Connections

the Journal of the National School Reform Faculty

Winter 2009

Director's Report Steven Strull, Director

For my director's report, I am pleased to reprint an interview I had with Melissa Milios Davis and Donna Reid of Houston A+, one of our Centers of Activity. The three of us spoke by phone this past October, and the text below appeared in an on-line publication of Houston A+. We spoke about many topics, including the roots of Critical Friends Groups, the growth of CFG work, and equity. As I read the interview for the first time, it reminded me of why I do this work, our work. My hope in sharing this piece in our journal is that it may help remind us, in some small way, how important our work is. The text below has been edited for space.

In your letter to NSRF members when you first became director, you said that you began your educative journey as a classroom teacher at DuSable High School in Chicago, where you learned about the Coalition of Essential Schools and the Annenberg Institute. Can you talk a little bit about how those organizations shaped your career and your thoughts on education?

Absolutely. Two things happened simultaneously when I was a first-year classroom teacher in Chicago. The first was that Bill Ayers and Bill Schubert, who were professors at the University of Illinois at Chicago, came to DuSable High School to begin a series of conversations with us (the teachers) about small schools. DuSable had been a Coalition of Essential Schools school back when there were only Nine Common Principles, and that was the lens we used to frame some of our work. Our principal had introduced us to the notion, as Ted Sizer would say, that "schooling and school reform ought to be a conversation among friends."

So Bill and Bill came to DuSable and started talking about small schools, and I thought, "Well, that's just about the silliest thing I ever heard of. Ten schools inside of one school? What does that mean, who goes where, who does what?" It just wasn't a natural fit. My image - in fact the collective image of schooling - was that a school was a building, and a building was a school. Anything else was kind of silly.

The second thing that happened was that Ambassador Walter Annenberg gave the challenge grant to public education. The Annenberg Institute was set up at Brown University alongside the Coalition of Essential Schools. As a CES school, DuSable received the invitation for faculty members to apply to become Critical Friends Group Coaches with the newly formed National School Reform Faculty at Annenberg. My assistant principal gave me the packet and said she thought that this was something I should apply for, and the community came around and coached me through the application process. Looking back on it now, it was a very respectful way to enter the work. We wrote the application, which was many, many, many pages long and contained many questions and scenarios. A couple of months later, we got word that I'd been chosen to receive the training.

That was in 1996, so it was the second year of CFG Coaches training, and so the fact that I had been selected was a really, really big deal. I would be flown to Seattle, we would be put up at a very nice hotel, all of our expenses would be paid, and we would each receive a stipend to do this work. To be told that I was going to travel across the country, be treated like a professional, and receive a stipend for my work was big, big, big, stuff.

Those two occurrences together set the course for the career that either I've chosen, or *(continued on page 9)*

Fostering CFGs in a PLC Landscape

Donna Reid, Texas

As 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 culture and make gains in student achievement.

More recently, while a group of coaches-in-training was debriefing a consultancy 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 *(continued on page 13)*

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Connections is a journal of the National School Reform Faculty, a division of Harmony Education Center. Published three times per year, it provides a forum for CFG Coaches and other reflective educators to share their practice.

Editorial Board: Debbie Bambino, Sarah Childers and Greg Peters

If you have any feedback or are interested in contributing to *Connections,* contact us at 812.330.2702 or dbambino@earthlink.net.

The mission of the National School Reform Faculty is to foster educational and social equity by empowering all people involved with schools to work collaboratively in reflective democratic communities that create and support powerful learning experiences for everyone. - adopted June 2001

Center of Activity Report: San Antonio

Ileana Liberatore, Texas

The seeds of the National School Reform Faculty San Antonio Center were sown nearly 10 years ago when a small contingent of educators from the International School of the Americas (ISA) and Lee High School in the North East Independent School District attended a five-day New Coaches Seminar in New Hampshire in the summer of 2000. Upon their enthusiastic return, the newly trained team introduced all 24 ISA faculty members to Critical Friends Groups, and as a staff they voluntarily elected to participate in school-based CFGs. Eight years later, CFGs remain a core component of the high school teachers' continuing professional development. Of the 26 teachers at ISA, 24 are members of CFGs, which are coached by teachers (administrators participate but do not coach). Trinity University clinical faculty member Angela Breidenstein provides ongoing support to the coaches through monthly study group meetings. At Lee High School, we have experienced several iterations of CFG work, depending in part on administrative expectations and mandates, as well as teacher initiative and advocacy.

