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PRELIMINARY EVALUATION OF THE ORAVA PROJECT

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Preliminary Questions

After reading the materials, discussing the project with Kurt Meredith, Jeannie Steele, and Gustav Matijek, I prepared a set of questions that addressed issues that seemed important to the project's success. These questions follow, along with the best answers I could formulate for them

1. At the outset, the Czechoslovak Minister of Education, Dr. Pisut, described the overall goal of what came to be the Orava Project as one of infusing an "ethic of democracy" into the entire Czechoslovak educational system, from top to bottom. But the nation of Czechoslovakia now does not exist, and Dr. Pisut has no more to do with the schools of Slovakia. This leads us to wonder about the current status of the "ethic of democracy" in the Orava Project.

- a. How is the "ethic of democracy" understood by the project staff?

In 1990, Dr Pisut asked, "How do you teach democracy?" By showing people how to form viable political parties, or how to hold open and free elections, some would answer Kurt Meredith and Jeannie Steele argue that before the outward public rituals of democracy can have substance, though, the people must have learned to practice day-to-day habits of thought and discourse that incline them to take responsibility for their own actions, and recognize the rights of others to do the same Steele and Meredith write:

For grades 1-4 and 5-8, the practices the Orava Project is promoting include,

****interactive approaches to teaching reading, that encourage children to predict, reflect, and evaluate, and compare ideas;**

****approaches to conducting discussions that encourage students to examine assumptions, compare the text's assertions with their own experiences, and debate interpretations among themselves;**

****using writing to record experiences and responses to events (including school lessons), to explore one's thoughts and to compare those thoughts with those of others**

****promoting the involvement of parents in their children's education.**

****finding peaceful and constructive means of resolving conflicts**

For the preschool teachers, the practices can be summarized as a **constructivist approach to teaching**, an approach promoted by developmental psychologists that encourages children to create knowledge through active discovery in the presence of observant teachers who adjust the school environment to present children with new challenges.

For all teachers, workshops are provided on ways to involve parents in their children's education, both at home, and in the classroom.

For all participants in the project--teachers, administrators, and interested faculty from Comenius University--workshops are provided on conflict resolution.

To set out the list of the project's core practices this way misses some nuances, however Meredith and Steele have recognized that the way in which they plan and conduct their activities teaches just as much as the activities themselves. Therefore, they have apparently been careful to introduce new ideas in an almost conversational way with the teachers, so that the ideas really do emerge from an open dialogue, rather than by imposition from the American experts. Said one teacher in Dolny Kubin,

You know, I was late joining this project, so when I came to my first meeting, I think it was their third. I took my seat and listened to Kurt and Jeannie and the teachers talking. I looked at my watch, and wondered when the meeting would start (You see, we are used to somebody important standing behind a lectern and talking on and on to us) Before I knew it, the meeting was over and I was bewildered. But I came back another time, and a time after that. Then one day I looked in my notebook at all the hand-outs. I didn't realize I had learned so much!

Similarly, the preschool teachers in the Constructivist Education Project make it clear that they are running this project themselves, with the help of two professors from Iowa who have become good friends. Indeed, they are. This group is running a

research project in which they have set up model preschool classrooms, based on constructivist principles. Later they plan to share their experiences with other Slovak teachers.

As one teacher said,

We went to Iowa to visit kindergarten and preschool classes there. The classes were good, but we can do better. With what we are learning about constructivist education and from our own experiences, we know now that we can set up model classrooms right here in Bratislava.

The school directors are participating in a group of eleven courses on school administration. As they told me, the courses were designed by a collaborative of professors from UNI and the school directors themselves. "What were their biggest challenges? What did they want to know, to be able to do?" The UNI professors asked these questions in a series of meetings with their potential students. Based on their answers, the professors designed a slate of courses for them. The Slovak school directors are expecting to teach much these same courses themselves to other school directors for the next cycle.

These school directors are very much involved in this project and they are highly motivated. One has translated from English to Slovak two books on school management so that students in the course may have up-to-date information to read.

c. How is the "ethic of democracy" understood by teachers and administrators working in the project?

