Leading the Work by Doing the Work
Kevin Fahey, Massachusetts

The experience of everyone who has coached or participated in a Critical Friends Groups (CFG) suggests that the support of the school principal is an important factor in implementing and sustaining CFGs. In fact this was one of the findings of the very first study carried out around November 2003 (Levis, 2003). This study found that, ‘Principals who failed to actively support the work of CFGs were the greatest hindrances to their success.’ However, as often happens, this study, raised other important questions.

One question was, “How could principals who work in very fragmented, isolated, competitive ways ever learn to support the collaborative, reflective, learning-centered work that happens in CFGs?” Two groups of school leaders whose work I have documented have tried a very simple answer to this question: They learned about CFG work by doing it themselves.

The District Team
The first study focused on one suburban district’s administrative team (superintendents, assistant superintendents, principals, and directors – 19 members). The superintendent, frustrated by the lack of collaboration and focus on issues of teaching and learning on the administrative team, convened the team in a monthly CFG. Likewise, the group used the Collaborative Assessment Conference as a vehicle to look at student work, raise issues of teaching and learning and to respectfully listen to each other. Comments such as “Working together on a real system issue was good,” “This type of discussion would be great if it could be expanded throughout the system” and “We were able to openly share our ideas and to respectfully listen to each other” were common.

Overall, the study found that over time, the team learned to use the protocols efficiently and productively, the facilitator gave fewer and fewer instructions, the team learned to use the Collaborative Assessment Conference to look at student work, and to respectfully listen to each other. Members of the team learned to use the Consultancy Protocol to look at their leadership practice.

How could principals who work in very fragmented, isolated, competitive ways ever learn to value and support the collaborative, reflective, learning-centered work that happens in CFGs? They learned about CFG work by doing it themselves.

Courageous Conversations Across Difference
Camilla Greene, continued

(emotion, I am not able to engage in the conversation in an authentic way. In order to engage in this Courageous Conversation about Race you have to have developed both your cognitive and emotional muscles.

I have enjoyed reading and noting the dawning of renewed interest in race at the consciousness of white people in our online chat. I applauded the courageous white people who have been willing to put themselves out there, making themselves vulnerable on the emotional level. These courageous folks have stopped intellectualizing the topic of race in order to begin to learn how to develop the will, skill, and courage to transform all of us across difference in order to interrupt inequalities in life and in the classroom. Most white people do not have a clue about what they do not know about race. If you do not live as the constant “other” how can you possibly know the impact of race? Alliance with people who have lived as the racialized “other” are critical if we are to create a reality safe for ourselves, and our students. In the online chat, white people were able to get to a space where they could state what they did not know. It is in the space of being willing to know what we do not know that we can begin to forge true alliances. I know a lot of white people, but a lot of white people are not my allies. My white allies across difference are folks with whom I have forged a relationship that holds continuous space for Courageous Conversations about Race and other important issues. They also know when and how to challenge the belief systems of other white people who have not yet begun to recognize their own white privilege. The white allies engage in conversations with other whites in ways that demonstrate their ability to be self-critical and reflective. White allies speak about and challenge their own long-held beliefs, which allows them to truly see both the impact of historical oppression and the strengths and the needs of their students of color and to develop change.

One thing I dislike about our online conversations about race is the number of people I refer to as “voyeurs,” people who have signed on but do not participate. These “voyeurs” read the online postings with emotions and whatever else others have put out there, but do not put themselves out there. I believe these folks are “piggy-back.”

These have long been hallmarks of the way I walk through this world, I sobbed for over an hour at this realization. And then I turned to attending to the characteristics of Color Commentary, so I might better understand the dialogue and discourse in which I want to partner. As I read, I replayed in my mind interactions from the Facilitators’ Meeting, including Camilla’s statement that as much as she appreciated what was shared, she could not trust any of us to be there in the future, when the going got rough. And I began to turn away from the shadows on the allegorical cave wall and take some first steps to move out of the cave, ready to enter a much richer, more multidimensional reality.

I want to live in a different world so badly my chest and heart ache. What I’m finding, as a result of this study, is that the cave, ready to enter a much richer, more multidimensional reality.

