

NSRF's Living History

A Conversation with Nancy Mohr and Alan Dichter

Peggy Silva, New Hampshire

When asked about the evolution of the National School Reform Faculty, Nancy Mohr laughed. "Gene Thompson-Grove has always said that the organization started at our kitchen table, while others recall a conversation in a basement room of a Chicago hotel, but the roots of this organization are deeply embedded in the work of the Coalition of Essential Schools and The Annenberg Institute for School Reform." Nancy, the Director of NSRF New York, and her husband Alan Dichter, Local Instructional Supervisor—Region 9, both point to the Citibank initiative as pivotal in provoking sustained discussion of what it means to be a leader.

Nancy recalls, "During its first year, Citibank Fellows (principals from around the country who came to Providence in the summer to become part of a learning community) taught for a month at Brown Summer High School. Principals selected to be Thompson Fellows

The principals were still in residence for only one week, in contrast to the teachers who were there for several weeks. The design of the program continued to promote the notion that principals were the experts in the instructional process. And, in keeping with the hierarchical underpinnings, principals stayed in air-conditioned hotel rooms during their one-week residency, while teachers lived in dormitories.

"All of this led, however, to powerful new learning. We accepted that school leaders play different roles in schools. We began to ask how we could be genuinely useful. We saw that effective facilitation could elevate conversations within a school community. Leaders who are skilled facilitators stimulate intellectual engagement."

Alan agrees. "The work of the Citibank program focused on instructional practice, not organizational change. As we recognized the value that school leaders could add, we began to train individuals in leadership and facilitation strategies. The earliest incarnation of this training was through Critical Friends Groups; however, those of us engaged in leadership development began to ask what the equivalent to looking at student work was for school leaders. We recognized over and over that effective facilitation

facilitator endorsement."

When asked to state their vision for the future of NSRF, Alan and Nancy had similar replies. "Saturation," Alan stated. "The presence of the organization lends credibility to the work. We need to identify potential leaders and facilitators and train them in habits of discussion and reflection."

Nancy agrees with Alan's thoughts about saturation. "Process, process, process—the whole idea of structures to think and to do. We need to forge connections in our work. By involving school leaders in intellectual engagement, we free their minds to think in new ways. We need to value the talk more than the skill level. It is imperative to make everyone an insider in the conversation."

That is happening in the NSRF work in New York City and in the State of Washington. For the past two years, a group of us have been working in Seattle with coaches from schools who have received money from the Gates Foundation. Time is a resource that cannot be shortchanged, and two years is not a long time. But by making the investment to engage in the intellectually rigorous work of forming small learning communities, we provided time and professional development resources that allowed people to engage in new learning, and time to 'chew on' ideas. Consequently, we now have ninety new schools on the trajectory for completing their work. This was previously uncharted territory for NSRF, but it has been deeply satisfying to be part of such a huge paradigm shift.

Facilitation is the intellectual underpinning of democratic practice. It is constantly scary, and always edgy, but it transforms and transcends, and provides mechanisms for using our minds well. ■

Nancy Mohr, Alan Dichter and co-authors Joe and Elizabeth MacDonald wrote The Power of Protocols: an Educator's Guide to Better Practice. The book is available at www.teacherscollegepress.com.

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Nancy Mohr and Alan Dichter

attended the program for a week and provided a typical hierarchical model of top-down observations. Feedback led to serious changes the following summer during my term as a Thompson Fellow. There was a conscious effort to make the program more amenable to all involved. A more laissez-faire philosophy was in place. Teachers and principals were paired to co-teach in a democratic fashion. Tensions simmered, then erupted, as inherent flaws surfaced.

enhances the dynamic in many settings. Over time, the questions and the learning evolved into concrete standards for facilitators. Building capacity for this work means training people, endorsing their acquisition of skills, and providing support. We teach leaders how to use a variety of protocols to enhance leadership mandates. We have learned that more significant change comes from ongoing support. Our web site (www.nsrfn.org) lists the process for