Melinda
Greg Peters, California

After recently crossing paths with a former student, I recalled this reflection written in November of 2007.

O
n Thursday, November 6, 2003, DeShawn was shot on the #14 Mission bus at 3:37 pm. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time—too close to a gang-related incident. Noting helicopters circling overhead had become all too “noninterruptive” for me. It was just before 4:00 that I first noticed them. They weren’t over the highway, so I ruled out an accident or traffic. Around this time, I received a fax from the district informing me of the shooting. The next morning, the school car from our neighborhood police station visited and informed our dean, Betty, about the details of the shooting and the potential impact on our community. Our school had faced crises before and we knew we had to respond.

To some, the shooting of DeShawn would not be considered a “crisis” for us. He was not our student. However DeShawn was a student at our neighboring school, which resides on the same block. The shooting itself was gang-related (even though DeShawn was not in a gang), this alerted me to the possibility of further violence. He was shot on “the 14,” a bus many of our students take home. He came from the same neighborhood as many of our students and was known by them. DeShawn was an African-American pub-
lic high school student in the same city as our students. Our students are deeply connected to the reality of their peers—especially when their reality is one of life and death—a topic our urban youth know far better than they should.

Advocacy—our most personalized class—stays together for a student’s entire four years, has the lowest student–teacher ratio, and is the vehicle for students to go directly home using alternative routes) as well as coaching with a more personal touch (encouraging parents to talk with their children about what it feels like to hear of another shooting… another person of color… another youth…). I also challenged parents not to assume there was no connection between their own children and those involved in the shooting.

Gang issues have been hot in San Francisco lately. In part due to our local gang issues, our school has a dress code. Recently, Betty had been experiencing recurring acts of disrespect from our students around our dress code. Students who normally had little issue complying were now coming to school out of dress code and displaying defiance when addressed about it. As a community, we knew there was a correlation between the rise in such interactions and the extent to which students felt (or did not feel) safe in their community. As individuals and as organizations, I think we are slower to respond to our local context than our students are because it is their home.

That Friday, Melinda (an African-American female) walked by Betty (a white woman) sporting a prominent red hat (hats and the color red, a gang color, are not permitted.) Betty addressed Melinda and her hat—Melinda blatantly ignored Betty and continued on as if Betty pushed the issue. Melinda vehemently refused to return to Betty’s seat. Betty told her to go back to her seat. She refused to engage and got up to go home.

As she walked out of my office, I noticed her backpack. In bold black marker it read, “Fred - October 10, 1999 - RIP.” She had been here before.

DeShawn died later that afternoon. Melinda chose to stay home on that Monday. She never apologized to Betty.

My heart aches. It aches for Melinda; it aches for all the “Melindas” of whom I am unaware. Most of all, it aches at the recognition that alone, I am not enough: I will need the “Melindas” and their grandmothers before me to keep educating me. I will need to listen more and when I am done, I will need to listen harder—for alone, I am not enough.

I sat with many unanswered questions—questions that make me wish to rethink other ways I should have engaged with Melinda:

• What was the role of race for this African-American woman dealing with two white administrators at a time when the black community of San Francisco is being killed off—literally—every weekend?

On a similar note, what was the role of authority? More than just the authority of an administrator, what is the authority of a school, a family or the street? Which authority takes priority for which students and under which circumstances? In the service of our students, how can we bring all of these together for consideration?

• Finally—what of this “disrespect”? We are quick to cry, “vulnerable” or “disrespected,” but I cannot help but... (continued on page 18)
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To some, the shooting of DeShawn would not be considered a “crisis” for us. He was not our student. However DeShawn was a student at our neighboring school, which resides on the same block. The shooting itself was gang-related (even though DeShawn was not in a gang), this alone heightened our concern for his safety. DeShawn was known by them. DeShawn, who was raised in the same city as our students. Our high school student in the same neighborhood as many of our students and from the same neighborhood, our school has a dress code. Recently, Betty had been experiencing recurring acts of disrespect from our students around our dress code. Students who normally had little issue complying were now coming to school out of dress code and displaying defiance and anger when addressed about it. As a community, we knew there was a correlation between the rise in such infractions and the extent to which students felt (or did not feel) safe in their community. As individuals and as organizations, I think we are slower to respond to our local context than our students are because it is their home.