Through our work at ISA and Lee, we have learned the following:

- CFGs represent a powerful means of teacher professional development.
- teachers need sustained support as they engage in the roles of CFG coach and peer leader.
- teachers are eager to be involved in meaningful learning with colleagues that they see can benefit their practices and student learning.
- thoughtful and careful implementation of this or any new initiative on a school campus is critical, and administrative support is important.
- when implemented via mandatory measures, CFGs can lose their potential, resemble other problematic staff development, and even be resented by teachers.
- participation in a local and/or national network can provide opportunities to deepen knowledge and skills.

As other school campuses in the greater San Antonio area learned about ISA's success with CFGs, and after a significant initiative in the North East School District to train central office and school leaders, which involved national facilitators like Gene Thompson-Grove, Camilla Greene, and Beth Graham, the need for a center that could provide training to interested local educators became apparent. With the help of our partner institutions, The Center for Educational Leadership at Trinity University and the high school campuses of the International School of the Americas and Robert E. Lee, the National School Reform Faculty San Antonio Center (NSRF SA) was established in 2005. The Center embodies several core commitments, including keeping student learning at the center of our work. In addition, we recognize the relationship between student learning and teacher learning and work to promote professional learning communities in schools and institutions.

One of NSRF SA's unique features is our commitment to helping educators at every stage in their professional careers, including formal preparation, induction years, and continuing professional development. National Facilitators and university teacher educators Angela Breidenstein, Ileana Liberatore, and Pat Norman introduce Trinity's teacher candidates to protocols as undergraduates. As our candidates complete the Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program, they often participate in school-based CFGs held at our Professional Development School campuses. In addition, as teacher educators we believe strongly in professional learning community. To that end, we structure our cohorts of 10-12 MAT students as though they are a Critical Friends Group.

Beyond teachers' formal preparation, our Center supports novices completing their first few years in the classroom. For example, we offer scholarships to our MAT graduates to attend the New Coaches' Seminars offered every year so that they will be equipped with tools to support their students' learning and to help establish/sustain professional learning community at their school campuses. A number of our MAT graduates also participate in a CFG that Pat facilitates.

Finally, we offer sustained support to experienced educators. For the past four years, we have offered new coaches seminars, facilitative leadership seminars for administrators, and *(continued on page 15)*

Center of Activity Report: Houston

Donna Reid, Texas

Houston A+ staff continues to provide the 40-hour new coach training seminar. During the 2007-2008 year, Houston A+ CFG National Facilitators trained approximately 300 teachers and administrators.

Over the course of the 2007-2008 school year, program coordinators Tim Martindell and Michael Webster trained 52 school improvement specialists in Spring Branch ISD.

Tim Martindell 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 comprised of 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 10 new coaches in Alief ISD.

Houston A+ coordinator Tim Martindell and consultants Donna Reid and Mary Matthews were joined by eight Houston 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 reflections 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 trainer's practice, and provides tips for implementing protocols. The newsletter is linked to the Houston A+ Challenge website, houstonannenberg.org.

THE HOUSTON A+ CHALLENGE

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 inquiries 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: 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, Alief, Houston ISD's: 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)

NSRF's Living History: An Interview with Ileana Liberatore

Debbie Bambino, Pennsylvania

Ileana Liberatore, a leading member of the San Antonio Local Center, is a native Texan from Crystal City, Texas. Ileana is pleased to share that her birthplace, Crystal City, is also the birthplace of La Raza Unida Party. She is also proud of her parents' accomplishments. Ileana's father worked as a migrant worker and later became the first Latino chancellor in the University of California's system; her mother, an immigrant from Mexico, became the director of the California Museum of Photography after raising her family.

Ileana Liberatore

What's your current role and how did you get involved with CFGs and NSRF?

I am currently the professional development school coordinator at Lee High School and The International School of the Americas (ISA). Both schools are located on one campus. I got involved with CFGs accidentally. My administrator went to a Winter Meeting and was so excited by the experience that she found funding to send a group from our school to a CFG training at Souhegan High School in New Hampshire. As a department chair, I was invited to attend. Even though I wasn't sure what to expect, once I got there it really changed the way I saw my role as a teacher and how I could affect change.

Can you tell us a little more about your background as a teacher?

I've been the PDS coordinator for the last three years. I was a classroom Latin teacher for 20 years in Dallas and San Antonio. Most of my experience has been in high schools, but I did teach Latin in a middle school for three years.

