The National School Reform Faculty® (NSRF®) publishes the Connections newsletter six times per year. To suggest a topic or submit an article, email nsrf@nsrfharmony.org or call 812-334-8379.

National School Reform Faculty®
Harmony Education Center

May 2013

Connections

From the Director

How to Give Feedback Effectively

By Michele Mattoon, NSRF® Director, NSRF National Facilitator, and CFG® Coach in Indiana, michele@nsrfharmony.org

A foundational activity necessary for the productive running of almost all our protocols is learning how to give feedback skillfully. Educators, indeed human beings in general, give feedback many times a day. It can be as simple as, "Mmmmm, this soup is tasty!" or as complex as rating a school's performance based on a myriad of factors over a period of years.

You'd think with all this practice we'd be really good at it. And you'd be right. We are good at it—most of the time. Unfortunately, when we give feedback specifically seeking to improve results, many of us are sadly lacking the skills it takes to do it well. Because the feedback issue is an amazingly complex one, NSRF has built effective methods for the delivery of productive feedback. Here are some of the points that we emphasize during our trainings:

What is your intent around giving the feedback? The first difficulty usually arises because most people aren't clear about why they are giving the feedback. What is the expected outcome of the feedback session? Is it to encourage the receiver to stay with the task? To help them* improve? To vent your frustrations? To build confidence? To inform the receiver of the consequences of their actions? Think clearly about your desired outcomes and then craft your feedback carefully to achieve that goal.

What is the "presenter's" Focusing Question? Almost every NSRF protocol designed to seek feedback centers around a specific invitation from "the presenter" (the one who is bringing their* work, their student's work, or their dilemma to the table). This person is helped by their CFG coach to carefully articulate what exactly it is that they want to get out of the session. The result is usually a question that begins, "How can I—?" (For example, "How can I word the directions of this assignment so that my students correctly complete all of the steps?" or "How can I make this rubric more consistent across all the categories?"). This question is crucial for the presenter to get the kind of feedback that they truly want and/or need. The structure of the protocol then assures that the group only gives feedback around that question and not on any other aspect of the situation or piece of work.

How much positive vs. negative feedback should be given? The most common formula of positive vs. negative feedback is the classic "feedback sandwich." The giver will talk about something that they like, move to something that needs work, and then ends with something they like again. The idea behind the sandwich method seems to be that the receiver of the feedback will feel better about what they need to change if they hear how great everything else was that they did. Unfortunately, this often doesn't work. People tend to focus on either the positive messages, so that the negative feedback gets lost, or (in my experience more common) focus only on the negative and overlook all

In this Issue ...

How to Give Feedback Effectively p. 1

*S/he, She or He, They: Language Choices p. 4

Finding a Better Way To Conduct Staff Meetings p. 5

30-Minute Meeting Protocol p. 7

Critical Friends Travel the World p. 8

From the Research Desk: Thinking about Teaching Thinking, Part 1: What's the Urgency? p. 10

Two Book Reviews: The Rainbow People, Spokes on the Great Wheel of Life p. 15

the positives.

Feedback sandwiches or any other configuration of ratios for giving feedback can seemed contrived to the receiver and often do not accurately represent what worked and what didn't. In fact, a recent study by the Journal of Consumer Research found that novices often find positive feedback more helpful, while experts seek out negative feedback. There's a lot of common sense around this finding. People who are learning to do something new often do a few things well and many things that could be improved. For them to continue to work on their new skill, project, etc., they need to build their confidence and understand their strengths. Hearing unsolicited negative feedback can be demoralizing and even cause the beginner to give up altogether. Experts, on the other hand, are "experts" because, presumably, they are already good at what they do. They have achieved a certain level of confidence in their abilities and now want to hone their skills. Asking for negative feedback allows them to fine tune the little glitches. That's not to say that even for experts, there's no place for positive feedback, too.

NSRF recommends that positive feedback (what we call "warm feedback") should be given first. Warm feedback can be general and does not have to specifically address the focusing question, although certainly some of it will. The purpose of warm feedback is to let the presenter know what is valuable and works. The importance of this for all people, including experts, cannot be overstated. A National Facilitator that I knew once told me a story about a time she asked a group to forgo the warm feedback section of the protocol and move directly into the cool feedback. After all, she clearly was "an expert" and didn't need reassurances that her document was "good." "Let's save some time," she said. "Just give me cool (negative) feedback around my focusing question. I'm tough, I can take it." The problem was that when she went to improve her document that night, she had no idea what to keep! "I looked at it and felt I had to start completely over. All I had in my head were things that I could improve. Because I didn't get any feedback on what worked, I had no clue if any of it did!"

After some time is spent giving only warm feedback, the group should then be led by the CFG coach to give cool feedback around the focusing question. In fact, if the coach finds someone straying from the area defined by the focusing question, the coach should stop the comment, restate the focusing question and then allow the feedback session to continue. During this session warm feedback can be given if someone is so moved, but cool feedback is never permitted during the warm feedback time.

When people know they are going to receive warm feedback and then cool feedback, it relieves the feeling of artificiality that can occur. The assumption is that although the presenter has asked for suggestions, they will always do some things well and that the group will honestly reflect these elements back to the presenter.

How can judgment be avoided during the feedback process? To be able to give feedback skillfully, i.e. to make the feedback precise, actionable and neutral enough so that it is not taken as a harsh judgment, the group needs to learn what "good feedback" looks like. At NSRF a key component of this training is using the "Feedback Nightmares" activity as a springboard for thinking about feedback do's and don'ts. This activity is a good way to build a common understanding of what productive

feedback is and what kinds of feedback are counterproductive or simply not useful.

Another imperative concept is that, out of all the feedback the group suggests, the presenter will only take the feedback that they think will work for them. All should share the important belief that the majority of the cool feedback (suggestions) that will be generated will be rejected by the presenter for one of two reasons—they have already tried it and it didn't work or they know it won't work in their particular situation. Consequently, everyone involved in the feedback session knows going in that most of what they say will be rejected. We can assume that, at best, a third or a quarter of what is said will be useful. This serves two purposes: 1. The presenter doesn't feel that they need to defend themself when talking about what ideas they will try to implement and 2. The group won't worry about "wasting" time by giving the presenter ideas that they didn't use. A transparent sharing of what the presenter found useful makes all involved feel that they have had a successful session!

