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 812-330-2702.

National School Reform Faculty®
Harmony Education Center

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Connections

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR: The NSRF Today and Tomorrow

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

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

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

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.

As principal, I chose intentionally to refrain from joining the CFGs as I wanted the teachers not to be constrained in any way by the presence of "their principal." 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.

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

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 conversations. 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 testing 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 schoolhouse), ***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

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

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

Classroom "Family Meetings" use NSRF Protocols to Practice Leadership, Civil Discourse, Democracy

By Kathy Boone, CFG Coach in Indiana, kathylboone@hotmail.com

Kathy Boone has been a teacher at Harmony School in Bloomington, IN, for nearly 20 years, with most of her time in this 5th-6th grade classroom. Using NSRF protocols and activities enriches her and her students' learning every year. She says she appreciates working within a multiage classroom within this preK-12 school because it allows her and her co-teachers the opportunity to be "the first level of trusted adults" beyond a student's family, and she honors those deep connections.

Kathy invites your questions or comments at kathylboone@hotmail.com

Editor's Note: This article is one excerpt from a longer article about a major life-skills curriculum revision due to a particularly challenging year in a 5th-6th grade classroom. Another excerpt was printed in the January 2014 issue of Connections.

Family Meeting (structured discussion for community-building and decision-making facilitated by students) stands out as a founding pillar of Harmony School. Harmony tradition strongly encourages the scheduling of regular Family Meetings as an opportunity for students and educators to connect as a community and empower student voice.

This venue provides students the age-appropriate opportunity to practice democracy, develop leadership, balance the voices heard within discussions, and make significant decisions about school policy and course of study. Through my various roles in many different programs at our school over the last twenty years, many memories of Family Meetings stand out as some of the most powerful moments I've experienced as an educator.

In the past several years, however, it seems our 5th & 6th grade Family Meetings languished. Less and less often did students bring provocative issues to the agenda, and more and more, Family Meeting evolved into simply a morning business meeting. The voices of our majority felt dismissed and subordinated by only a few charismatic, dominant individuals who were erroneously perceived by the group as harbingers of the norm.

Given the magnitude of issues we were dealing with in our class last year (as we shared in the January issue of ***Connections***), my co-teacher and I reflected on how to inspire student leadership and advocacy among our masses. How could we bring out the values and ideas and needs of the silent bystanders? Through generous use of NSRF protocols, we feel our Family Meetings have been revolutionized. Our objective was to empower bystanders to become active participants in our democratic process, and it has, by and large, been realized.

Never have I experienced such profound learning experience and examples of peaceful civil discourse, student leadership, and democracy in education as this year once we purposefully put NSRF Protocols, primarily Chalk Talk and Fishbowl, to work in Family Meetings.

Protocols allow us to practice facilitation skills, to hear all the voices in the group and practice civil discourse, to bring up sensitive issues, to create plans of action and agreements, and arrive collaboratively at decisions.

We began the year utilizing Chalk Talk, arriving at our Agreements, which students wrote up and posted in the classroom. They refer to it with each other from time to time.

Weeks later, I was stunned at the power of student voice and respect and civil discourse between the kids while using the Fishbowl Protocol. Teachers had previously modeled the Fishbowl Protocol, rather transparently, when we talked specifically about Civil Discourse and Nonviolent Communication. Our modeling, a discussion of a lighter issue,

served as a foundation for subsequent, more emotional issues. I feel it is important to practice the protocols a few times before tackling weightier issues.

Students chose the Fishbowl as a vehicle to discuss a proposal my co-teacher and I had been resisting: to allow music listening through headphones during independent work time. I think our classmates would agree that individual students became fully invested in the process and now are unlikely to transgress the new policy derived through that rather involved process. The experience was transformative for me, as I truly believe we deeply heard each other's concerns.

Even when a protocol spins out of control under student facilitation, ultimately we believe there is great potential for the intended lesson to internalize through higher order thinking skills as students experience the process.

