

NSRF-New York

by Alan Dichter and Vivian Orlen

When one considers the power of networks and their impact on school reform in New York City, New York seems, in many ways, like a small town. We think we can conservatively say that, together with a handful of NSRF colleagues, we've worked with more than 400 superintendents, principals, assistant principals, and other teacher-leaders in New York City during the past few years, embedding NSRF work into all our professional development efforts. The members of that relatively small group, along with our NSRF-NY-endorsed facilitators* and others we've trained, have worked with a geometric expansion of that number.

We have found that responsive facilitation and using NSRF's principles of reflective practice, collaboration, and shared leadership can be effective means of working with educators to create respectful, thoughtful, and safe conditions that encourage them to examine their practices critically. However, although the NSRF community is very much alive and well in New York City, it is a community of ideas and practice and not tied rigidly to the national organization. In fact, we are fairly certain that few of our community would identify the work they are doing as NSRF work. They understand it to be an approach to working with colleagues and students that values inclusion and multiple perspectives and sees leadership's responsibility as creating an environment in which collaboration enhances learning.

Our purpose here is to provide examples of how the principles and practices of NSRF have been applied and adopted in New York City. Although it is not necessary, nor has it even been possible, to apply the NSRF label to every application of NSRF principles and practices we have fostered, they underlie much of the progress under way in New York City schools. Recognizing positive educational outcomes and tracing them to their likely roots are worthwhile even if the forces that generated those outcomes are once or even twice removed from the organization to which they ultimately can be attributed.

The value of protocols and the recognition that skilled peer facilitation is important are becoming mainstream rhetoric in New York City. (Practice, of course, lags.) Many of us, in our different roles within the

*NSRF-NY endorsement requires participants to attend approximately thirty hours of training and then to present a portfolio of their work that demonstrates their ability to apply what they have learned. An alternative route to endorsement is through an apprentice experience, wherein the training involves working with an NSRF national facilitator. See www.nsrfnyc.org for a complete description of the endorsement process and standards for facilitators.

New York City Department of Education and partner organizations, have taken advantage of existing professional development opportunities to introduce new ways of working, and then be absolutely transparent about it. Depending on the circumstances, we may explicitly declare a link to NSRF, or we may not. Whether we do or do not, we aggressively encourage bold action by participants to “go home and try it,” and then come back and discuss it.

For example, after participating in a group that used an NSRF protocol to discuss a research article, the principal of a large high school changed the school’s planned professional development for the following week and, for the first time, engaged the entire faculty in reading and discussing a common text. The principal said that while he had been wanting to do something like that, he simply had no image of how to do so until he experienced it himself.

Another example involves a teacher who participated in an NSRF training session in which participants, using a common large sheet of paper, silently wrote responses to a prompt. She reported that the next day she used the strategy to introduce a new book to her class and had saved the paper for a reflective activity at the end. She was thrilled at how well it was received.

We have also offered more formal facilitation training in various configurations to build vibrant professional communities that support achievement for all students, even those traditionally marginalized and thought of as terminally at risk.

One recent example: Alan works with twelve high schools in New York City. After school leaders had engaged in inquiry and reflection over the course of months, it became clear to three of them that they weren’t realizing sufficient success despite various teacher team configurations. Meetings were going off on unproductive tangents; decisions seemed to take forever and often became bargaining sessions instead of creative problem-solving experiences. The leaders wanted the groups to be able to set agendas, follow through, seek solutions, assess progress, critique plans, and be creative: a tall order. Through a series of consultancies and other problem-solving protocols, it became clear to everyone that the teacher-leaders needed to strengthen their facilitation skills and broaden their repertoires in order to serve as effective leaders in those collaborative communities.

Vivian, Alan, and two principals hatched the idea of an institute for teams of administrators and teachers from the three schools. The institute, led by NSRF-trained facilitators, was rooted entirely in the schools’ work. After three intensive days, participants went back to their schools to apply what they learned, having committed to return a month later to discuss their efforts. When the leader teams returned, teachers

looked at how their work with colleagues and students changed, and formal leaders looked at how they supported staff, worked with teacher-leaders, and helped others develop skills and begin to change habits. The cycle was repeated twice.

Throughout the process, institute participants were encouraged to pursue NSRF-NY endorsement by presenting portfolios that demonstrated their facilitation skills. Five of the twenty-five participants received endorsement, and all left more skilled.

Those examples represent the more extensive applications of NSRF principles and practices, but we regularly see more modest applications by formal and informal leaders throughout the district:

- * We model and encourage using feedback as teaching-learning and community-building tools. Not only does it allow us to take the pulse of the group; it also engages everyone in a reflective process that helps us experience how feedback can shape future events. That happens when good leaders are able to synthesize input on behalf of those they lead, an activity that is an essential dimension of building a community of reflective learners.
- * When we work with a group, we use the practice of transparent facilitation, which is characterized by public reflection and sharing our thinking as facilitators regarding choices and intention. The interaction allows the group to see us not as leaders who have the answers, but as colleagues who strive to help members learn to ask better questions and to take increasing responsibility for their own learning and that of their peers.
- * In Vivian's school the teachers have undertaken an extensive reexamination of their twelve-year-old portfolio process. The inquiry makes extensive use of feedback and NSRF-structured protocols to guide the participants. Staff members trained as facilitators have emerged as leaders of the process.
- * Two of Alan's largest high schools are forming small learning communities. They believe that facilitation skills acquired by applying NSRF principles and practices are necessary to sustaining any change from within.
- * Some endorsed facilitators have gone on to form Critical Friends Groups, and others have taken on teacher-leadership roles in their schools or helped plan and facilitate a variety of professional development opportunities.
- * A recent series of professional development sessions for assistant principals looked very much like a Critical Friends Groups coaches-training institute; participants went on to take responsibility

for working with their colleagues in ways that closely resemble Critical Friends Groups.

Those are a few examples of the way NSRF-NY works. The NSRF label often isn't there, but the NSRF principles and practices always are, and the successes all count the same where it matters. As we like to say here in New York City, "You can't go to NSRF-NY, but you can find it in more places than you might think."

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