

Reflections on the First Annual NSRF Research Forum

Donna Reid, Texas

“Helpful”, “impressive”, and “empowering” were just some of the reactions buzzing around the Grand Hyatt’s ballroom at the First Annual NSRF Research Forum held on January 11, 2006, in Denver, Colorado. Almost sixty researchers, Coaches, students, and critical friends from all corners of the country gathered to share their research, question assumptions, dig deeper, and encourage each other in our inquiries related to Critical Friends Groups.

My colleague Mary Matthews and I presented work related to the Teacher as Researcher initiative that the Houston A+ Challenge sponsors in the Houston Center of Activity. As the Consultant for CFG Support, I support the work of the five active inquiry groups to which the Houston A+ Challenge awarded funds, and Mary is the lead teacher-researcher for one of those five groups. Her paper, “Back on the Road: Reflections on the Power of Critical Friends Groups to Improve School Climate and Student Learning at an Urban Elementary School,” describes how her inquiry team re-established CFG’s at Best Elementary, and examined school-wide data to answer the question “How Do CFGs impact student achievement in the core curriculum?”

In year one of Mary’s project, four CFGs with volunteer members that represented approximately half of the faculty were established. The data at the end of the first year shows a remarkable change in the school’s climate. The teacher turnover rate at Best Elementary dropped to 5% in a region where the turnover rate hovers around 22%. Ninety percent of the faculty volunteered to be in a CFG. Also, standardized test scores indicate that there may be a positive correlation between teacher membership in a CFG and student achievement. For example, 66% of the K-2 students whose teachers were in a CFG were reading at grade level while only 54% of students whose teachers were not in a CFG were reading at grade level. Scores on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills show a similar trend in grades three and four. You can read all of Mary’s paper at www.nsrffharmony.org/research.matthews.pdf

My paper, “Leavening the Dough: Growing Quality Teaching by Supporting CFGs,” analyzed the findings of all the Teacher as Researcher inquiry groups and developed a new metaphor for understanding how CFGs can transform professional development and improve student

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learning. In many ways, CFGs are to teacher learning and school improvement what leavening is to bread. First and foremost, CFGs are agents for advancing teacher learning and making it grow. Like yeast or baking powder, CFGs enlarge the “bubbles” of teacher knowledge that are already present in the school reform “dough.” And like biscuits whose baker has left out the baking powder, school reform efforts are destined to fall flat and be hard to swallow unless they include the leavening of collaboration, reflection, and a focus on student learning that can be found in CFGs.

We need to be asking ourselves if membership in a CFG is truly changing our thinking and practice. We need to be demanding evidence from ourselves that educators’ working in a collaborative, reflective group can increase student achievement. Most of all, we need to be continually sharing our findings with each other and with the larger education community.

So What?

Participating in the Research Forum helped me expand my thinking, refine my ideas, and make connections. For example, I started the day by attending Ellen Key’s presentation “Do They Make a Difference? A Review of Research on the Impact of Critical Friends Groups.” This discussion expanded my thinking by giving me a broad overview of the research that has already been done and pointing out weaknesses in the existing studies. Similarly, Angela Breidenstein and Pat Norman’s presentation about sustaining CFGs by offering ongoing support for CFG Coaches helped me rethink and revise the

support model that we are using in my Center of Activity. By far the most helpful element of the Research Forum was the conversations that sprang up after each presentation. During these informal talks, we probed, wrestled with, and sometimes polished the ideas that were being shared. I was grateful for each person’s participation and the connections that we made with each other and with our ideas.

Now What?

By attending the Research Forum, I discovered that there is an enormous hunger throughout our national community for stronger evidence that shows the relationship between CFGs and student learning. Teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders in the trenches need to be collecting and analyzing all kinds of data such as student work, notes from peer observations, and student and teacher reflections. We need to be asking ourselves if membership in a CFG is truly changing our thinking and practice. We need to be demanding evidence from ourselves that educators working in a collaborative, reflective group can increase student achievement. Most of all, we need to be continually sharing our findings with each other and with the larger education community.

Because of this realization, I will change my own practice. I will be more diligent about asking questions, collecting data, and sharing my findings about my own work, and I will encourage all the CFG Coaches that I work with to collect and share evidence that shows how CFGs improve teaching and learning in our schools. My greatest hope is that we will all gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of our work and that we will fill several ballrooms at the second annual Research Forum next year in Seattle. ■

You can read many of the research papers that were presented at the NSRF Research Forum at www.nsrffharmony.org/research.html

A helpful list of common and uncommon sources of data that a school or CFG might collect are listed in Kathleen Cushman’s article “Documenting Whole-School Change in Essential Schools” on the Coalition of Essential Schools website at www.essentialschools.org/cs/resources/view/ces_res/72#1

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