CONNECTIONS

FALL 2002

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Report From the Directors

Daniel Baron, Co-Director

I'd like to take this opportunity to wish everyone a healthy and productive beginning to the new school year. This has been a particularly significant time for me because September also marks the beginning of a new year in the Jewish calendar. During the ten holy days that mark the beginning of the year, observant Jews reflect back on the previous year to take account of their actions and those of their community. The intention of this practice is to reflect critically on their behavior over the past year and to become aware of where they fell short using their special gifts and talents in service to their community. The tradition expects members of the community to develop the habit of reflective practice as human beings, to take responsibility for their actions, and to adapt their own behavior in order to contribute to a more just and humane world.

I would like to take this opportunity to reflect back on the year from the perspective of a co-director of NSRF. Over the last year, the National Center has initiated a variety of approaches to reflect on the work of NSRF in order to continue to learn and grow as an organization.

Our mission statement places equity and social justice at the center of our work. It provides a direction for improved teacher performance and enhanced student learning that addresses the intolerable inequities that currently exist in so many schools and communities.

Last year, our Winter Meeting, the Looking at Student Work Collaborative meeting, and our national facilitators meeting all looked closely at how NSRF practices and protocols can advance our work toward better meeting the educational potential of those students who are not succeeding at school.

We have worked closely with the national VISTA program, The National Council of La Raza, The Bay Area Coalition of Equitable Schools, the Small Schools Coaches Collaborative, the Lucent Peer Collaboration Project, ASCD's First Amendment Schools Project and the Rural Schools and Communities Trust. All of these collaborations have grappled with the difficult issues of equity and social justice in a variety of contexts, e.g. inner city, Latino, and rural communities.

NSRF has always focused on creating professional learning communities that work toward improving student achievement. Over the last year we have sharpened our focus on closing the academic gap between social classes. We have learned a lot, and we have a lot more to learn.

One way to enhance our learning as an organization is through documentation. Documenting our work provides a rich data source from which we can learn and grow. CFG coaches across the country have been developing tools to document the adaptive practice of their members as well as the results of their changes in practice. Many of these tools are available through our office and online.

The National Center for Teaching

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Protocols in Practice: Houston High School Students Reflect on Reform

MichaelAnn Kelley and Paul Gray, Houston, Texas

"Being a part of this school is helping me to be more of a leader, because when I see the school doing new things and being the trendsetters for the rest of the nation in a lot of different initiatives, then it makes me not afraid to try something new."
-Eisenhower student, *Peer Review: A Case Study, 2002*. The Houston Annenberg Challenge.

As the reform grant programs drew to a close, the Houston Annenberg Challenge posed the following task to all of the participating schools: …develop a reflective portrait of changes in teaching and learning as a result of this grant. The design of the portrait must be interactive.

Members of the reform team pondered the best way to meet the challenge of developing a reflective portrait that could adequately describe five years of reform work at a large urban comprehensive high school. How could we even begin to summarize a process that has impacted 2,300 students and 180 teachers during each year of the work? And how could we do all of this in a 60-minute interactive presentation?

After our initial amazement about the task passed, we decided to let the students speak for themselves. How had the reform work made a difference in their schooling? What changes had their school seen over the past five years?

Two students, Patrick and Warren, accepted the challenge of producing the school's reflective portrait. They chose to develop, write, and produce a video to document the changes they have seen in the school. Prior to production, both students had to do research to find out what the school was like before the grant was awarded and during the earliest reform work. They turned to the school portfolio to find out about the history of their school.

The Eisenhower school portfolio has been compiled annually over the past five years. What began as a thin compliance document to meet the requirements of grant funders has evolved into a multi-layered reflective tool that captures brief moments in the life of our school-wide reform work.

During the video production process everyone learned several lessons. We learned the school portfolio told the story of our work in a way that people from different perspectives can all understand. Patrick and Warren were able to see the impact the reform had on their peers and therefore felt they needed to honor the other students' experiences. The students were able to determine what they felt was important, not necessarily what their teachers or members of the reform team felt was important, in their own school context. This realization led to another epiphany – that the real importance of school comes not from what the school can give us, but how we, the Eisenhower Learning Community, can support each other.

> *"Being a part of this school is helping me to be more of a leader, because when I see the school doing new things and being the trendsetters for the rest of the nation in a lot of different initiatives, then it makes me not afraid to try something new."*
>
> *-Eisenhower student, Peer Review: A Case Study, 2002.*

Once the students presented us with the first cut of their video, we decided to use a Tuning Protocol to strengthen the quality of the work. There were two foci for the protocol: content and technical skills. The dual focus was chosen because in a multimedia presentation, people are sometimes wowed by the "bells and whistles" and overlook important aspects of the content. We began with an introduction of the work by the students, followed by clarifying and probing questions. During the warm/cool feedback section, the feedback was divided into warm and cool for content and warm and cool for technical issues. After the feedback, the students reflected on what they learned from the protocol and what changes they could make in the reflective portrait.

Presenter Responses:

Warren (technical): "This was the first time that this program and a video of this length had been produced here at our school. The amount of technical skills that I learned has been overshadowed by the flaws. People are more apt to criticize what is wrong rather than praise what is good."

Patrick (content): "Trying to narrow six weeks of research of over five years of hard work down into 20+ minutes of script was very difficult. To show growth, learning, and change in a story was hard. I found that the best way to tell the story was to use actual quotes from the portfolio by the people involved in the different programs."

Warren: "Even though I've done the tuning protocol before, each time it helps me to step back from my work and re-evaluate and reflect on where I want to go with it."

Participant Responses:

Patrise: "I was in a new position this year as portfolio coordinator. It

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NSRF Journal Reader Survey

Thanks to all of you who responded to the electronic survey we posted on-line after the publication of our first issue of *Connections*. Articles from *Connections* are being used around the country for text based discussion, it has been slipped into the hands of numerous principals "to give weight" to the work we do, and it is connecting people to the work nationally.

Most of you preferred the mix of content that we tried for in the first issue as opposed to a theme. We will continue to work on finding a good balance of topics. Your continued feedback is essential to this process and we will post another survey later on down the line to get more input from you.

Some suggestions for future issues include: spotlighting specific schools with strong CFG cultures, parent involvement, accountability and CFGs, new protocols or adaptation of protocols, an annotated map, and how people are documenting their work.

We look forward to hearing your comments and suggestions. We hope that you enjoy this issue.

CONNECTIONS
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Editors
Deborah Bambino & Katy Kelly

Layout & Design
Sarah Childers

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If you have any feedback or are interested in contributing to Connections contact us at
812/330.2702
kkelly@harmonyschool.org
dbambino@earthlink.net

Schools with Spirit: Nurturing the Inner Lives of Children and Teachers:

A Book Review – Deborah Bambino, Pennsylvania

Anyone who has worked with me in the last eight months has heard about this book! I seem to carry it to all my meetings; whether it's a new coaches' training, a small schools' session or a meeting about the crisis in the schools here in Philadelphia, I find myself returning to this book for a quote or story that seems to fit the occasion.

In this book of essays edited by Linda Lantieri, "Fourteen respected educators ask whether schools can nurture the inner life of students without violating the beliefs of families or the separation of church and state."

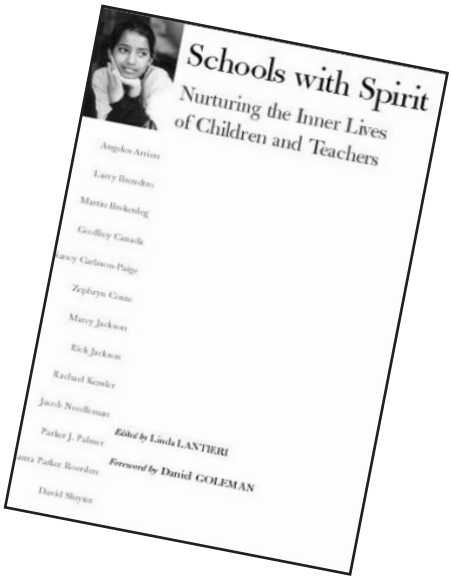
The "spirit" that's talked about in the title doesn't refer to a particular religion or set of beliefs; it doesn't mean the "School Spirit" we experience when we have a winning sports team, either. The spirit talked about in this powerful little book is embedded in the belief that "schools are active and alive organisms that place the highest value on self-knowledge, healthy interpersonal relationships, and building community (Lantieri, 2001)."

While I could describe what this book has meant to me, I think you'd find it more valuable if I let the words speak for themselves. Here are a few of the quotes that have pushed my thinking and practice this year:

On the need to set norms: "What are the conditions or agreements you need so you can be fully yourself here—so you can take risks to grow and learn, so you can talk about what matters deeply to you?"

