LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR:
"Agree" Now or Pay Later  By Michele Mattoon, NSRF National Facilitator, and Director of the NSRF, michele@nsrfharmony.org

People love to complain about the dreaded MEETING. Even the word can sap the strength of the most motivated of employees. We could fill volumes with the myriad reasons that people almost universally hate meetings, but for now, I’ll restrain myself and stick to one big issue—the existence of unspoken norms in the meeting culture.

A norm can be defined as a set of assumptions held by a group's members, outlining “appropriate/good” behavior and “inappropriate/disallowed” behavior. Norms often are not stated (in verbal or written form), but everyone knows what they are—and some of them aren’t pretty. Awhile back, during a meeting I was finding particularly tedious and irritating, I conducted a thought experiment. I pretended I was an alien disguised as a human being, inferring norms operating during what was billed as a “problem solving” forum. Here are some of the things I noted:

It was OK to:

• Keep yourself distracted with computers, texting, or grading papers … provided you didn’t openly distract others.
• Not participate at all.
• Talk a large percentage of the time (often repeating yourself) … provided your demeanor was forceful, and your voice loud.
• Leave the meeting once or twice.
• Interrupt the meeting chair … provided you were the boss.
• Take phone calls … provided you were the boss.
• Add agenda items or decide what agenda items should be talked about … provided you were the boss.
• Not start on time.
• Keep everyone past the stated ending time.
• Speak for others.
• State your opinions as if they were facts.
• Complain about how unproductive the meeting was with friends/colleagues …

Big Changes Still Afoot ... But a Bit Delayed

Everything we introduced on the front page of the November 2013 issue of Connections is still in progress: new website, updated protocols and activities, new design everywhere. But schedule and staff changes with our university student website team, extra days off thanks to Mother Nature and her polar vortex, and unexpected delays over the holidays are still playing out. Your membership benefits have not changed in the meantime. More will be revealed soon!
provided you were out of earshot of the people who might take offense.

And finally,

- Continue to meet about the same issue or problem over and over again, because nothing ever was decided.

It was not OK to:

- Point out that someone never participated.
- Point out that someone (or someones) used up 80% of the meeting’s airtime.
- Suggest that people put away distracting items … especially the boss.
- Insist that we start on time or end on time.
- Suggest that the meeting might be structured differently than prior meetings so that the outcome would be more productive.

Of course, I was one of the biggest culprits in all of this. Although the hours I have logged in meeting times are vast, I realized an uncomfortable truth about myself. Without stated norms, I simply perpetuate the culture of the “unspoken norms” along with everyone else, no matter how much they hamper meeting effectiveness. (I’m sure I’m not the only one who does this, and I invite you to conduct your own thought experiment sometime.)

Luckily, we have a powerful tool to combat the scourge of the meeting world: an activity to establish norms that will create a positive, trusting, and effective meeting atmosphere. At NSRF, we have settled on the language of “agreements,” rather than “norms” because we want to recognize from the beginning that each individual voluntarily commits to these values. We’ve learned that you can actually improve the culture of a regularly meeting group through this process: have members intentionally list what they need for effective meetings, collaboratively decide which agreements would work with the whole group, and pledge to be accountable and to hold each other accountable.

The Agreements Activity is best used with any group that meets on a regular basis. Here are some tips for setting a group's agreements:

**Don’t schedule the Agreements Activity as the first agenda item in the first meeting of a new group.** Give people some time to work together on other tasks to see where things go well, and what behaviors arise that aren’t universally appreciated. On the other hand, don’t wait so long that the group creates bad habits that will be hard to change. We suggest setting agreements at the end of the first meeting or the beginning of the second meeting. If your group has already been meeting for some time, schedule an open and honest discussion about the meeting culture. What’s working? What isn’t? Then, if people appear to want things to improve, you can facilitate the activity.

**Set aside adequate time.** Yes, the Agreements Activity really does take 40-60 minutes. Some people think the second step (making sure everyone understands the meaning of each listed agreement) is a waste of time. Nothing could be further from the truth. Without ensuring a common understanding of the terms in advance, you’re inviting huge discussions later when someone seems to have violated one of them. For example, someone may suggest putting “Be fully present” on the agreements list. Does this mean simply to practice active listening? Or, did the person suggesting it want people to close their computer lids, stop texting on their phones and quit grading stu-
dent work so that they may attend fully to the issue at hand? On the other hand, don't let the conversation stray into a desire to “perfectly” define an agreement because you’ll … .

