

# Eddying Out: Helping Your CFG Share Ownership of Planning and Leadership

Jay Davis, New Hampshire

In whitewater paddling and rafting, eddies are marvelous places. Calm spots of water just below rocks or bends in the river, they offer blessed relief from the often chaotic and turbulent currents and waves to the paddler who “eddies out.” More importantly, they provide the essential opportunity to take stock, check equipment, scan the churning water ahead, and plan the “best line” accordingly. An eddy is never a final destination, but often a crucial step to reaching that destination.

Neither are CFGs ever really our destination (as all of our work is ultimately focused on improving student understanding and performance) but instead an essential, and at times delightful, means towards reaching that end. Most CFG participants have experienced that wonder of finding calmer water together, removed from the schedule/paperwork/madding crowd

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of the school day. Indeed, this time “away” is precisely what allows us to re-enter the daily chaos of our professional lives with new purpose, skill and support.

But CFG time, too, can develop its own sense of turbulence and chaos. Particularly for coaches, stress can build as agendas need to be developed, group members tracked down for pre-protocol conferences, time managed in a way that involves all group members but allows for individuals’ needs. For some groups, the best intentions to plan collaboratively and have no internal hierarchy run headlong into the reality of busy professional lives, and the coach becomes the default—planner. The coach feels the pressure to make meetings productive, and the group loses the powerful advantage of the collaborative process. A need emerges to create an eddy within an eddy, to find

time where individuals and the group as a whole can take a broader perspective on the work they plan to do together; CFG work, too, can use some time to eddy out.

With my own group, we decided to address this need this past fall. After some consideration of what exactly it was that we wanted as a group, we decided on the following desired outcomes: 1) some overall picture of what we hoped to accomplish as a group this year, 2) a shared sense of ownership/responsibility for future meetings, and 3) an opportunity to collaboratively identify our own individual goals for the year.

To meet these three goals, I developed the following structure. At the beginning of the meeting, I made three columns on the whiteboard: “individual work we want to bring to the group”, “topics we would like the group to read about and discuss”, and “school-wide issues for the group to discuss.” We wrote in our individual notebooks for ten minutes, brainstorming in each category. Then, in triads, people shared their lists with others, while in the process winnowing out our most important items in each category.

For the next step, we brought our individual lists to the whiteboard and wrote in one item under each category. After looking at the final list of items on the board, we each used a marker to put a dot next to our two preferred choices in the “reading” and “school issue” categories, identifying the two topics in each list that we were most interested in addressing as a group. (These could include the topics we put up ourselves, but did not need to if we saw others that now appealed to us more.) No marks were made in the “Individual Work” category.

As a last step, we posted our schedule of meetings for the year on the board, with one or two blanks left open next to each meeting, depending on the meeting’s length. We then went around the group, “signing up” for meeting



slots. As each individual’s turn came, they could either sign up to bring their own individual work (a choice kept sacred by no voting on the board) or to take responsibility for presenting one of the issues, or finding an appropriate reading in the other categories. For those choosing from the non-individual categories, selections invariably reflected the group’s preferences as shown by the dots.

Five slots were intentionally left open for different times of the year, and we also decided that anyone with a pressing need (a student whose work plummeted, an upcoming assignment that suddenly needed adaptation, a school-board decision with unexpected ramifications) could ask to be scheduled for the next meeting as necessary.

In the months since that meeting—months of exhilarating and draining negotiating of our school’s and students’ various currents and waves—the benefits of periodic eddying out as a group are clear. As coach I feel less on the spot for needing to plan month to month. Far more importantly, though, the group shares an authentic ownership for what we are doing, and also knows that the topics being addressed are the ones that need to be. We have taken the time to slip out of the current for a bit of perspective—the chance to sit in the eddy and look at where we need to go, individually and collectively as a group. Such perspective is well worth the time. ■

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teaching and learning, as well as how the implementation of their plans may result in less than desired outcomes. Each school has become a more reflective school culture as a result of the KnowledgeWorks Foundation and OHSTI.