An at risk-youth made the comment that "The arts activities created an equality and freedom I have never experienced in quite as safe and pleasurable a way."

Another troubled youth said: "I think nature has a much stronger voice in my life today…it is the voice of restraint, the voice of practicality, the voice of kindness. Sometimes it keeps me from doing something I might want to do…other times it makes me feel good about what I am doing."



A Lakota author shared his grandfather's views: "The Europeans believed that Indian children were little primitives in need of socialization. In reality they had brought with them a backward theory of child development, one that assumed that children were evil and had to be punished into submission…At the core of this punitive mind set is a view where saying 'You are acting like a child' is interpreted as an insult…In the Lakota tongue, this phrase would be, "You are acting like a sacred being."

A teacher spoke of "Giving students the skills to dive down into the deep well that is uniquely their own, to meet at the underground stream that connects us all…"

I urge you all to dive deeply into this book; you won't be disappointed! ❖

Linda Lantieri, editor, and Daniel P. Goleman (2001). Schools with Spirit: Nurturing the Inner Lives of Teachers and Children. Beacon Press.

You can contact Deborah Bambino at dbambino@earthlink.net

Documenting Decisions: *Making Learning Explicit in Our CFG*

Betty Shockley Bisplinghoff, Sarah Bridges, Jill Hermann-Wilmarth,
Tina Allen, Donna Spangler, & Andy Plemmons, Georgia

"We were unsettled and unsure.... We didn't know each other....We felt unsure of ourselves professionally....We were tired and frustrated and it was only September! Indeed, we were a motley crew: one new university professor, two veteran classroom teachers, three first-year teachers, one graduate student, and two undergraduate students, all searching for some hope and stability in our professional lives."

-Jill, a graduate student in Language Education

I had no idea what I was getting into when they invited me to come to the first meeting of their CFG. I didn't even know what a CFG was. I'll admit it – I was a little intimidated when I walked into Sarah's fifth grade classroom the afternoon of our first meeting. I was out of my comfort zone of graduate school where the language tossed around, the experiences and discussions of my colleagues and fellow teachers of undergraduates rang with commonalities. This kind of school space was what I fled when I entered my graduate program. What would I have to say to these people that wouldn't isolate them or me?

Andy also worried, "When I was first invited to a CFG meeting, I was somewhat hesitant about going. In your first year of teaching, time is very valuable, and I did not have the time to "waste" going to another meeting. My level of frustration at the beginning of the year was reaching its peak. I felt like a traitor because I had turned my back on my philosophy of education and was now relying on lessons made by other teachers. There were so many areas that demanded my time that I didn't have time to make my own student-centered lessons. I was unhappy about my teaching practice, especially reading and math.

"Even with my feelings of hesitation, I decided to go to the meeting. After talking with everyone, I realized that others shared my problems or had issues that were just as frustrating. I began to feel a sense of support that was missing at my school. One of my greatest fears of graduating college was losing the support of my peers. At this first meeting, I began to find that critical encouragement once again. I decided then that CFG was an essential part of my teaching philosophy to constantly question my practice and focus on student learning."

Perhaps the strongest concern came from Tina, a veteran teacher, "I hate meetings. Nothing that is meaningful to classroom practice is ever addressed. Nothing that contributes to daily professional growth is discussed. Everyone gets off topic. Our focus is always blurred."

> *"We were unsettled and unsure.... We didn't know each other....We felt unsure of ourselves professionally....We were tired and frustrated and it was only September! Indeed, we were a motley crew: one new university professor, two veteran classroom teachers, three first-year teachers, one graduate student, and two undergraduate students, all searching for some hope and stability in our professional lives."*
>
> -Jill, a graduate student in Language Education

We have records of these initial concerns because we decided to build documentation into the work of our meetings. We included journal writing as one of our rituals of meeting together. We asked ourselves to record connections between our professional growth during these meetings and proposed actions supporting student learning. Reflections were guided by two concerns: 1) What am I thinking now? and 2) What do I plan to do about it? In addition, we routinely jump-started the "work" of our meetings with an initiating round of "So, what did we try, or reconsider, or change in our practice based on the work of our group two weeks ago?" This is the place where we claimed what actually happened. We did this in an attempt to make explicit and public the impact of devoting our time and attention to two hours of work together every two weeks. We also wrote summative reports that we read aloud to each other during our final meeting of the year.

Did our commitment to each other and the betterment of our professional selves through CFG meetings make a difference for us and our students? The following excerpts from the final reports explore this issue: "Even if I came to a meeting empty-handed, I left with a new idea for my classroom. Each issue that was brought to the group caused me to question my own practice. By the end of the year I had added several new elements to my writer's workshop and ripped down a mural to make room for student work. My first year would not have been as enjoyable without the support of the teachers involved in the CFG. With their help I have improved my practice and become stronger in speaking out about my beliefs.

"The observations we did with our group teachers forced me to examine my own teaching practices. I observed several styles of reading aloud to students. I made it a priority to read aloud to my students this past year. The teachers I observed validated my thoughts

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Golf Progress Report

Nancy Mohr, New York

Try as I might, I could not shake the urge to connect my experience this summer at golf school with my long-time experience with leadership and school reform. Many stupefying metaphors kept flying into my mind. I couldn't help myself. Some of them stuck. I didn't want them to because it seemed to trivialize the complexity of education. Golf is a game about trying to get a ball into a hole using a stick. . .Yet, it has its own set of consequences—business deals, marriages and the self-esteem of thousands hinge on hitting that ball just a little bit better. And still, compare that with trying to get kids to learn something in school.

I was not an eager student. I really would much rather have been sitting by a pool, reading trash. But my husband, Alan, wanted us to do this so he could improve his already very good game and so we could figure out once and for all if I was hopeless and should give it up. I will say that I turned out not to be hopeless, but, sorry to say, there is not a miracle ending to this story either.

I did get a little bit better. But even that was due to a lot of effort, making me wonder all the more; why did I want to do this? Something John Mayher (*Uncommon Sense,* 1990) would say is that it is "common sense" of this game—it is difficult and frustrating and somehow that makes us want to conquer it. This seems to work for some grown-ups; most kids are too smart to want to go that route.

Golf coaches generally teach through feedback. I quickly learned that the proportion was about 90% "warm" feedback and 10% "cool." And that worked well for me. I realized that all too often in the past (and I'm not naming names) I would be told, do this, try that, remember the other thing. It was just too much information and too many things to try to put together. Our golf coach instead figured out what each of us in our (small) class needed most to work on. Mine was follow-through. She stuck to that. I am sure she could have named at least a hundred other things I should have worked on but she bit her tongue and kept on repeating "follow through" for three days and kept on reinforcing it when I (occasionally) did it right.

Nancy Mohr practicing her follow-through.

The big surprise for me was how I dealt with change. Yes, indeed, as someone who advises people to enjoy change for a living, I found that I was not so eager to do it myself even when the change was my own idea. Learning a different way of hitting a ball meant unlearning what I was used to. It meant getting worse before getting better. It meant feeling annoyed, stupid and wanting to go back to what I was comfortable with, never mind if it worked.

Changing meant practicing a lot. Making up my mind to change did not make any difference. Doing it was hard and awkward and I had to do it over and over and even then what I decided to do was frequently not the same as how it came out.

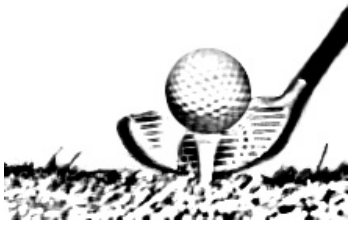
And raising the stakes—putting on pressure, comparing myself with others, trying to achieve a standard? That only made things worse. I became most painfully aware of the role of self-esteem in learning. And it made me mad to think about all of the cavalier dismissal of its importance for kids. *Self-esteem—please! We have to have rigor and vigor in our learning*. If the world of finance can turn "consumer confidence" into an economic indicator, then I think I feel better about needing to feel confident about myself and my golf game.

And, ironically, trying hard was also generally counter-productive. The harder I tried, the more mistakes I made and the more frustrated I became. I had to work at relaxing more, taking a more holistic approach and keeping my eyes on the prize, in this case that little ball.