Later, we experienced a messier and more tense (but not necessarily less effective or transformative) Fishbowl, around the problem with students talking out of turn. When the "fish" were all students and we teachers were on the outside of the "bowl" observing, the students agreed that their 'best' conversations were spontaneous and that turn-taking limited their creative thought. At that point they began disregarding the rules of order (and the protocol), 'modeling' their point to teachers. Chaos ensued… the student facilitator grew angry, several students left the circle in tears, and several dominant personalities fell into parallel heated arguments. Students with diverse neurological landscapes and certain sensitivities left the room.

After teachers redirected students back to the original Fishbowl Protocol process with the student facilitator, the children arrived at the conclusion on their own that it is probably best to follow basic rules of collegial discussion and turn taking in order to hear everyone's voices and lessen stress. We heard mindfulness training in their conversation (see previous article in January issue of Connections), as several of them described how their bodies became tense when the previous conversation had grown out of control. I'll admit our impulsive little group still tends to talk out of turn when excited about a topic, but we've clearly evolved to a more respectful level of deep listening and turn-taking. The process helped us to develop a shared rhetoric for disagreement and conduits for discussion where we can peacefully agree to disagree.

Even when a protocol spins out of control under student facilitation, ultimately we believe there is great potential for the intended lesson to internalize through higher order thinking skills as students experience the process. Sometimes learning and stretching our boundaries feels a little uncomfortable, doesn't it? NSRF protocols have certainly left their legacy, as our 5th & 6th Grade Family Meeting is surely forever transformed for the better.

Many scientific studies online cite mindfulness techniques like meditation,

mindful breathing, and yoga improve self-awareness, decrease stress, and help us live more peacefully within our own lives and as a community.

And through it all, I can say so far it's one of my favorite and most memorable years as an educator. Sometimes it is messy, because personal growth is difficult, and we've all grown through the experience. Yet on a daily basis we see friendship groups expanding, people speaking up for justice, supporting those with special needs, advocacy for the minority view, among other positive effects. We feel the positivity and human kindness in our days. It's not perfect, we are dealing with humans and change takes time, yet I think I can speak for the group that we are having a great year.

While I do not claim that using protocols in the classroom was the sole effect of such monumental change in our class from one year to the next, I do profess that mindful use of protocols in the classroom drastically improves student engagement, adds breadth and depth to student learning, and inspires students and adults.

I would welcome opportunities to discuss our approach to community building 'mindfully,' so please email me with your comments or questions. Ultimately, I hope our work as educators will help all of us grow as individuals, as a community, and ultimately help make the world a more just and peaceful place.

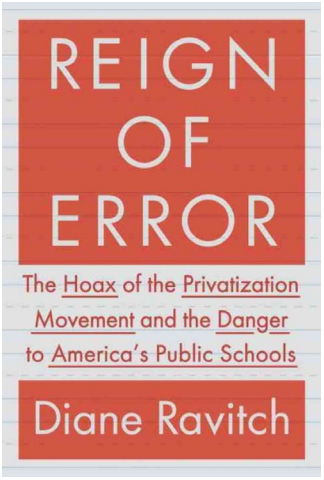
So far it's one of my favorite and most memorable years as an educator. Sometimes it is messy, because personal growth is difficult, and we've all grown through the experience.

BOOK REVIEWS

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

Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools

By Diane Ravitch



Published 2013, Alfred Knopf
New York

Diane Ravitch - currently a Research Professor of Education at New York University - is a familiar name to most educators; the former Assistant Secretary of Education under President George W. Bush, appointed to the National Assessment Governing Board by President Bill Clinton, and most particularly, the chief architect of the "No Child Left Behind" (or NCLB) education law. At a recent conference at Dartmouth College, in response to a question from the audience asking her to explain her dramatic turn around, Ravitch responded:

"I believed in those things [NCLB and the Race to the Top] because they didn't yet exist and sounded good in theory. Now they have [been tried]. I reviewed the evidence. I realized I was wrong and wrote a book about it. I decided the rest of my life would be committed to reversing course and correcting what I got wrong."

Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools is that book, and a must read for anyone interested in the future of our public schools. Ravitch begins with a heart-wrenching opening chapter – "Our Schools Are at Risk" – which serves as an overview of her perspective, namely that public schools are not failing drastically, are not broken, and are not in deep crisis (not to say there aren't areas of improvement needed, particularly in some urban areas). Furthermore, Ravitch states - the solution to this supposed public school disaster is not to continue to use even more standardized tests, not to fire teachers and principals, not to close schools, not to allow uncertified people to teach, not to eliminate teachers' unions, nor to use public funds to hire for-profit corporations to use vouchers to run charter schools and online/virtual schools - possibly spelling the death of public education. Thus, she closes that opening chapter as follows:

"If we mean to conquer educational inequity, we must recognize that the root causes of poor academic performance are segregation and poverty, along with inequitably resourced schools. We must act decisively to reduce the causes of inequity. We know what good schools look like, we know what great education consists of. We must bring good schools to every district and neighborhood in our nation. Public education is a basic public responsibility: we must not be persuaded by a false crisis narrative to privatize it. It is time for parents, educators, and other concerned citizens to join together to

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strengthen our public schools and preserve them for future generations. ***The future of our democracy depends on it."*** [emphasis mine]

Diane Ravitch then provides an in-depth analysis of what she calls the "corporate reformers" before launching into a detailed, thoroughly researched refutation of the false criticisms, the false attacks on public education in our country. There are 15 tightly argued chapters - accompanied by an Appendix of 41 charts and graphs - with such headings as: "The Facts About Test Scores," "The Facts About the Achievement Gap," "The Facts About the International Test Scores," "The Facts About High School Graduation Rates," and more. For each of these chapters, Ravitch begins with what she calls the "Claim" and the "Reality." For example, she begins the chapter entitled "The Facts About Teachers and Test Scores" as follows:

"CLAIM Teachers determine student test scores, and test scores may be used to identify and reward effective teachers and to fire those who are not effective.

REALITY Test scores are not the best way to identify the best teachers."

Her in-depth analysis then includes the finding that this idea comes, at least in large part, from one major source, that of statistician William Sanders who used his statistical model in advising agricultural and manufacturing industries. According to Sanders, by monitoring student progress on the test scores of a given teacher from year to year, he could isolate the "value added" by the teacher to that child's learning. Ravitch then goes on to site the joint statement prepared by the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and the National Academy of Education (NAE) noting the problems with this value-added assessment model which doesn't take into account such additional factors as:

Diane Ravitch.
Photo © Paul Wolfe, Courtesy Alfred E Knopf/Random House Books

- school factors such as class sizes, curriculum materials, instructional time, availability of specialists and tutors, and resources for learning (books, computers, science labs, and more)
- home and community supports or challenges
- individual student needs and abilities, health, and attendance
- peer culture ad achievement
- prior teachers and schooling, as well as other current teachers
- differential summer learning loss, which especially affects low-income children
- the specific tests used, which emphasize some kinds of learning and not other, and which rarely measure achievement that is well above or below grade level

She then concludes this chapter with this statement - "Aside from the absence of evidence for this way of evaluating teachers, there remains the essential question of why scores on standardized tests should displace every other goal and expectation for schools: character, knowledge, citizenship, love of learning, creativity, initiative, and social skills."

