

Interview with Gene Thompson-Grove

Katy Kelly, Indiana

The following interview with Gene Thompson-Grove, Co-Director of NSRF, was conducted on November 11th, 2004, by Katy Kelly, National Coordinator of the NSRF National Office.

Katy: Gene, you are one of the founders of NSRF. How did that come about?

Gene: Faith Dunne, Paula Evans and I were working for the Citibank Project at the Coalition of Essential Schools at Brown University.

K: Let's back up a bit. How did you get involved with the Coalition?

G: In 1987 I was working for the Boston chapter of Educators for Social Responsibility. I had announced my resignation effective the end of the school year. Joe McDonald, who was a Clinical Professor in Brown University's Education Department was going on sabbatical, and invited me to apply for his position while he was on leave for two years. Ted Sizer was chair of the Education Department at that time and he hired me. At the time the Coalition was not a separate organization from Brown's Education Department. As the Coalition grew, it moved across the street to a separate space. It had some of its own staff, but the chair of the Coalition (Sizer) was also the chair of the Education Department at Brown.

K: Okay, now back to the Citibank project. Was the purpose of the Citibank project to offer support to teachers in Coalition schools?

G: Yes. What we did was to bring together a group of teachers from around the country that met for one week in the spring. They developed a curriculum centered on an essential question. Working together, they really deepened their learning about teaching practices in Coalition schools. They then came to Brown for a month to

teach the course that they had developed at the Brown Summer High School. They taught for four hours in the morning and then spent the afternoon in a seminar to debrief the morning, give each other feedback, and to talk about how to support their colleagues in other Coalition Schools.

K: So how did Critical Friends Groups come about?

G: We had managed to stretch our Citibank project money from a four-year grant into five years, and we were at a point where we were thinking about what was next.

We knew that a large grant to public education was going to be given by Ambassador Walter Annenberg - but we didn't know how much or when. Then, one day, we walked into our offices at Brown and found out that the money had been given and that we now worked for the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (AISR). We didn't have a director and we didn't have a clear mission, and there was a fair amount of confusion about who exactly we were.

Paula Evans, the Director of Professional Development, was visionary and action-oriented. So, we gathered about twelve teachers and administrators from around the country with whom we had been working, and said to them, "We could apply to AISR for a large grant to do professional development the way we think it ought to be done, using what we have learned over the last five years. If you could do anything, what would you do?"

We used people's own experience - what they said they needed and what they had learned about effective professional development - and we read the research. The beauty of it was that the kind of professional development that we described as being most effective was also being mirrored in the research. People like Milbrey McLaughlin, Joan Talbert, Ann Lieberman and Judith Warren Little were writing about pro-



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fessional development that was job-embedded, and done within the context of one's daily practice. We knew that summer institutes, where you go to get re-energized or maybe even transformed, were in many cases ineffective. Practitioners said that even though they had made a commitment to be different when they got back to school, by October they pretty much did things the way they always had, not because they hadn't made a commitment to do things differently, but because it was too hard to change one's practice all by oneself.

We knew the professional development needed to be in the context of the classroom and counter to the way schools are set up in which teachers work in isolation, don't make their practice public, and are not accountable to each other and there are no norms in place for giving or receiving feedback on their practice. So, in 1995, the National School Reform Faculty and its Critical Friends Groups became the first professional-development initiative of AISR. Paula Evans, Faith Dunne and I were the first co-directors of the program. Financially, the program was well supported by Annenberg, but our focus was on developing work that would eventually be self-sufficient.

K: What are some differences between how you envisioned the work then and now?

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G: In the beginning, there was an application process that we don't have now. We had the money to pay for coaches to attend the initial seminar – as well as funds to provide ongoing support to the school. The principal and the school had to make a commitment to CFG work before they sent teachers to the new coaches seminar, and principals had to attend a three-day seminar as well. In the application, the school had to write about how CFGs would help them achieve their goals for improved student learning. During the first three years, we paid coaches a stipend of \$2,000 per year. Part of the commitment was to attend the Winter Meeting.

The application process also included the condition that CFG members, coaches and principals would work toward completing professional portfolios in which they documented changes they made in their practice and student learning as a result of their participation in a CFG.

K: Two things you mentioned – principals being involved and taking part in a principals' institute, and the portfolio component, are no longer required. What do you think about that?

G: What happened was that each year we had less and less money to support this work. It took huge financial resources to bring people together to institutes, meetings and conferences. It was difficult to require portfolios when we didn't have the funds to support either their development or ways to give each other feedback on them. We were just determining how we might use portfolios constructively in the context of changing practice when we left the Annenberg Institute and moved to the Harmony Education Center. Although schools and districts contributed a portion of the costs for preparing and supporting CFG coaches in the last two years we were at AISR, since we left nearly all of our funding has come from fees for service from

schools and districts.

K: Were principals integrated into CFGs in the first years?

G: Several of our CFGs had principals in them the first year. It was our belief that if we were going to change the culture of our schools, principals needed to do the work with their teachers.

K: I know that question still comes up: Should a principal be part of a teacher's CFG? Will their participation inhibit the CFG or will it enhance the whole?

G: That's not the right question.

K: What is the question?

G: The question is: What does the fact that we are asking this question about principal participation tell us about the culture of our school, and is that the kind of culture we want?

K: What has surprised you about the evolution of this work?

G: What has really surprised me is that the concept of CFGs has continued. As we did our work in the late 1990s, we were always conscious that schools were becoming more and more standardized, with a great deal of pressure, along with sanctions, being exerted from the "top." We were championing lateral accountability, as opposed to top-down accountability, and were interested in empowering ourselves to set our own high standards, and to take collective ownership and responsibility for the success and learning of all our students.

K: Why are you surprised that the work has continued?

G: It has surprised me that even though schools were wrestling with more and more mandates, including No Child Left Behind, people continue

to be willing to do work that runs counter to most of the profession's norms – that they have been willing to do the hard work of making their practice public for the purpose of receiving feedback, of situating themselves as learners, of believing that collaborating with their colleagues is time well spent. I think this work taps into the reason many of us became educators, because ultimately it is about empowering ourselves to trust our professional judgment and our collective wisdom.

K: Gene, what are your hopes and fears for the future of the NSRF?

G: My hope is that we can assemble the kind of resources that will allow us to bring together the expertise and knowledge that's in our network, as well as in our partner organizations. I think collectively we have a lot of knowledge and experience that we don't benefit from nationally, across all our centers of activity. I hope we can get to the point where that happens, and I believe a well funded and well coordinated research and documentation initiative will be key. We need to all reach for brilliance in our work – our students deserve no less, and we need each other to do that.

My fear is that CFGs and Professional Learning Communities will go the way of Cooperative Learning and Multiple Intelligences, where people do the work at its most superficial level. We need to tell the story about the roots and the principles underlying this work. I am less interested in having our work described in the educational literature, just for the sake of having our name out there. What I do care about is that our work is cited in the literature in a substantive way. I want this work to change the culture of our profession. I want our work to make a real difference for students. ■

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