Careful wording of cool feedback is essential if you don't want the receiver to be defensive and reject it. For example, the film company Pixar uses a method they call "plussing." This involves making sure that every critical comment has a positive attached to it. (Here is an example from Peter Sims' book, *Little Bets: How Breakthrough Ideas Emerge From Small Discoveries*: "Instead of criticizing the sketch or saying 'no,' the director will build on the starting point by saying something like, "I like Woody's eyes, and what if his eyes rolled left?") At NSRF we couch our cool feedback in "I wonder…" (For example, "I wonder if students created checklists including deadlines for each task they had to complete, if that would help them make sure they got the entire project completed in a timely fashion?") When cool feedback is couched in "I wonders" it has a profound effect on both the presenter (who is receiving the feedback) and the group giving the feedback.

Cool feedback stated this way doesn't sound harsh or judgmental to the presenter. After all, if the person giving the feedback is simply "wondering" if something would work, then the presenter feels more inclined to be open and wonder along with them. Neither defenses nor hackles are raised with this kind of language and the presenter doesn't leave a feedback session feeling as if their work is covered with red ink.

From the perspective of the individuals giving the cool feedback, the "I wonder" language frees up the creative part of their brains, allowing them to generate more "wonderings." They don't feel pressured to come up with the single "correct" advice. In contrast, statements like "I think they should ..." or "It would be more helpful if ..." trick the speaker's brain into thinking that there is only one answer (the one that their brain first provided). When this sort of feedback is offered, creative processes tend to shut down and fewer, less innovative suggestions arise.

Did the feedback achieve its intended result? As stated earlier, debriefing what came out of a feedback session is another way for not just the presenter, but for the rest of the group to learn and grow. Giving the presenter time to consider and then speak about concrete next steps they plan to take as a result of the feedback, allows both the presenter and the group to feel the session was valuable. It is also important to follow up with the presenter at a later session so the group can hear what happened after the feedback was applied. Again, this allows everyone to learn as much from the feedback session as possible.

Giving feedback is a skill that often determines whether any undertaking—a project, a lesson or an assessment will ultimately be successful or fail. Although many of us believe that we know how to give "good" feedback, research has shown that feedback often results in leaving the recipient unclear as to the intent behind it or what clear action steps could or should be taken. Spending time to educate groups around how to give feedback skillfully and using protocols designed to improve work not only ensure better results, but can markedly improve a school's culture by creating a feeling of investment in each other's success.

Michele Mattoon
Director, NSRF

P.S. Talk to us about great and not-great feedback—email us. In the next issue, we plan to address the keys to receiving feedback most effectively.

*See next page re: use of the pronoun "they" in this article and the rest of ***Connections***.

The first cohort is full, but we're now building a waitlist for a second, simultaneous class! Join us!

Summer Critical Friends Group New Coaches Open Training July 8-12

Bloomington, Indiana, $795 for five days' training
Visit the website or call 812-330-2702 for the waitlist.

Look what CFGs can do for your school:

- Help students succeed
- Model and build 21st Century Skills
- Build trust
- Reduce teacher and administrator isolation
- Transform school culture
- Build diversity of thought
- Extend and share leadership
- Facilitate participation from all members
- Provide healthy challenges
- Foster equity
- Honor and prioritize time for deep reflection
- Support strategic planning
- Reveal solutions to complex dilemmas
- Develop critical problem-solving
- Encourage creative, new thinking (sometimes around old problems)
- Carefully analyze work, and support everyone in receiving and giving focused, actionable feedback

"After a week of this training I feel we now have more tools to improve meetings, communication and the community at [my] school. Thank you so much." -- A new CFG coach from Wisconsin

*S/he, She or He, They: Language Choices

By Luci Englert McKean, Connections Managing Editor and CFG Coach in Indiana luci@nsrfharmony.org

As a trained journalist, I've struggled with decisions about style for this publication. AP vs Chicago Public Manual, upstyle versus downstyle headlines, other typographic choices all have been in question for a year now. In the end, I've decided to stop struggling and simply try our best to be consistent on a shoestring budget and with a very limited staff.

That said, the issue of gender equity in the English language has long been troublesome for me. GLBT (gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender) issues have become more widespread in the media. Frankly, I've become more aware of gender issues among people I actually know personally. Recently, Sweden adopted a gender-neutral pronoun for instances when the speaker/writer is uncertain of a person's gender, genders are mixed, or it needs to be deliberately ambiguous.

Since American English does not (yet) have a singular, gender-neutral pronoun for humans, with this issue and forward, I'm asking the grammarians among us to join with us in a bit of a throwback. Rather than the recent historical preference for "he" speaking of single humans of any gender, or the more complicated "s/he," I'm asking that in this publication we return to using "they" as a singular as well as plural pronoun that will encompass people who identify as masculine, feminine, or something elsewhere on the continuum.

I have it on good authority from Erin McKean (no relation), former editor of the Oxford English Dictionary and now chief wordsmith at Wordnik.com that "they" as a singular pronoun was perfectly respectable languge use since the 14th century. She referred me to this post "citing credentials so thoroughly it might shake even the ossified beliefs of William Safire."

I expect that, like me, many of you may cringe the first several times you read "they" and "their" as singular pronouns, but I hope you will remember those around us who do not fit neatly into "his" and "her" boxes, and will join us in standing at the forefront for this particular brand of equity.

Questions, comments, or indignant rants? Let's talk. Email luci@nsrfharmony.org

Finding a Better Way to Conduct Staff Meetings

By Leanndra Martinez, Los Angeles Education Partnership (LAEP) in conjunction with John Matich

After sitting through too many marathon meetings feeling frustrated and unproductive throughout his 20 years in education, John Matich, the director of Professional Development for Los Angeles Education Partnership (LAEP), started wondering if there was a better way to facilitate meetings.

"Meetings tend to get off track because of side conversations and often don't appear to use knowledge or create equity among the participants," Matich explained. "I sat in these meetings thinking 'Why are we here? What is the purpose?' and I realized that there had to be a more efficient way to do this."

