

# HORACE

## Networks and Essential Schools: How Trust Advances Learning

***Building mutual relationships that encourage honest looks at teacher practice and student work can profoundly shift the culture of schooling. Both inside schools and among them, networks of teachers are creating new ways to share and question their work, learn from each other, and hold themselves to higher standards.***

TO SEE A GROUP OF TEACHERS sitting around a table in silence at 8:15 on a school morning seems almost oxymoronic, given the press and pace of high school life. But for hundreds of Essential School teachers who have participated in professional development through the Coalition, the ritual of "Connections" now represents a new way of starting the day: quietly making space for human contact among their colleagues and speaking, when they are moved to, of the emotional realities they bring with them to work.

"It's not a discussion," says Gene Thompson-Grove, who introduced the practice when she began working with the Coalition's Citibank Faculty in 1990. "There's no need to respond, or even to speak at all. No one speaks twice, unless everyone else who wishes to has spoken." Not unlike a Quaker meeting, she says, these fifteen quiet minutes create bonds of community and authenticity among those who habitually share them. The same groups typically end the day with a comparable period of "Reflections," which often includes a brief journal entry responding to the day's work. And many teachers have also brought the rituals into their students' lives, starting and ending class sessions with Connections and Reflections.

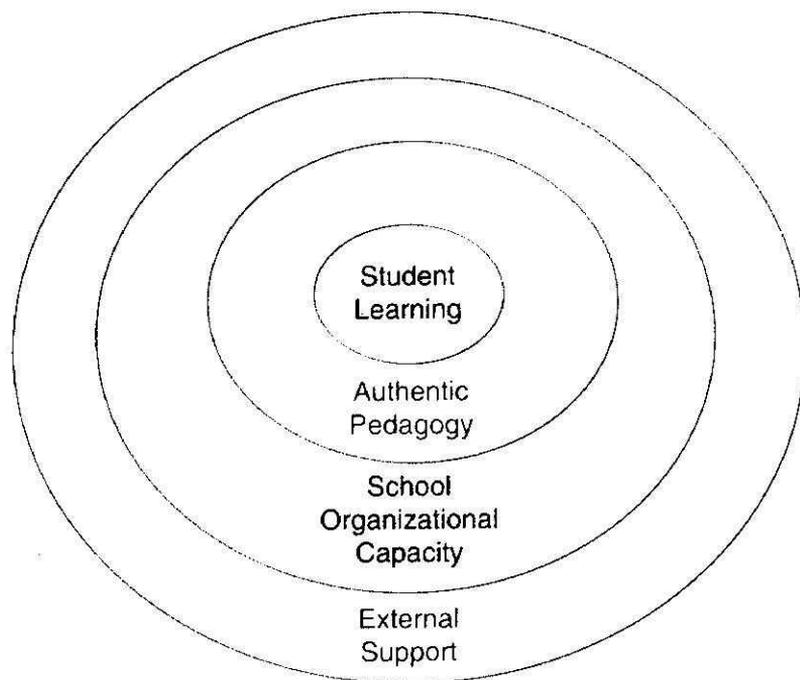
Why bother? What does the way teachers and students *feel* have to do with the central goal of Essen-

tial schooling, that students learn to use their minds well? Everything, say the growing number of educators who argue that successful learning can only take place when supported by an entire culture—a culture where it is safe to speak honestly of one's beliefs and questions, doubts and hopes and fears.

"What you believe about your students and your colleagues does directly affect the quality of student work in your school," asserts Bob McCarthy, the Coalition's interim executive director. "Acting as if a particular group of kids can't do challenging work, for instance, virtually guarantees that they won't. If you don't trust other teachers enough to open your classroom door to them, you can't get their support and feedback as you try new ways to reach students. And if administrators act as if teachers can't be trusted to hold themselves accountable for high quality work, they get a system where that doesn't happen."