Revisit and revise your groups’ agreements over time. An agreements list is a living document that should change with the changing needs of the group. We recommend that you post the document visibly so group members can refer to it during every meeting. Once the agreements are established, read them aloud during every other meeting (or so) for the first few months. This gives group members a chance to add, subtract, or modify the original agreements to better fit the group’s needs. (For example, after noticing that many people arrive late to the meeting, someone may want to add “Begin and end on time” to the list.) Once things are going smoothly and the agreements seem to be working, revisiting them 2 or 3 times a year may be enough.

Require this crucial agreement for your CFG. Although setting agreements is a good idea for any group that meets regularly, every Critical Friends Group must center around one agreement, no matter how it’s phrased: “maintain confidentiality.” Nothing will destroy trust faster than someone sharing a difficult issue in confidence at their CFG meeting, only to hear a non-member comment on that very topic in the hallway two days later. Why would anyone ever risk sharing a dilemma again? Also, confidentiality can be defined in many ways, so make sure your group members have a common understanding of the term. In the best of all worlds, people should feel comfortable sharing great ideas, resources and practices that came up in their CFG with others, but keep any sensitive dilemmas that are shared from being discussed outside the group.

Try this short-cut for single meetings. Finally, agreements can be effective and helpful even for one-off meetings or workshops. When I am facilitating or leading these meetings, I will explain what agreements are and then post this list of four:

1. Practice being fully present
2. Listen for understanding (suspend judgment)
3. Take responsibility for your learning and support others’ learning
4. Participate

These agreements or expectations help build an environment of positive collaboration no matter how long your meeting will be.

Setting agreements increases the efficiency and effectiveness of a meeting by clearly stating expectations around social behaviors. They give group members a way to address “inappropriate” behaviors with less risk of being perceived as personal attacks. Finally, agreements help create trust and reduce the stress levels of the group’s members through establishing predictability. (I know what’s expected of me and every member of the group and I know that if the meeting is not productive, I have a structure to address the problem.) Agreements are instrumental in shaping the culture of the group and thus defining its health and long-term prognosis for success.

Do you have any stories about group agreements you’d like to share? We’d love to hear them, so email us.

Michele Mattoon
NSRF Director
CREATING A NEW PROTOCOL: Filling the Buckets
By Jill Randall, CFG Coach in California, randall@hamlin.org

Editor’s Note: This article describes an example of how NSRF-certified CFG coaches may create or adapt protocols and activities for their needs. We encourage Connections readers to help this author and NSRF by trying out the protocol described here and reporting your results both to the author and to NSRF. After the protocol has been polished through this testing process, we’ll be able to formally add it to our library of resources.

I was first introduced to NSRF’s Critical Friends Group work a few years ago and participated in a CFG at my school. I found the work to be exciting and applicable. When the opportunity presented itself for The Hamlin School to host a new CFG Coaches Training in June 2013, I was eager to sign up. (Editor’s Note: The Hamlin School will be hosting an open training for CFG Coaches this summer in San Francisco.) As an arts teacher, the CFG language easily translated and supported arts classes as well as academic classes.

Many of the existing NSRF protocols and activities can be used to discuss arts lessons, units of study, and student work. However, I was seeking a protocol that could unpack one of our culminating events. How could a protocol discuss both the micro and the macro – the logistics as well as the student learning? At The Hamlin School, we organize so many great events, but the pace of the school year limits the time for reflection. How might a community honor an event through reflection rather than rush to the next?

