It’s Not Magic, It’s the Future  
Scott Murphy, Colorado

Confusion and curiosity are mainstays of my experience in education. They’ve taken over for anything I’d call absolute. It seems hard enough for us to figure out exactly what is going on right now with things like test scores, student motivation, and school culture. How in the world are we to predict what is going to happen with student scores next semester, their motivation next year, or the tenure of this school three years from now? One tool, however, in balancing that current confusion with hopeful curiosity is the Future Protocol, jokingly dubbed “Back to the Future” by new coaches two summers ago.

I developed the structure in 2001 at the request of our Superintendent to assist Jefferson County cabinet leaders in refocusing the district vision and fine-tuning the strategic plan. The idea was to give the diverse members of the group something to which they might all tether their ideas and to help them synthesize the relationship they saw between where the district was and where they wanted it to be. What was discovered in that meeting was what we already knew. Folk like to be productive with their time and appreciate guidance to go deep in their dialogue and discussion. What also emerged, however, was this new energy on how we might help manage discussion and coordinate efforts to make greater sense about wishful thinking and more about conscious effort.

To do this, several components seem key. One, participants must be able to really sense the future; I mean hear it, smell it, see it, and maybe even feel it. Buy-in cannot be at a tactful, distant level, but must be an intimate, intellectual, and emotional one. To do this I designed the protocol to work with an altered “present.” When speaking about the future, what they hope to accomplish or see change, participants don’t talk in future tense. They speak in present tense, as if it had already happened. Phrases like, “I see,” “we have,” and “their” begin to emerge and the language starts to shape a “can do” attitude toward this future time. Participants in the past have commented that the process itself is invigorating, hopeful, and engaging. It makes what seemed distant appear more real.

if it were something from which they
had already evolved. John D’Anieri, national facilitator, sees this step as key because it allows people to think strategically about any notion of what might prevent the success (or failure, if present is assumed). What generally happens is that obstacles, issues, and challenges are seen with less abrasion and more with a sense of frankness and acceptance. And by explaining it as something that “was” an issue or “used to be” missing, there is not helplessness to that reality.

Finally, there needs to be a way to get from here to there or there to here in this case. This component has been the most intriguing and the true crux of a successful Future Protocol. In this step, participants connect the “new” present (next semester, next year) to the past (today, in real time). The idea is for people to explain how this change happened, what was put in place, and how things were altered. Continuing with past tense language, participants draw connections between what they were and what they’ve become. What develops in this step is a working draft for an action plan. These connections begin to explain what the school or organization must do to make its vision a reality.

In the last couple years, some important discoveries have emerged from this step. One, when I facilitate it, I now put all thinking on paper. I use a large wall space and start with the future, dated at the top for a future time, but labeled “today” on the far right. On the far left, I put the current date and the word “then.” In the middle, I put the question “How did we get from ‘here’ to ‘then’?” with arrows pointing to the other two charts. The visual component seems to stimulate thinking, assist in making connections, and serve as a working document beyond the time of the protocol.

But when the protocol is over, the work is not done. In reality, it is just begun. The middle section on how the (continued on page 14)
Understanding “Our Work”

Chris Jones, Indiana

Part of the vocabulary that gets thrown around at the national center, at the office or at national meetings is the term “Our Work.” I have been confused by this term for a while. I know what my work is: building websites, answering phones and e-mail, helping to put together institute materials, but what is “Our Work”? I finally got to see “Our Work” recently. I have been working at the NSRF National Center in Bloomington, Indiana, for over a year. It is never easy to integrate new people into an existing institution and there is not exactly a manual for working at NSRF. I was told a few things, but had some questions answered, and was integrated into our NSRF staff CFG.

This arrangement worked well, but eventually the time came for my initiation: attending a coaches’ institute. I never like to ask anyone to do things that I am not willing to do, so when a chance arose to go to a new coaches’ institute in Indianapolis as part of the first Leadership Institute, I knew I needed to go. I had spent the last year making it known to educators to become coaches and start CFGs, so I owed it to myself and the people I want to help to gain a better understanding of “Our Work.”

I saw educators with real concerns take the time - a full week - to try something new. I had read all the protocols countless times, I knew at least the titles of most of the articles (and the content of many), but I had never made that connection. It feels like it is some-thing you always knew but forgot. At the same time it is one of the most difficult things I have done in my life. Trust and competition are a part of my (and I suspect many others’) culture. It is a hard thing to rewire your work to be more open and collaborative.

I am not sure if there is a standardized model of a New Coaches Institute, given the individual needs of different groups, but the first institute was pretty unique. It was designed to integrate teachers, community groups, students and parents at various points who were doing their own leadership development (continued on page 18).

Challenging Assumptions
Camellia Cosgray, Indiana

When I was 6 years old, I began first grade at Harmony School. Harmony is a unique place. With 180 students from age 3 through age 18, all in the same building, there is a familial atmosphere, and collaboration is the rule rather than the exception. Though there have been many changes since that fateful first day of school 20 years ago, Harmony is still my second home and my extended family.

Last December, I completed the CFF Education program at Indiana University (Bloomington), and I now hold an Indiana Teaching License. Though I am not teaching in the traditional sense, I am working with a group at Rhino’s, the local all-ages club and youth center, which is also affiliated with Harmony School. I have also been working for the National School Reform Faculty (housed at the Harmony School Education Center) for about two and a half years, putting together binders for trainings, designing brochures, editing protocols, and generally trying to support coaches and facilitators in any way that I can.

During this time I went from having no idea what protocols and even the organization itself were all about to feeling very comfortable with NSRF materials and having a good understanding of NSRF’s mission and purpose. I knew what CFGs were all about. I understood the purpose of protocols and how to use them. I knew why we read the articles we read. I went to a CFF coaches institute in Indianapolis.

What I found was that I actually knew and understood very little. I’d read all the protocols countless times, I knew at least the titles of most of the articles (and the content of many), I’d even put together the binder we were using for this particular institute; all that “preparation,” all that prior knowledge, didn’t prepare me for the power of protocols and the importance of CFG work. What I found was that I had assumptions about what I knew, the work that I did, the work of coaches all over the country, and about myself. Although most of these assumptions were of a positive nature, they were still assumptions.

I used to believe that CFGs were easy, that they just “happened.” It seems so obvious to me: CFGs are an amazing tool, therefore most educators will buy in easily and quickly, and trust will follow. Since I had grown up in a place where collaboration was the norm, I assumed that (continued on page 18).