

# 13 TEACHERS TEACHING TEACHERS™

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF TEACHER LEADERS

## Speaking up for those at risk

TEACHER OF THE YEAR FINDS HERSELF ON A PODIUM AND DECIDES TO USE IT



Former National Teacher of the Year Betsy Rogers, left, meets regularly with teachers at Brighton Elementary School in suburban Birmingham, Ala., to plan ways to boost student learning.

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

*“These are the children who haunt me because I know our school failed them, and they are facing a closing window of opportunity. This breaks my heart and, as educators, we should all be heartbroken for all the children that we lose along the way.”*  
— Betsy Rogers

**D**uring her term as National Teacher of the Year, Betsy Rogers often talked about the need for schools to serve at-risk children. She had always worked at Title I schools so she could talk authoritatively about the

challenges of such work. But visiting very affluent schools and very poor schools throughout that year brought the contrast into even sharper focus for her. When her year ended, Rogers decided to put herself back on

NSDC PROFILE  
BETSY ROGERS

### WHAT'S INSIDE

#### Voice of a teacher leader

Meet Bill Ferriter as he ponders a change in his school's leadership.

PAGE 4

#### Focus on NSDC's standards

Joellen Killion explains how school coaches can guide educators to achieve the Family Involvement standard.

PAGE 5

#### Research brief

Study says culturally responsive teaching helps, but requires much work.

PAGE 6

#### NSDC tool

Creating norms is one strategy for improving the ability of teams to work together.

PAGE 9



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the front lines of that work.

She returned to the Jefferson County (Ala.) School System where she had worked for her entire career and asked to be assigned to Brighton Elementary School, one of its poorest schools. Virtually all of Brighton’s students qualify for free- or reduced-price lunches. Most students are black but there is a growing Hispanic population. Although the community is only minutes away from Birmingham, Ala., Rogers said it has the flavor of a more rural community. The school has been identified as a school at-risk for many years.

One experience, in particular, brought the issues to the forefront for her. During her year as Alabama Teacher of the Year, Rogers had made regular visits to Brighton with her district’s federal programs coordinator. During one visit, the pair found small snakes in a kindergarten classroom.

In all, 16 snakes were found in this room and Rogers learned that the classroom had been plagued with snakes for two years.

District maintenance workers came that day and plugged the hole in the wall where the snakes were entering the room. An exterminator was called and students were moved to the music room. “The children stayed in the music room for three weeks with no chairs and tables. I am astonished when people wonder why the children in this school are not achieving at the expected level,” she wrote in a blog.

“The snake situation is very symbolic of the gap in the standards we have for schools with high poverty. I live in area where we have four very affluent school systems nearby. I am sure if there were ever a snake in any of these schools, the problem would immediately be addressed. Parents would simply not allow this situation. Yet, (in Brighton), this was tolerated.”

It was this school to which Rogers asked to be assigned. “I was placed in ‘the snake room.’ I felt like this was probably my just reward for telling this story,” Rogers said. She was moved to another classroom several weeks later but reports that the snake room has remained snake-free since that day.

“I just knew this was the place I wanted to be,” she said. “It may not have been the best

**BETSY ROGERS**

**Position:** School Improvement Specialist

**School:** Brighton Elementary School

**District:** Jefferson County, Ala.

**Professional history:** Taught elementary and middle school in the Jefferson County School System from 1974 to 1976 and 1984 to 2002.

**Education:** Doctorate in educational leadership, Samford University. Education specialist’s, master’s, and bachelor’s degrees in elementary education, all from Samford University.

**Honors and accomplishments:** 2003-04 National Teacher of the Year, 2002-03 Alabama Teacher of the Year. Served as a People to People Ambassador for the Accomplished Teacher Delegation to Australia and New Zealand, July-August 2002. National Board Certified Teacher (elementary education), 2000.

**To continue** this conversation, e-mail Betsy Rogers at brogers852@aol.com.

thought but I did believe that maybe if I went there, it might shine the light on some of the problems and maybe some other teachers would go there too.”

“I have really become convinced that we have to get our strongest teachers into our neediest schools. We weren’t doing that. I just decided that if I was going to say this, if I was going to believe this, then I had to do this,” she said.

