

Harmony/VISTA Anti-Poverty CFG

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An experiment has been going on for the past year in thirteen schools in Indiana and Vermont. Harmony School has been one of these schools. We have been busy combining service learning and the lessons we've learned about the power of Critical Friends Groups (CFGs), as part of a national VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) Americorps demonstration project.

The project partnership is designed to help schools connect with their surrounding neighbors in the pursuit of authentic service-learning projects that combat the effects of poverty on their community. We initiated a service learning class called "Understanding Poverty Together" and facilitated a CFG as part of our project's implementation. We hoped to foster the kind of collaboration and community that are CFG hallmarks in our work. Our CFG's membership reached well beyond the boundaries of a traditional "professional learning community" to include all stakeholders in the

project. In addition to two Harmony members with CFG experience, we invited students from the service learning class, representatives from community agencies, and members of the Bloomington community living in economic poverty to join. We hoped that our meetings would support the development of our work together in much the same way that CFGs have helped teachers improve their classroom practices. We wanted to use the CFG model to bring the classroom and the community together around the topic of poverty.

The format for our meetings evolved over time. We usually used an icebreaker activity as a good way to open up a meeting. After this activity, we would use a protocol to focus

on a dilemma related to poverty that a member brought to the group. We would often end our meetings reading or sharing student work.

In our fourth meeting we did a Consultancy Protocol with Levi, a sophomore in the service learning class. He was working on setting up a cooperative housing meeting that would provide a low-income housing option in Bloomington. Our CFG focused its energies on his dilemma. This meeting was a very powerful example of how our CFG could work. The protocol process made it clear to Levi that the idea of people supporting each other in a shared living



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environment was what really inspired him about his project. Levi left the meeting with new clarity and energy for his project. Using the knowledge and experience of the members in the group and the protocol as a guide, we were able to help this young person realize his vision. Within the next month he helped organize two meetings that planted the seed for the creation of cooperative housing in Bloomington.

We ended that particular meeting with a story that another student member of the CFG had written about living in poverty. His mother and the rest of the CFG members were very moved by his story. Using his words as our text deepened our overall understanding and shared purpose as a

group.

Insights

We weren't aware of other CFG's with memberships or goals like ours. We were a mix of community and school members exploring the potential of service learning around the issue of poverty. We didn't have a model to follow and struggled with many issues as the school year progressed. Some questions that we will be exploring further in the future are:

- Timing - Should we start the service learning class before our CFG in order to involve the students and their interests more?
- Should we invite only those agency reps who are going to work with us on specific projects?
- How should we determine our focus with such a diverse group?
- What role does student interest play in the mix?
- How can we foster consistent membership attendance given the changing schedules of our constituents - students, parents, neighbors, teachers, and agency representatives?
- What kind of incentives can we create for students (such as school credit) to encourage their ongoing participation?

- How do we design these meetings to satisfy the needs of the agency members who are taking time away from their jobs to be here while also giving students the opportunity to develop their own interests?
- How can we document and connect our work to the agencies in such a way that all those involved could demonstrate that their continued work in the CFG was valuable?
- How can we document the value of our joint work so that our membership and impact will continue to grow?

We were trying to use the CFG to shape what was happening in the service learning class. The CFG experience was most powerful when its members were collaborating with and

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supporting students' projects. Using CFG protocols and practices we were able to examine, reflect on and inspire students' efforts.

Even though not all agency representatives experienced the benefits of the students' projects in their work, they felt that their contribution to the students' efforts was worthwhile. We do want to stress that the agency members who felt most connected to the work of the CFG were those working directly with students on their service projects.

Reflecting back on the experience we see that more effort should have been devoted to outreach efforts with people of color and the poorer members of our community. Although

we tried from the beginning to recruit CFG members from the Latino and African-American communities, we were not successful in doing so. We need to closely examine our past efforts and come up with a new plan for next year.

Creating and coaching this CFG was not an easy task to undertake, however it turned out to be quite rewarding in the end. It was probably most satisfying to see the students interact with the agencies, share their work, and brainstorm new ways of impacting on poverty with professionals. Keeping this collaboration alive and bringing about positive change in our school and community remains our goal and we

look forward to the coming school year.

We hope that this broad-based approach to CFGs will be developed in other schools so that we can learn with others as we stretch the potential of the CFG within the school and in the greater community. ❖

If you would like more information about this CFG and its work, e-mail Gina at gweir@bloomington.in.us.

Editor's note – if you'd like more information about the Harmony/VISTA Service Learning Demonstration Project please contact Heidi Vosekas at hvosekas@harmonyschool.org

Protocols in Practice *(continued from page 2)*

was my job to facilitate the organization of Year 5's work. I found it very difficult to step into a position in the last year, as I did not feel that I had a broad picture of the work that had been done previously. This reflective portrait helped me to see the beginning, the middle, and the present."

Jackie: "I've worked with both students before, and I've also presented with Warren at a conference. I am not only amazed by his technical growth, but also by his perceptions of the work at Eisenhower. I feel that Patrick and Warren have captured Eisenhower and what we are about."

Facilitator Response:

MichaelAnn: "It's sometimes difficult to facilitate something that is so close and personal, yet I am always amazed by the professionalism of both teachers and students when given an opportunity to present their work."

How did this help us grow?

Having students more involved has allowed the adults/coordinators to step away and see the parts of the systemic structure and their relationships, as opposed to focusing only on the happenings of their programs. As

the Critical Friends experience of the faculty and students deepened over time, aspects of the "Critical Friends Group culture" became embedded into the school landscape. Formal and informal signs are present throughout the school. Informally, the language of Critical Friends—"clarifying questions", "warm and cool feedback", and other terms, peppers our everyday conversations. Formally, you can walk into classrooms across the campus and see Connections being done in a social studies classroom, a Tuning Protocol being done on an AP Art Studio portfolio, or students presenting and facilitating discussions in a biology classroom.

Rather than looking at individual groups and programs or evaluating test scores, the reflective portrait/video gave us a chance to achieve a holistic view of the reform work that is being done by our school community. The reflective portrait, like the portfolio, tells our story and shows the learning that has occurred among students, teachers, and administrators. We've learned how interrelated our learning is when we're committed to creating a school community that

seeks to be the best for all of its students.

"Woah! You didn't think we were going to close the book with that, now did you? No. We're starting a new chapter. That was only the beginning."—an Eisenhower student, "Dwight D. Eisenhower Houston Annenberg Challenge Peer Review Reflective Portrait", 2002, Eisenhower High School. ❖

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