NSRF
National School Reform Faculty
Harmony Education Center

CONNECTIONS

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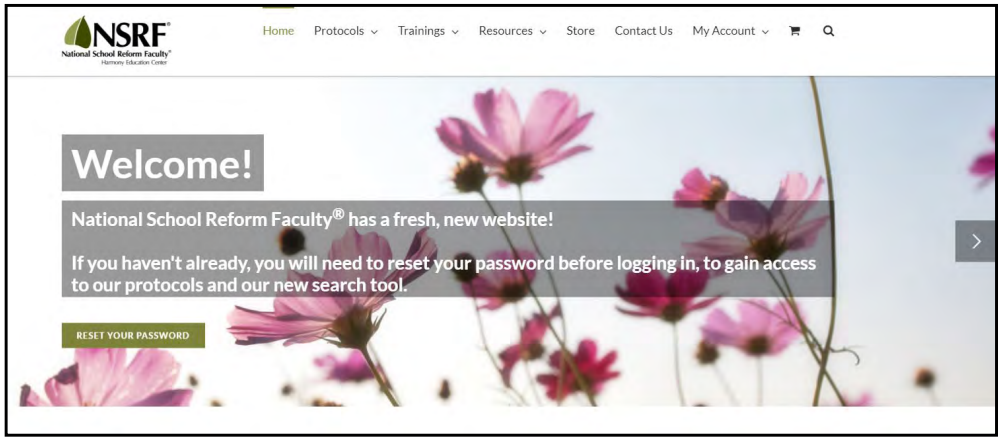
If you're reading on an electronic device, watch for O M C indicating "Original," "Member" and "Coach" materials, and blue type indicating hotlinks.



New NSRF website features Protocol Matching Tool, fresh design, new content

For months, the NSRF team has been redesigning our website, and now, you can see the results. We're hoping that our pre-launch testing caught the bumpiest parts of this transition, but if you have trouble finding what you need, call 812-330-2702 or email nsrf@nsrfharmony.org.

Requires password reset & you may need to check your spam filter

Although we converted our previous website database, we could not import passwords. The first time you login using your existing username or email address, you will need to set your password. (You may use the same one as before if you like.) You should have received an email with a password reset link—***if you didn't see it, please search your mail for "@nsrfharmony.org" and "whitelist" us by indicating that we are "not spam."***

New Protocol Matching Tool

For years, coaches have requested a way to match their work with possible protocols or activities, and, ta-dah, here it is! The PMT is only available for paying members, and as previously, $25 members have access to a more limited library of protocols than $75 certified coach members. ***New: you are not required to purchase a membership but if you do not, you will need to register a free account to see the original materials.***

Help us by pointing out "potholes" … and watch for more to come!

As you run into the inevitable "hazards" of a new website, please have patience with us and tell us, so we can address them ASAP. We hope to keep you all moving forward on your #CFG-work path as smoothly as possible.

Once we get all the problems solved, more upgrades are coming soon—a blog to bring you fresh content regularly, more protocols and activities, and even forums for CFG Coaches and for NSRF National Facilitators. If you have ideas or requests, or comments about the new site, please email luci@nsrfharmony.org.

The importance of belonging mindset and CFG® work

By Michele Mattoon, NSRF Director and International Facilitator. michele@nsrfharmony.org

You probably have heard of growth mindset, the belief that intelligence is not fixed at birth, a concept coined by bestselling author Carol Dweck. People with a growth mindset believe that intelligence, like a muscle, can be developed and grown over time. Dweck pioneered research at Stanford University around growth and fixed mindsets (the belief that intelligence is fixed at birth and can never improve). She was interested in the question of why some students are so resilient in the face of challenges while others are not. This research is especially important to educators because decades of research show a powerful relationship between a student's mindset (growth or fixed) and their academic achievement.

Growth is not the only mindset that powerfully impacts students

Not as well-known are the other two mindsets that have been known to affect a student's academic achievement: belonging mindset and purpose and relevance mindset. Students who have a belonging mindset believe that they are respected and valued by their teachers and peers and feel they fit well into their learning environment. For example, they may think, "I like coming to school because my teachers care about me and I have good friends in my classes." Think about students who may feel unsafe in school or "invisible" and consider how that mindset regularly if not constantly puts them into their "danger zone" (to use a term from the NSRF Zones of Comfort, Risk, and Danger Activity).