I needed a coach to show me what to do differently, but I also needed her to tell me what I was doing right. Often. Her leadership wasn't everything we look for in school reform—she wasn't particularly democratic, she set the agenda and did not solicit our opinions about the way things should be. She did not reflect, at least not while we were watching. She was, however, more than a good golfer. She was a good coach—she was clear about the goals, limited the strategies, knew they had to be done over and over and she loved the game. ❖

John S. Mayher, Uncommon Sense, Heinemann, NH, 1990

You can contact Nancy Mohr at nanmohr@rcn.com



Building Professional Learning Communities

Center of Activity Report – Juli Quinn, Los Angeles, California

When thinking about Los Angeles, the word Center seems incongruous; it just doesn't fit. LA, by its very nature is an amorphous conglomeration of areas, cities, towns, and school districts, each defying definition. With that in mind, the following is an attempt to describe some of the activities that are taking place in LA, which is not to say that they are the only activities. In the last *Connections*, some Higher Education efforts were shared. Here's a look at the tremendous variety of work taking place in the Greater Los Angeles Area.

In three local districts CFG strategies of reflection and collaboration are being embedded in the life of the schools through the development of professional learning communities.

Cross-role, cross-grade, and cross-curricular school teams of six to twelve people are working in community. These teams or community groups are facilitated by coaches who are trained and supported throughout the year. The coaches come together on an initial Saturday and then once a month from 4 to 7pm to learn protocols, share student work, and engage in text-based discussions. Standards and data are an integral part of every conversation, and the search for quality criteria is a common topic with which teachers regularly struggle. As a part of each "training" session, coaches plan ways to expand the work and engage their whole school community in strategies to improve practice and increase student achievement.

The site principal is included in the "Coaching Team" from the beginning. The principal helps lead the effort, demonstrating its importance by giving it time, and supporting the teachers' efforts to come together for observations and professional conversations. Teachers and administrators are examining the current use of time in each school to identify how the times when teachers come together already (e.g.: faculty meetings, grade level meetings, department/core meetings, banked time, common planning time) can be used differently. Rather than form free-standing CFG's, the focus is on finding opportunities to change how professionals do their daily work, using the CFG strategies.

Here's a further sampling of the work:
– In the *Glendale Unified District*, 13 teams are in their fourth year of implementation. At the end of last year all the teams came together in a "Building Learning Communities Expo" where everyone modeled protocols, shared strategies and learned from the feedback of their peers. These teams have networked quarterly to engage in mutual goal setting, Looking at Student Work sessions and a general sharing of their varied implementation models.
– The *Burbank Unified School District* has spent two years focused on building a professional learning community among all of its elementary school principals. The principal's group meets off campus five times during the school year to look at their own practice and to look at student work for evidence of teacher practice. The Director of Elementary Education participates as a colleague with the principals and brings the district perspective and support to the work.
– In the *Los Angeles Unified School District*, Debbi Laidley and the UCLA School Management Program have been active in Local District F, training CFG coaches for several years.
– *Local District B* sent 10 school teams, much like the ones formed in Glendale, to receive the Coaches' Training over five months of full-day sessions. Their implementation began this summer.
– In addition, Maria Elena Rico, Director of the Trainer Certification Unit and a former Citibank Fellow, has worked with Kimberly Haag, a former Math/Science Fellow, and me to train Local District personnel across the *LAUSD*. These Local District personnel have the job of providing support to schools within their Local Districts.
– In *Covina Valley Unified School District*, Steve Seaford, Director of Instructional Services and another former Citibank Fellow, convenes all the site principals regularly to look at their practices, identify organizational issues, and work on implementing systemic approaches to improved instruction.
– Hannah MacLaren, Director of the *Los Angeles Coalition of Essential Schools*, works with multiple schools around LA to develop and grow professional learning communities whose training and work parallels the NSRF Theory and Constructs.

LA is a big place with multiple school districts and diverse cultures, which defy the notion of a defined "Center of Activity." The opportunity to bring these folks together to work on the NSRF Winter Meeting has helped those of us doing work in LA to come together in an exciting way

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7th Annual NSRF Winter Meeting
January 16-18, 2003, Los Angeles, California
Register on-line at
www.nsrfharmony.org/wintermeeting.html
See page 19 for more details

UCLA School Management Program

Center of Activity Report – Lisa Manning, Debbi Laidley, Los Angeles, California

This August, 2002, the UCLA School Management Program (UCLA SMP) it reached its two-year anniversary as an NSRF-approved provider of CFG Coaches Institutes in California. During that time, we have organized and facilitated twenty Coaches Institutes attended by approximately 400 teachers, administrators, and district office personnel from the Greater Los Angeles area.

A snapshot of UCLA SMP's larger efforts

In addition to our efforts to work with a broad spectrum of schools and districts in the Greater Los Angeles area, the organization's focus over the 2001-2002 school year has been to provide CFG Coaches Institutes and follow-up workshops to two school districts: Colton Joint Unified School District in San Bernardino County and Los Angeles Unified School District's Local District F.

In Colton, teacher representatives from ten schools, along with seven administrators from the District's Central Office, worked together with us in August 2001 to prepare to become coaches for CFGs with their colleagues. We have organized two follow-up workshops to provide additional support, and the full group meets monthly at the District Offices to discuss successes, challenges and next steps.

In LAUSD Local District F, the superintendent has embraced CFGs as a powerful vehicle for improving student learning. He has provided resources so that each of the district's 63 schools can send a team of four teachers and one administrator to one of thirteen Coaches Institutes we've organized. This opportunity to impact the culture of an entire school district has been an exciting and challenging endeavor! As a result, we are now beginning a comprehensive effort to evaluate and assess the impact of CFG work in District F and plan our next steps.

Challenges

Among the greatest challenges we face as we prepare and support CFG coaches are issues regarding the time and format of the institutes, and the barriers to implementation once coaches have returned to their sites.

A number of educators express frustration with needing to be out of their classrooms for the five-day Coaches Institute. In some instances, coaches have been "selected and sent" to the institute, rather than having volunteered themselves to participate, which adds to their reluctance. In most cases, after a few days of engaging in the protocols and experiencing the power of the learning community, educators value the professional development time. Nevertheless, being away for five consecutive days is a struggle.

In terms of implementation, several coaches have returned to the first follow-up workshop (usually offered three months after the initial institute) without having started a CFG with their colleagues. A variety of factors has been cited for this lack of immediate implementation:

– Time constraints at school sites or district offices.
– Resistance to allowing CFGs to be voluntary, while other teacher collaboration activities are mandatory.
– Concerns about the response of colleagues to the idea of making their practice public.
– A sense of incredible pressure within an atmosphere of increasing focus on high-stakes tests and performance sanctions.

We are exploring ways to offer an increased level of on-site "coaching for coaches" in order to help them maintain their momentum as they leave the five-day Coaches Institutes and enter the implementation stage back at their sites.

Successes

We have learned a lot from each institute and continuously modify and improve our efforts. We're proud of our track record in terms of: honoring the concepts of constructivist, adult learning; utilizing experiential learning processes and reflection effectively; and providing well-run, professional events.

Team building in Los Angeles.

Each institute provides opportunities for participants to become swiftly and deeply engaged in their own learning, to make connections, pose their own questions and create relevance in the work. Attention is paid to participants' energy levels, their varied learning styles, and to the importance of their developing relationships and creating networks of support. A growing number of our faculty members are now skilled institute facilitators and are members of CFGs themselves. The personal experience each facilitator brings lends a deep sense of credibility to the work and enhances participants' awareness that the facilitators are facing some of the same challenges the school site coaches face.

Additionally, our staff including Program Manager Lisa Manning, has been engaged as learners in the five-day institute. Each staff member brings a personal understanding and value of the work of CFGs, and makes logistical decisions that support the work. Participants comment that for many of them, these institutes have been their most striking experience of

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Small Schools and CFGs

Steven Strull, Boston, Massachusetts

Last winter over 70 school folk sat around covered banquet tables, or rounds, munching on day-old bagels (the grocery store kind, not the fresh deli kind) and cut fruit waiting in anxious anticipation for the start of their six day experience. Some knew why they were there; others probably did not. It was a fairly representative mix of New England educators—mostly white folk at mid-career who were the first in their schools to attend a Critical Friends Group New Coaches Seminar.

This group of mostly classroom teachers, but some administrators and consultants as well, arrived by 8am on a cold New England February morning to begin the journey that we, the National School Reform Faculty, have been traveling. They were there because they wanted to be there, or they were asked to be there, or they were assigned to be there—but whatever the reason for coming, they were there, some optimistic, some skeptical, some relieved to be out of their classroom and school, and some—we like to think many—hungry for an opportunity to explore their practice in ways not previously considered or understood.

We at the Center for Collaborative Education in Boston, a Center of Activity for NSRF, had been planning this day for months. All the tools of our NSRF craft were in place—we had binders (the really big thick kind, stuffed with paper, "d" ring of course), markers, chart paper, tape, staplers, scissors, and post-it notes. We had a PowerPoint presentation and videos, back-up student work "just in case" and facilitators—NSRF facilitators whose current practice is involved primarily with school coaching in one of the school reform networks we operate at the Center.

