permission to say “We don’t know.” It gives us per-
mission to open up our classroom doors and ask
colleagues for help. We can walk into someone’s
classroom and say, “Since I’m not exactly sure
what I’m doing, my guess is that you might not be
either. Maybe together, we can figure something
out.” We can’t look to the state standards to figure
it all out. We can’t externalize our involvement and
complicity in the status quo. We can interrupt some
of these realities of schooling in this country.
I think that part of it has to do with the misogyn-
istic legacy. Most teachers in this country remain
female: they’re middle class, they’re white, they’re in
their forties, and they’re women. And most
administrators across the country are still men. So
you have a situation that began well over 100 years
ago in which the political authority is male domi-
nated and the workforce is female dominated. I
think part of the isolation in classrooms originated
as a survival strategy: one that we have to unpack
together in order to make the changes that we
know we need to make.

I’m afraid that a lot of people in Houston don’t
really associate their CFG work with NSRF yet.
We’re working on that, but would are some things
you say to encourage Houstonians to be part of
NSRF and to feel connected to NSRF?

Become a member - even at the smallest con-
tribution level. Through a robust Center of Activity
like Houston A+ Challenge, it’s important to push
the notion that NSRF is a collective and a member-
ship organization.

When members are involved in a national
movement, I think that NSRF is a stronger move-
ment than an organization. Our Centers of Activity
are very strong organizations, but I think NSRF
national is really a movement. CFG work is hav-
ing an effect in Houston and in Greater Texas, as it
clearly is, and if it is part of people’s teaching craft,
then I would encourage folks to become members
officially become a part of the movement.

That’s a great call to action to end on, and we’ll let
you get out to your next appointment.

Well, thank you very much. I hope that was
helpful.

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However, we have seen the extension of Looking
at Student Work and other practices in depart-
mental and level or content area meetings. While I’m
heartened by these changes in culture, I wish
everyone were in CFGs for their own learning ben-
efit. As a Latina, part of my concern for sustaining
the work has to do with our ability to attract and
sustain a diverse group of coaches and national
facilitators. Our community is 60% Latina/o and
we need to attract and sustain more minority
coaches.

What do you see as NSRF’s greatest challenge in
this period?

Right now, I think we are defining ourselves
as an organization. We are deciding how we are
going to work together across the country. I think
people have a good sense of what we should be
doing but not how we need to work together as
an organization. We are figuring out how to have
equal structure and enough space so we can all
“belong” and answer the question “How do I fit in?”

What are your greatest hopes for your work and
NSRF in the coming period?

I want my work to keep growing. We have
trained coaches in 12 area school districts and 28
schools, and we are introducing a new high school
to our work. I want to keep supporting our estab-
lished schools and serve them well.

I am on the Planning Committee and I hope
our Winter Meeting will be a defining event.

What would a “defining” Winter Meeting look
like?

Everybody would have a great learning
experience and would see it as time well spent.
Participants would make connections with col-
leagues from across the country and would leave
with an understanding of shared work and shared
hope for the future of our work.

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can be contacted at dbambino@earthlink.net

We can interrupt some
of these realities of schooling in this country.

At our next class, I reminded my students of our
Connections protocol with my grad students. As
I was troubled by some of the low expectations
for these “students” that were evident in the dis-
cussion section of the Consultation. One participant
suggested that Connections could be used to “kill”
about 15 minutes each day. Another participant
wondered if “these” kids could clean up the lab
and do something constructive. I was torn
between my plan to teach the process of the pro-
tocol and my desire to interrupt the biased teacher
expectations in my class.

Not either/or

I expected the either/or approach and decided
to use questions to both model the process and
interrupt the clearly biased view of these “Gen Ed”
students. I was able to redirect the focus by reminding
the group that Denise’s framing question asked,
“What can I do differently to support my last period
class’s learning of the required content?” I was
also able to wonder aloud about the impact of low
teacher expectations on low achieving students’
behavior and learning. Denise took the question
about her/our expectations to heart. I’m pleased to
share a piece of Denise’s successful change of
practice with her last period class.

An Excerpt from Denise’s Portfolio

I began each class with time for
Connections. Through this process the class has
developed a real sense of community. They show
concern for each other and are learning to respect
one another. They are better able to focus on the
content being covered in class; as a result student
achievement has improved.

While only four of the twelve students in this
class have an official IEP that designates their need
for assistance with written expression, the majority
of the class shares this problem. Writing is a
challenge but as shown in the class’s daily con-
nection time, verbal expression is not. In conduct-
ing this discussion on cancer, I wanted this verbal
group of students to have an opportunity to excel.