It has been an honor to be a part of this initiative. I have met and worked with some very caring, astute and insightful educators in Ohio public high schools, and I have formed collaborative relationships with a lot of the KnowledgeWorks staff. In addition, There are several NSRF members (Lois Butler, Marcy Raymond, Steven Strull, Nancy Sutton, Dyanne Alexander) with whom I have had the pleasure of continued and continuous collaboration. Whether or not a school is selected by KnowledgeWorks to engage in the deep planning year followed by the

September 2004 opening as 2, 3, or 4 small autonomous high schools, I know that all schools involved will have benefited from this long and arduous journey.

The journey also has been extremely painful. It is not easy as a school community to document and provide evidence to support the low levels of performance on every indicator for school success. Most schools know they are not meeting the needs of all of their students, and they are not used to emerging themselves in a deep analysis of their current reality. They know they are failing because they are being told they are not doing well. The lack of success is documented and appears in numerous newspaper articles. It is a different dynamic and the potential for transformation is more intense when you have to create and

document your current reality of failure. KnowledgeWorks had schools inform themselves of their low levels of performance. Now that this initial period of intense introspection is over, not one school can continue to do business as usual. With or without further assistance from KnowledgeWorks, with or without continued funding from the foundations, these large, mostly urban, high schools will continue to do things differently so that more students can succeed. ■

*To find out more about the KnowledgeWorks Foundation Ohio High School Transformation Initiative please visit the web site: [www.kwfdn.org](http://www.kwfdn.org)*

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*Ridge Arts Actors... (continued from page 11)*

they hone their skills. Beautiful wood carvings are everywhere, and in a place of honor is the work of students. Learning is natural and celebrated... Until the Priests of Logic and Science arrive, sent by the King to see if people were really good at woodcrafting. Their theory is that if one were to break woodcrafting into basic skills, it could be more easily taught and mastered. Once identified, teachers are mandated to teach only these skills, focusing on only one skill at a time. Students are told to forget “making things,” and to hammer, hammer, hammer. Pretty soon, the bent nails from hammering drills pile up, and no one is too interested in classes. Everyone is blamed—the hammer-impaired students, the parents who weren’t providing drill time at home, but mostly the teachers who could not follow simple directions. Because the schools are now falling apart, it is decreed that students would

be tested, and compared with students from nearby towns. (The only happy people at this point are the people who make nails!) The masters, who can no longer find joy in their work, leave the town...

After sharing the story with my students, they asked, “Is this about FCAT?” I knew we had the right piece. We adapted it for the stage, looking for the “actable moments.” We even found wonderful wood carvings done by our shop teacher (a member of the Woodturning Guild of Miami) to use as props.

To close the show, the character Mary (a little girl who once loved to carve and is now drowning in hammering drills) comes to the mike, looks out at the audience and says: “It’s too late for Woodcrafters’ City, but it’s not too late for us. You’re the principals, you can make a difference... you can be our heroes.” Then angel-

voiced Juliana sings, “Hero.” I was not crying alone this time.

One of the principals commented that we should send this tape to congress for viewing before any other legislation is passed.

These students will always have the memory of being heard by a roomful of adults who really cared what they had to say. Frequently, students view education as something that is done *to* them, not necessarily *for* them in any way they value. The idea that *they* were taking a stance about their education in a very public forum is an experience they will carry with them forever.

And for that, I am forever grateful to everyone who made it possible. ■

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# Students at the Center

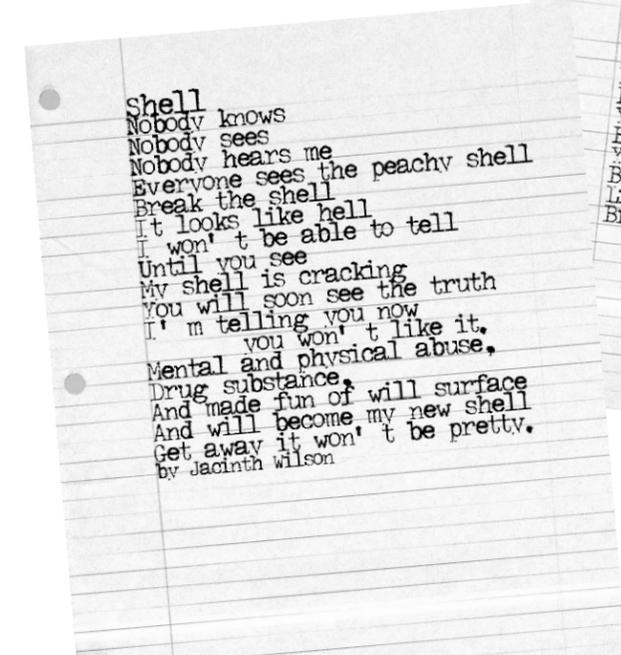
## Ridge Arts Actors and the No Child Left Behind Act

