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 Bispenghoff, Carmen Tolivaw, Ross Peterson- Veatch, Debbie Bambino, Camilla Greene, Bruce Law, Jill Hudson, Alan Dichter and Vivian Orlen for making their work public to their peers.)

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 discovering 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 (continued on page 16)
Towards a Coaching Platform for Early College High Schools

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Connections is a journal of the National School Reform Faculty, a division of Harmony Education Centre. Published three times per year, it provides a forum for CEG Coaches and other reflective educators to share their practice.

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NSRF’s Partnership with La Raza...

(continued from page 2)
were back from our state testing that afternoon. Our third-grade reading scores had gone up by 15%, the highest gain in a district of 84 elementary schools and our school’s highest score ever on third-grade reading. More stark to me was the gain in poverty-level scores (free and reduced), whose scores had doubled, had cut the achievement gap from 20% to 5%. Our biggest gain came with our Latino students, who had increased from only 18% proficient to 64% proficient, making the gap now only 7% from the previous gap of 38%. In my bones, I had known it would happen, and from the Chicago hotel room that night I called each of the 4 third-grade teachers at home. We didn’t say much, but we knew we had accomplished something special.

After some much deserved celebration, it was my role to create space for reflection on how something like this happened and how we might continue making it happen again and again. Lastly, it was to step back and let the teachers return to their students with a greater sense of hope and belief about what was possible.

Each gain brought up new steps needed to complete the circle. I realized over time that I could not sustain the work in my community role. I had others who could, and would, devote more time to it than myself. In March, two parents moved to the forefront of the parent/community volunteer role and we began to systematize the initial, organic work that we had done. For me, I had a thousand things playing in my mind. Do they share the big vision? And as I peel away a bit: Will they maintain it? Is it impacting student achievement? Does it support or distract from our core mission? Is it what the teachers were calling for?

By this time I had already communicated to the staff that I was leaving to spend time with my ailing father. What was so striking about that absolutely miserable and ruthless day was that it made us stronger. Through tears and disappointment, it forced us to look at sustaining the work, not just creating it.

It is amazing how people act when they get something they wanted, how they don’t want to let go. Freedom, love, identity. All of these cannot be dangled carelessly for curious consumption. They are meant for much deeper sustenance. For the staff, it was not about our new principal, it was not about improved student responsibility, it was not about more folks in the school or about the better scores. It was about hope. They had tasted it.

Peggy Silva reviews Creating Great Schools: Six Critical Systems at the Heart of Educational Innovation by Phillip Schlechty.

Schlechty pulls no punches in declaring his purpose for writing. He states that he wrote “to help leaders design school systems that invite inventions, as opposed to systems that mandate implementation of programs that will serve only to shore up for a brief time a system of schooling that must either be changed in fundamental ways or die.” He organizes his thinking around structures he defines as social systems: recruitment; knowledge transmission; power and authority; evaluation; directional; systems; boundary systems.

We are using to examine a school’s organization and the impact on student and teacher behavior. Schlechty turns that perspective around to wonder how the structure and the culture affect learning. Each chapter addresses a single structure and creates a strong argument for the need for transformation. He borrows C.M. Christensen’s ideas of disruptive innovations as imperatives for schools, if they want to remain relevant and vigorous.

He expresses his frustration with structures that accept oxymorons in design—although he does defend studying as a legitimate school activity, he states that as much studying goes on in a school restroom as exists in a study hall.

Schlechty argues that disruptive innovations require “supportive structural and cultural changes,” and that new ideas never receive their due because of the penchant for “insisting that only programs based on convincing data are worthy of support.”

The author’s arguments will find strong support from his readers. The strength of this text, however, lies in the series of key questions at the end of every chapter, questions that could be used to examine and redesign existing social systems.

In his chapter on knowledge transmission systems, Schlechty stresses the importance of discussion about norms within specific contexts. When arguments are developed, how are they grounded, and do people agree on this grounding? For example, when a person advances an argument is it justified by research, by moral tradition, or by conventional ways of doing things? Which of these knowledge bases are viewed by others in the school as valid grounds, and which of these knowledge bases are rejected by others?

In his exploration of power and authority systems, Schlechty asks:

Which persons or offices have control over the resources that provide the bases of power (for example, who can hire and fire, bestow status, and confer reputations), and how diffused or decentralized is this control?

He further asks whether rewards are linked to maintenance of the current system, as opposed to rewards available if one helps to support change efforts.

In discussing boundary issues within school structures, he asks questions about account-ability norms and mechanisms to protect those who work in school from “dysfunctional conflicts with...outside groups.”

Although Schlechty does not explicitly address issues of race, sex, or gender, issues of equity are embedded in each one of the series of questions asked at the end of each chapter.

School communities involved in studying their system prior to suggesting transformative changes will find this text a valuable tool. School leaders exploring the effectiveness of existing social structures will find essential perspectives in the questions the author poses. Consulting agencies will find guiding questions to push organizations’ thinking. As the author states in his introduction, “Those who lead systemic change need to be armed with every bit of insight and support the change effort.”

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Sustaining Leadership: A Principal’s Reflection
Scott Murphy, Colorado

It write this article I intend to give you the perspectives of a first-year elementary school principal and his attempts to create sustainable change and deep cultural impact, but it will surely be tempered with my own questions and curiosities about how to engage all school community members. This patient reflection must begin with the end, which in a circle is really just the beginning.

For unforeseen family health reasons, I have taken a one-year leave of absence from the school, but was able to have conversation with our instructional coach at the school a month after school started. She shared with me that while working with the eight teacher candidates from the University of Colorado who work at our school as part of their induction year, indeed something that was a first sign of successful work last year. As Cyndi, the coach, brought them up to speed on our work around student responsibility last year and the need around this discipline, the teacher candidate curiously stated, “But you guys don’t have a discipline problem.”

I wish I could express what went on in my stomach, my soul, when I heard her tell me this story. By no means is it a completed circle, but it is a strong indicator of growth from our work last year at a school that some called “out of control.” It also deepens my belief that “student discipline” is the wrong term and it skews everything we are trying to accomplish around creating learning environments that support the first day of school last year, we read an article and then made a consensus decision as a staff of 78 that we were going to “teach” student responsibility and we were going to create a system in which the students took the lead in their behavior management and responsibility. We were going to make a not-so-subtle shift from being disciplinarians, which was clearly not working, to being coaches and models.

The staff had said to me when I met with them in May of 2004 that “student discipline” was the number one issue at the school and I was able to rephrase that in August as “responsible students” is our number one priority. And they bought in fully!

In May of 2004 that “student discipline” was the number one priority. And they bought in fully! and you spend many days after either

fulfilling the promise or rejecting the impression. Promises were made; would they be kept?

Now, one could argue that student learning must be the number one priority, but I now concede that a leader must manage both big-picture change and score on long-term vision this mission must be accessed through short-term gain. To tout student learning and equity issues in the face of the staff’s stated concerns would have been only self-serving. The business of a principal, as I saw it, was to serve others, and in this case the teachers first. I hear some of you say, but what of the kids. My big-picture thinking was absolutely with the kids; however, my more immediate thinking was for the staff. I interpreted their needs as wanting care, things for them. I said something to that effect to the teachers first. Then, we talked about the big picture with boundaries, wanting tools, and like all people, wanting love. My hypothesis and decision-making guide was that if I empowered them in the everyday world of their work, then they would enact our school’s work around student responsibility and learning.

We designed a system based loosely on an article from Pi Omega Kappa by Marvin Marshall on raising student responsibility. We came to consensus. We created tools for teachers, students, and parents. We taught the system in classes, at parent meetings, and at schoolwide meetings, and we embedded the language into everything we did, from parent letters to announcements, math lessons, and lunchroom discussions. We showed students how to lead in their educational and social worlds and how to engage appropriately in challenges and conflict. We taught them the relationship between behavioral choices and the subsequent consequences. We talked with them, a lot! We poured it over the school like a blanket of fresh Colorado snow and worked tirelessly to keep it from melting.

As a result, we reduced our office referrals by nearly 50%. We cut suspensions down from 61 in 03–04 to just over 40 in 04–05 with many of those from a challenging 6th grade, which by design got less of our attention and energy. I put most of my energy into the K–5 group. Curious about that? Is that inequitable? Is that plain wrong? Maybe. Would you have chosen to have the K–5 get your energy? Maybe not. Perfect? Not a chance. It was a huge conflict of present and future and I was very forthright with the staff about maximizing current resources at the expense of future gain. I refused to get caught in chasing our tails and as a result we

paid a price with that grade level. However, in one year we had students, parents and teachers talking about different things. And the principal’s job is to be in that district.

