

# Connections

the Journal of the National School Reform Faculty

Winter 2009

## Director's Report Steven Strull, Director

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**F**or my director's report, I am pleased to re-print an interview I had with Melissa Milios Davis and Donna Reid of Houston A+, one of our Centers of Activity. The three of us spoke by phone this past October, and the text below appeared in an on-line publication of Houston A+. We spoke about many topics, including the roots of Critical Friends Groups, the growth of CFG work, and equity. As I read the interview for the first time, it reminded me of why I do this work, our work. My hope in sharing this piece in our journal is that it may help remind us, in some small way, how important our work is. The text below has been edited for space.



**In your letter to NSRF members when you first became director, you said that you began your educative journey as a classroom teacher at DuSable High School in Chicago, where you learned about the Coalition of Essential Schools and the Annenberg Institute. Can you talk a little bit about how those organizations shaped your career and your thoughts on education?**

Absolutely. Two things happened simultaneously when I was a first-year classroom teacher in Chicago. The first was that Bill Ayers and Bill Schubert, who were professors at the University of Illinois at Chicago, came to DuSable High School to begin a series of conversations with us (the teachers) about small schools. DuSable had been a Coalition of Essential Schools school back when there were only Nine Common Principles, and that was the lens we used to frame some of our work. Our principal had introduced us to the notion, as Ted Sizer would say, that "schooling and school reform ought to be a conversation among friends."

So Bill and Bill came to DuSable and started talking about small schools, and I thought, "Well,

that's just about the silliest thing I ever heard of. Ten schools inside of one school? What does that mean, who goes where, who does what?" It just wasn't a natural fit. My image - in fact the collective image of schooling - was that a school was a building, and a building was a school. Anything else was kind of silly.

The second thing that happened was that Ambassador Walter Annenberg gave the challenge grant to public education. The Annenberg Institute was set up at Brown University alongside the Coalition of Essential Schools. As a CES school, DuSable received the invitation for faculty members to apply to become Critical Friends Group Coaches

with the newly formed National School Reform Faculty at Annenberg. My assistant principal gave me the packet and said she thought that this was something I should apply for, and the community came around and coached me through the application process. Looking back on it now, it was a very respectful way to enter the work. We wrote the application, which was many, many, many pages long and contained many questions and scenarios. A couple of months later, we got word that I'd been chosen to receive the training.

That was in 1996, so it was the second year of CFG Coaches training, and so the fact that I had been selected was a really, really big deal. I would be flown to Seattle, we would be put up at a very nice hotel, all of our expenses would be paid, and we would each receive a stipend to do this work. To be told that I was going to travel across the country, be treated like a professional, and receive a stipend for my work was big, big, big, stuff.

Those two occurrences together set the course for the career that either I've chosen, or *(continued on page 9)*

the one that's chosen me.

**That's a great story. It's astonishing to think of CFG trainees as being such an elite group, because today the training is so widespread. There are so many established places in the country that offer it, and we're happy to be one here in Houston. Besides Houston, where do you see the strongholds of the CFG movement?**

They're in a lot of different places. New York is very strong. South Florida is very strong. New England is very strong - everything from an entire high school, Souhegan High School in New Hampshire, to a school district like Brookline, Massachusetts, where Gene Thompson-Grove [NSRF founder] works. Southern California is very strong. Denver and the Colorado area. San Francisco, Oakland, Portland, Seattle, Albuquerque. This is just off the top of my head.

**We'll just say, "And the list goes on and on."**

Dallas, Austin, San Antonio, Mathis, Texas. Just think about how strong the work is just that state. And the people - Gene Thompson-Grove always reminds me that it's about the people. See, you have Stephen Spring moving from Maine to Austin, and the work grows. You have people like Angela Breidenstein and her colleagues at Trinity University in San Antonio, and the work grows because the people are committed to making the work grow. Like you guys do in Houston. You've taken the CFG Newsletter, and all of the stuff that you are able to pull out is deeper and stronger and more important than anything that National could ever do, because it's really about teachers and kids and families and schools asking themselves hard questions - critical questions - about the work that they do and the work that they ask of children.

While national organizations might provide a bully pulpit - we might be able to organize national meetings, put out some publications, and do some research - the real work happens when a teacher and her colleagues sit in a classroom and look at student and teacher work. That's the power of this work. That's what I did in 1996 when I came back from the training seminar, and that's still the core of our work.