How does your work connect with NSRF's mission?

I use CFG practices and structures in my work with both practicing teachers and undergraduate and graduate students in education programs. I am currently coaching three CFGs, one on each campus and one that is a CFG of coaches.

I have an insider-outsider role in the schools. I use my outsider lens to push things along. For example, travelling with ISA's junior class the last two years as they toured civil rights historical sites in Alabama, Latino students asked me, "Where are the Latinos? What were we doing during all of this?" To help them answer that question, I decided to teach a two-week mini-course on the history of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement, one of the least studied social movements of the 1960s. The feedback from students was overwhelmingly positive. Students told me repeatedly that they appreciated the opportunity to learn not only about the role Mexican-Americans had in the Civil Rights Movement, but also to have conversations with me and other students about their experiences as Americans of Mexican descent.

Can you tell our readers more about the student population?

At ISA the population is very diverse. Students are selected by lottery and represent a cross section of the community: 450 students across racial, academic, socio-economic, and school experiences. Our junior and senior classes are about 45% Latino and 2% African-American; the remaining 55% are White or Asian.

We recognize that even though incoming students make a choice to attend the International School, they still need personalized supports as they make the transition to ninth grade and a new environment outside their home communities.

What are your biggest challenges in this work?

I would have to say that my biggest challenge is sustaining the work. We started our local Center in 2004 and the work in schools is going well. Every third faculty meeting in my schools is a CFG meeting. We continue to train new coaches every year and we have decided on voluntary rather than mandatory CFG participation. We hold several citywide forums each year and will be discussing Deborah Meier's essay, "Undermining Democracy," at our upcoming Fall Forum.

While CFGs are voluntary on both campuses I work with, at the large campus only 35 of the 187 eligible faculty members are in groups. *(continued on page 14)*

NSRF's Living History: An Interview with Tim Martindell

Donna Reid, Texas

This interview originally appeared in Coaching Facilitates Greatness*, an e-newsletter published by The Houston A+ Challenge. You can freely access other issues and subscribe at www.houstonaplus.org/criticalfriends.htm#newsletter.*

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.

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 leaders. My role will be 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 was 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 A+ (then known as the Houston Annenberg 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 very 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.

What 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)*

Protocols in Practice:
Structures Support Special Education Students' Rigorous Practice

Debbie Bambino, Pennsylvania

Last fall I taught a graduate course for teachers enrolled in the National Board Certification process. In this "Protocols in Practice" I will share how my student, and her students, were given the opportunity to grow and learn with the support of some basic tools I shared from our NSRF repertoire.

Using CFG Tools in a Grad Class

A few weeks into the class, I shared the Connections protocol with my grad students. As usual, the first experience was characterized by a fair amount of silence and a little discomfort. At our next class, I reminded my students of our community agreements and asked one of them to facilitate. In our debrief I asked the class how they might use Connections with their students. Later in the same class, we used the Final Word to discuss a chapter from *At the Heart of Teaching: A Guide to Reflective Practice* by Grace Hall McEntee et al. The next week we began to share dilemmas and use the Consultancy protocol and probing questions to expand our thinking and practice.

A Consultancy Near Disaster

During the first class, when we shared dilemmas, my student "Denise" presented her struggles with her last period biology class. Denise was clearly at her wits' end with this small group of thirteen students. Her "problem" class was made up of all white students, some with IEPs, some who were repeating the class, others without IEPs and who struggled with reading and written expression, and one student with Asperger's Syndrome and a personal classroom support aide. Denise shared that the social nature of the class was becoming a disruption to the learning process. She contrasted this "problem" class with the rest of her high-achieving and honors level classes. She clearly resented feeling like a babysitter, marking time at the end of the day.

I was troubled by some of the low expectations for "these" students that were evidenced in the discussion section of the Consultancy. 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 set it up for the next morning's students. As a former hospital housekeeper, I was stung by the decision to assign "these" kids clean up crew duty so they could do something constructive. I was torn between my plan to teach the process of the protocol and my desire to interrupt the biased teacher expectations in my class.

Not either/or

I rejected 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 functioning 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 begin each class with a 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. Written expression is a challenge but as shown in the class's daily connection time, verbal expression is not. In conducting this discussion on cancer, I wanted this verbal group of students to have an opportunity to excel.

