Fostering CFGs in a PLC Landscape
Donna Reid, Texas

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s a consultant for CFG support for the Houston A+ Challenge, an independent nonprofit that initiates and supports school reform efforts in the Greater Houston area, I get to work with Critical Friends Group coaches in schools all over the Houston region. The many reflections I have collected over the course of my work indicate how transformative CFGs can be for an entire campus, as well as for individual teachers and principals.

My own CFG story began in 1998 when I was one of four people on my campus who attended the first CFG New Coach Seminar held in Houston. At the time, I was a seventh-grade history teacher, and the training was personally transformative. I was amazed by how our facilitators were so responsive, and I felt empowered because CFG group members were expected to develop the agendas for our meetings instead of adhering to professional development dictated by the school district or state education agency. When we initiated CFGs at our middle school, the faculty embraced protocols as tools that helped us have timely, equitable conversations. Soon, with the participation of both teachers and principals, CFG practices infused our campus with more teacher agency, and our school portfolio was bursting with evidence of increased collaboration, intense focus on student learning, and rich reflection that led to improvements in our daily practice.

Unfortunately, I have also collected dozens of stories about how CFGs have been misunderstood and misused. For example, four years ago, I was shocked and disheartened when a successful CFG coach in a local elementary school confided that the new principal had just announced to the faculty “We’re not going to do CFGs anymore. The district wants us to do PLCs instead.” The coach felt like the rug had been pulled out from under her when the administrators demonstrated that they neither understood nor valued the important work that the school’s CFGs had done to revitalize the school. Our sustainability depends upon it. Our profession is to foster educational and social equity by creating and supporting powerful learning communities that create and support powerful learning experiences for everyone. - adopted June 2001


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Editorial Board: Debbie Bambino, Sarah Childers and Greg Peters

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Correction
In our last issue of Connections, we published the poem, “Race Matters” by John Patrick Moran. We mistakenly identified the author as being from California. In fact, Mr. Moran is a school coach with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. He wrote the poem during a weeklong Equity-Based Critical Friends Coaches training which was co-facilitated by Camilla Greene of Pennsylvania, Gregory Peters of San Francisco, and Roliesia Holman of North Carolina. - Connections Editorial Board
Consenting Adults: Conducting Case Conferences with Consciousness

Azure Dee Smiley, Indiana

The overall objective of a case conference is to bring people together with the common goal of developing an individualized education plan (IEP) (USDHHS, 2007). This specific case conference took place at a high school that had recently converted to a small school model in efforts to reform their practice with support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. One of the purposes of this small school initiative was to actively eliminate the sense of anonymity that most students live in large schools. Structural changes were made and professional development was provided to encourage faculty planning time with intentions to improve academic practice, promote collaboration among educators, enhance relationships with students, and implement methods of addressing the problems of social injustice. As Denise began to verbally read through the IEP paperwork, she stopped and asked everyone to introduce themselves to Wilma. One by one, each person in the room introduced themselves to Wilma and then described the agency they represented. When it was the student’s turn to speak, Denise, his teacher, asked him to remove his hat on school grounds. The student reminded Denise that housing had been allowed after school hours and that by this time the school day was officially over. Denise asked whether it was still permissible and if he did not remove the hat, she would call the police officer to remove him. The student refused, citing the same school rule. Denise then asked the dean to get the police officer to remove the student from the case conference because he openly refused to comply. Wilma hung her head, shook it from side to side, and laughed quietly as she scooted her chair away from the table and the rest of the group. Denise never addressed Wilma during this incident. Denise represented the student for the family. When she was called out to remove the student from the case conference, she remained silent during these interactions. A few minutes later the student, holding his hat, was escorted back into the conference by the police officer. As the student sat down he (continued on page 16)

controlled the agendas of those meetings by mandating that the groups use a minimum number of protocols to look at student work over the course of the semester. One of the reasons mentioned, this scheme reduced teacher agency when the leadership team also took up meeting time with other tasks throughout the year. When the estudiantes met to set the external goal of using protocols to look at student work a minimum number of times, the group had to do a tuning protocol almost every day in December. That left them exhausted and angry instead of engaged and empowered.