Wow, the intricacies of such work and the many-layered relationship between one thing and the next boggles my mind as I sit in this distant reflection. You are only getting a glimpse of one aspect of one decision of the hundreds of things that rolled in my head last year. It was the hardest, most complicated, most taxing and most rewarding work of my career thus far. The “everydayness” of it and the effort to keep that snow melting in the face of this group of other district/local/state/product/daily issues is a dance like no other. It is hard to know how to dance in those shoes until you’ve danced in those shoes. What I wonder for NSF is how do you go about it the “everydayness” How do we go to bed with it like the principal does every night and return to it every morning like the principal does every day? There is a safety at our distance as outside consultants and coaches. I am of the mind that unless the relationship is intimate, proximal, and constant (see: daily), then the results we seek are not likely the ones we want.

The second thing that the staff said to me in May 2004 was that they had concerns about parent involvement. I went to the staff and said prior support, community involvement, follow-through, follow-up, and the lack of all of it. I returned to them in August with a commitment to take the lead in developing a partnership with the community. My thinking was that if they took the direct lead with students, then I would take the lead with parents and community.

This was an opportunity to push back, albeit subtly, on the teachers to challenge their perceptions and beliefs. It was a win-win opportunity to prove a few of the staff wrong that folks wouldn’t get involved in the school. I called our approach “Beyond Invitations,” and if it worked we would have both the students and the staff positively supported by the community.

The big-picture message to our parents was that we wanted them and we needed them. The message to the community was quite simple as well. They could not have big help in supporting the children in their community. I think the difference in approach from previous times was that we didn’t merely invite them and then get upset when they didn’t show. We went out to the community and we told them that our kids need to learn how to read better and achieve higher academically. We could do it, but we could do it better with their help. Pretty simple.

First, I put together a team of parents (outside of PTA, which was a source of conflict early on) whose focus was to collaborate with me on community involvement for the sole purpose of increasing student achievement. Second, I joined the local Kiwanis Club, whose mission is work with children. Third, our team created a partnership with the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP). Fourth, I ran into Tom Barnes and Noble who headed up a group called Spellbinders, retired folks who do storytelling for kids, and we set up a program. Fifth, a parent suggested we have the local VFW work with our kids on things like flag protocol and other areas of their expertise. Lastly, we coordinated with the high school to bring students over to tutor and model for the children during our more vulnerable times, like lunch and recess.

By February, we had sixteen Kiwanis folks reading with our kids before, during and after school. We had storytellers in our school every week. We had tutors from age 17 to 71. We had administrative help with phone calls, filing, and supervision. We had people running weekly lunch workshops for small groups of kids, called “Workshop Wednesday.” I even did an eight week rock-climbing course for 12 sixth graders that culminated in a morning climb at the local rock-climbing gym. The school had come to life with the community and established a partnership to truly own the involvement.

It made a difference. Though it is only a snapshot at our two primary focus areas last year, we know it made a difference. While in Chicago for our national leaders’ meeting, I got a call from our instructional coach, because the first scores (continued on page 18)
that permeates 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, “Unhandling 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.nsrsharmony.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.

Reform" (i.e.: we are going to focus on results...something) 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, it is 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.

One critical element in the success of this project is the component aptly entitled, “Circle 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 Circle 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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A review of Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males: Closing the Achievement Gap, by Dr. Alfred Tatum.

October 2, 2005 marked the passing of August Wilson, one of the prominent African-American playwrights to chronicle the plight of Africans in America. In a radio interview on WBLS a friend and colleague of Wilson noted that Wilson had dropped out of public school in 10th grade and educated himself in the library. The question then became: would August Wilson have become the chronicler of the African experience in America and prominent playwright that he did become if he had remained a student in public education? In reflecting on the notion that public high school education might do more harm than good in centering African-American male identity, and might not equip them with the knowledge, skills and critical thinking they need to become productive citizens and lifelong learners, I have come to the conclusion that public high school classrooms as they are currently structured do not develop the full potential of African-American males. And I maintain that most African-American males engaged in learning and skill acquisition in most public high school classrooms find it irrelevant at best and hostile at worst to their lives and life experiences.

Dr. Tatum provides us with a framework that authentically validates the life experiences of these students and at the same time teaches literacy in ways that engage the heart, mind and soul of these Black adolescent males. Dr. Tatum, in his book Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males (Stenhouse Publishers, 2005) states that successful teachers of Black male students see “...literacy instruction as a tool of resistance.” (81) In his book he puts forth that Black male students need to have literacy skills embedded in the reading and understanding of short and long texts written by Black males describing the realities of Black males in America. To that end, Dr. Tatum includes a two-paragraph text by Michael Eric Dyson (2004), “Letter to My Thirteen-Year-Old-Everett in Prison.” Tatum describes the use of the letter as an example of the Black male surrender. “Their surrender is in large part connected to an arrested development resulting from their inability to resist their social conditioning.” (87) The teaching of literacy skills and reading strategies... (continued on page 12)

Must-Read Texts

“Below is a list of other must-read texts I would recommend for Black males reading amid turmoil. Most of them can be used as ‘cultural hooks’ to engage Black male students. My list is by no way exhaustive; I do not mean to suggest that these are the only must-read texts for Black males. Beyond these recommended texts, Black males need exposure to a vast array of fiction and nonfiction texts across genres as suggested by Carol Collins (1993).”

Source: Dr. Alfred Tatum, Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males, Stenhouse Publishers, 2005, Must-Read Texts: Pages 56-59

• The Fact: Three Young Men Make a Promise and Fulfill a Dream, by Sampson Davis, George Jenkins and Rameck Hunt
• There Are No Children Here, by Alex Kotlowitz
• A Hope in the Unseen: An American Odyssey from the Inner City to the Ivy League, by Ron Suskind
• The Beast, by Walter Dean Myers
• Our America: Life and Death on the South Side of Chicago, by LeAlan Jones, Lloyd Newman, and David Ivey
• The Greatest, by Walter Dean Myers
• Letter to My Nephew, by James Baldwin
• Stories of the Scoundrels, by James Goodman
• Workin’ the Chain Gang: Shaking Off the Dead Hand of History, by Walter Mosley
• Think Big, by Ben Carson
• And Still We Rise: The Trials and Triumphs of Twelve Gifted Inner-City Students, by Miles Corwin

The Greatest,
Stories of the Scottsboro, by James Goodman
Talk Can Change the Way We Work.
San Francisco, Jossey-Bass

Connections: a Journal of the National School Reform Faculty

Connections: a Journal of the National School Reform Faculty
For 29 rural school districts in Northern New Mexico, Critical Friends Groups were unheard-of until 2004, when LeadNM began to travel, bringing CFGs to northern New Mexico. Traditionally, professional development in these districts has consisted of presenting principals and teachers with strategies in a workshop format in an effort to “train” them how to do something “better” – interpret data, create “power” standards, increase math and reading scores on standardized tests – all with the idea that somehow this “training” would translate into action in the classroom.

As in other areas across the country, the idea of authentic collaboration was unheard-of in these rural districts. Funded through a No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Leadership Grant in 2003, the University of New Mexico, in partnership with the Northern New Mexico Network (a consortium of rural school districts), created LeadNM as part of a concentrated effort to bring principal leaders together in professional learning communities. For the next two years, preconceived ideas of professional development were challenged at every level – from superintendents to school staff – as the adoption of professional learning communities began to shape adult and student learning alike. One of the principals spoke forcefully during the early days of the grant, “After you’ve been out in the real world, slugging it out and you’ve been sued by the ACLU and you’ve had to restrain parents and you’re restraining children and you’re facing all these other things, I don’t want somebody telling me how it should be.”

Over the past two school years, six principal cohort CFGs totaling approximately 76 principals have been served by LeadNM. Each cohort meets for a full day once a month as a Critical Friends Group. As the participants become more familiar with the components of learning communities, e.g. norms, connections, protocols, more and more are beginning to implement these components at their school sites. Many have reported great success with the use of norms for staff meetings. One principal has gone so far as to suggest to her staff a norm whereby the only focus of their staff meetings will be student learning. Thus, she reports, all other matters pertaining to “management” will be handled in a different manner at different times. She reports that administrative issues no longer consume time during staff meetings. Others have adapted Connections to share success stories, and one principal has even reported that students, as is being used every morning in a kindergarten class – reporting that Connections has allowed the teacher a productive way to allow kids to say whatever it is on their mind and to then focus better on the work at hand.