Whatever the issue—whether national standards and testing; race, class, and gender; or new structures like charter schools—school people's beliefs about others can have a startling impact on both policy and practice. If authentic relationships built on trust and common concern begin to drive what goes on in schools, for example, small systems could evolve where people hold each other accountable to their

## Circles of Support: The Context for Successful School Restructuring



From Fred M. Newmann and Gary G. Wehlage, *Successful School Restructuring*. Madison, WI, Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, 1995.

shared standards and educational purpose. And if the traditional school culture of isolation gives way to honest talk, we stand to learn much about how our beliefs about children and their learning affect what they achieve.

Because of this, helping teachers strengthen and use relationships in networks both within and outside their own schools has lately emerged as a key Essential School strategy. School networks subvert the very function of bureaucracy—to regulate people who are expected to fight with each other—and replace it with looser associations of trust and common purpose. Locally, a network's critical mass and reputation can often protect restructuring schools from reactive political forces. And nationally, networks of like-minded school reformers can wield considerable political clout. At best, networks that create a "system of

schools" to counter the conventional "school system" hold radical potential for reshaping the way schools work together.

### How Networks Affect Quality

Student achievement lies at the heart of this push for more personal connections among school people. Entire groups of children suffer from low expectations, educators like Michael Alexander and Nancy Mohr argue, because teachers' beliefs about race, class, and gender currently go unchallenged by their colleagues. Few teachers invite direct critical review by their fellows of actual work, and even fewer schools ask outsiders in to give feedback.

Mistrust between "reformers" and "resisters," between administrators and teachers, between parents and school people grows from the same behaviors and attitudes that show up in troubled families: we

forget to listen respectfully; we fear losing power and control; we cling to ways that have served old purposes well.

Clearly, changing such familial patterns cannot happen by policy mandate, or even by introducing innovative programs. Only if the fundamental units in school organizations—teachers, parents, students, administrators—can establish new habits of relating to each other and their work will a dysfunctional school community begin to thrive.

"Change continues to be a problem of the smallest unit," declares Stanford University's Milbrey McLaughlin in her essay revisiting a decade later the conclusions of the Rand Corporation's 1980 Change Agent study of innovative school practices. To change what goes on in schools every day, she says, has proved "beyond the control of bureaucracy." In fact, McLaughlin's research into the context of secondary school teaching shows persuasively that personal connections among teachers—whether in a department, a



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professional organization, or a network—most directly influence the success of school reforms.

When a whole school creates such a context, extraordinary changes can result. Organizations change, Peter Senge asserts in his book *The Fifth Discipline*, when their members can identify their most deeply ingrained assumptions, then unearth a shared picture of the future and go after it together. In such "learning organizations," he says, people "continually discover how they create their reality and how they can change it, and continuously expand their capacity to create their future."

Senge is saying what most

successful school people intuitively know: that everyone learns more when people gather together by choice to do something they believe in. Whether it happens inside a school or outside it, this is a personal act, not a bureaucratic one.

In fact, most successful networks have grown organically from the needs of individuals to explore problems together, share resources, and learn from each other. The Foxfire Teacher Outreach Network, for instance, grew from one Georgia teacher's commitment to develop literacy through locally based experiential projects. The National Writing Project emerged from a widespread desire to share with

students in schools the real process writers use. The National Elementary School Network sprang from teachers' sense that Essential schooling, which began as a secondary school movement, had powerful meaning in lower grades, too. Even within schools, strong working relationships typically form on common ground, as when special education teachers, for instance, join other teachers to add perspective and resources to a student's learning situation.

### Student Work at the Center

The most powerful of these connections often happen when people gather at regular intervals to look

## The Essential School Network and How It Grew

The Coalition of Essential Schools is itself a network, which TheodoreSizer conceived as "a conversation among friends" about his Nine Common Principles. Such conversation flowed readily among the dozen original members schools and among the 150 participants at the first Fall Forum, held in Providence, Rhode Island in 1986. As the membership grew—to 50 schools by 1988, more than 100 schools by 1990, and more than 200 schools by 1995—school people began working together to support and strengthen each other's efforts. Essential school teams signed up for CES-sponsored "Treks," which created cross-school groups of "critical friends" to support each other's change efforts. More than 125 teachers received intensive professional development at Brown University during the four years of the Citibank Faculty program, and they, along with several dozen principals from the Thomson Fellows program, now constitute a network of practitioners, a nationwide "faculty," who work toward Essential school change. A similar program prepared math and science teachers to work with colleagues.

