



# Using NSRF Protocols vs. Ongoing Critical Friends Group® Work

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Many people know of NSRF® through the incredible library of protocols and activities available on our website—[www.nsrffharmony.org](http://www.nsrffharmony.org). Because many of our protocols and activities are freely offered, educators have used them for years, sometimes without the benefit of Critical Friends Group® coaches' training or the support of another person who has taken the training. While our policy of free access has certainly benefited educators, it has sometimes caused confusion between using our protocols and intentionally improving individual practice and school culture through the use of Critical Friends Group (CFG®) communities.

Perhaps a good way to begin to sort out this difference is to define both protocols and Critical Friends Group communities.

A **protocol** is a structured process or set of guidelines to promote meaningful and efficient communication, problem solving and learning. Protocols give time for active listening and reflection so all voices in the room are heard and honored.

A **Critical Friends Group community** is a particular variety of Professional Learning Community (PLC) so unique that we've registered it as a trademark. CFG communities consist of 5-12 members who commit to improving their practice through collaborative learning, the use of structured interactions (protocols), and meeting at least once a month for about two hours. Critical Friends Group coaches create an environment of trust that allows participants to give and receive feedback most effectively, and to use our protocols and activities to help students, teachers, and administrators create a culture of collaboration.

Over two decades ago, a group of educators was recruited to develop structured tools to help colleagues nationwide continually improve their work and develop best practices. This group eventually became the National School Reform Faculty. Every day we strive to fulfill our mission, "empowering educators to create meaningful learning experiences for all by collaborating effectively in reflective, democratic communities that foster educational equity and social justice."

Notice that nowhere in the mission statement are protocols mentioned. This is because protocols are widely useful tools to get productive work done in efficient and effective ways, and CFG communities are only one of the places where that can happen. Let's explore why Critical Friends Group meetings (not just the use of protocols) can be vital to positive school culture change.

**Establishing a time and vehicle for continuous improvement acknowledges its value.** When institutions give time and money to something, they convey their core beliefs and priorities. Schools and districts often say that they want faculty continually to improve their practice. But unless the administration supports that statement with proper training (giving the staff the tools to improve) and sets aside time for the tools to be used productively, significant improvement is unlikely to occur.

Proper training is vital. Without training, members of a PLC don't know how they are supposed to talk about important issues, how to translate conversations into actions, how to feel safe enough to do the hardest, scariest work. Conversely, if a school spends the time and money it takes to train faculty as CFG coaches but doesn't incorporate time in their schedule for CFG meetings to occur, the likelihood that educators will "find time" is very small.

However, once a school gets a critical mass of CFG coaches trained (one coach per 5-10 staff) and the coaches begin to consistently use that training in regular CFG sessions, the work simply becomes part of a school's culture—everyone expects to learn best practices throughout their career. Protocol use will spread through-

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out the school, ensuring that learning will be greater and more will be accomplished in a shorter period of time.

**Significant change takes time.** Many teachers will tell you how frustrating it is when new initiatives are introduced, only to be poorly implemented or completely abandoned six months later because they “weren’t working” or “didn’t show measurable positive results.” Significant change takes time. As CFG meetings become a regular, eagerly-anticipated event on everyone’s calendar, their impact becomes deeper and more meaningful. School leaders who survey their CFG community members consistently find that many participants report a positive change during the first year of implementation. Admittedly, the impact on markers like test scores may take longer to develop.

Using protocols during staff meetings often makes those meetings more productive and efficient. Using protocols to deeply look at and learn from student and adult work over a period of time in trusted CFG communities creates a stronger working environment, more satisfied teachers, and a better education for our students.

**All members fully participate.** CFG communities are deliberately small enough so that all participants can participate. Everyone doing CFG work is expected to participate in two ways. One: they must give feedback on work that their critical friends bring to the meetings. Two: at some point during the school year, they must bring a piece of their own work or their students’ work for the group to examine. In this way, there is assurance that each participant will actively engage.

**All teachers are leaders and must be responsible for their own learning.** “Teachers as leaders” is a phrase heard often among educators. Most use it to acknowledge that teachers are leaders in their classrooms and may take on other roles such as mentoring or coaching.

However, many schools and districts direct teachers to lead by guiding their own learning—continuously trying new techniques, strategies, technology, and other tools in their classrooms. When a teacher belongs to a CFG community, participants commit to taking on this “learning leadership” role. Because of the trust built up in the group, all members can consistently work collaboratively to give each other honest feedback and informed ideas about how to improve their practice, how problems might be solved or new content created.

**Protocols = tools. Critical Friends Group = environment for improvement and cultural change.** When the majority of educators participate in regular CFG meetings, you will see improvement throughout the entire school or district. Everyone becomes more connected and collaborative in the meetings, and feels continual support to learn and grow. Empowered to take control of their own learning, the CFG members contribute positively to school culture. As useful as they are, protocols alone cannot initiate and sustain substantive organizational change.

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