Highlights from NSRF's Centers

Massachusetts/Southern New Hampshire

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 Annenberg 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, Dover Sherborn, Fitchburg, Great Barrington, Leominster, Malden, Newton, North Adams, Waltham and Ware, as well as with schools and districts in CT, southern NH, and RI. Several urban charter schools in MA have trained CFG Coaches, as do several independent schools. Other districts have smaller cadres of trained coaches in individual schools.

Souhegan High School

In addition, NSRF Facilitators and CFG Coaches have been working with several districts in converting large schools into small learning communities, using CFGs as a professional development vehicle as well as a process for creating collaborative cultures – most notably in Cambridge (2000-2003), and currently, in Newton, Leominster and Springfield. The Center for Collaborative Education (CCE) Boston is working intensively with schools though their New England Small Schools Network Program (NESSN), especially in Boston, Malden and Worcester, MA, and in Utica, NY.

NSRF Facilitators also have a

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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 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 *Tuning* 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 audible - all the characteristics

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# of Activity in the North East

Southern Maine Partnership

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. Since 2002 they have hosted annual meetings and statewide listservs open to all trained coaches in Maine. In addition to a generalized consistency between the methods Southern Maine Partnership school coaches use in schools and the philosophy, activities and tools associated with NSRF, the Southern Maine Partnership has explicitly promoted the idea that schools engaged in comprehensive school reform should be engaged in creating professional learning communities. ■

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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
- as of July 1st 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 taken place for principals, as groups in leadership programs through the Vermont Principals Association, for the statewide group of Special Education Directors and as in-service days for staff at various supervisory unions. The core of their work since 1999 has been scheduling and conducting coaches training's for Vermont educators. These have taken place in varied formats:

- 5-day summer sessions for new coaches
- 4 day summer experienced coaches seminars (2003)
- Embedded trainings following varied schedules and conducted in supervisory unions. These training have followed different formats and have included the practice of new skills between sessions.

They have also hosted annual colloquia open to trained

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Watkinson School, Connecticut

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 regularly 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.

Watkinson School snapshot

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

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Massachusetts/Southern New Hampshire

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long-standing relationship with several school reform organizations locally, including: ATLAS Communities, Educators for Social Responsibility, The Education Alliance and Northeast Regional Lab at Brown, Project Zero at Harvard, SmART Schools at EDC, and the CT Center for School Change, and have begun work with the Tripod Project at Harvard, as well as with EDCO (Education Collaborative of Greater Boston). They also have an on-going relationship with some of the local colleges and universities connected with the Institute on Disabilities at the University of New Hampshire.

Finally, the Massachusetts/ southern New Hampshire NSRF Center has as both a policy and a practice "cross-pollinating" with other NSRF Centers of Activity from across the country. Last summer alone, we invited NSRF Facilitators from CT, ME, Salt Lake City, UT, and VT to work with us. One of the best examples of "learning from each other" has been our long-standing relationship with the Northeast Independent School District (NEISD) of San Antonio. NSRF Facilitators from Massachusetts and southern New Hampshire have worked with schools and district personnel in San Antonio since the summer of 2000, when twelve educators from the NEISD and Trinity University attended a CFG Coaches seminar facilitated by NH and MA NSRF Facilitators. San Antonio now has three NSRF Facilitators as well as three interns in the process of becoming NSRF Facilitators. This reciprocal relationship has formed the basis for important learning by CFG Coaches and NSRF Facilitators alike in both locales. ■

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Snapshot of a CFG

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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 experience. 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, I feel safe with these people. I trust them and value the perspective of such a diverse group, but when it comes down to it, the warm feedback is there to help build that very foundation of support and trust among the group's members. Clearly, someone much wiser than I created the structure of the *Tuning Protocol*! Or, as my tea bag says, "Wisdom becomes knowledge when it becomes your personal experience." ■

Diana Watson is in her first year out of the classroom. She is now on the staff of the newly created Center for School Success, a non-profit organization dedicated to helping students who struggle with learning achieve measurable success in school and in life. She can be contacted at Diana.Watson@valley.net.

Vermont NSRF

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coaches for the past several years.

School Coaching is a new topic for their group but one that has been a healthy part of their discussions. At this time they are in conversation with a group of organizations interested in bringing the concept of school coaching to Vermont High Schools. Besides VT NSRF, members of the group include The Harmony/VISTA Project, the state Service Learning Steering Committee, the Department of Education, High Schools on the Move, and Drop Out Prevention groups.

As a group VTNSRF is excited by the concept of school coaching and the opportunities it could bring to furthering the depth of change of practice in Vermont Schools. They believe by 2005 that they will have made strides in this area. ■

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Watkinson School, CT

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in our own Coaches CFG. All current coaches attend the Winter Meeting every year and use time away on the trip to infuse our work with new energy and ideas. We bring dilemmas from our Coaches CFG to share with coaches and NSRF Facilitators from all over the country so we can bring back their collective wisdom to help us here at Watkinson. Increasingly, lately, we find ourselves moving towards becoming NSRF National Facilitators and trying to bring the work to other schools in Connecticut through LASW and New Coaches' Institutes. In that way, we hope to make an impact beyond the walls of Watkinson. ■

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