Critical Friends Group as Research Team Grant

CFGs have become forums for teacher research through two-year grants funded by Houston A+. Critical Friends Group As Research Team (CART) provides ten grants that foster inquiry about teaching and learning by teachers and administrators; CART enables school teams to improve their practice and advance knowledge and theory. Each team is led by a trained CFG coach. Three action labs were held to discuss evidence and share the progress of the grantees as they conducted and documented their research.

CART Grant recipients and work to date include:
- Anderson Academy, Aldine ISD: Improving Arts-Based Approaches in Education: Learning from Self and Others
- KIPP Academy Sharpstown College Prep: Vision of Student and Teacher Excellence
- Stovall Academy, Aldine ISD: Improving Kindergarten Reading Fluency through the Use of Poetry
- Challenge Early College High School, Houston ISD: Building Teacher Collaborative Structures to Improve Student Learning and Self-Efficacy
- Houston Academy, Aldine ISD: Revisiting, Revising, and Reflecting on the Houston Academy STARS (curriculum) Units of Study
- PACE (Program of Accelerated Education), Humble ISD: CISD: Student Connectivity through Personalized Learning
- Faculty Academy, University of Houston (Main, Downtown, and Clear Lake) and Sam Houston State University: Faculty Academy Collaboration through Learning and Leading
- Eisenhower High School, Aldine ISD: Changing the Context and Content of Collegial Conversations
- Cross-District CFG, Aldine, Afton, Houston ISD: Changes in Latitude - Changes in Attitude
- Master Reading Teacher CFG, Houston ISD: Implementing Reader’s Theater as a Group of Master Reading Teachers.

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each student was expected to present one idea, question, and/or fact to the class. Classmates were expected to respond to the presenter who then had the last word on the topic. At the completion of this activity, each student submitted their list of ideas and a written reflection on the content of the discussion.

Reflection

Reflections were solicited to elicit the discussion by explaining my expectations, which were as follows; students would read five articles on the topic of cancer, students would record two ideas from different articles, students would present one idea to the class with an explanation as to the importance of said idea (10 points), students would present five ideas generated by at least five of their classmates (5 points), students would conduct themselves in a respectful manner during the discussion (5 points) and students will submit a written summary of knowledge gained from the discussion (10 points). Students were given ample time to read the articles. In order to assist students with poor reading skills, I read the articles aloud to them. Other students, who were comfortable with reading, worked independently.

Video Recording Analysis

(Students in my grad class were responsible for videotaping their classes and analyzing the tapes as part of their NICU/ICU portfolio.)

Protocols in Practice...

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discussion (10 points). Students were given ample time to prepare for the discussion. For example, the second presenter was concerned that removal of skin growths is not always a successful treatment for skin cancer. The first three respondents noted “cancer cells are still in the blood stream,” “grandmother had skin cancer,” and “cancer cells don’t listening on task for the entire discussion. (continued on page 19)
Many of us know Tim Martindell as the face of Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) for Houston A+ Challenge. Tim was recently promoted to a new position as the assistant director of leadership in teaching for Houston A+ Challenge. Donna Reid sat down with Tim to find out more about his vision for building CFG networks in the Houston area.

Congratulations on your promotion. Can you tell me more about your new position?

Well it’s a new position for Houston A+, in fact, and it was created in the recognition of the fact that strong schools don’t exist without strong teacher leaders. In order to expand our training and support networks for teachers using Critical Friends Group as a foundation. I will also be helping to coordinate these efforts with our principal leadership networks, including the Regional Principal Leadership Academy.

I envision that we’ll do this by customizing some of our existing CFG training and readings for slightly different audiences or purposes. For example, there may be specific seminars and networks for department chairs, team leaders, or first-year teachers. Instead of just one sort of generic CFG, we will have multiple tracks all based on the same methodology.

Tell me about how you first became involved in CFG work.

I first became involved in CFG while I was a campus-level coach at Drew Academy (Airline ISD) in the summer of 1998. I was one of five or six coaches on my campus, which was named a Beacon School by the Texas Education Agency as the American Education Week School of the Year. The school was also known as the Houston A+ Challenge. I coached the same group for four and a half years while I remained at Drew, up until I came to my campus, which was named a Beacon School by the Texas Education Agency in 2000.

What is your vision for CFG work in Houston?

