Taking Up the Research Challenge
Kevin Fahey, Massachusetts

It is not surprising that, in an organization whose essential principles include such commitments as making our work public, and both challenging and compelling our fundamental assumptions, research should claim an increasingly important part of the organizational conversation. After ten years of helping schools and districts build more collaborative, reflective communities that support good teaching, powerful learning and equitable practice, NSRF is in a unique position and perhaps even has an important responsibility to ask and answer some critical questions. And there is compelling evidence that NSRF has accepted this challenge.

This past year, NSRF has:
1. Created the position of National Research Coordinator.
2. Hosted an NSRF Research Conference, and
3. Created a task force to develop a multiyear NSRF research agenda, which was submitted to the Institution for Educational Research for funding at the end of July.

Each of these actions is evidence that thoughtful research that is helpful both to scholars and NSRF practitioners will be a crucial part of the work as the work moves forward into its second decade.

National Research Coordinator: In the spring of 2005, the Accountability Council created the position of National Research Coordinator. The Accountability Council and the Co-Directors felt that if research and scholarship were to become a more central focus in NSRF work, then it would be important to have a formal position to support this focus. In the initial discussions, the Co-Directors felt that some initial goals for the Research Coordinator would be to: (1) facilitate the creation of a multiyear research agenda, (2) partner with the Harmony Research Institute, especially in support of the Annual Research Conference, (3) develop an online database of NSRF-related research, and (4) facilitate a conversation around a theoretical framework of NSRF and CFT work. In general, like much of our work in NSRF, the job of the Research Coordinator is to “coach” – to support, to ask difficult questions, and to be transparent - an ongoing, complicated, professional conversation. Naturally, many of these goals for the National Research Coordinator are still in the beginning stages; however, there is reason, especially with our IES proposal and Annual Research Conference, to feel optimistic about the

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Conclusions is a journal of the National School Reform Faculty, a division of Harmony Education Center. Published three times per year, it provides a forum for CFT Coaches and other reflective educators to share their practice.

Editorial Board: Debbie Bambino, Sarah Childers, Camilla Greene, Debbi Laidley, and Greg Peters

If you have any feedback or are interested in contributing to Connections contact us at 812.330.2702 or dbambino@earthlink.net

Protocol Structure as an Equity...

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Participant feedback
“...it want to bring this protocol back to school and apply it in the classroom. I got a lot out of this... not only the idea of a protocol working for... feedback, but also the knowledge of these epic poems, which I have not had the chance to try yet.” - Student

“I got a practical experience with something I had often thought could be done, but had never tried. It’s a new tool for my coaching toolbox.” - CFT/ School Coach

“I valued the protocol and actually getting feedback from different points of view. I had a good experience receiving feedback.” - Student

“I valued the step-by-step approach and that (presenters) did not have to take anything (feedback) to the face.” - Student

“I think these would be powerful in school.” - Student

“I got to watch teens provide critical feedback.” - CFT Coach

“I learned different ways to give advice in a manner that didn’t hurt people’s feelings.” - Student

“I appreciated everyone’s thoughts and respect for each other. This learning experience will help me a lot in future projects I have to do.” - Student

“I valued that the presenters did not have to feel vulnerable at all when everyone gave feedback in a way that was organized to not hurt feelings.” - Student

“I definitely learned a different way to help give respectful feedback.” - Student

“I will bring this to English class and see how it works when you put it to work.” - Student

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I have heard this statement over and over in my years of education, and quite frankly, I am terrified rather than being impressed. Educators tell me this continually, and I believe they want me to be impressed with their color-blind philosophy, but I am not. Let me tell you why.

When you say you do not see color, you are telling me that you do not see me. So, if you say you don’t see color and kids are just kids, you are telling me that you are ignoring specific details that comprise the character and being of individual children. Each child comes into your classroom with different experiences, needs, thoughts, and perspective. That child’s color is just another great deal to do with their experiences, needs, thoughts, and perspective. For instance; I have many identities that make me who I am. I am black, I’m a woman, and I’m an educator, just to list a few. Black is the most essential identity because it is the one element that I am judged on every single day of my life. Before society sees a woman, they see a black woman; before society sees an educator, they see a black educator. With both positive and negative implications alike, it is how I am viewed once I step outside of my home each day.

