

Introducing CFGs to a New Network: Fighting the Good Fight

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For schools in Maryland and Virginia, Critical Friends Groups represent a new and foreign possibility. Driven by long-standing, rigid student assessment programs, teachers, principals, and central office folk often view teaching as an exercise in efficiency: How can we teach students more than we are currently teaching them? The typical professional development goal in such a climate of efficiency is to present teachers with strategies that enable them to teach “better” – measured always and only by student performance on standardized tests. “Better” teaching, like “better” learning, is an individual activity. The “best” teachers perform magic within the boundaries of their classrooms. The “best” learners test well on Maryland’s and Virginia’s standardized tests.

Introducing the heresy of authentic collaborative practice into such an educational culture has proven challenging on many fronts. Generous grant funding in 18 schools supported by the Chesapeake Coalition of Essential Schools has created ample opportunities for training. Simply stated, money is not a deterrent in the schools we serve. Instead, the challenges we face in promoting CFG work can be categorized into three areas: (1) preconceptions about professional development, (2) belief in the sanctity of traditional content, and (3) definitions of planning time as an individual – and zealously guarded – commodity.

These challenges have inspired us to create a training program in which participants are centered in the *processes* – rather than the *products* – of learning. Together with RoLesia Holman, we addressed this dilemma by designing a pre-coaching, introductory course. Our initial training is now a 30-hour course, “An Introduction to Critical Friends Collaborative Processes,” offered for graduate credit in partnership with Rosemont College in Pennsylvania. We encourage par-

ticipation across school and district roles. Secretaries, instructional assistants, central office staff, administrators, and classroom teachers – to date 262 people from across our network – have engaged together in this work.

The central focus of the introductory course is comfort with the processes of collaboration. Our hope is that participants will begin to use these processes in authentic settings – in their classrooms, in faculty meet-

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ings, as members of grade-level teams or academic departments, and the like. We attempt to empower people to engage in structured conversations in forums that already exist in their schools and districts. The initial training is comprised of three strands: (1) building trusting relationships and fostering development of a learning community through collaborative processes, (2) developing shared understandings through text-based discussions, and (3) rethinking teaching and learning through looking at authentic student and teacher work.

The initial training introduces a common language and provides shared experiences that we then work to support at the school, district, and network levels. It is not unusual, for example, for teachers in our network to ask for assistance in selecting a protocol to use in a grade-level meeting. Parent meetings have included text renderings, tuning protocols, and charettes. Collaborative groups have worked to establish ground rules and norms. Common understandings have helped us to elevate the level of

discourse at network gatherings and to build enthusiasm for the introduction of new tools and protocols.

Despite our successes among those who have engaged in our initial training, we have discovered that true Critical Friends Groups are slow to evolve. Among the 25 schools in our network, we have only six such groups functioning as CFGs. Others are beginning to form, but the challenges described previously are real deterrents. Those who have an opportunity to explore the work readily acknowledge its value, but the schools and districts in which these individuals work remain unconvinced that structured professional dialogue IS potent professional development.

We acknowledge two essential next steps in fostering the work of CFGs. First, we must find ways to support the efforts of those who believe in and promote the work in their schools and districts. We have begun to sponsor regional dinner meetings in different locations in our network that encourage collaboration among graduates of the introductory training and others interested in the work. Second, we must grow a cohort of CFG coaches and encourage their connection to the larger national work of the NSRF. We have scheduled a coaches’ training for July for graduates of the introductory course. We plan to engage members of the NSRF in working with us to design and facilitate this training.

Not surprisingly, we have been most successful in creating environments that support the development of CFGs in districts where central office officials have participated in and then promoted the training. In one district, for example, text-based discussions and uses of protocols to review professional and student work at the central office level are common. In another, teachers who participate in CFGs can earn re-certification credit – acknowledging CFGs as an effective form of professional development. We continue to work to reshape a vision

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from the other person. This work has made me continue to hone my listening skills. As president, listening to other people's problems and working to co-construct possible solutions is a big part of my job.

In general, I think I'd say that reflective practice has become a more ingrained part of who I am now. Each time I'm in a situation, I never leave it without thinking about the impact of my participation. I wonder what worked, what didn't work and how I could have handled it differently or better.

The key is that by reflecting, I grow, and this has made the idea of my being a lifelong learner more explicit.

Staying in this work and expanding my role as a facilitator has helped me understand the value of teacher inquiry and research. The more we do this work, the more we uncover the big questions we face. You know the ones I mean, the kind of questions that keep you up at night. Now when I have one of those problems, or a question, I find myself tapping into our collective experience by emailing colleagues in the broader network of coaches, asking for a resource or an experience they've had that can help push my thinking. I understand the need to systematically tackle those big questions over the long haul and I use collaborative, reflective

tools to help find answers.

Have your hopes for the Lucent Project been realized? Are collaboration and reflection a part of the way things get done in SDOL schools now?

I believe the seeds of collaboration and reflection have been planted and there are many signs that they are taking root. In the first five schools that were involved in the project, collaboration continues to be part of the ways those schools do business. In the Schoolwide Improvement Plans, the LLCs are listed as a strategy to improve student achievement and the groups continue to meet regularly during the school day. Since our expansion of the project district wide, LLCs have started to take hold in the other schools as well.

Earlier you talked about the sustainability of LLCs if there were changes in leadership. I know you've experienced some changes and I wonder if you might comment on the impact.

We have had leadership changes since the start of this work, changes at both the school level and at the District level, but the work continues to grow. Our new Superintendent supports the project and teachers continue to take advantage of the opportunity to collaborate with their peers and improve their craft.

What next steps do you envision? How will SDOL sustain the use of collaborative, reflective practices during the school day without the Lucent funding?

There are several ideas that the SDOL should consider as we end the funded phase of this project. Namely, we must bring the coaches (teacher and administrator) together to examine the current structures that support the LLCs and

determine what we must have in place to deepen the roots of collaboration. We should continue to support and grow the SDOL Apprentice Facilitator process to build capacity at the district level to support new and experienced coaches. And the most ambitious goal is to begin to create opportunities for students, parents and community members to participate in LLCs.

The power of collaboration is only truly realized when all members of the school community are reflective about teaching and learning in meaningful ways to accelerate student achievement and to close the achievement gap. ■

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at all levels of school organization. In some places, we have been successful in convincing people that tapping the expertise of a group of educators and encouraging them to value and share this expertise is an extraordinarily *efficient* form of professional development.

We remain optimistic that critical friends processes and, in time, Critical Friends Groups will continue to enrich the cultures of the schools and districts in our network. When we were trained as CFG coaches, Debbie Bambino and Carol Nejman taught us a mantra: "Trust the process. The work sells itself." They were right. ■

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