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If a student has a mindset that incorporates purpose and relevance, they believe that schoolwork is valuable because it is personally relevant to their life and that it is connected to a "higher purpose." They may, think, for example, "I want to do well in science so I can go to college, become a doctor and help my community when I get older."

Learning mindsets are important because they affect the way students see and react to challenges in and out of school.

Students will probably not do well in school if:

- They don't feel they can ever do better in a subject
- They feel like an outsider
- They just don't think school will make their lives better in anyway

On the other hand, students are more likely to do well in school if:

- They feel they can always improve in all subject areas if they work harder
- They feel like the school is their community and they are a valued part of it
- They believe that the things they learn in school are useful to them now and will pave the way for a promising future.

Mindsets are neither static nor immutable

It is important to note that research shows that mindsets can be changed. Teaching and nurturing the learning mindsets in our students can lead to sustained academic growth, as well as result in happier human beings.

A few years ago, I worked with some folks from Stanford University who were creating a website of researched-based resources for educators called PERTS (Project for Education Research that Scales), at perts.net. (See previous Connections articles here and here.) Together we put together a unique Five-day New CFG Coaches' Training for the Los Angeles Unified School District. We trained participants to use NSRF protocols and activities in combination with growth mindset presentations and materials. Throughout the training, my PERTS partner, Jacquie Beaubien and I made explicit to the participants how growth mindset was an integral part of all CFG work and protocols, in general.

Belonging Mindset and CFG work

After that experience, I became intrigued by the concept of belonging mindset. As long as I have been

working with CFG communities and using NSRF materials, I have heard people remark how much they enjoy this work, not just because the protocols work so beautifully, but because they get to work more intimately and effectively with a great group of intelligent, creative, and reflective colleagues.

Inherent in Critical Friends Group communities is the belief that we are all there to learn from one another (growth mindset), that we are among our "friends", people who want to help us, support us and have a stake in our success (belonging mindset), and that we bring in work that we think is important to the group (relevance) in order to help our students reach the highest level of academic achievement they can (purpose).

When Critical Friends Group communities were developed, we knew they could be an essential element for continuous improvement in school culture if they are executed with fidelity. We learned that the reason they accomplish this is largely because CFG communities are intentionally built to foster a strong sense of safety and trust between participants. Inherent in Critical Friends Group communities is the belief that we are all there to learn from one another (growth mindset), that we are among our "friends", people who want to help us, support us and have a stake in our success (belonging mindset), and that we bring in work that we think is important to the group (relevance) in order to help our students reach the highest level of academic achievement they can (purpose).

If you have already completed our Five-day New Coaches' CFG training, you know that after experiencing every protocol or activity, we debrief our experience: first through the lens of how we might use this with our colleagues and then how we might use it in the classroom with our students. This naturally led me to begin the conversation with the LAUSD training participants about how they might use CFG principles and practices in their classrooms to create a stronger sense of belonging with their students. We know that students who feel that they belong and are valued, and engage more fully in learning. They tend to have fewer behavior problems. They generally have more positive attitudes about their peers and teachers, thereby building important relationships that can lead to their success at school.

Conversely, we know that when students feel like they don't belong, they experience stress which adversely affects their learning, performance and ability to form relationships. This is because much of a student's energy is taken up by scanning for anything or anyone in their environment that feels risky or acts with hostility towards them. The constant anxiety that this causes makes the student feel socially, emotionally and/or intellectually unsafe, producing stress that makes learning impossible.

The fact is that human beings are social animals—biologically and psychologically. We evolved to live in connection with other humans. We are designed to avoid any kind of threats and feel good in our environment when we can bond with others. If we feel as though we are a valued member of the group, we are more likely to feel safe and can turn our attention to activities such as learning. Deliberately nurturing a sense of belonging among all students in our classrooms is an important key for any kind of learning experience to happen.

Keys to building Belonging Mindset in your students

Luckily, studies have shown that there are things we can do to alleviate students' worries about belonging. Doing activities that acknowledge and normalize worries about belonging can help a student move past the stress that these worries can cause. Teachers can also help by introducing experiences into their classrooms to facilitate ALL their students being accepted and valued members of the community. Such experiences have been linked to long-term gains in academic performance and reduction of achievement gaps that are based on race/ethnicity and gender.