During the June 2013 training week, I took a shot at creating a new protocol. We are giving it a test run this school year, with positive results so far. At our K-8 school in San Francisco, we organize many events and activities that could benefit from this kind of reflection and documentation. To my surprise, the list of yearly events became long:

- Dance, theater, and music performances
- Art shows
- Grandparents/Special Friends Day
- Learn about Hamlin Admissions Day
- Halloween Assembly
- Thanksgiving Assembly
- Family Fitness Night/Title IX Night
- Earth Week
- Spring Musical

Field trips
- New parent orientation sessions
- Parent coffees
- Curriculum Night (i.e. Back to School Night)
- Outdoor education trips

We also cycle through grade-level events including:

- 4th Grade Famous American Women Project
- 5th Grade Greek Day
- 6th Grade Symposium of the Centuries
- 6th Grade Presidio Partnership
- 8th Grade Rising to the Challenge Project
- 8th Grade Poetry Performance Project

Recently, we used the protocol to discuss my Winter Dance Assembly, which involved the 7th and 8th grade dance elective and the chorus. This 45-minute original production was presented on December 20th in front of the entire school. The audience (students and parents) totaled around 450 people. As the dance teacher, this was one of my largest projects here to date. I was excited but nervous to present this new project.

The protocol did just what I wanted it to accomplish – it provided the time, space, and structure to discuss an arts event and capture notes for future use. After using the protocol with my peers, I can now take these ideas and meet with my division head to conclude the conversation for this school year.

I hope that you can find use for this protocol at your K-12 school as well. Please email me with questions or comments at randall@hamlin.org.
Filling the Buckets

A 30-minute protocol to be used after student performances, art shows, assemblies, and other large, culminating events (Created for testing June 24, 2013 by Jill Randall, The Hamlin School, for the NSRF)

**Purpose**
- To provide structure for lead teachers to reflect on their work and hear feedback from colleagues
- To document the details of the activity, as well as suggestions for future use
- To discuss both the logistics and student learning

**Participants**
- At least 4 people
- Lead teacher(s) for the project
- Two or more teachers or staff members who witnessed the event
- Note taker (not the lead teacher) volunteers to document the meeting and take notes, which will be shared with everyone after the discussion

**Logistics and Data Capture**
Prior to the meeting, the lead teacher should capture the key details about the event: date, time, room, who was invited, setup of the space, etc. Also, if possible, document who participated in the event, both presenters/performers and also audience members (ex. all 6th grade students danced and 50 parents were in the audience). Display this information on a chart paper or projection, and include it in the meeting notes.

1. **Highlights and Stresses (3 minutes)**
The leader teacher or teachers have the opportunity to speak first about the event and its highlights and stressful aspects for them. The rest of the group quietly listens and does not respond yet.

2. **Shout Outs/Word on the Street (5 minutes)**
The group has the opportunity to share “shout outs” and positives about the event. “I loved seeing….I appreciated…..I was impressed with…..” Anyone in the group can share something he/she has heard about the event from students, parents, and audience members as well. Group members share responses “popcorn style.”

3. **"Red Flags" (3-5 minutes)**
Were there areas of concern or aspects that were concerning or raised questions? Anyone can verbally share and capture an idea here. It can be a comment about content, audience, preparation, logistics, etc. (Ex. “It would have been better to set up chairs instead of having the audience sit on the floor. Sitting for an hour on the gym floor is hard for the K-1 students.”)

4. **Content Review, Follow-up Questions, Warm/Cool Feedback (5-10 minutes)**
The lead teacher restates for the group what was presented/shared/performed at the event. The lead teacher then states a focusing question about the content to orient participants towards a specific area about which she/he’s seeking feedback. A few examples include:

   “In our Winter Dance Concert, the students explored many aspects of winter - the sights, sounds, and associations. There was no explicit storyline. Were the K-5 students in the audience okay with this? Did they ‘get it?’”
   “Did you experience joyful learning?”
   “How did the students demonstrate and share their knowledge?”

   The group can ask clarifying questions at this point.

   The lead teacher pulls out of the group and quietly listens to the group’s feedback.

   Go around the circle and have each participant share feedback. The facilitator will need to gauge whether to allow participants to share either warm or cool feedback during this round, or to have two “rounds” - the first being warm feedback and the second being cool feedback.

   The lead teacher rejoins the group and has the opportunity to respond to the feedback.

5. **Debrief (3 minutes)**
The group considers:
- What did you learn during our discussion?
- How was the protocol useful?
- Where can we keep this information, for future use? (e.g. Google Drive)
- Do the notes need to be shared with other community members who did not attend this discussion?