Planning

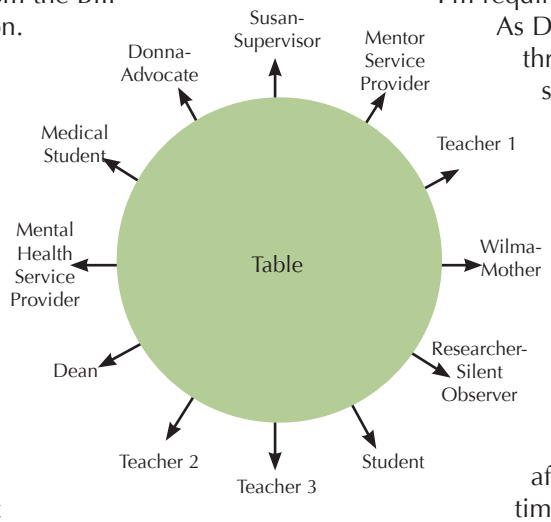
The goal of this discussion was for students to understand the relevance of studying cancer to everyday life. The discussion on cancer was an extended thinking activity designed to link student knowledge of the cell cycle with an understanding of how cancer starts, spreads, is treated, and can be prevented. The discussion format was utilized to engage students in the content. Students were expected to gain knowledge by reading five articles 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)*

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 that best meets the individual needs of a student with disabilities. In recent years, I have become acutely aware that with the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act and special education legislation like IDEIA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004), case conferences have become extremely powerful places.

The following narrative is a case conference I sat in as I was collecting data for a large-scale project (Smiley, 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 life of anonymity that most students live in large schools. Structural changes were made and professional development was provided to ensure faculty common planning time with intentions to improve academic practice, promote collaboration across disciplines, enhance relationships with students, and implement deliberate efforts to combat social injustice. As you will see, the administration's lack of knowledge regarding special education across the small schools at this high school and the racial bias held by the teachers had a devastating impact on this student and his family.



Case Conference seating arrangement

Case Conference Narrative

The case conference was held at 1:30 p.m. in a glass-walled room located at the main entrance of the school. One of the special education teachers had gone to Wilma's (African-American mother of the student) house to bring her to the conference. The room slowly began to fill with people around 1:50 p.m. Denise (European-American special education teacher), Susan (European-American area special education supervisor), Donna (African-American family-school advocate), and Wilma were all in attendance, as I (European-American silent observer & researcher) had been informed they would be. Additionally, a person from a community mental health service, a medical student, a representative from a community mentoring program, two additional special education teachers, a dean, and the student were all present.

When the conference began, Denise informed the group that there had been several behavior and attendance issues that needed to be addressed and that given these circumstances, the conference was going to be a manifestation determination (expulsion) conference rather than an annual case review. She asked if anyone objected and no one responded. She then gave Wilma a copy of her legal rights without offering an explanation, stating, "You probably already know these by heart, but I'm required to give them to you anyway."

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 hats were allowed after school hours and that by this time the school day was officially over. Denise replied that hats were not 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 scene. A few minutes later the police officer arrived and removed the student from the room while his mother sat watching. The entire room 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)*

the one that's chosen me.

That's a great story. It's astonishing to think of CFG trainees as being such an elite group, because today the training is so widespread. There are so many established places in the country that offer it, and we're happy to be one here in Houston. Besides Houston, where do you see the strongholds of the CFG movement?

They're in a lot of different places. New York is very strong. South Florida is very strong. New England is very strong - everything from an entire high school, Souhegan High School in New Hampshire, to a school district like Brookline, Massachusetts, where Gene Thompson-Grove [NSRF founder] works. Southern California is very strong. Denver and the Colorado area. San Francisco, Oakland, Portland, Seattle, Albuquerque. This is just off the top of my head.

We'll just say, "And the list goes on and on."

Dallas, Austin, San Antonio, Mathis, Texas. Just think about how strong the work is just that state. And the people - Gene Thompson-Grove always reminds me that it's about the people. See, you have Stephen Spring moving from Maine to Austin, and the work grows. You have people like Angela Breidenstein and her colleagues at Trinity University in San Antonio, and the work grows because the people are committed to making the work grow. Like you guys do in Houston. You've taken the CFG Newsletter, and all of the stuff that you are able to pull out is deeper and stronger and more important than anything that National could ever do, because it's really about teachers and kids and families and schools asking themselves hard questions - critical questions - about the work that they do and the work that they ask of children.

