Perspectives from Research: A History of the Vermont School Reform Initiative Our early Work as a Center of Activity & SRI as a Hybrid Reform

By David Leo-Nyquist

The focus of SRI was on getting the concept of professional community into the water supply of a school.


In the early years of our work as a Center of Activity, we focused almost exclusively on offering New Coaches’ Seminars—mostly in the summer—and on training large numbers of teachers and administrators to be CFG coaches in their schools. However, our initial measures of success—the number of New Coaches’ Seminars we offered and the number of new CFG coaches we trained—seemed less meaningful when we discovered that many trained coaches weren’t coaching CFG groups several years after their initial training, or if they were, their groups weren’t necessarily engaged in substantive CFG practices like looking at student work together. Over time we had developed the organizational capacity and collective expertise to offer high-quality New Coaches’ Seminars, but we weren’t developing our capacity to provide meaningful follow-up support at the school site (yet) because we didn’t realize how essential it was. As national Facilitators and as experienced CFG coaches, we were making the assumption that in five short days motivated and well-intentioned teachers and administrators could learn how to create and sustain transformative learning settings for colleagues within their schools. Eventually we realized that we were being presumptuous.

The turning-point in our collective thinking came when we began talking with leaders in districts and schools with a large number of trained CFG coaches—and where, in many instances, the leaders themselves were trained coaches. We assumed they would be able to “Get on with it!” and take the next steps to move the work forward, but we realized through these conversations that they often didn’t know how to do this. It wasn’t usually obvious what the “next steps” might be, especially when the steps called for were whole school steps. We realized that we couldn’t assume that individual CFG coaches would know how to use those resources once their training was over, or that school and/or
district leaders would know how to use those resources either. We also realized that as individuals and as a group we had a good sense of what “next steps” with CFG work might look like in a particular setting (school, district) because of our extensive prior experience with CFG work and our understanding of how schools change—or get stuck. The fact remained, however, that we weren’t using that part of our expertise within our current interpretation of the “VTSRI Facilitator” role, which was mostly limited to offering New Coaches’ Seminars.

Gradually we began to focus our conversations more on “deepening the work” and not just on “broadening the work” with more Seminars and more new coaches, and we discovered that “deepening” meant changing the school culture itself in significant ways and not just adding new groups that resembled CFGs. In fact, what we discovered when we began to look more closely at schools was that “CFG work” actually took on a different shape and form in each different school: that the work we were engaged in was, in Faith Dunne’s words, a form of “hybrid reform.” Dunne borrowed this concept from researchers David Tyack and Larry Cuban (1995), who developed the idea that while some school reforms are intended to be implemented in schools in the same shape and form of their original design, that rarely happens. According to Tyack and Cuban, “It is the rare reform that performs and persists according to plan. Even long-lasting reforms are not static, but evolve in ways often not foreseen by their proponents.” (60) They go on to suggest that “reforms can be deliberately designed to be hybridized to fit local circumstances.” As one of the original designers of CFG work, Dunne (2000) was very aware that “SRI was developed as a hybrid reform program, explicitly intended to be adapted to local circumstances and the expressed needs of practitioners on a school-by-school basis.” (1)

According to Dunne, “What mattered most was what remained in the school after the initial [SRI] support and formal commitment had ended.” When she and other evaluators were examining the long-term impact of SRI work on the schools they were studying in the late 1990s, “the focus of the evaluation was to be changes in thinking and behavior on the part of the participants rather than on the persistence of any specific structure.” As Dunne put it,