The notion of Professional Learning Community is really starting to take hold here in Houston and that looks different in different contexts. I think Critical Friends “gives legs” to the theory of Professional Learning Communities.

What are you’re going to be designing at A+?

We’re also looking at how CFGs reach out: how does this work go beyond the school group? So we might be looking at how to design CFGs for community members. For example, we trained a group of students this summer during our CFG Warm Up Workshop.

For more information about any of these grants or our work in schools, contact Donna Reid at cfgcoach@robreid.com.

Interview with Tim Martindell

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continuing CFG coaches’ training. Every fall and spring we host network meetings for educators engaged in CFG work. Our network now consists of 114 educators, at least 44 of whom have attended more than one continuing coach institute or meeting following their initial training. The network includes 81 teachers, 20 school administrators, three university-based educators, and 10 educators who hold other school and district roles. All told, the educators of the network represent 36 schools in 11 districts and five states, although primarily Texas.

We are deeply committed to active participation in the larger national organization. Grant funds secured through Trinity’s Department of Education have enabled the Center to financially support a delegation of San Antonio educators to attend Winter Meeting for the past seven years. Those educators then help plan and facilitate the annual local Winter Meeting to share national meeting concepts with their colleagues and administrators.

In addition to sending teams of educators to Winter Meetings, Center members have played a leadership role at such national events. Beyond their ongoing participation in CFGs in local schools, current Center facilitators have served as facilitators and Critical Friends at Winter Meetings and share responsibility for attending the annual Facilitator and Center Meetings. Moreover, Pat and Angela have presented research findings on the use of protocols to support preschool teachers’ preparation at NSRF’s annual Research Forum and the American Educational Research Association annual meetings. Angela serves on the Accountability Council, and Ileana is a member of the Houston Winter Meeting Planning Team. Thus we support local coaches, engage in the work alongside our CFG colleagues, actively participate in NSRF nationally, and conduct scholarship around our CFG work.

Our Center is excited about the possibilities and challenges that lie ahead for not only moving our work forward locally but nationally as well. In addition to upcoming local events like our Fall Gathering, where we will use a text-based protocol to explore “Undermining Democracy” by Deborah Meier, we look forward to providing financial support to a dozen area educators to attend this year’s Winter Meeting. Moreover, Angela and Pat continue to write about their CFG work, sharing it with researchers and practitioner audiences. We also want to work closely with our colleagues across the country in strengthening the national organization as we clarify and work to align our values and practices.

Ileana Liberatore can be reached at ileana.liberatore@trinity.edu

Center of Activity Report: Houston

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Center of Activity Report: San Antonio

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Facilitates Greatness

Donna Reid, Texas

NSRF’s Living History: An Interview with Tim Martindell

Donna Reid, Texas

The Houston A+ Challenge. You can freely access deepening the conversations that are going on in equity for all students. CFGs are really focusing and tools and forums to have the difficult conversations half years while I remained at Drew, up until I came to my campus, which was named a Beacon School by the Texas Education Agency in 2000.

What we’re going to be designing at A+ is a group of students this summer during our CFG Warm Up Workshop.

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Center of Activity Report: Houston

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Finally, our Center has been instrumental in the award and implementation of three Teacher as Researcher (TAR) grants. These grants are an outgrowth of CFG work that have been awarded for a third year at $5,000 each, with the specific charge of documenting the results for academic publication. These research teams met together monthly over the past year. Their joint chapter on lessons learned about the connection between teacher inquiry and student achievement in school reform have been submitted to the Association of Teacher Educators (ATE) 2008 yearbook (in press).

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Interview with Tim Martindell

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might be new and different protocols. Aligned with the A+ leadership initiatives, our CFG work is led by a very diverse group of Houston Area National Facilitators and apprentices. Our long-term strategy is to have the local CFG leadership mirror Houston community.

We’re also looking at how CFGs reach out: how does this work go beyond the school group? So we might be looking at how to design CFGs for community members. For example, we trained a group of students this summer during our CFG New Coach Seminar.

So there are a lot of things coming up. Tell me about how CFG practices have transformed you.

For me personally, I think I’ve learned to listen and ask much better questions.

Tim Martindell can be contacted at tmartindell@houstonaplus.org. Donna Reid can be contacted at cfgcoach@robreid.com.