In their monthly Critical Friends Group the principals are looking at student work, using protocols to face dilemmas, using text to grow new knowledge together around issues of leadership, equity and poverty. NCLB and teacher quality. Throughout the year, cohort participants have worked on the theory of shared, lateral accountability and how these CFGs are creating structures to help each district respond to students’ needs.

As the work with the principal cohorts of LeadNM began in Fall 2004, we asked our participants to consider how their individual school sites respond to the assumption that all kids can learn. We spent 6 months using Kegan and Lahey’s book, How the Way We Talk can Change the Way We Work, with the purpose of helping our participants understand and reflect on where they might be stuck NOT changing. Since leadership is very personal, the Kegan and Lahey book helps leaders start with themselves. We thus spent a large amount of our time in small feedback groups, using the process the authors offer for reflection. One of our focus areas grew to “How can we as leaders help change the conversation in our schools so that the talk is about what matters most, student and adult learning?”

We then moved into the model created by Richard DuFour in the 2004 book Whatever It Takes, Principals, the interest that they “go deeper.” Each participant has been asked to pick at least one category for success which they will attempt to focus on during the next school year. Combining this with the Kegan and Lahey model of moving from “New Year’s (continued on page 16)
group, which represented 11 different organizations doing small schools work from all geographic areas of the country (northwest, west, midwest, east, northeast, south). We had an almost equal gender balance, a representation of gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals, and represented Asian, Latino, African-American and Caucasian ethnicities. As a part of the seminar, we held a cultural sharing one evening. Every participant was invited to bring an artifact that represented their culture and on Tuesday evening we gathered in a circle and shared these artifacts and what they represented for us with each other. Through this experience we learned more about how both our own cultures impact us and about each other.

2. Collaborate with diverse people and divergent ideas as resources.

As facilitators we were explicit about inviting and supporting a diverse group of small schools coaches from around the country. Our diversity gave us an opportunity to find new places both within our comfort zone and in our risk zones throughout the week. We shared personal and painful experiences, read and discussed research and theory, developed theories of action and bonded around a collective responsibility to take our thinking and our schools. Through our exploration we became more aware of how we too often talk about symptoms rather than causes, rely on single truths rather than multiple stories, and focus on ability and supposed merit rather than privilege and oppression. By breaking open this paradigm and beginning to provide the language to discuss the difference between these two types of discourse, we made progress in recognizing and using discourse 1 to transform our thinking and action in our schools.

The idea that I cannot separate the mind from the heart and soul of this work toward equity was reinforced for me this week. I know that change is hard. I saw a community transformation where we said the words-anti-racism and anti-classism and isolation. We tried to find a balance.

Bobbi Aguero
TALC New Vision, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

3. Leave with tools, skills, knowledge and life experiences that help identify multiple entry points for the work.

As a part of the personal transformation work that is your experience with NSRF? How did you get involved in the first place?

I was steeped in NSRF-type ideas about school reform from the earliest part of my career, as an undergraduate at Dartmouth College. The faculty in the education department had strong connections to the ideas and people who had fueled the creation of the Coalition of Essential Schools and the National School Reform Faculty. Ted Sizer’s first book on high school reform, Horace’s Compromise, was hot off the press and was assigned reading in our courses. Faith Dunn was teaching in the department. Dennis Lilly was shaking things up as principal at Thayer High School in southern New Hampshire, and was a featured speaker on campus. Martha Rich directed Dartmouth’s secondary teacher preparation program when I was there. I feel really lucky, like I was in the right place at the right time. I was prepared – and inspired – to enter the teaching field by role models who embodied NSRF philosophy and practices.

In 1992, I got a teaching job at a new school in Tucson, Arizona. The school was supposed to be designed around CES principles and be a really innovative learning environment, but when we opened we met a lot of resistance from some parents. The school experienced a lot of turbulence in its early years, and there was high turnover. Those of us who persisted on needed a way to support one another to be good teachers and to not burn out. When I heard about the new Critical Friends Group program through the Annenberg Institute, I thought it could really help us out.

I was trained as a coach the summer of 1996 and we started our CFG that fall. The group proved to be an important lifeline for the twelve of us who participated. Each monthly half-day meeting was like a mini-retreat that allowed us to truly focus on our teaching and the ideals we believed in.

We returned to the Coalition of Essential Schools for inspiration and used two of the CES principles – students using their minds well and student-as-worker, teacher-as-coach – as a way to frame our work.

The school’s involvement with Critical Friends Groups followed a common progression in the early days of NSRF. Teachers in the first CFG told colleagues that it was helpful and word spread. Each year another CFG or two was created, and eventually, over three-quarters of the staff was voluntarily involved. Meanwhile, the school pushed for weekly late-start meetings for professional development and won approval from the district.

Over time, the idea of professional learning communities became part of the school culture and the late-start structure supported it.

How has membership in a CFG impacted your career?

Being a member of the same CFG for seven years had a profound impact on my teaching. We developed a lot of trust as a group and went quite deep with our inquiries. One thing my CFG helped me do was to look at teaching from the “heart level” of the work. It was really a paradigm shift for me and it came, in part, from using protocols that focus on looking at student work free of any judgment. Protocols like the Collaborative Assessment and Descriptive Review force the par-
When we talk about that which will sustain and nurture our spiritual growth as a people, we must once again talk about the importance of community. For one of the most vital ways that we sustain ourselves is by building communities of resistance, place where we know we are not alone.

- bell hooks, Teaching Transgress

There is an endless list of skills, tools, and knowledge that a small schools coach uses on a daily basis in his or her work. But if the focus and purpose of that work is not to interrupt and transform inequitable practices in schools, and to put in their place a more equitable system where a student’s achievement is not predicted by any determinate factor, then ultimately our skills, tools, and knowledge are for naught.

I am a small schools coach and an NSRF national facilitator. In the six years that I have been doing this work, and my previous ten years in the classroom, I have struggled with what it means to be a white woman working for social justice and equity in public education. I have struggled with understanding, and revoking the privilege I was born into and address inequities in American society. I have struggled to develop a deeper understanding of systemic institutionalized oppression and how it operates in our schools and within our children.

It’s a challenge to accept that I/we could actually contribute to the ongoing oppression of our students, but it is an even bigger challenge to take that first step to interrupt inequitable practices when we see them. Beyond recognizing the baggage we carry, we also need to have a clear sense of what we will replace inequitable practices and conditions with within our schools.

On July 25-29, 2005, 26 of us, coaches and seminar facilitators, came together to pilot the Coaching for Educational Equity Seminar. We came to the seminar committed to going deeper in our understandings of what comes after the interruption of inequitable practices. The next week, we were able to begin as building, bell hooks so eloquently stated, a community of resistance, a place where we knew we were not alone, a diverse community to which we could return again and again. We left with tools to create other communities of resistance in our local contexts in order to change the experience of school for our students.

Our seminar in Sonoma helped us to look inside and at each other in order to see further ahead on our journey toward intentionally equitable schools. Our experience clarified how deeply issues such as race and class are intricately woven into the fabric and structure of our schools and society, and how intricate and complicated our work of interrupting those structures has to be.

In creating the seminar, we were intent on creating a safe and provocative space for participants to explore and share their personal stories. In that process, we were very explicit from the beginning about our expectations and goals (see insert). We began the week with safer, foundational questions about our own experiences and built throughout the week to deeper, more personal inquiry questions and activities that addressed our own experiences in our work around issues of equity. We believe that this inside-outside work is a pre-requisite for coaches committed to facilitating transformative work in schools.

Within our theory of action, we had four goals for the week that we hoped participants would accomplish.

1. Develop awareness of and reflect upon who and how they are in their work (in relation to oppression, privilege, accommodation and transformation).

The seminar was designed to connect the personal and the political, the emotional and the intellectual, in ways that allowed participants to acknowledge and assess where they were in their own journeys and connect that understanding with their work in schools.

