

Connections

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Director's Report Steven Strull, Director, with Peggy Silva, New Hampshire

As a participant grappling with the proposed new fee-based membership structure at the membership summit in Houston last year, Peggy Silva, NSRF National Facilitator and writing coordinator at Souhegan High School, expressed her belief that there should be an institutional membership category that would allow individual schools to align with the work of the national organization using their own internal structures to further the work. Although the NSRF declined to consider an institutional membership in its initial membership offering, Director Steven Strull agreed to consider Souhegan's perspective for the first year of this new fee-based membership. Steven and Peggy decided to share their perspectives in *Connections*, as part of this issue's Director's Report, and are inviting others to comment.



Peggy Silva: CFGs serve as the foundation of professional development at Souhegan High School in Amherst, New Hampshire. All 120+ members of our professional staff and administrators, and over 30 members of our support staff, are members of CFGs, meeting monthly during a two-hour delayed opening. Our CFGs provide support to our Career Growth Process, the R & D branch of our professional development. We are a CFG school, and have been for many years. We have trained most of our own coaches, and our three National Facilitators sponsor annual trainings. We provide three days of training each year for our coaches, and send coaches to the NSRF Winter Meeting, some of whom serve as facilitators. Our National Facilitators attend NSRF meetings throughout the year and we provide articles for NSRF *Connections*. Yet now, despite an

extraordinary commitment to this organization, we find ourselves in a dilemma with NSRF.

Our organizational structure requires approximately 15 trained coaches to support our CFGs. Although we are a Center of Activity, our primary

work is internal. We rely on the expertise, the research, and the professional collegiality of the national organization to augment our work and to maintain our focus. We are willing to pay for that, in the same way that we pay for our association with the Coalition of Essential Schools, another value-based organization. CES charges Souhegan an annual institutional

membership fee as a school-based member of the Coalition. For the fee, Souhegan enjoys the cachet of belonging to a reform-based organization, and the opportunity to learn from others who share the same core beliefs.

As part of its shift to a dues-paying membership organization, NSRF has asked each of our coaches to join NSRF as a contributing member. As a school community, we have decided to support our coaches by paying for their participation in national meetings, by paying a stipend to our coaches, and by sponsoring and paying for their ongoing training. Our school has worked with our school board to get the time for us to work together on this essential professional development. Our National Facilitators, however, benefit in their ability to charge a fee for training others, and so our school asks them to pay for their individual membership in NSRF; we are not asking for them to be included in our school-based membership.

As a public high school here in the Live Free or Die state, we also have a very pragmatic concern about paying a contributing member

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fee. Public schools do not have the luxury of paying for a philosophical alignment; we cannot say to our school board that although there is a range of \$25-\$75 per member, we want to pay \$75 per coach because we believe in the mission of the NSRF. As we are a public institution, our budget is developed in conjunction with the school board and a finance committee, and is then voted on by the town. A system which charges by the coach would lead to some pressure to have fewer coaches, whereas a flat fee to several national organizations is an acceptable line item in our budget.

Souhegan High School accepts its responsibility to serve as active members of NSRF. To that end we are in support of paying an institutional membership fee for our school.

Steven Strull: Souhegan High School and many of its teachers and administrators have been active members in NSRF since its inception. There is great value in having Souhegan continue its tradition of using CFGs as the foundation of its professional development program, both for the school and the national organization, and the unintended consequence of limiting that participation based on NSRF's conversion to a dues-paying membership organization has to be considered.

In both written and verbal communication, Peggy and Principal Scott Prescott have made compelling arguments for the consideration of a school-based membership option. After careful consideration, I decided to accept Souhegan's proposal and offer an institutional membership that covers all of Souhegan's staff as members of NSRF. I made this decision as an exception to our current structure and I realize the dilemma I may have put NSRF in. However, Souhegan made a compelling argument, and they were the only school to ask for such consideration. While some Centers of Activity and a few school districts have inquired about institutional membership, I have asked those folks to work with me on the institutional question moving forward in the coming year as we consider standards and guidelines for Centers of Activity. I also asked Souhegan to limit this institutional membership to teachers and staff of Souhegan and that if, as a Center of Activity, Souhegan offers NSRF seminar experiences to people outside the staff that they follow the individual membership structure and build membership fees into those participants' cost structure.

There continue to be changes in the struc-

ture of how NSRF functions and operates. While the structure has not always been as clear and cogent as we would like, during the first year of my directorship, NSRF converted to a dues-paying membership organization. We did this after careful consideration, facilitating several regional and national summits to get the input of our members, and the publication of a membership report. As we consider how membership is working in the field, we continue to feel we made the right decision—with scores of National Facilitators and members contributing to the effort.

In my second year as director, we are considering standards and guidelines for National Facilitators. This work will be culminating at our 2008 National Facilitator meeting, coinciding with the publication of this issue of *Connections*. Our work moving forward will be to set standards and guidelines for Centers of Activity, and at the conclusion of that work our current organizational restructuring will be complete.

While our membership structure is focused on individual members, the compelling case made by Peggy and her colleagues at Souhegan demanded that we pay attention and not allow the unintended consequence of limiting the involvement of Souhegan faculty and staff. There is, of course, nothing in this understanding that limits the ability of individual staff members at Souhegan to additionally support our national organization and mission by making a voluntary contribution to NSRF.

As director, I am quite hopeful we are learning from this accommodation to the needs and interests of a vital member of our collective community. Souhegan High School's unwavering commitment to NSRF requires that we pay attention to how changes in our organization affect their ability to continue contributing, both financially and pedagogically, to our shared mission. I am comfortable with the decision that we made and I look forward to learning from that decision. I am also very proud to be the director of an organization that can have this kind of conversation in a forum as public as *Connections*. I welcome your input and commentary on this decision and I look forward to continuing our restructuring toward an economically viable national organization that furthers the mission of educational and social equity in the service of children. ■

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