If we feel as though we are a valued member of the group, we are more likely to feel safe and can turn our attention to activities such as learning. Deliberately nurturing a sense of belonging among all students in our classrooms is an important key for any kind of learning experience to happen.

Use NSRF materials to help

So, what NSRF activities or protocols can help students develop a belonging mindset? Here are some that you might want to try in your classroom:

1. **Transitions Activity:** During Transitions, students can volunteer to share whatever is demanding their mental attention at that time. Being listened to attentively by their peers, allows the sharer to feel valued, as do non-verbal signs from their teacher and classmates of empathy and compassion in their struggles, or joy at their good news. This activity is relatively risk free, as the sharers know that they will not be interrupted,

demeaned or silenced in any way. Sharing their joys and sorrow, irritations and successes gives students a chance for their peers to see them as a complex, whole person, one that they can relate to more than the cardboard stereotype they may have held in their mind previously.

2. Microlabs: The Microlabs Activity is a way for students to make meaning of a concept or idea without judgment toward the person whose turn it is to speak. This protocol affirms all ideas that are brought forth and builds community by addressing specific issues that the students have. Because all students are expected to participate, there is an equity of voices in the room.

This protocol relies on each person practicing active listening, which, like Transitions, reinforces each participant feeling that their voices are heard and valued.

3. Hopes and Fears Activity: By surfacing our positive expectations and our concerns around any given experience, Hopes and Fears builds community and increases belonging by highlighting the fact that our hopes and fears are often shared by others. Once they are spoken, they can be positively addressed by the coach and by their peers in this group.

The hopes and fears list becomes a living document that should revisited from time to time to make sure that eventually all hopes and fears will be addressed, and to allow adding new ones as they arise.

4. Setting Agreements Activity: Having your students participate in Setting Agreements creates a known, common list of expectations. By building the list together, everyone can depend on one another to respect the agreements, which cultivates a sense of belonging for everyone.

The prompt for creating a list of agreements is, "What do you need to have in place so that you may do the best work you can in this classroom?" Students work in small groups to write agreements that work for all of them, and then share them out to the large group so that a scribe can make a list of agreements for the entire classroom. Students also agree to take responsibility to help one another adhere to their agreements, thereby relieving their teacher of being the sole "rule enforcer."

5. Speed Success Analysis Protocol: This protocol allows all the students to analyze one another's successes so that everyone in the class can learn from them and feel celebratory together. It demonstrates that everyone has had successes (as well as failures) and this creates a feeling of mutual respect that helps to build trust. Using the Speed Success Analysis Protocol on a regular basis in your classroom throughout the school year will give everyone a turn to be celebrated and valued as someone whose shared successes contribute to others' learning and life satisfaction. (For more about Success Analysis, see "Are you as Successful as a Fifth Grader?" on page 8.)

It's all good

Generally speaking, all NSRF protocols and activities increase the likelihood of participants experiencing belonging mindset.

- Protocols are structured to ensure equity of voice and to level the playing field in terms of the power hierarchy. Ideally, no one voice has more power than another, regardless of experience, gender, class, age, race, or other unspoken attributes that contribute to power imbalances.

- Protocols give time for everyone to actively listen to their peers and to reflect and analyze what has been said.

- They reduce the stress that usually comes with giving and receiving feedback by being highly predictable, both in terms of their structure and the language used when giving it.

- By giving their peers suggestions for how they might improve their work, solve a problem, or create a new plan, all students now have a stake in each other's successes, which increases trust, allows more sharing, and starts the cycle all over again.

Students, like adults, who are exposed to protocols experience deep satisfaction from interacting with their peers around subjects that are meaningful to them and, as a result, affect the broader community in positive ways.

NEW! CFG COACHES' TRAINING FOR CLASSROOMS

Secondary (middle school through high school) teachers, are you interested in learning more ways to use protocols in your classroom? Why not turn your classroom into a Critical Friends Group community?

In this training, teachers will learn practical activities and protocols specifically for the classroom. The training will teach the basics of growth mindset, belonging mindset and purpose and relevance mindset so you can strengthen your students' belonging while boosting their achievement. This five-day training will give you tools to:

- **Build an atmosphere of safety and trust in your classroom**
- **Encourage active participation and equity of student voice**
- **Promote critical and creative thinking in your students**
- **Encourage students to develop skills in active listening and deep reflection**

For more information:

Contact NSRF at 812-330-2702 or nsrf@nsrfharmony.org, or email Michele directly at michele@nsrfharmony.org.