6. **Post-Protocol**
After the protocol, the lead teacher might then decide to meet with an administrator to debrief the event and to share the notes from the CFG.
Kaethe Perez is Director in the Office of Student Learning for Step Up for Students, a nonprofit organization that administers the Florida Tax Credit Scholarship Program. Kaethe supports private schools in establishing and maintaining collaborative partnerships with families for increased student success. Contact Kaethe with your questions or comments at kaethe_p@msn.com.

The Impact of Conversation Circles
By Kaethe Perez, CFG Coach and NSRF National Facilitator in Florida, kaethe_p@msn.com

All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten is a well-known book written by Robert Fulghum. As a long-time kindergarten teacher, I know the impact sitting in a circle had on my students. Everyone felt an equal part of the group conversation, and sharing could be done side by side or across the circle. When I decided to move from my teacher chair to the floor, sitting cross-legged with my students, the impact was even more powerful.

Later in my career I was a math coach for elementary teachers. My natural inclination (from my kindergarten experience) was to bring the older students closer to the board to encourage shared thinking about mathematical concepts. Sitting in a circle again, using community agreements, gave us the ability to share thinking, to restate for understanding, and to agree/disagree without negativity.

In my current work with Success Partners, I am still seeing the power of the circle. For instance, we assembled a HUGE check-out circle at the end of our Success Partners Summer Institute. This final activity allowed everyone to speak from their heart and to share the impact Success Partners would have on their parent-school partnership work. The circle naturally slowed us down and allowed us to focus, creating equality and connecting with others in a wonderful way.

During our November PEP rally at NorthRidge Christian Academy, this idea of the conversation circle was brought back to my thinking. During the Futures protocol, their staff was too large to sit at one table, so they made the decision to move the chairs into a circle, with a scribe in the middle. The norms were already established to acknowledge one another as equals, monitor equity of participation, and to speak and listen from the heart, to name a few. As you can see from this picture, the impact of a conversation circle is powerful!

I encourage you to thoughtfully reconsider room setup, perhaps intentionally using conversation circles when you set up meetings with your staff, your students, and your parents.
Employing NSRF Protocols in the Classroom to Teach Mindfulness Training and Conflict Resolution

By Kathy Boone, CFG Coach in Indiana, 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 will be printed in the March issue of Connections.

Starting at the beginning of this academic year, our class learned to engage in mindful breathing and meditation practice throughout the school day as a stress reduction practice. Last year was particularly challenging, and since half the class returned (last year’s fifth graders returning as sixth graders), we knew upfront that a classwide effort would be helpful. Of course, some days 5th & 6th graders can keep it together only a short time; however, they now appear to enjoy mindful breathing and simple meditation, and some kids even practice at home. Mindfulness training and conflict resolution provide practical strategies for all of us to use personally and with each other as we improve the classroom atmosphere. Early in the semester, we began conflict resolution training, as well.

Given that Harmony School and the National School Reform Faculty share space as divisions within Harmony Education Center, we had easy access to the mentorship of former Harmony teacher and current NSRF Director, Michele Mattoon. Last spring, when we presented her with our dilemma (lack of engagement in an apparently tired conflict resolution curriculum), she enthusiastically agreed to author a new one using NSRF protocols. She also offered to teach the new curriculum this fall, modeling the protocols so that we could employ them in the classroom later in a wider variety of contexts.

Michele captured the students’ attention using a MicroLab. The first question asked students to define the meaning of conflict; the second, to discuss best and worst ways to handle conflict. The third question was my favorite, “What would have to change in your life so you could have a closer match between what you believe about the best ways to handle conflict and how you actually do handle conflict?”

I like that this protocol allows us to practice deep listening. It felt much more engaging than traditional lecture-based teaching and we seemed to arrive at deeper meaning than our typical group discussions. Students did not display nearly the restlessness in chairs and appeared more physically comfortable as they didn’t sit in one place too long. Honestly, some of the students have independently connected to that last question in their goal-setting well after the class was over. One student told me later, “People have been telling me I have anger, so I’m going to write about that because I want to know what I have to change to have less anger.” Debriefing at the end of this protocol serves an important purpose in practicing reflection and self-assessment.

