The National School Reform Faculty: Reforming Schools from the Inside

In the Winter 2005 issue of **educational HORIZONS**, *Charles Glenn wrote that schools designed in a perfect system of educational diversity and choice could nonetheless end up as "uninspired carbon copies produced by educators without the foggiest idea of how to do anything differently."*

Most school reform tries to avoid that fate with various approaches, from founding new schools to converting existing schools. The National School Reform Faculty (NSRF), however, advocates a less-disruptive and less-costly route to reform: working with existing faculties in existing schools.

Daniel Baron is the co-executive director of the National School Reform Faculty. He spoke with J. Ogden Hamilton of Pi Lambda Theta in November 2004.

PLT: You have said that NSRF's mission places equity and social justice at the center of your work to address "the intolerable inequities in so many schools and communities." And you have also said that to do so, you must nurture educators' abilities to identify the gaps between their core beliefs and their practice, and also between the stated mission of a school and the school's actual practices and policies. Is it a fair characterization of NSRF's work to say that it helps educators confront the effects of bureaucracy upon constructive change?

BARON: In response to your question—Is it a fair characterization?—I would say yes. . . . We talk about shared vision, we talk about shared values, we talk about beliefs and core values, all of which get at the heart of schooling.

PLT: Can you describe how you are invited into a school and a district, and how you approach the question of core beliefs versus practices and school mission?

BARON: We get invited in a variety of different ways; there are multiple entry points. It may be that a school receives professional development dollars to develop teacher leadership and they come to the National School Reform Faculty's coaching seminars, which are weeklong, intense professional development experiences for teacher-leaders. Often the district becomes interested in our work and we work with the district to identify schools that would resonate with the work we would do in their buildings. Oftentimes we come through larger grants that are multi-district and multi-state, where the funder has recognized the power of our work and provided opportunities for schools or districts to apply for funding to support our work in their community.

PLT: For a district or a school that simply wants to send a teacher or a few teachers, what is the cost of attending that workshop?

BARON: It varies depending on where it is and whether it's residential or not. It could vary anywhere from $500 for the week to a couple of thousand dollars.

PLT: And most of that is paid for by grant money?

BARON: Either grant money or professional development dollars in the district. The entry point is typically through folks who become interested in the Critical Friends Group process, which is the hallmark of the National School Reform Faculty.

PLT: Can you describe it?

BARON: Critical Friends Groups are professional-learning communities made up of anywhere from six to twelve teachers, typically. There are also many administrators, building principals, and central-office administrators engaged in Critical Friends Group work. I'll share with you how it works at different levels:

It can be just a small group of teachers at a school who have made a commitment to support each other's learning by meeting once or twice a month, typically for two to two and a half hours, to make their work public to each other. The notion is that teaching has become a very isolated profession and in a sense teachers end up outside the life of a professional community where practitioners make their work public to their peers for the purposes of getting feedback on that work in order to adapt their work to better meet the needs of the learner. So teachers meet regularly and bring their own work to their peers—that being their unit lesson plans, their assessment tools that they have developed—and they bring student work that has been generated by the assignments and assessments. We look at what the intentions were,

what the goals were, what the expectations of the teacher were, and then we use different processes depending on the questions the teacher has to enter into reflective dialogue and to critique the work in order to support improving it.

PLT: Can you tell us how you get at examining the core values?

BARON: Sure. In order to create the environment where teachers will expose their own vulnerabilities and questions they have about their own practices to their peers, it's essential to create the kind of trusting and supporting environment that will allow that kind of disclosure and de-privatization of practice, so in the development of community we begin very often by exploring the core beliefs of the members of that group as well as the assumptions that those beliefs are based on. We encourage teachers from the very beginning of our work to uncover, or rediscover, the questions that keep them up at night—questions of their practice, where they know what they want and they also know that their practice doesn't fully represent what their intentions are in their work with children.

PLT: Would it be fair to characterize that as empowering them or freeing them, and motivating them to address specifically the reasons they got into teaching in the first place?