Linda Emm, Florida

*"Kids! I don't know what's wrong with these kids today!"*  
from *Bye, Bye Birdie*

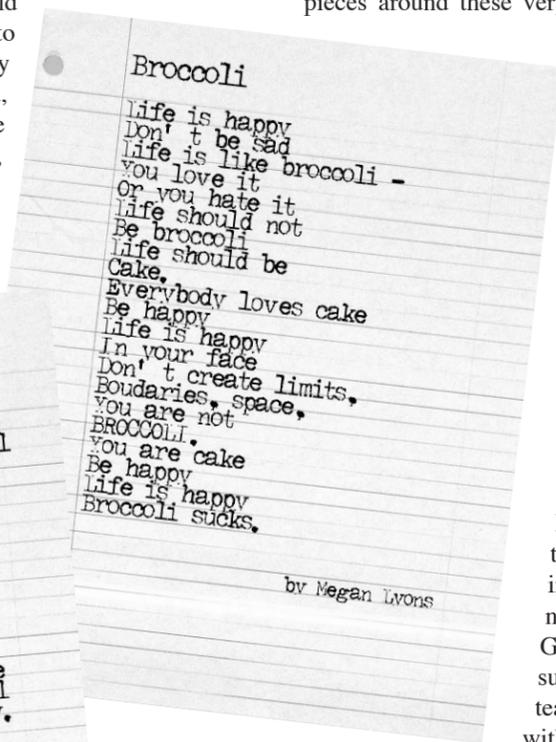
This song from *Bye Bye Birdie* reflects a question that has been posed from the beginning of time by adults about the children in their lives. You can hear this same question being posed today in teachers' lounges across the country. Maybe one reason the answer is so illusive is that they are asking the wrong people. To get authentic answers, we need to go to the primary sources: the students.

"So what about the students?" has been a question through which I have processed much of the NSRF work I've done over the years. As I was first struggling with probing questions, descriptive statements, and dilemmas, I was also thinking what powerful tools these could be for my students. Last year, we had a major casting crisis after auditions for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. We were so torn apart I thought we would have to scrap the whole idea... and I would need to pursue another line of work. While crying to my friend and colleague, Kim Brown, she remarked, "It sounds like you need a consultancy." And she was right. Another fellow coach, Sharon Jones, came up and facilitated a consultancy with me as the presenter and 35 wounded student actors as the group to help me resolve my dilemma. And it worked!



Returning to Cutler Ridge Middle School after a CFG coaches training in Boston, I became obsessed with creating a collaborative culture with my colleagues. As members of the Coalition of Essential Schools, and avid students of Senge, we were primed for this next step: an actual structure for doing and sustaining our inquiry into our practice and its effect on our students. And, though the process has gone through more phases than the moon, it flourishes still with a new principal, Dr. Elizabeth Alves. To me, there is a direct link between classes and teams where outstanding work is being produced by students and teachers, and the teachers' active participation in a collaborative group. Some teachers begin the day with Connections. Chalk Talks abound in all disciplines. Working on scenes in theatre, students work in companies, where they present their work to each other for feedback along the path to making it public. Reflections on the work (what we were trying to do, what we actually did, why we did it that way, and what we would do differently next time) are the norm.

These habits have greatly enhanced the work I do in theatre, especially with my Ridge Arts Acting Company. We rarely do published works. I feel middle school kids have so much to say, and have so few forums to give voice to their thoughts, feelings, concerns, delights, fears, and dreams. We build our performance pieces around these very personal issues, and doing



so increases our sense of community. These pieces are truly unique to the group that produces them, because no other group is like them.

