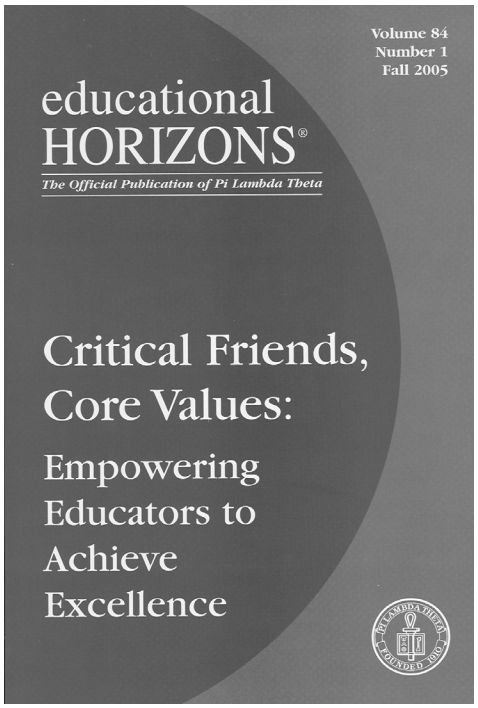
Connections

the Journal of the National School Reform Faculty

Winter 2006

Director's Report Daniel Baron, Co-Director

Greetings, colleagues. Last month, Pi Lambda Theta (PLT)'s educational journal "Educational HORIZONS" (EH) was distributed to more than 20,000 educators around the world. That in itself is not at all unusual. EH is a quarterly journal "founded in the spirit of academic excellence in order to provide leadership in addressing educational, social, and cultural issues of national and international significance." What is unusual is that PLT devoted the entire issue to our work. This month, I would like to share with you the introduction that editor Ogden Hamilton wrote about the fall issue. (Many thanks to Peggy Silva, Betty Bisplinghoff, Carmen Tolivar, Ross Peterson-Veatch, Debbie Bambino, Camilla Greene, Bruce Law, Jill Hudson, Alan Dichter and Vivian Orlen for making their work public to their peers.)



Educational HORIZONS, Fall 2005

Introduction to Educational Horizons, by Ogden Hamilton

Many approaches to school reform apply the concept literally: public schools are re-formed through dismantling and reassembling or else established from scratch with students pulled in from existing public schools. Our current issue explores an alternative approach, advocated by the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF). Its ideas and practices rely not on changing the school structures or variables, but on drawing out and developing educators' unused talents and latent abilities. What's more, NSRF adherents point out, top-down decision-making often desensitizes teachers to the core professional beliefs and values that originally attracted them to the field. By this logic, there must be potential in facilitating a return to those beliefs. NSRF focuses on developing facilitative leaders and collaborative, reflective cultures in schools and districts. The protocols, seminars, coaching, and follow-up of its Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) offer educators specific tools rather than just words: a systematic, documented alternative for those who either cannot afford large-scale structural change or simply doubt its practicality, even its necessity.

The aim is to establish an environment in which educators can safely make their practice "public" to CFG members, harnessing awareness of and respect for shared vulnerability as the enabling force. Our examination of NSRF ideas begins with an interview. Daniel Baron, a co-executive director of the organization, contends that through careful analysis, thoughtful individuals can systematically empower educators to achieve excellence in existing schools. Such an approach, though independent of such efforts as high-school conversions, charter schools, vouchers, functional communities, and parental choice, is nonetheless compatible with them. A series of brief companion essays complement the Baron interview. "A Day in the Life of School wide CFGs" describes how such groups work in one school; "Taking Time to Tend the Good" explains three NSRF protocols—the hands-on tools that structure CFGs and focus them on achieving specific objectives. Two other essays, "And Then There Was Hope" and "Sitting at the Piano Bench," demonstrate how CFGs can inspire educators to ensure success in school reform. The concern with equity in education

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that pervades NSRF work drives three following essays that explore such issues as teachers' cultural blinders; defining a moral institution; and the inherent difficulty of school reform. In the final section, "Unbundling the Elements," a middle-school principal recounts how she reshaped her management policies to reflect her CFG experience. A final entry, "NSRF-New York," shows how NSRF's principles can take on a life of their own, largely or completely independent of the organization itself." ▯

Educational HORIZONS can be downloaded in its entirety from our website, www.nsrfharmony.org

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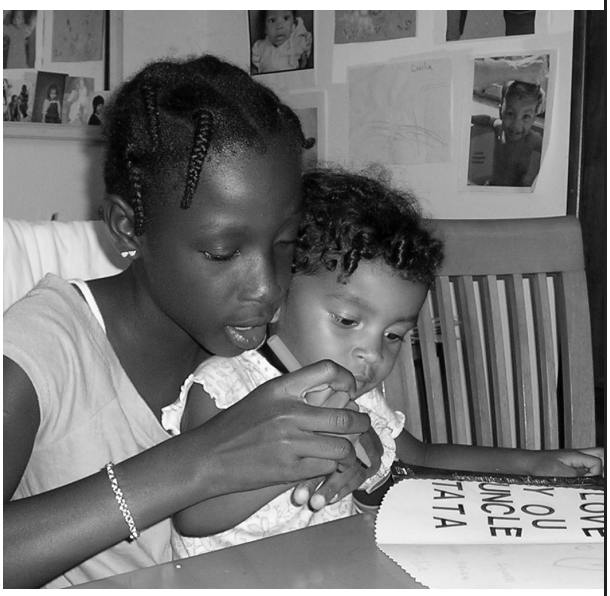

The mission of the National School Reform Faculty is to foster educational and social equity by empowering all people involved with schools to work collaboratively in reflective democratic communities that create and support powerful learning experiences for everyone.

Resolutions" (i.e.: we are going to focus on results… somehow) to using a language of commitment (…we are going to create a systemic plan to focus on the results of our students by incorporating the following benchmarks…), the participants are committing themselves to the concept that failure is not an option. Using the Individual Monthly Action Plan framework, each participant has set a goal that is personal and focused. While it is clear that this will help create actionable plans for Critical Friends Group participants over the final year of the project, is it also understood and articulated to the participants that much of this will not be sustainable without the commitment and understanding of all the stakeholders. Our work with the principals these past years has helped us see that schools truly want to work toward the academic success of all kids, but that very few have individualized plans within their schools to support this type of success.

"Isolation is the greatest enemy" -anonymous reflection

One critical element in the success of this project is the component aptly entitled, "Circuit Riders." These two positions are filled by former administrators who travel to the rural districts and provide on-site, sustainable support to the cohort participants. These Circuit Riders are trained as Critical Friends Coaches and continue to ask the tough questions of principals as they visit and listen.

A reflection from one of the participants states it best, "Our district is better because of LeadNM—because our vocabulary has changed as a direct result of the knowledge and wisdom shared by our trainers. We are moving in a positive way from the language of complaint to the language of action and collaboration for our students…" ▯

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Kegan, R., Lahey, L. (2001). How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work. *San Francisco, Jossey-Bass*