“I had hoped that other National Board Certified Teachers would join me. I’ve asked and asked but I haven’t had any takers,” she said.

When she realized that she could not attract already highly-qualified teachers to Brighton, Rogers said she shifted her focus to building the capacity of teachers already working in the school. Since then, a pre-candidacy class for national board certification has attracted a number of Brighton teachers. In addition, Rogers and the school’s principal have infused the school with job-embedded professional development. She brags that Brighton teachers have had learn-

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— Betsy Rogers



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— Betsy Rogers

ing opportunities built into more than 200 days each year.

Her actual title is school improvement specialist which means that Rogers functions as an all-around improvement coach. “I do whatever I need to do in order to help instruction take place. I model lessons, I’ll substitute when necessary, I attend grade-level meetings, I’ll write schoolwide improvement and accreditation plans. I’ll do anything that will help them,” she said.

Although she was recognized for her exemplary classroom teaching, she acknowledges that working to get other teachers to change their practice is difficult. “It does put you right out there. It’s tough, tough, tough to turn things around,” she said.

“The first year, (she and the new principal) didn’t know if we were going to survive. It was so overwhelming. We were used to a very high-functioning school,” she said.

“We had to start with very basic stuff just getting the school to be functional, like getting classes started on time,” she said.

When she arrived, she learned that most teachers arrived just before the bell rang and didn’t begin getting ready for their day until after that time. That meant that instruction often didn’t begin for about 45 minutes. After repeated messages from Rogers and the new principal, teachers began to start their instruction earlier. “I remember the first day that I walked through and everyone was teaching when the bell rang and I cried,” she said.

Rogers doesn’t try to make excuses for the teachers in her school but she notes that many Brighton teachers have never taught in another school. “They’re like kids in a dysfunctional family. They don’t know what’s normal. They thought that was normal,” she said.

In a blog that she maintained until the end of the last school year, Rogers wrote that she underestimated the needs of Brighton. “My journey the past two years at Brighton School has left me exhausted and feeling more like a novice teacher than a veteran of 24 years. I will say that I am finally feeling like I have some understanding of what it is like to work in a school that has been in multiple years of school improvement. This has been a very unfamiliar world to me, and I

was not prepared for this work,” she wrote.

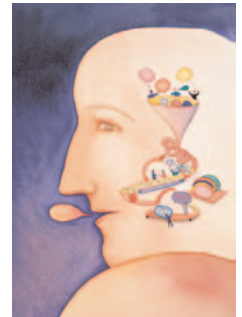
Whether in interviews, speeches, or blog entries, Rogers has been a tireless advocate for the poor children she serves. Her anger and frustration with a “system” that doesn’t share her sense of academic urgency is clear. “If there is one thing I could do for schools ‘under the gun’ for low performance, it would be to simplify life for these schools. Take away all the layers that do not focus on student achievement and send someone into the school who understands the pressure and has real solutions that work. For (those) who think they know, but have never worked in a low-performing school before, I ask you to come live in my trench and learn,” she wrote in one blog entry.

Rogers said she speaks out because she feels like being Teacher of the Year gave her a platform that might enable her to be heard. “I’ve been given an opportunity to be a voice. I never even dreamed that I would do this. As a classroom teacher, I just focused on those kids. I never tried to influence my colleagues. That’s a role that I just ignored.

“But, really, all teachers have to be voices for children. We all join professional organizations and we say that we believe there is nothing more powerful than a teacher’s voice. But we don’t take advantage of that. Even as a regular classroom teacher, you have to speak up and talk to the people in your community, people in your Sunday school.

“I know this is not popular. People look at me like they know I mean well. But a lot of what I say is resented by people. There are those who wish I’d just be quiet and go on. When I talk with educators about this, they can get very defensive. I don’t expect every teacher to do this.

“Children who live in poverty often don’t have anyone to be a voice for them. That is one of my roles as a teacher. I feel like I have an obligation to speak up.” ♦



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— Betsy Rogers



Join the conversation with Bill by logging into the NSDC members-only area and selecting the Blog link on the front page.