By their reports, Meredith and Steele have spent little time talking to teachers or administrators about democratic theory. They

have focused, rather, on day-to day matters of teaching methodology. It is surprising, then, how often teachers say they see changes in teaching as being directly related to the inculcation of democratic practices in students, and in themselves.

On an open-ended evaluation of a course on pedagogy that Steele and Meredith conducted in Dolny Kubin, for example, eleven respondents out of sixteen voluntarily described the benefits of the methods they were learning in much the same "day-to-day democratic" terms we attributed to Meredith and Steele, above.

Wrote one,

I feel that it is important that I always keep in mind that I have to teach children how to think, evaluate, accept others' opinions. I know now that that is my goal as a teacher. Before we never felt or were taught that it was important.

Another wrote,

I have changed my opinion. I do not want children to be full of information. I want them to speak about their problems to me and their classmates. I would like to teach them to accept other people and their opinion. I would like them to be responsible for their thinking and behavior, to be critical of themselves.

And another,

...I have to tell that I am impressed by the method of questioning the most. There are reasons for this that

are of tremendous importance: motivation for learning, expression of own opinion, using creativity, provocation of discussion, purpose for learning, why I learn. Children learn at the same time to be good listeners. I personally consider it very important at this time of democratic changes in our society

During an interview in Dolny Kubin, a fourth grade teacher spoke of the "freedom-anxiety" felt by Slovak youth, now that communism--with all its restrictions but also its guaranteed life roles--was in retreat. She was convinced, and the other teachers agreed, that the pathway to a secure future lies in self-reliance, in learning to take initiative and find new solutions to the challenges one faces. The ways teachers work with students in their classrooms, she went on, is a direct preparation for self-reliance and initiative-taking

2. School reform projects sometimes carry within them the seeds of their own destruction. Ideas imposed from the outside can fail to find "ownership" among the people ultimately counted on to carry them out; and the very suggestion that teaching can be done better may be offensive, if it is interpreted to mean that teachers haven't been doing their jobs well enough all along. The most effective change agents in education have gone about their work with respect and even affection for their clients, and have worked in a dialogical fashion in which new solutions to problems and new techniques may seem as if they occurred to everyone at once.

- a. Are the project staff sensitive to the pitfalls that can derail school reforms?

Meredith and Steele had recent experience in an eight-year school reform project in Illinois before coming to Slovakia. They are conversant with the literature on school reform, and they have developed a model of their own that appears to have been successful in other settings, and already seems well adapted to the Slovak setting, too

That model stresses maximum collaboration between trainers and trainees, and the eventual removal of even that distinction, as those who are trained begin to train others.

- b. Are the project staff proceeding in a truly dialogic fashion?

It appears that they are. It was clear to me, both from the responses to open-ended questionnaires I was provided and by the conversations with teachers and school directors, that the Slovak participants in the Orava Project feel that they have been treated with respect and that their own ideas, experiences, and concerns have been honored by the project staff and visiting professors.

- a. How are the project's initiatives being received by those they are designed to serve?

From everything I heard and read during my visit to Slovakia, from every conversation, and from every piece of documentary evidence, the project is being received with real enthusiasm by its participants

3. The project's stated goals are to inculcate an ethic of democracy at all levels of the Slovak educational system: the ministry, the faculty of education at Comenius University, the school districts, the schools, and the classrooms.

a. What progress has been made to date toward these goals?

As of this writing, the project has been active for only six months out of a thirty month timetable. To date, the Orava Project has involved dozens of teachers in the Orava School District; thirty school directors in Bratislava and in Orava, including the district administrator for the Orava Region and the director of the teacher training center, and at least two professors of education at Comenius University.

I am astonished by the amount of progress that has been made already: the collaborative planning that has been done, the workshops that have been carried out, and the friendships and alliances that have been formed.

Has the implementation worked at "all levels" of the educational system?

At the national level The Orava Project was conceived by the Czechoslovak Minister of Education, but he is no longer a citizen of the country in which the project operates. The office of the Slovak Minister of Education has changed hands five times in the past two or three years. The Ministry is reported to have extremely limited funds, and the schools are said to have given up on expecting much from it in the way of new initiatives. The staff of the Orava Project have not much involved themselves with the Ministry up to this point, and on the face of it, for them to do more at the moment might be counterproductive.

