

NSRF's Living History: An Interview with Kevin Horton

Debbie Bambino, Pennsylvania

NSRF's Living History is a series of interviews with members about our past, our present and our hopes for the future. In this issue we hear from Kevin Horton, who shares his story with Debbie Bambino of Connections.

How would you describe your goals and early work with NSRF?

I got involved with the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) in 1993 as a Social Studies teacher at Paul Robeson high school. Back then we had the Nine Common Principles and we focused a lot of our energy on the size of the school and our classes, teacher isolation and the way we were using our time. I attended a lot of conferences through CES, went to Fall Forum and got lots of good ideas about changes we needed at our school.

In 1996 when I was trained as a CFG coach in San Francisco, I felt that the protocols and processes brought me the facilitative tools I needed to put the CES ideas into practice. My CFG training really helped me get the ideas out and on the table with colleagues.



Kevin Horton

Did your coaching lead to the changes you thought were needed?

It was exciting when meetings felt productive. We had two groups with about eight teachers in each CFG and some changes were made, but it wasn't enough. Test scores started to improve but I wanted a bigger response for all kids, not just the kids in the classes of the CFG members. CFGs were kind of a back-door approach, because they were voluntary and didn't pull everybody into the change. We had about a hundred folks on the staff and only 16 of us were involved. We needed something that would make an impact on the whole school. We needed to collaborate across the disciplines throughout the school.

How did you try to expand the lessons you were learning in the CFGs?

We started using something called "Cognitive Coaching" across the school. It took three years to reach everybody but eventually everyone had

the training and was scheduled for peer visits during the school day. Teachers had pre-conferences, reciprocal visits and feedback sessions.

What impact did the cognitive coaching have at Robeson?

Initially, the results of cognitive coaching were good, the test scores were improving and I was optimistic. But then we had a change of administrators and the progress dwindled. Our new principal wanted higher scores and wanted them faster. "Teaching to the test" pulled the collaborative progress we had begun to make backwards.

You've been involved in Small Schools work in Chicago and around the country. What's the connection between that reform and the CFG and Cognitive Coaching initiatives?

The Small School tie-in is that the small school structure provided the structure to create CFGs across the whole school. In small schools you have a smaller staff that should share a common vision and have the opportunity to collaborate with their peers regularly around the issues of improved teaching and learning.

How would you describe your current goals and how are they aligned with NSRF's mission?

My goals are still pretty similar. I'm still committed to working with disadvantaged students and I still think adult collaboration is critical. I call myself a school transformation coach now. Today I'm hoping to join the staff of a small, college prep charter high school as a vice-principal. As an administrator I hope to initiate CFGs across disciplines at the school. I hope the CFGs will work as structures that introduce and support distributed leadership practices and shared instruction.

NSRF's mission speaks of empowering all people and reflective democratic communities and it talks about all of it in support of educational and social equity. It's my greatest hope that the staff at my new school will share the values of this mission and support their passion for the students through the use of collaborative

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practice. I hope folks will move from seeing it as all about their subjects to seeing that it's all about the students.

I hope as an administrator I'll be able to provide the follow-up, the extra push or accountability that's needed to transform our practice.

What's your greatest fear?

My greatest fear is that teachers will pay lip service without really changing their practice or improving instruction. I don't want to be involved in lots of planning unless it leads to changes in the classrooms.

What's your greatest hope and greatest fear for NSRF in the next period?

I think the organization is evolving and needs to continue to find ways to reach all students and not just the kids in the classrooms of the teachers who are the first ones to volunteer for CFGs. I think we need to expose everyone to best practices continually. My hope and fear for NSRF are related to my hopes and fears for my school. I hope we continue to connect our ideas to real changes in practice. I'm always worried about talk without action and hope we will hold ourselves accountable to each other in support of our students. ■

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The mission of the National School Reform Faculty is 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.

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were unsure about giving me this letter, and I am happy that you did. It shows a lot about your character, that you are brave, thoughtful, and caring. It also helps me to understand you better so that I can make class better for you.

I see that you are raising your hand and asking questions A LOT more than you did when I began teaching, and it is my goal now to make sure I am there to be answering your questions. I would like to ask you to write me another letter in a few weeks to let me know if you think class is getting better.

Thank you,
Rachel

Rachel later said that she really appreciated this exercise and how it allowed her to think about her initial questions. The *Connections* editorial board is wondering how others would respond to Vivian's letter and invite you to try this same reflective activity. To continue the shared reflection and learning we hope you will post your own letters to Vivian on our website at www.sfcess.org! ■

Rachel Kliegman is a middle school English teacher at San Francisco Community Alternative School – a San Francisco Small School.

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Protocols in Practice

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Thanks to friend and colleague Anne Rhodes - who lives outside of Ithaca in Freeville, New York and is a facilitator/trainer working on "Creating Inclusive Schools" - for the original version of these activities which I have adapted. ■

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