## Teachers hold the vision for a school

I'm about to say something that is likely to blow you away: Our teachers are passionate about our mission statement.

I'll bet you've never heard that before!

What's even more interesting is that our mission statement doesn't look any different than those hanging on the walls of schools across America. It reads, "Salem Middle School is a collaborative community that ensures high student achievement and values the unique needs of each learner." The difference is that our faculty mentally wrestled over exactly what our mission statement should say because we were committed to the idea that we were creating something more than a collection of clichés.



Our greatest challenge was the phrase "ensures high student achievement." Could we really "ensure" high student achievement, we wondered? Did we control enough of the variables in the lives of our students to literally guarantee that they would succeed?

In the end, we decided that it wasn't our job to simply teach and hope that students learned. We agreed to take ownership for learning, and we were jazzed! Our principal — who joined us as an equal participant in the conversation — announced that every action in our school should be taken with the word "ensures" in mind. "I will support your every decision," he said, "as long as you can demonstrate how it supports our mission."

Two years later, the word "ensures" continues to drive everything that we do at Salem. Instructional decisions are based on student achievement data. Questions asked in interviews determine the commitment of candidates to making certain that every child succeeds. Even cut-and-dried decisions like budgeting and scheduling are made with our mission in mind.

I didn't know how much our mission meant to our faculty until we found out in June that our principal was leaving for the local high school.

As soon as the announcement was made, panicked conversations became the norm in the workroom. "Leadership changes are never a good thing," one teacher shared. "New principals always come in and shake things up. So much for everything we've worked so hard to create. Out with the old and in with the new."

Only having experienced one leadership change in my career, I began asking colleagues from other schools about what we could expect.

Every teacher told me to prepare for drastic changes. The most oft-repeated advice, "Remember that this, too, shall pass. Learn to endure."

These answers left me with nothing but questions. Are teachers ever the vision-keepers in their schools, committed to a mission and a shared set of unchanging ideals regardless of leadership changes?

Can a school really be successful if they aren't?

Are we simply resigned to the notion that those outside of the classroom largely determine a school's direction? More importantly, what role can teacher leaders play in bridging the transition between administrators? How can we help to couple the life brought into our organization by a new principal with the significant investment that we've made into who we already are? ♦

### INTRODUCING...

**Bill Ferriter** is 6th-grade social studies and language art teachers at Salem Middle School in Apex, N.C. With this issue of *T3*, he begins a monthly column about the challenges of being a teacher leader.

Ferriter is well-qualified to take up this work.

- He is a National Board Certified Teacher in middle childhood (generalist) and was Wake County Teacher of the Year for 2005 and North Carolina's North Central Region Teacher of the Year for 2006.
- He is a senior fellow for the Teacher Leader Network, a moderator for the North Carolina NBCT chat group, and a policy consultant for Teachers Solutions, a project of the Center for Teaching Quality in North Carolina.
- He has been a prolific blogger on issues related to teacher leadership. Please join us in welcoming him to these pages!



## Coaches boost knowledge and skills needed to work with families

**S**chool constitutes such a small portion of a student's learning experience. In reality, students spend more time within their families and communities than they do learning in school. As a result, family and community make a significant contribution to a student's academic success.

When teachers involve students' families in the educational process, students will be more successful in school. Over five decades of research confirm this. To involve families and stakeholders, such as community organizations, business and industry within the school's community, and others, teachers rely on a body of knowledge and skills that they often develop from trial and error rather than from preservice or professional development programs.

A study by Joyce Epstein (1997) identifies a variety of ways to involve families in education. They include:

- **Parenting:** Helping families create home environments that support student learning.
- **Communicating:** Developing effective home-to-school and school-to-home communication that helps parents know what is happening in their child's education and how their child is progressing.
- **Volunteering:** Organizing family support in both the school and classroom.
- **Decision making:** Including parents in decisions related to school programs.
- **Collaborating with community:** Identifying and integrating resources and services to support education.

Coaches can serve to fill this void in a variety of ways.

