

Serendipity

John Pieper, Wisconsin

Since 1989, the Walt Disney Company has presented Disney's American Teacher Awards, saluting outstanding members of the teaching profession. Specifically, the program honors those teachers whose approaches exemplify creativity in teaching and who inspire a joy of learning in their students. In 2003, John Pieper was one of 30 teachers nationwide who received this award. CFG Coaches training was one of the benefits included with this special recognition. This is the last of three installments following John's journey as a new CFG Coach.

A few years ago I picked up extra money working for an auctioneer. We were in the process of combining a number of small estates when a particular group of boxes caught my eye. The word "Kerberger" was neatly printed on the side of each box. To most people, the contents were a worthless assortment of faded papers, outdated textbooks, black and white class photos, and old Valentines. A deeper connection flashed through my mind. I was gazing at a part of my childhood. Like little snippets from a home movie, my memories carried me back to 1964 and Dale School.

Miss Kerberger was my fourth-grade teacher. She was kind and caring. Teaching was her life's passion. I looked through the boxes with reverence and sadly realized how much had been lost when she passed away. Through experience, teachers accumulate a wealth of knowledge. Unfortunately, most of that wisdom is never effectively shared with colleagues. Several days later, while sitting in my own classroom, I envisioned the school as one large compartmentalized box where teachers rarely engaged in meaningful

interaction. The potential for opportunities missed was unsettling. Time passed and fate revealed a new and wonderful destiny for me. I experienced CFG training. The power of collaboration opened up a whole new world.

A little over a year ago, my principal, Mrs. Patti Vickman, and I were putting the final touches on an ambitious CFG action plan. First we would introduce the staff to CFG ideas, and then we would gradually develop a core group for our school's first CFG. We also shared a vision of what this work might look like if it was utilized throughout the district. We thought it would take a great deal of time and effort to get our colleagues in Oshkosh to buy into the CFG work. Fortunately, we were wrong!

Without the CFG training, the teachers had a hard time relating to the benefits gained from regular collaborative practices, but as additional staff members received the CFG train-

ing, momentum for the creation of a CFG gradually increased. The Critical Friends Group at Webster Stanley Elementary School is just beginning to realize how empowering this work can be. Now each time we meet, we gain a deeper understanding of the value of collaboration. We have developed a greater appreciation for the ways in which the protocols can push our think-



Dale School

ing and, in turn, make us more effective in our work. Professional articles now drive our intellectual development. Protocols are widely used throughout the district to improve the effectiveness of our meetings.

We have recently decided to incorporate regular classroom observations as part of our CFG strategic design. We are fortunate enough to have the flexibility within our building to provide opportunities for classroom observations. The observations are strictly voluntary. Members of our CFG who have completed observations have gained

new insights into their own practice. By sharing our enthusiasm, other teachers have expressed interest in what we are doing. We have discussed the possibility of starting a second CFG next year.

There have also been changes in my classroom. At the beginning of the year, the students created a list of classroom rules. We revisit them often, and they have evolved into classroom norms. Reflective writing

has become a regular part of our school day. Various protocols, such as The Final Word, Success Analysis, Chalk Talks, and Gallery Walks are helping the students achieve greater meaning from their work. The learning takes place within the framework of a caring learning community.

Never in our wildest dreams did we imagine that in only one year, our
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Miss Kerberger's Class

with colleagues and students changed. Formal leadership looked at how they supported staff, worked with teacher-leaders and helped others develop skills and begin to change habits. The cycle repeated twice.

Throughout the process, participants were encouraged to pursue NSRF NY Endorsement by ultimately presenting a portfolio of their work demonstrating their facilitation skills in action. Five of the twenty-five participants received endorsement. ALL participants left more skilled.

We see examples of formal and informal leaders at all levels within the district applying NSRF principles and practices:

- We model and encourage the use of feedback as teaching/learning and community-building tools. Not only does this allow us to take the pulse of the group, it engages everyone in a reflective process in which we experience how feedback can shape future events. This happens when a good leader is able to synthesize input on behalf of those they lead and is an essential dimension of building a reflective community of learners.
- Our practice of “transparent facilitation” (characterized by public reflection and sharing your thinking as facilitator regarding choices and intention) allows the group to see us not as leaders who with all the answers but as colleagues striving to help members learn to ask better questions and take increasing responsibility for their own learning and the learning of peers.
- In Vivian’s school (Landmark HS) the teachers have undertaken an extensive re-examination of their twelve-year-old portfolio process. This inquiry makes extensive use of feedback and NSRF structured protocols to guide them in this work. Staff trained as facilitators have emerged as leaders of this process of investigation and reform.
- Two of Alan’s largest high schools

are engaged in the process of forming smaller learning communities. They believe that facilitation skills acquired through applying NSRF principles and practices are absolutely necessary to sustain any change from within.

- Local Endorsed Facilitators have gone on to form Critical Friends Groups and still others have taken on teacher-leadership roles in their schools or stepped up to help plan and facilitate a variety of professional development opportunities.
- A recent series of professional development sessions for Assistant Principals (co-facilitated by Vivian, who was the only participating principal on the team of district facilitators) looked very much like a CFG coaches training, and participants went on to take responsibility for working with their colleagues in ways which closely resemble Critical Friends Groups.

These are a few examples of the way NSRF NY works. NSRF NY works almost entirely from within. You can’t “go to NSRF NY,” but you can find it in more places than you think. ■

NSRF NY Endorsement requires participants to attend approximately 30 hours of training and then to present a portfolio of their work demonstrating their ability to apply what they have learned in their work. An alternative route to endorsement is through an apprentice experience, where the “training” takes place by working along with a National Facilitator. See www.nsrfnny.org for a complete description of the Endorsement Process and Standards for Facilitators.

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district would be committed to offering CFG training to a diverse group consisting of one hundred teachers, principals and administrators. This means that approximately one out of every ten teachers in our district will have had the CFG training. The seeds for success will be nurtured further by the bargained agreement to provide ample collaborative time at all grade levels. There has even been some

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discussion about the possibility of Oshkosh becoming Wisconsin’s first NSRF Center of Activity. We dare to dream.

I believe nothing happens by chance. Sometimes along the path of life an event causes an individual to pause and seek the greater meaning of his being. It is during these moments of reflection that we study the path and contemplate the future. There was a reason why I came across Miss Kerberger’s boxes. Maybe that memory was the spark that is now allowing me to step forward in a leadership role. Maybe it was to help me remember how important teachers are in the lives of the children. Where I once only saw memories in boxes, I now see the future unfolding. Reaching the destination at the end of a journey is not the important part. What we learn, and who we share those experiences with along the way, are the things that give meaning to our journeys. Creating a smoother path for those who follow in our footsteps is the precious gift which we can offer. ■

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