We intentionally assembled our diverse (continued on page 14)

Consider attending this seminar if you are:
- willing to address equity issues on a personal as well as intellectual level
- concerned about how race, class, gender and other forms of bias affect the process of school change, teaching, learning and achievement
- looking for a high leverage strategic opportunity to reflect, share and learn with colleagues about coaching explicitly towards achievement and equity goals in small schools.

- From Coaching for Educational Equity Seminar flier

Schools provide one way to create public schools that are represented. Students take the bus, bike, carpool or walk to school each day. The school has a “place-based” emphasis and the downtown area – and the whole region really – serve as resources for teaching and learning. The teachers work with a number of community partner organizations to create curriculum that is authentic and engaging and not confined to the school walls.

Your school is so new, Carrie. Are you able to share any lessons with us as a small school leader? It is a challenging dance to be the leader of a brand-new school, especially one designed to be democratic in nature. How does one participate fully as a staff member and at the same time, lead the staff? How does a principal of a small school serve as an advisor, along with all of the certified staff members, and still play the role of disciplinarian? What does it look like when the principal of a staff of ten is in the CFG? I have many questions about how to practice “facilitative leadership” as a principal. Those of us in NSRF are establishing new norms for effective leadership. It’s exciting and it’s hard, and we have a lot of learning to share with one another.

Carrie Bienen can be contacted at carrie@cityhighschool.org and Peggy Silva can be contacted at psilva@sprise.com
that weren’t in the article or in our notes, took it too far.
• If you didn’t get something, you get to see their perspective.
• Knowledge grows—much bigger thinking.
• Get the knowledge of things I didn’t understand.
• We laughed a lot.
• We probably could have talked about it for a whole year!

What the teachers noticed the kids get from these conversations that are part of their educational goal:
• Laughter and fun. They like to talk. They are first and foremost interested in talking with each other about new information.
• Meta-cognition: students were able to identify themselves along a continuum from a conversation that is still and boring with listing of facts from text, to a conversation that could go on forever as they keep expanding on each other’s thoughts and generating new questions.
• Facts about topics and clarifying misconceptions and confusion.
• Talking with each other helps them to naturally use strategies of proficient readers—share background knowledge to support inferences about meaning of facts; highlight key points that are interesting.
• Fluency—oral and written: The kids’ reflections began with parroting of language and ideas generated by the class and teachers.
• We sometimes see those reflections become more detailed and easy with practice. Now more and more students are writing reflections with distinctive voices and their own ideas about both the process and the content of their conversations.

We keep returning to the initial key ideas students identified: simply listening and being interested in your partners’ ideas along with your own. Adding to and deepening, correcting, and clarifying—thinking more deeply, connecting with each other more. The classrooms are buzzing with the hum of many conversations, now spreading to every part of the day.

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It Is Not Rocket Science...
(continued from page 5)

meanings. Contexts help Black male students acquire language skills that empower them to use language in telling their stories while simultaneously mastering the skills and demonstrating academic excellence through reading and writing.

What does all of this mean for the middle or high school teacher of English working in an urban classroom teaching Black male students? In my mind it means that we, whether we be black or white or yellow or red, need to know who we are in relation to the dominant culture, and how we operate in that dominant culture. We need to be clear about what we believe to be the purpose of education. We need to love Black male students enough to struggle to successfully teach them the literacy skills they need to be successful in the oppressive American society. In many ways, I heard a similar message from African woman on WBAI that we need to look at other people as our “other” selves. If we look at Black males as future, current or potential criminals, we are not seeing them as people and we cannot teach them. If we cannot look at, and love, a Black male student who is looking hostile, wearing bagging, sagging jeans with his underwear showing and see him as a person connected to us, then we should not and could not be successful engaging him.

Dr. Tatum’s book Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males approaches the challenge of teaching literacy from the inside. In his book he includes tests, essential questions, and lists of books as well as charts of how and when and in what context to use certain skill development assessment and instruction. Dr. Tatum demonstrates strategies that make the theories, instruction and transfer of skills live in real time in authentic ways in the high school classroom. Aside from the acquisition of skills and the practice of theory, and instruction, Dr. Tatum challenges teachers to be activists. The question that remains is: Do we have the will and the courage to truly interrupt and transform public school cultures and our classroom practices in ways that will resonate with and engage Black males in learning, in a variety of challenging ways that will be meaningful in their eyes? This challenge is both a personal one and a group mandate. We must look inside ourselves and examine our personal beliefs and practice while connecting with others to bring out the genius that resides inside each Black male student.

For more information about essential conversations and lists of books as well as charts of how and when and in what context to use certain skill development assessment and instruction, I recommend Simple Conversations to Return Hope to the Future by Horton, M. (1999). For more information:

For more information:

Willing to Be Disturbed...
Flipping the Biased Script of Our Standardized Curriculum
Debbie Bambino, Pennsylvania

Many of us have been using Margaret Wheatley’s except. Willing to be Disturbed, to introduce conversations about norm setting and an understanding that we grow most when we are willing to challenge our often comfortably held assumptions and understandings. I’m wondering today how this process of challenging our individual assumptions gets translated into questions and challenges of the curriculum we are often mandated to teach.

In particular, I’m thinking today of the way Rosa Parks gets treated in our classrooms and in the media. Mrs. Parks died yesterday and was described in the Philadelphia Inquirer as the “Montgomery, AL seamstress...whose simple, spontaneous act of defiance...hers a spark to a movement...” Describing Mrs. Parks and her actions on that day in 1955 has long been a staple of classroom instruction, especially in February. However, the standard script about Mrs. Parks is often simplistic and comforting, it is disempowering, Mrs. Parks’ actions were neither simply spontaneous nor the result of her exhaustion after a hard day’s work.

Being willing to be disturbed in the case of how we teach about Rosa Parks for me means being willing to flip the script and write a letter to the editor. In classrooms, I hope it will mean an analysis of Mrs. Parks’ history as an organizer and activist for civil rights, who also happened to be a seamstress. A closer look at the facts will show that Mrs. Parks and a number of other women had been put off of buses for their refusal to move before Dec. 1, 1955. In fact, some of these African-American women were members of the Woman’s Political Council (WPC) and had refused to get off of the bus at any cost.

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For more information:

How to Have a Good Conversation: By Fifth Graders at Aspen Creek K-8

with Marjorie Larner and Their Teachers, Andrea Cipoletti and Debbie Deem, Colorado

Advice from what we did when we had a good conversation:
• We worked well because some of that stuff is very interesting.
• We had some background knowledge about other topics so that helped.
• We explained why we thought something and we learned more.
• Sometimes we both had the same thing but we still had different thoughts. For example, the water buffalo weighed 2000 pounds. She did not think that was a lot for a bison and I did.
• We understood each other and agreed and disagreed.
• We had different emotions.
• We stayed on topic.
• We asked each other questions and tried to help each other answer them—referring to text, background knowledge, inferring, asking more questions.
• We added on to each other’s questions, explain- ing it better.
• We talked about things we knew and didn’t know.
• We sat close enough together so that we could have a good conversation.
• We left questions open.

Cautions—challenges that came up:
• My partner and I had a hard time knowing what to talk about.
• When we didn’t get something it was hard if no one did and so we didn’t get the answer to our questions.

It was sometimes a challenge to think of what words to say.
• We were talking most of the time but my partner and I aren’t the best of friends so it was pretty hard to talk to somebody I don’t really know all that much.
• Our biggest challenge was staying on topic.
• It was too long because the book was BORING.

Advice: how to improve your conversation on the spot:
• ...at first we just went back and rewritten our facts and then after a little while we started looking at the book and we talked a lot more than we had about the facts we wrote down.
• Listen to each other, give each other information.
• Take turns on your conversation. We asked each other questions and tried to help each other answer them—referring to text, background knowledge, inferring, asking more questions.

Connections: a Journal of the National School Reform Faculty

Illustration by Calen Roda

No one has yet fully realized that wealth of sympathy, kindness and generosity hidden in the soul of a child. The effort of every true education should be to unlock that treasure….”

Emma Goldman
How to Have a Good Conversation: By Fifth Graders at Aspen Creek K-8

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No one has yet fully realized that wealth of sympathy, kindness and generosity hidden in the soul of a child. The effort of every true education should be to unlock that treasure…”  

Emma Goldman

In spite of all the other pressures on teachers and students, we still find sparks of sympathy, kind- ness and generosity in the classrooms where teachers collaborate and think together and where they embed this thinking and collaboration into their instructional practice with students.