**1. They can facilitate problem-solving sessions with teachers in their schools to explore meaningful and productive ways to involve families in their children's education.**

Considering how to involve parents at the school level, teachers and coaches can identify involvement strategies that are sensitive to cultural background and the unique challenges of families within the school community. Coaches may also help the school develop and implement special programs at school to engage parents. Academic programs, such as family math and literacy nights, family computer classes, or open library nights, provide opportunities for families to both learn about and support student academic outcomes.

**2. Coaches might help teachers develop a deeper understanding about the cultural background of students and their families.**

Coaches can identify



**FAMILY INVOLVEMENT**

Staff development that improves the learning of all students provides educators with knowledge and skills to involve families and other stakeholders appropriately.

resources, facilitate focus groups, interview parents, and offer various professional learning opportunities to help teachers understand their school's community and the cultural backgrounds of students.

Coaches can help teachers learn appropriate strategies for engaging parents, especially those



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unable to participate in routine school activities.

### **3. Coaches can help teachers identify ways to communicate with families.**

Parents want to know what their children are learning. Classroom newsletters, phone calls home about successes as well as problems, notes, parent meetings, or other forms of communication can keep parents involved even if they cannot participate in activities at school. For example, coaches can demonstrate how to use newsletter templates in common word processing programs to create classroom newsletters quickly and easily and include samples of student work and classroom photos. Communications to families might include information about what students are learning as well as a range of suggestions for how families might reinforce and extend learning at home. Coaches might help teachers use technology to communicate to families and students beyond the school. Coaches can also help teachers access and use district or community services for translation if needed.

### **4. Coaches can help teachers use a variety of ways to inform families about how students are progressing.**

As coaches support teachers in integrating both assessment of and assessment for learning in their classrooms, they can provide more specific and accurate reports of student progress to parents. By sharing various reporting formats, coaches assist teachers in choosing the most appropriate format for the level of students and family background. For example, families of elementary level students may be more interested in seeing samples of student work in the reports about student progress. At the secondary level, families might be more interested in knowing if students are on track with earning credits toward graduation.

### **5. Coaches can help teachers, especially novice teachers prepare for parent conferences or meetings.**

Coaches can suggest meeting agendas, share tips, help teachers know how to organize student-led parent conferences, and role-play meetings with parents. By helping teachers prepare for

potentially difficult conversations with parents, coaches can ease teachers' anxiety, give them support, and help them enter the meeting more confident.

### **6. Coaches might help teachers prepare for meetings with parents and school administrators when difficult situations occur.**

Coaches can listen and affirm as teachers share their feelings. They can engage teachers in exploring their interests and needs before they meet with parents. They can explore possibilities with teachers for solutions. They might practice opening statements and goal statements. By rehearsing and gaining clarity before the meeting, teachers are likely to be less emotional and more prepared.

### **7. Coaches can identify resources within the community to help both families and schools support students' educations.**

They may work with the district coordinator of community resources or may work with staff within the school to gather information about local adult education programs, hospitals, libraries, religious organizations, social services, or community organizations to learn what services they offer to families and schools. Coaches may learn about foundations, businesses, or other possible sources of external funding for special programs to support families and family involvement in schools.

Coaches support the implementation of the Family Involvement standard in various ways as they help develop teachers' understanding and skills related to engaging families in their students' education both at home and at school.

#### **Reference**

**Epstein, J. (2002).** *School, family, and community partnerships: Your handbook for action, 2nd edition.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. ◆

**For more information about NSDC's Standards for Staff Development, see [www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm](http://www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm)**

**CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE INSTRUCTION**

# Study finds the approach is valuable but requires training and support

BY CARLA THOMAS McCLURE

A study of a culturally responsive teaching intervention in four West Virginia schools indicates that the approach can have positive effects on teacher and student classroom behaviors — including time on task. However, findings reported by the Appalachia Educational Laboratory at Edvantia indicate that teachers need intensive training and ongoing support if schools are to realize the full benefits of the intervention.

### What is culturally responsive instruction?

Culturally responsive instruction is a teaching approach that aims to boost student achievement by connecting academic work to students' cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives. The Education Alliance at Brown University has examined research related to this concept and identified its guiding principles, which include active teaching methods, the communication of high expectations, culturally mediated instruction, and small-group instruction.

