many of us know Tim Martindell as the face of Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) 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. 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 you as a coach and what you do in CFG work.

I am trained in CFG while I was a campus-level coach at Drew Academy (Aldine ISD) in the summer of 1998. I was one of five or six coaches on my campus, which was named a Beacon School by Houston ISD. As is known to those of Houston A+/Challenge, I coached the same group for four-and-a-half years while I remained at Drew, up until I came to Houston A+ as an employee.

So what do you value about CFG work?

I think it gives teachers - and administrators - the tools and forums to have the difficult conversations that must take place in schools in order to ensure equity for all students. CFGs are really focusing and deepening the conversations that are going on in schools - and more importantly, it is pushing people out of their comfort zones into action.

How will your new position build on those experiences?

Houston A+ has spent the last 10 years working on school transformation from the teacher level up. One key fact we have learned is that in order to really change what happens in a school, you can’t just bring in a new leader - the entire staff must share common goals and a vision for transformation.

With our new Regional Principal Leadership Academy, we’re helping to prepare aspiring principals to transform urban public schools. All of our interns participate in the Critical Friends Group New Coach Seminar as their first week of training. It’s the foundation for their continued growth over the three-year coaching and mentoring process.

But that’s not enough. With our Teacher Leadership initiatives, my goal will be to help build some common ideas and common language for everyone in the school building. As the new school leaders in the Academy, receive continued coaching from A+, I will develop training and support to help the faculty in these schools really focus on equity and opportunities for kids.

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.

We’re going to be designing at A+ is really an expanded tool kit that a CFG coach might use, that contains some unique, context-specific tools. It could be different readings or it (continued on page 15)
Facilitates Greatness
Donna Reid, Texas
NSRF’s Living History: An Interview with Tim Martindell

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 leadership. I’m working 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, including the Regional Principal Leadership Academy.

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

I became intrigued in CFG while I was a campus-level coach at Drew Academy (Aline SD) in the summer of 1998. I was one of five or six coaches on my campus, which was named a Beacon School by The 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.

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We're also looking at how CFGs reach out: how does this work go beyond the school group? 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 Summer Coach Seminar.

Finally, our Center has been instrumental in the award and implementation of three Teacher as Researcher (TAR) grants. These grants are an outgrowth of CFGs and have been extended 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).

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

Interview with Tim Martindell

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 local CFG colleagues.

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. The powerful facilitator 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.

I am excited to continue exploring partnership opportunities both within and beyond the A+ network.

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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, we will use a test-case 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 researcher 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.

Ilene Liberatore can be reached at ilene.liberatore@trinity.edu

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