As the number of schools joining the Coalition rose, the number of schools less formally affiliated with CES and its ideas ballooned past the 1,000 mark. Over 3,700 people jammed the 1995 Fall Forum in New York. The five-year Re:Learning initiative ultimately spawned local Essential school networks in twelve states, comprising anywhere from a dozen to several hundred schools. Grass-roots networks, such as the Center for Collaborative Education in New York City, began attracting like-minded school people who meet regularly for discussion and professional development. Independent school districts, such as Jefferson County, Kentucky and Broward County, Florida, supported Essential school efforts and built active local school networks, further swelling the Coalition's ranks.

Not surprisingly, the Coalition's very success rendered the "conversation among friends" less personal and direct. Successful networks run the risk of overextending,

Columbia University professor Ann Lieberman points out—losing control over their intellectual quality and diminishing the sense of ownership on the part of an increasingly dispersed membership. Recognizing this, the Coalition has begun restructuring itself to seat its crucial functions—including governance, fundraising, and professional development—in regional Centers around the country. Restoring a more manageable scale to the Essential School network, CES's "Futures Committee" decided, would not only enrich and enliven its work but also enable more direct and honest accountability among its member schools. And it will allow local practitioners, through representation from the Centers at a twice-yearly national congress, greater influence on the Coalition's national agenda.

As a growing web of like-minded school reform initiatives increases its political clout through a "network of networks," Essential schools aim to strengthen and deepen the "near in" connections that most directly influence student achievement. Today the Coalition's strength is located not in Providence but in small regional networks of schools that use the "critical friend" strategy to advance the Nine Common Principles. Several dozen Essential school teachers are being trained to coach Critical Friends Groups (CFG) by the Annenberg Institute's new National School Reform Faculty; back home, they work with school-based CFGs to keep the quality of student work at center stage.

Along with Harvard University's Project Zero, Yale's School Development Project, and Education Development Center, the Coalition belongs to a network of ATLAS Communities that embrace the goals of all four groups. And it has joined with the League of Professional Schools, the schools involved in the Annenberg Challenge, the National Writing Project, the Breadloaf Rural Teachers Initiative, and many other school reform networks in using the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University as a forum for sharing resources and amassing political weight.

carefully at students' portfolios and exhibitions, read their essays or lab notebooks, witness their art or drama or music-making, and talk together about what they see. This kind of conversation leads naturally to students experiencing more continuity and coherence in what goes on at school. For teachers, it serves as a

springboard from which to reflect on their daily experience, relate it to the experience of others, and have their understandings critiqued by trusted colleagues. Parents become part of the web of shared interest, as they are invited to review and discuss what their children are learning. All involved are construct-

ing powerful new knowledge with every step.

Fred Newmann, the director of a massive University of Wisconsin study of the effects of restructuring practices on student achievement, draws a series of concentric circles to illustrate how student work benefits when a school organizes its professional community around improving teaching and learning, and when the external environment—community, district, state—consistently supports that effort. (See sidebar, page 2.) If one views the connections among Newmann's circles as the outline of a web, it is easy to see how a network begins to form.

Schools whose internal structures encourage communication and trust provide fertile ground for that to happen. Many Essential schools have encouraged this by creating "critical friends" relationships among their teachers, either through CES-sponsored programs like the Trek or through the Annenberg Institute's National School Reform Faculty. (See sidebar, page 5.) Such groups shape small networks in their own right, and also link to those in other schools until it seems sometimes that only "six degrees of separation" come between any given participants.

Their work starts with team-building, which most organizational change experts call a prerequisite for any reform effort's success. Paying attention to group process; for example, dramatically affects the quality of how people work together in a meeting. "We always review our norms first, and then address any issues that might get in the way of what we do," says Lois Jones, whose time as principal of Oceana High School in Pacifica, California has been marked by a passion for building community.

