learning. They are reflective thinkers, input-providers, and product producers.
4. Students are working to their fullest potential to become productive citizens—with the help of teachers, staff, and all stakeholders.

5. We help students believe in themselves, receive a high-quality education, and exceed so they will all achieve.

### **Design Plan**

Each small group was asked to develop 3-5 key concepts necessary to ensure the effective implementation of their strategic proposal. They developed these in conjunction with their teams of 8-10 people. Later, they returned to their larger team (department, administration, or school) and identified both bold and significant action items or ideas that would make a positive impact toward manifesting their strategic proposal. Those items were captured by their team's leaders and submitted directly to the school, so they are not available to report below. However, for the purpose of illustrating the design plan, the key concepts from the five strategic proposals stated earlier are reported below.

#### From Strategic Proposal #1

- Create professional development opportunities in order to properly ensure facilitation of different teaching models
- Promote student potential by encouraging them to facilitate instruction
- Plan with the entire team in order to ensure vertical alignment

#### From Strategic Proposal #2

- Students are respectful
- Community members serve as collaborative teachers in order to make learning relevant
- Teachers are incorporating strategies to address unique learning styles

#### From Strategic Proposal #3

- Students are actively engaged, self-directed, confident learners
- Students are exploring and discovering through multiple modes of learning
- Students are thinking critically and assessed using a variety of means. They are able to apply and defend their learning in many ways.
- Students produce standard-aligned products based on discovery and conceptual learning

#### From Strategic Proposal #4

- Students have high self-esteem through team-building and character education
- Students' learning needs are met through differentiated instruction
- Students voice their needs and are part of change through technology, career awareness, and community involvement

#### From Strategic Proposal #5

- Teachers offer opportunities and encourage students to stay motivated
- Teachers inspire and empower students to graduate
- Teachers create challenging and constructive learning experiences

- Students excel to higher learning

### **Impact/Results**

During day 1 of the two-day AI summit, there was a lot of excitement and energy generated as the participants began to experience the activities and realize their innovative ideas could have a significant impact and make a large-scale change possible. They held this energy throughout the three-week interim, as they returned to the centreplex charged and ready for another day of activities.

Dr. Dallemand's opening speech inspired them to think both globally and tactically, but to do so from a "30,000 foot view." His idea was for all the stakeholders to take ownership of identifying ingenious ways to design strategic proposals that the district leaders could then take back, and together with research and experts, develop the five-year plan. Later, sites, departments, and programs would determine and execute tactical objectives that support the successful fruition of the strategic plan. Dr. Dallemand mentioned that the organizational system and processes would change as the strategic plan was finalized and implemented, and those steps will be identified early next year. Design ideas were identified both individually and as groups, so those ideas will be collated and taken forward as the strategic plan begins to materialize.

From personal experience, I witnessed many participants realizing the power of their own voice. During day 1 of the AI summit, a lady called me over and told me she could not answer or participate in the interviews, as she was "only a cook and did have any significant learning experiences." Until this point, she had thought of her job as insignificant and not as important as the teachers. When she learned that all participants had an equal voice and that she could draw upon a significant learning experience she had outside of the classroom, her eyes lit up. She smiled and you could see a physical change in her face as she realized she matters to the success of every child. From that point forward, she was very engaged in the day's activities. In another example, on day 2, I was listening to stories being told by small 8-10 member teams. One team included a cross representation of teachers, bus drivers, and custodians. The custodian was mentioning how he had begun to initiate conversations with students who seemed to be lonely or not part of any group. He did not know if it would help make school any better for those students, but he said he was going to try because he wanted the students to know that someone was watching and that they were important. Those types of stories were heard throughout both days, as people began to take individual ownership in making a difference for students and to think that they mattered to their success even if they were not the students' teachers.

### **Moving Forward**

It is my understanding that Bibb County is working with the Center for Appreciative Inquiry as they move forward, and that may include additional support next year as they finalize their strategic plan. What type of support, if any, is requested remains to be seen and is not part of my responsibility to oversee. However, I would absolutely be **thrilled to continue** to be part of the

work with Bibb County and to offer support in any format deemed appropriate. Their work is so important, both to their students, and to the nation who is watching and can learn from their experience.

For my part, I will make myself available to the Center for Appreciative Inquiry as a support as they move forward with Bibb County. Additionally, I wrote a blog that was posted by the Center for Appreciative Inquiry, which provided an update on the Macon Miracle. Further, I posted both a quick summary and a media link to several AI groups I belong to on LinkedIn. Finally, I posted information, links, and photos on FaceBook, all in an effort to help promote and publicize the Macon Miracle.

### **Personal Reflection**

Before the event occurred, I wished for the confidence to “go with the flow.” To embrace the process and let it unfold as it needed to. I was also hoping this event would be the catalyst to bringing positive, sustainable change to the school system and the community. I was eager to feel the energy behind 4,500 people coming together to create a new vision, and I was hopeful that the day would bring new relationships and hope to those participating. During the event, I wished for success for the participants and the ability for them to creatively find new solutions to empower themselves. After the event, I wished for another opportunity to do it again!

I learned that I have good instincts and that I can trust my intuition, education, and skills to help bring about a successful outcome. I learned that I am not afraid, and that I am ready to be successful in my chosen vocation. I also learned that a good facilitator can only plan so much, and then she has to let go and trust the process. As Kathy Becker says, “bless the mess.”

