

# NSRF's Living History: An Interview with Tim Martindell

Donna Reid, Texas

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Many of us know Tim Martindell as the face of Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) for Houston A+ Challenge. Tim was recently promoted to a new position as the assistant director of leadership in teaching for Houston A+ Challenge. Donna Reid sat down with Tim to find out more about his vision for building CFG networks in the Houston area.

## **Congratulations on your promotion. Can you tell me more about your new position?**

Well it's a new position for Houston A+, in fact, and it was created in the recognition of the fact that strong schools don't exist without strong teacher leaders. My role will be to expand our training and support networks for teachers using Critical Friends Group as a foundation. I will also be helping to coordinate these efforts with our principal leadership networks, including the Regional Principal Leadership Academy.

I envision that we'll do this by customizing some of our existing CFG training and readings for slightly different audiences or purposes. For example, there may be specific seminars and networks for department chairs, team leaders, or first-year teachers. Instead of just one sort of generic CFG, we will have multiple tracks all based on the same methodology.

## **Tell me about how you first became involved in CFG work.**

I was trained in CFG while I was a campus-level coach at Drew Academy (Aldine ISD) in the summer of 1998. I was one of five or six coaches on my campus, which was named a Beacon School by Houston A+ (then known as the Houston Annenberg Challenge). I coached the same group for four-and-a-half years while I remained at Drew, up until I came to Houston A+ as an employee.

## **So what do you value about CFG work?**

I think it gives teachers - and administrators - the tools and forums to have the difficult conversations that must take place in schools in order to ensure equity for all students. CFGs are really focusing and deepening the conversations that are going on in schools - and more importantly, it is pushing people



*Tim Martindell*

out of their comfort zones into action.

## **How will your new position build on those experiences?**

Houston A+ has spent the last 10 years working on school transformation from the teacher level up. One key fact we have learned is that in order to really change what happens in a school, you can't just bring in a new leader - the entire staff must share common goals and a vision for transformation.

With our new Regional Principal Leadership Academy, we're helping to prepare aspiring principals to transform urban public schools. All of our interns participate in the Critical Friends Group New Coach Seminar as their very first week of training. It's the foundation for their continued growth over the three-year coaching and mentoring process.

But that's not enough. With our Teacher Leadership initiatives, my goal will be to help build some common ideas and common language for everyone in the school building. As the new school leaders in the Academy receive continued coaching from A+, I will develop training and support to help the faculty in these schools really focus on equity and opportunities for kids.

## **What is your vision for CFG work in Houston?**

The notion of Professional Learning Community is really starting to take hold here in Houston, and that looks different in different contexts. I think Critical Friends "gives legs" to the theory of Professional Learning Communities.

What we're going to be designing at A+ is really an expanded tool kit that a CFG coach might use, that contains some unique, context - specific tools. It could be different readings or it

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continuing CFG coaches' training. Every fall and spring we host network meetings for educators engaged in CFG work. Our network now consists of 114 educators, at least 44 of whom have attended more than one continuing coach institute or meeting following their initial training. The network includes 81 teachers, 20 school administrators, three university-based educators, and 10 educators who hold other school and district roles. All told, the educators of the network represent 36 schools in 11 districts and five states, although primarily Texas.

We are deeply committed to active participation in the larger national organization. Grant funds secured through Trinity's Department of Education have enabled the Center to financially support a delegation of San Antonio educators to attend Winter Meeting for the past seven years. Those educators then help plan and facilitate the annual local Winter Meeting to share national meeting concepts with area teachers and administrators.

In addition to sending teams of educators to Winter Meetings, Center members have played a leadership role at such national events. Beyond their ongoing participation in CFGs in local schools, current Center facilitators have served as facilitators and Critical Friends at Winter Meetings and share responsibility for attending the annual Facilitator and Center Meetings. Moreover, Pat and Angela have presented research findings on the use of protocols to support preservice teachers' preparation at NSRF's annual Research Forum and the American Educational Research Association annual meetings. Angela serves on the Accountability Council, and Ileana is a member of the Houston Winter Meeting Planning Team. Thus we support local coaches, engage in the work alongside our CFG colleagues, actively participate in NSRF nationally, and conduct scholarship around our CFG work.

Our Center is excited about the possibilities and challenges that lie ahead for not only moving our work forward locally but nationally as well. In addition to upcoming local events like our Fall Gathering, where we will use a text-based protocol to explore "Undermining Democracy" by Deborah Meier, we look forward to providing financial support to a dozen area educators to attend this year's Winter Meeting. Moreover, Angela and Pat continue to write about their CFG work, sharing it with researcher and practitioner audiences. We also want to work closely with our colleagues across the country in strengthening the national organization as

we clarify and work to align our values and practices. ■

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Finally, our Center has been instrumental in the award and implementation of three Teacher as Researcher (TAR) grants. These grants are an outgrowth of CFGs and have been extended for a third year at \$5,000 each, with the specific charge of documenting the results for academic publication. These research teams met together monthly over the past year. Their joint chapter on lessons learned about the connection between teacher inquiry and student achievement in school reform have been submitted to the Association of Teacher Educators (ATE) 2008 yearbook (in press). ■

*For more information about any of these grants  
or our work in schools, contact Donna Reid  
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might be new and different protocols. Aligned with the A+ leadership initiatives, our CFG work is led by a very diverse group of Houston area National Facilitators and apprentices. Our long-term strategy is to have the local CFG leadership mirror Houston community.

We're also looking at how CFGs reach out: how does this work go beyond the school group? So we might be looking at how to design CFGs for community members. For example, we trained a group of students this summer during our CFG New Coach Seminar.

**So there are a lot of things coming up. Tell me about how CFG practices have transformed you.**

For me personally, I think I've learned to listen and ask much better questions. ■

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