Oceana's Critical Friends Group has devised a number of ways to come together around student work. "Something as simple as showing rough videos of our senior exhibitions really brought us together,"

## Creating a Network of Schools as Critical Friends: The Fifty Schools Project

Since 1992 the Coalition's Fifty Schools Project has worked to bring together small clusters of exemplary reform-focused high schools and support them in sharing resources and solving problems. The effort could easily serve as a blueprint for how any like-minded group could structure a network:

1. Four to eight schools, preferably within easy reach of each other but possibly linked only through common ideas and goals, partner together in an active network. Teams from each school meet in person twice a year in a cluster retreat (convening on a Friday afternoon and lasting through Saturday evening), then follow up with electronic mail and videoconferencing. A five-day summer institute also convenes around a common theme.
2. A "cluster coordinator" provides logistical support and facilitative leadership to each member school. She begins the year with a visit to each school of up to a week, during which she observes and debriefs its faculty, notes areas of common need with partner schools, and introduces techniques and processes (such as the "tuning protocol") that the network can use in its critical friendships. In subsequent visits of one or two days, she provides structured checkpoints and follow-up as each school makes progress on its agenda for the year, helps start up critical friendships among the school's faculty, and gathers helpful resources and readings. She brokers school visits between teams around areas of mutual interest or need, and plays an important part in facilitating the twice-yearly cluster meetings. (The Fifty Schools Project bears the cost of the coordinator's salary for three years, but a group of schools could hire a comparable person by each contributing a portion of her salary from professional development funds.)
3. A "school coordinator" within each school works closely with the cluster coordinator to synthesize various initiatives within the school so that they have as much coherence as possible, and to make best use of the visiting coordinator's time. At specified intervals between the twice-yearly cluster meetings, the school coordinators report to each other on how the work in their schools is playing out. (The cost of the school coordinator equals that of reducing a full-time teacher's load by one quarter.) They also help reach agreement as to the agendas for the twice-yearly cluster meetings, which generally focus on specific common concerns such as heterogeneous grouping, democratic decision-making, standard-setting, or authentic instruction and assessment.
4. An evaluation program measures progress throughout the network. Schools agree to use the same measures across the network to assess and document their progress in the key areas they are tackling. If they need help in this effort from an outside partner (such as a university or foundation), they arrange for it collectively, and they disseminate results jointly when the time comes.
5. Schools in the network make and share video presentations for community and parent groups, write articles for publication about the process of school change, and present their work in public to support the network's efforts.

says humanities teacher Mary Stuart.

Like other Oceana teachers who are paired as critical friends, Jill Whitby and Greg Nakara sit in on each other's classes once every two weeks over a two-year period. Though Jill teaches math and Greg is a humanities teacher, they say the practice gets them in the habit of reflecting on their teaching. Feedback is informal and spontaneous; at the end of the first year the two went to Yosemite for some quiet time to review the year.

These habits and structures of reflective practice lay a solid ground for teachers to reach out to outsiders when they feel ready. As she documents the work by school clusters in the Coalition's Fifty Schools Project (sidebar, page 4), Nancy Walwood says, she notices a difference between schools that have CFGs and those that don't. "Schools where teachers know their ideas and opinions are valuable have a built-in language for working through things together," she says. "It's a natural progression then to include external partners to help them continue the work they've chosen."

Finding and practicing ways to promote respectful discourse on difficult topics helps immeasurably, these schools say. One tool that most CFGs find invaluable is the "tuning protocol" developed at CES by Joseph McDonald and David Allen, which offers a structured format for "warm" and "cool" conversation about student and teacher work. (See HORACE, Volume 11, Number 4.)

After ten teachers at New Hampshire's Souhegan High School learned to use the tuning protocol, says teacher Jennifer Mueller, they set up workshops to familiarize their colleagues with the tool. "New people had the chance to witness a safe conversation about important things," she says. As the practice spread, she says, "we did not anticipate how much it would help in our *unstructured* conversations, too."

"We struggle to find ways to say hard things to each other in an

## What Does a Critical Friends Group Do?

A Critical Friends Group (CFG) brings together four to ten teachers within a school over at least two years, to help each other look seriously at their own classroom practice and make changes in it. After a solid grounding in group process skills, members focus on designing learning goals for students which can be stated specifically enough that others can observe them in operation. They work out strategies to move students toward these goals and collect evidence on how those strategies are working out. In a structured setting of mutual support and honest critical feedback from trusted peers, they then work to adapt and revise their goals and strategies and to modify conditions within the school so as to better support student learning. A portfolio of each member's work documents evidence of their progress.

