

**Back On the Road:**  
**Reflections on the power of Critical Friends Groups to  
improve school climate and student learning at an urban  
elementary school**

## **On the Road**

Betty Roberts Best Learning Community is located in the Alief Independent School District in an urban area with many characteristics of an inner city. The once vibrant, middle class southwest Houston neighborhood has become an area of concentrated poverty, unemployment, lower education levels, poor housing, substance abuse and crime.

In 1999, Best Elementary formed a partnership with E.A. Olle Middle School and became the Best / Olle Learning Community in order to apply for a Lamplighter Grant from the Houston Annenberg Challenge. During the partnership, under the leadership of two visionary administrators of Alief ISD, the three Annenberg imperatives of addressing size, isolation, and teacher learning were embedded into the both schools' cultures.

As part of the reform efforts supported by that grant, Best Elementary incorporated Critical Friends Groups (CFG's) on campus.

Best Elementary targeted teacher learning as a school-wide reform effort. During this time staff development and CFG's were embedded into the school day.

Each teacher was required to participate in a CFG once a week and staff development on the other four days. Topics covered during staff development varied from content specialists topics to technology workshops. The structure of student supervision caused for reorganization of morning staff development.

In addition, community involvement was a school-wide effort. Best Elementary joined partnership with a local apartment complex that allowed students and their families a community connection. Families could attend tutorials called Family Fun Nights on campus or in the community.

Best Elementary sponsored annual and biannual retreats for its staff to build a sense of community among each other. Best and its feeder school, Olle Middle School, engaged together in whole school staff development retreats. This was a chance for teachers from both schools to come together to learn and plan for the beginning of the year. Both schools benefited by sharing expectations.

Best Elementary also had its share of challenges. There were students with behavior problems, a high student mobility rate, lack of parental involvement and an abundance of programs that made it difficult to properly monitor and ensure success.

Despite the challenges, Best was able to maintain acceptable scoring on state tests.

### **The Detour**

In January of 2003, the principal of Best Elementary was relieved of her duties under controversial circumstances. She had served as principal for twelve years at Best Elementary and was the first African American principal in the Alief Independent School District. The publicity surrounding this scandal was very negative and left many in the community, staff and students enraged.

The staff was divided because some sided with the principal and others had not. All the teambuilding that had been accomplished through staff development had somehow diminished. The CFG's ceased to exist. What began as a "let's work together for the good of our students" attitude had turned into "I will just come to work and go home."

To stabilize the environment, the principal of Olle Middle School, was chosen to preside over Best Elementary. The principal was sad to leave the learning community established at Olle, but complied with the demand to relocate to Best Elementary.

She was greeted with opposition, anger, frustration and bitterness. The task ahead of her would not be easy. The state tests would be coming up soon and she would not be able to confront that issue until she could gain the trust from the staff.

She was allowed to reestablish by bringing several employees with her and counted on support from the CFG coaches on campus to assist her on where to begin.

One of her first orders of business was to talk to the coaches and staff about what they needed through a survey. The principal worked hard to build a relationship with the staff, students and parents.

They understood that she had an open door policy and many would come and share their concerns about the culture of Best Elementary. Of course there were others who refused to allow the new principal the chance to build a relationship with them.

By the end of that first semester, the new principal was faced with a high staff turnover as well as challenging scores on state tests.

### **The U Turn**

To turn things around, the new principal recruited staff with the understanding that they would become a part of a professional learning community. All staff became a part of cohort groups which empowered their voices in school policies and procedures.

For example, the staff development committee organized what staff development would be offered on staff development days. The staff was given a survey on what they considered as essential staff development. The committee would then pool big ideas together and set up the workshops which would be given by specialists and teachers in the building. On staff development day, the staff could pick the staff development of their choice.

In 2004, Mary Matthews joined the Best family as a technology specialist. She was a previous employee of Olle Middle School as well as a trained CFG coach. Additionally, she had facilitated nationally and was a consultant for Houston A+ Challenge for training new CFG coaches in the summers at the University of Houston.

She brought with her a Teacher as Researcher grant from the Houston A+ Challenge, to incorporate and study the effect of CFG's on student achievement. This was a two year grant and this would be the first year of the study.

This grant set up CFG's on campus and the coaches of these groups formed the inquiry group. The coaches would meet once a month outside the school day with a group of staff on campus to look at student work, study articles, share best practices, have text based discussions and bring dilemmas to the table.

