

# Building Professional Learning Communities

Center of Activity Report – Juli Quinn, Los Angeles, California

When thinking about Los Angeles, the word Center seems incongruous; it just doesn't fit. LA, by its very nature is an amorphous conglomeration of areas, cities, towns, and school districts, each defying definition. With that in mind, the following is an attempt to describe some of the activities that are taking place in LA, which is not to say that they are the only activities. In the last *Connections*, some Higher Education efforts were shared. Here's a look at the tremendous variety of work taking place in the Greater Los Angeles Area.

In three local districts CFG strategies of reflection and collaboration are being embedded in the life of the schools through the development of professional learning communities.

Cross-role, cross-grade, and cross-curricular school teams of six to twelve people are working in community. These teams or community groups are facilitated by coaches who are trained and supported throughout the year. The coaches come together on an initial Saturday and then once a month from 4 to 7pm to learn protocols, share student work, and engage in text-based discussions. Standards and data are an integral part of every conversation, and the search for quality criteria is a common topic with which teachers regularly struggle. As a part of each "training" session, coaches plan ways to expand the work and engage their whole school community in strategies to improve practice and increase student achievement.

The site principal is included in the "Coaching Team" from the beginning. The principal helps lead the effort, demonstrating its importance by giving it time, and supporting the

teachers' efforts to come together for observations and professional conversations. Teachers and administrators are examining the current use of time in each school to identify how the times when teachers come together already (e.g.: faculty meetings, grade level meetings, department/core meetings, banked time, common planning time) can be used differently. Rather than form free-standing CFG's, the focus is on finding opportunities to change how professionals do their daily work, using the CFG strategies.



Here's a further sampling of the work:

– In the *Glendale Unified District*, 13 teams are in their fourth year of implementation. At the end of last year all the teams came together in a "Building Learning Communities Expo" where everyone modeled protocols, shared strategies and learned from the feedback of their peers. These teams have networked quarterly to engage in mutual goal setting, Looking at Student Work sessions and a general sharing of their varied implementation models.

– The *Burbank Unified School District* has spent two years focused on building a professional learning community among all of its elementary school principals. The principal's group

meets off campus five times during the school year to look at their own practice and to look at student work for evidence of teacher practice. The Director of Elementary Education participates as a colleague with the principals and brings the district perspective and support to the work.

– In the *Los Angeles Unified School District*, Debbi Laidley and the UCLA School Management Program have been active in Local District F, training CFG coaches for several years.

– *Local District B* sent 10 school teams, much like the ones formed in Glendale, to receive the Coaches' Training over five months of full-day sessions. Their implementation began this summer.

– In addition, Maria Elena Rico, Director of the Trainer Certification Unit and a former Citibank Fellow, has worked with Kimberly Haag, a former Math/Science Fellow, and me to train Local District personnel across the *LAUSD*. These Local District personnel have the job of providing support to schools within their Local Districts.

– In *Covina Valley Unified School District*, Steve Seaford, Director of Instructional Services and another former Citibank Fellow, convenes all the site principals regularly to look at their practices, identify organizational issues, and work on implementing systemic approaches to improved instruction.

– Hannah MacLaren, Director of the *Los Angeles Coalition of Essential Schools*, works with multiple schools around LA to develop and grow professional learning communities whose training and work parallels the NSRF Theory and Constructs.

LA is a big place with multiple school districts and diverse cultures, which defy the notion of a defined "Center of Activity." The opportunity to bring these folks together to work on the NSRF Winter Meeting has helped those of us doing work in LA to come together in an exciting way

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7th Annual NSRF Winter Meeting  
January 16-18, 2003, Los Angeles, California

Register on-line at  
[www.nsrffharmony.org/wintermeeting.html](http://www.nsrffharmony.org/wintermeeting.html)

See page 19 for more details

# Looking at Student Work Collaboratively

NSRF and The Looking at Student Work Collaborative are offering a day long “Looking at Student Work” pre-conference to the Coalition of Essential Schools’ Fall Forum.

The practice of looking at samples of student work in collaborative teacher inquiry groups, such as Critical Friends Groups (CFGs), has become a prominent form of professional development. In this session, participants will explore the purposes and principles for looking at student work collaboratively (LASW), as well as engage in some of the practices of LASW. Most of the workshop will be devoted to looking at student work samples that participants themselves bring and present. We will work in

small groups, learning about, using, and reflecting on different “protocols” (e.g. the Tuning Protocol, the Collaborative Assessment Conference, and the Consultancy) to structure the conversations. Groups will be facilitated by experienced NSRF facilitators and members of the national Looking at Student Work Collaborative, which supports schools and teachers in LASW.

This workshop will be offered as day-long session on Thursday, November 14. Capacity is limited, and registration is on a first-come, first-served basis.

## What

Looking at Student Work Collaboratively Workshop

## When

Thursday, November 14, 2002

## Where

Washington, D.C.  
Marriott Wardman Park Hotel

## Cost

\$145

## To Register go to

[www.essentialschools.org/pub/ces\\_docs/fforum/fforum.html](http://www.essentialschools.org/pub/ces_docs/fforum/fforum.html)

## Building Professional Learning Communities

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to share best practices and dilemmas. Whether or not the term CFG is used in training and implementation “models” of the various LA efforts, one can see that the work in LA consistently focus-

es on building the capacity of site principals, teachers, and schools to reflect upon their practices to improve student learning by using the collaborative strategies and tools that folks doing

CFG work have proven to be effective and valuable. ❖

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## UCLA School Management Program

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being treated as a valued professional – some even say it has been their first such experience. ❖

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Information about upcoming Coaches Institutes can also be found on UCLA SMP’s website at [www.smp.gseis.ucla.edu](http://www.smp.gseis.ucla.edu).

## Documenting Decisions

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and after two more stops and discussions, we juggled three balloons through the entire class six times in a row! We walked in the room, patting each other on our backs, congratulating each other on our efforts. It wasn’t the juggling we were proud of. We were proud that we had become a team that needed each other.

Likewise, as I think of the CFG, I feel great pride in the team we have become. I realize that we are not meeting only every other Monday. We are

meeting much more—in the hallways, on the telephone, or in another’s classroom. I realize that I need the CFG and the community we have built so that I don’t just juggle my concerns. I can tackle them with the help of others.

Because of our efforts to begin documenting the learning surrounding our CFG, we’re beginning to shape a process for embedding teacher action research into the ongoing rituals and routines of our time together. We’ve

made a good start, but we will begin again next year trying to do an even better job of not just making our teaching public - but also our learning. We’re coming to accept that we may never feel as settled or sure, as we’d like to be. We are confident, however, that the stability of our critical friends group will give us the support we need to keep asking the hard questions and not feel so alone in the process. ❖

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