

Where in the World is the NSRF Work?

By David Leo-Nyquist, Vermont

The recent publication of Milbrey McLaughlin and Joan Talbert's 'must-read' *Building School-Based Teacher Learning Communities* (2006) sends us NSRF folks a very mixed message: there's good news and bad news. First the good: These researchers have certainly done their homework, and they are most definitely our allies. McLaughlin's immersion in cutting-edge school reform developments dates back more than thirty years. She co-authored the Rand Change Agent Study in 1975 with Paul Berman, and more recently has teamed up with Talbert and others on influential works of theory, policy, and practice. This substantial body of work makes it clear that McLaughlin and Talbert's perspective is both national in scope and deeply rooted in the best thinking about school reform of the past generation. Most importantly, they have maintained a focus on the precepts we recognize as the heart of NSRF work. Fifteen years ago they agreed with Seymour Sarason "that schools exist *for teachers* as well as *for students*." This insight prompted them to monitor the evolution of "teacher learning communities" since that time—a period that coincides with the birth-to-early-adolescence growth of NSRF from its CES and Annenberg lineage. They're talking about *our* history here, folks.

But now for the bad news. You can look and look, but you won't find *our* story in this wonderful book. Our collective work over these past eleven years is invisible: we don't show up on their radar screen. In the detailed Index that includes multiple references to such items as "stages in the development of learning communities," "collaboration and developing communities of practice," and "[school] culture and developing communities of practice"—certainly issues that map out our own NSRF terrain—you won't find a reference to "CFG," "NSRF," or "protocol." Nor will you find references to any of the recent NSRF-related writing published by the same Teachers College Press that published McLaughlin & Talbert's book. (I'm thinking here, for example, of *Standards of Heart and Mind* [2002], *The Power of Protocols* [2003], *At the Heart of Teaching* [2003], and *The Facilitator's Book of Questions* [2004].) What's going on here?

I'm reminded of an insight from David Hawkins, writing more than forty years ago about the complex relationship between educational practice and educational theory/research. He wrote, "Our efforts are being made, I believe, in an historical situation where the best practice excels the best theory in quite essential ways; this fact defines a strategy we ought to follow." Modern NSRF translation: we've been *doing* good work for more than a decade, but we haven't (yet) been documenting and writing about that work in ways that seem to matter to researchers and policymakers. The strategy Hawkins recommends is simple: "Under these circumstances, it seems to me the better part of wisdom to find the good school situations—not the better third but the best one per cent—and engage in close observation and intellectual resonance; then try to recreate such situations and make them more abundant and reproduceable, no holds barred."

We've taken some important first steps in this direction with the initiation of a yearly Research Forum in conjunction with Winter Meeting, and with the appointment of a Research Coordinator. Judith Warren Little (another ally) in her recent work has demonstrated what Hawkins' "close observation and intellectual resonance" with exemplary NSRF work might look like. (I'm thinking here, in particular, of Little's gems in the November 2003 *Kappan* and the August 2003 *Teachers College Record*.) We have some work to do. It will be well worth the effort, though, if five years from now when McLaughlin and Talbert publish their next review of promising developments in the world of "school-based teacher learning communities," our work appears at the very *center* of their account, instead of nowhere to be found.

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