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 Essential 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
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 department, a...
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...
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 check-points 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.

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 Trick 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,"
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.

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 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

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**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

- Inspirationals
- Awareness sessions
- Initial conversation
- Charismatic speakers
- Conferences
- Courses and workshops
- Consultations

### Learning in School

- Team teaching
- Peer coaching
- Action research
- Problem-solving groups
- Reviews of students
- Assessment development
- Case studies of practice
- Standard setting
- Journal writing
- Working on tasks together
- Writing for professional journals
- On-line conversations
- School-site management team
- Curriculum writing
- Mentoring
- Peer reviews of practice

### Learning out of School

- Reform networks
- School/university partnerships
- Subject matter networks
- Study groups
- Collaborations
- Teacher centers

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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.

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

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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 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 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 Restructuring Education, 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

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.
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 Marilyn Wentworth, who helped found the Southern Maine Partnership's regional CFS 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, like a theater company, 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."

Readings About Networks