While national organizations might provide a bully pulpit - we might be able to organize national meetings, put out some publications, and do some research - the real work happens when a teacher and her colleagues sit in a classroom and look at student and teacher work. That's the power of this work. That's what I did in 1996 when I came back from the training seminar, and that's still the core of our work.

Talking about the core of your work, I notice that social equity is front and center in NSRF's mission statement. Why do you think that social equity is so important in public education?

Because public education is basically an unfair construct. It is a construct that favors white, middle, and upper-middle class children. The basic dilemma is that the children who need our public schools most often get the least. As a national organization committed to student achievement through adult learning, NSRF would like to have some role or responsibility in changing that fundamental problem.

If we can predict how many prisons we're going to need based on third grade achievement data, we have a big equity problem. To pretend to do this work without addressing that fundamental issue does a disservice to the children we are supposed to be serving.

Race and class ought not to be a determining factor. The hidden curriculum, which is fairly well defined in the literature, should not have predictive value on educative outcomes. For example, I've heard that the state of Indiana predicts it's future need for prison beds based on third grade achievement data. If we can predict how many prisons we're going to need based on third grade achievement data, we have a big equity problem. To pretend to do this work without addressing that fundamental issue does a disservice to the children we are supposed to be serving.

I tell school faculties all the time that we have our degrees, we have our middle class incomes, we have a degree of comfortableness in this life. Our clients don't have that, and it's up to us to help make sure that changes. When I visit a certain very complicated school in Brooklyn this morning, I'm going to walk in the front door and know that most of the children inside that building will not graduate from high school; they will be destined to live lives of either abject poverty or some sort of very low or middle class existence within our service economy. And if NSRF can help interrupt that - at all - then our mission is worthwhile.

Why do you feel that Critical Friends Groups and adults getting together to talk about student learning are such powerful models for addressing some of those issues?

Because it gives us *(continued on page 14)*

An Historic Election - A Teachable Moment

Greg Peters, California

On November 4, 2008, history was made - in our country and for our world. It was one of those moments so rare in life that each of us will remember. We will remember exactly where we were, what we were doing, and what we were feeling.

I was sitting - ironically - in the presidential suite of the Westin Hotel in North Carolina with the staff of National CES and other CES Center Directors who had gathered for the Fall Forum. We broke bread together as we discussed the implications for this momentous event - eyes and ears never fully leaving the television screen. At 11:03 p.m. EST, Barack Obama was declared the 44th president of the United States - the first biracial president, the first Black president, the first non-white president. I cried … and the depth of emotions surprised me. I believed I was ready for this decision. I felt it was time for this, and I wanted it. I looked inside and understood that I was crying not because of the results - but rather their implications. My tears came with the realization that this one night would do more for the youth I have been committed to serve than all our school reform efforts had done to date. I cried because I knew that tomorrow, our students- specifically, our black and brown students- would wake up to a new schema. THEIR world context would be changed to its core; they would know, in ways that had not yet been truly true, that what was possible for them now was deeply different and perhaps just a bit more equitable.

Later, I lay in my hotel bed with my husband on speakerphone, "watching TV together," awaiting President-Elect Obama's acceptance speech. I froze as the first family stepped onto the Chicago stage. I wanted nothing - not even the sound of my own breath - to interrupt this moment, this image that now is tattooed on my mind forever. I wondered with excitement, "What are our students thinking as they view this proud, black family take their place not only in our collective history but also, ultimately, in a house that their ancestors helped to build for the profit of others?"

The next day Gary Cruz, a teacher in one of San Francisco's most segregated and lowest performing high schools, was also feeling at a deeper level. He wondered if the same was true for his students and did what good teachers do; in spite of the pressures of scripts and coverage, he grasped a teachable moment. He asked his two classes of students - who ranged in grade level (sophomores through seniors) as well as experience (AP, Special Education, deaf, and former gang members) - to take out their journals and reflect on the following prompts.

1. What were you doing when you found out the election results? Where were you, who was with you? What were people saying? (What?)
2. What were you feeling when you heard the news? Which emotions were shown by people around you? How could you tell? (So What?)
3. What does this make you think about the future? What do you think of the future of our country? In 20 years, what might you tell your children and/or loved ones about this historic day? (Now What?)

And, when his students were finished, they talked.