For several years the Boulder Valley School District has supported a variety of in-school and cross-district collaborative groups. Debbie Deem and Andrea Cipolletti, fifth grade teachers at Aspen Creek K-8, have taken part in nearly every one of these opportunities to work with other teachers to explore aspects of best practice instruction.

This fall they wanted to more intentionally use their learning from their collaborative experiences to help their students engage in similarly meaningful reflection and conversation. They wanted to guide their students to break through the routine of contrived book discussions to real talk that touched them deeply, changed their thinking, expanded their views, strengthened their relationships.

Drawing on a clear philosophical stance in regard to teaching for understanding, that learning is thinking, and that we learn through seeing models and through interaction with our resources and with each other, Debbie and Andrea spent part of each afternoon with their students engaged in every deepening conversations about nonfiction short texts and books, in pairs and small groups.

They began this effort by modeling a conversation about an article from “Time for Kids” for their combined classes. Their main goal was to show their students an authentic conversation, with interactions between them that led to new knowledge, changed understanding, new ideas. After the first modeled conversation they asked the kids what they had noticed that made it a meaningful conversation. This provided the first guidance for the kids’ own conversations.

The students volunteered what they would now do differently in their own conversations:

• Ask more questions.
• Try and think more.
• Use notes as a starting point for conversation.
• Don’t just change ideas when someone shares—add on to theirs.
• Listen to what my partner says and respond.

From there the kids were off and running in conversations about a variety of nonfiction topics based on short articles and books, chosen to include topics the kids otherwise might not choose or know about, with an eye to expanding their interests in the world. At each step along the way Debbie and Andrea have asked students to reflect on whether and how their thinking and learning was impacted by the conversation with their classmates. The kids have expanded their initial ideas, generating long ongoing lists of advice, cau- tions, suggestions and promises of encouraging outcomes. When we told them we were writing an article about their thinking and conversations, Matt exclaimed, “We’re teaching the teachers.”

Indeed, as we read through each day’s reflections, they remind us of what is supported in adult CFC’s through norms and protocols. They remind us to carry these principles of good conversations with us throughout the day with all our colleagues. Following are the lessons and experiences from 60 kind and generous fifth graders.

Advice on how to ensure you have a good conversa- tion:
• Don’t get distracted.
• Respond to each other; don’t just list your ideas.
• Ask each other questions and see if you can answer someone’s question.
• Share background knowledge.
• Don’t interrupt each other.
• Don’t argue if you disagree on something.
• Listen to your partners when they are talking and help them when they are confused.
• Take turns reading your notes about your thinking and then talk about it.
• Look at each other.

Advice from what we did when we had a good conver- sation:
• We worked well because some of that stuff is very interesting.
• We had some back- ground knowledge about other topics so that helped.
• We explained why we thought something and we learned more.
• Sometimes we both had the same thing but we still had different thoughts. For example, the water buffalo weighed 2000 pounds. She did not think that was a lot for a bison and I did.
• We understood each other and agreed and disagreed.
• We had different emotions.
• We stayed on it—stopped and thought about what each other said—one of us said a comment and then another said one that related to it—built on each other’s ideas and questions.
• We used our notes to remind us of what we had thought when we read.
• We helped each other with pronouncing names.
• We talked back and forth. We shared our thoughts. We told about some of our experiences.
• We got to share each other’s thinking, questions, answer, reasons sometimes we would disagree.
• We added on to each other’s questions, explaining it better.
• We talked about things we knew and didn’t know.
• We sat close enough together so that we could have a good conversation.
• We left questions open.

Cautions—challenges that came up:
• My partner and I had a hard time knowing what to talk about.
• When we didn’t get something it was hard if no one did and so we didn’t get the answer to our questions.

What we got from our conversations:
• We talked about what we would do if we were in a drought. We also talked about what the people might have done in the dust bowl. We talked about what happened to us in the drought we had a couple years ago.
• We had a lot of stuff in common. We both thought the same things were funny because they were funny. We could connect to what each other was saying.
• We talked about different things that we both didn’t know and we shared questions and got an answer! Also found out things that one of us knew and the other didn’t.
• We shared background knowledge got to know each other a little better.
• We added ideas to each other’s ideas

Illustration by Calen Roda

It was sometimes a challenge to think of what words to say.
• We were talking most of the time but my partner and I aren’t the best of friends so it was pretty hard to talk to somebody I don’t really know all that much.
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• Listen to each other, give each other information.
• Take turns on your conversation.

As we asked each other questions and tried to help each other answer them—referring to text, background knowl- edge, inferring, asking more questions.
• ...I was trying hard to converse with my partner and I was seriously learning some new stuff from him and asking him questions about what he said.
• ...we had a great chat then we started to talk about different things. But we snapped out of it.

Connections: a Journal of the National School Reform Faculty

(continued on page 12)
Many of us have been using Margaret Wheatley’s except. Willing to be Disturbed, to introduce conversations about norm setting and an understanding that we grow most when we are challenging our often comfortably held assumptions and understandings. I’m wondering today how this process of challenging our individual assumptions gets translated into questions and challenges of the curriculum we are often mandated to teach.

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I hope our script will also introduce students to the Highlander School in Knoxville, TN, where Mrs. Parks, Dr. King and countless others attended trainings, and developed strategies designed to lead the struggle against racism in this country. And finally, I hope we will begin to ask students why they think the “official story” promoted about Mrs. Parks is inaccurate. Our classroom conversation with our middle and high school students will open up questions about other parts of “the story” that our textbooks are wrong about and will hopefully disturb and engage many of the kids who are now simply marking time in many of our classrooms.

Flipping the script about Rosa Parks in many ways means flipping the script about the role of our schools. Will we begin to acknowledge the role of our schools as sites where inequity and the status quo are reinforced? Will we begin teaching students to become critically thinking citizens who are willing to be disturbed and disturb the system? Will we open the doors to our students’ questions about the curriculum and its inherent bias? If we do, it won’t be easy to return to page 92 and answer the questions at the end of the chapter. Once our kids experience the power of an authentic curriculum powered by their own questions, it’s likely they’ll demand more of us as their teachers and as citizens. Motivating our kids as co-designers of their own learning based on an accurate understanding of the power of collaboration seems like a fitting way to honor Mrs. Parks’ legacy and put our willingness to be disturbed to an authentic test.

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For more information:

When we talk about that which will sustain and nurture our spiritual growth as a people, we must once again talk about the importance of community. For one of the most vital ways that we sustain ourselves is by building communities of resistance, places where we know we are not alone.

bell hooks, Teaching Transgressions

There is an endless list of skills, tools, and knowledge that a small schools coach uses on a daily basis in his or her work. But if the focus and purpose of that work is not to interrupt and transform inequitable practices in schools, and to put in place a more equitable system where a student’s achievement is not predicted by race, class, and other forms of bias, our work is not enough.

From Coaching for Educational Equity Seminar flier

In the seminar, we were, without a doubt, a safe and provocative space for participants to explore and share their personal stories. In that process, we were very explicit from the beginning about our expectations and goals (see insert). We began the week with safer, foundational questions about our own experiences and built throughout the week deeper, more personal inquiry questions and activities that addressed our own experiences in our work around issues of equity. We believe that this inside-outside work is a pre-requisite for coaches committed to facilitating transformative work in schools.

Within our theory of action, we had four goals for the week that we hoped participants would accomplish.

1. Develop awareness and to reflect upon who and how they are in their work (in relation to oppression, privilege, accommodation and transformation).

The seminar was designed to connect the personal and the political, the emotional and the intellec-
tual, in ways that allowed participants to acknowledge and assess where they were in their own journeys and connect that understanding with their work in schools. We intentionally assembled our diverse
community of co-inquirers in a way, helping us to discover new insights into how to become more effective teachers. We learned so much from those experiences, not about concrete strategies but simply about how “to be” in the classroom. From them on, I tried harder to listen to and understand each individual student.

How did you get involved with NSRF on a national level?

I just jumped in and volunteered to facilitate workshops at winter meetings. I was eager to be connected to others doing this work around the country. My participation in NSRF on a national level helped to keep me excited in the work I was doing back at my school. It provided a way for me to channel my energy and keep me committed to a profession that can be very frustrating.

Who are your mentors in NSRF?

