

Critical Friends Coaches' Refresher – Retreat for the Coaches


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The Capital Region BOCES Center held a one day retreat on August 6th to support our area's coaches in their continued work with school districts to utilize the tools of CFGs to promote professional communities. Fourteen coaches gathered in a small lake house hidden in the bustling community of Latham, NY. This location jewel reminded me of what sometimes our work brings to school districts, a shining treasure nestled in and overlooked by a very bustling community. The fourteen coaches ranged from coaches experienced for the past three years to coaches newly trained in the spring of 09. The day was led by two newly inducted National Facilitators excited to support coaches in the Capital Region so that the work of collaborative reflective practices can be promoted in schools.

A coaches' support group has been in existence in the Capital Region since a new coach training was conducted in the 06-07 school year by Bill Polluck from the Effective Schools Coalition of Rutgers University. The individuals knew after their five day training that they needed to keep the spirit alive of what we had learned and committed to a continued support group. This support group has continued and has met at least four to six times a year to review our work, practice protocols, conduct consultancy and support each other in our various roles with school districts.

Our day of retreat began with much anticipation and excitement from the coaches about an opportunity to renew their skills and their souls in the work they do. I also, as a National Facilitator was excited and anxious to work with these coaches who I knew affect many professional lives in schools. It is critical to me that our skills are honed and that our spirits are bolstered for the promotion of reflective democratic dialogue and effective tools for learning in a professional community. Connections seemed like a great way to start the day to center ourselves on transitioning from the outside to a small retreat house on a lake surrounded by a small wooded reserve. It set the tone for the rest of the day with a respect and appreciation for attending to our human need for quiet reflection and renewal. A world café around the questions of what is your passion, what is your purpose as a CFG coach and what is your hope for those you lead, renewed our spirit of dedication and sealed our resolution as a group. We had a chance to revisit our norms and used chalk talk to facilitate renewal of our ground rules. The morning ended with two activities that were given as a choice and the group divided evenly to engage in some new experiences with data driven dialogue and a fun scavenger hunt activity designed to share practices with the CFG protocols.

After a satisfying lunch and a chance to explore our beautiful lake and wooded area, we utilized the surroundings and the great weather to conduct our opening activity for the afternoon outside. The Paseo, or Circles of Identity, protocol was facilitated to help the group strengthen their personal professional identities and reflect on how our perceptions of other's identities shape our decisions and behaviors. The beautiful outdoors helped to soothe the sometimes uncomfortable and tension provoking reflection that the protocol may elicit. As we learn more about each other, we are able to support each other better. This activity also helped to further solidify our identity as a group and set the stage for how we might support each other in our work for the coming year.



The day was quickly closing upon us and we reflected on our charge for the coming year and when we could continue coming together. A quick write for the closing was a good bookend to the day reflecting quietly again about our days ahead and what we want to look forward to. As we come upon the culmination of another five-day coaches training in the fall, we look forward to the growth of our coaches' support group with new members. This renewal of the coaches is vital to the continued development of the CFG work in our area. Several members have expressed interest in also becoming National Facilitators. This is a testament to the power of the tools and the needed promotion of the reflective dialogue in our school communities.

From the mouths of the coaches their reflection on the day gratified my own sense of purpose to renew our coaches' sense of self and purpose. Noteworthy feedback were: "the data driven dialogue was just what I needed", "I was especially pleased with the data driven protocol and the world café for two very different reasons: the data driven allows you to go deeper while the world café opens up thinking and allows you to go broadly", "I feel like I learn something new to try out each time we meet", "I especially like the de-briefing to clarify questions about using the protocol – what to do if.. what would you do when...", "I need to grow personally to grow as a coach", and "especially liked the idea of marrying passion with work for both teachers and learners". I have personally grown as a coach and National Facilitator and am fed by the opening up and growth of our local coaches. With each encounter with our coaches support group, my hope is restored.