Ready to sharpen your facilitation skills?

If CFG® Coaches' Training is not offered at your school this summer, which of these Open Training dates could work for you?

Bloomington, IN, July 9-13, 2018

Led by NSRF Director, Michele Mattoon, $850 ***Nearly full!*** *(link)*

Philadelphia, PA, Aug. 6-10, 2018

$1,100 for five days' training ***Nearly full!*** *(link)*

If one or more colleagues or friends joins you in Bloomington in July or October, you each receive a $50 discount!

Bloomington's Autumn training will be 3 days in Oct. 2018 plus 2 days scheduled by participants, likely in January/Feb 2019

Bloomington, IN, $850 for five days' training*

New Open Training benefits: Now each participant in Open Trainings receives a copy of the Coaches' Handbook, AND a 12-pack of Collaborative Cue Cards

Rave reviews from participants about NSRF CFG training:

"Best PD EVER!"

~ A new coach in North Carolina

"This training introduced me to a supportive group of colleagues. I did not have this before this training." ~ A new coach in Toronto

"I learned that the protocols are really useful in bringing out our 'best selves.' They drew me into the activities in a way that nudged me towards being fully present. I developed a greater awareness of the effect of my behavior and how it might benefit or hurt the rest of the participants." ~ A new coach in Michigan

To enroll or learn more, click through to the NSRF website or call 812-330-2702!

What are the best combinations for CFG teams and in CFG trainings?

"Shuffling the Deck" in CFG terms

By Luci Englert McKean, NSRF Assistant Director and National Facilitator. luci@nsrfharmony.org

Imagine your school staff represented by a stack of playing cards. There are a variety of metaphors you might choose here, but for instance, let's have the number cards represent grade levels, the suits (hearts, spades, clubs, diamonds) represent subject matter, and the face cards (king, queen, jack) represent administrators. You might even identify a "joker" or two. Depending on the context of the "game," you might even find a few "wild cards" among your colleagues.

Every card game begins with the dealer shuffling the cards thoroughly, then dealing each player a "hand" of random cards. In poker or any other card game, there are specific hands that you're trying to achieve in order to win the game.

I was thinking about common ways that schools set up working groups of colleagues, and some "poker hands" work better than others in particular instances … but the most "winning hands" for CFG work may surprise you. (I'll start by addressing the composition of CFG communities, but also describe specifics regarding ideal composition of on-site CFG trainings. Open Trainingsare always a "shuffled deck," beneficial to all who participate.)

Straight flushes in cards and meetings

One powerful poker hand is a "straight flush"—any five-card sequence in the same suit (e.g.: 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 of diamonds). When you open a brand-new deck of cards, this is the order the cards appear: Ace to King of one suit, then another, a third suit, and the fourth, til you have 52 cards, with a couple of jokers thrown in at the end. Most schools build committees in this orderly way. Consider the suit representing subject matter and the number, various classrooms: several middle school math teachers of relatively equal power working together on shared curricula, for example.

Since most of us are familiar with this sort of working group, I have a question for you. How many times have you sat in a committee meeting and, when a problem is introduced, you have a pretty good idea of who will speak first, who may not speak at all, and approximately what every speaker will say before they say it?

NSRF protocols, of course, are designed to structure conversations to achieve a desired outcome. Within a protocol led by a trained coach, there is no room for idle conversation, ranting about something beyond our control, or content that isn't focused on the problem at hand. So converting committee meetings into Critical Friends Group meetings can help participants be more effective by using protocols to encourage equality of voice, reflection, critical thinking, and creative solutions.

But for coaches' trainings…

However, if you're planning a new CFG Coaches' Training, then "not shuffling" is less-than-ideal, if not downright problematic.

Putting together a training group consisting of 15 literacy coaches from your district, or only central operations staff, for instance, means that you're limiting the world-view of the whole group. Remember, in coaches' training, all participants bring in their own dilemmas and pieces of work, and we run protocols to help them address those things within the trainings. A too-similar cohort might benefit from using protocols, but may not think in drastically different ways. And they're probably already in meetings together all the time. In contrast, coming to a CFG coaches' training, especially an "open" training with educators of all sorts, is the perfect opportunity to get vastly different perspectives on one's problems that pushes each one's thinking beyond the silo of their usual interactions.