The Center for Collaborative Education is a school reform organization in Boston committed to equitable school reform. We organize and practice in several school reform networks including the New England Small Schools Network (NESSN), the Southern New England Coalition of Essential Schools Network, the Boston Pilot Schools Network, and regional and national Turning Points. Though our work is structured through different networks, we all operate with a common theory of action and a deep belief that teachers working together in a collaborative professional community will not only deepen their practice but also purposefully and positively affect student achievement.

Most of the teachers on this day are part of the New England Small Schools Network (NESSN), a Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation funded initiative. The newest network at the Center, NESSN works directly with five New England school districts to help them consider how they might restructure their existing large schools into small schools and/or create new small schools within their districts. Developmentally, NESSN is based on the principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools, coupled with the Center's experience with the Boston Pilot Schools. In addition to decreasing school size, NESSN is committed to helping districts and schools consider and implement five autonomies that we believe are necessary to effect positive school change and increase student achievement. As professional educators, we believe that teachers must have autonomy over their schedule, budget, curriculum, governance, and personnel. In addition to size and autonomy, we also believe that school people, working together, must create and sustain a common vision of learning and teaching.

NESSN Institute

Small schools, while structural in nature, are really a metaphor for each student being known well, by at least one caring adult, who takes responsibility and accepts accountability for her educative outcome. We approach our work with a simple bias, that those closest to students, the teachers, must make ALL substantive decisions regarding learning and teaching. We make a distinction between schools and school buildings, helping districts understand that they already have the capacity to house several schools within one structure.

We work with schools and districts exploring, interpreting, and refining these considerations through professional development experiences both on and off-site. Our work is structured through professional coaching relationships organized and practiced by the Center's coaching staff and is mostly time-limited. In the case of NESSN, our initial commitment to our schools and districts is for five years.

At the center, as we planned for our work in schools, it became clear that it was necessary to leave a coaching legacy after our direct involvement ends. Toward that end, we have turned to our ongoing work as part of the National School Reform Faculty.

We are committed over the next several years to train up to 15% of each NESSN school's faculty to become Critical Friends Group Coaches, thereby creating the capacity for each school person to be involved in a CFG. We are also instituting a system of support for trained coaches and for school and district administrators. They

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And Now a Few Words with the Author…

An interview with Peggy Silva by Deborah Bambino

This spring Peggy Silva and Robert Mackin published *Standards of Mind and Heart: Creating the Good High School*, their account of the planning and birth of their school, Souhegan High, in Amherst, NH. Read on to learn what Peggy had to say about her work in a recent interview with Debbie Bambino.

Tell us a little about your background and your current work.

I'm a charter member of Souhegan High School and a member of the planning team. I'm a long-time member of the Coalition of Essential Schools and have presented workshops at a number of Fall Forums. I'm a coach and national facilitator of the National School Reform Faculty and I am a charter member of Educational Writers for Change. This year I will be responsible for designing and facilitating a Writer's Workshop at Souhegan, as well as supervising our graduate interns for the University of New Hampshire.

Your book says it's the story of a school, but that more than anything it is a story about democracy. Can you elaborate?

High schools are among the least democratic organizations in our society.
Bob Mackin, our first principal, consistently prioritized our need to honor democracy in our daily practices and program. The pressure to act efficiently, quickly, etc. often reared its head in our day-to-day work. Democracy is messy, not neat, and sometimes it can be painfully slow. As our population has grown, the challenge of democratic practice has grown too.

I loved the quote about "a clean stall was the sign of a dead horse." How does this quote relate to the change and growth process at Souhegan?

Dan, one of our teachers, said that, and he also said that anything worth doing is worth doing poorly. These words reflect the heart of our work as teachers modeling the reflective growth process. We take risks, we make mistakes and we talk about them. We recognized early on that mistakes were necessary if we were going to reach good products.

There's a lot of discussion about your "mission" in the book. Can you describe the inception and ongoing life of your mission statement in the school?

Two volunteers came together to work on the planning of our school. After a lengthy period of working on every word and syllable of our mission, we knew we had an opportunity, really a luxury, of getting school right. We asked ourselves what we held sacred and once we agreed to it, we etched it in calligraphy on the school's entrance. All incoming ninth graders spend the first three days of school unpacking the mission and making it their own.

We hold our collective feet to the fire by consistently asking the question of all programs and activities, "Does it reinforce our mission? How or how not?" On those occasions when we neglect this focus, we find ourselves drifting from our true, authentic purpose.

How did you develop the "Souhegan Six" norms?

One of the planning team members, Cleve, worked on this process with students. He was determined to come up with rules that reflected our philosophy, not the usual list of "Thou shalt nots" that we often find in our schools and districts. He basically put it to the kids by saying, "This is how we want the school to be, so what rules do we need?"

Now that the norms are in place, new students use them as text in text-based conversations as part of their orientation to our learning community.

What's the role of voice in your school?

It goes back to what I said about democracy being messy and time-consuming. We need to hear and honor all voices. We worry about voice all the time and we have been moved to try new structures and models as we

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Souhegan High Mission Statement

Souhegan High School aspires to be a community of learners born of respect, trust and courage. We consciously commit ourselves:

- To support and engage an individual's unique gifts, passions and intentions.
- To develop and empower the mind, body and heart.
- To challenge and expand the comfortable limits of thought, tolerance and performance.
- To inpsire and honor the active stewardship of family, nation and globe.

Souhegan Six

- Respect and encourage the right to teach and the right to learn at all times.
- Be actively engaged in the learning; ask questions, collaborate and seek solutions.
- Be on time to fulfill your daily commitments.
- Be appropriate; demonstrate behavior that is considerate of the community, the campus and yourself.
- Be truthful; communicate honestly.
- Be responsible and accountable for your choices.

Harmony/VISTA Anti-Poverty CFG

Gina Weir and Rusty Peterson, Bloomington, Indiana

An experiment has been going on for the past year in thirteen schools in Indiana and Vermont. Harmony School has been one of these schools. We have been busy combining service learning and the lessons we've learned about the power of Critical Friends Groups (CFGs), as part of a national VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) Americorps demonstration project.

The project partnership is designed to help schools connect with their surrounding neighbors in the pursuit of authentic service-learning projects that combat the effects of poverty on their community. We initiated a service learning class called "Understanding Poverty Together" and facilitated a CFG as part of our project's implementation. We hoped to foster the kind of collaboration and community that are CFG hallmarks in our work. Our CFG's membership reached well beyond the boundaries of a traditional "professional learning community" to include all stakeholders in the project. In addition to two Harmony members with CFG experience, we invited students from the service learning class, representatives from community agencies, and members of the Bloomington community living in economic poverty to join. We hoped that our meetings would support the development of our work together in much the same way that CFGs have helped teachers improve their classroom practices. We wanted to use the CFG model to bring the classroom and the community together around the topic of poverty.

Harmony/VISTA Service Learning Project

The format for our meetings evolved over time. We usually used an icebreaker activity as a good way to open up a meeting. After this activity, we would use a protocol to focus on a dilemma related to poverty that a member brought to the group. We would often end our meetings reading or sharing student work.

In our fourth meeting we did a Consultancy Protocol with Levi, a sophomore in the service learning class. He was working on setting up a cooperative housing meeting that would provide a low-income housing option in Bloomington. Our CFG focused its energies on his dilemma. This meeting was a very powerful example of how our CFG could work. The protocol process made it clear to Levi that the idea of people supporting each other in a shared living environment was what really inspired him about his project. Levi left the meeting with new clarity and energy for his project. Using the knowledge and experience of the members in the group and the protocol as a guide, we were able to help this young person realize his vision. Within the next month he helped organize two meetings that planted the seed for the creation of cooperative housing in Bloomington.

We ended that particular meeting with a story that another student member of the CFG had written about living in poverty. His mother and the rest of the CFG members were very moved by his story. Using his words as our text deepened our overall understanding and shared purpose as a group.

Insights

We weren't aware of other CFG's with memberships or goals like ours. We were a mix of community and school members exploring the potential of service learning around the issue of poverty. We didn't have a model to follow and struggled with many issues as the school year progressed. Some questions that we will be exploring further in the future are:

– Timing - Should we start the service learning class before our CFG in order to involve the students and their interests more?
– Should we invite only those agency reps who are going to work with us on specific projects?
– How should we determine our focus with such a diverse group?
– What role does student interest play in the mix?
– How can we foster consistent membership attendance given the changing schedules of our constituents – students, parents, neighbors, teachers, and agency representatives?
– What kind of incentives can we create for students (such as school credit) to encourage their ongoing participation?
– How do we design these meetings to satisfy the needs of the agency members who are taking time away from their jobs to be here while also giving students the opportunity to develop their own interests?
– How can we document and connect our work to the agencies in such a way that all those involved could demonstrate that their continued work in the CFG was valuable?
– How can we document the value of our joint work so that our membership and impact will continue to grow?