At Comenius University. Here the picture is a little brighter. The Orava Project has sent consultants to Comenius University from UNI to facilitate a shift to a credit system. In time, this should make it easier to set up new courses and programs at the university; and also expose the faculty to enough competition for students that they may feel some motivation to consider reforms in their teaching.

The Orava Project is also supporting initiatives at the university on constructivist education, parent involvement, conflict resolution, and computer technology in education. In addition, the project is offering to give the university and up-and-running training program for school administrators.

There are problems, to be sure. Comenius University, too, is desperately short of funds. The faculty are paid so little that they must find other jobs in order to support themselves, so there is limited time for faculty to become involved in the activities of the Orava Project. And although the administration of the Faculty of Education professes to support the program, its actions would not always seem to match its words.

At the schools level. The project's activities are most enthusiastically received out in Orava Region, where the work of preparing teachers and administrators appears to be proceeding beautifully. Fifteen school directors from Bratislava are participating in the school administration program, too, and they appear to be committed and enthusiastic. The teachers of early childhood education in Bratislava are clearly benefitting from their participation in the project.

b. What are the prospects for a successful implementation at all these levels?

It must be admitted that the task of having a nation-wide impact on education in Slovakia will be difficult without a strong ministry of education as a collaborator, and given less than 100% support from a university that is itself beset by grave problems. No one should be surprised by this Eastern Europe stands out from all the places in the world as perhaps the area most seething with rapid change

In the coming months, though, the project staff will be re-evaluating its options. In two and a half years, many positive changes should be up and running across the Orava Region. Teachers and school directors will have the expertise to train others in the methods they have learned

Should the project then set its sights on expanding its activities to the other schools throughout the large Orava district? Should it move into the city of Bratislava? Into other districts in the country? To other universities? Can Comenius University be counted on to help promote the project's activities? Can the Ministry of Education?

Meredith and Steele make it clear that they came into this project expecting to have to adapt to fluid circumstances That attitude would appear to afford their best assurance of success

4. The project has an ambitious agenda, involving democratizing educational practice at all levels, training school administrators in effective practices, and preparing local

leaders to continue functioning as change agents once the grant period has ended. Can the project really do a good job of carrying out such an ambitious set of plans?

This question troubled me as I read the project proposal, and I gather it troubled some people at USAID, too. But Meredith and Steele argued that (1) these different branches are necessary because Slovakia's needs for change were so great; and (2) that, so long as good people were working in each branch, each activity could function as a semi-autonomous unit. I came to agree with both arguments.

We have already said above that the kinds of thinking and discourse practices that are promoted within a classroom support the formation of democratic habits. It can easily be shown that the involvement of parents in their children's education not only makes for a more democratic school, but spreads the benefits of an education in democracy to the older generation. Happily, a highly competent expert in family involvement has been able to run successful workshops, and also to develop a collaborative relationship with a professor at Comenius University. Thus the likelihood is increased of her initiatives' staying on after she has stopped coming to Slovakia.

The program to train school administrators also has a clear imperative. Eighty-five percent of the school directors in Slovakia were elected to their posts from the teaching ranks after 1989, with no prior training for their new roles. Obviously they need training in school administration--both to do their jobs well, and also to understand and support their teachers' moves toward democratic classroom practices. Here again, it seems that the participants in the school administration program have formed a close working relationship with the faculty from UNI.

The same can be said for the projects in constructivist preschool education, parent involvement, and conflict resolution. They are needed on their own merits, they support the general thrust of the Orava Project, and they are largely self-supporting, once the UNI staff form relationships with Slovak professionals who take an interest in the activities

Nonetheless, managing these many activities well takes skill on the part of the project directors. Their work is pivotal in all of these activities, from screening project specialists who come; to orienting those specialists to work effectively in-country; to appropriately supporting Slovak participants in the diverse project activities, to facilitating contact between UNI, Slovak teachers and administrators, USAID staff, and so on. Dr. Meredith and Dr. Steele seem to do all of these things well, but their competence should not obscure the importance and the difficulty of these tasks.

5. The Orava Project has so far brought some fifteen different faculty members from the University of Northern Iowa to work for varying amounts of time in Slovakia. On the face of it, working with this number of people would seem to pose problems for the coherent management of the project, and also run the risk of overwhelming the Slovak hosts with foreign ideas and foreign agendas, and hence undermine the Slovaks' sense of ownership of their own reform processes. Working with so many professionals from one school would also seem to pose concerns for quality.