If I am being judged daily to day by the color of my skin, how can we ignore the color of our students? When we teach, we must realize that the world has taken it into our classrooms. I ask you, how can you not see color? I am not asking you to alter the color differences to prevent you from being a thoughtful educator, I am simply asking you to be aware of those differences and allow yourself to live in “awareness.” Living in awareness simply means that you realize the differences, you don’t feel compelled to apologize for the differences, and that you consider those differences when you are working with all students.

Please do not read my message and confuse the term color with low-income. The two are not the same. Low-income children do not equal children of color. I am stating this for my colleagues teaching in private schools and privileged neighborhoods. Just because a student of color comes from a middle-class family, does not mean that student is now “confused” to the point of disrespect to Ruby Payne, but we educators tend to hide behind the poverty issue when speaking on racism and the two are different entities. Each adds to the disproportionate circumstances in our nation’s school buildings. Many can be found on the research page of the NSRF web site. On January 24th, the Second Annual Research Forum will take place before the Annual NSRF Winter Meeting in Seattle (see page 3 for more information).

I get discouraged by the attitude of our trainings when participants make comments like “I like the training, but the equity stuff out, kids are just kids.” I’m even more discouraged when I realize these educators are teaching children, and I’m not sure I have succeeded in my goal of energizing them about CFG work. To me, CFGs give us a tool to live in “awareness,” so if a participant in my training still feels that “kids are just kids” at the end of the week, I feel as though I have failed that educator, but most importantly, I have failed their students.

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Taking Up the Research Challenge (continued from page 2)

Tanisha Davis-Doss, Washington

progress that has been made so far. I was asked to serve in this role and have done so during this busy and exciting past year.

National Research Conference: Another important research-related step that NSRF took last year was to host an NSRF Research Conference. At the 2005 Winter Meeting in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a number of folks interested in research-related issues met and formulated ways to both support and focus research efforts around NSRF work. One suggestion was to sponsor a conference to highlight CFG-related research, offer scholars and practitioners an opportunity to learn from each other and connect the efforts of NSRF scholars nationwide. Jesse Goodman, Director of the Harmony Education Center, offered to coordinate the first conference. This small group was excited by the possibility of a conference; however, not a few of us wondered if we would end with just the same group sitting around the same table, except this time in Denver.

The very good news was that over twenty researchers presented papers and another thirty participated in the many related conversations. Scholars from San Antonio to Gainesville to Seattle to New York presented on issues such as sustaining CFG work, small school CFG work, and CFG theory. Many papers can be found on the research page of the NSRF web site. On January 24th, the Second Annual Research Forum will take place before the Annual NSRF Winter Meeting in Seattle (see page 3 for more information).

Scholars, practitioners, researchers, teachers and students are encouraged not only to attend, but to present papers, studies, and works in progress.

Multiyear Research Agenda: This spring, a small group of NSRF folks including Frances Hensley, myself and Daniel Baron began a conversation about how CFG work is now – or past time – for NSRF to craft and fund a multiyear research project that would inform our work and help it move forward. Scott Hutchinson, the Harmony Education Center Director of Development, quickly suggested that we meet with Rockman et al., a national research and evaluation organization with offices in Bloomington and multiple ones across the country. Two of the Rockman folks, Teri Ackey and Cathy Spagia, were introduced to the National Facilitators at the May meeting. After more discussion, the group – now expanded to include Steven Strull, Gene Thompson-Grove and Heidi Vosekas – decided to formally pursue an ambitious, national research opportunity funded by the Institute for Educational Services, the research arm of the US Department of Education. The proposal represents a partnership between NSRF and Rockman et al. Teri Ackey, representing Rockman, and I, representing NSRF, will be the co-principal investigators of the effort, with ongoing involvement of colleagues from our organizations we represented. After long hours of discussion, writing, rewriting, more discussions and more editing, our proposal was submitted to IES on July 27, 2006.

