



Dave Lehman is the former founding principal/teacher of the Lehman Alternative Community School in Ithaca, NY. This public middle-high school was recently named after him and his wife by the Ithaca, New York Board of Education upon their retirement after 30 years. Dave was a member of the very first "Principals Seminar" leadership group at the beginning of the NSRF, under the umbrella of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. Soon thereafter he was trained as a coach and then a national facilitator.

Contact him with your questions or comments at [davelehman@mac.com](mailto:davelehman@mac.com)

## RETROSPECTIVE: Twenty Years of My Life in NSRF as It (and I) Evolved

By Dave Lehman, NSRF National Facilitator, and Former Interim Director of the NSRF, [davelehman@mac.com](mailto:davelehman@mac.com)

This year, 2014, marks the twentieth anniversary of the National School Reform Faculty and Critical Friends Groups. The experience has been amazing and transformative, for myself and other teachers and administrators throughout the United States and Canada, with whom I have had the pleasure of working as an NSRF National Facilitator. We felt it might be helpful to newer readers of *Connections* to know more about the history of the organization and how I came to be a part of it.

This history begins with the Coalition of Essential Schools at Brown University beginning in the 1980s. Here, the National Association of Secondary School Principals and the National Association of Independent Schools jointly commissioned Ted Sizer, then chair of the education department at Brown, to conduct a five year "study of high schools" in the U.S., which subsequently was conducted between 1979 and 1984. As a result of this study, three books were published. First, in 1984 and written by Ted Sizer, was *Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School*. In this book Sizer viewed the American High School through the eyes of a prototypical, middle-aged, white, male, high school English teacher, Horace Smith. Horace's "dilemma" was his continually having to compromise the quality of his teaching given all the constraints he experienced, not the least of which was having five classes totaling some 150 students, for whom, among other things, he was to read and evaluate their writing!

The second publication, in 1985, was *The Shopping Mall High School: Winners and Losers in the Educational Marketplace* by Arthur G. Powell, Eleanor Farrar, and Harvard professor of the Graduate School of Education, David Cohen. The "shopping mall" metaphor served as a summary of high schools which offered a plethora of courses where coverage succeeded over depth, and where students were sorted into winners and losers with little concern for those who dropped out along the way. The third and final volume, published in 1986, was *The Last Little Citadel: American High Schools Since 1940* by Robert Hampel, Professor in the History of Education at the University of Delaware. Here Hampel pointed out how little the American high school had changed in 46 years, and how it was likely to be difficult to change in the near future, thus the image of an impenetrable "citadel."

In *Horace's Compromise*, Ted Sizer introduced the idea of a revolution in high school education, a radical altering of the American high school, that would breakthrough the impenetrable "citadel," by using a simple set of nine common principles. Further, Sizer invited those teachers and administrators interested in joining such an endeavor to form a network, to become known as the "Coalition of Essential Schools." These schools would focus on the "essential" skills, knowledge and attitudes young people would need to be successful citizens without having to pick and choose from the "shopping mall" of course offerings. In CES schools, each student would be known well, teachers would have a class load of no more than 80 students, and high school graduation would be based on exhibitions of what had been learned, not on standardized tests. This call to action resulted in an initial group of a dozen high schools forming the beginnings of the Coalition in 1984 with the support of five different educational

foundations, including the Carnegie Foundation.

Three years later, in 1987, is where I enter the story. At the time, I was founding principal of The Alternative Community School (ACS) in Ithaca, New York. ACS applied to and was granted entry into CES, then under the umbrella of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (AISR) at Brown University, and the directorship of Ted Sizer. [The Institute was initially funded, in 1993, by the distinguished publisher, broadcaster, diplomat and philanthropist, Walter Annenberg, with an endowment of \$50 million.] Soon, the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) was formed at Brown as the professional development arm of the Coalition.