The second seminar focused on feelings, beginning with a pair-share on mediation, negotiation, and how they relate to conflict. Pair-sharing definitely set the stage for more hands to go up during the whole group discussion that followed, so we’ve been starting more of our large group discussion questions this way this year.

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
group discussion with pair-share in other classes. **Block Party** was perhaps the most popular protocol among our group of kids. The first time, however, our energetic group benefited from clear reminders that “this wasn’t a 5th & 6th grade mosh pit.”

I also recommend keeping a watchful eye on the body language of some of your more sensitive individuals and those who struggle with social cues. Once they have the experience under their belt, future Block Party experiences go without a hitch, so I really encourage you to try it.

We did have one student who clearly felt unsafe during this protocol. This turned out to be a positive learning experience for all, because it cued a conversation about how the student felt, what their needs were, and provided a context to develop self-advocacy strategies. The student in question has agreed to try this protocol again sometime, and I feel comfortable. Overall, though, the Block Party was popular among the kids. After all, learning is inherently social, and this technique satisfies social needs in the young and appears to make learning fun. As a language arts and social studies teacher, I see Block Party as very versatile in that it’s a fun and accessible way to make meaning out of virtually any short text.

In the third seminar, our students shared their feelings more deeply. As a NSRF-certified CFG coach, I have used protocols with this class before, so our kids were already familiar with **Chalk Talk**. Michele revealed the question, “What makes you angry?” Our students seemed very forthright with their responses, and since they were familiar with the protocol, they often branched off of others’ ideas more than they did the first several times we used Chalk Talk in other contexts.

Sharing strategies for owning our anger and calming down gifted us with each other’s various methods so we could adopt them for ourselves. **Affinity Mapping** is very effective in helping develop life skills strategies: categorizing invoked higher order thinking skills and deepened their ability to access those strategies when their rational thinking brain shuts down due to anger. We observed that the more sensitive and neurologically diverse students who shied away from the more social protocols were particularly engaged in Affinity Mapping. I’m now inspired to try this protocol in other classroom contexts.

Of course, active listening plays an integral role in conflict resolution, and I would suggest that both Michele’s conflict resolution curriculum and the NSRF protocols practice in vital active listening will clearly help our students learn and have healthier relationships.

We never go a year without conflict resolution training. It’s an essential part of our curriculum. We believe we’ve better met the unique emergent needs of the new generation by using NSRF protocols and Michele’s curriculum. Eventually we’ll adapt it and make it more our own, but for now we are basking in the sunshine of far more healthy relationships and a kinder and more compassionate classroom community.

**Look for part two of Kathy’s article in the March issue of Connections.**
At this time of year, in the memory of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., I usually reread Why We Can’t Wait, Where Do We Go From Here, or another of his writings and sermons in Testament of Hope: the Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr. But, earlier this year I read the amazing 400+ page account of Dr. King’s murder and the search for his murderer, Hellhound on His Trail: The Stalking of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the International Hunt for His Assassin.

What do you know or remember about what happened in Memphis, Tennessee on April 4, 1968? Who was King’s assassin? Was he ever captured? What compelled him to do it? Where did he come from and where did he go?

And how much do you really know about King? Why was he on that hotel balcony in Memphis that April afternoon? Why was he in Memphis in the first place? Through this thorough research and reporting by author Hampton Sides, you will find answers to these questions and more, in a non-fiction book that reads very much like a compelling, absorbing novel.

The meticulously detailed account begins with James Earl Ray’s escape from prison on a previous charge:

“On April 23, 1967, Prisoner #416J, an inmate at the maximum-security Jefferson City Penitentiary in Missouri, stuffed himself into a bread-filled metal box bound for the prison farm workers. He became the first man to successfully escape in the institution’s 131-year history. Fashioning himself Eric Galt [one of a series of identities Ray adopted during his bizarre journey], this nondescript thief and con man drifted through the American South, down into Mexico, and then to Los Angeles. His dream was to become a director of porn films.”