Earlier this year we were invited by Gene Thompson-Grove to take part in the closing ceremonies for the ATLAS Communities Principals' Institute. The principals would be spending a week in March looking at data surrounding the "No Child Left Behind" legislation and the question of equity in its implementation. Working with national facilitators (including Gene and Daniel Baron), superintendents, principals, and teachers, they would struggle with all aspects of NCLB - Gene thought that perhaps a fitting close

would be to hear from students on the issue. What effect does this whole thing have on students in the classroom?

Introducing the idea to my students was an eye-opening exercise. I wrote "No Child Left Behind" on a chart, and asked

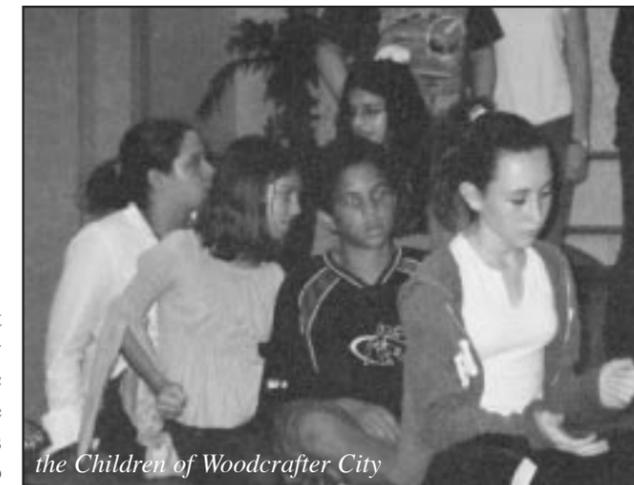
them what it meant. They thought it might mean not to forget anyone when you leave. Or if you go on a field trip, everyone has to go...and you can't come back until everyone's on the bus. I explained it was a law, intended to make sure that schools work for everyone in them—not just the easy ones to teach. They thought that was a terrific idea. We continued the discussion through questions like: what would it take to make this true? For them?

For their friends? For those students sitting in the back of their classes who seem totally disengaged? And how would we know when all children were succeeding? This sort of stumped them (although they have visions of schools where learning is joyful — in ALL the classrooms, with teachers who remember what it's like to be a kid, and who listen to them).

I suggested that maybe the people who created the law weren't quite sure what it would look like, either.

They think maybe a test might tell them how children are doing... Well! Florida has this "little thing" called the FCAT, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. "Is that why we have FCAT?" My students immediately pounced on that with very vocal protests. The overwhelming view was, if THAT's what NCLB was about, maybe it was a trick! (Their words, not mine.)

At that point, I offered the information that they would have the opportunity to speak to some principals who were good thinkers about teaching and learning, who would love to hear students' views on this very volatile subject. Did they think they would have something to offer? They were more than willing to



*the Children of Woodcrafter City*

seize the challenge.

First they wrote poems about themselves and how they see the world... Megan writes, "Life is like broccoli — you love it or you hate it!" and extols us to "don't set limits, boundaries... be cake!" Jenny proclaims, "I may be black, white, green, purple, orange, Cuban, Puerto Rican, Haitian, Chinese...but ain't I somebody?" ... Jacinth's words cry out: "Nobody knows, nobody sees, nobody hears me... My shell is cracking, you'll soon know the truth..." Christina's words sing, "I am the sweetest lemon you will ever taste, the saddest person you will ever

see smile..." And sweet Kevin shocks with the words: "Middle school is a dangerous, brutal world in which everyone is alone."

I wept. These kids are so willing to offer their souls up for all the world to see. (Talk about going public with one's work!) Clearly, the ATLAS principals would get an honest insight into these kids' world. We had the opening to our presentation.

Now what? How could we create a group performance piece about the impact of NCLB on their school lives, that would be both theatrical and deliver a message we believed?

As fate so often works, Pete Bermudez returned from one of his Cleveland NSRF work sessions with an article titled, "The Woodcrafters' City." Written by Rick Traw, and appearing in the January, 2002, edition of *Language Arts Magazine*, this is a cautionary tale of assessments gone wild... Set in a city where woodcrafting is passed from generation to generation, the story begins with children sitting with masters as

*(continued on page 12)*

