Changing the Conversation: Reflections of Rural New Mexico Principals

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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 had 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 No Child Left Behind (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 professional learning communities. For the next two years, preconceived ideas of professional development were challenged at every level – from superintendents to school staff – as the language 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."

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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 that *Connections* 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 text 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 Lahey'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 Lahey 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 expressed the interest that they "go deeper." Each participant has been asked to pick at least one category for success which they will attempt to focus on during the next school year. Combining this with the Kegan and Lahey model of moving from "New Year's

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that pervades 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, "Unbundling 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." ▯

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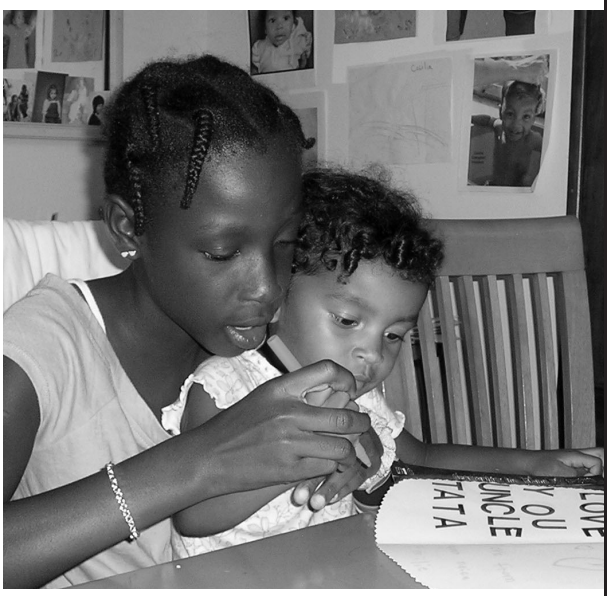

The mission of the National School Reform Faculty is to foster educational and social equity by empowering all people involved with schools to work collaboratively in reflective democratic communities that create and support powerful learning experiences for everyone.

Resolutions" (i.e.: we are going to focus on results… somehow) to using a language of commitment (…we are going to create a systemic plan to focus on the results of our students by incorporating the following benchmarks…), 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, is it 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.

"Isolation is the greatest enemy" -anonymous reflection

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…" ▯

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DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R., Karhanek, G. (2004). Whatever it takes: How Professional Learning Communities Respond When Kids Don't Learn. *Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service.*

Kegan, R., Lahey, L. (2001). How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work. *San Francisco, Jossey-Bass*