

Small Schools and CFGs

Steven Strull, Boston, Massachusetts

Last winter over 70 school folk sat around covered banquet tables, or rounds, munching on day-old bagels (the grocery store kind, not the fresh deli kind) and cut fruit waiting in anxious anticipation for the start of their six day experience. Some knew why they were there; others probably did not. It was a fairly representative mix of New England educators—mostly white folk at mid-career who were the first in their schools to attend a Critical Friends Group New Coaches Seminar.

This group of mostly classroom teachers, but some administrators and consultants as well, arrived by 8am on a cold New England February morning to begin the journey that we, the National School Reform Faculty, have been traveling. They were there because they wanted to be there, or they were asked to be there—but whatever the reason for coming, they were there, some optimistic, some skeptical, some relieved to be out of their classroom and school, and some—we like to think many—hungry for an opportunity to explore their practice in ways not previously considered or understood.

We at the Center for Collaborative Education in Boston, a Center of Activity for NSRF, had been planning this day for months. All the tools of our NSRF craft were in place—we had binders (the really big thick kind, stuffed with paper, “d” ring of course), markers, chart paper, tape, staplers, scissors, and post-it notes. We had a PowerPoint presentation and videos, back-up student work “just in case” and facilitators—NSRF facilitators whose current practice is involved primarily with school coaching in one of the school reform networks we operate at the Center.

The Center for Collaborative Education is a school reform organization in Boston committed to equitable school reform. We organize and practice in several school reform

networks including the New England Small Schools Network (NESSN), the Southern New England Coalition of Essential Schools Network, the Boston Pilot Schools Network, and regional and national Turning Points. Though our work is structured through different networks, we all operate with a common theory of action and a deep belief that teachers working together in a collaborative professional community will not only deepen their practice but also purposefully and positively affect student achievement.

Most of the teachers on this day are part of the New England Small



NESSN Institute

Schools Network (NESSN), a Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation funded initiative. The newest network at the Center, NESSN works directly with five New England school districts to help them consider how they might restructure their existing large schools into small schools and/or create new small schools within their districts. Developmentally, NESSN is based on the principles of the Coalition of Essential Schools, coupled with the Center’s experience with the Boston Pilot Schools. In addition to decreasing school size, NESSN is committed to helping districts and schools consider and implement five autonomies that we believe are necessary to effect

positive school change and increase student achievement. As professional educators, we believe that teachers must have autonomy over their schedule, budget, curriculum, governance, and personnel. In addition to size and autonomy, we also believe that school people, working together, must create and sustain a common vision of learning and teaching.

Small schools, while structural in nature, are really a metaphor for each student being known well, by at least one caring adult, who takes responsibility and accepts accountability for her educative outcome. We approach our work with a simple bias, that those closest to students, the teachers, must make ALL substantive decisions regarding learning and teaching. We make a distinction between schools and school buildings, helping districts understand that they already have the capacity to house several schools within one structure.

We work with schools and districts exploring, interpreting, and refining these considerations through professional development experiences both on and off-site. Our work is structured through professional coaching relationships organized and practiced by the Center’s coaching staff and is mostly time-limited. In the case of NESSN, our initial commitment to our schools and districts is for five years.

At the center, as we planned for our work in schools, it became clear that it was necessary to leave a coaching legacy after our direct involvement ends. Toward that end, we have turned to our ongoing work as part of the National School Reform Faculty.

We are committed over the next several years to train up to 15% of each NESSN school’s faculty to become Critical Friends Group Coaches, thereby creating the capacity for each school person to be involved in a CFG. We are also instituting a system of support for trained coaches and for school and district administrators. They

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and America's Future (NCTAF) and the National Center for Restructuring Schools and Teaching (NCREST) are working together on an in-depth study of the Lucent Peer Collaboration Project. The focus of the study will be on the impact of learning communities on school and district culture, teacher practice and student achievement. Their first in-depth report should be available later this year.

NSRF's New York City Center of Activity has developed a portfolio process that is guided by a rubric for responsive facilitation and public exhibitions.

Five faculty researchers from Indiana University documented our learning at the Looking at Student Work meeting. We are eagerly awaiting their findings.

Our work has also been featured in Carl Glickman's *Leadership for Learning: How to Help Teachers Succeed*, Peggy Silva and Bob Macklin's *Standards of Mind and Heart – Creating the Good High School and Reflection: The Heart of Changing Practice* by Grace Hall McEntee, Jon Appleby, JoAnn Dowd, Jan Grant, Simon Hole, and Peggy

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will be able to meet several times during each school year, in job-alike sessions, to share their coaching practices and systems of district support with their colleagues.

The bagels and fruit from last winter may be gone, but the goals of that seminar are now taking shape as we have new CFGs operating at each of our NESSN schools. As over thirty new small schools begin emerging in thirteen school buildings in our five NESSN districts, each will have the capacity to have Critical Friends Groups. In one school, Linden Elementary in Malden, MA, we have helped create the capacity to have school-wide CFGs within the first year of our involvement. According to Principal Nicholas Catoggio, "teachers are eager to meet around 'looking at

Silva, to be published in February 2003.

This journal *Connections* is providing a forum for NSRF practitioners to publicly reflect on their work.

This summer, NSRF has supported the reflection of regional centers of activity in Seattle, WA, and Portland, OR. A new strategy of having external critical friends observe week-long new and experienced coaches' seminars has provided an invaluable opportunity for learning from each other.

As this year's work draws to a close and the new school year begins, several burning questions about our work are in the front of my mind:

- How can we nurture educators' ability to identify the gaps between their core beliefs and their practice?
- How can we inspire coaches to articulate and develop their tacit understanding of what makes our work so critically different from previous work so that it can't be taken away by external constraints i.e. funding cuts, changing leadership, etc.?
- What are the necessary pre-existing conditions for our work to be able to flourish in schools and districts?
- How can we provide the essential

ongoing support to coaches after initial coaches training?

– How can the national office strengthen our support of the regional centers and expand the opportunities for learning from each other?

I hope that next year I will be able to report to you on our learning around these and other essential questions.

In closing, I'd like to share that this is also a special time to celebrate the great miracle of life, to appreciate all of the opportunities we have to contribute to others, and to remember those loved ones who have passed away. I am eternally grateful for the privilege of having known and learned from Faith Dunne and Nancy Cieslak. They live on through their extraordinary contributions and continue to make our world a more just and humane place for teachers and children. ❖

Daniel Baron, Gene Thompson-Grove, and Steve Bonchek, the three co-directors of NSRF, will take turns reporting out to us in Connections.
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student work' in their new Critical Friends Groups. Rather than wait for capacity, we've decided to go all-school CFG starting this October."

The teachers at Linden who attended our seminar last spring are enthusiastic about beginning their work. Through their school-based coach, Stephen Spring, they have created the structures that will allow them to meet together regularly to look at student and teacher work and visit each others' classrooms. They have restructured their school day to allow for ongoing professional development and have taken the steps necessary to strengthen their professional community. They have seen the power that NSRF processes can bring to their practice and understand deeply how their

professional community will impact student learning.

We have created an ambitious professional development calendar for this school year, including a seminar for new coaches in the fall and several days of professional development for teachers and administrators already involved in this work. As we continue coaching our districts and schools, we look forward to new NSRF colleagues sustaining the work we have begun. Our time in the schools may be limited, but the legacy we are able to provide through our continued involvement with NSRF should pay dividends for the teachers and children we serve long after our initial work ends. ❖

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