Each CFG meets for at least two hours monthly with a coach, sometimes from within the school and sometimes not. Many Essential schools have more than one CFG; and typically, the groups broaden their perspective through partnerships and regional meetings with CFGs from other schools. The Annenberg Institute's National School Reform Faculty provides training to CFG coaches and helps with yearly week-long summer institutes for school teams.

Sometimes people with a common interest will form a Critical Friends Group whose members hail from different schools. Librarian Mark Gordon, for example, coaches a "virtual" CFG that links five Essential school librarians via electronic conferencing; and CFGs made up of Essential school principals convene in many regions.

honest but comfortable way," says Souhegan's academic dean, Allison Rowe. Such talk includes more than just "straight shooting" about academic matters, she adds.

"Both with students and with colleagues, we need to be able to talk about how their behavior affects us," she says. "Someone once said to me in a critical friends meeting, 'You're using an *administrative* voice that makes me very uncomfortable.' That was real learning for me—I didn't even know I had an administrative voice! But it was even harder for the person to say it."

Using the tuning protocol within their school gave new heart to the faculty of Louisville's Fairdale High School, discouraged by Kentucky's high-stakes labeling of schools according to state test scores. "We brought it first into the classroom to focus on student work," principal Sherry Abma says. "It helped build a culture of trust in which teachers could critique their own work."

"Doing this redefines the starting point," says Allison Rowe. "It helps you be flexible enough to move people from the point where they're beginning." As people grow used to

having a safe place to voice their concerns, "resisters" and "reformers" start sharing the same goals.

"The term 'buy-in' sends the wrong message," observes Kenneth Duncan, who teaches at Flower Vocational-Technical High School in Chicago. "We're not *selling* something. This is about bringing ideas together until we shape something we all want."

"Implicit in every conversation in a good network is a sense of 'into,' 'through,' and 'beyond,'" says Steve Jubb of the Bay Area regional CES Center. "The work is always evolving from shared understanding, and leading to continued action aimed at what's good for kids."

## Networks Among Schools

Both in the Coalition's regional Centers and in local school networks, Essential schools pursue the same kind of interconnections with the same tools and strategies aimed at building trust and candor. In the process, Bob McCarthy says, they are reclaiming accountability as their own business.

"The Coalition base became so

large that it lost the ability to stay accountable," he says. "School clusters can solve that by developing clear expectations among themselves and setting up ways to routinely hold each other accountable."

"Ask yourself what kind of evidence you would trust from another school that they are making a difference to students," CES vice-chair Deborah Meier told a Fifty Schools gathering recently. "Then ask, 'How would I check it out?'"

The Fifty Schools network has used the tuning protocol both to check out that evidence and to ease any awkwardness in visiting a partner school to view their work in progress. (See sidebar, page 4.) "It allowed us to enter each other's school cultures smoothly, giving us a common language in which we could get down to business," says principal Kathy Mason of Croton-Harmon High School in New York, where a faculty team has exchanged visits over the past three years with Chatham (NY) High School and Souhegan High School.

The practice became so routine that, stuck in the planning stages of a new advisory program, Croton's faculty asked its Fifty Schools team to present their work in progress for "tuning" to Souhegan, which had long been using advisory groups.

## Teachers Learning Along a Continuum of Connections

Ann Lieberman uses this chart to describe the many ways that connections among teachers and the outside world can advance their professional growth.