In the summer of 1994, the NSRF invited Coalition schools to apply to send teachers to trainings for what were to become “Critical Friends Groups.” Under my principalship, four ACS teachers applied, and two were accepted and attended that initial training. Upon their return that fall semester, they helped our staff meet the few requirements of forming a CFG (to meet at least monthly for two hours, and to share work with the goal of improving their teaching practice). With an initial pool of funds granted from NSRF and the Annenberg for supplies and snack food, a group of ten ACS teachers volunteered and began to meet in the evenings, once a month under the leadership of one of our newly trained CFG coaches. The second trained coach formed a CFG to facilitate the transition of incoming middle school students, particularly students of color, from an Ithaca District elementary school. This second CFG incorporated some of our ACS staff and staff from that Ithaca District elementary.

The first ACS-CFG continued for a number of years, increasing to bi-weekly meetings held after school for greater continuity and convenience of time. Numbers of participants went up and down over a ten-year period with student teachers coming and going, but the experience was so powerful that folks stuck with it, amazing onlookers. Although it was difficult in the beginning to

get people to bring work to be critiqued, those who did bring their own or their students’ work got something meaningful out of it. Even when they didn’t present their own work but participated in reviewing others’, participants were able to reflect on their own work and take something away. During the final year of this ACS-CFG, they addressed a perceived need for a more meaningful way for eighth graders to demonstrate their completion of middle school, and designed the “Middle School Challenge Project.” As a result, ACS eighth

graders began developing their own individual projects annually and presenting them to the staff and parent/caregivers at their middle school promotion.

The joint-CFG lasted a year or two and was helpful to those of our staff who taught the middle schoolers. It subsequently led to the development of a special first semester sixth-grade curriculum of two double-period blocks in the morning – an interdisciplinary math/science course, called “I and T” (Inquiry and Tools) and an interdisciplinary English/social studies course, called “PAL” (People Art and Literature). This made for an easier transition to middle school with fewer initial class changes and fewer new teachers to get to know since the sixth graders came basically from elementary classrooms with one teacher for most of the time.

As principal, I chose intentionally to refrain from joining either of these CFGs as I wanted the teachers not to be constrained in any way by the presence of “their principal.” Even though the school was, and still is, administered in a very collaborative, democratic fashion, I was, after all, the one who evaluated their teaching performance each year. And indeed, I could see the power of the work they were accomplishing within the CFGs without my participation whatsoever.

During this time, going back to July 1995, I was one of about 45 principals from throughout the country who were invited to be part of a five-day principals’ seminar, sponsored and funded by the Annenberg Institute. All invited principals were involved with various school

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reform movements including Project Zero, Accelerated Learning Schools, Comer Schools, and Coalition schools. The principals' seminars were held initially in Providence, Rhode Island at Brown University.

The attendee principals committed to meeting three additional times that first year, and to keeping a personal portfolio of reflections. We met in December in Chicago, March in St. Louis, and July in Boston. The idea was to create our own "professional learning community of school principals," where we could share what we were doing in our schools to radically change public education with a particular focus on issues of equity and diversity. We were delighted that Ted Sizer, Anthony Alverado, Bill Ayers, and Seymour Sarason all participated, as well. We heard and interacted with nationally known educators and authors, and read articles and books about school reform/transformation (e.g. Lisa Delpit's provocative *Other Peoples Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* and Vivian Paley's *White Teacher*). Through the seminars, we learned to use CFG protocols to share our own work, holding up a mirror for each other, making our work public in order to improve it. We learned about "constructivist teaching" and generated this list to describe it – *constructivist teaching is*:

- \* when students' interests generate curriculum;
- \* when learners engage in describing and/or demonstrating their own learning about a given problem or their own thinking/learning;
- \* when new learning relates to prior learning in a real world way;
- \* when the product of the pedagogy is not pre-determined, it evolves;
- \* when the teacher acts as facilitator/coach/encourager;
- \* when children are actively involved;
- \* when students are encouraged to create personal meaning;
- \* when assessment is mutually determined;
- \* when, as a teacher, you do as much listening as talking; and
- \* when teachers use a variety of student groupings to support learning.

