One plus One equals One

Michaelann Kelley and Mary Matthews, Texas

"I felt one of the most effective activities was Connections. In the beginning it was one of the most awkward things to do, but by the end I felt that everyone was more comfortable…I believe this program (CFG) could work wonders in school…I hope that we can got back to school and train others so that they can be equipped with these tools." Vladimir, 11th grader, Eisenhower High School

The quote above could have been taken from almost any reflection sheet in any Critical Friends Group training, but it wasn't. The above reflection is just one from the newly trained student CFG coaches. This first for the Houston educational landscape took place during the third week of June, when 15 students were trained in the processes of Critical Friends Group, the professional development approach embraced by the adult educators of the students' schools. The students were part of a pilot program sponsored by Houston A+ Challenge to promote leadership, reflective practice and study skills. Groups of students from Challenge Early College High School (Houston ISD) and Dwight D. Eisenhower High School (Aldine ISD) participated in the weeklong program.

Mary Matthews pictured far left, Michaelann Kelley pictured fourth from left, center.

We (the authors) facilitated the daily sessions and were impressed with the consistent high quality of student insights and reflections. Not unlike adults trained in the CFG protocols and processes, the students reported that many of their experiences were powerful and life-changing. Tim Martindell, Houston A+ Challenge CFG Program Director, pointed out, "These students' Critical Friends Group journey runs parallel to the paths that many of their teachers have traveled before them and the same journey that I have seen in many participants have in my CFG trainings."

While the group faced many challenges and successes because they were the first to experience the program, both the students and the facilitators learned much more than was planned. The agenda had all the protocols of an adult CFG training, ice breakers, norms and team building. In addition, the students participated in leadership exercises and texts on study skills and time management looking at maximizing their potential. Teachers, club sponsors and administrators nominated the students based on the following criteria: newly elected school leadership positions, advisory facilitator positions or for their potential to change school climates at their respective schools. The students are expected to return to their campuses and implement the protocols, activities and leadership skills with their peers in the classroom, in clubs and extra curricular activities.

One goal that was definitely achieved was the planting of seeds for dynamic student leaders. As Jasmine wrote, "This past week has been a life changing experience…I've done things that I never imagined I would do…including finding out what kind of leader I can be…I have learned how to take control without being a control freak and

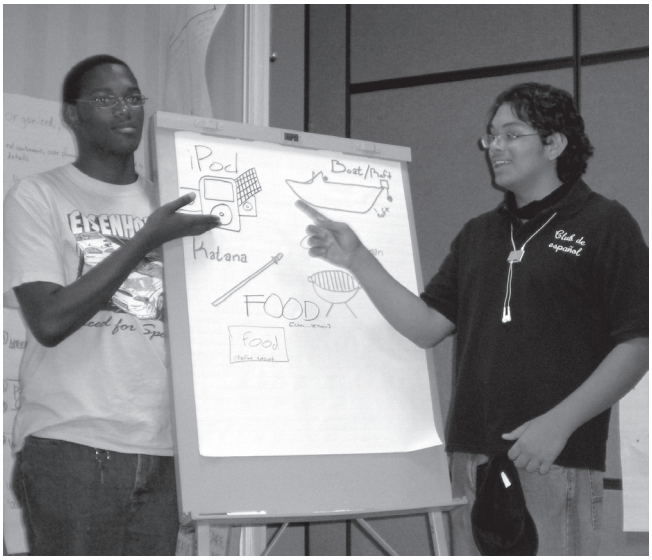
"This program is one of the best things I have ever experienced. Yes, we learned some of the things that can be used as a leader to help groups and clubs, and we also had a lot of fun." – 11th grader, Eisenhower High School

"I feel that this program has been really eye-opening. I feel that I am going to leave here as a better person … I feel that if people go into this program with the mentality that they will give their all, then they can make bonds that will last a lifetime." – 11th grader, Eisenhower High School

getting a group on the same page to prevent negativity…I owe all my success in leadership from this point forward to this program."

Janie, a 12th grader at Challenge Early College High School, wrote, "At the end of the week we were no longer two schools thrown into the same program, we were friends that shared the same experience." After reading this reflection, Mary and I are confident that these students are going to shine. One school in Aldine ISD plus One school in Houston ISD equals One group of students ready to take on the world – together.

The statements below were taken directly from students' reflection sheets. You can also hear from a couple of the students directly in a video chronicling the week of CFG training on the Houston A+ Challenge website (houstonaplus.org/news/2008-06-20-CFG-NewCoaches.html).



"I would love to have other students have this same experience. I learned that learning never ends." – 12th grader, Challenge Early College High School

"The program brought many new and old faces together. This program made everyone better leaders. Many of the protocols that were learned this week can be implemented in our school's advisory program." – 12th grader Challenge Early College High School. ■

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