For the sake of discussion, let's stay temporarily with our imaginary cohort of 15 literacy coaches from the same district. In that training, when someone presents a chunk of student work, everyone's thinking primarily about their shared experience as literacy coaches, and maybe their own experience coaching this familiar student. But imagine for a moment the perspective that that student's math teacher or baseball coach might add to that group -- wild card, right? Not all wild cards are helpful, but others have the potential to generate a plethora of brand-new ideas.

When you're forming a training cohort, you don't want to have just one wild card in a sea of "same suit" others.

You want all the participants to have some attributes and perspectives unique to them but also some attributes and perspectives shared with at least a few other people in the room--a shuffled deck that's not all one suit.

Especially important when there are power imbalances

Picture what happens when you have a group of relatively equal colleagues and one "boss" (or colleague who isn't a boss but has close ties to that office). Even with the best of bosses, there will be some dilemmas that people will not feel comfortable addressing when the boss is in the room. Additionally, conversations will be skewed. Even groups that have

used our Setting Agreements activity will struggle with this sort of imbalance, and frankly, it's not a good environment for the boss to get support, either.

Similarly, having a group with just one person of color can be quite difficult for that person. The group may consciously (or unconsciously) expect them to represent "the voice of all Teachers of Color" or worse, "the voice of all People of Color." Clearly, this expectation isn't remotely fair to that teacher and likely will cause more friction than it removes. That said, groups of ONLY Teachers of Color can be enormously helpful, allowing a safe container where they may support each other without concern for observers who are not part of the group.

When "shuffling" is best

What we've learned in 20+ years of Critical Friends Group work is that talking to people who are NOT your "just like you" gives you the broadest context to reconsider your problem or next steps. Teachers who work with a very different age group, for example, have a perspective about tactics that work brilliantly with younger students. You may have never heard of those ideas and thus could not have considered the way they might positively impact the situation. Educators from an entirely different environment (teachers from rural public schools learning alongside teachers from elite private schools, for example) bring fresh skill sets and considerations to a discussion.

Obviously in your school-based CFG work, you're not going to bring in teachers from other schools. However, when you're first beginning to consider CFG work, you may want to consider sending a few of your team to an "open" training with NSRF. Attendees at open trainings are "shuffled" randomly—because individuals can attend from any organization, open trainings tend to have VERY diverse types of people in the room. They're also a perfect option when a school or district would like to train their administrators separately from their faculty training happening on-site. Schools and districts often find that this creates "the best of both worlds"—colleagues working together in a training at a less expensive price-point, and a few admins attending a training elsewhere, where they'll have the joy and satisfaction of being "not the boss" but a peer among peers.

The specific time when you want a "royal flush"

In poker, the very best hand that wins every time is called a "royal flush." This is the Ace, King, Queen, Jack, and ten, all of one suit (Clubs for example). Because these are the most powerful cards in a deck, the royal flush represents school or district administrators.

Not long ago I led a training which included heads of school, operations-level managers and directors, (specialty) coaches, and classroom teachers: a grouping that we specifically do not recommend for on-site trainings because of the power imbalance. As we were discussing dilemmas that could be brought to the training group for our practice session, one of the heads, looking at some of the teachers from his school, said, "You have NO IDEA the dilemmas I know about but can't discuss with you!" His frustration was palpable and appropriate.

NSRF always suggests that, whenever possible, administrators be trained in a separate cohort (their own "royal flush") rather than mixing them in with teachers for this reason, and because the opposite is also true: people would rather their bosses not know about problems until after they have tried to solve the problem themselves.

Similarly, administrators should not expect to attend CFG communities alongside their staff but instead should have their own administrative CFG community. In an admin group, they are surrounded by people of relatively equal-to-them power, with the same sorts of dilemmas and relatively similar work to bring to the group for improvement. It's vitally important (one might say "critical") that administrators can have trusted places to work out these dilemmas, without having to break confidences or alarm teachers who work for them.