Drawing on his work with Adaptive Schools and Critical Friends, Matich learned that meetings can be run intentionally to support group development and to accomplish specific tasks. After considering the key goals that groups try to accomplish during meetings—keeping everyone updated on each other's work, accomplishing tasks, making decisions—Matich developed the 30-Minute Meeting. This strategy is a weekly meeting that outlines current updates, questions, needs, and next steps. With busy schedules and limited time, the 30-Minute Meeting offers a way for teams to consistently check in with each other and establish working goals for the week. During the meeting, participants share updates, pose questions and/or needs to the group, and sign up to respond to a question/need and that directly pertains to them. This process also supports distributed leadership as facilitators and recorders are rotated every week. The 30-Minute Meeting doesn't take the place of planning, reflecting or problem-resolving meetings. However, it highlights the needs for those meetings and allows participants to sign up and schedule them for another time.

LAEP began using the 30-Minute Meeting when four separate departments merged into one. It quickly became apparent that there was a need for staff to efficiently share updates about their work and to create a cohesive department. "We were so used to working in isolation and didn't know what was happening with the person down the hall," recounted Carlos Donoso, LAEP's Transform Schools manager. "The 30-Minute Meeting made us more aware of what everyone was doing and has created a more supportive environment where we are all stepping outside of our job descriptions to support each other's work."

Not only has the 30-Minute Meeting been an effective way to facilitate department meetings at LAEP, but schools in our network have put it into practice.

David Levine, teacher at the School of History and Dramatic Arts (SoHDA) in Los Angeles, struggled with meetings filled with "endless conversations about minutia that left us with no conclusions or solutions. [We were] getting into operational conversations, when we needed to be talking about curriculum."

Since SoHDA began using the 30-Minute Meeting, Levine says that they now have more convivial and solutions-based meetings. "We are a very 'get it done group' and we like to know we have gotten things solved and problems, issues, and challenges don't linger. It means a lot to us to be able to look at our list and see progress," Levine said. "Being able to solve needs between two people rather than the whole group saves time and stress for all."

John Matich is the Los Angeles Education Partnership's director of Professional Development, a position he has held since 2004. He has ten years of teaching experience, primarily in middle school social studies. Over the past nine years, John had defined the LAEP coaching and professional learning models based on his expertise in Cognitive Coaching™, Adaptive Schools™, and Critical Friends Groups. John is certified as an Agency Trainer at the Center for Cognitive Coaching and the Center for Adaptive Schools.

For more information, contact John Matich at jmatich@laep.org

Similarly, teachers at the Los Angeles River School have been using the 30-Minute Meeting as a faculty meeting protocol for two years. Since using this strategy, teacher Paul Payne has noticed a change in their school's group dynamics. "We actually enjoy spending time together as a whole staff," Payne noted. "We've become really good at identifying individual versus whole group needs and we don't waste time on concerns that only require a few people's attention. Everyone has a chance to give input on topics they feel passionate about, but without the laborious conversations that make faculty meetings drag on and on."

The 30-Minute Meeting allows groups to share updates and complete tasks, but Matich also infused the meeting with grounding strategies, distributed leadership, and opportunities to reflect that he found were often missing from previous meetings. The facilitator signals the beginning of the meeting by inviting everybody to state their name, how they are feeling, and saying, "I'm in." This strategy allows people's voices to be heard early in the meeting, builds relational trust, and acknowledges how people are feeling at the particular time to avoid behavioral assumptions about how people are behaving.

"The strategy creates a sense of community and moves us from 'me' to 'we'," Matich said. "People think 'we don't need that fluff,' but we know from research that intentional strategies that support group development often matter more than the task at hand."

He found this to be true when he first tried the "I'm in" strategy with a group. When beginning a meeting with a group of teachers, Matich felt low energy in the room, so he tried the strategy to bring the group together. As the group members took turns saying how they were feeling and "I'm in," one teacher who looked disengaged since sitting down said that he had a family emergency the night before, but he knew how important the meeting was to the group.

"If we hadn't done the grounding strategy, we wouldn't have known why he was behaving the way he was. He wasn't mentally present at the meeting, but we understood what was happening," Matich said.

At the end of the meeting, the group has the opportunity to reflect on the process and voice frustrations or satisfactions. "Reflection is one of the most neglected pieces of learning," Matich noted. "Without reflection, one-third of the group might think it went well while two-thirds might think the meeting did not met their needs." As a result of the reflection process during LAEP's 30-Minute Meeting, LAEP staff adjusted the process multiple times to increase craftsmanship around the meeting. The meeting initially began with someone recording all of the updates as people were talking. Now, everybody types their updates and questions/needs prior to the meeting so that it runs smoothly.

One of the most challenging elements as a participant is the "no cross talk" rule. Cross talk often is a main factor in getting meetings side tracked and lasting far longer than intended. "The intent is to listen to each other. When you cross talk, you're not listening," Matich explained. "When we know that we can't talk, it forces us to be better listeners because we are not trying to think about what we're going to say next."

When groups first begin using the 30-Minute Meeting, there's a concern that it won't be productive for people or that people will not follow the process. However, the exact opposite has happened. Groups at schools and non-profits have embraced it and found that the protocol highlights and celebrates work in a simple, structured way.

National School Reform Faculty
Harmony Education Center
www.nsrfharmony.org

30-Minute Meeting

Created in the field by John Matich

The 30-Minute Meeting Protocol offers a way for teams to consistently check in with each other and establish working goals for the week, reducing isolation and building opportunities for fresh collaboration. The protocol keeps the group on-task and facilitates each individual having a voice. By revolving meeting facilitation and recording, the process also builds leadership skills.

To begin, establish a consistent meeting time and location (i.e. Every Monday at 10:30 in the Conference Room). The facilitator guides the group through the following process:

1. Facilitator welcomes the group and invites them, in round-robin fashion, to state their name, how they are feeling, and say *"I'm In."* (3 minutes)

2. Participants come prepared to the meeting with lists of updates and are invited to share them in round-robin fashion. (5 minutes)

3. Facilitator invites the group to share, in round-robin fashion, questions and/or needs for the week (Q & N). The facilitator paraphrases and checks for clarity and then cues the recorder to capture the question/need on a large poster paper. After the first round, the facilitator invites participants to add to the list or say *"pass."* Questions are not answered at this time and needs are not addressed. (10 minutes)

4. Once questions and needs are identified, the facilitator invites group members to "sign up" to follow up with the author of the Q & N. (i.e. *"Who was the author of 'What are we doing about documenting the reflections from our professional development sessions?' Who would like to meet with John to provide clarity around that issue?"*) The facilitator cues the recorder to list the names of the people who would like to be part of that conversation. Other questions/needs might be: *"I need help organizing the materials for Tuesday's information meeting"* or *"When and how should we incorporate technology as part of our own professional development?"* (10 minutes)

5. Facilitator asks the group who would like to be the facilitator and who would like to be the recorder for the next meeting.

