Changing the Conversation: Reflections of Rural New Mexico Principals
Ann House and Connie Chene, New Mexico

For 29 rural school districts in Northern New Mexico, Critical Friends Groups were unheard-of until 2004, when LeadNM began to travel, bringing CFGs to northern New Mexico. Traditionally, professional development in these districts has consisted of presenting principals and teachers with strategies in a workshop format in an effort to “train” them how to do something “better” – interpret data, create “power” standards, increase math and reading scores on standardized tests – all with the idea that somehow this “training” would translate into action in the classroom.

As in other areas across the country, the idea of authentic collaboration was unheard-of in these rural districts. Funded through a New Children’s Learning (NCLB) Leadership Grant in 2003, the University of New Mexico, in partnership with the Northern New Mexico Network (a consortium of rural school districts), created LeadNM as part of a concentrated effort to bring principal leaders together in profession-al learning communities. For the next two years, preconceived ideas of professional development were challenged at every level – from superintendents to school staff – as our notion of professional learning communities began to shape adult and student learning alike. One of the principals spoke forcefully during the early days of the grant, “After you’ve been out in the real world slugging it out and you’ve been sued by the ACLU and you’ve had to restrain parents and you’re restraining children and you’re facing all these other things, I don’t want somebody telling me how it should be.”

Over the past two school years, six principal cohort CFGs totaling approximately 76 principals have been served by LeadNM. Each cohort meets for a full day once a month as a Critical Friends Group. As the participants become more familiar with the components of learning communities, e.g. norms, connections, protocols, more and more are beginning to implement these components at their school sites. Many have reported great success with the use of norms for staff meetings. One principal has gone so far as to suggest to her staff a norm whereby the only focus of their staff meetings will be student learning. Thus, she reports, all other matters pertaining to “management” will be handled in a different manner at different times. She reports that administrative issues no longer consume time during staff meetings. Others have adapted Connections to share success stories, and one principal has even reported to using protocols as is being used every morning in a kindergarten class – reporting that Connections has allowed the teacher a productive way to allow kids to say whatever is on their minds and to then focus better on the work at hand.

In their monthly Critical Friends Group the principals are looking at student work, using protocols to face dilemmas, using test to grow new knowledge together around issues of leadership, equity and poverty. NCLB and teacher quality. Throughout the year, cohort participants have worked on the theory of shared, lateral accountability and how these CFGs are creating structures to help each district respond to students’ needs.

As the work with the principal cohorts of LeadNM began in Fall 2004, we asked our participants to consider how their individual school sites respond to the assumption that all kids can learn. We spent 6 months using Kegan and Lacey’s book, How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work, with the purpose of helping our participants understand and reflect on where they might be stuck NOT changing. Since leadership is very personal, the Kegan and Lacey book helps leaders start with themselves. We thus spent a large amount of our time in small feedback groups, using the process the authors offer for reflection. One of our focus areas grew to “How can we as leaders help change the conversation in our schools so that the talk is about what matters most, student and adult learning?”

We then moved into the model created by Richard DuFour in the 2004 book Whatever It Takes, Principals must direct the conversation so they “go deeper.” Each participant has been asked to test the idea of seeking out the conversation that is most significant to them. They will attempt to focus on the next school year. Combining this with the Kegan and Lacey model of moving from “New Year’s” (continued on page 16) to 4. Commit to interrupt and transform inequities in your local context and engage others in this process.

By the end of the week, we were all inspired and tired. We turned toward home with heads full of new ideas, new perceptions, and much unpacking still to be done. We left committed to taking our learning back with us to engage in our work in a different way. We formed strong bonds throughout the week (our community of resistance) and are hopeful that we can come together again as a group sometime soon to reflect on our experiences, support each other in our local work, as we continue to grow in our understanding and practice.

Sometimes when we attend a transformative seminar or training it can be difficult to share it with anyone who didn’t experience it with us. And often, at such times, we turn to poetry to bridge the gap between inner thoughts and language.

Below is a reflection on the week from one of our participants, which resonated with many of us who were there.

How to Coach for Equity

Have courage
Listen to the voices of those at the table and those Who never get invited to the table
Be empathetic
Be strong
Have voice
Use it
Live in a large risk zone
Wear 8 colored hats
Remember your life
Forgive your fear
Be resilient
Be like Velcro
Share readings
Connect people
Bear witness
Be yourself
(with no apologies)
Keep your sense of humor
(Laugh at yourself! Laugh with yourself–)
Take the stuff you don’t like about yourself
And shake it up
Take the stuff you like about yourself
And shake it up
Be water
Be persistent
Have a map
Make it go where it doesn’t now

- Alex MacPhail, Southern Maine Partnership

For more information on future Coaching for Educational Equity Seminars please contact Kim Feicke at feicke@lclark.edu

(continued on page 16)
that persuades NSRF work drives three following essays that explore such issues as teachers’ cultural blinders; defining a moral institution; and the inherent difficulty of school reform. In the final section, “Unhurdling the Elements,” a middle-school principal recounts how she reshaped her management policies to reflect her CFG experience. A final entry, “NSRF-New York,” shows how NSRF’s principles can take on a life of their own, largely or completely independent of the organization itself.”