Many people in NSRF inspire me. I have learned a tremendous amount about facilitation and leadership from working with Gene Thompson-Grove. Every time I lead a coaches’ training, I learn so much from those I co-facilitate with – Pete Bermudez, Beth Graham, JoAnn Groh, to name a few. Everyone in NSRF is committed, thoughtful. The stories of school leaders in NSRF who started new small schools and stayed with those schools for decades helped me to see the path I’m on now. Dave Lehman, Steve Bonchek, Nancy Mohn – what incredible role models for a new principal.

What served as a catalyst for forming your own small school?

I am now the principal of a new charter school, City High School, in Tucson, Arizona. We’re currently in our second year and have 130 students in grades 9-11. Certainly one catalyst to starting a new school was my desire to create a place for students and staff that embodied the goals of NSRF – to become a place of learning where adults collaborate and inquire and are responsive to students’ needs. I took to heart comments by Ted Sizer and Debbie Meier that progressive educators shouldn’t let charter schools be the province of the conservatives in our field. And I wanted to have good educational opportunities, and charter schools provide one way to create public schools of choice. When I looked around and saw colleagues like Peter Garbus making the effort in Massachusetts, I figured I should do the same to create that kind of environment for young people in Tucson.

We had a lot of encouragement locally as well …

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group, which represented 11 different organizations doing small schools work from all geographic areas of the country (northwest, west, midwest, east, northeast, south). We had an almost equal gender balance, a representation of gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals, and represented Asian, Latino, African-American and Caucasian ethnicities. As a part of the seminar, we held a cultural sharing one evening. Every participant was invited to bring an artifact that represented their culture and on Tuesday evening we gathered in a circle and shared these artifacts and what they represented for us with each other. Through this experience we learned more about how both our own cultures impact us and about each other.

2. Collaborate with diverse people and divergent ideas as resources.

As facilitators we were explicit about inviting and supporting a diverse group of small schools coaches from around the country. Our diversity gave us an opportunity to find new places both within our comfort zone and in our risk zones throughout the week. We shared personal and painful experiences, read and discussed research and theory, developed theories of action and bonded around a collective responsibility to take our thinking and our schools. Through our exploration we became more aware of how we too often talk about symptoms rather than causes, rely on single truths rather than multiple stories, and focus on ability and supposed merit rather than privilege and oppression. By breaking open this paradigm and beginning to provide the language to discuss the difference between these two types of discourse, we made progress in recognizing and using discourse to transform our thinking and action in our schools.

3. Leave with tools, skills, knowledge and life experiences that help identify multiple entry points for the work.

As a part of the personal transformation work that is the connection between small schools and NSRF?

Over the last 5 years as the movement to break down the size of high schools has grown, NSRF has been involved in the practice of small schools coaching, beginning in 2000 with the formation of the Small Schools Coaches Collaborative (SSCC) in partnership with the Small Schools Project (SSP) and Coalition of Essential Schools NW (CESNW) to support the professional development of small schools coaches working with Bill & Melinda Gates schools in Washington. A part of the grant received by SSCC to coach towards small schools was a piece known as “And Beyond” which was designed to capture learning on the development and practice of small schools coaches in order to transfer that learning to other settings around the country. This seminar is a direct result of the work of “And Beyond.”

The idea that I cannot separate the mind from the heart and soul of this work towards equity was reinforced for me this week. I know that change is hard. I saw a community transformation where we said the words-racism-existed, named and addressed the issues of oppression, systemic oppression, reproducing classism and the feelings attached-anger, frustration, isolation. We tried to find a balance. We still have a long way to go.

Bobbi Aguero
TALC New Vision, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

the work of interrupting inequities in our lives and in our work.

We unpacked the ways in which the way we talk impacts how we act using the text “Changing the Discourse in Schools” (by Eugene Euhanks, Ralph Parish and Diannes Smith) and the language of Discourse II. We explored how the language we use in schools too often reproduces inequity and keeps us from transforming both

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The students of City High School. City High School was founded by current principal Carrie Brennan.

What is your experience with NSRF? How did you get involved in the first place?

I was steeped in NSRF-type ideas about school reform from the earliest part of my career, as an undergraduate at Dartmouth College. The faculty in the education department had strong connections to the ideas and people who had fueled the creation of the Coalition of Essential Schools and the National School Reform Faculty. Ted Sizer’s first book on high school reform, Horace’s Compromise, was hot off the press and was assigned reading in our courses. Faith Dunne was teaching in the department. Dennis Littkey was shaking things up as principal at Thayer High School in southern New Hampshire and was a featured speaker on campus.

Martha Rich directed Dartmouth’s secondary teacher preparation program when I was there. I feel really lucky, like I was in the right place at the right time. I was prepared – and inspired – to enter the teaching field by role models who embodied NSRF philosophy and practices.

In 1992, I got a teaching job at a new school in Tucson, Arizona. The school was supposed to be designed around CES principles and be a really innovative learning environment, but when we opened we were met with a lot of resistance from some parents. The school experienced a lot of turbulence in its early years, and there was high turnover. Those of us who inherited needed a way to support one another to be good teachers and to not burn out. When I heard about the new Critical Friends Group

Our members have a profound impact on our teaching. We developed a lot of trust as a group and went quite deep with our inquiries. One thing my CTG helped me do was to look at teaching from the “heart level” of the work. It was really a paradigm shift for me and it came, in part, from using protocols that focus on looking at student work free of any judgment. Protocols like the Collaborative Assessment and Descriptive Review force the par...
For 29 rural school districts in Northern New Mexico, Critical Friends Groups were unheard-of until 2004, when LeadNM began to travel, bringing CFGs to northern New Mexico. Traditionally, professional development in these districts has consisted of presenting principals and teachers with strategies in a workshop format in an effort to “train” them on how to do something “better” — interpret data, create stronger standards, increase math and reading scores on standardized tests — all with the idea that somehow this “training” would translate into action in the classroom.

As in other areas across the country, the idea of authentic collaboration was unheard-of in these rural districts. Funded through a New Children’s Leadership (NCLb) Leadership Grant in 2003, the University of New Mexico, in partnership with the Northern New Mexico Network (a consortium of rural school districts), created LeadNM as part of a concentrated effort to bring principal leaders together in professional learning communities. For the next two years, preconceived ideas of professional development were challenged at every level — from superintendents to school staff — as new ways of professional learning communities began to shape adult and student learning alike. One of the principals spoke forcefully during the early days of the grant, “After you’ve been out in the real world, you don’t want to give it up and you’ve been sued by the ACLU and you’ve had to restrain parents and you’re restraining children and you’re facing all these other things, I don’t want somebody telling me how it should be.”

Over the past two school years, six principal cohort CFGs totaling approximately 76 principals have been served by LeadNM. Each cohort meets for a full day once a month as a Critical Friends Group. As the participants become more familiar with the components of learning communities, e.g. norms, connections, protocols, more and more are beginning to implement these components at their school sites. Many have reported great success with the use of norms for staff meetings. One principal has gone so far as to suggest to her staff a norm whereby the only focus of their staff meetings will be student learning. Thus, she reports, all others pertaining to “management” will be handled in a different manner at different times. She reports that administrative issues no longer consume time during staff meetings. Others have adapted Connections to share success stories, and one principal has even reported using different lenses, as is being used every morning in a kindergarten class — reporting that Connections has allowed the teacher a productive way to allow kids to say whatever is on their minds and then focus better on the work at hand.

In their monthly Critical Friends Group the principals are looking at student work, using protocols to face dilemmas, using test to grow new knowledge together around issues of leadership, equity and poverty. NCLb and teacher quality. Throughout the year, cohort participants have worked on the theory of shared, lateral accountability and how these CFGs are creating structures to help each district respond to students’ needs.

As the work with the principal cohorts of LeadNM began in Fall 2004, we asked our participants to consider how their individual school sites respond to the assumption that all kids can learn. We spent 6 months using Ann and Richard’s book, How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work, with the purpose of helping our participants understand and reflect on where they might be stuck NOT changing. Since leadership is very personal, the Kegan and Lahey book helps leaders start with themselves. We thus spent a large amount of our time in small feedback groups, using the process the authors offer for reflection. One of our focus areas grew to “how can we as leaders help change the conversation in our schools so that the talk is about what matters most, student and adult learning?”