6. Debrief: Facilitator invites the group to reflect on the meeting using the following question: *"What worked for us today? What do we need to focus on or do differently next meeting?"*

Copyright 2013, National School Reform Faculty®. To receive permission to copy it for use in your Critical Friends Group®, call the NSRF® office at 812-330-2702 or email nsrf@nsrfharmony.org. Protocols are most powerful and effective when used within an ongoing professional learning community facilitated by a certified NSRF CFG coach. To learn more about professional learning communities and seminars for new or experienced coaches, please visit the National School Reform Faculty website at www.nsrfharmony.org.

"NESA, a community of schools, strives to create a sense of belonging and identity, diminish feelings of professional isolation and foster a culture of mutual support and professional engagement."

"Collaboration is the cornerstone of our success."

NESA: Core Values--www.nesacenter.org

Critical Friends Travel the World

By David Nelson, Teacher and Faculty Development and Growth Program Coordinator, American Community Schools of Athens, Greece, NESA School Representative, NSRF National Facilitator, nelsond@acs.gr

The Near East South Asia Council of Overseas Schools (NESA) welcomed the National School Reform Faculty to Bangkok, Thailand where the annual Spring Educators Conference for International Schools of the NESA region was held April 4-8, 2013. Conducting its latest international CFG New Coaches training as a part of this year's conference, NSRF extended its services to the 37 participants from American and International schools of the Near East, and South Asia region.

The NESA Spring Conference boasts some of the most widely acclaimed professional development experts from the United States and around the world and annually attracts over 600 participants from international schools. Collaboration is intrinsic to NESA's vision of professional development as an organization that strives to "create dynamic, collaborative professional relationships that transcend current barriers and boundaries in order to maximize student learning in member schools." This year, the CFG New Coaches Training added the Critical Friends element by offering a special 5-Day Strand, in which teachers and administrators earned CFG Coaches Certification.

The training attracted an equal blend of administrators and teachers from the region, with larger school groups from schools in Saudi Arabia. Teachers from International schools in Malaysia, India, Kuwait, Jordan, Greece, Bahrain, Dubai, and many more, discovered the value of Critical Friends Groups and the applications of a variety of protocols. Many felt that the model will help them to address unique challenges of international schools by maximizing the involvement and interactions of faculty. Given a relatively high turnover of staff and the unique make-up of the student body of their schools, many felt that CFG groups can provide an invaluable resource by extending collaboration.

One participant commented on the final day of reflections expressing that the training was "just what I needed at this point in my career." Another teacher described the training as "Transformative!" and ended feeling confident that her team and she "now possess the understanding and skills to begin to lead our school forward in improving learning on every level with all stakeholders involved."

This year's offering of extended trainings within the context of an already packed conference was a bit of a

trial run to see whether participants would favor focus over numerous opportunities. What we found was that the participants in the CFG training felt empowered by the extension of time in the five-day training, and felt that they had gained a great deal from their peers and new Critical Friends. Specifically, one participant reflected that the experience was "Wonderful—awesome!I feel like I got more out of this than many of my colleagues in the regular NESA sessions, because of the extension of learning and practice. I really felt like this training is empowering for both teachers and teacher leaders."

As the ACS Athens School Representative to NESA and now a NSRF International Facilitator, I wish to commend David Chojnacki, Executive Director of NESA and his team for this year's impeccably designed Spring Educators Conference. It was a tremendous privilege to train under Michele Mattoon, Director of NSRF and side by side with Tonio Verzone and Kevin Horton. As our world of Critical Friends expands around the globe, more and more professionals understand the value of the work of NSRF in helping connect all of us with innovative ways to improve teaching and learning.

FROM THE RESEARCH DESK: "Thinking about Teaching Thinking Part 1, What's the Urgency?"

By Dave Lehman, Connections Executive Editor, NSRF National Facilitator, and CFG Coach in Wisconsin, davelehman@mac.com

Virtually every educational reform initiative of the past decade or more, every educational critic, and every national study of what's wrong with, and what will be needed in U.S. education in the future, calls for teaching our young people to be thinkers – analytical problem-solvers, imaginative and creative, critical thinkers. In this "From the Research Desk" I will explore this crucial and timely topic of "Thinking About Teaching Thinking" in two parts: Part I, in this issue of *Connections,* will look at what the problem is, why is it so important to develop these abilities in our students, what's the evidence that they are not becoming the kind of thinkers being called for, and why now? Then, in our summer issue of *Connections*, I will continue with Part II, possible solutions, what we can do about it, and how might we teach these skills.

I begin with our working definition of "critical thinking" from Daniel Willingham, Professor of Psychology at the University of Virginia and author of "Ask the Cognitive Scientist" column in the *American Educator.* "From the cognitive scientist's point of view, the mental activities that are typically called critical thinking are actually a subset of three types of thinking: reasoning, making judgments and decisions, and problem solving." (We may find this definition too narrow, too limiting, and possibly incomplete, but more on that later!). What follows is a sampling from some of our best educational thinkers on the crucial importance of teaching thinking (the titles alone speak volumes).

I begin with the most recent book by Tony Wagner, Co-Director of the Change Leadership Group at Harvard's Graduate School of Education. In *The Global Achievement Gap: Why Even Our Best Schools Don't Teach the New Survival Skills Our Children Need – and What We Can Do About It,* Wagner states a number of facts about our current high school students., For example:

"The high school graduation rate in the United States – which is about 70% of the age cohort – is now well behind that of countries such as Denmark (96%), Japan (93%), and even Poland (92%) and Italy (79%).

The United States now ranks tenth among industrial nations in the rate of college completion by 25- to 44-year-olds.

Sixty-five percent of college professors report that what is taught in high school does not prepare students for college. One major reason is that the tests students must take in high school for state-accountability purposes usually measure 9th or 10th grade-level knowledge and skills. Primarily multiple-choice assessments, they rarely ask students to explain their reasoning or to apply knowledge to new situations (skills that are critical for success in college)…."

Based on several hundred interviews with business, non-profit, and education leaders, Wagner goes on:

Dave Lehman is the former founding principal/teacher of the Lehman Alternative Community School, a public middle- high school recently named after him and his wife by the Ithaca, New York Board of Education upon their retirement after 30 years. He currently is doing "School Improvement Coaching" with East HIgh-School in Madison, Wisconsin.

