

The National School Reform Faculty® (NSRF®) publishes the Connections newsletter six times per year. To suggest a topic or submit an article, email nsrc@nsrcfharmony.org or call 812-330-2702.

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR: The NSRF Today and Tomorrow

By Michele Mattoon, NSRF National Facilitator, and Director of the NSRF, michele@nsrcfharmony.org

I recently was looking through some old files and found the contract that Harmony School signed years ago with the Annenberg Institute of School Reform at Brown University. In 1994, The Annenberg Institute launched a “national school reform faculty” that trained educators within the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) to become “critical friends group coaches.” As a part of CES, Harmony was selected to be one of the 45 or 50 schools that piloted the CFG experience.

At the time I was team teaching in a first and second grade class and not particularly interested in being in that first CFG. However, I soon heard many positive reports from the members of that first group. Protocols started to appear in our meetings and staff retreats. I was intrigued, and signed up for the next year.

Although it may sound cliché, the experience changed my life. I’m betting that many *Connections* readers will

agree with me, especially those who have completed a five-day CFG new coaches training and experienced the power of a trusted group of colleagues giving you respectful, useful feedback. Once the principles behind CFGs are infused in the culture of your work, they also begin to spill over into the everyday interactions of your personal life. This training works because it helps people interact in ways that are respectful, efficient and effective, no matter who you work with, where you are, or what you’re doing.

During the time that I have been the director, NSRF has continued to change with the times. The NSRF team has worked hard to continuously improve what we do in these areas:

1. Quality Control: Because one of the main services that NSRF provides is our five-day CFG New Coaches Training, we have become very careful when it comes to training and hiring facilitators—people who not only know the work inside and out, but are engaging

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and flexible enough to address the specific needs of the group they are working with.

NSRF-certified National (and International) Facilitators must have worked in education, have led a CFG for at least a year and have gone through internships with a qualified mentor facilitator. Every time a National Facilitator leads a training, they share their agenda with us, and turn in copies of the last day of Reflections (feedback forms that reflect to us how useful participants found the training to be overall, and any comments they have about the facilitator.) When we invoice our clients, we ask them again to give us feedback on the training directly. All this information allows us to determine which facilitators are skillfully laying the foundations for quality experiences and which ones might need a bit of improvement. The sharing of agendas also provides ways that facilitators can learn from each other and improve our practice together.

2. More for our Members: NSRF has always been committed to keeping our materials and services at the lowest cost possible, and we became a membership organization in 2007. The hope was that membership fees would help us continue offering our materials for free and keep training costs low. Membership was set up much like membership to public radio or TV—the person paying the fee really didn't get anything tangible in return except the good feeling that comes from paying forward the good experience they shared.

Along with that good feeling, we will now give members actual value for their memberships. While all the protocols that we have up on our website “for free” to all will remain that way, any new or revised materials will only be

accessible by members. There will be three categories of membership, each with its own level of access to more and more materials: members who have not been trained as NSRF CFG coaches, members are NSRF-certified CFG coaches and current NSRF-certified national (and international) facilitators.

3. Training Offerings: The primary focus of NSRF is to provide trainings to educators (or people who work with educators) around the world. By far, the most popular training is our five-day CFG New Coaches Training which we originally offered only on-site at various schools and districts. Right before I became the director, NSRF offered its first open training here in Bloomington, Indiana, which anyone could attend. Now individuals or small groups of people from schools can travel to various locations around the world to be trained. Open trainings have become so popular that, this year alone, we will have offered five different open training sessions everywhere from San Francisco, CA to Athens, Greece!

We also have been offering three-day Administrative Trainings specifically designed for participants in leadership positions. We understand how vital it is to the changing of school culture for administrators to understand what CFGs are and how to support them in their schools. These three days also teach administrators how to use protocols to improve their own work, which reinforces the value of the work for teachers. Many leaders who have gone through this training find it so valuable that they choose to add two more days of training, thereby completing the requirement to become NSRF-certified CFG coaches.

NSRF continues to offer Experienced Coaches Trainings for people who have completed CFG coaches training and

have been practicing within a CFG for a period of time, but are looking to hone their skills as a facilitator or learn new protocols and activities. Experienced Coaches Trainings are tailored to fit the needs and goals of the particular school or district and generally last two or three days. These trainings can focus on topics such as Peer Observation, Looking at Student Work, Innovation and Brainstorming, Equity, Conflict Resolution, Problem Solving, Leadership, Dealing with Stress and Change and much more.

Last, we also sometimes do shorter trainings on specific subject areas such as Observation Protocols or Looking at Student Work. We also sometimes provide an Introduction to Protocols workshop based on the needs of a particular audience such as early childhood educators or university education majors.

NSRF “practices what we preach,” by continuously improving our work, to create new learning experiences for our educators. We listen closely to what participants need and desire, and tune our agendas and training offerings accordingly. In this way we strive to meet educator’s needs in this changing world.

4. Facilitation: Recently, NSRF has offered facilitation services to educational institutions seeking an expert facilitator (and neutral third party) to lead a group through a particular process. Some of our national facilitators are experts in using protocols to help groups work efficiently and effectively on sessions around strategic planning, problem solving, mediation, etc. Many schools begin their relationship with us by hiring us to do trainings, but call us back regularly to make use of our facilitation expertise.

5. New Materials: Along with creating new protocols, the NSRF staff has been revising and fine-tuning all our protocols and activities in line with our continuous improvement efforts. Revisions are grounded in years of experience of what works (and what doesn’t), and what “translates” best to new users of the work. We hope you will find our new and improved materials embody a more consistent format and are clearer to understand and implement.

Keeping up with new information about how human beings think, communicate and innovate is important as we move through this process. We are finding that the information in books like *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, by Daniel Kahneman, *Give and Take: A Revolutionary*

Approach to Success, by Adam Grant and *Social: Why Our Brains are Wired to Connect*, by Matthew D. Lieberman help explain why our protocols work so well and what we can do to improve them even more. As fast as we create or revise them, we’ll share them with members and member-coaches on our new website (see #2)!

Once our new website is up and running, our attentions will turn to getting two (at least!) new protocol reference books to you. The new books will feature our revised protocols and activities, and many new ones. We have spent the past four years soliciting our members, asking them what changes they would like to see in a new book. We’re implementing as many of these suggestions that we can to create products that will be significantly more useful and user-friendly.

Looking even further down the road, NSRF plans on developing many more resources for our members—videos, more books of protocols and activities, and perhaps even a protocol selection app for your computers and mobile devices! We will enthusiastically do all we can to continue to carry out our mission.

Cheers!



Michele Mattoon, NSRF Director

**NSRF Mission:
Fostering educational
and social equity
by empowering all
people involved with schools
to work collaboratively
in reflective democratic
communities
that create and support
powerful learning for everyone**