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Report from the Directors

Steve "Roc" Bonchek, Co-Director

Of the three NSRF co-directors, I am the only one who wasn't involved in NSRF's national network before 1999. Up until then my exposure to NSRF was as the director of Harmony School. With 185 pre-k to 12th grade students and sixteen faculty, we had utilized and benefited from our CFG at Harmony since we started our first group in 1995. Consequently, when NSRF decided to leave Brown University and become part of Harmony I had only an inkling of NSRF's potential to touch tens of thousands of educators and millions of students.

All that has changed.

Since Harmony's founding in 1974 with four high school students, I had always hoped that we could serve as a catalyst for public school reform. The basic philosophy of Harmony had its origins in the "free school movement" of the late 1960s and early 1970s. That philosophy can best be summed up in the following statement:

Schools should be a place where all people are engaged in an authentic democratic community and together have meaningful and revealing dialogue that begins to formulate new dimensions of ourselves and of society.

Ron Miller, president of the Foundation for Educational Renewal which funded the first three issues of *Connections*, writes eloquently about this movement in his book *Free Schools, Free People*, available through SUNY Press (www.sunypress.edu).

When I started to experience the process of CFGs in 1995 it seemed very consistent with Harmony's philosophy. CFGs appeared to be the perfect group process within which people in schools could have this "meaningful and revealing dialogue." In the three years that



NSRF has been a part of Harmony, many more educators have come to agree with this conclusion.

Building on the work that went on at Brown University from 1995 to 2000, we have seen the budget of NSRF grow from \$10,000 to \$2,000,000, and through the work of 26 Centers of Activity, 8000 additional educators have attended NSRF Coaches Institutes. However, amidst all this activity, there are two NSRF initiatives that touch me "where I live(d)." You see, in my life I have only lived in two places —Bloomington, Indiana, and Cleveland, Ohio, and as an adult I have really had only one job—being at Harmony School.

The fact that NSRF work fit so naturally into Harmony School came as no surprise. However, to my great surprise, the largest single NSRF district project has emerged in my old hometown, Cleveland—within the Cleveland Municipal School District. I would like to take this opportunity to share with you what is going on in these two communities, Harmony and Cleveland, that are so close to my heart.

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Report from the Directors

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At Harmony we have three CFGs made up of teachers and staff, one Coaches CFG that includes coaches from Harmony School, Indiana University, and the Indiana Department of Education, and one CFG made up of faculty, students, parents, and community members. The effects of CFG work on the Harmony culture have been profound. The first thing that I noticed as director was the expanded level of teacher leadership that I observed in faculty meetings. This from a faculty that was already empowered to make all curricular and budgetary decisions.

However, even within this engaged faculty of 16, there was a gap between

has risen. The use of the Descriptive Review process has also provided a great boost to our ability to reflect on and design implementation strategies to support many of our neediest students and their families.

The Cleveland work began when NSRF National Facilitator Dave Lehman, from the Alternative Community School in Ithaca, NY, and I met with a Cleveland team that was working on a Gates Foundation project that planned to start a new small school in Cleveland. As part of this work, Dave and I introduced the notion of CFGs. Two Assistant Superintendents on the Cleveland team became so excited about what CFGs could contribute that they asked us to begin discussions with their Director of Professional Development about training two coaches in each of Cleveland's eighty-nine elementary schools.

The results of that meeting and ensuing conversations have led to a brand new small school in Cleveland—Success Tech Academy—and the widespread use of CFGs throughout many of Cleveland's elementary and middle schools. The small school work was facilitated by monthly visits from Philadelphia NSRF Facilitator Debbie Bambino. Debbie's work there over the course of nearly 14 months resulted in the opening of the school last September. The training of over 200 coaches has been facilitated by a team of 20 NSRF National Facilitators who have been making monthly visits to Cleveland since November, 2001.

Members of this national team come from Ohio, Florida, Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Georgia, Oregon, New Mexico, and Pennsylvania. Amazingly, even with the brutal Cleveland winter, they never missed a day that they had committed to be there. The NSRF team has made monthly visits to Cleveland over the last sixteen months, and though I have only been there three of those days, each time I have had the opportunity to participate

in sessions and talk to many Cleveland coaches and district leaders.

The main thing that stands out for me about the Cleveland work is how the NSRF team has been able to instill a sense of hopefulness into a group of over 200 educators in a fairly typical urban district and, even more importantly, provide them with some "tools" to actualize that new-found optimism. This year, NSRF Facilitators Pete Bermudez, from Florida, and Connie Chene, from New Mexico, have facilitated a Cleveland Principals' CFG with 13 elementary and middle school principals. They hope to expand on that group next year, as the leadership in Cleveland has come to understand how pivotal principal support and understanding of CFG work is to their ultimate success. Next year we also hope to expand our work to high schools and to begin apprenticing some Cleveland coaches with the NSRF National Facilitation Team.

The presence of the kind of "authentic community" I referred to earlier is apparent in both Cleveland and Harmony NSRF work. In Cleveland, the manner in which some twenty NSRF facilitators have been able to come together, whether or not they were previously acquainted, and immediately find a common language and set of experiences upon which to build, has said volumes about the authentic community that runs throughout NSRF. We certainly want to build upon that sense of community in the future as more and more educators get involved with NSRF.

As we grow, the challenge of maintaining the sense of community that I have known at Harmony for nearly 30 years and have now found within NSRF is both daunting and exciting. I believe that with the creativity, commitment, and powerful minds that permeate the NSRF network, we are up to this challenge. ■

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The effects of CFG work on the Harmony culture have been profound.

people who took on more leadership and responsibility and those who did not. I believe because of CFG work we experienced an increase in teacher and staff self-confidence and a higher comfort level with their own abilities. The workloads at the school are now more equally distributed among all of us and there is clearly a higher collective capacity for leadership. This has been significant for me as more and more of my time is involved with national NSRF issues.

The effect this has had on the Harmony students can be seen in our classes. Teachers are taking more risks by making their work more public, trying out new curriculum ideas that have been tuned in CFGs, and CFG strategies are utilized routinely. Harmony faculty meetings and program level family meetings (our decision making meetings that involve students and teachers working together to address program level issues) are much more efficient, and teacher and student satisfaction with these meetings