Contact him with your questions or comments at davelehman@mac.com

"I have come to understand that there is a core set of survival skills for today's workplace, as well as for lifelong learning and active citizenship – skills that are neither taught nor tested even in our best school systems.... The First Survival Skill: Critical Thinking and Problem Solving.... In one form or another, the ability to ask good questions has been a recurrent theme in almost all of my conversations about core competencies and skills for success in today's workplace. The habit of asking good questions was most frequently mentioned as an essential component of critical-thinking and problem-solving.... Equally important, they are skills that our kids need in order to participate effectively in our democracy."

Yong Zhao, born and raised in China and now a distinguished Professor at Michigan State University, has written a recent critique of U.S. education, *Catching Up or Leading the Way: American Education in the Age of Globalization*. He summarizes a number of recent studies, including the "Partnership for 21st Century Skills," "Engage 21st Century Skills: Literacy in the Digital Age," and the "Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council of European Union."

"Underlying these proposals is the recognition of a number of core assumptions, which can be used to guide our decision about what schools should teach.... Assumption #4: Cognitive skills such as problem solving and critical thinking are more important than memorization of knowledge.... What is common across all is an emphasis on high-level cognitive skills."

And in the preface to his book, Zhao explains its title:

"...what China wants is what America is eager to throw away – an education that respects individual talents, supports divergent thinking, tolerates deviation, and encourages creativity; a system in which the government does not dictate what students learn or how teachers teach; a culture that does not rank or judge the success of a school, a teacher, or a child based on only test scores in a few subjects determined by the government."

So there is not only this somewhat newer recognition of a "global achievement gap" between the U.S. and other countries in developing thinking skills, but the more familiar "achievement gaps" between white and students of color, between those students from families of wealth and those from poverty, students with and without "disabilities," and between what it took for young people to be prepared for the 20th-century and what it now takes to be prepared for a future world of globalization in the 21st-century.

Mike Schmoker is an education writer, speaker, consultant, and author of *Results Now: How We Can Achieve Unprecedented Improvements in Teaching and Learning,* and *FOCUS: Elevating the Essentials to Radically Improve Student Learning*. In a short piece he wrote in the April 2012 issue of *Phi Delta Kappan,* "Can Schools Close the Gap?," he identifies one of the major causes of these "gaps" is "disastrous literacy practices." Referring to various recent studies, he notes that too many students get to college and "can't read the textbooks in any discipline they encounter." He also reports that "students write very little and receive even less instruction in academic, argumentative writing despite the immense effect such writing has on intellectual development and readiness for post-secondary studies."

Lisa Delpit, Professor of Education at Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, also speaks to this issue in her new book [see my Review on page 15 in this issue of *Connections*]. In the chapter entitled "Picking Up the Broom: Demanding Critical Thinking,"she describes the following all too common situation in many of our urban high schools, those primarily serving students of color:

"What does it look like to demand critical thinking in classrooms serving low-income students of color? A native Alaskan teacher recounted to me a favorite story about her own schooling, which provided this teacher with the perspective she needed to teach her students in her own village. She says that her one Native teacher in a high school with a population of all Native students and otherwise white teachers once placed a broom on the floor of the classroom. As the students entered class, they all stepped around or over the broom. After all the students were seated, the teacher picked up the broom and began to lecture them. 'Why didn't any of you pick the broom up?' Did they think it belonged on the floor? Who were they waiting for to tell them what was right? The message of the lesson was contained in her repeated word, 'You cannot afford not to think! No one will think for you, and if they do, they mean you no good!'"

One of the most recent books to sound this alarm, published in 2013, is by Nel Noddings, Professor of Education, Emerita, at Stanford University. In *Education and Democracy in the 21st Century*, she notes: ***"Several major themes will guide our thinking throughout this book.... A third is to bring critical, analytical thinking to our work as educators.... While some 20th century ideas should be abandoned, others should be revived, analyzed carefully, and reevaluated. Critical thinking, for example, was mentioned as an educational aim throughout the 20th century, and it still appears prominently on lists all over the world. Indeed, it is more important today than ever, not only because of the increasing sophistication of technology but because we are trying to move toward a participatory democracy that is capable of deliberation."***

Echoing this concern about developing students for a "participatory democracy" and using the often stated need for "21st century skills" is the article "Learning 21st Century Skills Requires 21st Century Teaching." This article, in the October 2012 issue of *Phi Delta Kappan,* was written by Anna Saavedra and V. Darleen Opfer, a Policy Researcher and the Director of RAND Education at the RAND Corporation of Santa Monica, California. They state:

"Globalization, economic necessity, and low civic engagement compound the urgency for students to develop the skills and knowledge they need for success.... Regardless of the skills included or the terms used to describe them all 21st-century skills definitions are relevant to aspects of contemporary life in a complex world. Most focus on similar types of complex thinking, learning, and communication skills, and all are more demanding to teach and learn than rote skills. These abilities are also commonly referred to as higher-order thinking skills, deeper learning outcomes, and complex thinking and communication skills."

"Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution."
— Albert Einstein

Several authors over the past two to three decades, a period in which we have seen the unprecedented expansion of technology and media, have expressed deep concern that this new "information/digital age" is leading to the development of students who don't think deeply about anything. When so much information about everything and anything is available in a nano-second, speed seems to be taking over the teaching of thinking. Here is a sampling of those who are sounding this alarm, beginning in 1990 with Jane Healy, an educational psychologist, teacher, educational consultant, and adjunct faculty member of Cleveland State University. In *Endangered Minds: Why Children Don't Think and What We Can Do About It*, she reports:

"I developed a questionnaire requesting anecdotal information on cognitive changes observed in students. I handed it out at national meetings and conferences to experienced teachers in schools where population demographics had remained relatively stable. Approximately three hundred teachers responded, and I was amazed by the unanimity of response. Yes, attention spans are noticeably shorter. Yes, reading, writing, and oral language skills seem to be declining – even in the 'best' neighborhoods. Yes, no matter how 'bright,' students are less able to bend their minds around difficult problems in math, science, and other subjects."

The second is by Alan November, internationally respected consultant in integrating technology across the curriculum, whose workshop I attended more than ten years ago.

