

# NSRF's Living History

## A Conversation with Sharon Allen-Hamilton Debbie Bambino, Pennsylvania

**D**uring the 2000 '01 school year the School District of Lancaster (SDOL) joined three other districts in the Lucent Peer Collaboration Project. NSRF, at the invitation of The Philanthropic Initiative (TPI), has been involved with the project and its rollout of district-wide Lucent Learning Communities (LLCs) since its inception. One outstanding feature of this project has been the intentional collaboration of administrative and union forces on the project in each district. This issue's Living History segment features my conversation with Sharon Allen-Hamilton, president of the Lancaster Education Association and CFG coach/facilitator.

### **Can you tell us a little bit about what it was that first attracted you to the Lucent Peer Collaboration Project in the SDOL?**

As President of the Teacher's Association in Lancaster, I was part of the team that was interviewed by Hallie Tamez of TPI and Daniel Baron of NSRF. During those first conversations I was struck by Daniel's mention of teacher empowerment and the ways that learning communities allowed teachers to take responsibility for their own professional growth.

As Association President I had become increasingly aware of the teachers' concerns about the value of their professional development sessions for their day-to-day practice. In light of their concerns, the idea of a grass-

roots project where teachers would be responsible for their own learning really appealed to me. I was especially interested in the plan to provide teachers with a structure, framework and tools, along with the time to collaborate and reflect on their work. I thought that this combination of time and tools would allow teachers to sustain their growth even after the Lucent funding was exhausted, or there was a change in leadership.

### **As a public school parent and a teacher, how did you think the creation of LLCs would help students?**

I was a classroom teacher for 17 years and I know that teachers col-



laborate in small ways all the time. I thought the LLCs would help teachers add more focus to their collaboration and sharing. During my training as a coach I learned new ways to structure conversations so that we could zero in on improving our practice.

When we look at student or adult work and really focus on a question or dilemma, we always end up with concrete ideas to improve our practice and that helps our students.

### **Can you share an example of the kind of teacher learning or change that you're describing?**

One LLC explored a district process, which was developed to support students who were not meeting stan-

dards. While the process was familiar to some teachers, it was not widely used in schools. The LLCs helped to unpack some reasons why the process was not used widely and enabled the presenter to create new ways of supporting teachers in the use of the support process.

### **As President, what potential benefits did you see for your Association members?**

I really welcomed the opportunity for teachers to reflect on their practice. I appreciated the Superintendent's commitment to shared leadership of the teaching-learning and accountability pieces of the process.

The benefit I saw for our members was really about this shared leadership or teacher empowerment. Traditionally, as teachers, we always thought we knew what was best for the students in our classrooms, and that understanding directed our classroom practice and decision-making. But we didn't always examine the results of our practice to see if it was indeed accelerating student achievement. We haven't always taken, or been given, the time to ask ourselves if our teaching was really meeting the needs of all of our students.

Now, when we collaborate to "tune" a plan or examine an assignment with a focus on results for students, we can collect reliable evidence and adjust our instruction, as it's needed. In the end, we see the benefits for members as an increase in student achievement...their success is the best benefit we can get!

### **How has your understanding of collaboration and reflection grown as a coach? How has it changed the day-to-day way you do your work?**

Since I started coaching, I find myself thinking a lot more about the assumptions I make about what I see, or things I hear people say.

### **Can you give me an example?**

Well, by acknowledging my own assumptions I now ask more questions and make sure to get clarification

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from the other person. This work has made me continue to hone my listening skills. As president, listening to other people's problems and working to co-construct possible solutions is a big part of my job.

In general, I think I'd say that reflective practice has become a more ingrained part of who I am now. Each time I'm in a situation, I never leave it without thinking about the impact of my participation. I wonder what worked, what didn't work and how I could have handled it differently or better.

The key is that by reflecting, I grow, and this has made the idea of my being a lifelong learner more explicit.

Staying in this work and expanding my role as a facilitator has helped me understand the value of teacher inquiry and research. The more we do this work, the more we uncover the big questions we face. You know the ones I mean, the kind of questions that keep you up at night. Now when I have one of those problems, or a question, I find myself tapping into our collective experience by emailing colleagues in the broader network of coaches, asking for a resource or an experience they've had that can help push my thinking. I understand the need to systematically tackle those big questions over the long haul and I use collaborative, reflective

tools to help find answers.

**Have your hopes for the Lucent Project been realized? Are collaboration and reflection a part of the way things get done in SDOL schools now?**

I believe the seeds of collaboration and reflection have been planted and there are many signs that they are taking root. In the first five schools that were involved in the project, collaboration continues to be part of the ways those schools do business. In the Schoolwide Improvement Plans, the LLCs are listed as a strategy to improve student achievement and the groups continue to meet regularly during the school day. Since our expansion of the project district wide, LLCs have started to take hold in the other schools as well.

**Earlier you talked about the sustainability of LLCs if there were changes in leadership. I know you've experienced some changes and I wonder if you might comment on the impact.**

We have had leadership changes since the start of this work, changes at both the school level and at the District level, but the work continues to grow. Our new Superintendent supports the project and teachers continue to take advantage of the opportunity to collaborate with their peers and improve their craft.

**What next steps do you envision? How will SDOL sustain the use of collaborative, reflective practices during the school day without the Lucent funding?**

There are several ideas that the SDOL should consider as we end the funded phase of this project. Namely, we must bring the coaches (teacher and administrator) together to examine the current structures that support the LLCs and

determine what we must have in place to deepen the roots of collaboration. We should continue to support and grow the SDOL Apprentice Facilitator process to build capacity at the district level to support new and experienced coaches. And the most ambitious goal is to begin to create opportunities for students, parents and community members to participate in LLCs.

The power of collaboration is only truly realized when all members of the school community are reflective about teaching and learning in meaningful ways to accelerate student achievement and to close the achievement gap. ■

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at all levels of school organization. In some places, we have been successful in convincing people that tapping the expertise of a group of educators and encouraging them to value and share this expertise is an extraordinarily *efficient* form of professional development.

We remain optimistic that critical friends processes and, in time, Critical Friends Groups will continue to enrich the cultures of the schools and districts in our network. When we were trained as CFG coaches, Debbie Bambino and Carol Nejman taught us a mantra: "Trust the process. The work sells itself." They were right. ■

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