Hellbound describes James Earl Ray’s growing racism and obsession with Dr. King, as well as his avid support of George Wallace’s campaign for the Presidency. Ray traveled to Los Angeles, and decided to seek notoriety as the one who would stalk and kill Dr. King, who he had come to hate vehemently.

You may recall that King had come to Memphis in April 1968 to lead peaceful protests supporting the garbage workers on strike. The striking workers, all black, were driven to seek better wages and working conditions after two of their co-workers were crushed to death by the hydraulic trash compactor on
their antiquated garbage truck. The book outlines how this march unfortunately and disappointingly ended in violence, due in large part to triangulations between King’s nonviolent group, members of the Black Panthers who were frustrated with that nonviolent approach, and the blatantly racist Director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, who viewed both King and the Panthers as dangerous radicals. Here, too, you will read a storyline that seems to be all too familiar today: Attorney General Ramsey Clark refused time and time again to engage in what he viewed as illegal wire-tapping and surveillance of King, despite repeated orders to do so by Hoover. Indeed, much of the rhetoric and rabble-rousing described in the late 1960s sounds far too similar to radically conservative factions today for comfortable reading.

_Hellbound_ predominantly focuses on Ray’s obsession with Dr. King and his work, pulling together details from scores of interviews and both published and unpublished documents. But the author also reveals details about Dr. King that many people today do not know. For instance, you may be surprised to learn that King was on that balcony in Memphis because he was a heavy smoker and had stepped out for a cigarette. Additionally (although perhaps not so surprisingly given similar stories of recent U.S. presidents and other international leaders), you may be disappointed to learn that King was a womanizer. Perhaps one might say these personal qualities, or shortcomings, make him all the more human, and do not negate his amazing leadership. He was one who was not afraid to risk his life for the civil rights and social justice of fellow citizens, and who was not afraid to take what some considered unpopular positions on such issues as the Vietnam War, which he came ardently to oppose. It makes his legacy even more important as we educators continue to confront racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, and able-ism in our schools. Perhaps we have our own dreams of public schools where every student is cared about and known well, and every effort is made to help each succeed, becoming fully participating citizens in a democracy, a fully educated, critically-thinking, problem-solving citizenry.

After detailing the assassination halfway through the book, the narrative holds readers’ attention, following Ray’s narrow, daring escape from Memphis to Toronto, Canada, and from there to his flight abroad. Woven throughout is the story of the amazing work by FBI agents and others who tracked him down and captured him just in the nick of time before boarding a plane in Lisbon, Portugal. Ray was headed to seek asylum in Rhodesia, then a segregated, apartheid country.

From here you will follow Ray to solitary confinement in a Nashville prison, when in 1971 he was transferred to Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary. Then, six years later on June 10th 1977, James Earl Ray again escaped from prison, this time with five others. The six escapes had each made a piece of pipe that they linked together to make a pipe-ladder to get them over the prison wall. Within a few hours or days they all were captured, tracked down by bloodhounds in the rugged wilderness surrounding Brushy Mountain and returned to prison. Ray himself was the last to be recaptured, having survived only on wheat germ.

At last, the book relays Ray’s stabbing by several black inmates, then his resulting diagnosis with Hepatitis C, causing his death twelve years later, in 1998.

Ultimately, one must consider whether the _Hellbound on His Trail_ title refers to Ray’s singleminded obsession, or that of the federal agents tracking Ray repeatedly. In any case, I highly recommend this book and look forward to conversing with anyone else who reads it. Please email me with your thoughts.
The New American High School
By Theodore R. Sizer
Published 2013, Jossey-Bass

In 1987, I was the principal of the Alternative Community School, a public middle and high school in Ithaca, New York. We applied for and were granted membership as one of the first fifty schools to join the fledgling Coalition of Essential Schools, begun by Ted Sizer, then Chairman of the Education Department at Brown University. The application process was extensive, requiring not only a letter from me stating why we wanted to become a member school, but other similar letters from several staff as well as a board resolution indicating support for our application. Thus, when I learned at the 2013 fall forum of the Coalition that a new book from Sizer had been published, I was anxious to read it.


