

Doing Principals' CFGs

Dave Lehman, New York

It is very rare that all of the Elementary Principals get together to share...if we could always work this way it would be incredible.

– an Elementary Principal

I enjoy this more than I ever thought I would. Strategies [protocols] are very helpful, and realizing that we have similar issues is reassuring. I look forward to having the consultation piece next time.

– a Secondary Associate Principal

I was very pleased with the way this meeting/training occurred today. I must admit, I was hesitant to become part of a CFG – time issues. However, after this session, I can clearly see the benefits of a CFG and how becoming part of a group can actually save me some time and help me complete my job responsibilities more effectively.

– a Director

Looking at student work is directly applicable to work with department heads and staff at staff meetings. Help with my issue expanded my thinking on it; and helped me to plan an action. I like this a lot.

– a Secondary Principal

These are a few quotes from some of the “Reflections” of the Principals’ CFGs

I have been coaching in the Ithaca City School District in upstate New York. Public School Principals, Associate Principals, and central office Directors typically lead very lonely professional careers. There is only one Elementary Principal in any given elementary school and, although they may meet with their Associate Principals, Secondary Principals find themselves alone in making decisions. And certainly Directors at the middle management level in school districts - e.g. of Special Education, Staff



Newly Re-named Lehman Alternative Community School

Development, and Pre-K are in lonely positions. As the above quotes indicate, it is my strong belief that school district administrators are almost desperately in need of CFG professional learning communities. Thus, in this article I will briefly summarize how I got these groups started, support for them from the Central Administration, how often, where, and when we met, what worked and what didn't.

Several years ago when a new Superintendent of Schools was hired, I was in the interim position of Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, K-12, while continuing to serve as the Principal of the Alternative Community School (6-12). In that capacity in her first summer, the Superintendent consulted with me about activities for a summer workshop with the district's "Administrative Team" (all Principals, Associate Principals, Directors, and Managers). She knew of my involvement with the Coalition of Essential Schools and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, and thus I designed a series of text-based discussions, walkabouts, and an introduction to some other protocols as well. This culminated in my recommendation at the end of the summer workshop that we form several CFGs to continue this kind of professional collegial sharing. Thus, two Elementary Principals groups (four each), a Secondary Principals CFG (four), and a Secondary Associate

Principals group (five) met, with support from the Superintendent, on the last morning of the workshop to engage in "consultancies" and decide on times to meet. Our Secondary Principals CFG, of which I was a member, met regularly for the next two years, either once or twice per month in the office of one of the Principals, on a rotating basis, after school from 3:30-5:00. Although the Superintendent continued to call on me to use CFG protocols (particularly text-based discussions) during our monthly Administrative Team meetings, and despite the other groups very much wanting to do their CFGs, after a meeting or two, all but the Secondary Principals' CFG petered out and did not continue to meet. My guess is that it was too much to expect that they could carry on the CFG activities without the experience a facilitator/coach such as I provided our Secondary Principals.

In the summer of 2001-02, again at the Administrative Team summer workshop, and again with the full support of the Superintendent, I presented a new CFG proposal. This time I offered to facilitate/coach two administrator CFGs, each made up of a mix of Elementary and Secondary Principals, Associate Principals and Directors. Although there was unanimous support for this proposal, it was modified to create three CFGs; one for the Elementary Principals (eight), one for the Secondary Principals and

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Associate Principals (nine), and one for the Directors (seven). [Note: the initial CFGs may have been too small – only four or five in each – as there is probably a critical mass needed of at least seven or eight.] The Superintendent even went so far as to pay for refreshments to be prepared by our district kitchen staff and delivered to the site of each CFG meeting. She included the meeting times for each of these CFGs in the district's Administrators' calendar for the year, indicating these CFG sessions would substitute the second meetings of each of the administrative subgroups each month. Whether such Central Administrative, specifically Superintendent support, is essential to the creation and sustainability of these CFGs is not clear, but it certainly didn't hurt. And I believe that our Superintendent's continually having me use CFG Protocols at Administrative Team meetings at least helped create a new supportive culture for professional learning communities among all our administrators.

These groups met consistently on a monthly basis for the next two years – the Elementary and Secondary Principals groups met after school from 3:30-5:00 and rotated among the different schools so that no one or two had to always drive the farthest to get to the meetings (ours is a 155 square mile district in which schools are widely spread). The Directors met in the morning from 8:30-10:30 in one of the conference rooms in the Central Administration building. [Clearly, the two hour sessions are preferable and were more productive, although we did accomplish things in the hour-and-a-half meet-

I found that these people, despite several having been in the district for a number of years, really didn't know each other very well, and needed to build a sense of trust, particularly as they increasingly came to take risks within their groups to share real concerns, issues, and problems

ings.] During these CFG meetings I introduced each group to a number of protocols and then we re-used several as the participants began to identify issues they wished to tackle and a protocol they thought might help. I introduced and used *Connections* starting with the second session of each group, and used reflections from the very beginning with each group. I also used ice-breakers (or warm-ups) to begin virtually every session as I found that these people, despite several having been in the district for a number of years, really didn't know each other very well, and needed to build a sense of trust, particularly as they increasingly came to take risks within their groups to share real concerns, issues, and problems. I began each CFG with the *Success Analysis* Protocol as a way to get them initially to share something positive and to celebrate successes so as not to focus only on problems – these people in particular are sorely in need of positive strokes and must be encouraged if they are ever to engage in the more difficult challenges facing us all in public education. We established our *Group Norms*, and used all varieties of protocols for getting help on an issue. Most particularly *Consultancies*,

Sticky Issues, and *One Minute Consultants* – as this was frequently what they appreciated the most. Also, we used all of the variations of *Text-Based Discussions* – including *The Final Word*, *Save the Last Word for Me*, and *Text Rendering* (now a personal favorite). We did at least some work with the various protocols for looking at student work, sometimes using these actually to look at administrators work. Although experience with one of these administrator CFGs taught me

that, when using the *Tuning Protocol* for a particular piece of administrator work, that regardless of whether the person says they really want to hear the cool feedback first and it doesn't matter if it's mixed in with the warm, I will always insist on beginning with the warm feedback before going to the cool. Particularly with the Secondary Principals and Associate Principals, we frequently did a check-in at the beginning of our sessions, going around the group, asking each person simply to share where they were, what they were feeling, experiencing, dealing-with, excited about, and/or perplexed by – then sometimes using something from that process as the focus of a *Consultancy* even if only to use the short *Sticky Issues Protocol*.

Lastly, at the end of the second year of coaching these three CFGs I indicated to the Superintendent and subsequently to each of the groups that I would not continue facilitating their sessions and encouraged them to get coaches training for themselves. This led to a CFG Coach at my school and I offering a one-week "Beginning CFG Coaches Training" last summer, which was paid for by the district through the Staff Professional Development office. As a result, all three administrator CFGs are at some stage of functioning on their own with trained Coaches from their ranks now in each group. An additional positive spin-off from all of this work has been the ever expanding use of some of the protocols by our district administrators while working with their various staffs, tackling real issues, looking at student work, and beginning CFGs among the teachers in their buildings. It has taken five years to get this far, but it seems to have been well worth the effort and I'd like to believe that it has begun to make a difference with the students in the elementary and secondary schools throughout our district. ■

Dave Lehman can be contacted at dlehman@aol.com