If you come to Massachusetts or southern New Hampshire to visit the NSRF “Center of Activity,” you won’t find a building, or an administrative assistant, or even a phone number in the telephone directory. However, you will find a great deal of CFG work being done by hundreds of CFG Coaches, led by nearly a dozen NSRF National Facilitators and interns, in schools and school districts across the region.

NSRF work in Massachusetts and southern New Hampshire has had a long history. Two of the original Co-Directors lived in Massachusetts while working in Rhode Island at the Asilomar Institute for School Reform (AISR), and Souhegan High School (in southern New Hampshire) was the first school in NSRF’s network to move to whole school CFGs. In fact, Souhegan’s use of CFGs to realize its mission — Souhegan High School aspires to be a community of learners born of respect, trust, and courage — was featured in an early NSRF video: A Community of Learners.

There has been a steady growth in activity in the region since 2000, when NSRF moved to Harmony in Bloomington, Indiana, and National Facilitators from Massachusetts and southern New Hampshire sponsored the first of many national CFG New Coaches Seminars in the Northeast region. Last summer alone, participants in Massachusetts and Souhegan CFG Coaches Seminars came to New England from twelve states.

NSRF Facilitators have worked extensively on training and supporting CFG Coaches during the past several years with the following Massachusetts districts: Brookline, Cambridge, Danvers, Duxbury, Fitchburg, Great Barrington, Leominster, Malden, Newton, North Adams, Waltham and Worcester. Massachusetts is central to the state network areas of Springfield, Somerville, and Souhegan High School (in southern New Hampshire). In 2004 they are a collaborative group of 7 national level facilitators whom: • meet regularly in center retreats and meetings • use the tools of our practice to conduct center meetings • have used the future protocol to begin the development of a strategic plan • have developed a relationship with the Snelling Center for Government for fiscal services and administrative support • as of July 14th have hired a part-time director, Margaret MacLean

Annually, introductory one-day sessions have taken place to initially introduce participants to CFG practices. These have been taken place for principals, as groups in leadership development or for teachers in schools. These have followed different formats and have included participants: high school principal, school psychologist, learning specialist, college instructors (teacher prep), science museum educator, and me. Several of us are also CFG Coaches. (Two of us, Jay Davis and I, are also NSRF Facilitators.) In fact, that is how this Critical Friends Group got started. Three of the members were participants together in a coaches’ training last year, and were determined to create a Critical Friends Group that would really push the thinking of the members.

At that recent fire-side meeting, I was co-presenting a brochure, using the Tuning Protocol. We had also included a text-based discussion as part of the agenda. That led to rich conversation and, of course, we found ourselves pressed for time. I was eager to go ahead with the Tuning, despite the time crunch, (only 30 minutes), anxious to get feedback on the brochure so it could be used immediately. Sticking to the protocol is something I feel very strongly about, and often “preach” about not changing the process. “The protocols are created very consciously, and have been tested over time... they work the way they are written...” I BELIEVE THIS to be true. I would never allow this to happen in a coaches’ training. Yet, faced with the dilemma of squeezing a practice into limited minutes, I heard myself saying, “We can skip the warm feedback; and go directly to the cool... I really need to know what doesn’t work.” Does that sound like the sentiments of a NORTH, or what??? “Just give me the information so I can get to work on it.”

The designated facilitator strongly suggested otherwise, but acquiesced. We went through the protocol, and dedicated several quick rounds to cool feedback. The comments were actionable, credible and auditable — all the characteristics

NSRF-related activities at the Southern Maine Partnership (SMP) have been ongoing since 1996. While some work of the Southern Maine Partnership is explicitly NSRF, the spillover influence into many aspects of SMP work has been large. The single largest component of SMP’s NSRF-related work has been helping educators in Maine become NSRF-trained CFG/PLC Coaches, and providing support for them after initial training. At this time, there are approximately 150 educators in Maine who are NSRF-trained CFG/PLC coaches. A second aspect of their work is support for trained coaches and the hosting of coaches’ support meetings.

Southern Maine Partnership

Watkinson School, Connecticut

Watkinson School snapshot

At Watkinson School, Hartford’s only independent day school, the impact of CFGs has been immeasurable (although we’re trying to change that through better documentation methods!). Although about 60% of faculty and administrators participate in voluntary CFGs, the language and methods of critical friends have seeped into almost every aspect of our school culture. In classes students have come to give each other warm and cool feedback, and tune each other’s work. At our annual upper school retreat, students participate in the Future Protocol, where they imagine who they want to be in the future and speak about it as if it has already happened. Then they devise a plan for how their high school career can help them get there. At our faculty meetings we often use protocols like Microlabs or a Consultancy to get at people’s issues and concerns around a new proposal.

At a recent board meeting, the entire board of directors participated in a continuum exercise designed to help members of the school reach agreement about which school initiatives should be the focus of a major new capital campaign. Our CFGs are facilitated by pairs of committed coaches who support each other’s growth as facilitators

Vermont NSRF

Vermont NSRF (VT NSRF) activities have been ongoing since 1999. In this time period much has changed. In 1999, they were a small group of three individual coaches working independently in different geographic areas of the state. In 2004 they are a collaborative group of 7 national level facilitators whom:

- meet regularly in center retreats and meetings
- have agreed upon standards of practice
- use the tools of our practice to conduct center meetings
- have used the future protocol to begin the development of a strategic plan
- have developed a relationship with the Snelling Center for Government for fiscal services and administrative support
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Several urban charter schools in MA Ware, as well as with schools and Great Barrington, Leominster, Malden, Danvers, Dover Sherborn, Fitchburg, years with the following Massachusetts CFG Coaches during the past several Coaches Seminars in the Northeast the first of many national CFG New southern New Hampshire sponsored when NSRF moved to Harmony in activity in the region since 2000, NSRF video: of learners born of respect, trust, and of Activity in the North East

