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From Idea to Practice – The Brain-Based Research Team

By **Alexis Wright**, *Dean of Children's Programs*

This year saw a very exciting professional development idea come to life for the faculty. For a while, I had wondered about the possibility of forming a team of faculty that could spend a distinct period of time together engaged in professional development around brain-based research and cognitive development, and then spend time infusing the school with what they had learned. There were some distinct advantages for the faculty: we would be developing and cultivating a cohort of experts on the topic, this could be a terrific leadership opportunity for classroom teachers, and it allowed for teachers to teach their peers. From my perspective as dean, not only would the project provide the benefits above, but I also thought of it as, most importantly, a chance to help the school arrive at some data and research to help further support the progressive approach as a relevant and vital educational model along with being a possible fundraising opportunity, a marketing opportunity, and a springboard into other collaborative professional development teams in the future.

I shared this nascent idea with faculty in the winter of 2013. Enthusiastic, and so reflective of our community, they asked about the process by which they might serve on the team. Also reflective of our community, through the generosity of the School for Children families, at the annual benefit we were able to raise over \$35,000 for the effort. After a rigorous application process, we selected a team of eight faculty members, and given our relationship with the Bank Street Graduate School, we then added three Graduate School faculty members to the team, for a total of eleven.

In the fall of 2014, all of the team members went to the *Learning & the Brain* conference in Boston, one of the preeminent conferences focused on disseminating the latest research in neuroscience and psychology and their potential applications to education. Over three days, the team heard from leading researchers about the latest discoveries in neuroscience and neuroeducation. Upon their return, the excitement and energy were palpable—the team could not wait to share their newfound knowledge with their colleagues, and to implement new practices in their classrooms. Next, the team set about planning the College's professional day, a day when the School for Children and Graduate faculties come together to further their professional growth. The team arranged for three keynote speakers, experts in their fields, and small group discussions that reflected on the implications of their research on teachers and students in the classroom. For the second part of the day, faculty had the choice of participating in small-group discussions on topics such as the brain and the arts, the

brain and core executive functions, and the brain and technology, all with the point of helping faculty understand the implications of brain research and understanding on their pedagogy and the classroom environment.

After having participated in the NYSAIS Brain Conference and other professional development workshops and conferences, last spring the team led a faculty meeting and selected an array of books for the faculty to read over the summer. With the generous support of the Parents' Association, we have also arranged to host Dr. Adele Diamond, a scientist at the forefront of research on executive functioning and brain development, in the spring of 2016, ensuring that the work and conversations will continue into the next school year.

At the end of this two-year project, I know the team will have helped faculty and parents understand some of the latest research and the implications of brain-based learning. The team will make recommendations to its colleagues about ways in which our already dynamic and challenging curriculum can take advantage of this research, and ways in which faculty can incorporate the research and findings into their practice.

And, importantly to me, as the dean of a progressive school, I strongly suspect that the team's findings will further validate the ways in which we as a school already appreciate children and think about teaching and learning. The team will help provide some of the evidence that justifies the progressive approach to teaching and learning, and help us with our communication and marketing efforts to prospective families.

Our mission requires that we "improve the education of children and their teachers by applying to the education process all available knowledge about learning and growth..." The Brain-Based Research Team at Bank Street is working to ensure that happens, as they infuse the community and culture with new knowledge, which will ultimately strengthen the way we teach and how we work with our children. I am thrilled that the work has challenged us, enriched us, and will help us remain at the forefront of progressive education.