

# CONNECTIONS

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## *In this issue...*

2  
Protocols in Practice

3  
*Schools with Spirit:*  
Book Review

4  
Documenting Decisions

5  
Golf Progress Report

6  
Building Professional  
Learning Communities

7  
UCLA School  
Management Program

8  
Small Schools and CFG's

9  
Interview with Peggy Silva

10  
Harmony/VISTA  
Anti-Poverty CFG

11  
Creating a Community of  
Learners Among College  
Faculty

12  
NSRF & First  
Amendment Schools

13  
Looking at Student Work  
Collaboratively

14  
NSRF Winter Meeting  
January 16-18, 2003

## Report From the Directors

Daniel Baron, Co-Director

I'd like to take this opportunity to wish everyone a healthy and productive beginning to the new school year. This has been a particularly significant time for me because September also marks the beginning of a new year in the Jewish calendar. During the ten holy days that mark the beginning of the year, observant Jews reflect back on the previous year to take account of their actions and those of their community. The intention of this practice is to reflect critically on their behavior over the past year and to become aware of where they fell short using their special gifts and talents in service to their community. The tradition expects members of the community to develop the habit of reflective practice as human beings, to take responsibility for their actions, and to adapt their own behavior in order to contribute to a more just and humane world.

I would like to take this opportunity to reflect back on the year from the perspective of a co-director of NSRF. Over the last year, the National Center has initiated a variety of approaches to reflect on the work of NSRF in order to continue to learn and grow as an organization.

Our mission statement places equity and social justice at the center of our work. It provides a direction for improved teacher performance and enhanced student learning that addresses the intolerable inequities that currently exist in so many schools and communities.

Last year, our Winter Meeting, the Looking at Student Work Collaborative meeting, and our national facilitators meeting all looked closely at how NSRF practices and protocols can advance our work toward better meeting the educa-



tional potential of those students who are not succeeding at school.

We have worked closely with the national VISTA program, The National Council of La Raza, The Bay Area Coalition of Equitable Schools, the Small Schools Coaches Collaborative, the Lucent Peer Collaboration Project, ASCD's First Amendment Schools Project and the Rural Schools and Communities Trust. All of these collaborations have grappled with the difficult issues of equity and social justice in a variety of contexts, e.g. inner city, Latino, and rural communities.

NSRF has always focused on creating professional learning communities that work toward improving student achievement. Over the last year we have sharpened our focus on closing the academic gap between social classes. We have learned a lot, and we have a lot more to learn.

One way to enhance our learning as an organization is through documentation. Documenting our work provides a rich data source from which we can learn and grow. CFG coaches across the country have been developing tools to document the adaptive practice of their members as well as the results of their changes in practice. Many of these tools are available through our office and online.

The National Center for Teaching  
*(continued on page 14)*

## Director's Report

(continued from page 1)

and America's Future (NCTAF) and the National Center for Restructuring Schools and Teaching (NCREST) are working together on an in-depth study of the Lucent Peer Collaboration Project. The focus of the study will be on the impact of learning communities on school and district culture, teacher practice and student achievement. Their first in-depth report should be available later this year.

NSRF's New York City Center of Activity has developed a portfolio process that is guided by a rubric for responsive facilitation and public exhibitions.

Five faculty researchers from Indiana University documented our learning at the Looking at Student Work meeting. We are eagerly awaiting their findings.

Our work has also been featured in Carl Glickman's *Leadership for Learning: How to Help Teachers Succeed*, Peggy Silva and Bob Macklin's *Standards of Mind and Heart – Creating the Good High School and Reflection: The Heart of Changing Practice* by Grace Hall McEntee, Jon Appleby, JoAnn Dowd, Jan Grant, Simon Hole, and Peggy

### Small Schools and CFGs

(continued from page 8)

will be able to meet several times during each school year, in job-alike sessions, to share their coaching practices and systems of district support with their colleagues.

The bagels and fruit from last winter may be gone, but the goals of that seminar are now taking shape as we have new CFGs operating at each of our NESSN schools. As over thirty new small schools begin emerging in thirteen school buildings in our five NESSN districts, each will have the capacity to have Critical Friends Groups. In one school, Linden Elementary in Malden, MA, we have helped create the capacity to have school-wide CFGs within the first year of our involvement. According to Principal Nicholas Catoggio, "teachers are eager to meet around 'looking at

Silva, to be published in February 2003.

This journal *Connections* is providing a forum for NSRF practitioners to publicly reflect on their work.

This summer, NSRF has supported the reflection of regional centers of activity in Seattle, WA, and Portland, OR. A new strategy of having external critical friends observe week-long new and experienced coaches' seminars has provided an invaluable opportunity for learning from each other.

As this year's work draws to a close and the new school year begins, several burning questions about our work are in the front of my mind:

- How can we nurture educators' ability to identify the gaps between their core beliefs and their practice?
- How can we inspire coaches to articulate and develop their tacit understanding of what makes our work so critically different from previous work so that it can't be taken away by external constraints i.e. funding cuts, changing leadership, etc.?
- What are the necessary pre-existing conditions for our work to be able to flourish in schools and districts?
- How can we provide the essential

ongoing support to coaches after initial coaches training?

– How can the national office strengthen our support of the regional centers and expand the opportunities for learning from each other?

I hope that next year I will be able to report to you on our learning around these and other essential questions.

In closing, I'd like to share that this is also a special time to celebrate the great miracle of life, to appreciate all of the opportunities we have to contribute to others, and to remember those loved ones who have passed away. I am eternally grateful for the privilege of having known and learned from Faith Dunne and Nancy Cieslak. They live on through their extraordinary contributions and continue to make our world a more just and humane place for teachers and children. ❖

*Daniel Baron, Gene Thompson-Grove, and Steve Bonchek, the three co-directors of NSRF, will take turns reporting out to us in Connections.*

*Contact Daniel Baron at dbaron@bloomington.in.us*

student work' in their new Critical Friends Groups. Rather than wait for capacity, we've decided to go all-school CFG starting this October."

The teachers at Linden who attended our seminar last spring are enthusiastic about beginning their work. Through their school-based coach, Stephen Spring, they have created the structures that will allow them to meet together regularly to look at student and teacher work and visit each others' classrooms. They have restructured their school day to allow for ongoing professional development and have taken the steps necessary to strengthen their professional community. They have seen the power that NSRF processes can bring to their practice and understand deeply how their

professional community will impact student learning.

We have created an ambitious professional development calendar for this school year, including a seminar for new coaches in the fall and several days of professional development for teachers and administrators already involved in this work. As we continue coaching our districts and schools, we look forward to new NSRF colleagues sustaining the work we have begun. Our time in the schools may be limited, but the legacy we are able to provide through our continued involvement with NSRF should pay dividends for the teachers and children we serve long after our initial work ends. ❖

*Contact Steven Strull at the Center for Collaborative Education at sstrull@ccebos.org*