He began that workshop with this story of Zack (also found in the beginning of his book, *Empowering Students with Technology*):

"The Danger of Ignorance – A fourteen-year-old named Zack was asked what he was learning in school by his retired neighbor. Zack answered, 'I'm working on a history paper about how the Holocaust never happened.' The neighbor was incredulous. 'Zack, where did you hear that the Holocaust didn't happen?' 'I found it on the Internet in my high school library. Concentration camps were really clinics to help the Jews fight typhus carried by lice….' [turns out Zack had stumbled on a website by a professor who promotedthis bizarre theory].

"Zack was fully equipped with all the technical expertise necessary to access the Internet. But his school failed to provide him with the tools to make sense of the information…. Many young people can be deluded by a false sense of confidence when they think they know what they are doing. Students and adults alike too often mistake technical mastery with critical thinking. Increasingly, students will become victims to the expansive dark side of the Internet unless we teach the critical thinking skills necessary to make meaning out of the overwhelming and potentially manipulative amount of information that is now available and growing every day." [this book was written in 2001!]

The third I'd like to show you is the most recent, written in 2011. I reviewed Nicholas Carr's *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains,* in the September 2012 issue of *Connections* but felt it needed to be cited again briefly here. Carr raises the concern that our contemporary media-saturated lives are producing young people who are "shallow," not "critical, analytical, creative thinkers," possibly because of subtle, yet pervasive changes to their brains:

"While acknowledging that it's now hard to imagine living without the Internet and online tools like the Google search engine... their heavy use has neurological consequences. What we're not doing when we're online also has neurological consequences. Just as neurons that fire together wire together, neurons that don't fire together don't wire together. As the time we spend scanning Web pages crowds out the time we spend reading books, as the time we spend exchanging bite-sized text messages crowds out the time we spend composing sentences and paragraphs, as the time we spend hopping across links crowds out the time we devote to quiet reflection and contemplation, the circuits that support those old intellectual functions and pursuits weaken and begin to break apart. The brain recycles the disused neurons and synapses for other, more pressing work. We gain new skills and perspectives but lose old ones."

Lastly, I return to Daniel Willingham and his book, *Why Don't Students Like School?: A Cognitive Scientist Answers Questions About How the Mind Works and What It Means for the Classroom*. He describes nine key cognitive principles, the first of which relates directly to our question about teaching thinking – "People are naturally curious, but we are not naturally good thinkers; unless the cognitive conditions are right, we will avoid thinking." Willingham goes on to explain this surprising and disturbing principle:

"Your brain serves many purposes, and thinking is not the one it serves best. Your brain also supports the ability to see and to move, for example, and these functions operate much more efficiently and reliably than your ability to think… It's no accident that most of your brain's real estate is devoted to these activities. The extra

Test your own problem solving abilities: In an empty room you find a candle, some matches, and a box of tacks. The goal is to have the lit candle about five feet off the ground. You've tried melting the bottom of the candle and sticking it to the wall, but that wasn't effective. How can you get the lit candle five feet off the ground without having to hold it there?* Solve this in 20 minutes.
(Solution on back page.)

brain power is needed because seeing is actually more difficult than playing chess or solving calculus problems."

He then enumerates three properties of the thinking brain to explain why thinking is so difficult:

"First, thinking is slow…Your thinking system does not immediately take in a visual scene. Second thinking is effortful; you don't have to try to see, but thinking takes concentration. You can perform other tasks while you are seeing, but you can't think about something else while you are working on a problem. Finally, thinking is uncertain. Your visual system seldom makes mistakes, and when it does you usually think you see something familiar to what is actually out there – you're close, if not exactly right. Your thinking system might not even get you close; your solution to a problem may be far from correct."

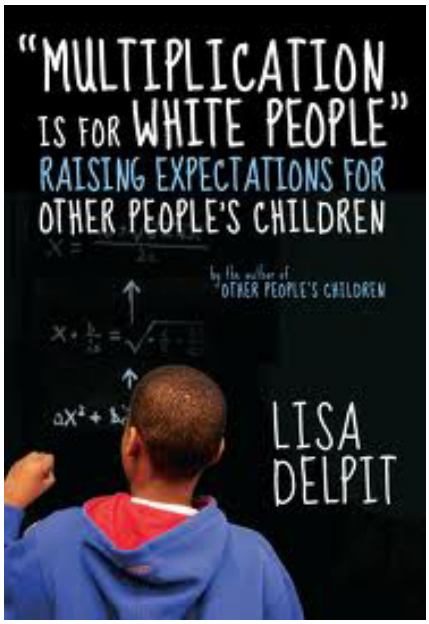
Thus, hopefully you can begin to see why teaching thinking is not only crucial to our students in the 21st century, and why it's essential in leveling the educational playing field by closing the various "achievement gaps" between our students. I hope to have also referenced enough authors and books here to begin describing why it's so difficult, how it may even involve limitations of and changes to our brains, and why it's thus so hard to teach.

So stay tuned for our summer issue of *Connections* and "Thinking About Teaching Thinking, Part II: How Can We Do It?" We will look at specific strategies to address the issues raised today in "Part I: Why the Urgency?" Be prepared for an expanded, more holistic definition/understanding of thinking that includes creativity, imagination, feelings, intuition, even emotions; all essential aspects of thinking. — *Dave Lehman*

(Did you try the problem-solving puzzle on the previous page? If not, go try it now. You can find the correct solution on the last page of this issue of Connections.)

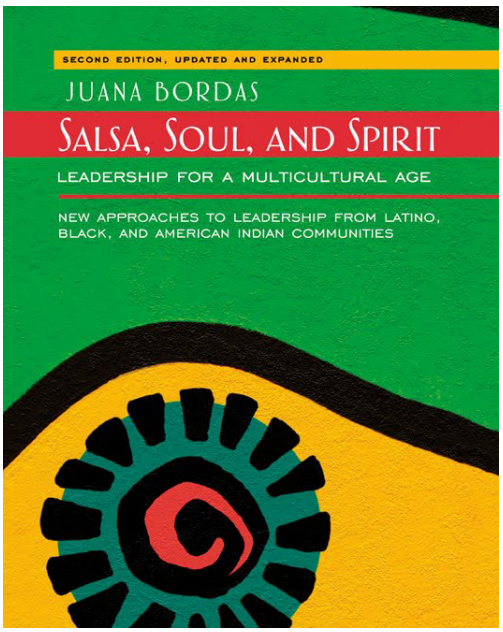
TWO BOOK REVIEWS: The Rainbow People, Spokes on the Great Wheel of Life

By Dave Lehman, Connections Executive Editor, NSRF National Facilitator, and CFG Coach in Wisconsin, davelehman@mac.com



Multiplication Is For White People: Raising Expectations for Other People's Children

By Lisa Delpit, 2012,
New York: The New Press



Salsa, Soul, and Spirit: Leadership for a Multicultural Age

By Juana Bordas, 2007,
Second Edition, 2012,
San Francisco: Barrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

In keeping with NSRF's commitment to equity and diversity, we are reviewing two books in this issue.

