

Fostering CFGs in a PLC Landscape

Donna Reid, Texas

As a consultant for CFG support for the Houston A+ Challenge, an independent nonprofit that initiates and supports school reform efforts in the Greater Houston area, I get to work with Critical Friends Group coaches in schools all over the Houston region. The many reflections I have collected over the course of my work indicate how transformative CFGs can be for an entire campus, as well as for individual teachers and principals.

My own CFG story began in 1998 when I was one of four people on my campus who attended the first CFG New Coach Seminar held in Houston. At the time, I was a seventh grade history teacher, and the training was personally transformative. I was amazed by how our facilitators were so responsive, and I felt empowered because CFG group members were expected to develop the agendas for our meetings instead of adhering to professional development dictated by the school district or state education agency. When we initiated CFGs at our middle school, the faculty embraced protocols as tools that helped us have timely, equitable conversations. Soon, with the participation of both teachers and principals, CFG practices infused our campus with more teacher agency, and our school portfolio was bursting with evidence of increased collaboration, intense focus on student learning, and rich reflection that led to improvements in our daily practice.

Unfortunately, I have also collected dozens of stories about how CFGs have been misunderstood and misused. For example, four years ago, I was shocked and disheartened when a successful CFG coach in a local elementary school confided that the new principal had just announced to the faculty "We're not going to do CFGs anymore. The district wants us to do PLCs instead." The coach felt like the rug had been pulled out from under her when the administrators demonstrated that they neither understood nor valued the important work that the school's CFGs had done to revitalize the school culture and make gains in student achievement.

More recently, while a group of coaches-in-training was debriefing a consultancy this past June, a participant blurted "Everybody on my campus HATES protocols!" When I followed up over lunch, the teacher explained that the school's administrative team supported the PLC model enough to schedule time in the school day for departments and grade levels to meet, but they also

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If you have any feedback or are interested in contributing to *Connections*, contact us at 812.330.2702 or dbambino@earthlink.net.

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controlled the agendas of those meetings by mandating that the groups use a minimum number of protocols to look at student work over the course of the semester. Although well-intentioned, this scheme reduced teacher agency when the leadership team also took up meeting time with other tasks throughout the fall. In order to meet the external goal of using protocols to look at student work a minimum number of times, the group had to do a tuning protocol almost every day in December. That left them exhausted and angry instead of engaged and empowered.

Such anecdotes show that there are widespread misunderstandings about what PLCs are and how CFG practices can support the development of true professional learning communities.

What exactly is a PLC?

There is no single accepted definition for what a professional learning community is and does, but Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker have popularized the concept of PLCs in North America through books such as *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement* (1998), which lists the following characteristics (pp. 25-29) for a PLC:

- 1) shared mission, vision, and values
- 2) collective inquiry
- 3) collaborative teams
- 4) action orientation and experimentation
- 5) continuous improvement
- 6) results orientation

DuFour and Eaker write that educators in a professional learning community “create an environment that fosters mutual cooperation, emotional support, and personal growth as they work together to achieve what they cannot accomplish alone” (p.xiii). They go on to assert that “no factor is more significant in a school’s change process than the faculty’s sense of self-efficacy. . . . The schools most likely to create a collaborative learning community are those with educators who are willing to accept responsibility for doing so” (p.129).

The PLC concept espoused by DuFour and his colleagues is now very popular in at least three Houston area school districts, and when I first read DuFour and Eaker’s book several years ago, much of it resonated with my own CFG experiences. We’ve even used excerpts from their books as the basis for text-based discussions at regional CFG follow-up sessions, because they clearly explain about the need for transformation in our schools and offer inspiration

to get started.

However, there is an inherent conflict hidden within this popular PLC model. At one point DuFour and Eaker write, “. . . clarity of purpose is enhanced when teams are provided with clearly stated performance goals that indicate what the team is to produce or accomplish” (p.123). Notice the passive voice of that verb “are provided.” It implies that the members of that PLC are not setting their own goals and do not have a strong voice in deciding what to produce or accomplish. That passive verb diminishes agency. I believe that this tension between encouraging educators to take fuller responsibility for student learning while not really trusting them to do it has strangled many fledgling professional learning communities.

How do CFGs fit in the PLC landscape?

When people ask me if a CFG is like a PLC, I say, “Yes, and more!” At the Seattle Winter Meeting in January 2007, participants in an Open Space session about this topic agreed that PLCs and CFGs share many traits, including the use of protocols, a focus on student learning, the use of collaborative teams and collective inquiry, and the possibility of changing school culture. This same group also listed several traits that are unique to CFGs, such as “clearly defined notion of skillful facilitation,” “responsive to individual and small group [needs],” “more private and confidential,” and “riskier work.” These educators, who had been involved in CFGs all across the country, clearly valued CFGs for not having imposed agendas, while still keeping the learning of students and the adults who serve them as the centerpiece of their work.

Gene Thompson-Grove said it best during her opening address at the 2005 Winter Meeting in Cambridge Massachusetts: “It is the one reform initiative, in my experience, that makes any sense, because it is rooted in a belief that the learning of students - of ALL students - is what makes our relationship to each other significant. And it is one of the few reform efforts that truly empowers teachers to be the authors of their own learning, that gives them the capacity to assume leadership around issues that really matter in their schools and districts.”

Now What?

Those of us who value Critical Friends Groups must understand what makes CFGs special

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IEP meetings and try it out in a variety of states. If you are interested in being part of this collaborative effort, please contact me. ■

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and be explicit about the tensions regarding power and agency that inevitably surface when CFGs are introduced in a school. Our sustainability depends upon it. We must continue to set our own agendas and plans, and we must be accountable for revising and implementing those agendas and plans to meet the needs of our students. We cannot afford to settle for PLCs that are nothing more than grade or departmental groups with new names. Our students' success depends on our willingness to disturb the status quo, and CFGs are a big first step on the journey. ■

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did not have one discipline problem. I did not have to remind students to complete an assignment. I could keep even the most talkative student in check by simply asking if his comment had anything to do with the discussion.

I learned that our daily Connection time has paid off in terms of student respectfulness. This is a rowdy, talkative bunch of students. But by following our expectation of respectful behavior while someone is talking, on a daily basis, this class has learned the concept of control. They were able to honor one another as they raised their hands to speak and waited to be called upon. I can't begin to say how proud I am of these students.

The final thing I learned from this discussion was that my students thoroughly enjoyed the process. One student wrote in his reflection, "I thought this discussion was a good idea because I learned a lot and had fun doing it. The fact that we had to come up with our own topics out of the magazine taught us how to pick important facts out of a group of information ... I really hope we do it again." Based on their performance and attitude, I intend to use discussion with this class as often as possible."

Denise's transformation from a teacher who was frustrated and unhappy about being "stuck" with a last period class of noisy, failing students, to a teacher working to differentiate instruction in support of each student's success was a pleasure to behold. Denise's "willingness to be disturbed" and challenge her assumptions about these students and their abilities reinforced my belief in student empowerment and our responsibility to personalize instruction. Denise's shift and success has also made me wonder about all of the students and teachers who continue to "mark time" in too many of our classrooms, with or without their IEPs. ■

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Correction

In our last issue of *Connections*, we published the poem, "Race Matters" by John Patrick Moran. We mistakenly identified the author as being from California. In fact, Mr. Moran is a school coach with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. He wrote the poem during a weeklong Equity-Based Critical Friends Coaches training which was co-facilitated by Camilla Greene of Pennsylvania, Gregory Peters of San Francisco, and RoLesia Holman of North Carolina. - *Connections* Editorial Board