Diane Ravitch then devotes the final 11 chapters of ***Reign of Error*** to solutions to the above "errors," each describing a recommendation. In a short introductory chapter to these possible solutions, Ravitch first reminds us that principals and teachers in schools cannot alone solve what are critical factors deeply embedded in our current society:

"The current reform approach ***DOES NOT*** *alter the status quo of deep poverty and entrenched inequality. After more than a decade of No Child Left Behind*

[I'm reminded that 2014 is supposed to be the year when all students would be proficient in reading and math!], *we now know that a program of testing and accountability leaves millions of children behind and* ***DOES NOT*** *eliminate poverty or close achievement gaps. The growing demand for more testing and more accountability in the wake of NCLB is akin to bringing a blowtorch to put out a fire."* [emphasis mine]

Ravitch then refers to the work of Stanford University's Linda Darling-Hammond who points out that it's not as tough we don't know what works. From the 1960s into the 1980s there were the highly successful educational policies of the "War on Poverty" and the "Great Society" in which - "the black-white reading gap shrank by two-thirds for 17-year-olds, black high school and college graduation rates more than doubled, and, in 1975, rates of college attendance among whites, blacks and Latinos reached parity for the first and only time before or ever since." Using her format, here are her 11 solutions with research evidence to support each one:

SOLUTION NO. 1 Provide good prenatal care for every pregnant woman.

SOLUTION NO. 2 Make high-quality early childhood education available to all children.

SOLUTION NO. 3 Every school should have a full, balanced, and rich curriculum, including the arts, science, history, literature, civics, geography, foreign languages, mathematics, and physical education.

SOLUTION NO. 4 Reduce class sizes to improve student achievement and behavior.

SOLUTION NO. 5 Ban for-profit charters and charter chains and ensure that charter schools collaborate with public schools to support better education for all children.

SOLUTION NO. 6 Provide the medical and social services that poor children need to keep up with their advantaged peers.

SOLUTION NO. 7 Eliminate high-stakes standardized testing and rely instead on assessments that allow students to demonstrate what they know and can do.

SOLUTION NO. 8 Insist that teachers, principals, and superintendents be professional educators.

SOLUTION NO. 9 Public schools should be controlled by elected school boards or by boards in large cities appointed for a set term by more than one elected official.

SOLUTION NO. 10 Devise actionable strategies and specific goals to reduce racial segregation and poverty.

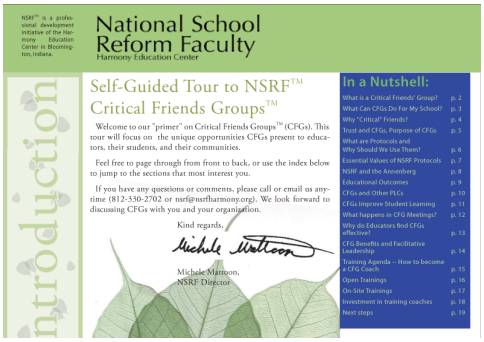
SOLUTION NO. 11 Recognize that public education is a public responsibility, not a consumer good.

It is particularly important to note that three of these solutions do not involve teachers or schools – No. 1, No. 6, and No. 10 – and yet are crucial in addressing the current situation for all too many students.

Building on these 11 chapters is the last chapter - with a thoughtful analogy in the title, "Conclusions: the Pattern on the Rug" - in which Diane Ravitch first reminds us all:

"Public education is an essential part of the democratic fabric of American society. *Nearly 90 percent of American students attend public schools, whose doors are open to all, without regard to race, ethnicity, language, gender, disability status, national origin, or economic class. Control of public education is democratic, subject to decisions made by elected or appointed officials, rather than by private boards an for-profit corporations. Community schools are controlled by residents of the community, not by corporate chains. In 95 percent of the school districts in the United States, if the public does not like the decisions of their school boards, they can vote them out of office.* ***The goal of our public educational system, evolved over many decades, is equality of opportunity."*** [emphasis mine]

And Ravitch ends ***Reign of Error*** noting in particular: ***"Protecting our public schools against privatization and saving them for future generations of American children is the civil rights issue of our time."*** [again, emphasis mine] Thank you Diane!



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