**Talking about the core of your work, I notice that social equity is front and center in NSRF's mission statement. Why do you think that social equity is so important in public education?**

Because public education is basically an unfair construct. It is a construct that favors white, middle, and upper-middle class children. The basic dilemma is that the children who need our public schools most often get the least. As a national organization committed to student achievement through adult learning, NSRF would like to have some role or responsibility in changing that fundamental problem.

Race and class ought not to be a determining factor. The hidden curriculum, which is fairly well defined in the literature, should not have predictive value on educative outcomes. For example, I've heard that the state of Indiana predicts its future need for prison beds based on third grade achievement data. If we can predict how many prisons we're going to need based

on third grade achievement data, we have a big equity problem. To pretend to do this work without addressing that fundamental issue does a disservice to the children we are supposed to be serving.

I tell school faculties all the time that we have our degrees, we have our middle class incomes, we have a degree of comfortableness in this life. Our clients don't have that, and it's up to us to help make sure that changes. When I visit a certain very complicated school in Brooklyn this morning, I'm going to walk in the front door and know that most of the children inside that building will not graduate from high school; they will be destined to live lives of either abject poverty or some sort of very low or middle class existence within our service economy. And if NSRF can help interrupt that - at all - then our mission is worthwhile.

**Why do you feel that Critical Friends Groups and adults getting together to talk about student learning are such powerful models for addressing some of those issues?**

Because it gives us (continued on page 14)

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permission to say "We don't know." It gives us permission to open up our classroom doors and ask colleagues for help. We can walk into someone's classroom and say, "Since I'm not exactly sure what I'm doing, my guess is that you might not be either. Maybe together, we can figure something out." We can't look to the state standards to figure it all out. We can't externalize our involvement and complicity in the status quo. We can interrupt some of those realities of schooling in this country.

I think that part of it has to do with the misogynistic legacy. Most teachers in this country remain female: they're middle class, they're white, they're in their forties, and they're women. And most administrators across the country are still men. So you have a situation that began well over 100 years ago in which the political authority is male dominated and the workforce is female dominated. I think part of the isolation in classrooms originated as a survival strategy: one that we have to unpack together in order to make the changes that we know we need to make.

**I'm afraid that a lot of people in Houston don't really associate their CFG work with NSRF yet. We're working on that, but would are some things you say to encourage Houstonians to be part of NSRF and to feel connected to NSRF?**

Become a member - even at the smallest contribution level. Through a robust Center of Activity like Houston A+ Challenge, it's important to push the notion that NSRF is a collective and a membership organization.

Members are involved in a national movement. I think that NSRF is a stronger movement than an organization. Our Centers of Activity are very strong organizations, but I think NSRF national is really a movement. CFG work is having an effect in Houston and in Greater Texas, as it clearly is, and if it is part of people's teaching craft, then I would encourage folks to become members and officially become a part of the movement.

**That's a great call to action to end on, and we'll let you get out to your next appointment.**

Well, thank you very much. I hope that was helpful. ■

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However, we have seen the extension of Looking at Student Work and other practices in departmental and level or content area meetings. While I'm heartened by these changes in culture, I wish everyone were in CFGs for their own learning benefit.

As a Latina, part of my concern for sustaining the work has to do with our ability to attract and sustain a diverse group of coaches and national facilitators. Our community is 60% Latino/a and we need to attract and sustain more minority coaches.

**What do you see as NSRF's greatest challenge in this period?**

Right now, I think we are defining ourselves as an organization. We are deciding how we are going to work together across the country. I think people have a good sense of what we should be doing but not how we need to work together as an organization. We are figuring out how to have enough structure and enough space so we can all "belong" and answer the question "How do I fit in?"

**What are your greatest hopes for your work and NSRF in the coming period?**

I want my work to keep growing. We have trained coaches in 12 area school districts and 28 schools, and we are introducing a new high school to our work. I want to keep supporting our established schools and serve them well.

I am on the Planning Committee and I hope our Winter Meeting will be a defining event.

**What would a "defining" Winter Meeting look like?**

Everybody would have a great learning experience and would see it as time well spent. Participants would make connections with colleagues from across the country and would leave with an understanding of shared work and shared hope for the future of our work. ■



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