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New alliances already brewing after BIF-2

Natalie Myers
Posted 10/14/06

Alice Wilder spends a lot of time on the floor, talking to 2- to 5-year-olds. As the research and development director for Nickelodeon's preschool television series "Blues Clues," she knows how to interview children, to figure out how they think and what interests them.

Now, she wants to broaden that concept.

At the BIF-2 Collaborative Innovation Summit, held at Trinity Repertory Company in downtown Providence two weeks ago, Wilder spoke about bringing students of all ages into the conversation about education reform, asking "what works and what doesn't work for them."

Her concept would involve creating a venue for student discussions and inviting public officials to listen. Rhode Island, because of its size and proximity to her home in New York City, might be a perfect testing ground, Wilder said.

The idea resonated with Angus Davis, who said he shares Wilder's passion for improving the public education system, especially in Rhode Island. Davis is the co-founder of California-based Tellme Networks, an Internet and voice-based service provider for cell phone companies. He lives in Providence and is a native Rhode Islander.

Davis approached Wilder after her presentation to discuss an education reform project he is working on, but that he would not disclose in an interview because it is in preliminary stages.

"The general idea of looking out for students and including them in conversation, I absolutely agree with her," he said. "I'm sure there will be an opportunity to collaborate."

That connection and possible collaboration is one example of the sort of outcome summit organizers had hoped to achieve, said Melissa Withers, communication director for the Business Innovation Factory, a nonprofit formed to implement economic development strategies in Rhode Island.

The aim of the summit is to "create the environment, then step away ... see what percolates," she said. "We're not just trying to promote a business. ... It's about strengthening the network of innovators across sectors."

This year, 34 "storytellers" from universities, nonprofits, large private companies, technology startups and everything in between converged at the two-day summit, Withers said, to share their ideas with about 300 attendees.

Measuring the connectivity between them is challenging, she said, especially as BIF is often not a partner in the collaboration. But BIF still can point to meaningful collaborations that evolved as a result of last year's summit, she said.

Josh Silverman said he met Dennis Littky at last year's summit, the same way Wilder and Davis met this year. Silverman introduced himself after Littky finished his 15-minute story about forming The Met School, a non-traditional high school in Providence that aims to teach students one at a time, without the structure of classes, tests or grades.

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Litty's story resonated with Silverman, who said he got his own start in design while attending a non-traditional high school. Silverman is the founder and owner of Schwadesign, a design firm he moved to Providence from Boston about a year ago.

"I wanted to get involved," Silverman recalled. And he has.

Since attending last year's summit, he has applied his skills as a designer to rebranding The Met's Web site. He said his objective was to help the school clarify what it communicates about itself to the outside world.

The next project involves "making sure the modes of communication internally are as efficient and effective as it could be," Silverman said. Asked what he gets out of the collaboration, he replied: "It's personal and professional satisfaction."

In the past year, he has spoken to groups of students at The Met about his experience starting a company. And Silverman said he is looking forward to hosting one of The Met's two-day-a-week mentorships sometime this fall.

BIF's tracking of summit-inspired collaborations is "more sophisticated this year," Withers said.

The nonprofit asked all participants to fill out an online survey after the summit, the results of which will show the number of new connections they have made and where that connectivity is strongest. "It will give us some data to stand on," she said.

In the meantime, more collaboration already is brewing as a result of this year's summit. Rite-Solutions and Item New Product Development may team up, representatives of both companies say.

Jim Lavoie, a BIF-2 speaker and CEO of Rite-Solutions, said his company might work with Item to develop software for some of the new products Item is developing.

"Our plan is to meet up with them," said Trish Wadley, director of business development at Item. "We won't know whether there is any synergy there until we actually meet."

Before the summit, Wadley added, "we weren't aware" that Rite-Solutions existed.

"We got to meet a lot of other people who are doing innovative business in Rhode Island," she said. "From young companies starting out that we could mentor ... to direct peers running big businesses in Rhode Island, like we are."

Davis said it's that "creative spark" between people "that makes a conference like this successful."

"Even if you only get one or two connections ... it's a home run," he said.

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