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

Editorial Board: Debbi Bambino, Sarah Childers and Greg Peters

If you have any feedback or are interested in contributing to Connections, contact us at 812.310.2702 or dbamblino@earthlink.net.

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.

The Five Freedoms Project

- freedom to question and learn
- freedom to experiment and take risks
- freedom to question authority
- freedom to engage in shared leadership
- freedom to be a full partner in our society

Joe Sizer understood that school reform is dominated by policy and the same time, he understood that these crucial shapers would never succeed if it were not grounded in the voice of educators. The New York Center of Activity has highlighted the voice of educators. The CES founder Ted Sizer understood that school reform is going for depth. Sizer understood that school reform move as its head. With the CES founder Ted Sizer.

The Khalil Gibran International Academy Sarah Childers, Indiana

A New Era in Learning

In 1994. The Annenberg Institute for School Reform Faculty, a division of Harmony Education, was created by the New York City Department of Education with the objective of promoting adult learning communities in the intermediate grades and the South Bronx. NSRF/NY helps these schools influential, both regionally and nationally. They understood that depth without influence can be short-lived.

Nancy and Alan brought this influence to carry 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 Faculty, a division of Harmony Education, was created by the New York City Department of Education with the objective of promoting adult learning communities in the intermediate grades and the South Bronx. NSRF/NY helps these schools influential, both regionally and nationally. They understood that depth without influence can be short-lived.

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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 functions were 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 often critiques 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 understand the context and goals of the work they are critiquing and to advocate for its success. 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: 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, to exchange critical friends press each other to go deeper.”

Nancy Mohr and Alan Dicther, 2002

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 – produce the application NSRF was seeking? Nancy and Alan argued that the traits of critical friendship, capable of guiding teacher action to propose, act upon and reflect on research taking place in their classrooms. Dana and Vendel-Hoppey utilize NSF protocols to facilitate understanding conversations and share the protocols in detail with their readers. The authors advocate for two site-based professional learning communities: action research and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). These combine these ideas by protocols to guide their they. They call their learning teams inquiry-oriented PLCs and define these as a group of six to twelve professionals who meet on a regular basis to learn and practice critical friends to engage in continuous cycles through a process of action research (articulating a wondering, collecting data to gain insights into the wondering, analyzing data, making improvements in practice based on what was learned and sharing learning with others.” (Dana and Vendel-Hoppey, p. xiii) As I was writing this description, I thought it sounded suspiciously like a CFG! And as I proceeded through the text, I continued to have difficulty differentiating between inquiry-oriented PLCs and a Critical Friends Group.

The authors present 10 essential elements of healthy PLCs: (p. 57)

1. Establish a vision that creates a momentum for action. (p. 24)
2. Build trust among group members. (p. 27)
3. Pay attention to the ways power can influence group dynamics. (p. 30)
4. Understand and embrace collaboration. (p. 33)
5. Encourage teachers to appreciate and value diversity within the group. (p. 36)
6. Promote the development of critical friends. (p. 37)
7. Hold the group accountable for learning and its documentation. (p. 39)

The Reflective Educator’s Guide to Professional Development: Coaching Inquiry-Oriented Learning Communities

By Nancy Fichtman Dana and Diane Vendel-Hoppey

This text strives to “demonstrate how coaching promotes learning at each step of the action research process.” (Killion, p.x) The authors suggest several types of collaborative meetings structures that allow facilitation, leadership, and teacher action to propose, act upon and reflect on research taking place in their classrooms. Dana and Vendel-Hoppey utilize NSF protocols to facilitate these learning conversations and share the protocols in detail with their readers. The authors advocate for two site-based professional learning communities: action research and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). These combine these ideas by protocols to guide their work. They call their learning teams inquiry-oriented PLCs and define these as a group of six to twelve professionals who meet on a regular basis to learn and practice critical friends to engage in continuous cycles through a process of action research (articulating a wondering, collecting data to gain insights into the wondering, analyzing data, making improvements in practice based on what was learned and sharing learning with others.” (Dana and Vendel-Hoppey, p. xiii) As I was writing this description, I thought it sounded suspiciously like a CFG! And as I proceeded through the text, I continued to have difficulty differentiating between inquiry-oriented PLCs and a Critical Friends Group.

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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 reformers 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 carry 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 mission of the National School Reform Faculty is to foster educational and social equity by empowering all people involved with schools to teach and learn, ongoing cycles of planning 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 surge 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 Consoli, 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 skilled peer leaders whose commitment to facilitative leadership and critical friendship influences the aspiring teachers they educate.

As it has throughout its history, 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 (nsrfny.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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References

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register at nsrfharmony.org