

Our World Café

Gregory Foote, California

A number of us had been to the NSRF Winter Meeting in 2003 and had found the World Café experience enlightening and refreshing. We thought that it would be a great avenue to begin the discussion about what Critical Friends Groups could do for our failing school. One way we tried to make a fundamental difference in the school's collaborative climate was to have a World Café during Common Planning Time on a Thursday last school year. We had hoped to find promise for our future. We had asked to have every 4th Thursday of our school's Thursday Common Planning Time set aside for CFGs. This would give one hour each month to those teachers who were interested in meeting in CFGs. Our World Café was our launching pad. All teachers were invited. We had refreshments and flowers. We lowered the lights and read a poem. We put paper on the tables for doodling and began our World Café conversations.

We had about 30 teachers attend. Directly from that experience four new CFGs formed. Every 4th Thursday until the end of the school year, those CFGs met regularly, as did three others that had already formed before the World Café experience. We had seven active CFGs in all. The attitude among participants was fantastic. Groups had dedicated members who would get together to talk about their particular programs. Programs were spawned and others flourished as a result of this enthusiastic, collaborative work. For example, AVID, our college preparatory program, began and our Academic English Mastery Program was strengthened. Other ongoing programs, such as our school's Environmental Academy, now had a venue to focus on their needs and their direction. Each group

was a voluntary core of teachers supporting each other in their examination of student learning and their decision making about the direction they felt students of our school should take. We were looking at student work and at our building data to determine posi-

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worked hard and found the rewards gained from collaborating on their work with colleagues.

Sadly, when we returned this year, we found that this CFG time had been taken away and replaced with mandatory team, grade level, and department meetings. While these meetings have their place and importance, the fundamental issue of truthful conversation about the direction of where we wanted the school to go took a back seat to mandated directives and informational department meetings. Our thoughtful, voluntary, guided support changed to mandatory Tuesday meetings where protocols were prescribed and articles were chosen for us. Our Tuesday meetings were mandated because we are an under-performing school. The district prescribes 16 Tuesdays per

year to schools like ours. The integrity of our Critical Friends Groups was missing. One or two CFGs do still meet on their own time, but their work does not filter out to the larger school in the ways it did last year.

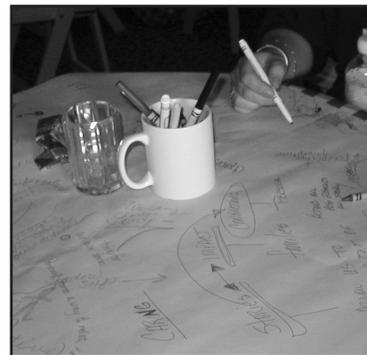
At this year's Winter Meeting we spent great amounts of time discussing the ideal of equity and what it means. We also attempted to discuss what equity looks like. The conversation was rich and insightful. I felt as if my experience in Philadelphia meant more to me as an educator than any other experience I have had in 14 years in this business. I returned to Los Angeles with hopes and thoughts of creating a better and more equitable world for the children of my school. So what does the mandated meeting scenario I've described have to do with equity?

It is equal when all students are given excellent programs and tools to succeed. It is equitable when students have options to find their own success in their schooling through programs that demand a high level of accountability and rigorous higher-level thinking. Both, the AVID program and the AEMP program do this. Without the time

to carefully look at the work we and students do, these programs and others will go by the wayside. Our school's AVID program is in doubt for next year, as are many other programs that help students to succeed. We may not be able to answer what equity in education looks like, but it is quite clear to most when they don't see it.

Today, I sometimes wonder if it is too late to make the changes needed to stop the inertia of the state's taking control of our school; but then I still hope that we can be honest about our direction. I hope that we can look at the children we teach and give them, all of them, the education they deserve.

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Winter Meeting...

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Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "Certainly there is a possible right for you that precludes the need of balance and willful election ... Place yourself in the middle of the stream of power and wisdom which animates all whom it floats and you are without effort impelled to truth, to right, and a perfect contentment." The 2004 NSRF Winter Meeting was a "journey through mud to magic" (to paraphrase my storytelling protocol partner) which placed me back in the middle of the stream of my life, impelling me toward truth and right, if not perfect contentment. ■

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I am still thinking about the question, "What does equity look like?" Without open conversation, how will we get there? We won't. We will continue as an institution to tell ourselves we are reaching all students when in fact the data shows something very different. When every student is empowered to take control of their learning and all students see themselves as a vital connection to the world, then we will begin the road toward real reform. Until then, the best we can do is pretend and congratulate ourselves for thinking we are doing the right thing, instead of actually doing the right thing. It is not easy, but it is critical to have that conversation. CFGs give voice to progress and provide a check on what does and does not work. They bring voice to the table where no voice existed. World Café is not a panacea, but it is a bridge to the table where conversations about where to go begin. ■

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Report from the Directors

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This year, the National Facilitators' Meeting took place in Chicago in May. Conversations among the National Facilitators at this meeting, as well as among Center of Activity contacts at the annual Winter Meeting in January, are just two ways that leaders in the organization learn with and from each other, thus supporting the growth and development of NSRF work nationally.

Hawaii was one of those parts of the country that - up until this spring - did not have a formal way to participate in the decision making of NSRF, or to learn with people in NSRF from other parts of the country. There were people interested in pursuing CFG work, but since Hawaii didn't have any NSRF National Facilitators, there was not a Center of Activity to support the work or to facilitate CFG Coaches Seminars. Educators in Hawaii had to either go to the mainland for their CFG Coaches' seminars, or had to fly NSRF National Facilitators to Hawaii.

So, in February, two NSRF National Facilitators from the mainland and three CFG Coaches from Hawaii co-planned and co-facilitated a two-day Introduction to CFGs for 24 participants from Hawaiian schools. Following the two-day introduction, these CFG coaches from Hawaii were sponsored by an NSRF National Facilitator in Los Angeles, and went to California to co-facilitate a full five-day CFG coaches seminar with her.

Hawaii now has two NSRF National Facilitators, hopes to offer CFG coaches seminars with follow-up, and is our newest NSRF Center of Activity. One of the interesting things about Hawaii's Center of Activity is that it has involved public and charter schools, as well as independent schools, from its inception. Intentionally bringing together these diverse strands of educators is consistent with Hawaii's cultural value of interdependence, and other Centers of Activity will hopefully be able to learn from their experience and work together.

NSRF's National Center provides some direct support to individual CFG coaches, but the bulk of the National Center's work is focused on supporting local Centers of Activity and their National Facilitators. The NSRF National Facilitators in the Hawaii Center of Activity are not bringing national projects to their local community, but are instead using ideas, insights and tools gleaned from their work with the work of others in NSRF's national network to inform their local work and context. That is what building capacity is all about.

From Hawaii to Maine, to Washington and Florida, NSRF Centers of Activity are providing the necessary support to help educators move away from their previously isolated practice toward the development of collaborative learning communities. The ultimate goal? To support every child in developing his or her full capacity as a person, as a learner, and as a responsible citizen. ■

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