### Why are researchers studying culturally responsive instruction?

The National Center for Education Statistics projects that, by 2008, 41% of all students — but only 5% of all teachers — will be ethnic minorities. Minority students as a group are achieving at lower levels than white students and are more likely to drop out. Researchers are studying culturally responsive instruction to see if and how

teachers might use it effectively to address the achievement gap.

### How was the Edvantia study done?

Eight schools in the same district participated in the 2003-04 study. The superintendent selected four as pilot schools (one elementary, one middle, and one high), and researchers selected four comparison schools whose demographics and achievement levels matched those of the pilot schools. (In the pilot schools, the percentages of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch were 33%, 60%, 67%, and 78% and the percentages of black students were, respectively, 27%, 35%, 34%, and 76%.)

The full treatment group consisted of 22 teachers who participated in professional development sessions, attended twice-a-month meetings on implementing the professional development, and received ongoing technical assistance. One subgroup of teachers taught culturally responsive curriculum units; another subgroup did not. The partial treatment group consisted of 158 teachers in the pilot schools who did not participate in professional development sessions, attend meetings, or receive assistance. One subgroup taught culturally responsive curriculum units, and another did not. The comparison group consisted of 128 teachers in the comparison schools who received no culturally responsive



### EDVANTIA™

Carla Thomas McClure is a staff writer at Edvantia ([www.edvantia.org](http://www.edvantia.org)), a nonprofit research and development organization that works with federal, state, and local education agencies to improve student achievement.

materials or training.

Edvantia researchers collected data through paper-and-pencil instruments, classroom observations, and analysis of student results on the statewide achievement test. Focus groups and interviews with project participants provided contextual data.

#### What were the results of the study?

Teachers in the full treatment group who taught a culturally responsive instructional unit added the equivalent of 14.22 days of instructional time over the course of a year by keeping themselves and students on task over 90% of the time. These teachers demonstrated a significantly higher quality of instruction and had more success engaging students in interactive instruction than teachers in other classrooms studied.

In the pilot schools, students' perceptions of (1) belonging to their school community, (2) their ability to do well academically, and (3) their families' expectations of them all improved.

Culturally responsive instruction is more

likely to have a positive effect on teachers' beliefs, perceptions, and behaviors when teachers receive intensive training and ongoing support, combined with hands-on experience in teaching culturally responsive curriculum units. For maximum results, Edvantia researchers also recommend schoolwide implementation.

#### What are the implications for coaches?

Coaches who are incorporating culturally responsive instruction can maximize the potential benefits by providing intensive professional development, model lessons, and ongoing support.

#### Reference

**Hughes, G., Cowley, K., Copley, L., Finch, N., Meehan, M. L., Burns, R. C., et al. (2005).** *Effects of a culturally responsive teaching project on teachers and students in selected Kanawha County, WV, schools.* www.edvantia.org/publications/pdf/MAACKExecutiveSummary.pdf ◆

**Teachers Teaching Teachers (T3)** is published eight times a year by the National Staff Development Council, 5995 Fairfield Road, #4, Oxford, OH 45056.

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**WHAT TEACHER LEADERS  
NEED TO KNOW ABOUT ...**

# Creating norms

**A**ny teams or groups that meet on a regular basis will have smoother working relationships if they begin by developing a set of operating norms or ground rules. This activity will walk you through the steps to create norms for a team or group.

**PREPARATION:**

Before the meeting, write the list of norms at the right on a sheet of chart paper and post on the meeting room wall. In addition, refer to the handout on Page 11 and create six more posters, one for each category:

- Time
- Listening
- Confidentiality
- Decision making
- Participation
- Expectations

Place these posters on the meeting room walls as well.

**SUPPLIES:** Chart paper, sticky notes, pens/pencils.

**TIME:** Two hours.

**DIRECTIONS:**

1. **Indicate** to the team that effective teams generally have a set of norms that governs individual behavior, facilitates the work of the team, and enables the team to accomplish its task.

