

*Alan Dichter, an NSRF National Facilitator, has been active in school reform for more than 20 years and is currently a Local Instruction Superintendent in New York City. He was part of the team that helped give birth to the National School Reform Faculty and, after helping establish NSRF NY, now serves as co-director.*

*Vivian Orlen is also an NSRF National Facilitator. She was a co-founder, in 1993, and is now Principal of Landmark High School in New York City. Landmark HS opened as, and remains, a member of the Coalition of Essential Schools.*

When you consider the power of networks and their impact on school reform in New York City, you realize that New York is really, in many ways, a small town. Just a handful of us at NSRF have worked with more than four-hundred superintendents, principals, assistant principals and other teacher leaders in NYC over the last few years, embedding NSRF work into all professional development that we do. If you add our NSRF NY Endorsed Facilitators and others we've trained, the number of people we have worked with expands geometrically.

We have found that responsive facilitation and the use of NSRF's principles of reflective practice, collaboration, and shared leadership can be effective means of working with people in districts to create respectful, thoughtful, and safe conditions that will encourage them to look critically at their practices.

So, while the NSRF community is very much alive and well in New York City, it is a community of ideas and practice far more than an organization. We are fairly certain that only a small number of that community would think to identify the work they are doing as NSRF work. What they understand it to be is an approach to working with colleagues and students which values inclusion and multiple perspectives and sees leadership as being responsible for

creating an environment where learning is enhanced by collaboration.

The use of protocols and the recognition that skilled peer facilitation is important are becoming mainstream rhetoric in NYC. Practice, of course, lags. What many of us have done, in our different roles within the NYC Department of Education and partner organizations, is to take advantage of professional development opportunities that exist to introduce some new ways of working and then to be absolutely transparent about it. We aggressively encourage bold action by participants to "go home and try it" and come back and talk about it.

A principal of a very large high school, after participating in a text-based discussion using an NSRF Protocol, changed the school's planned professional development for the following week and engaged the entire faculty, for the first time, in reading and discussing a common text. The principal shared that while he had been wanting to do something like that, he simply had had no image of a way he could pull it off until he experienced it himself. A teacher who participated in an NSRF training session where participants silently responded to a prompt in writing on a common large sheet of paper, reported that the next day she used this same strategy to introduce a new book to her class, saving the paper for a reflective activity at the end. She was thrilled at how well it was received.

We have also offered more formal "facilitation training" in various

configurations in order to build vibrant professional communities that support student achievement for all students, even those who have traditionally been marginalized and thought of as terminally at-risk.

One recent example: Alan works with twelve high schools in New York City. After he had engaged school leaders in a process of inquiry and reflection over the course of months,

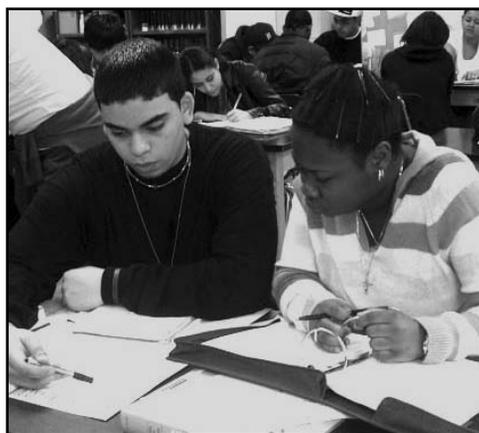
it became clear to three of these school leaders that while they were working in various teacher team configurations, they weren't realizing sufficient pay-off. Meetings were going off on unproductive tangents.

Decisions

seemed to take forever and often became bargaining sessions instead of creative problem-solving experiences. They wanted the groups to be able to set agendas, follow through, seek solutions, assess progress, critique plans and be creative. A tall order. Through a series of consultancies and other problem-solving protocols, it became clear to all that teacher-leaders needed to strengthen their facilitation skills and broaden their repertoire in order to be effective leaders in these collaborative communities.

