

Indiana Center of Activity Report

Daniel Baron, Indiana

We call the Indiana Center of Activity the Hoosier School Reform Faculty (HSRF). The name HSRF evolved out of an inquiry question: What is the potential of a local Center of Activity to influence public schools to put equity at the center of their work as they transform schools and districts into democratic learning communities?

HSRF grows out of the Harmony School's history of support of democratic school reform in high-poverty schools, a history that was greatly influenced by my initial NSRF coaches training in 1995.

Fast forward to June of 2000, when the Harmony Education Center became the home of NSRF. For the next two years, all of the energy of the Harmony School Outreach Office was focused on the survival, growth, and new mission of NSRF. Our local work came to a standstill while we worked to establish NSRF's national office in order to make NSRF a permanent national institution committed to the creation and sustainability of democratic learning communities with a focus on educational equity for each student.

By 2002, NSRF had grown dramatically and was providing services to national organizations, school districts and schools all over the country. It was now time to direct our attention back to the work in Indiana. Our theory of action was focused on our local school district and the Indianapolis Public School system.

Our first move as a formal Center of Activity was to build on our previously strong relationship with the School of Education (SOE) at Indiana University. Cathy Brown, an Associate Dean of the School of Education, was involved in a three-year project working collaboratively with the I.U. Math Department, the SOE Mathematics Education Department, and local secondary math teachers in Monroe County. The project design was based on the Japanese Lesson Study model. After the first year, Cathy was con-

cerned that the study group had not built a professional community where members felt safe enough to take risks, ask the tough questions, or expose their professional vulnerabilities. She invited me to introduce the concept of Critical Friends Group to the Lesson Study Group.

It was a great match, and working together with NSRF facilitator Ross Peterson-Veatch, the group made the transition from study group to CFG. This early success led to HSRF facilitating two full-day retreats of the I.U. SOE faculty in two consecutive years.

Indiana University has also sponsored coaches seminars for I.U. faculty and Monroe County Community School Corporation (MCCSC) teachers and administrators for the last two summers, with another seminar scheduled for this August. Betty Bisplinghoff from the Athens, Georgia Center and Ross have been invaluable members of the facilitation team.

Last June, HSRF and Indiana University entered into a formal partnership to offer professional development services to I.U. faculty as well as to offer our services to every district in Indiana. The services are offered through I.U. by HSRF.

Those first two coaches seminars have evolved into an extraordinary partnership between MCCSC and HSRF. The critical incident that led to our deep relationship with MCCSC came on the last day of coaches training, when the Superintendent, Dr. John Maloy, and his Associate, Bruce Law, came for lunch.

Over twenty-five teachers engulfed them both. They wanted their central office administrators to know about the power of the work. Perhaps equally important, they wanted to communicate the need for cultural transformation that had to occur in order for the work to take root in their schools. They insisted that their principals had to know and understand this work so that it could become the core of professional development for their buildings.

Dr. Maloy invited these impassioned teachers to attend the Administrators' Advance (retreat) on August 15th. That respectful invitation led to the new coaches planning and facilitating the afternoon of the Advance. The coaches facilitated their administration through a Collaborative Assessment Conference on the Chalk Talk document from their June seminar that responded to the questions "What makes this work so powerful and what will it take to sustain the work back in your schools?"

They also created small groups to have text-based conversations and to participate in looking at student work sessions for all administrators. I had the great pleasure to observe my daughter Heather, a teacher, facilitate a group with Dr. Maloy and to hear her ask him "and what evidence do you have to support your perspective?"

Over the course of this school year, MCCSC has demonstrated its commitment to CFGs as the heart of their professional development for the district. This year, HSRF provides:

- Monthly two hour meetings of the entire Leadership Team (all instructional and noninstructional administrators in the district)
- Monthly principal CFGs for 14 of the 22 MCCSC Principals (with plans for all principals participating next year)
- Monthly two and a half hour meetings for all CFG coaches to deepen and sustain their work in their school
- Monthly HSRF facilitation support for every coach of a CFG in this year's seven identified schools (tier-1 schools)
- Monthly support for the district-wide "Human Understanding of Diversity Initiative"
- An introduction to the seven tier-2 schools that will be implementing CFGs next year

HSRF's other major initiative is in the state's largest, and lowest, achieving district in Indiana. The Indianapolis Public School (IPS) system is chal-

(continued on page 12)

lenged by the effects of a history of inequitable education provided to students of color. The system loses over 75% of all of its high school students. The situation is dire and the moral imperative is clear.