"Direct" Teaching	Learning in School	Learning out of School
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inspirationals</li> <li>• Awareness sessions</li> <li>• Initial conversation</li> <li>• Charismatic speakers</li> <li>• Conferences</li> <li>• Courses and workshops</li> <li>• Consultations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Team teaching</li> <li>• Peer coaching</li> <li>• Action research</li> <li>• Problem-solving groups</li> <li>• Reviews of students</li> <li>• Assessment development</li> <li>• Case studies of practice</li> <li>• Standard setting</li> <li>• Journal writing</li> <li>• Working on tasks together</li> <li>• Writing for professional journals</li> <li>• On-line conversations</li> <li>• School-site management team</li> <li>• Curriculum writing</li> <li>• Mentoring</li> <li>• Peer reviews of practice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reform networks</li> <li>• School/university partnerships</li> <li>• Subject matter networks</li> <li>• Study groups</li> <li>• Collaborations</li> <li>• Teacher centers</li> </ul>

*Reprinted with permission from Ann Lieberman's "Transforming Conceptions of Teacher Learning," in M. W. McLaughlin and I. Oberman, eds., Teacher Learning: New Policies, New Practices. New York: Teachers College Press.*

The resulting proposal won faculty approval partly because of how it was developed and presented.

"Schools trying out new ideas appreciate not having to start from scratch," says Nancy Walwood. "And even when teachers feel

buried under everything, taking time away from the school building to get feedback from other schools has proved a very powerful way to push past the comfort zone, to try new things and ask new questions. They communicate with each other in ways that they don't in school."

If several different groups of people, working on different aspects of change, get together over time between the same two schools, a critical mass begins to accumulate of knowing the other school well, notes Oceana's Greg Nakata. Cross-school visits between Oceana and the Humanities school at Piner High School in Santa Rosa sent Nakata's team back "brimming with ideas," he says; and Piner revamped its senior exhibitions based on the ideas it gleaned from Oceana.

Small-scale school connections often blossom into larger networks. Bill Liebensperger worked for one year as an external coach to a new Critical Friends Group at Reynoldsburg High School, traveling some 40

## Regional Centers: A Larger Link, A Stronger Voice

The Coalition's Regional Centers provide many of the same benefits to affiliated schools that clusters do: a milieu in which to work together on common concerns, to build critical friendships, and to locate helpful resources. In fact, many began as smaller networks or clusters of schools engaged in critical friendships.

But as nonprofit organizations with governing boards and position in the community, CES Centers also can reach into the outside world to rally support for schools in the midst of complex change. They can bring together small clusters or networks for larger conferences and forums. They can exert pressure on districts and administrators to support systemic change; they can raise money from foundations; they can carry out long-term evaluative studies and publish the results. Finally, Centers send voting representatives to CES's new governing Congress, giving the national network a stronger regional voice.

CES regional Centers are already up and running in New York City, Boston, Southern Maine, San Francisco, Los Angeles, St. Louis, Kansas City (MO), Chicago, and elsewhere. The National Elementary School Networks has also launched school-based centers across the country to foster Essential School principles in elementary schools.

miles from his own high school in Galloway, Ohio, which was not yet ready to commit to a CFG. At year's end the team ran a week-long summer institute modeling the critical friend process to other schools in the region, and a small network of Ohio schools was born.

## Multiple Networks

Doesn't there come a point when outside networks take over the landscape, distracting teachers from the daily work of school? Schools involved in multiple networks need a strategic plan, Steve Jubb observes, to make the situation work for rather than against them.

In California, where he and Lisa Lasky co-direct the Bay Area CES regional Center, an Essential school might easily participate in as many as half a dozen overlapping networks—the state's 1274 School Restructuring initiative, a partnership with Stanford University, the Bay Area Writing Project, the Annenberg Challenge, the Transitions project on college admissions, and more. So as the Center facilitates connections among twenty Essential schools, it also aims to coordinate and bring coherence to their work on many different initiatives.

"At best, multiple connections can deepen the work, give more people opportunities to become leaders in the school, and galvanize new ideas into action by providing money or conceptual structures," says Jubb. "The down side comes if you just assign the same group of people to merely 'comply,' in the interests of time."