- a. Is the involvement of so many experts from UNI introducing an unmanageable variety of agendas into the project?

So far, this hasn't been the case. It appears that the Orava Project has been able to recruit American experts in the subfields of education who have had valuable skills to share with their Slovak hosts. It also appears that Steele and Meredith have been able to orient these people successfully to the goals of the Orava Project

Matt Kollasch, for example, comes to Slovakia during his breaks to work on computer technology for education. He works closely with Vladimir Benko, from the Comenius University faculty (like most faculty, though, Vladimir has other jobs besides his university post)

Asked about the purposes of his work here Matt could easily relate it to the larger task of democratizing the educational system

For one thing [he said], when we link teachers around the country together through e-mail, we're setting up avenues of free speech. You can limit free expression through the newspapers, because every newspaper comes off a press in one location. But it's a lot harder to limit free expression through e-mail, because the nodes can easily shift from place to place.

Talking about introducing technology into a school, he says:

I approach it as a group problem-solving activity. If we're putting one computer into a school, I assemble the teachers and I ask them 'Where shall we put it?' 'How can it best be used?' 'How can we share it to everyone's best advantage?'

Listening to Matt talk about his work, I am struck by the parallels between his way of thinking and Meredith and Steele's. In this most technological of fields, he is keenly aware of the fit of his piece into the larger democratic whole. If they have coordinated their way of thinking even half so closely with other UNI consultants, they have done well indeed.

b. Is the involvement of so many UNI staff undermining local initiative and ownership among the Slovak educators?

From what I saw, it would take a lot to suppress the initiative of the Slovak professionals. Slovak schools are probably ahead of US schools in their across-the-board achievement in mathematics and science. Moreover, the problems of violence and resistance in US schools is well known to the Slovaks. In truth, no American teacher can enter a Slovak classroom without feeling a sense of awe at the respect--even reverence--with which students take to the academic enterprise. The Slovak teachers with whom I met seemed discerning about what they wanted to take from the US educational experience, and what they didn't. In my view, they are active partners with the Orava Project staff in negotiating the direction of the activities. A related issue has to do with encouraging local talent. Here the project was already heading in a good direction, by training local professionals to become change agents themselves. Beyond that, while I was there Dr. Steele recruited the participation of the Partners for Democratic Change

in the on-going conflict resolution workshops That is, an American expert sponsored by the Orava had already delivered a workshop to more than 250 students and faculty at Comenius University. The Orava Project was arranging to hand the names of those participants over to the Partners for Democratic Change, who would invite those people to further workshops that the Partners plan to offer at the University. This sort of collaboration would seem to strengthen the Orava Project's possibilities to effect lasting change.

- c. Can the project directors consistently find specialists with the necessarily high levels of professional preparation, communication abilities, and suitability for effective work in cross-cultural situations--if it limits its recruiting of American professionals to only one institution?

From what I have seen, the University of Northern Iowa has produced an impressive range of talent for this project so far. If they had to go outside their own teaching ranks to find more talent, it would be no embarrassment, because up to now they have done as well as anyone could expect of any single institution.

It needs to be stressed that the demands of performing well in this setting are high, and while Meredith and Steele have done an extraordinary job of coordinating the work of the visiting professionals, I am sure this work is not easy. It appears essential that they (1) continue to have final say on who does or doesn't work in the Orava Project, and that (2) they be allowed to recruit from beyond UNI's faculty as they see fit. The success of the Project's making a meaningful and lasting contribution to the quality of education in Slovakia may well hang in the balance.

6. In the United States, thoughtful educators and social critics have growing concerns for the status of "the ethic of democracy" in our own classrooms. One doesn't have to look far to see signs of social malaise in our communities and in our schools--especially in our large cities, but also in communities of all sizes. Are there lessons to be learned in the Orava Project that would be useful for American educators to learn?

