

Center of Activity Report: New York

Joseph McDonald, New York

The New York Center of Activity is one of the oldest in the National School Reform Faculty. It was founded by Nancy Mohr and Alan Dichter. From the beginning it has wrestled regionally with a dilemma that NSRF as a whole has faced – the pursuit of depth and influence. Nancy and Alan were both veteran wrestlers with this dilemma, having been pioneers in New York City's small schools movement, and early leaders of the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES). As principals, they struggled on a daily basis to deepen the reform practice of their own schools, even as they pushed in every way possible they could to make these schools influential, both regionally and nationally. They understood that depth without influence can be short-lived.

Nancy and Alan brought this influence to carried this insight into their involvement with NSRF, and where they were well-placed for influence.

The conversation during which NSRF was dreamed up took place around their dining room table in New York City. It was 1994. The Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University had just been launched with CES founder Ted Sizer as its head. With the school reform movement increasingly

dominated by policy-makers and policy perspectives, Sizer wanted the Institute to highlight the voice of educators. The conversation over Nancy's cooking was all about how to do this. Sizer understood that school reform would never succeed if it were not grounded in the best ideas and instincts of the people he liked to call schoolkeepers. They needed influence. At the same time, he understood that these crucial shapers of reform were implicitly its targets too. They need support on a continuing basis in going for depth.

Within a year of this dinner, Nancy had joined Paula Evans, Faith Dunne, Gene Thompson-Grove, Camilla Greene and others on NSRF's original staff. They traveled continually, networking with hundreds of other educators and school reformers across the United States. To foster depth



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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.
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of practice among these educators, they promoted a mechanism called the critical friends group. The name was drawn from English school reform circles, and its function was described in a brief 1993 article by Art Costa and Bena Kallick. "A critical friend," Costa and Kallick wrote, "is a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person's work as a friend." Critical friends are well-positioned, Costa and Kallick continued, to understand the context and goals of the work they are critiquing and to advocate for its success. They may be students in the same course who commit to supporting each other's learning progress. They may be school administrators who overcome the predictable loneliness of their roles by networking across settings. Or, Costa and Kallick suggested (introducing the application NSRF would adopt), the critical friends may be teachers who form "a critical friends group. . . of as many as six people who meet and share practices, perhaps every other week." Such critical friends press each other to go deeper.

But how does such a group gain influence as well as depth? How does something as intimate as a critical friends group – or CFG, the term that soon gained currency – become influential beyond its six participants? How can it affect the larger school? How can it have an impact beyond the school? How does it become more than something marginal? How does it avoid becoming targeted as alien? How does it make school reform?

Back home in New York City, Nancy and Alan raised these same questions within the context of the small schools, the local reform organizations, and the local reform politics they knew best. The answers they reached helped shape the center of activity they cooked up – literally cooked up, over many dinners to which leaders of many New York City school reform organizations were invited. These other reformers always emerged from the dinners more persuaded than before that NSRF was onto something that they needed to know more about. Nancy and Alan called it facilitative leadership, and it is two steps back from CFG. The first

step back considers what it takes to engage in the kind of critical friendship at the core of a CFG – to embrace in a genuine and productive way the apparent contrariness of being at once friendly and critical. Such an approach involves the kind of low-key shock that people experience during their first use of protocols – those facilitative devices that artificially segment speaking and listening and warm and cool feedback, among other things. Then the next step back considers what it takes to lead others through the experience of critical friendship. This is where facilitative leadership comes in. Moreover, Nancy and Alan argued that the traits of facilitative leadership, indispensable to coaching CFGs, are also useful throughout schooling

– whenever people meet to plan, to solve problems or to examine their work together. In a book they co-authored with Joe and Beth McDonald, *The Power of Protocols*, they wrote that "at its heart, facilitating is about promoting participation, ensuring equity, and building trust." What school reform leader would not want to cultivate people who know how to do these three things? If there were such school reform leaders

in New York, Nancy and Alan decided they didn't want to have them to dinner.

Meanwhile, they reasoned that the broad applicability of facilitative leadership to schooling – whether in peer settings like CFGs or in more formal kinds of meetings – made it a good first topic for NSRF newcomers to take up. Mindful of their own context, they knew it would resonate well with the school reformers they hoped to influence.

Nancy died in 2003, after having presided over many influential dinners, as well as two large gatherings of school reformers from throughout New York, who came to explore facilitative leadership and share their experiences with it. Each of these gatherings also featured an Endorsement Roundtable over which Alan presided and over which he presides today as Co-Director of NSRF/NY. These are opportunities for experienced facilitators – from any organization – to present a portfolio documenting their facilitative leadership. Critical friends provide feedback using



Nancy Mohr and Alan Dichter, 2002

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an adaptation of the Tuning Protocol. Upon completion of the Roundtable, the presenting facilitators are formally “endorsed” and become eligible to serve as lead facilitators in other NSRF/NY seminars and consultations. Nearly 50 endorsed facilitators have joined the larger ranks of NSRF members by means of the New York Endorsement Roundtables. Generally, they have come to a Roundtable after training seminars embedded in other organizations besides NSRF – organizations drawn to NSRF expertise in facilitative leadership. Notable among these is the New York City Department of Education. In a 2005 article about NSRF/NY, Alan and Vivian Orlen describe the center as a low-profile but highly influential organization within the Department of Education – quietly responsible for a great growth in awareness there of the value of leadership by schools.

Today, NSRF/NY is housed at NYU’s Ruth W. Horowitz Teacher Development Center and has adopted the name NSRF/NY @ NYU. Alan Dichter and Joe McDonald are Co-Directors. Natalie Rodrigues is Coordinator (natalie.rodrigues@nyu.edu). The Center continues to work closely with the New York City Department of Education through National Facilitators like Alan Dichter and Vivian Orlen, Anthony Conelli, Charlene Jordan, Elayna Konstan and Steven Strull – who work there or at the New York City Leadership Academy. The Center also works closely with NYU’s network of partner schools in New York City, located in three historic neighborhoods – the Lower East Side, East Harlem and the South Bronx. NSRF/NY helps these schools nurture skillful peer leaders whose commitment to facilitative leadership and critical friendship influences the aspiring teachers they educate.

As it has throughout its history, NSRF/NY also works with other school reform organizations. Indeed, it provides tailored workshops or consultations for any school reform organization – whatever its particular platform of reform – that promotes adult learning communities in the interest of improving student learning and that believes these communities should be led by people who know how to promote participation, ensure equity and build trust. Among the Center’s most important clients today are ATLAS Learning Communities – an organization affiliated with the University of Connecticut that coaches schools and clusters of schools in New York and other places in a comprehensive school design focused on authentic teaching and learning, ongoing cycles of planning

and reflection, shared leadership and relationships. Another important client is the Partnership for Innovation in Compensation for Charter Schools (PICCS), an affiliate of the Center for Educational Innovation/Progressive Education Association. NSRF/NY is assisting the PICCS network of charter schools in New York City in establishing a culture of peer review using a tool based on the Tuning Protocol. It is also assisting PICCS in scaling up what one of its members – Renaissance Charter School in Jackson Heights, co-led by NSRF National Facilitator Gwen Clinkscales – has pioneered, namely the use of CFGs as a schoolwide leadership mechanism.

Of course, NSRF/NY continues to run Endorsement Roundtables – at least once a year. See details about the Roundtable and the standards for endorsement at the Center’s website (nsrffny.org). Finally, like most NSRF Centers, NSRF/NY@NYU offers regional seminars. This year, two of these focused on facilitative leadership, and one on coaching CFGs – thus continuing the balance and emphasis characteristic of the Center since its earliest days. ■

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