**Sample norms.**

***We agree to ...***

- Meet only when there is a meaningful agenda.
- Start and end on time.
- Allow everyone to contribute an agenda item.
- Post the agenda before the meeting.
- Avoid interrupting others when they are speaking.
- Dress comfortably but appropriately.
- Have healthy refreshments.
- Have a different facilitator and recorder for each meeting.
- Differentiate between brainstorming and discussion.
- Address only schoolwide issues.
- Express disagreement with ideas, not individuals.
- Feel responsible to express differing opinions within the meeting.
- Maintain confidentiality regarding disagreements expressed during the meeting.
- Reach decisions by consensus.
- Listen respectfully to all ideas.
- Conduct group business in front of the group.
- Conduct personal business outside of the meeting.
- Silence all cell phones during meetings.
- Avoid checking for or sending text messages or e-mail messages during meetings.
- Avoid personal grooming (brushing hair, applying make-up, cleaning fingernails) during meetings.



2. **Point out** the sample norms that are posted in the room. Point out the other six posters and the questions that are posed on each poster. *Time: 15 minutes.*
3. **Recommend** to the team that it establish a set of norms:
  - To ensure that all individuals have the opportunity to contribute in the meeting;
  - To increase productivity and effectiveness; and
  - To facilitate the achievement of its goals.
4. **Place a pad** of sticky notes on the table and give every person the same kind of writing tool. Ensure that all sticky notes are the same color.
5. **Ask each person** to reflect on and record behaviors they consider ideal behaviors for a group. Ask them to write one idea on each sticky note. *Time: 10 minutes.*
6. **Invite the team** members to place their ideas on the charts at the front of the room. Ask them to refrain from discussion while doing so.
7. **Read each norm** that has been suggested. Allow time for the group members to discuss each idea. As each recommended norm is read aloud, ask the group to determine if it is similar to another idea that already has been expressed. Sticky notes with similar ideas should be grouped together. *Time: 30-45 minutes.*
8. **When all of the sticky notes** have been organized, assign two individuals to work together to write the norms suggested under each heading. In some cases, there may be only one norm; in others, there could be several. Use the worksheet on Page 5 to record these norms. *Time: 30 minutes.*
9. **Read each of the proposed** norms aloud to the group. Determine whether the group can support the norms before the group adopts them. You could ask for a thumbs up to indicate support or find another way for each team member to indicate to the team his or her willingness to abide by these ground rules. *Time: 30 minutes.*
10. **When the team agrees** that it will abide by this norm, the facilitator writes the norm on a new sheet of chart paper with the label:  
\_\_\_\_\_ **TEAM NORMS**  
Leave that poster in the team's meeting room for future meetings.
11. **The facilitator should also transcribe** the norms onto an 8½ by 11 sheet of paper and distribute to all team members.
12. **The facilitator should review** the meeting norms at the beginning of each meeting to ensure that participants are regularly reminded about the agreements they have made to each other. ◆

**For more information** about setting norms, see the Aug/Sept 1999 issue of *Tools for Schools* which is available in the members-only area of the NSDC web site.

**Ask each person to reflect on and record behaviors they consider ideal behaviors for a group.**

<b>WHEN ESTABLISHING NORMS, CONSIDER</b>	<b>PROPOSED NORM</b> <div style="float: right; background-color: #008080; color: white; padding: 2px; font-weight: bold;">NSDC TOOL</div>
<b>TIME</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When do we meet?</li> <li>• Will we set a beginning and ending time?</li> <li>• Will we start and end on time?</li> </ul>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<b>LISTENING</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How will we encourage listening?</li> <li>• How will we discourage interrupting?</li> </ul>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<b>CONFIDENTIALITY</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Will the meetings be open?</li> <li>• Will what we say in the meeting be held in confidence?</li> <li>• What can be said after the meeting?</li> </ul>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<b>DECISION MAKING</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How will we make decisions?</li> <li>• Are we an advisory or a decision-making body?</li> <li>• Will we reach decisions by consensus?</li> <li>• How will we deal with conflicts?</li> </ul>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<b>PARTICIPATION</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How will we encourage everyone's participation?</li> <li>• Will we have an attendance policy?</li> </ul>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<b>EXPECTATIONS</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do we expect from members?</li> <li>• Are there requirements for participation?</li> </ul>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>