BARON: Exactly. We rekindle—intentionally rekindle—the reason teachers chose this work and the impact they hoped to have on the quality of the student's mind as well as the quality of the student's life. By remembering and rekindling those original intentions of moving into teaching as a profession, we help to bring to the surface some of the dissonance that exists in teachers' work lives.

PLT: How do you address the dissonance, or rather, how do you encourage them to address the dissonance?

BARON: It's an inquiry process, so the Critical Friends Group agenda is always established by the group itself; it's not the leader or the coach's role, it's not the principal's role. The agenda is established by the questions that participants bring with them to that meeting. Very often those questions surrounding their practice and their students' learning get to the very heart of their purpose for teaching and at the very heart of what they hope to see in the development of their students' thinking. When the product of student work falls short of the goals that teachers have, questions naturally arise in the mind of the teacher, and it's those questions, of both identity and integrity, that we focus on in terms of finding that learning space for the teachers to

improve their work so their intentions and practices come into much closer alignment.

Much of our work is in schools with children in poverty, and one of the things I've found as a common denominator of folks who live in poverty is a sense that they have lost control over their own destiny: that they have little opportunity to really influence their own future. And ironically we often find the same, what I might call a "poverty mentality," in the teachers of children in poverty. So part of our work is to help empower teachers to have a voice in their own professional lives, and beyond having a voice in their professional lives, also having the capacity to make real decisions about meaningful issues in the school, to have a voice in solving the real problems that exist in the school. Until they develop those empowering citizenship skills of being active agents for the transformation of the culture of the school, we can't even hope that they can help their children to recognize their own responsibility as citizens and have an impact on the quality of life in their communities.

PLT: The first contact of substance is going to be the week-long workshop, be it residential or not, but there is an ongoing product that comes out of it. That is the Critical Friends Group, correct?

BARON: Yes, although we don't want to pigeonhole the NSRF as just that week-long seminar entry point or just the Critical Friends Groups, because we do a lot of other work around leadership and facilitation. But the Critical Friends Group, which is the ongoing monthly work that really allows teachers to develop the kind of bonds and trust that would give them the confidence to expose their vulnerabilities, is what gets at those core values and core beliefs that the original question came from. I think it's most likely to occur in an intentional community of practice that meets regularly over time with the intent of supporting each other's learning and taking responsibility for our own learning.

PLT: How many years has NSRF been doing this?

BARON: Ten years.

PLT: Do the CFGs that you put in place simply continue indefinitely?

BARON: Continue and more! What happens most often is that a small group of teachers begins, and they invite colleagues after experiencing the power of the group and the power of collaboration focused on student learning. By word of mouth the groups often grow and then split to maintain the intimate quality of the interactions. And leaders emerge who are interested in taking coaches' training, and they

become coach of a new group. A lot of teachers co-coach to demonstrate the collaborative leadership and distributed leadership that we'd like to see more of in schools.

PLT: So they maintain an active correspondence with the National School Reform Faculty?

BARON: Yes. The National School Reform Faculty publishes a journal three times a year. We have annual meetings to bring coaches from across the country together, and then we have a Website that also serves as a communication vehicle and a way to distribute new materials and protocols as they are developed.

PLT: At this point, how many people would you say are engaged in carrying out work that started with CFGs?

BARON: We've trained more than 10,000 coaches nationally.

PLT: And a coach is a teacher in a school?

BARON: That's right; it's a peer. Most are teachers, but not all. It might be a principal with principals or a central-office administrator with other central-office administrators, as well as a teacher with teachers. When we look at changing the culture of the school to one that reflects the habits of reflective practice, that reflects the shared common goal of all children succeeding, and that reflects a collective responsibility for the learning of all children in the building—all students: it can be done at the school level, but it's very difficult to sustain over time if the district doesn't share those attributes.

PLT: That certainly squares with what Deborah Meier, PLT's Excellence in Education recipient, has said about the ultimate loss of momentum after the success of the New York City small schools projects during the 1990s.