In Chicago, eleven CES schools are clustered with a regional Coalition center, and teachers have begun getting together to work on topics like block scheduling and to share tools for peer coaching and other strategies. In each school a Critical Friends Group of teachers will soon be meeting regularly with its coach, and coaches from the eleven schools will also meet monthly to share progress. A Leadership Team for

## Elements of a Successful Network

A review of the writings of Ann Lieberman and Maureen Grolnick, Andy Hargreaves, and others suggests these elements of a successful network:

- Building trusting relationships through inquiry and work initiated or chosen by members because of their own needs and carried out together over time.
- Establishing norms of reflective practice and shared decision making, which provide internal avenues by which to share information.
- The support of district and building leadership, including respect for true empowerment of teachers, parents, and students rather than "contrived collegiality" in the service of administrative control.
- A common purpose and the flexibility to adapt and revise that purpose together as the network evolves.
- Compelling activities that support the central purpose, allow for participants to share their own experience, and extend intermittent "transformative" experiences into actual daily work.
- Crossing role groups to use both "outside" and "inside" knowledge, balancing theory, research, and practice to solve common problems.
- A reliable way to provide information to members.
- Structures and roles that diffuse responsibility and leadership among the members of the organization.
- An emphasis on informal personal connections in network activities, even at the expense of efficiency or uniformity.

principals will meet monthly as critical friends. Finally, parents will be working with the Right Question project, a national effort to help parents improve communication with their local schools. When viewed in the context of its surrounding state and national network affiliations—the Illinois Alliance of Essential Schools, the Annenberg Challenge, the National School Reform Faculty—Chicago forms a web of complementary connections supporting the same central goals.

In Missouri, two regional Centers in Kansas City and St. Louis have worked together to establish an Essential School presence across the state and to cooperate with the Accelerated Schools movement, the League of Professional Schools, the National Center for Educational Renewal, and other school reform efforts. From that effort is growing a shared network whose schools are collaborating to advance "authentic pedagogy," says Susan Hanan, who directs the St. Louis Center. A new Principals Leadership Network will

tie into that work; so will "action research" by member schools on the effects of shared decisionmaking on teacher practice and student learning.

Sometimes a large network must break into smaller ones to get the job done. "A network has to share an intention," says Marian Mogulescu, who coaches a CFG at Vanguard High School, which belongs to one of twelve small networks linked through the Center for Collaborative Education in New York City. "The point of ours is to pool our staff development money to work on the same issues."

Because people typically join networks by choice, what they do there tends to have a spontaneous, flexible, personal character. Often members forge relationships face to face, then keep them alive using e-mail. For example, many Essential school teachers are members of the Four Seasons network, a joint project of Columbia University's National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching (NCREST), CES, the Foxfire Teacher Outreach

Network, and Harvard University's Project Zero. Its participants meet twice yearly to work on authentic assessment, then keep in touch via the World Wide Web. "It's as if the conference extends all year," says Joel Kammer, a teacher at Piner High School and a Four Seasons member.

## How Networks Thrive

If such connections stay alive and informal, research by Ann Lieberman and Maureen Grolnick shows, networks will adapt to their changing contexts and last as long as they remain useful—unlike bureaucracies, which tend to perpetuate themselves indefinitely. And as long as a network broadly disperses leadership and responsibilities, it can provide a vital and resilient alternative to a calcified bureaucracy.

As much as school change depends on coordination and support at all levels, though, it rests on individual people making authentic personal relationships based on interests, needs, and growing trust. "It is very difficult to change one's practice in a vacuum," says Marylyn Wentworth, who helped found the Southern Maine Partnership's regional CES Center. "Everyone

needs a place to generate ideas, share reflection, get feedback, tackle problems, express frustration. Teaching requires too much energy to be without the regeneration that comes from the collective intelligence of a strong network."

That regenerative process is personal, which is why informality and spontaneity characterize a strong network more than efficiency or uniformity. But we're talking about respect, not intimacy, Deborah Meier points out: work-oriented activities that may spill over into the social as the work gets done, like a theater company's opening night party.

"The basis for all organized learning is to invite in new people who are more expert than we are in what we want to do," she argues. "But this only happens if adults in schools have an exciting intellectual life of their own—if we get together the way lawyers do, to have good thick conversations in small groups. Without this, educating kids is impossible; kids need to experience a responsible, thoughtful community of grownups whom they want to be like. We must build these structures into the very purpose of schooling, and then hold ourselves accountable to providing them." ▽

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