Snapshot of a CFG

Gathered in a cozy living room, enjoying the warmth of a fire, sat the eight members of the “Boundary Spanners” CFG. We are all educators: high school principal, school psychologist, learning specialist, college instructors (teacher prep), science museum educator, and me. Several of us are also CFG Coaches. (Two of us, Jay Davis and I, are also NSF RF Coaches.) In fact, that is how this Critical Friends Group got started. Three members were participants together in a coaches’ training last year, and were determined to create a Critical Friends Group that would really push the thinking of the members. At that recent fire-side meeting, I was co-presenting a brochure, using the Tuning Protocol. We had also included a text-based discussion as part of the agenda. That led to rich conversation and, of course, we found ourselves pressed for time. I was eager to go ahead with the Tuning, despite the time crunch, (only 30 minutes), anxious to get feedback on the brochure so it could be used immediately. Sticking to the protocol is something I feel very strongly about, and often “preach” about not changing the process. “The protocols are created very consciously, and have been tested over time... they work the way they are written...” I BELIEVE THIS to be true. I would never allow this to happen in a coaches’ training. Yet, faced with the dilemma of squeezing a Tuning into limited minutes, I heard myself saying, “We can skip the warm-up; and go directly to the cool... I really need to know what doesn’t work.” Does that sound like the sentiments of a NORTH, or what?? “Just give me the information so I can get to work on it.”

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Apples and CFGs in Harmony: A “Core” Curriculum
John Pieper, Wisconsin

Since 1989 the Walt Disney Company has presented Disney’s American Teacher Award to six outstanding members of the teaching profession. Specifically, the program honors those teachers whose approaches exemplify creativity in teaching and who inspire a joy of learning in their students. In 2003 John Pieper was one of 30 teachers nationwide who received this award. CFG Coaches training was one of the benefits included with this special recognition.

This is the second of three installments following John’s journey as a CFG Coach.

“Y
ou do realize we will have to bring in food with "
food?" Brennan chimed in as the third of us began to plan our first CFG meeting. Outside the meeting room, Brennan would treat the please. A message was sent to all building staff members, and then we anxiously waited to see who would show up. Brennan and Kathy had gone through the CFG training early last summer. They too were eager to put their training to use.

On the day of the organizational meeting, eight souls uneasily sat at each other. There were a few questions pertaining to when the group would meet, how much time would people have to invest, and the truly important question, how would this work help the students? Stacey agreed to bring in a sample meeting, how much time would people have to each other. There were a few questions gone through the CFG training early last summer. They too were eager to put their training to use.

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The true power of the protocol came out when we debriefed the process. Stacey’s words were an affirmation to the value of the work.

“At first I was nervous about pre-

senting.” She said. “But the further into

it we got, the more secure I felt. I was so

impressed by the depth of thinking all of

you were doing for me. This has really been

a helpful experience. Thank you for

being there for me.”

Lot’s comments were equally grati-

fying. “As we were discussing Stacey’s dilemmas, I found myself thinking of

ways her work, and the comments from others, could affect my work. Not only
did the process help Stacey, but it helped me as well. This is really neat stuff!”

The group was almost giddy with excitement. I just cloyly smiled and let out a deep sigh of relief. Brennan, Kathy, and I all agreed this first CFG meeting exceeded our expectations. Even better, a colleague volunteered to take our classes if we wanted to set up some classroom observations. I am blessed to work with such a wonderful staff.

Later, as I had time to reflect, my thoughts drifted back to last year’s Winter Meeting. I had talked with many CFG Coaches and they shared a variety of mixed experiences. They ained concerns regarding time, administrative support, defensive posturing by peers, and a sense of isolation. Yet for all of the obstacles facing these coaches, each and every one projected a sense of commitment and optimism. The demeanor of these people was like that of someone who under-

stands the outcome of the process, but

also acknowledges the critical factors that are required to nurture growth.

In some ways the situation re-

minds of John Apples. An apple of simple means, he had the vision and
determination to dedicate his life to a

process. He did not wait to watch the

apple trees grow. He spread the seeds near

and far so that he was enriching the lives of everyone he met.

Like so many John Chapmans, CFG

Coaches and facilitators are also planting seeds. We seek out the fertile ground of learning and plant seeds of knowledge. Our ideas are rooted in sound practices. We have a mission to bring meaningful learning and equity to our students. We

see the potential good the CFG work can bring to our schools. Yet we understand it will take time for our work to branch out across America. If we stay the course and continue to successfully reach out to more and more educators, then at some point, our patience, persistence and passion will come to fruition. When that epiphany occurs and there is a magnitude paradigm shift in the way schools function, then it will be time for a “Gala” celebration for our students and colleagues. Isn’t life “Delicious”?

John Pieper can be contacted at

joepieper@wisners.com

Webster Stanley Critical Friends Group

Stacey’s dilemma involved a unit she was working on in Social Studies. There were limited resources available, and she was uncomfortable with the time frame she had to present the unit to the class. Con-

sidering the fact that four of the group’s members did not have any background in such things as probing and clarifying questions, the protocol flowed smoothly and effec-

tively. There was an intensity of thought that you just don’t get when you meet informally.

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of really helpful feedback. I was making notes all over the document. Then we were done - out of time - and it hit me... I had NO IDEA if there was ANYTHING, anything at all worth keeping. By skipping the warm feedback, I had seriously shortchanged the experi-

ence. The warm feedback isn’t there for warm fuzzies. It’s there so we don’t throw the baby out with the bath water! What IS worth keeping? Additionally,

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