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Kim Carter, continued

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were connected to (1) the isolated and fragmented nature of the team; (2) the power of the isolated, competitive culture in which the leaders worked; and (3) the superintendent who, in effect, had ordered the team to be more collaborative. Simply put, the team had a long way to go to become a professional learning community and ordering them to go there, only got them part of the way.

The TILE CFG

The context of the second study is quite different. In this study, 14 graduates of a M.Ed. Leadership program met in a CFG. The group had been trained in a two year, cohort-based M.Ed. program called the TILE program (Teacher Initiative for Leadership in Education) which was very much based on ideas of critical friendship, and used protocols as the central element of its pedagogy. The group was multi-district, regionally based and completely voluntary.

The TILE CFG has met continuously since fall 2004. Because the group was trained in the use of protocols as part of their leadership education program, they used many more protocols than the district group, facilitated the conversation themselves, had no difficulty bringing dilemmas of practice, student work or relevant tests to the table, and in the third year agreed on a focus of difficult conversations, especially as they related to equity.

In a series of interviews, the members of the group stated that the TILE CFG continued to support them in their own leadership learning and their ability to bring this perspective back to their own schools. One principal summed up the experience by saying,

You have to trust in the group. I knew that when I missed CFG meetings, I was really missing something. I think it was the honest, truthful conversations, and the people who were there. I used to feel I had a voice. I don’t always feel I have these in my own district. Comments such as "In this job you are the only vehicle that I’ve seen that helps us keep the focus on ourselves and our place in this issue. In CFGs we don’t complain about our students or their families, we focus on ourselves and what we can do differently."

Leading the Work by Doing the Work

Linda Emm is a Curriculum Support Specialist in Miami Dade County Public Schools, working closely with colleague Pedro "Pete" Bermudez, a University of FloridaLastinger Center for Learning, an NSF Center of Activity and a cadre of both long-time and new NSF trained coaches, to grow the work of CFGs in a variety of contexts.

Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and what drew you to NSF?

Kids are my passion. First I was drawn to children’s theater and then to teaching. I thought teaching drama was the one job that would keep me grounded and make me want to come to work each day.

At my middle school my principal got me involved in thinking about learning styles and peer coaching and lots of new ideas about teaching. When I heard about NSF and CFGs it felt like this was the way to focus on the real work, a way to put the big ideas into practice.

You’ve played a few different roles in your district since becoming a coach in 1996. Can you describe a few high points of your CFG experiences?

For me the CFGs have been the most real work, a way to put the big ideas into practice.

Our CFGs are the only vehicle that I’ve seen that helps us keep the focus on ourselves and our place in this issue. In CFGs we don’t complain about our students or their families, we focus on ourselves and what we can do differently.

This work and its power to transform how teachers are in schools, the way we engage our students and each other is what keeps me going.

Can you tell us about some of the challenges you’ve faced?

Sustaining the work is always a challenge: figuring out what it means for teachers who have been silenced in the past, often for their entire careers, to collaborate and come up with their own solutions, is a challenge. Customizing the work in response to the unique context is also a challenge. Recently, I was working with a group of internationally trained teachers, who were all experts in their content area. These experts’ needed tools that would help them make space for conversations about, and with, their kids. They needed help making connections with their kids and their kids’ lives. Their CFG provided the space for them to make these connections.

This challenge turned into a high point when these teachers got their kids’ scores up and presented their work at a recent event organized by their union.

How would you describe your current goals and their connection to NSF’s mission?

My goal is the transformation I talked about earlier . . . our kids have to be engaged and we can only focus on that, on their engagement, if we hold each other’s feet to the fire and figure out what engages and disengages them. Our CFGs are the only vehicle that I’ve seen that helps us keep the focus on ourselves and our place in this issue. In CFGs we don’t complain about our students or their families, we focus on ourselves and what we can do differently.

The transformation is bound up with social justice and that’s what got me involved in theater and in education, and it seems like when (continued on page 14)
In 1998, the Juneau School District and community members began advocating for another high school that would help to reduce the size of the current high school, in order to better meet the needs of more students. Not everyone in Juneau agreed with this approach, and it took eight years and seven different votes before the community finally approved another high school. Even after the vote of approval, there remained an air of anger and divisiveness over the building of the new school. The traditions of a one-high-school community remained a strong voice, and any change to move to two high schools was very hard for many people to accept. They feared that their strong sports program, as well as the entire tradition of a large comprehensive high school, would be compromised with the building of an additional school.