The foreword to Sizer’s latest book is written by Deborah Meier, another prominent education reform activist and friend of the NSRF. In it, she describes the early days of the Coalition, 1983-85: “We were a small gang of maybe seven or eight schools [and] Ted’s hope was that we’d grow to perhaps fifteen nationwide…” The CES website shows 77 current member schools, plus hundreds of affiliate members. In The New American High School, Sizer envisions a “critical mass of schools, perhaps several hundred spread across a dozen states…” This book presents his “vision of what such a future secondary education might be,” not just one idea, but creative, crucially needed new approaches that are mindful of the condition of our high schools early in the 21st century. He views our secondary schools as the “oxygen of our democracy,” reminding us of the 10th Common Principle of the Coalition, ‘Democracy and Equity,’” where “[the school] should model democratic practices that involve all who are directly affected by the school [staff, students, and parent/caregivers].”

The New American High School is really a collection of fifteen essays, organized into a series of chapters beginning with “The Problem” and closing with “The Prospect.” In between are such chapters as “Learning,” “The Language of Schooling,” “Pedagogy,” and “Morality” as key dimensions of the “new” high school, as well as more practical chapters dealing with “Time,” “Space and Costs,” “Courses,” and “Testing.” But this book also is a personal memoir, as Sizer shares his own educational experiences, including his extensive teaching experiences at both the secondary and college level. As Headmaster of Phillips Academy in Andover, Dean of the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University, Chairman of the Education Department at Brown University, and co-principal, with his wife Nancy Faust Sizer, at the Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School in Devens, Massachusetts, Sizer has considerable experience and wisdom to share.

Sizer envisions several best practice qualities in a “new” high school, which connect directly with the ten common principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools. In chapter three on “Learning,” Sizer describes what schools should primarily be all about:

“Learning – at least good learning – should be cumulative, one skill or idea building on another. It must stick, meaning that is it is so deeply in the mind that it will be readily at hand when we need it.”

Rather than memorizing rote facts, students should learn and be able to accomplish important things that are usable in a different context and at a different time. It is a process—and should be a joy, even a revelation at times—in which students are determining in large part what matters to them, what they want to learn, what will
be useful, what might be a worthy purpose, and what to do to form healthy habits. This chapter on “Learning” aligns with the first Common Principle of the Coalition, “learning to use one’s mind well.”

In chapter 4, “Differences,” Sizer speaks about inclusive assignments and different teacher styles and student learning styles. He notes that such sensitive teaching takes longer and requires teachers to know each of their students well, as “schools are not assembly lines because children are not widgets.” Here, too, he offers a series of five suggestions to teachers to help students come to grips with their own uniqueness, developing their own ethical code and life principles, such as: “Eventually, assign each student to illumine the concept of identity with an example, whether found in fiction, past reality, today’s reality, or even his or her own experience.”

Sizer goes on to picks up his theme of “Personalization” (Coalition Common Principle #4) with his perhaps familiar recommendation of an 80:1 student-to-teacher ratio. He notes, “When a student’s mastery of the material seems secure, promote her on the basis of her exhibited performance, both written and oral.” This quality is strikingly similar to CES Common Principle #6, “Demonstration of mastery: Teaching and learning should be documented and assessed with tools based on student performance of tasks.”

Chapter 5, “The Language of Schooling,” is particularly important to Sizer, not surprising since he was a former English teacher! He says,

“Words count. They can clarify an idea and situate it in time or place…. They can provoke objection…. Words shape the way we think, and control the vocabulary of our work. The language of schooling is influential. Often the words indicate the kind of behavior that is expected.”

What follows is an eight-page insightful discussion of some two dozen words of schooling, including “public,” “freedom,” “universality,” “safety,” “etched,” “logic,” and even “dork!” For example:

“Understanding. By this we mean ‘to know something thoroughly,’ by which we mean something mastered deeply enough to use in new contexts. If an adolescent cannot use these new learnings in important and relevant situations, he or she has not truly mastered them. To stress again: the ultimate purpose of education is to develop the ability to understand important matters well and use those matters for worthwhile personal and social ends.”