A few words if you're considering training

If you don't have control over the "game" or the "deck," but you're hoping to pitch the idea of getting trained as a CFG coach and starting CFG work in your school, here are some choices to consider:

- Visit our website to select a good Open Training for you.
- Consider bringing a colleague to the training: some of our open trainings offer discounts for bringing another person. It's always wonderful to have a trained partner in continuing the work when you're back at your desk!
- Get some info from NSRF demonstrating the power of CFG work, and present it to your administrators with the specifics and dates of the open training you want to attend.
- And if you ARE the administrator, revisit bullet #1 above. Then in bullet #2, think of someone who might be hesitant to adopt CFG work, and bring them to training. Then you achieve the double-benefit of not only having the colleague to collaborate with, but also you've already "won over" a challenger to the wonderful process of Critical Friends Group work!

Luci Englert McKean is the Assistant Director of the NSRF, Managing Editor of Connections, an NSRF International Facilitator, and CFG Coach. She's also the curator and speaker coach for TEDxBloomington. Email her at luci@nsrfharmony.org

Are You as Successful as a Fifth Grader?

By Kevin Mabie, NSRF National Facilitator DrKevinMabie@gmail.com

One of my favorite NSRF protocols is the Success Analysis Protocol. In schools, I have typically used this protocol at the end of a school term to encourage self-reflection among teachers and to open our eyes to our colleagues' accomplishments. In Western Civilization culture, "bragging" is often frowned upon, so we have learned to avoid speaking of our successes with joy unless we are surrounded by close friends or family. This protocol, however, makes bragging not only okay, but desirable!

The coach first asks participants to identify a success from a given period of time (i.e. first semester, this school year, in the past 5 years). Participants are then given a couple of minutes to jot down details about that success. What made this a meaingful "success" for you? Who did it affect? Were there fiscal "wins," powerful community connections made, or other sorts of breakthroughs?

Then, in groups of three or four, a rotation begins. In each triad or quad, the first presenter shares their success, then other participants have an opportunity to ask clarifying questions. After those questions have been answered, the presenter turns their chair around so they may hear but not make eye contact with the other participants. The others then have a conversation, analyzing and extrapolating details of the success. Some of these details may have been heard explicitly, while others may be inferred.

At the conclusion of the analysis, the presenter turns back around to rejoin their quad and reflect on what they heard. Almost always, the presenter expresses an even deeper recognition and satisfaction with their success based on what they heard from the other participants. Their critical friends add perspective to the presented success story, emphasizing its importance and effect on others. Typically, each round ends with a lot of smiles, high-

fives, and fist bumps. It's a lot of fun! After this, then the next person in each quad presents their success, and the rounds repeat until each person has presented and heard from the others in their small group.

Modifications for fifth graders

Until recently, I had only attempted this protocol with adults and with high school students…but recently I was asked to run it with elementary students, so I gave it a shot. The results were fantastic! These kids relished the opportunity to share their successes with their peers, and they embraced the chance to talk about their peers' successes!

Working with fifth graders, I was very directive in my approach when I had them identify their success. I asked them to consider any success inside or outside of school within this school year, and I posted the 5Ws and H on the board (who, what, when, where, why, and how). I gave them six minutes to write freely about their chosen success, and encouraged them to consider each W and H in their writing.

In contrast with the standard way this protocol is run with adult learners, I added a bit more structure by my serving as a timer for the entire room. As I facilitated, I listened to the amazing variety of things they identified as successes. I also collected their written notes, and here is some of what I learned.

"In November, I got a 100% on my English test. My parents were proud of me, also. I studied a lot."

Lauren wrote that she got a 90% on a math test last week; she went on to say that her mom got her a shake from Jack-in-the-Box to celebrate!

Another student wrote that she got a 103% on a social studies test that was really hard to study for; she explained how her mom had helped her study.

Not just academics

Other things we do in schools provide students with reasons to smile:

One student spoke of how proud she was to have had her art featured at a local mall.

Another student wrote, "When I ran for Student Council, I was really just trying to have fun, but I was so excited when I got voted into STUCO!

Bailey pointed out that a teacher had chosen her, out of all of her classmates, to receive an "Empathy Award." She was most moved by this because she thought it was "awesome" that her teacher "noticed her." She added, "He finds ways to notice us all the time."

While stressful, school examinations offer opportunities for students to be proud of their work, especially when they're not always successful…and our responses to their hard work and success (both before and after the tests) are certainly noted.

And not just in-school successes

Athletics and activities give our young people experiences to be proud of:

Wyatt hit two homeruns and won a game for his fall baseball team.