Lisa Delpit, no stranger to educators concerned about the education of students of color, is presently a Professor of Education at Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Juana Bordas was born in Nicaragua and is the President of Mestiza Leadership International and Founding President and CEO of the National Hispanic Leadership Institute in Denver, Colorado. Both have received numerous awards for their contributions to the fields of education and leadership. Delpit received the Harvard School of Education award for Outstanding Contribution to Education, and Bordas, the Leadership Legacy award from Spellman College.

These books are both based on research from professional resources. Their bibliographies and the works cited in their footnotes are a treasure in themselves. The volumes are profoundly personal as their following dedications attest:

[Delpit's] ***"This book is dedicated to my mother, Edmae Butlier, a ninety- six-year-old educator who is still teaching me patience, unconditional love, and the value of finding something to laugh at every day. To my daughter, Maya Delpit, who – as she constantly reminds me – taught me everything I know about teaching 'other people's children'; To my Southern University students who continue their commitment to education in the face of challenges that would leave lesser people hiding under the covers; And to the brilliant and talented students of Southern University Laboratory School, their teachers, principal, and families."***

[Bordas's] ***"Para mi Madre, mis Hermanas, mis Hijas, y mis Comrades. (For my mother, my sisters, my daughters, and my friends.) You have been the cradle and the substance of my life."***

Lisa Delpit

But before going further, a word about the titles of these two books. Delpit's title, *Multiplication is for White People*, comes from a student teacher at Southern University who didn't know what to say when an African American 8th grade boy asked her, "Why you trying to teach me to multiply, Ms. L.? Black people don't multiply; black people just add and subtract. White people multiply." The rest of her book's title, *Raising Expectations for Other People's Children*, is in part a reference to her earlier book, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*. In that earlier work, Delpit acknowledges the simple reality in this country that our classrooms are rapidly becoming composed of a "majority of minorities" — African American, Latin American, Asian American, and Native American. Yet, European American (or "white") teachers are overwhelmingly those who are teaching these students — thus, "other people's children."

Juana Boraas

Juana Bordas' title, *Salsa, Soul, and Spirit*, refers to what she calls "new approaches to leadership from Latino (salsa), Black (soul), and American Indian (spirit) communities." Her subtitle, *Leadership for a Multicultural Age*, addresses a wide audience of leaders including, but not limited to, educational administrators. She explains this more fully in her Preface:

"Today's leadership models, although they may differ from person to person and method to method, generally have a common bias toward Western- or European-influenced ways of thinking and approaches. Contemporary leadership theories center on the dominant or mainstream culture and exclude the enormous contributions, potential learning, and valuable insights that come from leaders in diverse communities. However, the task of integrating leadership from these communities into the American mainstream does not fall to Anglo leaders or

authors. To be authentic and effective, this information must emerge from leaders and scholars in communities of color." [a main reason why she, as a Latina, has written this book]

Thus, throughout her book, Bordas incorporates the African symbol of the "Sankofa," the mythical bird from West Africa at the beginning of each chapter. This bird, whose head is turned around looking backwards, symbolizes the respect West Africans have for the insight, knowledge, and wisdom acquired from the past. The bird symbol is said to remind us, "Our roots ground and nourish us, hold us firm when the winds of change howl, and offer perspective about what is lasting and significant." Yet, Sankofa's feet are facing forward, thus reminding us, "The past is a pathway to understanding the present and creating a strong future." In other words, Sankofa tells us to learn from the past — to avoid the dead ends, the mistakes, and the pitfalls of previous personal and ancestral experience.

Both of these authors draw on interviews with those with whom they are directly involved. Delpit's talks are more informal, often on the spot, with elementary school students in their classrooms, individual high school students, and several teachers and student teachers with whom she works. Bordas more formally uses quotes in each chapter from interviews with a group of eleven current leaders, three African Americans, four American Indians, and four Latino/as. Both authors provide us with themes and "factors," lists of major principles around which they organize their books. Delpit describes two major themes:

"The first is the symbiotic interplay between my personal life as a mother and my professional work as a scholar and hopeful activist. Within the chapters of this volume are stories that range from my daughter Maya's first years in elementary school through her admission to college…. The second theme that runs through the book, from the chapters on educating young children to those focused on college students, is the relevance of a list of ten factors I have formulated over a number of years that I believe can foster excellence in urban classrooms." [I would suggest all classrooms!]

Here is Delpit's list of 10 "factors" we must do to create this excellence:

1) Recognize the importance of a teacher and good teaching especially for the 'school dependent' children of low-income communities.

2) Recognize the brilliance of poor, urban children and teach them more content, not less.

3) Whatever methodology or instructional program is used, demand critical thinking while at the same time assuring that all children gain access to 'basic skills' – the conventions and strategies that are essential to success in American society.

4) Provide children with the emotional ego strength to challenge racist societal views of their own competence and worthiness and that of their fami-

lies and communities.

5) Recognize and build on children's strengths.

6) Use familiar metaphors and experiences from the children's world to connect what students already know to school-taught knowledge.

7) Create a sense of family and caring in the classroom.

8) Monitor and assess students' needs and then address them with a wealth of diverse strategies.

9) Honor and respect the children's home cultures.

10) Foster a sense of children's connections to community, to something greater than themselves.

She then weaves these "factors" throughout each of her eleven chapters. For example, in Chapter 2, "Infinite Capacity," she expands on Factors #2 and #9 above, describing "3 Steps to Sanity" –

a) believe in the children,

b) "fight foolishness" (or what educator Herb Kohl says, "fight stupidity," e.g. attempting to build teacher-proof schools with scripted low-level instruction and worksheets), and

c) learn who our children are and discover the legacies they bring.