Successful hybrid reform…would result in schools where key practices had become embedded in the organizational culture…[S]uccess would not be measured by fidelity to a national model or a particular set of outcomes. Rather it would be judged by the extent to which the habits of people inside the school had become more focused on collaboration than on privacy, the degree to which teachers and administrators had become more reflective and pro-active about improving their practice, and the ways in which the concept and processes originally associated with CFG work has spread beyond the boundaries of the formal groups. In fact, we believed it would not matter much whether CFGs were still operating in the school; what would matter was the persistence of professional collegial work in the service of enhanced student learning…Successful hybridization results in the emergence of collegial habits in other places in the school. This is not necessarily the result of adding more CFGs…but rather in finding CFG-like behaviors in non-CFG settings…. (Dunne & Honts, 2000)
Understanding the work we were doing as “hybrid reform” allowed us to begin to look more broadly and more deeply within the culture of a school to look for evidence that teachers’ attitudes and behaviors related to collaboration were changing as a result of “CFG work” that had been introduced to the school. We began to consider what it might mean to “get the concept of professional community into the water supply of a school,” and what CFG-like behaviors in non-CFG settings” might look like. It also prompted us to do some serious investigation into the relationship between student learning and teacher learning communities, and to see if there was research support for our assumption that supporting teacher learning has an impact on student achievement. What we found convinced us that we’re on the right track with our work.

The research base for the connection between student learning and teacher learning communities

*Improved student learning depends upon teacher learning.*
—Milbrey McLaughlin & Joan Talbert (2006)

*CFG work needs time to truly take hold. Districts, funders, participants, and documenters need to recognize that short cuts are unlikely.*
—Lucent Collaborative Learning Communities Project (2003)

Over the past decade a consensus has emerged among educational researchers and school reformers around the connection between teacher quality, embedded, school-based professional development that supports teacher learning, and student achievement. While Vermont SRI’s long-term goal is certainly improved student learning for all students, in the early stages of our work we don’t have a primary focus on attaining quick and measurable gains in student achievement. We understand that changing the culture of schools takes time, but we understand the immediate pressures and demands placed upon teachers and administrators in the high-stakes testing climate created by No Child Left Behind. Researchers Milbrey McLaughlin and Joan Talbert (2006) clearly articulate this tension we experience in our own work between short-term gains in test scores and the long-term work of culture change within schools:

School and district leaders sometimes perceive a trade-off between pursuing the goal of building a teacher learning community and responding to accountability pressures from external policy systems. Norms of collective responsibility and collaborative teaching practice develop slowly, yet high-stakes accountability systems demand fast, significant improvement in student achievement. The press for immediate gains in test scores pushes a pace of change that can undermine the development of school learning communities…Schools’ efforts to boost scores quickly worked against community development and innovation when they turned the spotlight on individual teachers’ classrooms outcomes… (62)

We anticipate—based on a growing body of research that supports this claim—that *over time* noticeable gains in student achievement will be a result of our efforts to change the school culture to support teacher learning. We cite here two recent large-scale research
studies that clearly establish the connection between teacher learning and student achievement.

In the first study, McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) have amassed data covering almost two decades of research at Stanford University’s Center for Research on the Context of Teaching to support their claim that “Improved student learning depends upon teacher learning.” (3) They have pulled together evidence across multiple large-scale national initiatives regarding the challenges and prospects for significantly improving public education. Their research project—using a combination of field-based research and qualitative and quantitative analysis—studied teacher learning communities capable of improving student learning and closing achievement gaps, and examined reform strategies and practices at the state, district, and school levels in California, New York, North Carolina, Washington State, Philadelphia, and Chicago. Early in their book they summarize their results:

Teacher learning [in teacher learning communities] translates into enhanced student learning. A wide range of statistical data supports the claim that school-based professional learning communities improve teaching and learning. Evidence includes:

• Positive effects of teacher learning community measures on student achievement for both regional and nationally representative school samples

• Strong correlations of teacher learning community with teaching practices that predict student learning gains…Valerie Lee and colleagues conducted three studies that consistently showed that teacher community had a positive statistical effect on student achievement gains. Each study used sophisticated multilevel modeling techniques designed to estimate professional community and other school effects on student outcomes. All three studies support the hypothesis that students do better academically in a school where their teachers take collective responsibility for the success of all students. Further, these analyses showed that students’ socioeconomic status had less effect on their achievement gains in schools with collaborative teacher communities; in other words, inequalities between students mattered less. (9)