BARON: Exactly! So we have been working more and more with feeder patterns for high schools: middle schools that feed into a high school and elementary schools that feed into a middle school. The result is a whole district in which leaders at every level—teacher-leaders in the building, principal-leaders across buildings, and central-office administrators—are all engaged in collaborative practice and in collaborative groups, striving simultaneously and authentically to improve their own work. So principals bring principal work to the table for feedback, they read professional texts around leadership work, and engage in reflective discourse and dialogue about their authentic work. Central-office administrators do the same with the work that

they do, and teachers do the same with the work that they do. All three groups look at student work, analyze and collaboratively assess the work, and then always explore the implications for their practice as leaders in order to have an impact on the quality of that work.

PLT: How would a person outside the system be able to assess the success of the CFG process? What are the measures you can use for somebody outside the system?

BARON: There have been multiple research studies done on our work and other collaborative group work. Seashore Lewis would be one source, Fred Newman would be an important source to look at; more recently Schmucker has written a very strong piece called "The Tipping Point" that shows an overwhelming abundance of research that supports the notion of professional development that builds the capacity of teachers to share and reflect on their work in order to adapt it to meet the needs of kids. And there's a preponderance of evidence that shows not only does it impact student achievement, but it has a profound impact on the sense of teachers' efficacy and satisfaction with their jobs: the sense of belonging to a professional-learning community has a profound impact on teacher retention as well as student achievement.

PLT: Does the general understanding of performance in schools extend beyond standardized test scores, adequate yearly progress, and No Child Left Behind? Is there something that would not be in danger of being seen by some as warm and fuzzy and non-quantitative?

BARON: There are two ways to answer that question. One is yes, we can show evidence of significant improvement in adequate yearly progress. The tricky part, which is also the tricky part around the whole scientific notion of research as well as the concept of No Child Left Behind, is that in order to use traditional research methodology, we would need to have both a control group and the group that's using Critical Friends Group, and then every teacher of every child would have to be engaged in Critical Friends Group work and would have to be implementing that collaborative work in all subject areas related to the test. We don't have that kind of control over school populations. The higher the level of collaboration and the higher the percentage of teachers doing Critical Friends Group work, the higher the test scores tend to be. But schools that are using Critical Friends Groups tend to be innovative, tend to recognize the power of innovation, and tend to have many other initiatives taking place simultaneously, so to be able to isolate the benefits of Critical Friends Groups, although it's tempting to do so, I think is not good science.

PLT: Then it would be fair to say that the education of a young person doesn't lend itself to the assumptions that must go into the scientific method.

BARON: That's right. I think the strongest point we have in support of the efficacy of our work is teacher response to it. The overwhelming response we receive is that it's the best professional development they've ever experienced, and that it has a palpable impact on the way they work not only with children, but with their colleagues, so teacher commitment to this professional development is profound and it's very hard for administrators or districts not to pay attention to the faculty when they say, "This is what we need at this school."

PLT: Has there been any research done on turnover rates among teachers who have been through your program?

BARON: At this point, all we have is anecdotal results, but they all indicate that teachers who have CFG training have lower turnover than those who don't. There is also some ongoing work related to that question that's looking in a structured way at the effect on preservice teachers of working with CFGs. A DOE Partnerships for Quality Education grant is funding the University of Houston-Downtown and four other universities to work with six school districts to test the efficacy of pre-service CFG training. Thus far the school districts have found those pre-service teachers to be so good that they hired them straight out of their pre-service work.

PLT: Ultimately your success requires not just "benign neglect" but support from the administration. Have you run into situations where the administration does not pick up on Critical Friends from the success of the first group?

BARON: There must be cases nationally where that has occurred, but this work is so intentional that an attitude of neglect is difficult to maintain. Much more frequently, the principals are advocates of this work because they recognize the beneficial effects of teacher collaboration on achievement. The greatest challenge with leadership is not neglect; rather, it occurs when the leader wants to control the agenda—and that happens quite frequently—so with principals it's really less a question of neglect than one of power and of the principal really valuing teacher-leadership and the development of leadership behaviors both in the classroom and across the building.