We were trying to use the CFG to shape what was happening in the service learning class. The CFG experience was most powerful when its members were collaborating with and

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Creating a Community of Learners Among College Faculty Through the Use of Reflective Practice

Cheryl M. Jorgensen, Joseph J. Onosko & Cate Weir, New Hampshire

"I have a student in my class who came with a generic list of "accommodations" that I'm supposed to provide. It seems pretty sketchy. Are there some things I ought to know in order to best meet this student's needs?"

"The students in my large intro class fall asleep, turn in poor work, and seem disinterested in the material. I know I should be doing something other than lecturing, but how can I make the class more engaging while still covering all the material I need to?"

"I have my students do a group project at the end of the semester. Would rubrics be a way to assess each student's contribution to that project and have them evaluate one another's work as well?"

These questions probably sound familiar. You might think we heard them in the faculty lounge of our high school, but we didn't. These are the kinds of questions that seven faculty members wrestled with during their first year as members of a "Reflective Practice Group" (RP) at the University of New Hampshire, one of four New Hampshire higher education institutions that participated in a project called "Equity and Excellence in Higher Education," that supporting faculty efforts to restructure their teaching practices to improve post-secondary outcomes for diverse students.

Today's college students represent greater diversity than ever before: some are just out of high school, some took a few years off to work, some represent linguistic and cultural diversity, and others are making mid-life career changes. All of our students have 'special needs' and we're determined to learn how to meet them. The structured and unstructured conversations that faculty had in their RP groups was one strategy used to meet these needs for the ultimate purpose of improving student learning and performance.

A member of an RP group may want suggestions and feedback about the design of a course syllabus, a teaching strategy, course materials, the best use of technology, a design for an experiment, ideas for an end-of-course final project, or strategies to support a student with particularly challenging learning needs. She may want to look at the work that students produce and ask the question "Did they learn what I think I taught?"

Dr. Meg Peterson, a faculty member in the English Department at

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NSRF and the First Amendment Schools

JoAnn Groh, Tucson, Arizona

Representatives from eleven schools used NSRF practices to collaboratively think about their action plans as part of the First Amendment School Initiative, a multiyear reform effort sponsored by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development and the First Amendment Center. Meeting in Washington D.C., this July, administrators, teachers, parents and students were asked to work towards creating schools in which students could learn and practice the civic habits necessary to sustain a free and democratic society. Participants welcomed the opportunity to use the Tuning Protocol as a tool to facilitate cross group conversations and learning. Many praised the mini-CFG training workshop and follow-up sessions as a high point in the three day meeting.

First Amendment Schools are schools which strive to enact the following four guiding principles:

1 - to create laboratories of democratic freedom in which students have ample opportunity to practice democracy;
2 - to commit to inalienable rights and civic responsibility especially those rights listed in the First Amendment;
3 - to include all stake holders to work towards the common good in schools and communities; and
4 - to translate civic education into community engagement encouraging students to become active participants in public life.

Harmony School was picked as one of the first eleven schools. The other chosen sites represent a diverse cross section of America including elementary, middle and high schools; public, independent and charter schools and rural, urban and suburban schools.

A follow-up meeting is planned for next summer so participants will have a chance to learn from each others' experiences. In the meantime, schools will be involved in electronic conversations and there may be some cross school visitations. As their facilitator, I was impressed with their ambitious action plans. The rumor is that they want to use the Consultancy Protocol next time. ❖

For more information about this exciting new project, go to http://webserver2.ascd.org/web/firstamendment/FLASHINTRO.cfm.

JoAnn Groh teaches at Catalina Foothills High School in Tucson and is a long-time CFG coach. Contact her at jo@fc.cfsd.k12.az.us

Harmony/VISTA Anti- Poverty CFG

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supporting students' projects. Using CFG protocols and practices we were able to examine, reflect on and inspire students' efforts.

Even though not all agency representatives experienced the benefits of the students' projects in their work, they felt that their contribution to the students' efforts was worthwhile. We do want to stress that the agency members who felt most connected to the work of the CFG were those working directly with students on their service projects.

Reflecting back on the experience we see that more effort should have been devoted to outreach efforts with people of color and the poorer members of our community. Although we tried from the beginning to recruit CFG members from the Latino and African-American communities, we were not successful in doing so. We need to closely examine our past efforts and come up with a new plan for next year.

Creating and coaching this CFG was not an easy task to undertake, however it turned out to be quite rewarding in the end. It was probably most satisfying to see the students interact with the agencies, share their work, and brainstorm new ways of impacting on poverty with professionals. Keeping this collaboration alive and bringing about positive change in our school and community remains our goal and we look forward to the coming school year.

We hope that this broad-based approach to CFGs will be developed in other schools so that we can learn with others as we stretch the potential of the CFG within the school and in the greater community. ❖

If you would like more information about this CFG and its work, e-mail Gina at gweir@bloomington.in.us. Editor's note – if you'd like more information about the Harmony/VISTA Service Learning Demonstration Project please contact Heidi Vosekas at hvosekas@harmonyschool.org

Protocols in Practice

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was my job to facilitate the organization of Year 5's work. I found it very difficult to step into a position in the last year, as I did not feel that I had a broad picture of the work that had been done previously. This reflective portrait helped me to see the beginning, the middle, and the present."

Jackie: "I've worked with both students before, and I've also presented with Warren at a conference. I am not only amazed by his technical growth, but also by his perceptions of the work at Eisenhower. I feel that Patrick and Warren have captured Eisenhower and what we are about."

Facilitator Response:

MichaelAnn: "It's sometimes difficult to facilitate something that is so close and personal, yet I am always amazed by the professionalism of both teachers and students when given an opportunity to present their work."

How did this help us grow?

Having students more involved has allowed the adults/coordinators to step away and see the parts of the systemic structure and their relationships, as opposed to focusing only on the happenings of their programs. As the Critical Friends experience of the faculty and students deepened over time, aspects of the "Critical Friends Group culture" became embedded into the school landscape. Formal and informal signs are present throughout the school. Informally, the language of Critical Friends—"clarifying questions", "warm and cool feedback", and other terms, peppers our everyday conversations. Formally, you can walk into classrooms across the campus and see Connections being done in a social studies classroom, a Tuning Protocol being done on an AP Art Studio portfolio, or students presenting and facilitating discussions in a biology classroom.

Rather than looking at individual groups and programs or evaluating test scores, the reflective portrait/video gave us a chance to achieve a holistic view of the reform work that is being done by our school community. The reflective portrait, like the portfolio, tells our story and shows the learning that has occurred among students, teachers, and administrators. We've learned how interrelated our learning is when we're committed to creating a school community that seeks to be the best for all of its students.

"Woah! You didn't think we were going to close the book with that, now did you? No. We're starting a new chapter. That was only the beginning." –an Eisenhower student, "Dwight D. Eisenhower Houston Annenberg Challenge Peer Review Reflective Portrait", 2002, Eisenhower High School. ❖

MichaelAnn Kelley and Paul Gray are teachers and CFG coaches at Eisenhower High School in the Aldine Independent School District in Houston, Texas. MichaelAnn teaches visual art and has been the campus-based reform coordinator for five years . She has been actively involved in CFG coaching and work since 1998 . mkelley@aldine.k12.tx.us

Paul teaches mathematics and has been a program coordinator for five years. He was trained as a CFG coach in 2001, but has been participating in CFG work since 1998. pgray@aldine.k12.tx.us

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have grown.

Our current principal, Ted Hall asks the question, "What happens to voice when you get big?" We are currently moving to a small learning community structure so that community meetings will be small enough to allow for the thinking, rethinking and messy thinking that ensures all voices are heard.

How are students grouped at your school?

Our classes are heterogeneous and inclusive. We believe that heterogeneity is both authentic and rigorous. Having said that, we mobilize the material and staff needed to support the training of a diverse group of learners. Our organization teaches students the art and craft of self-advocacy.

One clear example of our support for heterogeneity is our teacher to student ratio. None of us teaches more than eighty students. If I did teach more than eighty kids, we'd read less, write less, etc. In smaller classes I can encourage everyone's voice, everyone's potential to publish. In a large class I would encourage Jennifer, but I wouldn't be able to give Kathleen the extra support she needed to experience success.

What assessments do you use at Souhegan?