An institute was hatched by Vivian, Alan and two principals for teams of administrators and teachers from these three schools. The institute was led by NSRF-trained facilitators and was rooted entirely in the work of these schools. After three intensive days, participants went back to their schools to apply what they had learned, having committed to return a month later to talk about their efforts. Teachers looked at how their work

*(continued on page 18)*



with colleagues and students changed. Formal leadership looked at how they supported staff, worked with teacher-leaders and helped others develop skills and begin to change habits. The cycle repeated twice.

Throughout the process, participants were encouraged to pursue NSRF NY Endorsement by ultimately presenting a portfolio of their work demonstrating their facilitation skills in action. Five of the twenty-five participants received endorsement. ALL participants left more skilled.

We see examples of formal and informal leaders at all levels within the district applying NSRF principles and practices:

- We model and encourage the use of feedback as teaching/learning and community-building tools. Not only does this allow us to take the pulse of the group, it engages everyone in a reflective process in which we experience how feedback can shape future events. This happens when a good leader is able to synthesize input on behalf of those they lead and is an essential dimension of building a reflective community of learners.
- Our practice of “transparent facilitation” (characterized by public reflection and sharing your thinking as facilitator regarding choices and intention) allows the group to see us not as leaders who with all the answers but as colleagues striving to help members learn to ask better questions and take increasing responsibility for their own learning and the learning of peers.
- In Vivian’s school (Landmark HS) the teachers have undertaken an extensive re-examination of their twelve-year-old portfolio process. This inquiry makes extensive use of feedback and NSRF structured protocols to guide them in this work. Staff trained as facilitators have emerged as leaders of this process of investigation and reform.
- Two of Alan’s largest high schools

are engaged in the process of forming smaller learning communities. They believe that facilitation skills acquired through applying NSRF principles and practices are absolutely necessary to sustain any change from within.

- Local Endorsed Facilitators have gone on to form Critical Friends Groups and still others have taken on teacher-leadership roles in their schools or stepped up to help plan and facilitate a variety of professional development opportunities.
- A recent series of professional development sessions for Assistant Principals (co-facilitated by Vivian, who was the only participating principal on the team of district facilitators) looked very much like a CFG coaches training, and participants went on to take responsibility for working with their colleagues in ways which closely resemble Critical Friends Groups.

These are a few examples of the way NSRF NY works. NSRF NY works almost entirely from within. You can’t “go to NSRF NY,” but you can find it in more places than you think. ■

*NSRF NY Endorsement requires participants to attend approximately 30 hours of training and then to present a portfolio of their work demonstrating their ability to apply what they have learned in their work. An alternative route to endorsement is through an apprentice experience, where the “training” takes place by working along with a National Facilitator. See [www.nsrfnny.org](http://www.nsrfnny.org) for a complete description of the Endorsement Process and Standards for Facilitators.*

*Alan Dichter may be contacted at [adichte@nycboe.net](mailto:adichte@nycboe.net)  
Vivian Orlen may be contacted at [vorlen@nycboe.net](mailto:vorlen@nycboe.net)*

district would be committed to offering CFG training to a diverse group consisting of one hundred teachers, principals and administrators. This means that approximately one out of every ten teachers in our district will have had the CFG training. The seeds for success will be nurtured further by the bargained agreement to provide ample collaborative time at all grade levels. There has even been some

*I believe nothing happens by chance.*

discussion about the possibility of Oshkosh becoming Wisconsin’s first NSRF Center of Activity. We dare to dream.

I believe nothing happens by chance. Sometimes along the path of life an event causes an individual to pause and seek the greater meaning of his being. It is during these moments of reflection that we study the path and contemplate the future. There was a reason why I came across Miss Kerberger’s boxes. Maybe that memory was the spark that is now allowing me to step forward in a leadership role. Maybe it was to help me remember how important teachers are in the lives of the children. Where I once only saw memories in boxes, I now see the future unfolding. Reaching the destination at the end of a journey is not the important part. What we learn, and who we share those experiences with along the way, are the things that give meaning to our journeys. Creating a smoother path for those who follow in our footsteps is the precious gift which we can offer. ■

*John Pieper can be contacted at [jpieper@new.rr.com](mailto:jpieper@new.rr.com)*