PLT: So is it also necessary that the principal know how to lead and how to allow people to empower themselves and how to delegate?

BARON: I would say it can be sufficient—I don't want to say that it requires enthusiastic delegation of power by the principal for a Critical Friends Group to be successful. I agree with Terry Deal [Lee G. Bolman and Terence E. Deal, *Leading with Soul,* Jossey-Bass, 1995] when he suggests that the gifts of power include significance, authorship, and power; that they're not truly leadership gifts until they are given to the people you serve. And Critical Friends Groups clearly provide a vehicle for teachers to do significant work, to have authorship over their teaching and their students' learning.

PLT: So that would mean—I think you said it earlier—that the principal is your key, and if you have the principal on board working effectively you have a constructive environment that should almost always succeed.

BARON: Yes.

PLT: Do you approach principals specifically, for instance in places where you would identify principals: the principals' associations, schools of education to the extent that we have higher ed training administrators. Do you focus on them particularly in your outreach?

BARON: Yes, we do. At our national meetings we'll have principal-leadership strands; just yesterday I met with a group of seven principals. I think one of the connections to principals is that the person who feels even more isolated than the teacher in the classroom is the principal in the office. I think principal isolation is one of the primary pitfalls of principal leadership, so creating the opportunity for principals to enter into a community of practice is a great entry for them to recognize the value of teachers having the same kind of professional-learning community. So very often the best way to generate principal support is to have principals actively engaged in principal groups where they expose their vulnerabilities and pose their questions about their practice to their peers, and work collaboratively on supporting each other's learning.

PLT: Assuming you have a district that has picked Critical Friends Groups up—not just a school, but a district that supports it—how is the product or result communicated to the school board?

BARON: Well, the district I met with just yesterday has actually culled reflective comments from the participants and shared them anonymously with the board members to demonstrate that there are thirty-year veterans who recognize for the first time in their careers not only that they need to change, but also how to change to benefit the learner of today.

In our work with district-level leaders, they very often bring the school board into the equation because a lot of our work is around responsive facilitation and meeting effectiveness and efficiency, and also creating a lateral-accountability system where we're holding each other accountable for the quality of our work, and very often both the efficiency and the effectiveness of the work. Administrators want to see school boards working similarly, and they expose the boards to the work so that they can begin to take on more of the behaviors of a learning organization.

PLT: Is there any direct outreach to state legislators?

BARON: We work closely with the Education Commission of the States and have done some work with both service-learning and civic-engagement projects that work directly with state legislatures and policymakers.

PLT: Do you think you're having any impact on state legislators? Do you get them to listen to the more sophisticated, qualitative side of education evaluation?

BARON: You know, it's hard to generalize about state legislators, but there are pockets. When I say "pockets" I'm thinking of Vermont—where we have close to 200 Critical Friends Groups—Maine, Utah, New Mexico, and Florida, where we have begun to engage state legislators in the importance of this work, the power of this work. We're in the early stages of having an impact in some states where there is a critical mass of teachers engaged in the work and where there's also a recognition of the need for educators to collaborate in order to meet the diverse needs of the populations they serve. But it's not just state legislators who respond to us. In many states we're having a greater impact on the departments of education than on the legislators.

PLT: To return to the essential principles and motivations of NSRF we discussed some time back: it appears that you seek to empower educators to regain what some would refer to as their calling.

BARON: Although the language of "calling" is not language that's common to our practitioners, a significant piece of our work is a belief that teachers working together can envision and create a teaching and learning environment that can benefit every student in the school. It's a recognition that the answers lie within the teachers of the school, in knowing their students well and their families well, and that giving ownership to the teaching profession of both their vision and the actualization of the vision creates a sense of both mission and purpose

that's very hard to replicate when the vision is imposed from the outside.

So the opportunity for faculty to come together with significant blocks of time to focus on the things that are most important but aren't often seen as urgent allows the faculty to get in touch with core values, with best practices, and to support each other to sustain the innovation and revision of the teaching practice.