In the spring of 2003, Nancy Sutton, former NSRF principal and former principal of Manuel High School in Denver, invited Steve Bonchek (Executive Director of HEC) and me to the University of Indianapolis to discuss the potential of a new Bill and Melinda Gates Project. The intention of the grant was to transform all five Indianapolis comprehensive high schools into a total of more than twenty equitable small schools that demonstrate their commitment to social justice and the academic success of each student.

After several months of conversation, HSRF became the professional development/school transformation technical assistance provider for the University of Indianapolis through its Center for Excellence in Learning and Leadership (CELL). My fellow national facilitators Camilla Greene, Lois Butler, and Carol Myers and I began meeting regularly to co-construct a strong partnership between CELL, the IPS District, the Indianapolis Education Association and HSRF.

The HSRF coaching team in this initiative includes Lois Butler, Kevin Horton, Virginia Hardy, Wendy Brannen, Tom Gregory, Megan Howey and Naomi Milstein. HSRF tapped from both New York and Chicago facilitator talent to help build our capacity to lead an urban district through a transformation process. This cross-pollination has been invaluable to all of us.

Each coach was matched with one high school and has been supporting the school's orientation, exploration, and design and preparation planning process. The team explicitly promotes the cause of equity and our purpose is to provoke the interruption of past inequitable practices of the schools and district and to replace those practices with democratic, reflective, equitable,

and inquiry-based teaching, learning, and leading.

Students and parents have led the way. Megan and Naomi lead the Harmony VISTA Student Voice Initiative that works directly with students and parents in each school (see Megan's article in this issue). Each VISTA volunteer is trained as a CFG coach. The VISTAs have worked collaboratively with other community-based organizations. They provide student and parent leadership services, convene both Parent and Student Congresses, and facilitate student and parent leadership institutes. The Parent and Student Institutes meet concurrently during the CFG summer seminar. All three strands use CFG principles and practices and each strand works to "tune" and share each other's work.

Students initiated my most powerful memory of this project to date. I will never forget the official public launch of this initiative. Gathered in Union Station were government, business, and educational leaders who came to learn about the potential of small schools. A pair of young, inspired, and passionate student leaders facilitated every round-table conversation in the huge hall. Those young facilitators demonstrated what the adolescent youth of Indianapolis are capable of achieving.

NSRF principles and practices guide all of our work in Indianapolis. The school transformation coaches are totally committed to engaging their school teams on a journey toward social justice, equity, and small-school autonomy. Over the last year we have trained almost a hundred IPS coaches, facilitated every district leadership team meeting and created a Network Learning Community comprised of the leaders of all five schools. This summer's coaches' seminar will ensure that there are at least two CFG coaches in every small school.

Over the course of the last two years, HSRF has worked to build the capacity of IPS to convert its five comprehensive schools by:

- facilitating the district's transformation known as the Moral Imperative
- facilitating monthly District Leadership team meetings
- facilitating monthly Network Learning Community meetings for small-school leaders
- supporting a small-school leadership design that includes a full-time Facilitator of Teaching and Learning position (CFG coaches training is a requirement) in each school
- facilitating the steering committee that is made up of District leaders, small-school leaders, union leadership and building administrators. Its purpose is remove obstacles that get in the way of transformation
- facilitating monthly professional development of all of the district's Instructional Coaches
- providing all IPS Instructional Coaches with coaches training this summer

In August of 2005, 22 brand-new small schools will begin a "year of residency" with their autonomies in place as defined by a Memorandum of Understanding signed by the President of the IPS Board of Education, the President of the Teachers' Association, the Director of CELL, and the Superintendent of Schools. This innovative residency design principle will help to establish the culture of inquiry and reflective practice.

Although there has been an extraordinary amount of intensely meaningful work over the last few years, HSRF is still discovering the potential of our work as we proceed on a journey of placing equity at the center. We are working tirelessly to interrupt inequities and transform current unacceptable practices into educational experiences that embody the words of NSRF's mission to "foster educational and social equity by empowering all people involved with schools to work collaboratively in reflective democratic communities that create and support powerful learning experiences for everyone." ■

Daniel Baron can be reached at dbaron@bloomington.in.us