At gymnastics, Megan got "shot through" on the bars. She got it by "practicing and practicing." She said that her coach helped her.

"My whole family was there. They were a huge support for me."

Another student got first place in an Irish dance competition. She explained that, "My whole family was there. They were a huge support for me." Most important to her was that her big sister (in seventh grade) was there.

Success Analysis feels GREAT!

Fifth graders relished this opportunity, and adults do, too. One past colleague described the experience of listening to others analyze your success as similar to listening to a sports talk radio show when you're the person who got the game-winning hit the night before. Others can take our successes and help us to feel just a little heroic, like they should!

Whether you find a situation soon to use this protocol or not, and no matter what ages you work with, I hope you find some opportunities to reflect on your successes. There is never a bad time to do so!

Dr. Kevin Mabie is committed to impactful and engaging adult education. Aside from serving as a National Facilitator of NSRF Critical Friends Group Trainings, Kevin is a Global Professional Instructor for the Crisis Prevention Institute. A lifelong educator, Kevin spent 18 years in K-12 education, teaching high school English and serving as a high school principal before beginning in his current role. *drkevinmabie@gmail.com*

Use These "5 Rs" to Keep your Group Agreements Fresh and Meaningful

By Kaethe Perez, NSRF International Facilitator. kaetheperez@gmail.com

Do you remember when your Critical Friends Group community first began and you used the Setting Agreements Activity? By collaborating to discuss what each of us needs to do our best work, we begin to build deep trust. Then so we can work together safely and do the deep work that is the hallmark of CFG communities, far beyond what any individual protocol can do in a given setting.

What? You haven't set agreements yet? Do that, and come back to this article later. If you need more support in convincing your colleagues to take the time for this step, read NSRF Director Michele Mattoon's article "Agree Now or Pay Later" from the January 2014 issue of Connections.

Kaethe Perez is an NSRF International Facilitator based in Florida. She is recently retired from Step Up for Students, 40 years in public schools, and work at the Lastinger Center for Learning at the University of Florida. She may be reached at kaetheperez@gmail.com.

If you set Agreements awhile ago but may have "forgotten" them …

Over time, groups might become blasé with the agreement chart, somehow thinking the group already "knows" this, or "we have so much to do, we will just point to the chart and say something like 'here are our agreements, now let's get started.'" Worse yet, maybe the agreements are listed on the agenda template, eventually becoming wallpaper on the top of the agenda, not even mentioned. And worst of all, maybe you aren't even displaying your group agreements when you meet!

We cannot underestimate how vital it is that your CFG group has done the heavy lifting of establishing agreements. If you've added new people to your group, you need to do the activity again. Remember the basic difference between "agreements" and "norms"—if rules are imposed upon you without your consent or participation, then those are norms, and the unspoken ones are the most dangerous. In contrast, if your group consciously makes agreements with one another, you can manage complex group dynamics with much more ease.

If your group has been stable but you haven't revisited long-established Agreements to see if anything needs to be changed, added, or deleted, then let's talk about fresh ways to approach them.

Five Rs to keep agreements fresh

Rather than quickly mentioning (glossing over) the agreements at each meeting, here are 5 Rs guaranteed to freshen the attitude and encourage everyone to embrace the purpose and power of shared agreements. I suggest you use a different tip every other meeting!

1. Recommit Ask the CFG members to silently review the agreements with the intention to practice/strengthen a specific agreement during this time together. Which particular agreement do each of you need to focus on today? Place a mark on that agreement. Ask members to share with a neighbor to actualize their intention.

Tip for the coach: mark your agenda somewhere in the middle and, at the debrief portion of that activity, check in with the group. Has everyone kept their intention in mind? How's it going?

2. Restate The agreements were co-constructed by the group during the first few meetings, and are usually written and posted on chart paper or on the paper agenda. During Restate, the facilitator reads each agreement one at a time, asking members of the group to restate in their own words what the agreements mean to them. This is very powerful since individual CFG members' perspectives on the agreements can inform the entire group, especially when the context is personal. This sharing helps build and renew trust in the group.

3. Refresh in a different format. The facilitator writes the words BE - LISTEN -TRUST in separate columns on chart paper. Asking the group to review the agreements with a fresh eye, then suggest single words or short phrases under each category, reflecting specific agreements, to coalesce the group today. Here are some examples, but trust that your group will state what they will need given their feelings and the work at hand today.

