Top educators brainstorm innovative ways of teaching

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SHAKER HEIGHTS — More than 600 of the top teachers in the country spent the past three days blowing up traditional teaching methods, such as the three R’s and rote memorization, and brainstorming new ways of instructing the nation’s children.

Hathaway Brown School in Shaker Heights hosted the three-day Education Innovation Summit, a two-year project in the making funded by the Edward E. Ford Foundation. The teachers came from 120 private schools across North America.

The conference’s theme was based on the theory that “The spark of invention often lights when unfamiliar forces collide.”

Participants engaged in sessions that probed such visionary topics as the Origins of Transformative Ideas; the Neuroscience of Talent; Architecture as a Vessel of Vision; Solving the Creativity Crisis; and What Schools Can Learn from the Restaurant Revolution, featuring food author Michael Ruhlman and Jonathon Sawyer, chef-owner of the Greenhouse Tavern.

“We think innovation and creativity are moral imperatives,” said Bill Christ, Hathaway Brown’s head of school. “We can’t continue to teach our children the way we did in the past.”

Christ and his staff conceived the summit as a think tank for educators and innovators in fields such as science, business, medicine, the arts and education.

“There’s a hunger for this,” Christ said. “Teachers want to be creative. But schools don’t usually talk to each other. The idea is to get them all in one place.”

The dynamic Bill Strickland had the participants jumping up and applauding Saturday after the heartwarming story of his founding the National Center for Arts & Technology in Pittsburgh.

Strickland, president and chief executive officer of Manchester Bidwell Corp., has developed a career education plan that teaches inner-city high school students through culture and enterprise. For instance, some of the students make pottery, paint murals, grow orchids and give musical performances.

Strickland has taken the Pittsburgh model to six other cities, including the newest school, the Cleveland Center for Arts and Technology, which opened Thursday in the Midtown corridor with the help of a $14.8 million grant from the Cleveland Foundation.

University Hospitals and the Cleveland Clinic are partners in the school, Strickland said. There is no tuition.

The teenage students soon learn that the culture at the private Arts and Technology schools is much different from what they have experienced in public school, Strickland said. For starters, there are dress codes.

“One of the first things we do is make them pull their pants up,” said Strickland, a community activist and MacArthur “genius grant” recipient. “When they start wearing a belt, we know we have them.”

Hathaway Brown wanted to provide conference participants with the full Cleveland experience, which included an evening at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum on Friday.

But they weren’t counting on the 3 inches of snow that fell during the Saturday morning sessions, which must have been an eye-opener for the teachers from Hawaii, but not so much for the teachers from Maine — two of the 30 states represented at the conference.

Bob Hallett, executive director of the Edward E. Ford Foundation, said the $250,000 grant to fund the summit was a good investment.

“Hathaway Brown clearly has a national reach, and we’re pretty happy about that,” Hallett said. “We’re citizens. We have an enormous responsibility to participate in the education of our children.”

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