Educational HORIZONS can be downloaded in its entirety from our website, www.nsrfharmony.org

Daniel Baron can be contacted at dbaron@indiana.edu

(continued from page 1)

Resolutions” (i.e.: we are going to focus on results... somehow) to a language of commitment (we are going to create a systemic plan to focus on the results of our students by incorporating the following benchmark...), the participants are committing themselves to the concept that failure is not an option. Using the Individual Monthly Action Plan framework, each participant has set a goal that is personal and focused. While it is clear that this will help create actionable plans for Critical Friends Group participants over the final year of the project, it is also understood and articulated to the participants that much of this will not be sustainable without the commitment and understanding of all the stakeholders. Our work with the principals these past years has helped us see that schools truly want to work toward the academic success of all kids, but that very few have individualized plans within their schools to support this type of success.

One critical element in the success of this project is the component aptly entitled, “Circuit Riders.” These two positions are filled by former administrators who travel to the rural districts and provide on-site, sustainable support to the cohort participants. These Circuit Riders are trained as Critical Friends Coaches and continue to ask the tough questions of principals as they visit and listen.

A reflection from one of the participants states it best, “Our district is better because of LeadNM—because our vocabulary has changed as a direct result of the knowledge and wisdom shared by our trainers. We are moving in a positive way from the language of complaint to the language of action and collaboration for our students...”

Ann House may be contacted at ahouse@unm.edu, and Connie Chene may be contacted at cchene@comcast.net


(continued from page 6)

It Is Not Rocket Science: The Challenge, Struggle, Will and Skill Lie Within Each of Us
Camilla Greene, Connecticut

A review of Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males: Closing the Achievement Gap, by Dr. Alfred Tatum.

October 2, 2005 marked the passing of August Wilson, one of the prominent African-American playwrights to chronicle the plight of Africans in America. In a radio interview on WBLS a friend and colleague of Wilson noted that Wilson had dropped out of public school in 10th grade and educated himself in the libraries. The question then became: would August Wilson have become the chronicler of the African experience in America and prominent playwright that he did become if he had remained a student in public education? In reflecting on the notion that public high school education might do more harm than good in centering African-American male identity, and might not equip them with the knowledge, skills and critical thinking they need to become productive citizens and lifelong learners, I have come to the conclusion that public schools classrooms as they are currently structured do not develop the full potential of all African American males. And I maintain that most African-American males engaged in learning and skill acquisition in most public high school classrooms find it irrelevant at best and hostile at worst to their lives and life experiences. Dr. Alfred Tatum provides us with a framework that authentically validates the life experiences of these students and at the same time teaches literacy in ways that engage the heart, mind and soul of these Black adolescent males. Dr. Tatum, in his book Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males (Stenhouse Publishers, 2005) states that successful teachers of Black male students see “…literacy instruction as a tool of resistance” (81) In this book he puts forth that Black male students need to have literacy skills embedded in the reading and understanding of short and longer texts written by Black males describing the realities of Black males in America. To that end, Dr. Tatum includes a two-paragraph text by Michael Eric Dyson (2004), “Letter to My Son...Everett in Prison” tatum describes the use of the letter as an example of the Black male surrender. “Their surrender is in large part connected to an arrested development resulting from their inability...to resist social conditioning” (87) The teaching of literacy skills and reading strategies in

Must-Read Texts

“Below is a list of other must-read texts I would recommend for Black males reading amid turmoil. Most of them can be used as ‘cultural books’ to engage Black male students. My list is by no way exhaustive; I do not mean to suggest that these are the only must-read texts for Black males. Beyond these recommended texts, Black males need exposure to a vast array of fiction and nonfiction texts across genres as suggested by Carol Collins (1993).” Source: Dr. Alfred Tatum, Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males, Stenhouse Publishers, 2005. Must-Read Texts: Pages 56-59

• The Fact: Three Young Men Make a Promise and Fulfill a Dream, by Sampson Davis, George Jenkins and Rameck Hunt
• There Are No Children Here, by Alex Kalitowska
• A Hope in the Unseen: An American Odyssey from the Inner City to the Ivy League, by RonSuskind
• The Beast, by Walter Dean Myers
• Our America: Life and Death on the South Side of Chicago, by LeAlan Jones, Lloyd Newman, and David Isa
• The Greatest, by Walter Dean Myers
• Letter to My Nephew, by James Baldwin
• Stories of the Scottsboro, by James Goodman
• Workin’ the Chain Gang: Shakin’ Off the Dead Hand of History, by Walter Mosley
• Think Big, by Ben Carson
• And Still We Rise: The Trials and Triumphs of Twelve Gifted Inner-City Students, by Miles Corwin

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