

CONNECTIONS

SPRING 2003
a Journal of the National School Reform Faculty

Report from the Directors

Steve "Roc" Bonchek, Co-Director

Of the three NSRF co-directors, I am the only one who wasn't involved in NSRF's national network before 1999. Up until then my exposure to NSRF was as the director of Harmony School. With 185 pre-k to 12th grade students and sixteen faculty, we had utilized and benefited from our CFG at Harmony since we started our first group in 1995. Consequently, when NSRF decided to leave Brown University and become part of Harmony I had only an inkling of NSRF's potential to touch tens of thousands of educators and millions of students.

All that has changed.

Since Harmony's founding in 1974 with four high school students, I had always hoped that we could serve as a catalyst for public school reform. The basic philosophy of Harmony had its origins in the "free school movement" of the late 1960s and early 1970s. That philosophy can best be summed up in the following statement:

Schools should be a place where all people are engaged in an authentic democratic community and together have meaningful and revealing dialogue that begins to formulate new dimensions of ourselves and of society.

Ron Miller, president of the Foundation for Educational Renewal which funded the first three issues of *Connections*, writes eloquently about this movement in his book *Free Schools, Free People*, available through SUNY Press (www.sunypress.edu).

When I started to experience the process of CFGs in 1995 it seemed very consistent with Harmony's philosophy. CFGs appeared to be the perfect group process within which people in schools could have this "meaningful and revealing dialogue." In the three years that



NSRF has been a part of Harmony, many more educators have come to agree with this conclusion.

Building on the work that went on at Brown University from 1995 to 2000, we have seen the budget of NSRF grow from \$10,000 to \$2,000,000, and through the work of 26 Centers of Activity, 8000 additional educators have attended NSRF Coaches Institutes. However, amidst all this activity, there are two NSRF initiatives that touch me "where I live(d)." You see, in my life I have only lived in two places —Bloomington, Indiana, and Cleveland, Ohio, and as an adult I have really had only one job—being at Harmony School.

The fact that NSRF work fit so naturally into Harmony School came as no surprise. However, to my great surprise, the largest single NSRF district project has emerged in my old hometown, Cleveland—within the Cleveland Municipal School District. I would like to take this opportunity to share with you what is going on in these two communities, Harmony and Cleveland, that are so close to my heart.

(continued on page 16)

In this issue...

At the Heart of Teaching
Book Review

New Teacher Inductions

Eddying Out: Helping Your
CFG Share Ownership of
Planning and Leadership

Small Schools- Ohio High
School Transformation
Initiative

Winter Meeting Review

NSRF's Living History-
A Conversation with Nancy
Mohr and Alan Dichter

Fires in the Bathroom
Book Review

Ridge Arts Actors and the
No Child Left Behind Act

The Trees Are Lovely, But
Where Is the Forest?

Center of Activity Report
Chattanooga, TN

NSRF Summer Leadership
Seminar on Equity

NSRF/HSEC
P.O. Box 1787
Bloomington, Indiana
47402

Non-Profit Org
BULK RATE
U.S. Postage
PAID
Bloomington, IN
Permit No. 327

NSRF Coaches List Serve Conversations On-line

If you are not on the coaches list serve but would like to read what coaches are talking about, you can read archived conversations on-line at www.nsrflharmony.org/conversations.html

At Harmony we have three CFGs made up of teachers and staff, one Coaches CFG that includes coaches from Harmony School, Indiana University, and the Indiana Department of Education, and one CFG made up of faculty, students, parents, and community members. The effects of CFG work on the Harmony culture have been profound. The first thing that I noticed as director was the expanded level of teacher leadership that I observed in faculty meetings. This from a faculty that was already empowered to make all curricular and budgetary decisions.

However, even within this engaged faculty of 16, there was a gap between

has risen. The use of the Descriptive Review process has also provided a great boost to our ability to reflect on and design implementation strategies to support many of our neediest students and their families.

The Cleveland work began when NSRF National Facilitator Dave Lehman, from the Alternative Community School in Ithaca, NY, and I met with a Cleveland team that was working on a Gates Foundation project that planned to start a new small school in Cleveland. As part of this work, Dave and I introduced the notion of CFGs. Two Assistant Superintendents on the Cleveland team became so excited about what CFGs could contribute that they asked us to begin discussions with their Director of Professional Development about training two coaches in each of Cleveland's eighty-nine elementary schools.

The results of that meeting and ensuing conversations have led to a brand new small school in Cleveland—Success Tech Academy—and the widespread use of CFGs throughout many of Cleveland's elementary and middle schools. The small school work was facilitated by monthly visits from Philadelphia NSRF Facilitator Debbie Bambino. Debbie's work there over the course of nearly 14 months resulted in the opening of the school last September. The training of over 200 coaches has been facilitated by a team of 20 NSRF National Facilitators who have been making monthly visits to Cleveland since November, 2001.

Members of this national team come from Ohio, Florida, Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Georgia, Oregon, New Mexico, and Pennsylvania. Amazingly, even with the brutal Cleveland winter, they never missed a day that they had committed to be there. The NSRF team has made monthly visits to Cleveland over the last sixteen months, and though I have only been there three of those days, each time I have had the opportunity to participate

in sessions and talk to many Cleveland coaches and district leaders.