We then moved into the model created by Richard DuFour in the 2004 book Whatever It Takes, Principals model the interest that they “go deeper.” Each participant has been asked to pick at least one category for success which they will attempt to focus on during the next school year. Combining this with the Kegan and Lahey model of moving from “New Year’s resolutions” (continued on page 16)
that persuades 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, “Unhandling 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.nwHarmony.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 Individuals 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, it is 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.

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 principles 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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October 2, 2005 marked the passing of August Wilson, one of the prominent African American playwrights to chronicle the plight of Africans in America. In a radio interview on WILS a friend and colleague of Wilson noted that Wilson had dropped out of public school in 10th grade and educated himself in the libraries. When he became prominent Wilson had become the chronicler of the African experience in America and prominent playwright who he had become if she had remained a student in public education? In reflecting on the notion that public high school education might do more harm than good in centering African-American male identity, and might not equip them with the knowledge, skills and critical thinking they need to become productive citizens and lifelong learners, I have come to the conclusion that public high school classrooms as they are currently structured do not develop the full potential of African American males. And I maintain that most African-American males engaged in learning and skill acquisition in most public high school classrooms find it irrelevant at best and hostile at worst to their lives and life experiences.

Dr. Alfred Tatum, in this book Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males (Stenhouse Publishers, 2005) states that successful teachers of Black male students see “…literacy instruction as a tool of resistance” (81) in his book he puts forth that Black male students need to have literacy skills embedded in the reading and understanding of short and long texts written by Black males describing the realities of Black males in America. To that end, Dr. Tatum includes a two-paragraph text by Michael Eric Dyson (2004), “Letter to My Nephew Everett in Prison,” described the use of the letter as an example of the Black male surrender. “Their surrender is in large part connected to an arrested development resulting from their inability to resist their social conditioning” (87). The teaching of literacy skills and reading strategies in ways that engage the heart, mind, and soul of these Black adolescent males. Dr. Tatum, in his book Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males (Stenhouse Publishers, 2005) states that successful teachers of Black male students see “…literacy instruction as a tool of resistance” (81) in his book he puts forth that Black male students need to have literacy skills embedded in the reading and understanding of short and long texts written by Black males describing the realities of Black males in America. To that end, Dr. Tatum includes a two-paragraph text by Michael Eric Dyson (2004), “Letter to My Nephew Everett in Prison,” described the use of the letter as an example of the Black male surrender. “Their surrender is in large part connected to an arrested development resulting from their inability to resist their social conditioning” (87). The teaching of literacy skills and reading strategies in ways that engage the heart, mind, and soul of these Black adolescent males. Dr. Tatum, in his book Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males (Stenhouse Publishers, 2005) states that successful teachers of Black male students see “…literacy instruction as a tool of resistance” (81) in his book he puts forth that Black male students need to have literacy skills embedded in the reading and understanding of short and long texts written by Black males describing the

It Is Not Rocket Science: The Challenge, Struggle, Will and Skill Lie Within Each of Us

Camilla Greene, Connecticut

Must-Read Texts

“Below is a list of other must-read texts I would recommend for Black males reading amid turmoil. Most of them can be used as ‘cultural hooks’ to engage Black male students. My list is by no way exhaustive; I do not mean to suggest that these are the only must-read texts for Black males. Beyond these recommended texts, Black males need exposure to a vast array of fiction and nonfiction texts across genres as suggested by Carol Collins (1993).”

Source: Dr. Alfred Tatum, Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males, Stenhouse Publishers, 2005. Must-Read Texts: Pages 56–59

• The Fact: Three Young Men Make a Promise and Fulfill a Dream, by Sampson Davis, George Jenkins and Rameck Hunt
• There Are No Children Here, by Alex Kotlowitz
• A Hope in the Unseen: An American Odyssey from the Inner City to the Ivy League, by RonSuskind
• The Beast, by Walter Dean Myers
• Our America: Life and Death on the South Side of Chicago, by LeAlan Jones, Lloyd Newman, and David Isay
• The Greatest, by Walter Dean Myers
• Letter to My Nephew, by James Baldwin
• Stories of the Scoundrels, by James Goodman
• Workin’ the Chain Gang: Shakin’ Off the Dead Hand of History, by Walter Mosley
• Think Big, by Ben Carson
• And Still We Rise: The Trials and Triumphs of Twelve Gifted Inner-City Students, by Miles Corwin

The Challenge, Struggle, Will and Skill Lie Within Each of Us

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A

I write this article I intend to give you the perspective of a first-year elementary school principal and his attempts to create sustainable change and deep cultural impact, but it will surely be tempered with my own questions and curiosity about how we can talk leadership.

Patient reflection must begin with the end, which in a circle is really just the beginning.

For unforeseen family health reasons, I have taken a one-year leave of absence from the school, but was able to have conversation with our instructional coach at the school a month after school had started. She shared with me that while working with the eight teacher candidates from the University of Colorado who work at our school as part of their industry certification, something that was a first sign of successful work last year. As Cyndi, the coach, brought them up to speed on our work around student responsibility last year and the myriad around discipline, the teacher candidate curiously stated, “But you guys don’t have a discipline problem.”

I wish I could express what went on in my stomach, my soul, when I heard her tell me this story. By no means is it a completed circle, but it is a strong indicator of growth from our last year at a school that some called “out of control.” It also deepens my belief that “student discipline” is the wrong term and it skews everything we are trying to accomplish around creating learning environments in which the first sign of success was that we had started.

We read an article and then made a consensus decision as a staff of 78 that we were going to “teach” student responsibility and we were going to create a system in which the students took the lead in their behavior management and responsibility. We were going to make a not-so-subtle shift from being disciplinarians, which was clearly not working, to being coaches and mentors.

The staff had said to me when I met with them in May of 2004 that “student discipline” was the number one issue at the school and I was able to rephrase that in August as “responsible students” is our number one priority. And they bought in fully!

We’ll work with you.” Leadership is interesting in just protocols. It was a way of saying, “I heard what you said and I want to collaborate with me on community involvement for the sole purpose of increasing student achievement.” Second, I joined the local Kiwanis Club, whose mission is work with children. Third, our team created a partnership with the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP). Fourth, I ran into Dr. Barnes and Noble who headed up a group called Spellbinders, retired folks who do storytelling for kids, and we set up a program. Fifth, a parent suggested we have the local VFW work with our kids on things like flag protocol and other areas of their expertise. Lastly, we coordinated with the high school to bring students over to tutor and model for the children during our more vulnerable times, like lunch and recess.

I even did an eight week rock-climbing course for 12 sixth graders that culminated in a morning climb at the local rock-climbing gym. The school had come to life in May 2004 was that they had concerns about parent support, community involvement, follow-through, and the lack of all of it. I returned to them in August with a commitment to take the lead in developing a partnership with the community. My thinking was that if they did not lead with students, then I could take the lead with parents and community.

This was an opportunity to push back, albeit subtly, on the teachers to challenge their perceptions and beliefs. It was a win-win opportunity to prove a few of the staff wrong that folks wouldn’t get involved in the school. I called our approach “Beyond Invitation,” and if it worked we would have both the students and the staff positively supporting our school’s involvement.

The big-picture message to our parents was that we wanted them and we needed them. The message to the community was quite simple as well. They could be big help in supporting the children in their community. I think the difference in approach from previous times was that we didn’t merely invite them and then get upset when they didn’t show. We went out to the community and we told them that our kids need to learn how to read better and achieve higher academically. We could do it, but we could do it better with their help.

First, I put together a team of parents (outside of PTA, which was a source of conflict early on) whose focus was to collaborate with me on community involvement for the sole purpose of increasing student achievement. Second, I joined the local Kiwanis Club, whose mission is work with children. Third, our team created a partnership with the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP). Fourth, I ran into Dr. Barnes and Noble who headed up a group called Spellbinders, retired folks who do storytelling for kids, and we set up a program. Fifth, a parent suggested we have the local VFW work with our kids on things like flag protocol and other areas of their expertise. Lastly, we coordinated with the high school to bring students over to tutor and model for the children during our more vulnerable times, like lunch and recess.
were back from our state testing that afternoon. Our third-grade reading scores had gone up by 15%, the highest gain in a district of 84 elementary schools and our school’s highest score ever on third-grade reading. More stark to me was the gain in poverty-level states the impecunious, whose scores had doubled, had cut the achievement gap from 20% to 5%. Our biggest gain came with our Latino students, who had increased from only 18% proficient to 64% proficient, making the gap now only 7% from the previous gap of 38%. In my bones, I knew it would happen, and from the Chicago hotel room that night I called each of the 4 third-grade teachers at home. We didn’t say much, but we knew we had accomplished something special.