It is moving, as an American teacher-educator, to hear Slovak teachers affirm so eloquently the relationship between child-centered methods of teaching and the formation of a democratic character. American teachers may know many of these methods, but few of us could readily articulate the political philosophy behind them

As our Slovak colleagues remind us, democracy is an evolving ideal toward which we can work, through the encounters we have with our colleagues and our students every day. Slovak educators are involved in a vigorous and inspiring conversation about these issues, and it would seem that American educators and our students would benefit from participating in the same debate

I would encourage the staff and participants of the Orava Project to make their experiences widely known among American educators.

Conclusion

The Orava Project is off to a very good start. It is meeting real needs, both long-term and short term, of Slovak teachers and administrators, and its activities are being carried out in a

manner that is characterized by just the sort of democratic processes the project seeks to promote. The specialists brought from the University of Northern Iowa have done their jobs well, and have built real friendships for the project in the host country. The project directors are to be commended for their especially good work in helping plan the project to begin with, and in rising to new challenges to manage a complex undertaking in a way that gives many people a chance for meaningful participation and success

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Charles Temple, Professor of Education at Hobart and William Smith Colleges¹ earned his Ph.D. in education with a concentration in literacy from the University of Virginia. He has served as a Fulbright Scholar in Portugal, and has worked as a consultant on a USAID-supported project that is producing new basic language textbooks in the Dominican Republic. He is co-author of six books in the field of reading and language arts education. For the journal The Reading Teacher, a publication of the International Reading Association, he edits a column on international issues. He serves on the editorial board of the National Council of Teachers of English journal, Language Arts

¹ As of August, 1995, Dr Temple will chair the Department of Educational Studies at St Mary's College of Maryland, St. Mary's City, Maryland

SO1 Improved basic education policies, institutions, technologies and data, especially for underserved populations

IR1 Improved policies and increased global resources for basic education

IR2 Improved formal and out-of-school learning environments for basic education

IR3 New and improved basic education technologies identified, developed, tested, evaluated and applied

IR4 Accurate and timely basic education data collected, analyzed, disseminated and used for policy and program planning

IR5 Improved basic education in countries in crisis or transition

IR6 Expanded learning opportunities for pre-school age children

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HOBART AND WILLIAM SMITH COLLEGES



June 21, 1995

Kathryn Stratos
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Dear Ms Stratos,

Thank you for your prompt response to my report on the Orava Project. Although the report went right to the limits of what I learned from reading furnished materials and visiting the project site, I am happy to try to answer your discerning questions.

Let's go first to the questions raised in the body of your letter, and then return to the larger issue of the project's sustainability and prospects for replication

It did appear that the components of the project were functioning quite well, thanks in large part to the relationships that had been cultivated between the different professionals from the US and their Slovak counterparts. For each component of the project--teacher training, administrators' training, conflict resolution workshops, preschool education, parent involvement, and educational technology--I met capable Slovak professionals who were genuinely engaged in the activity and who clearly had strong relationships with US counterparts, that seemed likely to be maintained with minimal stoking by Meredith and Steele.

It was surprising that Meredith and Steele had found so many people in their home institution who were able to work successfully across cultures. This surely didn't happen entirely by luck. Meredith and Steele worked closely with the UNI administration in the selection of faculty, and they conducted extensive orientations for those people back in Iowa and in Bratislava. Success has a way of making things look easy, though, and Meredith and Steele were concerned that they (1) continue to have approval over who came from the US to work in the project, and (2) that they be allowed to go to institutions beyond UNI, as need be, to recruit personnel.

beyond
JA ?

On the parent involvement activity The UNI professor conducted workshops for teachers in the Orava District (and, I believe, in Bratislava) on ways to involve parents in their children's education from supporting their children's learning, to eventually sharing in decision-making in the schools She had found a counter-part at Comenius University who was helping local teachers adapt the suggestions to their own situations. From what I was told, nothing of this sort had been done in Slovakia in anyone's memory, and in some cases it was an uphill battle to get parents to participate. Teachers often volunteered favorable comments on the techniques they had learned in these workshops, though, even when we were speaking of other topics This seems like a very promising activity, and I agree that its progress would be well worth documenting

You raised the question of support of the project from Comenius University and from the national ministry of education. There are problems, surely, but if one takes a flexible attitude--as Meredith and Steele certainly do--there are also opportunities. A critical problem at Comenius University is low faculty salaries, which require faculty to hold jobs outside of the university So much moonlighting certainly undermines the professional culture of the school, but it also means there are many highly-qualified faculty available to work with the Orava Project, especially as their participation provides access to resources and professional contacts The ministry of education is starved for funds and in apparent disarray, but (and I am not sure about this) that may leave the way open for educational districts to take initiatives that they might not take if central control were stronger.