Although we will not know about the funding of the grant until next spring, the group, as well as our Critical Friends who read through numerous versions of the proposal, feels that it is particularly strong and sustainable. And through the grant-writing process we have already gained three substantial and important insights about NSRF work.

The first is related to findings of existing research related to CFGs and other kinds of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). It seems that there is broad support in the literature for ideas like “professional community,” “communal schools,” and “collaborative, transparent practice.” Lots of researchers and theoreticians support NSRF’s core ideas and practices. On the other hand, there is very little research literature on how CFGs (or any other PLC) connect to changes in teacher practice or gains in student learning. It is this connection between sustained, solid CFG work and changes in teacher practice and gains in student learning that our IES proposal addresses.

Secondly, we learned that sustaining CFG work, especially in high schools (the focus of the grant), and especially in urban high schools, is very difficult. The site-selection process for the IES proposal, despite a nationwide network of facilitators and Centers of Activity, was more difficult than we had imagined. We heard stories of isolated instances of persistent quality practice, exciting new work, and good work that has struggled or even lapsed for a variety of reasons, but fewer accounts of sustained and widespread high school work that offered the possibility of examining the connections between the work of CFGs and the work of high schools. One of the grant proposal’s goals is to begin to document some of the factors that sustain our work in high schools.

Finally, we learned something that NSRF practitioners already know - that in the world of
large at school. The statement, “Kids can be cruel” may ring true for us but Jesse lived it. Faced with challenges like Jesse’s, some kids become the class clown, others become violent, and still others learn to fade into their surroundings. Jesse learned to fade. It has been observed that a 400-pound teenager could go unnoticed in a classroom, but Jesse had learned to do just that. He was quiet and unobtrusive in the classroom, making sure not to draw attention. He would not talk to anyone, except maybe a couple of teammates. He worked hard and always produced solid ‘B’ work. I was empathetic to Jesse, as I was overweight as a teenager and have carried that into my adult life. I was friendly and allowed time and space outside of class for Jesse to open up to me as a teacher and a caring adult.

The fall semester was eventful; the football season was uncharacteristically bad, which led to many additional dispensing verbs to Jesse. Also, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita disrupted calendars, classrooms, and learning in our district. The new seven-period 50-minute class schedule adopted by the school board was a nightmare for teachers and students alike. The opportunity to learn about each student and build relationships was destroyed with the changes and lack of routines. All the stakeholders were feeling the effects, especially students like Jesse, the quiet, well-behaved ones that just want a little of your time. Their needs were trumped by the needs of hurricane refugees and early teacher burnout due to the new schedule.

During my planning period on a day close to Christmas, Jesse dropped by; he wanted to talk. We joked a little as I tried to enter grades into the computer. I was busy, but Jesse lingered. I went to make photocopies and when I returned he was still waiting for me at my desk, sitting in my chair. I was thinking, “I have so much to do before exams next week I could use some time to myself.” It was a brilliant move for Jesse to sit in my chair. He made me change my perspective and get out of behind my “To-do list.” It finally hit me; Jesse wants to talk about something serious.

I asked him, “Jesse, what are you doing over the holidays?”

He gave me an answer I was unprepared for: “I am getting gastric bypass surgery.”

We talked about the surgery, we talked, well mostly, he talked and I nodded in agreement, about how hard it is growing up fat or, to be political.

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**Results Now: How We Can Achieve Unprecedented Improvements in Teaching and Learning**

A Book Review by Chris Kingsbery, Pennsylvania

Mike Schmoker, in his new book **Results Now: How We Can Achieve Unprecedented Improvements in Teaching and Learning**, urges educators to confront the brutal facts about American public education. Rather than offering a defeatist attitude about these facts, Schmoker encourages his readers to see them as opportunities to “blow the lid off school attitudes, systemically and swiftly reduce achievement gaps, and enhance the life chances of all children, regardless of their social or economic circumstances.” (p. 2)

Schmoker’s focus is clear: in order to make any kind of gain the focus must be on instruction and the supervision of instruction. We must “address the monumental gap between common and effective teaching practices, and between typical and effective instructional supervision.” (p. 3)

In this very accessible text, Schmoker sets a tone of urgency for American educators and provides a simple yet elegant framework for using what we already know to transform both adult and student learning in our nation’s schools. The book moves from stating the brutal facts into a rationale for a focus on academic literacy across all content areas. Schmoker speaks to the power of “authentic literacy” and describes it as “teaching critical and authentic literacy” (p. 165) through authentic experiences. His advocacy is strong and convincing.

