

# Creating Effective Small Schools

Kim Feicke, Oregon

**I**t could have been an ugly situation. After two years of dreaming and planning, the four small schools' staff had created to replace its large high school had just been reduced to three. Difficulties in the planning process and student choice, amongst a myriad of other variables, led the leadership team to dissolve one of the schools before it even opened.

There was a collective sadness in the school the next day, but an atmosphere of supporting each other and moving forward prevailed. There is nothing easy about converting a large high school into small autonomous schools and there are daily examples of the frustrations schools face in their efforts. But what many at this particular school have agreed on is that their attention to process from the inception of this work has gotten them through the tight spots. Their foundation in Coalition for Essential Schools (CES) Principles and Critical Friends Groups has supported them in creating a collaborative and supportive process that has resulted in the successful implementation of three small schools this year.

I am their school coach.

Ultimately, for me, my goal as a school coach is no different than the Mission Statement of NSRF: to foster educational and social equity by empowering all people involved with schools to work collaboratively in reflective democratic communities that create and support powerful learning experiences for everyone. Creating effective small schools is how we do that. Coaching schools through the process of creating small schools is what I do, and NSRF tools and protocols are my toolbox for doing it.

How do I use NSRF in my work? Let me count the ways.... The easiest way I can describe it is just to show you what a typical week looks like for me.

On Monday, I'm meeting with the planning team of a large comprehensive

high school for the first time. They've just received a planning grant for creating smaller learning communities and this is their first meeting together as well. Throughout the day I spend with them we will do some ice breaking and team-building activities I pulled off of the NSRF website, we will do a text rendering



on an article related to their reform effort, we will do the Continuum Dialogue Protocol so they can get a sense of where they are in their attitudes about this work, and we will do a chalk talk about their school culture.

After spending the day with them, I will drive to another district I'm working with to meet with their Student Leadership Team, a group of students from each of the high schools in the district that are working together to build student voice in the district. I will teach them the Consultancy Protocol and they will spend the evening supporting each other in dilemmas they're facing at their individual schools as they implement their action plans.

On Tuesday, I meet with a group of teachers from schools across Portland who are working on their Continuing Teacher's License, a requirement to teach in Oregon. We will use the Success Analysis Protocol to examine culturally relevant lesson plans that each teacher is bringing with them to discuss attributes of successful culturally relevant

learning experiences. As a part of the program, the teachers are required to write a statement about their classroom environment. They will start with the Metaphor Activity to give them a jumping off point into their writing.

On Wednesday, it's off to another school where my task will be to facilitate a joint meeting of the high school leadership team and the site council about where their redesign work is right now and what the next steps are. I don't know what we're doing there yet, but last time we met as a large group we did a Tuning Protocol around the design plan.

On Thursday I get to go to my coaches CFG group, my place of refuge in this work! The place where I get help with my dilemmas, challenge my own practice, and grow professionally.

Beyond coaching in schools, Small Schools Northwest at Lewis & Clark College is creating a network of professional development opportunities to support the long-term sustainability of small schools. If we consider CFGs to be valuable professional development for educators, what are we doing to support that concept and build it into our preparation of new teachers and support of veteran teachers? How does it inform our work in preparing administrators to work in an environment of school change? How does it support the changing role of counselors in schools? These are some of the questions we're looking at as Lewis & Clark College works towards its goal to create a "truly diverse school of education committed to bridging the achievement and social class gaps."

Thus along with our typical Center of Activity work—CFG Coaches' Trainings, ongoing learning opportunities and support for CFG coaches, and introducing CFGs to new audiences—we are also working to integrate CFGs into our teacher education program. Currently, teachers can receive graduate credit not only for participating in the CFG Coaches'

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# Success Analysis Protocol

The facilitator's role is to help the group to keep focused on how the success described by the presenter is different from more routine work. The analysis of what made this so successful is the purpose of the protocol. The facilitator is a full participant in this protocol, and each participant takes a turn as the facilitator.

"Success" is defined as something that proved to be highly effective in achieving an outcome important to the presenter.

1. **Identify a success.** Write a short description of a success in some arena of your professional practice. Describe the specifics of the success. Be sure to answer the question, "What made this different from others like it that I have had?" You might choose a success that surprised you, or that you haven't already analyzed on your own, or that you would like to get others' thinking about. It doesn't have to be a large success — people learn a lot in this exercise from relatively "small" successes as well. (5 minutes)
2. **Presenter describes the success.** In triads, the first presenter tells the story of his or her success, in as much detail she s/he can remember. The group takes notes. (5 minutes)
3. **Group asks clarifying questions.** The rest of the group asks clarifying questions about the details of the success in order to fill in any information the group needs to be helpful to the presenter. (5 minutes)
4. **Group reflects on the success story.** Group members discuss what they heard the presenter say, and offer additional insights and analysis of the success. The presenter is silent and takes notes. (10 minutes)
5. **Presenter reflects.** The presenter reflects on the group's discussion about what made this so successful. The group then discusses briefly how what they have learned might be applied to all of their work. (5 minutes)
6. **Protocol begins again for the next group member.** Repeat steps 2 through 6 for each member of the group. Remember to keep the focus on the underlying principles or processes that made for success.
7. **Debrief protocol.** What worked well? What would we do differently next time?
8. (If there is time), the **triad identifies and lists the factors that contributed to their successes**, and shares this in the large group. The large group looks for trends across triads, and then discusses what it would mean to consciously create conditions that lead to success.

coaches, mathematical communication, issues of equity and social justice, service learning, powerful teaching and learning, distributed leadership, etc.

Teachers, by our very nature, tend to be hyper critical of our work. We are reluctant to talk about our practice, and are particularly reticent to share our successes with our colleagues out of deeply ingrained sense of humility. We are much more likely to share our limitations than our strengths. The Success Analysis protocol provides an opportunity for all participants to learn from each other's practice and to apply what we have learned from each other for the benefit of all of our students.

I am now much more inclined to mark the correct answers (even with red ink!) on student and teacher work. ■

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for participating in the CFG Coaches' Training, but also for the work they do in their CFG in their school. We are also integrating CFG and NSRF work into our Continuing Teachers License Program and other programs and are deeply examining other ways to model and support collaborative and reflective practice throughout the college.

In the words of BAYCES director Steve Jubb, "We are so much more effective at meeting human needs as interdependent communities than we are as independent individuals." Our goal of equitable opportunities and outcomes for each of our children is impacted by our ability to work together and problem-solve as a community. As a school coach and director of Small Schools Northwest, I see it as my responsibility to model, support and create collaborative community in the environments I work in, and I deeply value the support and reflective thinking that comes from NSRF and motivates me to continue this work. ■

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