

The work of CFGs, and the principles that underlie it, have been integral to Houston A+ Challenge (formerly Houston Annenberg Challenge) since it was founded in 1997. We have offered CFG new coach training since 1998 – to date providing CFG new coach training to almost 600 educators – and CFG work is embedded in all Houston A+ initiatives and professional development services. (see side bar)



Houston A+ also uses Critical Friends tools and strategies as the operating foundation for the organization. Continual learning, examination of practice and cycle of inquiry are integral pieces of all meetings. Houston A+ staff members examine each other's work, ask probing questions and read and discuss the latest research to determine its application to the work around supporting student learning.

Grants from the Annenberg Foundation, Bank of America, the Brown Foundation, the Joe B. Foster Family Foundation, the Clayton Fund, Ocean Energy, and the Simmons Foundation support the work of CFG in the Houston area.

Some Highlights of Houston A+ Initiatives

Houston Schools for a New Society
Houston Schools for a New Society (HSNS), a partnership between Houston ISD and Houston A+ Challenge, is redesigning high schools to ensure that all Houston ISD graduates have the knowledge and skills they need for college or the workforce. Participating high schools are moving away from the traditional, large comprehensive high

school model into small, theme-based academies designed around quality teaching and learning and maximum personalization of the learning environment for all students. Many of these schools' staff members have received CFG new coach training. In addition, a recent informal survey indicates that many of the schools also are using CFG tools in their regular academy meetings as they develop a professional learning community on campus. As adults begin to collaborate in new ways in these smaller structures, CFG coaches have been able to help structure meetings in such a way that they focus on improved student learning and professional dialogue.

Partnership for Quality Education

In 2000, Houston A+ Challenge joined a team of universities, school districts and a community college that was forming Partnership for Quality Education to redesign teacher preparation programs at their respective institutions. PQE formed six design teams to reshape teacher education courses along with core and majors courses. The PQE teams attended CFG trainings and then used the protocols to facilitate their design work. In addition, "Making the Case for Quality Teacher Education," a new report by Adolfo and Betin Santos of the Consortium for Assessment, Research and Evaluation (CARE), quotes several PQE design team members as saying CFG changed the way they teach. For example, participants said they have implemented more discovery learning in their classes and become more of a coach than a lecturer.

Fondren Reforming Schools Summer Institute

More than 250 Houston area educators, parents, and community members convened in July for the eighth

annual Fondren Reforming Schools Summer Institute (FRSSI) to explore the theme "Keeping Kids Connected." Institute highlights included keynote addresses by Jim Burke and Grace

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Houston A+ Initiatives and Professional Development Services

- K-5 Mathematics Initiative
- K-5 Fine Arts Initiative
- Fondren Reforming Schools Summer Institute (cross-district institute focused on school reform)
- Houston Schools for a New Society (partnership with Houston ISD 24 comprehensive high schools)
- Partnership for Quality Education (higher education initiative)
- Regional High School Network (high school reform initiative in three metropolitan area school districts)
- New Visions in Leadership Academy (cross-district leadership initiative)
- Regional Senior Fellows (cross-district learning network)
- Focused Impact Award - supports the original Houston Annenberg Challenge network schools in the areas of math, literacy, and fine arts.
- Teacher as Researcher Grant – supports CFG-trained teachers and administrators in their inquiries about teaching and learning.
- Challenge Early College High School – a new small high school

The most striking effect of our new community was among students who, in the past, had been told – implicitly, or explicitly – that they could not learn. The success they began to experience as teachers learned to vary instruction, to give up the hold they had on “knowledge,” and to discover the passion that is waiting to be unleashed in every student, was infectious. Kids who had been previously denied access to quality instruction discovered multiple entry points to learning. They were invited to ask questions, and practiced crafting better ones. Teachers held higher expectations for all students. There was a feeling of “we can do this!” in our school. As we developed portfolios and presentations, too, students became

more accountable for their learning. Parents who attended and participated in these student-led presentations often left in tears of joy, for they had never before seen their child as learner.

We had tangible evidence (significant increases in state and national test scores and college attendance, decreases in dropout rate, acts of violence, and discipline issues, and, most importantly, the narrowing of gaps in achievement among racial and socio-economic groups) to support the claim that ours was a learning community. But statistics cannot bring to life the “feel” of our school. In three short years, we transformed a place where thinking and learning were habits reserved for a select few, where the intellectual needs

of most kids were undernourished, and where teachers worked in isolation and liked it that way, into a respectful community where all could learn to use their minds well. An intellectual community grew and was nourished there; a culture whose seeds were planted and watered among the adults, and whose fruits were borne through the successes of the children under our stewardship. ■

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Sammon; dozens of workshops organized around the strands of fine arts, literacy, mathematics, personalization, and professional learning communities; and home group discussions. A hallmark of the FRSSI is the home groups, composed of about 20 participants each. Facilitated by teams of new and experienced Critical Friends Group coaches, the home groups give each participant a taste of the power and effectiveness of being part of a professional learning community.

Supporting Coaches

Six clinics for new and experienced CFG coaches were held during the 2003-2004 academic year at no cost to participants. These 2 or 3 hour clinics were facilitated by experienced facilitators from the Houston area and delved into these topics: beginning a group and keeping it going, using and designing protocols, action research, dealing with difficult people, equity, and leadership. One hundred and nineteen coaches and facilitators participated in these clinics. Six clinics are planned for the 2004-2005 academic year.

Supporting Facilitators

The Houston A+ Challenge supported the development of a regional CFG composed of experienced facilitators. Called the K-16 CFG because its 17 members hail from elementary schools, middle schools, high schools, universities, foundations, and administrative posts, the CFG met monthly and developed the inquiry focus “How can our CFG training and experience be used to its maximum potential in our work?” This group serves as the main pool of facilitators for CFG seminars and clinics in the Houston area.

Supporting Inquiry

The Houston A+ Challenge awarded seven Teacher as Researcher grants to CFG coaches in May 2004. The grant supports each of the seven CFGs’ inquiry work with \$10,000 during two years. The Teacher as Researcher grant has the potential to effect change in a broad cross-section of Houston area schools. Fifty-eight CFG members will be directly involved in the action research projects supported by the grant. These CFG members rep-

resent four school districts (Houston, Aldine, Alief, and Spring Branch). Furthermore, faculty and staff from five local colleges and universities (Rice University, University of Houston, Houston Community College, Prairie View A&M, and University of Saint Thomas) have committed to support these inquiry projects. Several of the inquiry groups also have engaged other members of the community by including business partners and parents as participants in the research.

The seven inquiry projects, which include elementary, middle, and high schools, will tackle questions dealing with literacy, math, and fine arts. Within those content areas, several projects also will work to find strategies for how to best teach some of the Houston area’s neediest students: impoverished readers, English Language Learners, and Special Education students struggling with mandated standardized tests. ■

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