Planning

The goal of this discussion was for students
to understand the relevance of studying cancer
to everyday life. The discussion on cancer was an
extended thinking activity designed to link student
knowledge of the cell cycle with an understanding
of how cancer starts, spreads, is treated, and can
be prevented. The discussion format was utilized
to engage students in the content. Students were
expected to gain knowledge by reading five arti-
cles from YOUR WORLD, Biotechnology & You,
Volume 11, Issue Number 1... As students read
they were expected to come up with at least 10
ideas, questions, and/or facts that interested them
from the articles. The
day of the discussion, (continued on page 17)
During the 2007-2008 year, Houston A+ CFG National Consultant Tim Martinelli and Michael Webster trained 52 school improvement consultants in Spring Branch ISD.

Tim Martinelli and CFG consultant Donna Reid provided training in facilitative leadership using the CFG model for 86 Goose Creek Consolidated School District leaders. The initial cohort was chosen by a 26-member leadership team including Superintendent Barbara Sultis. Through its Houston A+ replication grant, Goose Creek trained an additional 60 elementary and middle school leaders to build critical mass within the district for the CFG work. Denton plans to become a center of activity in North Texas.

Using funds from a replication grant, CFG consultant Michaelann Kelley facilitated CFG training for 35 staff members of Aldine ISD’s Eisenhower High School in January. This brings the number of trained coaches on the campus to 40 and is reinvigorating the teachers as they focus on examining student work and refining teacher practice, as well as building the capacity of teacher leaders. Local National Facilitator Mary Matthews used funds from a similar grant to train 15 coaches in March.

Houston A+ coordinator Tim Martinelli and consultants Donna Reid and Mary Matthews were joined by seven area educators at the National School Reform Faculty winter meeting held in Tampa, Florida, December 12-15. Tim, Donna, and Mary each designed and facilitated a 15-hour home group session, as well as modeled CFG facilitative leadership practice to apprentice facilitators from the Florida region of NSRF. Participant evaluation from the home groups noted the rigor and depth brought to the discussion by the Houston area national facilitators. Teachers and administrators continue to attend trainings and Donna Reid is providing follow-up support for CFG trainers with a biweekly electronic newsletter. This newsletter highlights CFG work in the Houston area, spotlights a new electronic newsletter. This newsletter highlights low-up support for CFG trainers with a biweekly newsletter. This newsletter highlights low-up support for CFG trainers with a biweekly newsletter. This newsletter highlights low-up support for CFG trainers with a biweekly newsletter.

Critical Friends Group as Research Team Grant

Each year, Houston A+ Critical Friends Group as Research Team (CART) provides ten grants that foster inquiry into teacher and/or administrator practices. The grants aim to improve 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 Skills to Improve Student Learning and Self-Efficacy
- Houston Academy, Aldine ISD: Revisiting, Revising, and Reflecting on the Houston Academy STARs (curriculum) Units of Study
- SPACE (Program of Accelerated Education), Humble ISD: CIBS: 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 Content and Context of Collegial Conversations
- Cross-District CFG, Aldine, Alief, 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 (continued on page 15)

Protocols in Practice...

(continued from page 7)

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.

Presentation of ideas followed the discussion by explaining my expectations, which were as follows: students will read five articles on the topic of cancer; students will record two ideas from each article (2 points for each idea), students will present one idea to the class with an explanation as to the importance of said idea (10 points), students will present their ideas presented by at least five of their classmates (5 points), students will 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, they read the articles aloud to them.

Other students, who were comfortable with reading, worked independently.

Reflection

Having students discuss the topic of cancer is much more effective than taking notes, completing worksheets, and/or taking a test on the subject. Students are to state educated opinions and share real-life experiences with the class. The process allows for a more in-depth discussion of the topic on a more personal level than the textbook could ever provide. As I told my students when they wanted to know how proud I was of them, “You said if you didn’t know why we were having a discussion on cancer, this is one topic that has great relevance to your lives, and knowledge of this topic could benefit you by extending your life.”

Video Recording Analysis

(Students in my grad class were responsible for videotaping their classes and analyzing the tapes as part of their NSRF portfolios.)

Proof of a student learning to reason can be seen in the fourth presenter’s discussion. This student is trying to understand the point of medication in cancer treatment. He asks “If there isn’t a cure, then what do the pills do?” Other students, who were comfortable with reading, worked independently.

I was very impressed with the outcome of this discussion, and I made a point to let my students know how proud I was of them. One thing I did that made this process so successful was I stressed preparation for the discussion. I made sure that even my low level readers would be prepared by reading the articles as they were discussed.

I learned that my students, regardless of ability levels, are all capable of comprehending difficult scientific concepts.

I learned that discussion is the best method to actively engage this particular class of students in a topic related to biology. All of the students were listening and on task for the entirety of the discussion.
A 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-directed conversations, 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 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-directed conversations, with evidence of increased collaboration, intense focus on student learning, and rich reflection that led to improvements in our daily practice.

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