PLT: When the people succeed—when they really feel they've succeeded—what difference do you see? How do you know you've succeeded?

BARON: Typically we know we've been successful when kids are creating student work that they didn't think they were capable of previously. We know we're succeeding when the classroom becomes a learning community and students are supporting each other's learning, when the power dynamic between teacher and student changes to one of shared leadership. When teachers take an inquiry stance and move out of the expert role the relationship with kids changes dramatically, and when teachers see themselves as learners in a community of learners with their peers the work becomes invigorating, the work becomes stimulating, and the renewal it provides gives an energy to the life of a teacher that typically isn't present in the traditional system.

PLT: How do you find that the CFG approach involves parents and impacts them?

BARON: Both directly and indirectly. Indirectly, very often teachers will bring dilemmas to their group about interactions with their family members and how to engage families and parents in the education of their children, so very often teachers will collaborate with other teachers who have had members of that family before, or will share strategies of parent engagement useful with similar parents in the past.

More actively and less frequently, schools have Critical Friends Groups of both teachers and parents together. In some cases parents are even trained in Critical Friends Groups methodology as they take leadership training as parents. I mentioned Vermont earlier. There are several schools in Vermont that have school-and-community Critical Friends Groups where teachers and parents and community members come together to work together to improve the school.

PLT: Have you put CFGs in place in a school-choice environment, such as Minnesota, where parents have a right to put their students where they feel they are going to get the best education?

BARON: We are in states where parent choice and student choice is available. Take the Bill and Melinda Gates High School Conversion Project: we may well have Critical Friends Groups in all five or six small schools that are converted out of one large school. Reflective practice is present very often in all the small schools' offerings and is recognized as an essential component of the culture of the schools. The Critical Friends Group to this point has not been identified as a comprehensive school reform demonstration project or a schoolwide reform approach because it doesn't look at governance and structures. It's unique in that Critical Friends work has a sharp, laserlike focus on teaching and learning, so it hasn't been adopted as a schoolwide reform project. It ignores many of the essential issues of governance and structure. We've chosen to position NSRF as a professional development strategy that has a focus on teaching and learning. I think that as related to parent choice, when teachers are responsive to their students' needs, and when schools are responsive to the whole community in recognizing that it takes the whole community to educate each child, there's a much more welcoming environment for parents and students. The mission of National School Reform Faculty is to engage all members of the school community in democratic learning communities and to create powerful learning experiences for all members of the community, and parents are an essential part of that formula and mission.

PLT: Are the resulting smaller schools going to be distinctive in several ways: that's the point of breaking up the large school, is that not right?

BARON: I prefer the word "converting." Schools are converted to several smaller schools, not broken up. Schools are converted into small, excellent, and equitable schools.

PLT: And then they are distinctive in ways that reflect the faculty and the parents and the work of CFGs?

BARON: Yes, and the students as well, absolutely, and the community. They have distinct visions and distinct missions, and they have commonalities of high expectations, autonomy, equity—both equity of access and equity of outcome—and the distinctiveness of teachers creating a school around a collective vision of parents and children, students, and teachers coming together to design that school together.

PLT: When the CFGs are applied in the school-conversion process, are the original faculty members left in place and simply converted to smaller groups, or is there more of a freezing and unfreezing process

that takes place with the staff? When you go from one large school to several smaller ones, how much from scratch are you starting?

BARON: With state requirements for graduation, the equity issue demands that each small school have the capacity for every student to graduate successfully and be prepared for college, so there is a need to distribute faculty equitably and to distribute kids equitably so we aren't creating a track system, and so the best teachers aren't reserved for the brightest students. Once there's an equitable distribution of teachers across all schools, how they gather around interests, teaching styles, or thematic career-based opportunities, the way schools organize, the ideas schools organize themselves around, are very different from setting to setting. But teacher choice is an essential ingredient.

PLT: And presumably, then, parental choice.

BARON: And student choice. Choice without difference is meaningless, so the distinct nature of the schools is essential.

PLT: Daniel, thank you very much for talking with Pi Lambda Theta.