In Chapter 3 "Stuff You Never Would Say: Successful Literacy Instruction in Elementary Classrooms," Delpit refutes many unsuccessful literacy practices, including looking up words in the dictionary, writing down definitions, then writing them in sentences. Then she expands on Factors #3 and #6 describing "what does work" –

1) Integration: connecting new vocabulary to prior knowledge;

2) Repetition: encountering/using the word/concept many times; and

3) Meaningful use: multiple opportunities to use new words in reading, writing, and discussions.

Likewise, Bordas describes "8 Principles of Multicultural Leadership" as the first step in integrating the leadership practices of communities of color into an inclusive and multicultural form, drawing on core values that are keystones in these cultures.

Part one, A New Social covenant with these Principles:

- ***Sankofa – learn from the past***
- ***I to We – from individualism to collective identity***
- ***Mi Casa Es Su Casa – developing a spirit of generosity***

Part two, Leadership Styles in Communities of Color:

- ***A Leader Among Equals – community conferred leadership***
- ***Leaders as Guardians of Public Values – a tradition of activism***
- ***Leaders as Community Stewards – working for the common good***

Part Three, Creating the Circle of Leadership:

- ***All My Relatives – La Familia, the village, the tribe***
- ***Gracias – gratitude, hope, and forgiveness"***

At the end of each chapter that addresses these eight principles, Bordas provides a short section called "Next Steps," reflections for applying each principle. For example, at the end of Chapter 2 about Principle #2, "I to We – from individualism to collective identity," she describes an activity for understanding the group (e.g. a school faculty or subject area department) and their collective heritage (see the sidebar "Understanding Our Collective Heritage" on page 19.).

Interestingly both Lisa Delpit and Juana Bordas end their respective books with stories from Native American cultures, from which I chose to title this pair of book reviews: "The Rainbow People, Spokes on the Great Wheel of Life." Delpit ends her book

with this story from J. C. High Eagle, an Osage/Cherokee musician, actor, and speaker:

"….if we live life right, we truly understand that we are but spokes on the great wheel of life and that which endangers one spoke endangers the entire wheel. Our work is to strengthen the wheel by strengthening each individual spoke. We are all a part of the wheel."

And Bordas ends her book with this story about the prophesies of the Hopi Elders:

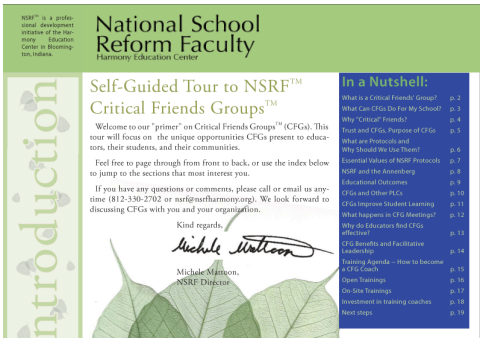
"Let it be said by the children of the seventh generation that we fulfilled the Hopi prophesies, and we became the universal tribe, the rainbow people who reflected the iridescent beauty of humankind and, just as they prophesied, restored the earth, brought peace and understanding, and healed the damage caused by previous generations. All that we do now must be done in a sacred manner and in celebration. We are the ones we have been waiting for."

Indeed, we ARE the ones we have been waiting for. If not us, whom? If not now, when? We ARE all part of the wheel, and in these two books by these dedicated women are a rich resource of tools and strategies for making the celebration of our students' diversity part of a new non-hierarchical, collaborative, organizational framework for our schools, one that embraces and reflects an egalitarian pluralism with the values and norms of a multicultural perspective.
— *Dave Lehman*

Understanding Our Collective Heritage: A New Activity for CFGs

Based on the work of Juana Bordas, suggested by Dave Lehman, NSRF National Facilitator

"Participants bring the oldest picture they have of their grandparents or antepasados (ancestors) and something that represents their culture. Each person shares the story reflected in the picture. (In the oral tradition of communities of color, people embellish, use flowery language, and use their imagination!) Their cultural gifts are also shared. These are placed on a table that has been draped with a nice cloth and decorated with flowers and even candles. People comment on what they have learned about each other's history and unique backgrounds. This exercise creates a cultural collage of people's backgrounds and family histories.



Want to clarify your understanding of NSRF's Critical Friends Groups? Want some support explaining CFGs to friends, colleagues, and administrators? Click the photos above or the links below to review our latest promotional materials, or email us to request copies and links:

A Self-Guided Tour to NSRF Critical Friends Groups (pdf)

and

Video Glimpse of NSRF New CFG Coaches Training

Solution to page 11 puzzle

Dump the tacks out of the box, tack the box to the wall, and use it as a platform for the candle.

Help us give you what you want!

Are you looking for advanced protocol training, beyond the basics taught in a five-day training? Would you feel more confident with an intermediary step toward becoming an NSRF National Facilitator? Want advice on 'tough crowds' or difficult dilemmas?

We want to hear from you!

Please email nsrf@nsrfharmony.org or call us at 812-330-2702 to discuss what "next steps" appeal to you in your use of NSRF® Protocols and Critical Friends Groups®!

How'd we do?

How did you like this issue? Do you have ideas for future articles, book reviews, or topics you'd like to explore (or you'd like us to explore)? We'd love to hear your experiences with NSRF Protocols and CFGs. Email us, or call 812-330-2702.

The National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) is a professional development initiative that focuses on increasing student achievement through professional learning communities. We train individuals to coach Critical Friends Groups, or CFGs, a specific type of Professional Learning Community (PLC). Critical Friends Groups use protocols and activities to facilitate meaningful and efficient communication, problem solving and learning.

As the NSRF does not receive grant support, your paid membership helps us continue to freely provide the original NSRF protocols and supporting materials via our website, as well as support our mission to continue offering training across the nation and world. We encourage you to support our scholarship fund so that any teacher could participate in a training regardless of ability to pay our fee.

Join or renew online at http://www.nsrfharmony.org/membership.html

National School Reform Faculty®
Harmony Education Center
Adult Learning in the Service of Student Achievement

National School Reform Faculty®
909 E. Second St.
Bloomington, IN 47401
http://www.nsrfharmony.org
812-330-2702
Please "Like" us on Facebook and join the conversation!
http://www.Facebook.com/NationalSchoolReformFaculty
Executive Editor: Dave Lehman
Managing Editor: Luci McKean
Director: Michele Mattoon