Following are some of his students' reflections and responses:

"I was on my way to my mom's pizza place. I was with my little sister. I was yelling "OBAMA - OBAMA!" Throughout downtown people were chanting with me and my sister all happy and shocked." - Female Salvadorian senior, student body president

"When Barack Obama won the election I was in my house in the kitchen … my parents and uncles and aunties were in the living room watching the election and I was listening to it. People had their mouths drop. Most of all they were happy. This is history; next time we can have a Latino President!!!" - Latina senior

"I was in a garage on 22nd and York. I was with other poll workers; we were cleaning up. People including me were happy and excited and hugging and jumping." - Female Salvadorian senior

"I was in a taqueria at 24th and Alabama,

then I heard the cook say, 'Obama gano!' ("Obama won!"), and I rushed to the kitchen. I was like yeah!!! We won … we started celebrating, … they kicked me out of the kitchen of course, but I was still happy!!!" - Latino senior

"I was in my dad's room watching the news. My dad and my brother were with me when we heard it. People were just shocked, and some of them even cried of joy to see Obama win. They were just celebrating to each other, saying that history has been made." - Latino senior immigrant

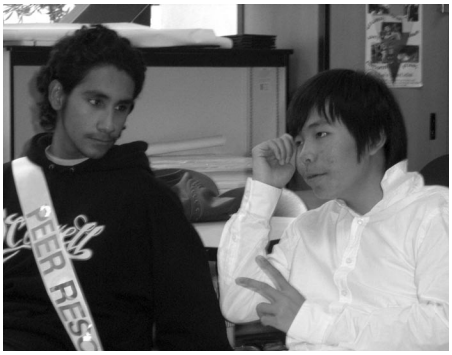
"I was disappointed to have missed his speech." - Deaf female African-American sophomore

"When I heard the news I had to go watch the TV because I wasn't sure if he did win." - Latina senior

"I with mom Happy excited when TV Obama." -Deaf male Mexican senior, immigrant

"I was with my family watching the news. My mom was excited, I was shocked - truly. Democracy for me had never been so loud." - Latino senior

"I was at my house with my family and talking to one of my friends when Obama was elected president. When I heard that, I was shocked and thrilled to see an African-American for the first time ever become president." - Latino senior, special education



"I was at the polls. I worked for 16 hours and I was awake for a little more than 20 hours. I was really happy he won and I feel proud because I know I helped him win by being at his campaign. I heard people at the headquarters were crying and happy. I also think they expect too much of him right now." - Latino senior

"I was working on Capp for the election polls. I was confused because I did (not) understand how Obama won if the votes weren't counted. Once other people called me to tell me the results I knew it was true. I felt happy and accomplished because I wanted Obama to win. I heard people honking in the streets yelling "Obama" and felt very happy because I knew there was finally going to be change. Other people thought negative and said Obama was going to die before going into power. I think that if nothing happens to Obama there will be change." - Latina senior

"I was in my pajamas and the stars were out and the sky was clear of clouds. I was feeling like they're going to rig the votes. But when he won it was like a dream, it was like now I most definitely can do anything - be anyone. It was awesome!" - Female African-American junior

"I together with my family watch TV. Happy! I feel good. Crying laughing Obama. I observed my family." - Deaf male Chinese sophomore, immigrant

"I was at home when I found out. I was supposed to be writing a sestina. My mom was next to me on the couch. I felt relief because McCain did not win. Now I am hopeful about Obama being president. I'm glad we finally have our first African-American president. I think our country will improve with Obama but it won't be easy. It will be hard for Obama to make these changes. Every one expects the best from him. I doubt he will be able to make everyone happy. But I think he will at least be better than Bush. I'm also glad to have a democrat for a president although I don't think of myself as being part of any political party." - Female Guatemalan senior, immigrant

"I was at home in my pj's. I was so excited I wanted to cry. The whole world is going to change. We finally have an African-American President instead of a white one. That makes it seem like dreams can come true and yes you can." - Israeli female senior

"Happiness and tears of joy." - Latino senior

"I stood in disbelief with tears in my eyes. November 4, 2008, was the best day of my life. I kept telling my sister to pinch me because I didn't know if I was done dreaming. To see young men who sell drugs and gang-bang 24/7 cry because finally what they used to wish 4 came to pass! All *(continued on page 12)*

you heard were the voices of "if Obama, a BLACK MAN can be the president of the U.S. I know I can do anything." …to know that I witnessed history made me feel proud to be black. I know that now I can do anything! Obama being president only motivated me as a black female to go out and achieve all of my goals. YES I CAN! To try and defeat the impossible because now anything is POSSIBLE! In 20 years I'll be the first Black female president and say change is possible only if we work together as one. That's what showed me that our country, the U.S. ... the best county on planet earth is ready for change, if we weren't Obama wouldn't be my president today." - Female mixed-race junior

