

Connections

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Director's Report Daniel Baron, Co-Director

Greetings colleagues. I hope that you have had some time this summer to reflect on just how important our work is in the quality of our students' lives, present and future. It is so easy to get distracted by all of the demands of the urgently unimportant issues that confront us daily during the school year. One of the great benefits of reflective practice is that we can take the time to remember what really matters and then to infuse our work with what we know will bring meaning and understanding to the work of our students.

Late summer is a great time to take stock of what is, imagine what is possible, and to make the professional commitment to revise our work for the benefit of our students. I would like to take this opportunity to share some recent developments in NSRF and to reflect back on some lessons learned over the first ten years of our work.

NSRF is currently poised to make an extraordinary contribution to the lives of urban youth and their teachers. Over the last four years, many of us have been engaged in the small school transformation movement. Through the generosity of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, NSRF facilitators and coaches have been working hard in schools and districts across the country to interrupt the gross inequities of far too many inner city school districts.

Much of our work is focused on raising academic achievement through empowering students, families and teachers to strive for intellectually rigorous, culturally and personally relevant curriculum grounded in caring and trusting relationships.

NSRF is actively involved in small schools projects in Arizona, California, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, Washington and Wisconsin. Critical Friends Groups are an

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Celebrating NSRF's tenth anniversary!

integral part of the work everywhere we work. Achieving equity of academic outcomes is at the heart of the small schools movement. It is our commitment to ensure that every student graduate from high school ready for college. It is my belief that every child deserves the choice of going to college and that no child has a choice unless he/she has been accepted into a college or university. The NSRF mission expresses our commitment to eliminate the predictive value of race, class, gender and disability on academic achievement.

After ten years of practice, NSRF has come to understand the need for district transformation in order to support the work of professional learning communities in schools. The intentional transformation of the culture of a school is much more likely to be sustained over time if the district also models the habits of reflective practice. So many of our early CFG coaches and Annenberg

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principals are now engaged in central office work that it was inevitable that our work would eventually flourish at the district level. These administrators have experienced the power of making their authentic work public to their peers for the purpose of receiving feedback to improve the effectiveness of their work. We now know that whole districts can be transformed when the practice of professional learning communities becomes embedded into the culture of teachers, principals, and central office administrators.

Much has been written recently about the essential role of professional learning communities in improving student achievement. It seems as though every educational journal I read has a reference to learning communities. However, not enough has been written about NSRF practice and effectiveness in improving the quality of the educational experience for students and teachers. Until now. This fall, the educational honor society Phi Lambda Theta's journal "Educational Horizons" will be entirely devoted to NSRF practice in schools and universities across the country. Each Center of Activity will receive ten copies to share with their colleagues.

In celebration of NSRF's tenth anniversary, the Lastinger Center, an NSRF Center of Activity in Southern Florida, has received funding from the Wachovia Foundation to document our learning over the last ten years. This publication will be an invaluable resource to coaches and facilitators across the country working at any level of schooling.

NSRF is committed to generating the resources to support and document research that will provide the evidence necessary to deepen and sustain our work through our second decade of Critical Friends Groups and facilitative leadership.

At this year's Winter Meeting, my colleague Gene Thompson-Grove boldly stated that our work "goes against the tide of current educational reform." I take great pride in that statement. I am also aware that we are contributing to a very powerful undertow pulling us back to our core beliefs of equity and social justice for every child. Although the tide is easier to see, it is the undertow that disrupts the status quo that can cause the sands to shift. NSRF is committed to continuing our tradition to build on the talents and strengths of all our members and to interrupt those practices that do not serve our students well.

I wish you all a school year guided by inquiry and curiosity, supported by colleagues and community, and focused on the success of each child. ■

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as it is a tool for encouraging reflection on the recent past. [Donna's Reflections, 1-11-2005]

Maintaining the blog actually helps me reflect on my reflections. Studying the entries over

Blog Links

Here are some links to get you started on your own blogging adventure:

<http://awd.cl.uh.edu/blog/> provides resources for getting started to use blogs for yourself or with your students.

<http://bloggingineducation.blogspot.com/> highlights articles related to using blogs in a variety of education-specific ways.

<http://donna.robreid.com/weblog/> my own web log shares the activities and reflections of a CFG Coach.

<http://blogs.setonhill.edu/MikeArnzen/> Pedablogue, a "personal inquiry into the scholarship of teaching," is authored by Michael Arnzen of Seton Hill University. His personal reflections are updated regularly, often humorous, and always thoughtful. This blog is a great model for a professional reflective journal.

time helps me see connections and reinforce the good work that we do for students, teachers, and schools. Now if I could just find time to work on that golf swing... ■

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