The main thing that stands out for me about the Cleveland work is how the NSRF team has been able to instill a sense of hopefulness into a group of over 200 educators in a fairly typical urban district and, even more importantly, provide them with some "tools" to actualize that new-found optimism. This year, NSRF Facilitators Pete Bermudez, from Florida, and Connie Chene, from New Mexico, have facilitated a Cleveland Principals' CFG with 13 elementary and middle school principals. They hope to expand on that group next year, as the leadership in Cleveland has come to understand how pivotal principal support and understanding of CFG work is to their ultimate success. Next year we also hope to expand our work to high schools and to begin apprenticing some Cleveland coaches with the NSRF National Facilitation Team.

The presence of the kind of "authentic community" I referred to earlier is apparent in both Cleveland and Harmony NSRF work. In Cleveland, the manner in which some twenty NSRF facilitators have been able to come together, whether or not they were previously acquainted, and immediately find a common language and set of experiences upon which to build, has said volumes about the authentic community that runs throughout NSRF. We certainly want to build upon that sense of community in the future as more and more educators get involved with NSRF.

As we grow, the challenge of maintaining the sense of community that I have known at Harmony for nearly 30 years and have now found within NSRF is both daunting and exciting. I believe that with the creativity, commitment, and powerful minds that permeate the NSRF network, we are up to this challenge. ■

Steve Bonchek can be contacted at
<harmony@indiana.edu>

When I first heard about the KnowledgeWorks Foundation's Ohio High School Transformation Initiative (OHSTI), I was intrigued, hopeful, and eager to be a part of this initiative that is unlike any other high school transformation initiative. The key elements of the OHSTI that appeal to me are

- the 15 Non-Negotiables
- the ongoing modeling of supportive and equitable relationship building through the community engagement practices
- the collaborative relationship building and support built into the program for the high schools and the school coaches.

Overall the common thread of this work of transforming large, urban high schools into small schools is the impor-



tance of structuring, and restructuring positive relationships aimed at increasing student achievement.

The 15 Non-Negotiables (see sidebar), which are a major part of the OHSTI, made it evident to me that the KnowledgeWorks Foundation had knowledge about, studied, and looked at other high school transformation models and learned from their mistakes. The 15 Non-Negotiables made crystal clear the level of support, commitment, and innovation expected from all of the stakeholders in order to provide an academically rich, student centered, and standards based educational environment. Positive and supportive relationships are recognized as a key ingredient for success for high school students in low performing, mostly urban districts. Going one step further, KnowledgeWorks required school districts to sign documents agreeing to abide by the 15 Non-Negotiables

in order to be a part of the OHSTI and these 17 school districts are

publicly held accountable for supporting the high schools' transformations into small schools. There are no hidden agendas, and ongoing support is built into all the levels of engagement.

The OHSTI is collaboration among several foundations: the KnowledgeWorks Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Other funding sources include: The US Department of Education and the Ohio Department of Education. 41 high schools in 17 Ohio school districts accepted the challenge to begin the transformation to small high schools. This challenge includes

a pre-planning year, a deep planning year and two implementation years. This first year each school had to incorporate the language and intent of the 15 Non-Negotiables in their school portfolio. One of the Non-Negotiables is that the high schools must form small high schools of no more than 400 students. Another noteworthy Non-Negotiable is the level to which OHSTI requires the community of each school to be engaged in the transformation process from the very beginning. The involvement of the school community and all of the stakeholders must continue in the creation, implementation, and ongoing evaluations phases of each small school.

The Harwood Institute has partnered with the KnowledgeWorks Foundation to help districts involve their communities. Each district has selected a community organization referred to as a "Center of Strength." Each Center of Strength is required to meet with members of the community in groups of 8 to 10 people over a period of time. As a result of these meetings



large segments of each of the 41 school communities Ohio involved in the

KnowledgeWorks High School Initiative were asked a series of questions, such as what they value about teaching and learning, what they want their students to know and be able to do, and what they know about small high schools. Then each Center of Strength compiled the community responses and presented them to each high school design team to incorporate in its school portfolio. In addition, the Harwood Institute brings the community stakeholders together several times during the year to share strategies and design new platforms and arenas for community engagement.

The OHSTI is a very complex and comprehensive plan with many levels of engagement. While the Centers of Strength were actively engaging the school communities in the transformation initiative, each of the 41 Ohio high schools were engaged in a rigorous process of identifying their current reality, and creating a narrative vision of how they would be transformed into small, autonomous high schools centered on individual students' successes. Each high school then wrote a strategic plan to chart how they were going to go from their current reality into 2, 3 or 4 highly successful and academically challenging small high schools opening September 2004. Each high school put together a school portfolio which contained detailed descriptions of their current reality along with their narrative vision and strategic plan for transformation.

KnowledgeWorks provided a school coach for each of the 41 high schools in the transformation initiative. Each school coach worked closely and collaboratively with the district and the school to help create a school portfolio. These school portfolios were modeled on Victoria Bernhardt's "The School Portfolio Tool Kit" series. Dr. Bernhardt has constructed the 7 rubrics of continu-

(continued on page 15)