What really struck me at the last Winter Meeting was the number of individuals who shared with me some degree of discontent with their CFG’s work. They spoke of a mismatch between their group’s actual collaborative work and their vision of the possible, of wondering how to push their CFG to the next level, or of the challenges of doing CFG work in their specific contexts. This was particularly interesting to me since it was the incongruity between my hopes and the results of CFG work that first motivated me to explore critical friends groups as a researcher.

Several years ago I had gone through coaches training to become a member of a group of colleagues from our local school district and university, and as a group we had initiated several new CFGs. I felt affirmed in this space where both my questions and expertise counted, amazed by the potential learning from a long, deep, collaborative discussion of just one piece of student or teacher work, and excited to learn about how many different types of protocols would work. However, once the novelty began to wear off and I grew weary of the monthly question “Does anyone have work they would like to bring to the group?”

Uncertain of whether my discontent related to my own unrealistic expectations or to our CFG’s need to push forward in a new direction, I began pursuing answers to questions such as: “How can we follow up?” What is the ultimate potential for a CFG? What factors help or hinder a group in meeting this potential? How do CFGs develop into strong learning communities? How can this development be facilitated?

My research began in the library as I searched for research reports specifically related to CFGs and more generally related to professional learning communities and group development. My interest in pursuing these questions was heightened when I discovered, through claims about the effectiveness of CFGs in enhancing collegial relationships and teacher professionalism, and in impacting teaching and learning, the existing body of research on collaborative inquiry, and the many CFGs that have held CFGs back from meeting their full potential.

These struggles have related to relation-
What Happens When We Intentionally Reflect on Our CFG’s Work?
Ellen Key Ballock, Pennsylvania

What really struck me at the last Winter Meeting was the number of individuals who shared with me some degree of discontent with their CFG’s work. They spoke of a mismatch between their group’s actual collaborative work and their vision of the possible, of wondering how to push their CFG to the next level, or of the challenges of doing CFG work in their specific contexts. This was particularly interesting to me since it was the incongruity between my hopes and results of CFGs that first motivated me to explore critical friends groups as a researcher.

Several years ago I had gone through coaches training and was very much impressed by one of my colleagues from our local school district and university, and as a group we had initiated several new CFGs. I felt affirmed in this space where both my questions and expertise counted, amazed by the potential learning from the experiences of others, and excited to share my work with others. What I remember most is the amazing amount of student or teacher work, and excited to pursue answers to questions such as the following: “What have I learned from this month?” “Does anyone have work they would like to bring up?” “What kinds of learning are you experiencing?” I felt affirmed in the group, and my actual CFG experience that first motivated me to explore critical friends groups as a researcher.

What Happens When We Intentionally Reflect on Our CFG’s Work? (continued from page 8)

Ellen Key Ballock

Several years ago I had gone through coaches training and was very much impressed by one of my colleagues from our local school district and university, and as a group we had initiated several new CFGs. I felt affirmed in this space where both my questions and expertise counted, amazed by the potential learning from the experiences of others, and excited to share my work with others. What I remember most is the amazing amount of student or teacher work, and excited to pursue answers to questions such as the following: “What have I learned from this month?” “Does anyone have work they would like to bring up?” “What kinds of learning are you experiencing?” I felt affirmed in the group, and my actual CFG experience that first motivated me to explore critical friends groups as a researcher.

What Happens When We Intentionally Reflect on Our CFG’s Work? (continued from page 8)

Exploring Critical Friends Groups as Researcher...
What Happens When We... (continued from page 21)

inequities have we identified within our own context? How are we responding?
• What biases and stereotypes have we identified within our practice or within ourselves? How are we responding?
• What are we learning about the relationship between culture and student learning? How are we working towards more culturally responsive practices?
• How do we hold one another accountable to taking action based on what we learn and discuss as a group, within our own individual practice or within our organization as a whole?
• How do we know whether we are making progress as a group? How do we measure success? What evidence or documentation do we have of our own learning and impact? What differences can we identify in student achievement across all subgroups?


This research has been funded in part by a grant from the Lastinger Center for Learning.

Ellen Key Ballock can be reached at elenkey@hotmail.com

there were 32 new CFG Coaches seminars. CFG Coaches seminars are our most typical introduction to the work of NSRF and our mission. These 32 sessions reached educators in 19 states through 20 Centers of Activity in every region from Massachusetts to Hawai’i.