When the bond election finally passed in 2005, the Juneau School District made a bold move; instead of simply planning for the new school, they decided to engage in an all-encompassing high school educational plan to address the protacted lack of student success and issues around equity. They realized that to make any significant change, they needed to go public with their data and actually create a process where all members of this diverse community would be heard. At this point, we were hired as facilitators, representing the Colorado Critical Friends Group, because we proposed a process that would utilize structures and protocols to create surfaced by conversations that had previously occurred in community meetings. Working with school district leaders, we created a formal process called The Next Generation: Our Kids, Our Community that would include:

- forming an Advisory Committee,
- facilitating community forums,
- developing a website,
- creating a summer school,
- submitting a final recommendation for a high school educational plan.

School district leaders realized that they faced several challenges. The community divided, not only on the need for a new high school, but also on the type of changes needed to address their lack of student success. Even some high school staff members were resistant to any type of change. Our challenge was to incorporate com-

In summary, these two studies describe, in two different contexts, one way school leaders can learn to value and support CFG work in their schools. Simply put, supportive school leaders do the work for themselves. A district team made significant gains towards becoming a more reflective, collaborative learning community, and to a lesser extent transferred some of that learning to their leadership practice. In the second study, a group had a more robust understanding of CFG work created and sustained a leadership CFG, whose work then influenced their work as school leaders. The comparison of the two studies, however, opens up other dilemmas. The district team was coerced by the superintendent to do collaborative work, and although it took a great deal of support and good facilitation, the power of the work eventually began to get some traction and show some results. Because the group was made up of an entire district team, the potential benefit to the district and the district's children seemed much greater than in the second group whose members were much more skilled, but from a variety of districts. The next challenge is to figure out a way to leverage professional community building on a district and regional level. Our work, use essential questions to drive fac-
tulty meetings and collaboratively examine data. Another principal described a more ambitious use of the CFG ideas, “I decided that my approach was to run my faculty meeting as a CFG.”

Two principals depicted two very powerful examples of connections between the TILE CFG and the leadership practice of the district admin-
istrative team. In the first example, one principal explained how a presentation that she made about her CFG work influenced how the district admin-
istrative team functioned. She explained the connec-
tion in this way:

“I made a presentation about CFGs to the dis-


tric leadership team. I presented on CFGs and

PLCs (Professional Learning Communities). We

first did a Chalk Talk; I talked about National

School Reform Faculty and the components of a

CFG. We did a Consultancy about a professional
dilemma presented by one of the principals. We
did a check-in, group closed out session.

Ultimately, what happened was the Assistant
Superintendent decided that the district leader-
ship team meetings would be run as a CFG.

Throughout the year, principals brought student
work, a dilemma or a text based discussion to
the meeting. They still do it today. This year, the
principals are running their grade level meetings
as CFGs.”

A second connection to district leadership practices surfaced because one district had hired three TILE CFG members as elementary principals. These three principals explained that hav-
ing been through a formal process called The Next
Generation: Our Kids, Our Community that would include:

- forming an Advisory Committee,
- facilitating community forums,
- developing a website,
- creating a summer school,
- submitting a final recommendation for a high school educational plan.

Before my TILE CFG colleagues arrived, the
previous superintendent tried to get conversations about teaching and learning printed on the leader-
ship team. He tried to do a book study on Good to
Great (Collins, 2001). They rode him out of
town. But now principals make a difference with three of us who understand the value of this work.

In general, the TILE CFG members saw a number of very strong connections between the work of the TILE CFG and their leadership prac-
tice.

Summary

In summary, these two studies describe, in

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These studies are available on the NSRF website, at www.nsrharmomy.org
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for Alaska Natives and students of poverty. Alaska Natives and students of poverty also achieve at lower levels, drop out more, participate less in activi-
ties, and are grossly underrepresented in upper-level classes offered by the high school.

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