My favorite experience, my personal best, came as I witnessed the process the group I was supporting underwent. They were so authentic, open, and present with each other. They put aside differences in socio-economic, education, and employment levels to collaboratively create a vision that would benefit not only themselves but their entire community. They let me into that sacred space of sharing their inner desires and hopes. They were honest, committed, and fun to be around, and I felt extremely blessed to have been accepted and be a witness to their transformation.

The energy of the group on day 1 was strong. Initially they were a little tentative and unsure, but as the day unfolded and they recognized that all voices had equal say and “power,” their energies grew stronger. They sang, danced, told stories, and even joked about the outcomes they were creating. As they did so, their energy grew and influenced mine positively. In fact, I could honestly see that their energy was contagious. Even when they were separated, when the energy was strong, the other groups would stop what they were doing to take part in the other’s circle experience. We laughed, whooped, and hollered our way to some very creative solutions.

### **Permissions**

I believe Bibb County School District is fully expecting us to promote and share their experiences. Dr. Dallemand has invited members of the media to participate in the two-day summit and has encouraged AI facilitators to Tweet and upload to Facebook to promote the event.

### **Additional Questions:**

#### ***Why participate in this strategic planning summit?***

I chose to participate in this strategic planning summit for several reasons. First, because of the vision that Dr. Dallemand has for reinventing his school district and creating avenues for children to be successful both in and out of school. As a life-long learner and a consultant to the early education and social service field, I am familiar with how important a quality education is. To participate in an event that fosters innovative learning opportunities and improves the graduation rate is in alignment with my core values and desire to help children create better lives for themselves. I know that through their betterment, their community will prosper as well.

The second reason I chose to participate was because Kathy and Jim were involved. Having spent time with them in Reno, I have come to greatly admire their dedication to improving the lives of others, their commitment to quality and change, and their ethics and integrity. I knew that anything they chose to sponsor would be run with the highest level of respect and professionalism, and I was eager to see how a change process could occur with 4,500 people involved.

The third reason I chose to participate is because it supports my professional vision. Over the past year, I have worked to establish myself as an independent consultant, trainer, and coach. This AI summit provided a platform for me to take the professional leap of a lifetime. It not only gave me the forum to do so, but it did so at an unprecedented level. Being part of history and knowing that I could make a difference for the community, teachers, and students of Macon was important to me, as I have been lucky enough to receive a high-quality education and understand the opportunities it creates.

Finally, being able to participate in this event was something that touched my heart. I grew up in a family that did not have a lot of money, and my mom had to work two jobs to support us. She always encouraged my education and she believed in me when I didn't believe in myself. I resonated with Dr. Muhammad's speech about the importance of his mother and her desire to empower him to expect more of himself because my mother did the same for me. While I didn't know that the keynote would resonate on such a personal level, I did know that the opportunity to improve the lives of children was something I could not pass up. My life's purpose is around helping people and organizations use their strengths to bring out the best possibilities. This project was not only personal but professionally rewarding as well.

***What was the best thing that happened to you?***

The best thing that happened to me is that the experience validated who I am personally and professionally. I have been waiting to make the leap of faith to start my own business, and this opportunity validated my experience and sense of readiness. I was so touched by the stories people shared, by their willingness to be present and to dream big, and to commit to making a difference. The energy in the room was palpable and filled my heart. The people were incredibly gracious and kind, and I felt a sense of purpose and enjoyment that verified that I am on the right path.

***What did you learn from this experience?***

I learned that AI is both a science and an art. From a scientific perspective, there is a framework that enables people to go through a process that facilitates change. There are also activities, theories, principles, and supporting research to verify the efficacy of appreciative inquiry. One can learn the framework and apply it across different contexts, groups, and setting. However, there is also an art form that requires the practitioner to be able to respond to what is emerging in the moment. To respect the process, to empower the participants to trust and “bless the mess,” and to help people creatively accomplish their dreams are key attributes of a good AI facilitator. Knowing the stages of AI is helpful, but to be really successful requires listening to your instincts, respecting the pace and needs of the participants, and being confident to help people experience its full effect. I learned that I enjoy this process more than I could have ever anticipated or imagined.

***Did this experience have an impact on you personally? If so, how?***

Absolutely! Not only did I meet some amazing people (co-facilitators and participants), but I had the opportunity to do what I love the most: To bring out the best in people and in organizations. From the day I received confirmation that I was included as a co-facilitator, I knew this would be life-changing. I could feel my energy rising daily in anticipation of being part of such a large-scale change effort. During my travel to Georgia, I reflected on the importance of this project. From the students, staff, and community, this event had the opportunity to change lives in a way that could have positive generational impact for many years to come. As the day began, and I felt the energy rising in the arena, I was awe-struck by the sheer power of potential present. When Dr. Dallemand spoke of his vision, it brought tears to my eyes knowing that there were so many compassionate people dedicated to making a difference for others. I felt immense gratitude and pleasure in being witness to such transformation. Finally, at the conclusion of the event, I knew that something had changed within me. I was no longer the person speaking about doing AI summits---I was the person helping make them happen! That shift is something that is difficult to put into words. Essentially, it was about coming into my own professionalism and finding alignment between my purpose, strengths, and vocation. I am eternally grateful for this opportunity.