Chapter 7, “Space and Costs,” covers practical considerations for those seeking to start a new high school. However, in the best spirit of the kind of dialogue and conversations Sizer so much appreciated and enjoyed, I wish I could’ve asked him, “What about environmental and sustainability issues? Shouldn’t we be looking to build a ‘green,’ environmentally-conscious school? And shouldn’t we, at least to some degree, engage the staff, students, and parent/caregivers in the discussions of what should be the design of a new school (as called for in Principle #10 of the Coalition)?” Recently, at the Lehman Alternative Community School, the opportunity arose to expand the physical school building, and for over a year, the students, staff, and parent/caregivers engaged in conversations with the school district’s architect over just what was needed in re-shaping the existing building and creating the new addition.

Chapter 8, “Courses,” begins with a discussion of “subjects,” and could easily be related to Coalition Common Principle #2, “Less is more, depth over coverage.” Certainly the parallel is evident in his statement, “the program’s design should be shaped by the intellectual and imaginative powers and competencies that the students need, rather than by ‘subjects’ as conventionally defined.” Sizer goes on to list seven “… skills and habits that most American parents and politicians today devoutly wish that every one of our students would learn, these being the necessary minima for successful functioning in a thriving democracy:

1) listening,
2) expressing,
3) empathy, sensing and evaluating,
4) the habit of restraint,
5) the habit of responsible autonomy,
6) the habit of attending to the legitimate needs of others, friends and family members, including animals, and

7) the habit of wonderment, the practice of the creatively wandering mind."

Returning to chapter 6, “Time,” in the same spirit of dialogue and meaningful conversation I mentioned above for the chapter on “Space and Costs,” I would argue with Sizer’s affinity for the year-round, twelve months high school. Although I appreciate the argument about maximizing the use of the building, I believe students need the summer break, but not so much as the original need for young people to help agriculturally. Although my old school, the Lehman Alternative Community School, has pioneered a summer program in which youth from LACS and across the region are paid a stipend to be fully engaged in all aspects of running an extensive organic garden, producing vegetables that are marketed to the greater Ithaca community. Additionally, I believe the summer months are a crucial time for high school youth to be with their families, to develop other interests, and engage in other meaningful activities. For many high school students it also is the time for a summer internship, and paid jobs to begin saving for the costs of their future education, whether a four-year college, two-year college, or a certificate-granting one-year technical training.

In chapter 9, on “Technology,” I was pleased to see Sizer raise some of the current issues involved with all the technology tools at the disposal of our youth. For example, he notes, “All users of computers must ponder who can invade them…. Another danger for us is to depend too much on technological tools. Just because Google or Wikipedia says something is so, we must never assume that what it tells us is the answer or answers.” There also is the insightful chapter 10 on “Pedagogy,” in which Sizer speaks about the “craft of teaching,” of “teaching as an art,” and teaching as the influential “telling of stories.” Here he derives three lessons from his military training in the ROTC while a student at Harvard:

“1) Start small and select a topic that is likely to interest most students but will grow into a broader and more accessible understanding.

2) Pick the subjects carefully. Subjects must represent a class of influential happenings, not just a one-of-a-kind event.

3) Treat the students like the adults they are becoming.”

Throughout this book, Ted Sizer emphasizes the importance of students being prepared to be democratic citizens. In chapter 12 on “Choice,” he says, “The role of choice in the new American high school must be considered in ways both broad and historical, for at its core, choice is an important expression of democracy. By definition, freedom implies choice.” And from here, he goes on to discuss various ways to create meaningful choices for high school students.

Finally, in the closing chapter 15, “The Prospect,” the ever-optimistic Sizer says, “As long as those of us who are convinced that a new kind of American high school is required are at once patient and resilient, the future appears bright.” Then he closes with this summary statement of hope for our nation’s youth in the future: “We want our students to grow up to be informed, principled, and free.” [emphasis mine]

In her preface to the book, Ted’s wife, Nancy Faust Sizer, notes that he had colon cancer starting in 2001, then was diagnosed with metastatic (spreading) cancer in 2005. Ted Sizer died on the 21st of October 2009. We will miss him and his writings, for it was in his writings that he developed his ideas. As he put it, “I’m never sure of what I believe until I have written it.” Thanks for everything, Ted!
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