After some much deserved celebration, it was my role to create space for reflection on how something like this happened and how we might continue making it happen again and again. Lastly, it was to step back and let the teachers return to their students with a greater sense of hope and belief about what was possible.

Each gain brought up new steps needed to complete the circle. I realized over time that I could not sustain the work in my community role. I had others who could, and would, devote more time to it than myself. In March, two parents moved to the forefront of the parent/community volunteer role and we began to systematize the initial, organic work that we had done. For me, I had a thousand things playing in my mind. Do they share the big vision? And as I peel away a bit: Will they maintain it? Is it impacting student achievement? The big vision? And as I peel away a bit: Will they continue making it happen again and again. Lastly, it was to step back and let the teachers return to their students with a greater sense of hope and belief about what was possible.

Scott Murphy has been a high school English teacher, middle school English and science teacher, district staff development coordinator, NSRF National Facilitator and an elementary school Principal. You can reach Scott at smurphy@jefco.k12.co.us

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Peggy Silva reviews Creating Great Schools: Six Critical Systems at the Heart of Educational Innovation by Phillip Schlechty.

Schlechty pulls no punches in declaring his purpose for writing. He states that he wrote “to help leaders design school systems that invite inventions, as opposed to systems that mandate implementation of programs that will serve only to shore up for a brief time a system of schooling that must either be changed in fundamental ways or die.” He organizes his thinking around structures he defines as social systems; recruitment; knowledge transmission; power and authority; evaluation; directional systems; boundary systems.

We are using to examine a school’s organization and the impact on student and teacher behavior. Schlechty turns that perspective around how the structure and the culture affect learning. Each chapter addresses a single structure and creates a strong argument for the need for transformation. He borrows C.M. Christensen’s ideas of disruptive innovations as imperatives for schools, if they want to move from a “service to engagement.” He expresses his frustration with structures that accept oxymorons in design—although he describes studying as a legitimate school activity, he states that as much studying goes on in a school restroom as exists in a study hall. Schlechty argues that disruptive innovations require “supportive structural and cultural changes,” and that new ideas never receive their due because of the penchant for “insisting that only programs based on convincing data are worthy of support.”

The author’s arguments will find strong support from his readers. The strength of this text, however, lies in the series of key questions at the end of every chapter, questions that could be used to examine and redesign existing social systems. In his chapter on knowledge transmission systems, Schlechty stresses the importance of discussion about norms within specific contexts. When arguments are developed, how are they grounded, and do people agree on this grounding? For example, when a person advances an argument is it justified by research, by moral tradition, or by conventional ways of doing thing? Which of these knowledge bases are viewed by others in the school as valid grounds, and which of these knowledge bases are rejected by others? In his exploration of power and authority systems, Schlechty asks:

Which persons or offices have control over the resources that provide the bases of power (for example, who can hire and fire, bestow status, and confirm reputations), and how diffused or centralized is this control? He further asks whether rewards are linked to maintenance of the current system, as opposed to rewards available if one happens to support the change effort. In discussing boundary issues within school structures, he asks questions about accountability norms and mechanisms to protect those who work outside school from “dysfunctional conflicts with…outside groups.”

Although Schlechty does not explicitly address issues of race, sex, or gender, these issues of equity are embedded in each one of the series of questions asked at the end of chapters.

School communities involved in studying their systems prior to suggesting transformative changes will find this text a valuable tool. School leaders exploring the effectiveness of existing social structures will find essential perspectives in the questions the author poses. Consulting agencies will find guiding questions to push organizations’ thinking. As the author states in his introduction, “Those who lead systemic change need to be armed with every bit of insight that supports the change effort.”

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Connections: a Journal of the National School Reform Faculty

NSRF’s Partnership with La Raza: Towards a Coaching Platform for Early College High Schools
Pedro “Pete” Bermudez, Florida

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Connections is a journal of the National School Reform Faculty, a division of Harmony Education Center. Published three times per year, it provides a forum for CEG Coaches and other reflective educators to share their practice.

Editorial Board... Debbie Bambino, Camilla Greene and Peggy Silva
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If you have any feedback or are interested in contributing to Connections contact us at 812.330.2702 or dbambino@earthlink.net

NSRF’s Partnership with La Raza... (continued from page 2)

Rico, NSRF National Facilitator from Los Angeles, and I have been coordinating professional development support for NSRF Early College High Schools in Los Angeles, CA, Tucson, AZ, Washington, DC, Houston, TX, and Lancaster, PA. Maria Elena and I, along with key NSRF staff members, have also codesigned and cofacilitated a series of multiday cohort meetings. These meetings bring together school teams and their respective college and community partners three times a year to support each other’s learning and assess their progress towards becoming successful schools for the students they serve. NSRF Early College Cohort meetings usually revolve around an in-depth site visit hosted by a member school and framed by a question selected by the school community. Other NSRF National Facilitators who have contributed to this project include Connie Chene, New Mexico, and Simone Waite and Belkis Cabrera, Florida. The cohort is working on developing its own internal capacity and currently has an additional nine individuals who are trained NSRF Coaches.

Currently, the cohort consists of twelve schools and plans are underway to provide specialized training, leadership development, organizational and instructional coaching, and assessment and accountability standards based on needs assessments performed at site visits. To date, in nine states and the District of Columbia, six small schools of exemplary practice are operating and six more are emerging.

The NSRF and NCLR are currently working on the adoption of a coaching platform that will provide a more comprehensive approach to support the vital work that Early College High Schools do for Latino students throughout the nation. The major design elements of this platform include:

• Building consensus and support at the school and organizational level to design and implement learning communities in all NCLR Early College High Schools;

• Identifying and training a cadre of coaches who will facilitate the work of learning communities in all NCLR Early College High Schools;

• Providing regular follow up activities to support and deepen the work of learning community coaches and their group members;

• Documenting the learning, growth, and overall impact of the work of learning communities on professional practice and student achievement in NCLR Early College High Schools;

• Developing facilitative leadership capacity in all NCLR Early College High Schools.

At a recent site visit to one of the schools I serve, the principal shared a letter from a senior who had recently graduated. In the letter, the student expressed his gratitude for the education he had received and expressed his desire and commitment to continue his studies in college. The sad part of this was that he was writing the letter from a jail cell as a result of “his past having caught up with him.” Moments later, a mother came in with her daughter who had just arrived from Mexico and spoke no English. With eyes full of hope, she told the principal that she had heard from her neighbors that “this school would take good care of her child and prepare her for college.” I couldn’t tell whether the mother or her daughter had a green card…but I know that at this school, it wouldn’t matter.

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Four major functions provide essential focus to the organization’s work: capacity-building assistance; applied research, policy analysis and advocacy; public information efforts; and special and international projects. These functions complement NCLR’s work in five key strategic priorities – assets/ investments, civil rights, education, employment and economic status, and health.

NCLR is headquartered in Washington, DC and serves all Hispanic subgroups in all regions of the country. NCLR has field offices in Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York City, Phoenix, Sacramento, San Antonio, and San Juan, Puerto Rico. Through its community-based efforts, NCLR reaches more than four million Hispanics through a formal network of affiliates – more than 300 Hispanic community-based organizations (CBOs) that serve 41 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia – and a broader network of more than 35,000 groups and individuals nationwide. In 2004, NCLR expanded its regional outreach with the opening of a New York City office. NCLR now has eight field offices throughout the country.

Three years ago, the NSRF was invited to partner with NCLR to provide support for its Early College High School Demonstration Project – an initiative to develop and strengthen blended institutions involving Latino-serving community-based organizations, institutions of higher education, and public schools with the goal of graduating students with the equivalent of two years of college credit. For me, the connection between the work of helping build small high schools to serve some of the poorest and underserved Latino communities around the nation and the NSRF’s mission of fostering “educational and social equity by empowering the people involved with schools to work collaboratively in reflective democratic communities” was irresistible and I embraced both the opportunities and challenges of the work without reservation.

During the past three years, Maria Elena (continued on page 19)
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 Tolivay, Ross Peterson-Veatch, Debbie Bambino, Camilla Greene, Bruce Law, Jill Hudson, Alan Dichter and Vivian Orlen for making their work public to their peers.)

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 on not 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 (continued on page 16)