"I was at my house watching T.V. with my parents. It is such a HUGE change for our country and hopefully now we can have more great changes. To have an African-American president is a powerful historic event. I think this changes how our country is going to be viewed and for our future." - Female mixed-race junior

"I was at home on my computer. When they announced that Obama won, my mom started crying. I felt inspired, like anything is possible. I used to think I would never see the day that someone that wasn't white would win president. I hope that in the future more things would be easier and rational." - Latino senior

"I was at basketball practice and we all just started about how dangerous it is for him. When I heard … the amount of options I saw as possible broadened. When I came home my mother was crying and it hit me why we came to the U.S." - Male Bosnian junior, experienced civil war, immigrant

"When I saw that many Republican states switched to Democratic states, such as Pennsylvania and Nevada and Florida, I knew what was going to happen. I was excited but I kept my cool. I hope Obama makes world peace attainable." - Male African-American senior

"I felt like inspired, almost to cry ... I felt like deep in me, Obama is going to change America. People around me were not surprised, because they just already knew he was going to win. They had faith in him all along … Whatever my goals are, I can achieve them, without any walls between me and them. This makes me think the future of the U.S. is in the right hands. Believe me, the U.S. is going to change." - Latino senior, immigrant

"This makes me feel that I can set a goal and that I can make it happen if I want to. But it takes your family, friends and people to achieve a goal and that we can all change the U.S. for good." - Latina senior

"I think we will have change. Obama my family supported." - Deaf male Mexican senior, immigrant

"I got a chance to be alive on November 4, 2008, to see Obama become the first African-American (president) and I saw hope for the US. It is one of the most important days of my life and I will never forget this day. I feel that my future is going to be much better; I will have more opportunities and a chance. Also I feel that anything is possible now and if he became president why can't I?" - Female, Salvadorian senior, student body President

"I felt like there is maybe hope for the USA, maybe we can get on the other countries good sides again. I will tell people that this day a spark went off that ignited the American people ablaze with hope and courage." - Male Bosnian junior, experienced civil war, immigrant

"I will tell (my children) … don't forget kids, anyone can be whatever they want." - Latino senior, immigrant

"I will encourage my children try become president if they want to." - Deaf male Chinese sophomore, immigrant

"To talk about the future we must understand the past and our past has been filled with injustice and racism, hatred and slavery. Yet that night was truly a small step for 2 men but a huge step for mankind. The future has always been there but now I feel that rather than trying to put it off I want to run towards it (and) when I look back at the fourth of November of 2008 I will do so with pride and I will tell my kids and friends that it was one of the greatest moments of America, the world and the human race! " - Latino senior, spoken word poet

At the Fall Forum, Glenn Singleton asked, "What does it mean that our next president has the face of our most underserved students?" These students have certainly shared their answers to the question; what is yours? For me, I now realize that my own schema must change. In my effort to meet students where they are, I now must recognize I am working with a new day - a new world for our youth - one with more promise and possibility, one with a renewed sense of hope. ■

Note: while the data may appear biased, all voices of the students in Gary's two classes are represented. Greg Peters can be contacted at gpeters@sfcess.org.

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. Although well-intentioned, this scheme reduced teacher agency when the leadership team also took up meeting time with other tasks throughout the fall. In order to meet 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.

Such anecdotes show that there are widespread misunderstandings about what PLCs are and how CFG practices can support 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 what they cannot accomplish alone" (p.xiii). 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.129).

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 text-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.123). 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 verb diminishes agency. I believe that this tension between encouraging educators to take fuller responsibility for student learning while not really trusting them to do it has strangled 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 of students and the adults who 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 what makes CFGs special *(continued on page 19)*

permission to say "We don't know." It gives us permission 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 those realities of schooling in this country.

I think that part of it has to do with the misogynistic 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 dominated 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 contribution 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 membership organization.

Members are involved in a national movement. I think that NSRF is a stronger movement than an organization. Our Centers of Activity are very strong organizations, but I think NSRF national is really a movement. CFG work is having 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 and 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 departmental 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 benefit.