His final chapter focuses on leading a professional learning community. This focus on clear leadership to sustain this learning environment was refreshing to read, as this seems to be the area where many such initiatives falter. He considers not only building-level leadership, but the role of the central office and state in promoting professional learning and accountability for that learning in our nation’s schools. His final conclusion is a call to action for “teachers and school leaders at the state, or province, district and school levels to immediately and relentlessly begin to share, examine, and engage in dialogue about the reality of schooling in America on every occasion—until our actions and commitments begin to erase the awful inertia of past decades.” (p. 164)

This book would be a useful text to use with school leaders to focus their improvement efforts. The language and message are achievable and compelling. The “solutions” offered are achievable and the results are what we are looking for. This is not a cookie-cutter formula for school improvement; it is a conversation starter that raises the sense of urgency we all need to share around the very real gap between what we know about instruction and supervision and what we commonly see in our schools.

Results Now: How We Can Achieve Unprecedented Improvements in Teaching and Learning, by Mike Schmoker, ASCD, 2006

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**Transformation of Body and Soul**

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Changing the Work: A Report from the Houston Center of Activity

Donna Reid, Texas

Looking at my work is hard. Changing my work is even harder," observed CFG Coach and high school art teacher Ron Venable when asked what was most surprising about participating in a Teacher as Researcher (TAR) CFG last year. Hard as it may be, changing the work of schools is the ongoing mission of many of the CFG coaches and facilitators who practice in the Houston area. As a not-for-profit public, private partnership, the Houston A+ Challenge advances Critical Friends Group work in Houston by sponsoring New Coach Training Seminars three times a year under the leadership of National Facilitator Michaelann Kelley, offering leadership clinics for experienced coaches, and supporting TAR grants for CFGs across the city.

Teacher as Researcher Grants

One of the newer initiatives promoted by the Houston A+ Challenge is the TAR Grant. In March of 2004, a request for proposals was sent to every trained CFG Coach in the greater Houston area. Seven two-year, $10,000 grants were awarded, and five of these groups are still active. The action research that these CFGs have been doing has had far-reaching effects on both student learning and teacher practice.

The Houston CFG Reunion was held on Saturday, February 25, at the University of Houston.

With a strong focus on equity, these five groups have collected data that shows that CFGs can have a huge effect on teacher and student learning.

For example, TAR participants reported that being in a CFG helped them focus on student needs and student achievement. The most powerful learning came with the realization that "our group learned to value our own knowledge." Being in the TAR CFGs has encouraged many members of the five inquiry groups to reach out to other educators and spread their knowledge by presenting seminars and conferences such as the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and the NSRF Research Forum.

This growth in teacher learning affects student learning as well. Besides improvements in standardized test scores, the teacher researchers report that students are more engaged in classroom activities and more reflective in their work. Being in a CFG helps educators become more focused, collaborative, and reflective. These important habits are then passed on to students through such means as assignments that depend on collaboration and portfolios that develop skills in reflection. Thus, through the support of the TAR Grant, these CFGs have changed teacher practice and student work.

CFG Reunion

The Houston CFG Reunion was held on Saturday, February 25, at the University of Houston. Daniel Baron, Co-Director of NSRF

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I think this speaks volumes about how well Jesse had done at tailing into his surroundings. Some students had not even noticed a quiet 400-pound student every day in their class, yet now at a more self-confident 275 pounds, they see him. Jesse was given permission to drink again through both the surgery and his social activism.

The combination of the two events can be seen as the ‘perfect storm’ in Jesse’s transformation.

Jesse commented on his transformation, “I see myself as a whole different person, someone that I want to get to know more and I want others to get to know, also.”

The implication for me as a teacher is remembering the need to reach and get to know all of my students.

Teacher as Researcher Karen North with a student at The Rice School/La Escuela Rice

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