All tenth graders take the state tests and we're required to meet all the state benchmarks, but New Hampshire doesn't have a large state bureaucracy and the tests aren't our only measure of student achievement. We honor testing as one form of data. We've been working with the University of Wisconsin on multiple forms of assessment. However, the best measure of our students is our ability to know them well and mobilize the structures and resources they need to meet the standards and experience success. The proof is in our students' willingness to stick around and graduate. They decide to finish both their course work and their exit projects even though it sometimes means working through the summer and graduating in August.

About a half dozen of our students have needed extra time and taken it.

Describe your advisory program.

At Souhegan we are committed to holistic education and our advisory program plays a strong role in our personalized approach to our students. "We believe that the presence of caring adults in students' lives leads to their greater success." Our advisories meet every day and are made up of ten to twelve students and an advisor. The advisor acts as an advocate and primary contact person at the school for all four of the student's years with us. Our mission states that we're going to "challenge and expand the comfortable limits of thought, tolerance and performance." At Souhegan we want our students to use their "minds and hearts" well both in and out of school. Advisory provides one critical context for the implementation of our mission.

Tell us about your greatest hope and your greatest fear in this next period.

Actually, they're the same thing. I'm concerned with our rapid growth and while I'm hopeful about our ability to grow and restructure, I'm afraid at the same time. We won't have the luxury of a grace period for reflection and planning this time. This time, school is in session and we'll be meeting at the end of the day. I wonder how we'll take the time for storytelling, how we'll make space for all our voices after teaching 1000 kids all day. I hope we haven't exceeded our capacity to honor what we hold sacred.

Anything else you'd like to tell our readers?

I'd like everyone who reads the book to know that it's really the product of sixty-five teachers and thirty-five students who all read drafts, weighed in, and added their voices to the finished product. ❖

Contact Peggy Silva at psilva@sprise.com
Contact Debbie Bambino at dbambino@earthlink.net

Creating a Community of Learners...

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Plymouth State College who is part of two RP groups at her college, praised the RP process. "The hour that I spend in my RP group is one of the most productive of my whole week. After 10 years here at Plymouth, I have learned to stay away from those activities that sap my energy…RP re-energizes me. Not only do I see tangible results in my students' work, but participation in these groups has changed the way I think about my teaching."

Reflective practice has the potential to improve instruction, increase collaboration among faculty, and promote great success among the increasingly diverse students enrolled in college today.

Reflection and collaboration help unlock the mysteries of teaching and learning whether your students are in kindergarten or the first year of college. ❖

The authors coordinate the "Equity and Excellence in Higher Education Project". For more information about the project, visit their website–http://iod.unh.edu/EE.

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Director's Report

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and America's Future (NCTAF) and the National Center for Restructuring Schools and Teaching (NCREST) are working together on an in-depth study of the Lucent Peer Collaboration Project. The focus of the study will be on the impact of learning communities on school and district culture, teacher practice and student achievement. Their first in-depth report should be available later this year.

NSRF's New York City Center of Activity has developed a portfolio process that is guided by a rubric for responsive facilitation and public exhibitions.

Five faculty researchers from Indiana University documented our learning at the Looking at Student Work meeting. We are eagerly awaiting their findings.

Our work has also been featured in Carl Glickman's *Leadership for Learning: How to Help Teachers Succeed*, Peggy Silva and Bob Macklin's *Standards of Mind and Heart – Creating the Good High School* and *Reflection: The Heart of Changing Practice* by Grace Hall McEntee, Jon Appleby, JoAnn Dowd, Jan Grant, Simon Hole, and Peggy Silva, to be published in February 2003.

This journal *Connections* is providing a forum for NSRF practitioners to publicly reflect on their work.

This summer, NSRF has supported the reflection of regional centers of activity in Seattle, WA, and Portland, OR. A new strategy of having external critical friends observe week-long new and experienced coaches' seminars has provided an invaluable opportunity for learning from each other.

As this year's work draws to a close and the new school year begins, several burning questions about our work are in the front of my mind:
– How can we nurture educators' ability to identify the gaps between their core beliefs and their practice?
– How can we inspire coaches to articulate and develop their tacit understanding of what makes our work so critically different from previous work so that it can't be taken away by external constraints i.e. funding cuts, changing leadership, etc.?
– What are the necessary pre-existing conditions for our work to be able to flourish in schools and districts?
– How can we provide the essential ongoing support to coaches after initial coaches training?
– How can the national office strengthen our support of the regional centers and expand the opportunities for learning from each other?

I hope that next year I will be able to report to you on our learning around these and other essential questions.

In closing, I'd like to share that this is also a special time to celebrate the great miracle of life, to appreciate all of the opportunities we have to contribute to others, and to remember those loved ones who have passed away. I am eternally grateful for the privilege of having known and learned from Faith Dunne and Nancy Cieslak. They live on through their extraordinary contributions and continue to make our world a more just and humane place for teachers and children. ❖

Daniel Baron, Gene Thompson-Grove, and Steve Bonchek, the three co-directors of NSRF, will take turns reporting out to us in Connections.
Contact Daniel Baron at dbaron@bloomington.in.us

Small Schools and CFGs

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will be able to meet several times during each school year, in job-alike sessions, to share their coaching practices and systems of district support with their colleagues.

The bagels and fruit from last winter may be gone, but the goals of that seminar are now taking shape as we have new CFGs operating at each of our NESSN schools. As over thirty new small schools begin emerging in thirteen school buildings in our five NESSN districts, each will have the capacity to have Critical Friends Groups. In one school, Linden Elementary in Malden, MA, we have helped create the capacity to have school-wide CFGs within the first year of our involvement. According to Principal Nicholas Catoggio, "teachers are eager to meet around 'looking at student work' in their new Critical Friends Groups. Rather than wait for capacity, we've decided to go all-school CFG starting this October."

The teachers at Linden who attended our seminar last spring are enthusiastic about beginning their work. Through their school-based coach, Stephen Spring, they have created the structures that will allow them to meet together regularly to look at student and teacher work and visit each others' classrooms. They have restructured their school day to allow for ongoing professional development and have taken the steps necessary to strengthen their professional community. They have seen the power that NSRF processes can bring to their practice and understand deeply how their professional community will impact student learning.

We have created an ambitious professional development calendar for this school year, including a seminar for new coaches in the fall and several days of professional development for teachers and administrators already involved in this work. As we continue coaching our districts and schools, we look forward to new NSRF colleagues sustaining the work we have begun. Our time in the schools may be limited, but the legacy we are able to provide through our continued involvement with NSRF should pay dividends for the teachers and children we serve long after our initial work ends. ❖

Contact Steven Strull at the Center for Collaborative Education at sstrull@ccebos.org

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on the importance of reading aloud to students.

"When I first started with this group, I was a fourth grade social studies and science teacher without a homeroom. As a result of my work with this CFG, I have decided to become a classroom teacher responsible for all subjects. All the reading, peer observation, discussions, and sharing has propelled me back into the classroom where I can have a better sense of community and find answers to many of the teaching and learning questions that have arisen in our professional discussions. Personally, I plan to continue trying to make time for reflecting. Also, I'll consider the effects of looping on student achievement and focus on the organization of my record keeping and assessments.

"One session I particularly enjoyed was the evening when we came up with absurd ideas. I had many dreams that night. I think we always have to have a dream when we are teaching and work to inspire the children to have them as well. CFG has given me the time and space to dream those dreams.

Talking about what my friends in the CFG were doing in their classrooms with my pre-service teacher students brought validity and meaning to what I was saying. I was no longer isolated. This connection was furthered for me when, for one of our "CFG assignments," we were to visit each other's classrooms. I had been to Andy's classroom before to observe my student during his field experience. I already felt comfortable in the space, and respected so much of what Andy was doing, and how he had guided my student. When I went for my CFG observing, Andy was teaching a math lesson. At one of our CFG meetings, a math professor had talked with us about how to teach math more effectively – Andy was using her suggestions! And his students were loving it! I was seeing how Andy's already established rapport with his students – the rapport that he had also supported my student in establishing as well – was crucial to this new teaching method. I could see the community in action. I learned by watching and participating with his students' learning.

I also went to Sarah's classroom, and she came to mine. Watching her writer's workshop was inspiring. I got to see the freedom that her students have to follow what is important to them. I saw how Sarah takes risks by encouraging students to ask controversial questions in their writing and to write scary feelings. I can't wait to share this practice with my students with Sarah's permission. When Sarah came to my class, she observed and participated in discussions about homophobia and racism. Not only did she provide a new perspective to my students but she helped me to understand where my students' thinking processes are. I gave students more power in the planning and leading of discussions for the remaining class periods – my leading seemed too heavy handed.