The inquiry group planned to discuss the recruitment of members and establish strategies to involve the entire staff. A presentation was given to the whole staff and everyone was encouraged to sign up according to a day and time. Initially, 60% of the staff volunteered to be a part of a CFG.

The inquiry coaches also met with each other and Mary Matthews as part of the inquiry CFG. Their meetings were once a month on Saturday mornings for three hours.

During this time coaches were able to share general details of their CFG meetings. If a dilemma was presented, a protocol would be used to give feedback. This group also read and discussed articles, engaged in teambuilding and discussed next steps for their own groups. Each member also had a responsibility to the grant to ensure accountability.

During the first year, there were two school-wide dilemmas brought before the inquiry group. The first one concerned the discipline policy. The inquiry team used a protocol to obtain feedback on this dilemma. From the feedback there was a discussion with the administrators. Finally, the staff was given an in-service on the discipline policy in place and clarity was given to every facet of the school's discipline plan.

The second dilemma involved dismissal procedures in the gym. Once again the administrators were informed that there were issues surrounding dismissal. And the administrators took the steps necessary to clarify what procedures should be followed during dismissal. This was done with the staff that had duty in the gym.

By the end of the first year of the grant, several changes had occurred to improve the school's culture. One, the staff felt more open to discuss issues within their groups. This was significant in giving teachers support and feedback on problems. Second, the teacher turnover rate was less than five

percent. This helped to maintain consistency with teams. Thirdly, teachers felt empowered in giving input to rules and procedures at school.

After one year of CFG's being reestablished at Best Elementary, the data showed that students of teachers in a CFG performed better on the district common assessment and state tests than students of teachers not involved in a CFG:

### **Kindergarten thru 2<sup>nd</sup> grade**

(Based on reading levels assessed at the beginning/ end of year)

- 66% of students of teachers involved in a CFG are reading at grade level.
- 54% of students of teachers **not** involved in a CFG are reading at grade level.

### **Third Grade**

Reading / Math

- 71% / 50% of student of teachers involved in a CFG passed reading and math TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills).
- 63% / 43% of students of teachers **not** involved in a CFG passed reading and math TAKS.

### **Fourth Grade**

Writing / Reading / Math

- 87% / 68% / 83% of students of teachers involved in a CFG passed writing, reading, and math TAKS.
- 77% / 65% / 66% of students of teachers **not** involved in a CFG passed writing, reading and math TAKS.

### **Year Two**

The CFG recruitment process was very successful for the second year of the grant. One hundred percent of the staff signed up for a CFG and at least ninety percent have committed to attending. Two additional coaches were added to accommodate the membership. This made a total of six groups on campus.

Each group meets for two hours once a month outside of the school day. Sometimes the meetings are scheduled on campus and at other times the meetings are held at restaurants. Several restaurants in the community have partnered with Best to give discounts on their entrees.

Two new administrators came to Best Elementary in the second year of the grant. Although both had experience as assistant principals, neither had been trained in the Leadership Academy for administrators through Houston A+ Challenge, so they were unfamiliar with CFG work. At the beginning of this semester, all the administrators were asked to be a part of the inquiry team however their schedules would not allow the commitment. Feedback from the inquiry coaches from their cogs suggests the need for the staff and the new administrators to build community between each other.

Another school-wide dilemma...

## **Reflections**

A lot has been learned about Critical Friends Groups during the past year. When teachers are empowered to learn together, share their best practices, build community and bring dilemmas and student work to the table, the rewards are passed down to the students. Teachers who are involved in a CFG are given an avenue for lifelong learning and sharing their practice that is invaluable.

CFG coaches are heavily instrumental in how effective their groups are. There should always be a goal to work toward and new learning should be an underlying norm.

CFG coaches are the key to the success because they are willing to give the time to do teambuilding, create agendas, and carry out meetings to address teacher dilemmas, look at students work and discuss articles to assist the teachers in their classroom.

They exhibit commitment because they meet with their school groups as well as with each other to share strategies, articles and address issues that may have hindered the school landscape to be a success.

Because of the support and initiative of their new principal, Best Elementary teachers have been empowered to reach a higher level with the utmost expectations for their student academic achievement. Best Elementary is now, back on the road!