Anecdotes show that there are widespread misunderstandings about what PLCs are and how CFGs can practice the development of true professional learning communities.

What exactly is a PLC?

There is no single accepted definition for what a professional learning community is and does, but Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker have popularized the concept of PLCs in North America through books such as Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement (1998), which lists the following characteristics (pp. 25-29) for a PLC:

1. shared mission, vision, and values
2. collective inquiry
3. collaborative teams
4. action orientation and experimentation
5. continuous improvement
6. results orientation

DuFour and Eaker write that educators in a professional learning community “create an environment that fosters mutual cooperation, emotional support, and personal growth as they work together to achieve which they cannot accomplish alone” (p. 23). They go on to assert that “no factor is more significant in a school’s change process than the faculty’s sense of self-efficacy... The schools most likely to create a collaborative learning community are those with educators who are willing to accept responsibility for doing so” (p. 29). The PLC concept espoused by DuFour and his colleagues is now very popular in at least three Houston area school districts, and when I first read DuFour and Eaker’s book several years ago, much of it resonated with my own CFG experiences. We’ve even used excerpts from their books as the basis for test-based discussions at regional CFG follow-up sessions, because they clearly explain about the need for transformation in our schools and offer inspiration to get started.

However, there is an inherent conflict hidden within this popular PLC model. At one point DuFour and Eaker write... clarity of purpose is enhanced when teams are provided with clearly stated performance goals that indicate what the team is to produce or accomplish (p. 23). Notice the passive voice of that verb “are provided.” It implies that the members of that PLC are not setting their own goals and do not have a strong voice in deciding what to produce or accomplish. That passive voice diminishes agency. I believe that this tension between encouraging educators to take full responsibility for student learning while not really trusting them to do it has resulted in many fledgling professional learning communities.

How do CFGs fit in the PLC landscape?

When people ask me if a CFG is like a PLC, I say, “Yes, and more!” At the Seattle Winter Meeting in January 2007, participants in an Open Space session about this topic agreed that PLCs and CFGs share many traits, including the use of protocols, a focus on student learning, the use of collaborative teams and collective inquiry, and the possibility of changing school culture. This same group also listed several traits that are unique to CFGs, such as “clearly defined notion of skillful facilitation,” “responsive to individual and small group [needs],” “more private and confidential,” and “riskier work.” These educators, who had been involved in CFGs all across the country, clearly valued CFGs for not having imposed agendas, while still keeping the learning community and the end goals that serve them as the centerpiece of their work.

Gene Thompson-Grove said it best during her opening address at the 2005 Winter Meeting in Cambridge Massachusetts: “It is the one reform initiative, in my experience, that makes any sense, because it is rooted in a belief that the learning of students - of ALL students - is what makes our relationship to each other significant. And it is one of the few reform efforts that truly empowers teachers to be the authors of their own learning, that gives them the capacity to assume leadership around issues that really matter in their schools and districts.”

Now What?

Those of us who value Critical Friends Groups must understand that making CFGs special (continued on page 19)
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More recently, while a group of coaches-in-training was debriefing a consultation this past June, a participant blurted “Everybody on my campus HATES protocols!” When I followed up over lunch, the teacher explained that the school’s administrative team supported the PLC model enough to schedule time in the school day for departments and grade levels to meet, but they also

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Fostering CFGs in a PLC Landscape (continued from page 13)

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The final thing I learned from this discussion was that my students thoroughly enjoyed the process. One student wrote in his reflection, “I thought this discussion was a good idea because I learned a lot and had fun doing it. The fact that we had to come up with our own topics out of the magazine taught us how to pick important facts out of a group of information … I really hope we do it again.” Based on their performance and attitude, I intend to use discussion with this class as often as possible.”

Denise’s transformation from a teacher who was frustrated and unhappy about being “stuck” with a last period class of noisy, failing students, to a teacher working to differentiate instruction in support of each student’s success was a pleasure to behold. Denise’s “willingness to be disturbed” and challenges her assumptions about these students and their abilities reinforced my belief in student empowerment and our responsibility to personalize instruction. Denise’s shift and success has also made me wonder about all of the students and teachers who continue to “mark time” in too many of our classrooms, with or without their IEPs.

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Connections (continued on page 17)

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Connections (continued from page 18)