A related body of recent research on school reform and improvement growing out of the Chicago School Reform Act of 1988 done by Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider (2002) draws on a ten-year body of both quantitative and qualitative evidence that has been assembled on school-community change and its impact on student learning. During the 1990s Bryk and Schneider spent three years studying this ambitious, large-scale reform in twelve different elementary school communities. Their focus is on a concept they call “relational trust,” which they define as “the connective tissue that binds these individuals together around advancing the education and welfare of children.” (144) Summarizing their results, they write:

Not surprisingly then, we found that elementary school communities characterized by high relational trust were much more likely to
demonstrate marked improvements in academic productivity across the early to mid 1990s in Chicago. (123)

When teacher share their work with colleagues within a small group whose membership remains consistent over time, what Bryk and Schneider call “relational trust” is built within a context that can be described as a “teacher learning community.” Ideally, that’s what a CFG is, and that’s what “CFG behaviors in non-CFG settings” help to build. Bryk and Schneider also use the concept of relational trust to help explain what motivates teachers who become involved with school improvement efforts and who quickly discover that their involvement doesn’t make their work any easier. In the process the researchers help to underscore the moral imperative that underlies our work and that inspires many of the teachers and administrators we work with:

Relational trust foments a moral imperative to take on the hard work of school improvement... In addition to taking risks with new classroom practices, reform also requires teachers to take on extra work: for example, engaging with colleagues in planning, implementing, and evaluating school improvement initiatives.... From a purely self-interested viewpoint, it would seem quite reasonable for teachers to ask, Why should we do this? A context characterized by high relational trust provides an answer. In the end, reform is simply the right thing to do. (122-123)

What this research suggests is that if we can significantly increase the opportunities for teacher learning in our project schools here in Vermont and sustain that teacher learning with targeted support, we can, over time, expect to have a significant impact on student achievement. An important issue that Dunne didn’t address in her insightful evaluation study of NSRF work is the importance of on-site follow-up support in sustaining the reform efforts initiated in a school by CFG training. An unsupported hybrid reform in a school could easily degenerate into “anything goes,” which does not necessarily provide the conditions for powerful student learning. What we have learned to describe in our own work as “school coaching” provides, for us, the missing link between initial CFG training and changing the culture of a school. When we began as a group to explore the implications of what follow-up support in a school might look like and how we might provide that support, we also consulted the emerging national research literature on school coaching to inform our thinking and our design process.

**The research base for school coaching as a support for teacher learning communities**

*At the core of the coaching process is a belief that the key to increased student achievement and systemic change is adult learning.*


*School-based facilitation of teacher learning community development is essential for changing school culture*...

–McLaughlin & Talbert (2006)

What we have discovered in our own experience in schools is that CFG work doesn’t necessarily “stick” just because there happen to be several trained CFG coaches on-site, a
principal who has some understanding of the work, and one or more official CFGs that some teachers may belong to. While it may be possible for a well-intentioned teacher to learn important basic facilitation and small-group leadership skills in a 5-day New Coaches’ Seminar, they don’t necessarily learn the skills needed to sustain the learning of their colleagues over time. That’s a form of leadership training and *it’s an additional teaching role*—as a “teacher of teachers”—that most newly-trained CFG coaches are unable to take on once they return to the demands of full-time teaching with no release time to plan for their new responsibilities. Where CFG work has flourished, in our experience, it does so because *someone* takes on a leadership role—a principal or a teacher-leader—and creates the conditions for it to flourish. It doesn’t happen by itself. What we discovered is that trained CFG coaches need *ongoing support* in order to build their facilitative and leadership skills within small-group settings.

School Coaching was our response to this problem: School Coaches can help CFG coaches and school leaders (administrators and teacher-leaders) figure out how to use SRI tools, practices, and trained coaches to support targeted school improvement initiatives. Our own experience with the School Coach role as it has emerged in our thinking and our practice is confirmed by current research studies. As McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) put it, “school-based facilitation of teacher learning community development is essential for changing school culture.” (67-68) In their exhaustive review of large-scale national school reform projects over the past 20 years, they have carefully documented the importance of a “community development facilitator” or “school coach” in instances where teacher learning communities have had a significant impact on changing the culture of a school:

In all instances of significant school culture change that we found, leadership from within or outside the school was involved in getting the community development process started. This observation dovetails with the finding from research on community-building in business that a skilled “community coordinator” is key…. Community-building is not just about creating or defining new work for teachers to do collaboratively. It is also about changing a school’s professional culture. The effectiveness of a community facilitator depends upon the individual’s skills in this role and upon the authority they have or are granted to lead school change. Once legitimized as a leader of change in the school, skilled facilitators can establish new norms of teaching—reflection on teaching with colleagues and co-designing interventions to better meet student needs. Community facilitators create a focus, rationale, and vehicle for teachers to depart from private classroom practice. Skilled teacher community facilitators guide the group’s learning and improvement practices. They establish conditions of effective learning environments for teachers… (40-42)

McLaughlin and Talbert’s research also provides compelling evidence that a “teacher community facilitator” or “school coach” needs to be more than just a short-term intervention if the collaborative practices being introduced within a faculty are to take root and be sustained:

Learning communities in schools need ongoing human resources, a coordinator or a coach—someone to nurture development, monitor
teachers’ progress and needs, assist with inquiry, and broker access to knowledge resources in the broader environment. Experience suggests that this need does not go away once a learning community is established. Facilitation, brokering, and convening are fundamental needs of a learning community that must be met consistently and in a timely way. And they must be someone’s responsibility, rather than tacked onto the job of an already overloaded department chair, teacher leader, or administrator. The responsibility merits title, dedicated time, and line-item provision in school or district budgets. (McLaughlin & Talbert, 115-116)

Our own design process for our initial School Coaching Project at Thetford Academy, and for the scaling-up of that TA work to include three additional schools during the current school year, was shaped by McLaughlin and Talbert’s work and also by another major research study called “Learning to Change: School Coaching for Systemic Reform” (Fouts & Associates, 2005) that provides detailed case studies of several major coaching organizations and programs that focus primarily on district-wide or school-wide coaching for systemic change. Their research-based recommendations for effective coaching support provide guidelines that have influenced the design of our own School Coaching model as it has evolved over the past 18 months.

Coaching organizations should:
• develop a clear theoretical model(s) guiding the coaching organization and practices. These models should be based on sound organizational and adult learning theories, and the coaches should have a clear understanding of those ideas as they develop their coaching practices.
• provide extensive and on-going training for coaches in those models...Coaches should be expected to learn and grow throughout the coaching process, constantly refining their skills and furthering their understanding of adult learning and organizational change.
• give special attention to the qualifications for coaches.
• give special attention to the assignment of coaches to schools and districts.

The importance of a proper match of a coach to a given situation cannot be overstated. Not all coaches have equal abilities in all areas, and not all schools or districts need the same coaching service. (116)

A third important body of school coaching research has emerged from the Bay Area in California, where an organization called the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC) has been involved with ambitious whole-school reform efforts for more than a decade with the support of both external and internal school coaches for school culture change. Their research findings point to the importance of the School Coach role for carrying out various kinds of “capacity-building” functions with a school to improve the core activities of teaching and learning, and also for expanding a faculty’s embrace of shared responsibility and distributed leadership:

Our findings indicate that reform coaches can serve as a bridge between a vision of improvement and its enactment, through day-to-day support for
teachers and others in leadership roles. Because reform coaches interact with multiple levels of the school system, they are uniquely positioned to bring focus and coherence to improvement processes that are often vulnerable to fragmentation. They attempt to build capacity not at a single part of the school system, but at every level with influence over teaching and learning—helping teachers to improve their individual knowledge and skills, support grade and department teams to collectively solve problems, and prompting leadership teams to make difficult decisions that affect whole schools, rather than promoting only pockets of excellence and mixed opportunity for students. The role represents a first step in the formal distribution of leadership beyond the principalship… (Coggins, et.al, 20)

Taken together, this significant body of recent research supports the concept of “hybrid reform,” calls for a school-by-school adaptation of reform interventions, points to the crucial importance of building relational trust over time among participants in school based teacher learning communities, and provides a rationale for the support provided by both external and internal School Coaches that are the key components of our own School Coaching model.

Sources Cited