Another major connection for me happened when, during a meeting, we were asked to participate in an "Absurd Idea" protocol. I think a lot of us felt a little silly doing this at first, but as we warmed up to each other's ideas, we dreamed of ways to make them happen. My dream was to plan collaboratively for my own undergraduate class with an elementary school teacher, and likewise to help her plan. Eureka! Sarah hopped on board! WE decided that this could really become a reality! We could help each other's students by bringing our expertise into each other's classrooms. We set up meeting times for the summer.

Sarah created a very specific top ten list as she reported on the influence of CFG work:

1. Shared reading and text-based discussions help me share my reading life with my students. I can pull from how we discuss text at CFG and use those strategies with my students. Also, just sharing my reading life makes reading so much more real for my students.
2. Honoring time, one of our norms, has become a huge benefit. I am learning how to structure activities according to time managed protocols. I have tried many – the way we established norms (writing our own lists and moving to larger groups) and tuning protocols. I also created many of my own protocols to use for book discussions, tuning of writing, problem solving, and decision-making. I loved how because we honored time during our CFG meetings, we had time for everything.
3. The importance of having a group was significant. I felt that I had to make a choice to honor my group members every time I went. I became part of the group, which I needed and which needed me. If I chose to stay home, I chose to let everyone down and break our norms. This played out in my classroom because it heightened my awareness of our group's needs. As I became more a part of the CFG, I encouraged my students to be more cooperative and to rely on each other more. I structured more learning experiences where they had to work in a group to succeed and where they could learn about each other's strengths.
4. I loved our norm about having no hierarchy of expertise. This was a change from the school environment and allowed me to learn within a group where everyone stood on equal ground.
5. Another of our norms, "if you wonder it ask it", practically became my motto. I have always asked questions and encouraged question asking in my classroom but never had I realized how important it truly is to listen to the questions of others. I can't count the number of questions I heard asked at the CFG that made me think more deeply about something I was doing or something I needed to do in my classroom. I love even the huge questions, like the focusing question for our peer observations, "What am I learning about my practice today and what am I being encouraged to try?"
6. CFG increases my curiosity about possibilities inside the classroom. When we came up with our absurd

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ideas and listened to the group work through plans of actions, it all seemed so possible. Our ideas became less absurd and by the end, they all sounded really good and they sounded like ideas that we could work on together. Jill and I are even starting a summer planning adventure based on children's literature.

7. My experiences in the CFG helped me set up a dependable time and process for professional reflection.

8. Visiting other classrooms made me think about what I was brushing over in my practice. After visiting Jill's class, I seriously thought about whether or not I was purposely avoiding risky topics or if I was just waiting for the opportunity to discuss difficult issues when a topic arose more naturally.

9. Visiting Tina's classroom helped me to appreciate her so much more and to revalue the knowledge I gained in her classroom and the space she provided for me to grow when I was her student teacher.

10. The shared text, *Readers and Writers with a Difference: A Holistic Approach to Teaching Struggling Readers and Writers* (Rhodes & Dudley-Marling, 1996) helped me to realize my concerns with our school-wide reform initiative. If I had not read this text and been able to talk through my issues with the group, I might not have realized that my anger with the situation at my school had been affecting my learning.

Sarah was also able to share how the work of CFG meetings spilled over into her classroom life and filled up her spirit. What follows is the end-of-year response she composed regarding the importance of time spent with the CFG and her life as a first-year teacher. She uses an early experience from our CFG work, the group juggle, to organize her connections:

Sometimes my life seems to be one big juggling act - one person trying to keep as many responsibilities going at once as possible. And, if one task takes even one second too long, the whole deal falls to the ground and here I am, looking at the pieces, feeling like it's impossible to make them one again.

I began this first year in the classroom rationalizing that teaching would require just a bit of juggling. All I had to do was keep all of my assessments, readings, meetings, and reflections going at once. I could do it. I was practically invincible at the start of the year—or so I thought.

I started that first day of school with my fresh class of fifth graders doing a group juggling activity where every person was responsible for maintaining a pattern of throws and catches in order to keep a set of balls moving. Perhaps I planned the activity to symbolize all of the learning my students and I would be juggling together. Perhaps I planned it to show how we all had a part in the classroom that had to be done appropriately or we couldn't succeed. Perhaps I planned it because I knew this group juggle would prove to my students and me that we were already a team, even before the end of the first day.

I was sure my students would not really need practice working together. I would just take some time to demonstrate cooperation with this activity, and we would move on from there, juggling our other tasks but knowing how to accept and offer help if needed. I was juggling many tasks almost solo, and I felt like I learned enough every hour to fill the pages of thirty books. My students would be the same way.

Well, here we were, that first day of school, standing in a circle, preparing for our group juggle, when, splat, I dropped the ball before it even left my hand. The next ball dropped too. Finally, we got one object through the first five people and it dropped again just as the yelling began.

"Why'd you have to drop the ball?" a furious student snapped.

"Don't you know how to catch?" another chimed in.

"Come on, skip him, he can't catch. This game isn't fair anyway. I'll never even get to touch the ball," a disgruntled student announced.

I looked around, picked up the balls, and quit. I didn't want to see any more failed tosses. I didn't even say anything to stop the put-downs or injured feelings that remained in play as we walked back into the classroom. We moved on to the next thing planned, and I moved on to watch many of my other first year ideals shatter as I dropped them one at a time. I dropped reading my students' reader response journals each night and for a time assigned each student only one day to write. I dropped writing in my journal consistently and for a time produced only one response every Monday. I dropped reading every night before bed and only did this on the weekends. I picked up whining in exchange, and spent many hours after school venting to my mentor teacher, Tina, who always encouraged me just enough to pick up the pieces at the end of each day and start anew. But I was still mostly alone, hidden in my classroom, and the cycle went on for a while.

A few months after school started, I began going to the CFG. This group of educators met once every two weeks to grow as a team of learners. I'd been in a CFG during my ten weeks of student teaching, and I remembered the peer observations fondly, and I must admit, the idea of having another adult physically in my room got me tempted to rejoin.

Almost immediately, however, I saw a problem that made me question the worth of the CFG. Our peer observations didn't start for a while. I quickly began to feel overwhelmed with our shared reading but could not drop it because I had committed to the group. Our norms specifically stated that I was committed not only to coming prepared but to challenging the thinking of the group members. Yet, I remember thinking and saying, "I have to go to CFG tonight" on those days of the first few meetings. The CFG was just another responsibility to juggle. I still kept going, and I still kept whining.

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I found comfort, however, in listening to other people talk about their learning concerns and I liked sharing mine. But did I really need this? The cheering squad of my CFG members often thwarted my efforts to keep my whining and complaining in play. The positive attitudes were contagious, and sometimes I'd even join in and encourage those in the CFG. But I was still THE team and I still had to juggle alone. This one member team could still exist without the cheering squad.

The year progressed slowly. I still whined to Tina at school, my students still whined at each other. We all still juggled with some outside encouragement from others, until the week after winter break. I was sick. I was sick of school. I was sick of learning. I was sick of cheering. I was sick of encouraging. I was sick of listening to myself think. So I quit. I quit reflecting in a productive way. I quit reading as much as I needed. I quit abiding by the norms of the CFG and the norms established in my classroom. I was so overwhelmed with all of my failings for the year that I felt that starting again would be impossible. Work in my classroom became more independent. I quit structuring as many interactive activities. I began seeing all of my students' shortcomings and restarting them again seemed impossible. My classroom was a miserable place to be. And I was its miserable leader.

I decided to bring the issue to the CFG. Or, actually, the issue brought me. I didn't really know why or what the issue was. For the first time in a long while, I knew I needed help and so did everyone else. I knew I couldn't start my juggling act again with my low morale. Betty, our experienced and insightful leader, organized a Charrette, a protocol where, basically, I explained my obstacle for about ten minutes and the group talked about the concern for about twenty minutes. The amazing part was that when we started the Charrette, the issue wasn't my issue any more. The group had to take on the concern as if it were their own. It was part of the protocol. I wasn't even allowed to talk. I wasn't able to jump in and take my issue back. I lost all control. And for the first time in my life, momentarily, I couldn't juggle with nothing to juggle.

I remember being so scared that night, listening to the others talk about why I was not reflecting and why I had seemingly lost my mind. I remember thinking that there was no way this would work. There was no way that this little activity would end productively. But, it wasn't just an activity. It was an experience that led me to drop the need for total control of my own learning. It was the experience that made me realize that I was not alone and that there was more than one person on my team.

Apparently, the group was what I needed all along. That night of the Charrette, my CFG devised a plan to help alleviate some of my stresses and, as a result, I left that meeting with a reflection partner and ideas for organizing my thinking as I reflected about my learning. I left, with journal in hand, writing as I walked, making comments such as, "I am thinking and that is exactly what I need to be doing! I yearn for this communication every day." I left making the decision to try again.

