

The Diarist Project

A new approach to documenting and learning from change initiatives

Over the past several years, The Diarist Project has been exploring a new way to learn from efforts to create change—primarily the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s ambitious *Making Connections* initiative—and to communicate what it is learning to people who can use these insights.

The diarist approach is a mix of journalism, oral history, process documentation, “journaling,” reflective practice and communications strategies. It has developed several guiding principles:

Learn from those who are doing the day-to-day work.

The core of the diarist process has been a series of periodic interviews with the people who were leading the efforts to implement this initiative in the sites. The assumption is that these people have a lot to teach...if only they had the time to reflect on and communicate what they are learning. Diarists give them that opportunity.

Learn as the work unfolds.

In *Making Connections*, diarists were given the chance to interview people every few months over the course of years, capturing their thinking as they were doing their work, experiencing challenges and developing strategies. In essence they were maintaining a diary of the thinking of the people being interviewed. The idea is to create a record of people’s thinking about the day-to-day struggle of implementing a project before memory fades and history gets rewritten in people’s minds.

But for many people, these interviews became more than a way to record their thinking. They became a way to explore and reflect on issues in their work, a way to think through their strategies, to process what they were learning. Many of the people the diarists interviewed commented on how the interviews were one of the few times in their busy work lives when they could actually reflect on their work.

For diarists, being able to interview people and observe developments over time gives them a valuable window into what can be learned from an effort to create change.

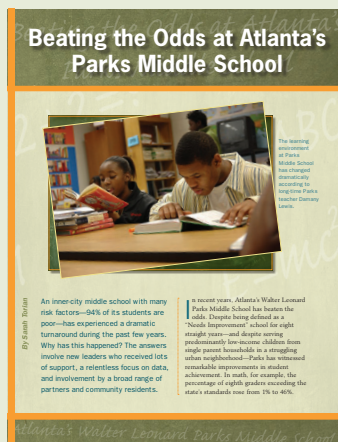
Learn about the process of implementing an initiative.

Over time, people have learned a lot about strategies that are effective in countering poverty, such as expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit and building jobs “pipelines.” People have also developed some potentially powerful ideas about what it takes to make a difference. In *Making Connections*, some of these ideas involved the need to build “authentic demand,” develop a “two-generation strategy” and create a local “results culture.”

But how do you implement these strategies and concepts? Why does a strategy that works well in one place struggle in another?

Through reflections with a range of people involved in the work, diarists try to better understand the answers to questions like these:

- ♦ How do you build a sense of a team among disparate individuals and agencies, especially



Diarists tell stories about the work that explore what can be learned.

REFLECTIONS

On the process of change

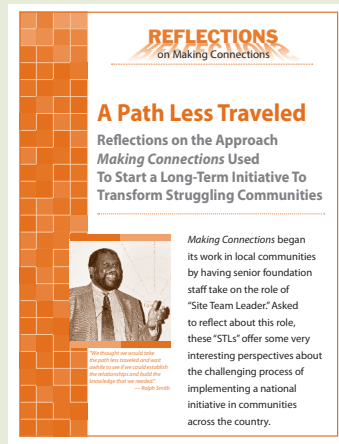
when that team includes residents of struggling neighborhoods?

- ♦ How do you work with personal and organizational self interests so that they don't undermine the work of the team?
- ♦ How do you build relationships that can last longer than one issue campaign?
- ♦ How do you insure that the "messy human stuff" doesn't undermine the work you are trying to do?
- ♦ How do you build a sense of movement that can overcome inertia and create a "new normal"?
- ♦ How do you get enough people to understand and embrace a set of powerful ideas so that you actually reach a tipping point?

Communicate what you learn in a way that reflects people's experiences and insights.

Similar to the way that journalists emphasize the importance of sources and direct quotations, diarists use extensive quotations to communicate what people are learning. Diarists see these quotes as a form of "data" that grounds the ideas not in numbers but in people's actual experiences and thoughts.

All of us have our own theories and assumptions about this work and it is very easy to hear what people are saying through the filter of these assumptions. Diarists usually record interviews and then use quotes directly from the transcripts. While we edit and shape what people say to make it understandable and read-



able, we base what we write on the actual words, examples and experiences of the people we interview.

Don't oversimplify. Acknowledge that people often have very different perspectives about what happened and what can be learned.

An initiative like *Making Connections* is extremely complex, involving many people, many sites and many years of experiences. By interviewing a range of people involved with an initiative like this, diarists are able to communicate this reality of multiple perspectives. Similar to the way that good journalism includes multiple points of view. "It does a really good job of capturing some of the complexity," is what Ralph Smith said about one of the diarist reports. (Smith is the Casey Foundation Vice President who initiated the diarist work for *Making Connections*.) He added that multiple perspectives is "what we want to hear and something we could only get through a process such as this."

Communicate in a way that the people doing this work will actually read and learn from it.

We try to use quotes and examples and stories in ways that make our reports and reflections very readable. As Christopher Waller, the principal of an Atlanta middle school that was the subject of a diarist publication, put it:

"It's easy to read, which means that people like me will be more apt to read it and apply it to their schools. It gives you a glimpse into the practical side of turning around a school. It shows practical strategies that schools can do immediately. It explains the simple things we do."

To see other diarist publications, go to www.DiaristProject.org. To learn more about the diarist work, contact Tim Saasta at Tim@CharityChoices.com.