We also used various videos to generate deep conversa-

tions. I remember in particular the discussion following the viewing of *The Color of Fear*, with the Oakland Men's Project, produced by StirFry Seminars and Consulting. Looking back, I found this description of the documentary:

*"The Color of Fear is an insightful, groundbreaking film about the state of race relations in America as seen through the eyes of eight North American men of Asian, European, Latino and African descent. In a series of intelligent, emotional and dramatic confrontations, the men reveal the pain and scars that racism has caused them. What emerges is a deeper sense of understanding and trust. This is the dialogue most of us fear, but hope will happen sometime in our lifetime."*

The following notes from my journal are a personal reflection of the impact of this video and our discussion, and are but one example of the deep personal learning that we principals experienced over the course of the year:

*"This was a powerful film for me, and now I sit among a group predominantly made up of women and know that once again as a white male I am the target - the bad guy - and rightly so. How do I continue to get stronger within/without myself about being anti-biased and anti-racist? How can I help, in particular, our young white males while simultaneously going the extra mile to support our students of color, our young girls, the women on the staff, and the men? How can I be more compassionate and more socio-politically-educationally effective? After all, this is at the heart of what education should be all about, namely, building a truly democratic society in which all people can flourish."*

We continued to meet annually for several years after that initial year, coming together to share our experiences trying to establish CFGs with staff in our own schools. This subsequently led to annual winter meetings of NSRF which included teachers from CFGs, and a "home group" just for principals.

Then, in August of 2001, I attended the "CFG Coaches Training for Administrators" held in Breckenridge, Colorado, and thus became a CFG coach. It was here that I developed an action plan using NSRF protocols, developing study groups with the Ithaca City School District administrators. I subsequently facilitated three such groups, one with the elementary principals, one with the secondary principals, and one with the district directors. I continued to lead meetings of these three

district administrator groups for the next three years, until my retirement in 2004.

For several years, I was part of a team of NSRF coaches and National Facilitators with the Ohio High School Initiative, to restructure and shift culture within 17 high schools in Ohio. We also had a similar team in the North Carolina New Schools Project. The state superintendent there was under pressure to make major reform efforts throughout the state, so worked with us for several years in order to create new small schools and some early college high schools. Around that point in time, I became an NSRF National Facilitator and began leading trainings and facilitating other meetings, and continue to do so. During a time of transition at the NSRF, I acted as the interim director of the organization until we hired Michele Mattoon, current director.

### Looking back, looking forward

As NSRF continues to move forward, what are the implications of our past history, briefly highlighted here? Certainly we should continue to focus on and deepen our work on educational inequities of income, social class, race, gender, and sexual preference, to find new ways, new strategies, new protocols to meaningfully engage staff and students in increasingly effective teaching/learning strategies that insure the success of all students. In our age of increasing pressure from standardized test-

ing and common core standards, it is absolutely essential that we remember the central role of education in this country – to educate global citizens to become the drivers of our democracy. Thus, we must increasingly use CFGs – or at least the protocols and professional development strategies – to help develop students who are creative, critical thinking, problem solving, caring young people. We must find new ways to incorporate the new educational technology – from iPhones and iPads to smartboards, the Internet, Facebook and Twitter – as meaningful tools to aid in this work, not just to play with the latest gadget. After all we are the *National* (implying in every state, from the school house to the state house), *School* (but not just a building, rather education in which the whole community is the school-house), *Reform* (continuing to grow and learn, not just to stand still and continue education as usual), *Faculty* (a group of collaborating teachers and administrators, working as a professional learning community).

Congratulations NSRF on our twentieth anniversary! Godspeed!



## Applications are now open for our Summer Critical Friends Group New Coaches Open Training July 14-18

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- Transform school culture

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- Foster equity
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- Support strategic planning
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- Encourage creative, new thinking (sometimes around old problems)
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**“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**