BE

- **present**
- **aware of my own idiosyncrasies**
- **compassionate in my reactions**
- **open to ideas**
- **"willing to be disturbed"**

LISTEN

- **actively**
- **for understanding, not necessarily agreement**
- **from the place of possibility**
- **without judgment**

TRUST

- **yourself**
- **in the process**
- **what is said stays, what is learned leaves**
- **we have each others' back**
- **enough to wonder aloud**

4. Remind As you're planning your meeting agenda, make note where it would be helpful or prudent to remind the group of a specific agreement. Such as, "Remember our agreement 'Expect it to be messy?' During this next activity, there might be some grappling of ideas and the chart paper might get scribbley, so take a breath and remember messy can result in great ideas!" Develop some verbal cues and use them in advance of an activity to avoid the need for reining someone in when they forget a challenging agreement.

5. Reflect During a debrief of a protocol or work session, ask a specific debrief question about agreements:

- **Which agreements do you believe helped the group process? How?**
- **Which agreement assisted you personally during this time? Would anyone like to share aloud their experience?**

Agreements need to remain 'alive'

Within the Setting Agreements Activity, we suggest that every group revisit their Agreements about two meetings after they were set. By that point, people may have "forgotten" an agreement or two (especially if you chose to set more than about seven agreements), and other experiences may already have arisen which encourage participants to ask for an edit. Reassuring everyone anytime the Agreements are discussed that this list NEEDS to remain alive for the health of the group can make this process easy, helpful, and even enjoyable.

We'd love to hear your thoughts and experiences about this activity and about this article. Please contact us and your ideas might make it into a future issue of ***Connections***!

Harmony School seeks a full-time teacher for 1st/2nd grade class

The National School Reform Faculty and Harmony School are both part of Harmony Education Center. The school is seeking a 1st/2nd grade teacher. If you or someone you know is interested in teaching in this lovely independent school in Bloomington, Indiana, please click the logo at right for details.

HARMONY SCHOOL
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What Agreement do you think is most powerful for your group?

Which Agreements are most challenging for you personally?

What has helped your group keep your Agreements?

Please email luci@nsrfharmony.org with your ideas and we'll share the best ones!

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NSRF is a non-profit, professional development initiative that focuses on increasing student achievement through a specific variety of professional learning communities. Part of Harmony Education Center, we train educators to coach Critical Friends Group communities. CFG communities use NSRF protocols and activities to facilitate meaningful and efficient communication, problem solving, and learning.

Paid membership helps us continue to provide NSRF materials via our website, as well as support our mission to offer training across the nation and world. We encourage you to support the Lois Butler Scholarship fund so that any teacher could participate in a training regardless of ability to pay our fee.

Shout-out to researchers

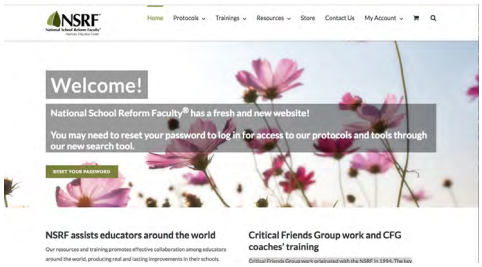
Have you written a thesis or dissertation on a topic associated with Critical Friends Group® work or NSRF® protocols?

Now and then, we hear from someone seeking published research on the efficacy of Critical Friends Group® work, or the use of protocols in the classrooms. We're happy to share research we have on file, but we realize that most of it is dated. We expect some of you can point us to fresher research. If you know of any studies we should know about, too, please contact luci@nsrfharmony.org. Thanks so much!

Shout-out to EVERYONE!

*What do you think? How are we doing with **Connections**, and the new website?*

We're working hard to eliminate bugs and add all current members and member-coaches to the new website. We really want to hear feedback from you, whether you have warm or cool feedback to share ... especially if you're having a problem finding something you need!



Please send comments of any variety to luci@nsrfharmony.org. We appreciate it!

Want to write for Connections?

Submit your ideas to luci@nsrfharmony.org and let's talk. Authors of published articles receive one free year's subscription to NSRF.

MANY WAYS TO STAY IN TOUCH

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We're just starting to learn about LinkedIn, but we'll be here soon, too.

http://www.NSRFHarmony.org and nsrf@nsrfharmony.org

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