I just finished perusing my most recent educational journals and newspapers. Every one of them—from Kappan, to the newsletter from the New England Middle School Association, to the MASS ASCD publication, to the Journal of Staff Development’s fastback, Tools for Schools—includes articles about collaboration, or about looking at student work, or about reflective practice and facilitative leadership.

My reading leaves me wondering what makes our work in NSRF different from the practices described in these publications. If educators were looking for resources to help them begin working on collaborative practices in their schools, why would they call NSRF? More personally, why do I first look to colleagues in NSRF to expand my thinking? Why do I call on NSRF? What makes us different? Let me try out a few ideas.

We believe that we need to hold each other accountable for good work that makes a difference for all students. I think back to the first week of the first year of NSRF’s CFG Coaches Seminar in Providence, RI, when twenty-five of us struggled to figure out what it would look like if we shaped the professional development in our schools around the concept of creating learning communities. On the last day of our seminar, Barb Bleyaert from Michigan said, “It is simple. If I am in a CFG with you, it means that I am as committed to your practice, and to your students, as I am to mine.”

Unlike others who believe that the only viable accountability measures are top-down and must include sanctions, we believe that educators can, through critical friendship, hold each other accountable for high quality work. Furthermore, we believe that this is important to do at all levels of the educational system, as well as in all parts of our own organization. It is, I believe, the only way we can truly live our mission statement, and work for educational equity.

We believe that our work is about changing the culture and norms of schools. While others stress using protocols almost as an end in themselves, we know that protocols are only a means to an end. Protocols and the agreements they imply create opportunities for people to develop the norms, habits and skills necessary for creating and sustaining collegial conversations and strong learning communities—communities that are focused on student learning and are characterized by shared values and expectations, joint work, and reflective dialogue. We know that the protocols help us to do authentic work together, no matter what our previous relationship. And in trusting the work, we lay...
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