It seems possible, even likely, that the Orava Project can sustain its successes without strong and engaged support from the ministry of education or from Comenius University. We have the example in the United States of the National Writing Project, an affiliation of local projects in which teachers have been trained to train teachers. NWP has gotten funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities, but it receives guidance and energy from the teachers and university faculty who choose to participate The Essential Schools Movement in the US operates the same way In Western Europe the network of ecoles modernes has sustained itself sometimes in spite of hostile ministries of education

So, in answer to your larger question, by working with teachers and local school administrators, by cultivating

friendships among talented university personnel, by forging alliances with other grassroots democratic movements, Meredith and Steele are following--if by necessity--a path that many successful school reforms have followed. I, too, would be interested to hear their thoughts on long-term implementation of the project, as they confront more of the realities in Slovakia

As to replicability, Meredith and Steele are training a group of people, both in Slovakia and at the UNI, who should one day be prepared to help educators in other parts of Slovakia, and perhaps other countries in Eastern Europe, to carry out similar projects of their own.

Again, I appreciate the opportunity to participate in the Orava Project, and I will follow the developments of the project with great interest

Sincerely,



Charles Temple, Ph. D.
Professor of Education

P S.

Please note that after July 15th my address will be:

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cc: K. Meredith, J. Steele



U.S. AGENCY FOR
INTERNATIONAL
DEVELOPMENT

June 14, 1995

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Dear Professor Temple

Thank you for sharing your evaluation of the Orava Project. I read the report with interest and was happy to see that your assessment was generally very positive and complimentary. The section on the Slovaks' receptivity and understanding of the Orava Project was especially interesting to me. More speculation on your part regarding the project's sustainability and chances for replication would have been useful.

Several of the questions which you examined were ones that I have had about the project. It was good to read that, thus far, Meredith and Steele have been able to coordinate and weave the diverse activities--from introducing computer technology in educational settings to family involvement in education--into a coherent program. The danger that dispersion will lead to ineffectuality, however, will remain, and is one that we and Professors Meredith and Steele will have to continue to be watchful of.

The second issue that has concerned me, which you explored, is the reliance thus far on UNI faculty. While the quality of assistance thus far has apparently been high, it is my understanding--as confirmed prior to our signing the grant with UNI--that UNI has affiliations with other universities, which could increase pool of experts upon which the Orava Project could draw. I would expect that UNI would facilitate Meredith and Steele taking advantage of this resource.

Some segments of the report brought up issues that were new to me. Your reference to the success of the expert in family involvement, for instance, piqued my curiosity. What exactly has she accomplished that you feel confident will be adopted, continued, and expanded by her Slovak counterparts once her involvement ends? It seems we have an example of potential "impact" here that UNI might document.

I also found myself wondering about the nature of the problems the Orava Project has encountered with the pedagogical institute at Comenius University. What, more specifically, are the forms of support or receptivity that have not been

forthcoming? Would it be wise to expand collaboration with the other three pedagogical institutes in Slovakia, to ensure the sustainability of the Orava Project's efforts at the tertiary level? Could this be done in a way that does not antagonize UNI's counterparts at Comenius?

Finally, as mentioned above, the report left me wondering about how we ensure that the Orava Project reaches beyond the Orava and Bratislava school districts. What cost-effective strategies for expansion and replication exist if neither the Ministry of Education nor Comenius University is forthcoming in its support? The original proposal included a plan for nationwide expansion of the project over the course of twenty years. This was a key reason for our support of the project. We will want to challenge Professors Meredith and Steele and their Slovak counterparts to be creative and ambitious in thinking through the crucial issue of replication.

Thank you for your engagement and interest in the Orava Project. And thanks again for sharing your evaluation. I copy Kurt Meredith and Jeannie Steele, as they may want to comment on the questions raised here in forthcoming reports on the project.

Sincerely,



Kathryn Stratos
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