I walked into my classroom the next day knowing we needed a change. As we met in an oval on the floor, I threw out questions to students, hoping they would catch. "Hey, what is going on in here and how can we work through this together?" They echoed my concerns as questions popped up around the oval as to why people were putting people down, and why some people couldn't be quiet during private writing, and why we had to work so much by ourselves. The previously miserable classroom wasn't my responsibility any more. I'd lost all control as the students' minds raced for solutions. We left that oval, after about an hour and a half of small group, large group, and individual reflection time, with a new set of norms and expectations for our learning environment. We left the oval in committees, assigned to research certain aspects of our learning, and with a new sense of belonging to a group. We left wanting to work together and wanting to succeed.

Eventually, as the weeks passed, the CFG became a more cohesive team. I was able to take on the concerns of my CFG members as my own and they took mine. My class became a more cohesive team as well, and when we met in the oval to discuss, we were willing to tackle issues together. I could ask my class and CFG to help me and they could ask me to help them. Much of the time, we didn't even need to ask.

On the last day of school, I decided to give the group juggle another go. Perhaps I planned it because I wanted to symbolize all of the learning my students and I had been juggling together. Perhaps I planned it to symbolize how we all had a part in the classroom that had been done appropriately so that we did succeed. Perhaps I knew I had planned it because I just wanted to see what would happen when the objects started to drop.

In the risky spirit of the final days of school, we decided to juggle water balloons. As before, I was the first to drop the object and splat, I was soaking wet. Laughter filled the air and the first thrower picked up a new balloon to start again. Splat, splat, splat. Three times in a row, the balloon dropped before it hit the eighth person. The yelling began, just as it had before, but the words were completely different.

"Wait a second, just listen," one student begged. "We have to figure out how to make this work."

"Yeah, it looks like if we are quieter, we might be able to concentrate." A suggestion was offered.

"Oh, and did you notice that we are all kind of looking around and not watching the balloons. Maybe we should all watch the balloons."

"Okay, yeah, and for those people who keep dropping it, maybe we could throw it a little lighter and higher so it'd be easier to catch."

The balloons were back in play

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Looking at Student Work Collaboratively

NSRF and The Looking at Student Work Collaborative are offering a day long "Looking at Student Work" pre-conference to the Coalition of Essential Schools' Fall Forum.

The practice of looking at samples of student work in collaborative teacher inquiry groups, such as Critical Friends Groups (CFGs), has become a prominent form of professional development. In this session, participants will explore the purposes and principles for looking at student work collaboratively (LASW), as well as engage in some of the practices of LASW. Most of the workshop will be devoted to looking at student work samples that participants themselves bring and present. We will work in small groups, learning about, using, and reflecting on different "protocols" (e.g. the Tuning Protocol, the Collaborative Assessment Conference, and the Consultancy) to structure the conversations. Groups will be facilitated by experienced NSRF facilitators and members of the national Looking at Student Work Collaborative, which supports schools and teachers in LASW.

This workshop will be offered as day-long session on Thursday, November 14. Capacity is limited, and registration is on a first-come, first-served basis.

What
Looking at Student Work Collaboratively Workshop

When
Thursday, November 14, 2002

Where
Washington, D.C.
Marriott Wardman Park Hotel

Cost
$145

To Register go to
www.essentialschools.org/pub/ces_docs/fforum/fforum.html

Building Professional Learning Communities

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to share best practices and dilemmas. Whether or not the term CFG is used in training and implementation "models" of the various LA efforts, one can see that the work in LA consistently focuses on building the capacity of site principals, teachers, and schools to reflect upon their practices to improve student learning by using the collaborative strategies and tools that folks doing CFG work have proven to be effective and valuable. ❖

Contact Juli Quinn at jqnn@earthlink.net

UCLA School Management Program

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being treated as a valued professional – some even say it has been their first such experience. ❖

Contact Debbi Laidley at dlaidley@smp.gseis.ucla.edu or Lisa Manning lmanning@smp.gseis.ucla.edu.

Information about upcoming Coaches Institutes can also be found on UCLA SMP's website at www.smp.gseis.ucla.edu.

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and after two more stops and discussions, we juggled three balloons through the entire class six times in a row! We walked in the room, patting each other on our backs, congratulating each other on our efforts. It wasn't the juggling we were proud of. We were proud that we had become a team that needed each other.

Likewise, as I think of the CFG, I feel great pride in the team we have become. I realize that we are not meeting only every other Monday. We are meeting much more—in the hallways, on the telephone, or in another's classroom. I realize that I need the CFG and the community we have built so that I don't just juggle my concerns. I can tackle them with the help of others.

Because of our efforts to begin documenting the learning surrounding our CFG, we're beginning to shape a process for embedding teacher action research into the ongoing rituals and routines of our time together. We've made a good start, but we will begin again next year trying to do an even better job of not just making our teaching public - but also our learning. We're coming to accept that we may never feel as settled or sure, as we'd like to be. We are confident, however, that the stability of our critical friends group will give us the support we need to keep asking the hard questions and not feel so alone in the process. ❖

Contact Betty Shockley Bisplinghoff at bettysb@arches.uga.edu

7th Annual NSRF Winter Meeting

Katy Kelly, Bloomington, IN

I like to think of the Winter Meeting as NSRF's big annual reunion. It's our chance to meet new people, reunite with old friends, learn about what's going on in different places around the country, and most importantly to take the time with our NSRF colleagues to think critically about the work we are doing in our CFGs, our schools and beyond.

Each year we hold the meeting in a different part of the country to give a boost to a different Centers of Activity. This gives many local coaches the chance to take advantage of a national event.

We are delighted that this year's meeting is being organized by the LA Center and hosted by the UCLA School Management Program and the Charter College of Education at California State University.

Using reflections and feedback from past meetings, our planning team has been working to create an agenda that meets the needs of attendees while infusing into the meeting the best new research and thinking about NSRF practices.

We do our best to balance the needs of new coaches with experienced ones, teachers with administrators, those who prefer structure with those who'd rather have a flexible agenda.

This year we will hold to the tradition of placing participants in home groups modeled on CFGs. Participants will be in "job alike" groups: Teachers, Principals, District Office/ Superintendents, Higher Education, Professional Developers, or if specifically requested a Mixed Group. We are pleased to add two new strands this year – Students (for students currently involved in CFG work) and one for people involved with Small Schools. Home groups are facilitated by at least one NSRF National Facilitator and one from the Los Angles Center of Activity.

Within home groups, participants will be able to meet with peers in a CFG type setting in order to deepen their understanding of issues related to their work. To learn from the successes of each other and better understand our own successes we will use the Success Analysis protocol. There will also be opportunity for presenting dilemmas, looking at student or personal work, discussing text, and open time for each home group to determine its own agenda.

Out of home groups we will have a "World Café" - an all group experience that consists of small group conversations around a guiding question- and Coaching Clinics.

The idea of a Coaches' Clinic came in response to past participants who wanted a chance to work on specific skills such as choosing a protocol, setting agendas, giving life to a flagging CFG, presenting the work to your district, etc. Please let us know if there is a particular topic you'd be interested in.

In January, when we come together as a large collaborative learning community, we want to remember to celebrate our successes but at the same time ask ourselves how to build on them in order to live up to our mission.

Come ready to celebrate, to reflect, to work hard, and be renewed. I look forward to seeing you in Los Angeles. ❖

Contact Katy Kelly at kkelly@harmonyschool.org

NSRF Mission Statement

The mission of the National School Reform Faculty is to foster educational and social equity by empowering all people involved with schools to work collaboratively in reflective democratic communities that create and support powerful learning experiences for everyone.

7th Annual NSRF Winter Meeting

Hosted by UCLA School Management Program & Charter College of Education at California State University, LA

Where
Los Angeles, California

All sessions will held at:
Manhattan Beach Marriott
1400 Parkview Avenue
Manhattan Beach, California

When
January 16-18, 2003
The meeting begins at 8am on Thursday and ends noon on Saturday.

Cost
Before December 6th- $350
After December 6th- $395
School Groups
1st participant, $350
($395 after December 6th)
additional participants, $320
($365 after December 6th)
Student - $100
(minors must be accompanied by an adult)

Lodging
Manhattan Beach Marriott
1400 Parkview Avenue,
Manhattan Beach, CA 90266
Phone - 310 546 7511
Rate
$129 single
$129 double
$10 per additional person
Group Rate Deadline
January 2, 2003

Registration Deadline
Please register by December 6, 2002

Register on-line at www.nsrfharmony.org/wintermeeting.html

Questions
Heidi Vosekas 812.330.2702
hvosekas@harmonyschool.org