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Turned to face her I stated, “Be careful, there is still a gun on the 14.” A bus many of our students take home. He came from the same neighborhood as many of our students and was known by them. DeShawn was an African-American public high school student in the same city as our students. Our students are deeply connected to the reality of their peers’ lives – especially when their reality is one of life and death – a topic our urban youth know far better than they should.

Advocacy – our most personalized class – stays together for a student’s entire four years, has the lowest student-teacher ratio, and is the vehicle for our schoolwide communication. I wrote a letter to distribute the following advisory classes in order to share the essential information about the shooting and a related school message – just enough facts to inform everyone and dementify the many rumors that come with any media-glorified event. We offered pragmatic knowledge of teaching students to go directly home using alternative routes as well as coaching with a more personal touch encouraging parents to talk with their children about what it feels like to hear of another shooting… another person of color… another youth…. I also challenged parents not to assume there was no connection between our own children and those involved in the shooting.

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I called Melinda’s grandmother, who was apologetic and supportive of both the rule and the consequences. My students’ parents and grandparents have consistently taught me a vital lesson… our students are not our kids. Our students come to us with the values and morals of their families deeply imbedded in their being. I find that our schools’ expectations of our students often fall short of those of their families.

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• What was the role of race for this African-American woman dealing with two white administrators at a time when the black community of San Francisco is being killed off – literally – every weekend?

• On a similar note, what was the role of authority? More than just the authority of an administrator, what is the authority of a school, a family or the street? Which authority takes priority for which students and under which circumstances? In the service of our students, how can we bring all of these together for consideration?

• Finally – what of this “disrespect”? We are quick to cry “vulnerable” or “disrespected,” but I cannot help but (continued on page 18)
work. These relationships and alliances provide me with the support I need to maintain the strength to continue this work.

Tanisha, you mentioned CFE and I know Kim is involved in that work as well. How is CFE the same as or different from your work as facilitators of new coaches’ seminars?

Tanisha: CFE provides the tools, definitions, and support needed to lead for educational equity. Personally, I see this as different from coaches’ seminars because it creates the space for the emotional, realistic and appropriate “self-work” needed to lead for educational equity.

When I am facilitating a traditional CFG Coaches Seminar, as opposed to a seminar focused on equity, I do not always have the support I need from my co-facilitators to be able to speak my truth. When I am involved in CFE work, I know that my truth, and the truths of the participants, is needed and supported by my colleagues. In traditional seminars, I have been asked to lead the “equity day,” or the “equity exercise.” With CFE, I know that equity is at the center of our work, and that we are ALL responsible for it; it’s no longer the special responsibility of colleagues of color.

Kim: For me the difference between a CFE and a CFG seminar lies in its primary goal. Very briefly, a CFG seminar gives you the skills and tools to run a CF– with all that entails. The goal of a CFE seminar is to engage you in deeper reflection on equity, and the disposition to use them to challenge, interrupt and transform the status quo. CFE uses some CFG processes, but also many others. I have come out of CFE with a heightened awareness of my privilege as a white woman and a deeper understanding of where I need to take my facilitation in order to challenge and support others in this journey. I’ve gained a new understanding of what it means to work across difference with colleagues who look and think differently from me.

As NSRF continues to evolve and grow, what are your greatest hopes and fears for our work?

Tanisha: I hope that we continue to grow, and work with those who see it as a separate entity that we should divide into two groups: those of us who see CFEE as a critical, essential piece of all CFG work, and those who see it as a separate entity that we should be able to “choose” if and when we incorporate it into our curricula and work.

