Michigan Coalition of Essential Schools (MCES) is a group of different educational institutions and Critical Friends training model than many others throughout the country. Called Connections for Students’ Success (CSS), the 12 days of training are distributed over two years with a two-day kick-off in the winter of year one and a three-day summer session that same year. The remaining days are two-day sessions spaced throughout the second year. Their peers select teacher leaders who are trained in team building and the use of protocols. They are expected to return with knowledge and skills to lead collaborative groups back in their respective schools. We encourage these CSS coaches to work with these groups voluntarily versus holding mandatory meetings. The building principal is responsible for ensuring that all training with the CSS team of coaches that consist of 4-5 teachers from each school. Principals mentor them to support their efforts but do not participate in the CSS meetings back at the school site, where looking at lesson design and student work is the desired outcome of the meetings.

The CSS has eleven schools being trained. One group is in its second year of training and the others have just begun. Almost all of the schools are affiliated with the Michigan Coalition of Essential Schools (MCES) as their partner in Comprehensive School Reform (CSR). The CSS training is one of the key strategies in the MCES Theory of Change to improve student achievement. We asked participants to comment on its various aspects. Lori Gibson, from Union City Middle School, Chad Culver, from Vanderbilt Schools, Rebecca Brown, from Grayling High School, and Jim Bodrie, a school reform coach in three schools including all grade levels, responded to our survey. We all agreed that the number of days and the pace allowed us to better understand and apply the knowledge and skills they were learning.

As Lori said, “Practicing the specific protocols and examining higher-order teaching thinking skills increased our ability to share them with our respective teams.” Rebecca appreciated how “we’ve gradually been ‘pushed’ to delve even deeper.” Chad’s observation was that “student work has become one of the most useful and challenging points upon which we consider and reflect.”

The principals’ participation in the training is crucial and keeps everybody on “the same page.” The focus is always on student achievement, but using proven methodology to stir the efforts.

The training has had an impact on their work. Using the Standards of Instruction and Assessment has brought the lessons to a much higher level. The focus exists on student achievement, but using proven methodology to stir the efforts.

During this seminar participants will:
• discuss Rob Evans’ new book Family Matters (participants will receive a copy to read in advance)
• examine the critical components that provide the frame for collaborative community
• have the opportunity to present a case study from their own school community

Special Guest
Rob Evans—Clinical and organizational psychologist and the executive director of The Human Relations Service in Wellesley, MA. Former high school and pre-school teacher and child and family therapist, he has consulted to hundreds of public and private schools throughout the U.S. and internationally, working with teachers, administrators, and boards.

NSRF Principals’ Seminar
July 14-16, 2004, Cambridge, Massachusetts

In honor of the work and leadership of our colleague, Nancy Mohr, and to deepen our support of principals in the NSRF network, we are pleased to announce the first NSRF Principals Seminar. Facilitators
Paula Evans—Former high school teacher, Director of Professional Development and Co-Director of NSRF at the Annenberg Institute of School Reform; former principal of Cambridge Ridge and Latin School in Cambridge, MA; current Director of the New Teachers Collaborative in Devon, MA and Lead Founder of the Community Charter School of Cambridge (opening September 05)
Dave Lehman—Principal and Teacher, Alternative Community School (middle-high school) in Naubuc, New York - member school of the Coalition of Essential Schools, and New York City Department of Education, Compact Partnership School - CFG Coaching Facilitator with NSRF, member of the original Annenberg Institute for School Reform “Principals Seminar,” Advisor to Cleveland Heights/University Heights High School as part of the Gates Foundation funded “small schools conversion project,” Facilitator for Naubuc School District and Cognia CFPs.

The question of voluntary CSS groups or mandatory CSS groups met with varied responses. From Rebecca’s perspective at Grayling High School: “We initially invited all members of the staff and then placed the interested ones in groups. Our first meeting was done during an in-service, and we encouraged even the non-committed members to observe one of the groups. This worked out better than we ever could have imagined — the ‘observers’ were so impressed that they all joined the groups they observed!” Jim offers another point of view: “Voluntary participation is always the most desirable option. However, if this doesn’t happen, I think it’s important that CSS takes place during a time when all staff are required to be in attendance”. But Chad cautioned that “One must be careful to uncover the contrived collegiality aspects and use the time as effectively and efficiently as possible.”

CSS has an impact on student leadership - and we are interested in deepening our efforts to support principals in this work.

In this meeting we will focus both on the community of adults within our schools and on the relationships between schools and parent/caregivers in an era of changing family support for young people.

Essential Questions:
• How do schools and families work most effectively to support our students?
• How does our school support teachers and staff with an effective learning community?

For more information
If you have any questions about the meeting please feel free to contact nsrf@michigances.org - Janett Bundy, jlbundy@michigances.org