NSRF dues-paying membership added a new dimension to sessions this summer. Offering membership to seminar participants provides a new opportunity for them to be engaged in the national NSRF community and support the mission of NSRF. The summer sessions in Hawai’i were the first to build in a one-year NSRF membership for participants.

This summer has been another learning opportunity for all of us. Our continued work has come a long way in spreading our mission and vision for democratic and equitable schools. The door has been opened to hundreds of new NSRF colleagues and scores of old ones have been renewed in their practice and purpose. We look forward to reflecting on the important work of this summer in search of its impact on the lives of our students this fall.

The NSRF events database was the source for the information in this article. This database is only as good as the data provided, so if you are an NSRF National Facilitator, please let the National Center know about any upcoming NSRF seminar experiences, so we may promote them on our website and use the collected information to enrich our network.

Chris Jones can be contacted at cjones@nsrfharmony.org

Peggy Silva, New Hampshire

NSRF’s Living History: An Interview with Greg Peters

Greg Peters

T  wo years ago, Gregory Peters became the director of SF-CESS, the San Francisco Coalition of Essential Small Schools, a regional center of the Coalition of Essential Schools and a center of activity of the NSRF. Prior to this work, Greg served as principal and coach for the Leadership High School in San Francisco, a ten-year-old charter school in the southeastern section of this city. Of the 140 students currently enrolled at Leadership, 95% are students of color, and 40% of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Greg remains co-principal of Leadership High School, serving as a liaison between this laboratory school and the larger network of organizations focused on school change.

Greg notes that poor nutrition, gangs, and violence are major factors in his students’ daily lives. Leadership High School is a safe community for our students, but our students are victims and witnesses and even sometimes purveyors of the violence that surrounds them.

We absolutely know our children well, and as a result are committed to serving them even though we know any one of them could exist on either side within the cycle of violence and oppression that plagues our urban youth.

How were you introduced to NSRF? What is this organization’s role in your work?

I was a member of a CFG just as they were introduced. The following year (1996) I trained with Juli Quinn as a coach, and coached a group from Ocean High School, where I was a math and art teacher for six years. CFGs became essential in my work as a new principal at Leadership High School.

Just in its third year, Leadership was not a good place for students or for their teachers. The school lacked a strong culture of professional development. CFGs were a natural fit in helping to shift the culture to that of a learning organization. The faculty of Leadership High School was firm in its commitment that I serve as an instructional leader, so we had to negotiate what that meant in the daily life of our school. We spent that first year learning how we needed to work together. CFGs provided a needed structure for our learning. We used that structure, but operated under a different name. At the time, NSRF did not have a presence in the Bay Area, so we chose to call our groups “I-Groups,” a combination of CFG principles and mini-research groups. We trained our department leaders as coaches, although we have heterogeneous groups, not department members. Our I-Groups meet every three weeks in a rotation of collaboratively led by departments, teams, and professional development.

We are very conscious in our school’s I-Groups and in our five-day training seminars about our focus on equity. While it is the challenge for every participant to keep equity at the center of our work, how do we measure success? It is coaches’ responsibility to ensure this. Our school is located in a tough place, but we have a lot to be proud of. Following an independent audit of the San Francisco Unified School District, Leadership High School was one of only two schools cited for making progress in closing the achievement gap. I choke saying this out loud because our progress still is not even close to being enough. We need to share this information to help sustain the work, but in the larger context, our successes are merely a blip on the screen of an intense urban area such as San Francisco.

Greg, please describe the roots of your commitment to equity in your life and your work.

As an openly gay school leader, the concept of equity is an innate part of my individual profile. However, my greater sense of empathy comes from growing up as a gay and closeted member of a poor Black island family on welfare. As a teenager I passed for straight because that is the first assumption of others, and for middle-class because I am white and educated. As a result, I was able to hear what my own oppressors (those who looked like me) said about me while I was in the very same room. I was hated in front of my face without a filter because they didn’t know I was their target. I learned quickly what those with power and prejudice said of others when they believed the others were not in their presence. Out of fear, defense, anger and frustration - and in ignorance of what exactly to do - I learned

(continued on page 20)