Kim: My greatest fear for NSRF is that we will allow ourselves to be immobilized by the discomfort that comes with unpacking and addressing our own biases and assumptions around equity work, and that we will block our ability to hold ourselves accountable for moving forward in our work.

My greatest hope is that as an organization, we will be able to develop the processes we need to engage in dialogue and reflection to strategize where we are in our mission and what our next steps are so that we can have a decisive impact on the enormous gap that exists between who achieves and who does not.

Students at the Center... (continued from page 11)

wonder what respect looks like in the eyes of our students – especially those students whose lives are defined by race and authority and family and the street.

Melinda attended school through her senior year but did not graduate. Her relationship with me through that time continued to be “cold and yet soft.”

I recently ran into Melinda – three years later – while walking downtown; she gave me a big hug and proudly proclaimed that she had earned her diploma and was working for social justice at AmeriCorps. She said she’d stop by to see me soon. I still find myself questioning the inequity embedded in the ways we define respect.

I look forward to exploring my questions with Tanisha in the struggle for equity. I still have much to learn from her.

must think that this book shows many parallels between the work of Critical Friends Groups and the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) because of the tremendous amount of post-it notes and underlining that was evident when I finished reading. Even after rereading to pull out significant quotes, I felt myself saying yes that is true and fits perfectly into what I am doing.

The book opens with a forward by Lee Shulman. He describes the work of CASTL as follows: “The scholarship of teaching and learning ... views teaching as serious, intellectual work, ask good questions about their students’ learning, seek evidence in their classrooms that can be used to improve practice, and make this work public so that others can critique it, build on it, and contribute to the wider teaching commons” (p. ix). He points out the need for making the work public, which is often the missed step or a step not included in past CFG work. I recognize there is a very fine line between making work public and breaking the trust of the CFG, and this could be part of the reason for the lack of substantial literature about the work of CFGs. But as I reflect back, I wonder about the path the work of the critical friends traveled. As a first-year coach, I went to a portfolio evaluation of the work of second-year coaches in Pawling, N.Y. There, experienced coaches were required, as part of the process, to document evidence through portfolio-making and to publicly defend the work of their CFG. I am wondering now whether the dropping of this component of the work seven years ago has contributed to the lack of current longitudinal evidence to substantiate the powerful work that has been happening in CFGs over the past ten years.

In the book ofCASTL, Hatch points out that “few reform efforts reach directly into the classroom to look carefully at what teachers do” (p. 3). The work of the National School Reform Faculty and theHoustonA+ Challenge(formerly Houston Annenberg Challenge) tried, and I think were very successful in, reaching into the classrooms to the teachers and the students. There is powerful anecdotal information on the impact the CFG work has in schools. This journal’s archive contains stories about stories about the positive impact of our collaborative, reflective work. The question is to what end. As a group of teachers and inquirers, we need to create the needed research and produce the literature of our own work.

Hatch illuminates some of the pitfalls of teachers doing research, “the fact that the demands of teaching must take precedence over the demands of research makes it particularly difficult for teachers to maintain a focus on a particular issue or question. For teachers, the object of study is like a moving target that refuses to stay still long enough to get a careful look...” (p. 18). Hatch continues throughout the book describing the successes and challenges that faced the teachers participating in the program. The book brings the teachers to life, using their writings, until their voices are heard loud and clear.

The conclusions that Hatch presents are on target and speak to the trials that I go through in maintaining my own work with CFGs. He states in one conclusion, “the current working conditions for teachers fail to provide adequate time and rewards for the careful examination of teaching and learning, but they also underscore how much can be done even under adverse conditions.” He continued, “what might be possible if we had a system of education that … embraced the idea that teachers’ expertise can be a critical resource in redefining classroom practice and improving schools” (p. 101).

I recommend this book to anyone in a CFG, working to develop CFGs, or interested in changing teaching and learning systems for the good of our students.