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% Latino/a 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 enough 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 established 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 colleagues 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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Centers of Activity Report: San Antonio
(continued from page 3)

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 area teachers 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 preservice 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 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. ■

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Center of Activity Report: Houston
(continued from page 4)

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
(continued from page 6)

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. ■

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said, "I don't know why you need me here, you're not listening to me or my mom." Denise described this confrontation as a typical display of the student's daily behavior. Susan used this opening as a chance to discuss behavior plan options. She asked if the student could call home when a conflict arose. Denise responded, "We can try that, but he doesn't listen to her (Wilma) either." She continued, without looking up from the paperwork, to explain that Wilma's inability to provide consistent transportation had been a hindrance to all behavior plans they had attempted to implement thus far.

Denise continued to read through the manifestation paperwork aloud, word for word, without looking up or asking if anyone needed clarification. At this point several side conversations began among some committee members, and others were having unrelated conversations on cell phones. The legal portion of the paperwork moved away from behavior and on to attendance. After 30 minutes without making eye contact or speaking, Wilma stated that she was upset about getting so many calls from school saying her son was not in attendance when she puts him in the taxi cab each morning. Denise pulled out the student's attendance records and report card and passed them around the group. According to the attendance sheet, the student had missed the majority of school days listed and was failing all of his classes. When the student and one of his other content area teachers looked at his records, they both pointed out that this was his schedule before he was put on a half-day schedule and was enrolled in a different small school on campus. It became apparent that the computer system was not updated when his schedule was changed, so it appeared on paper that the student had been skipping school when he was, according to his current IEP, meeting with a mentor in the afternoon. According to the representative from mentor services, the student had been in attendance at all sessions. Wilma then stated that she had been summoned to truancy court due to this clerical error and asked if the school could help sort out that situation. At this point one of the other special education teachers voiced a concern that communication between professionals within the different small schools was an ongoing struggle in this situation, but this comment was left unaddressed by the committee. Denise responded to Wilma's question about truancy court by saying that Wilma would have to appear in court to straighten this out legally. Donna later called and offered to attend the court session with Wilma to help.

As the conference proceeded, a homebound plan was developed. Wilma asked how her son would be able to graduate when he would only be working with a tutor a few hours a day. Denise responded by saying that those are the best services they can provide with the resources available. After the paperwork was passed around and signed, Donna asked Wilma if she understood and agreed with everything that was just discussed. Wilma became visibly upset and hung her head once again. The student responded to Donna's question by saying, "No she's not okay with it, but she will sign because that's what you want her to do." As everyone filed out of the conference Wilma was crying, and the student was upset.

Leading for Best Practice?

The lack of leadership and facilitation in this case conference had demoralizing effects on the family and in actuality opened the school up for litigation in several ways. At no time did a leader (special or general education) step in and remind the IEP team that a change of conference purpose, from annual case review to manifestation determination, and the invitation of additional people without prior parent notification were not acceptable. When the behavior issue regarding the hat emerged, neither leader in the room stepped up to address it. They allowed the police to be summoned instead of doing their jobs and intervening. Neither leader commented on the transportation situation when this topic was expressed as a hindrance to providing educational services. Additionally, in a room of 12 people, all with the alleged goal of doing what was best for the student, not a single administrator accepted responsibility for the incompetent attendance record keeping taking place in their school. Even worse, once they were made aware of the grave impact their failure had had on this family, neither leader offered to help clean up the legal mess caused by the school. The painfully passive role these leaders played in this case conference also allowed a teacher, with obvious racial bias against the student and his mother, the power to control the climate of this conference and adversely affect the services this student and family received from the school. Denise wanted the student "out of her school" and mobilized the forces necessary to make it a reality. Later, in an individual interview, Denise *(continued on page 18)*

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.

Discussion preparation: I introduced 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 of interest 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 comment on 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, I 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. This 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 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 NBCT 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. She asks "If there isn't a cure, then what do the pills do?" Student respondents mention "stop the spread," "put cancer in remission," and "slow down the cancer." At that point we discuss the role of angiogenesis and angiogenesis inhibitors in the treatment of cancer. In her "last word, the presenter shows the thought she has invested in this idea as she contemplates the discussion. "You said if you stop feeding the tumor, it will starve. If you do that, you can stop the cancer." She was able to use deductive reasoning to better understand the role of angiogenesis in the treatment of cancer.

I was able to help students further explore possible solutions to the concerns presented by each person by asking probing questions and directing students to the information found in the articles we read 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," "great grandmother had skin cancer removed in many locations on her face," and "cancer entered the blood stream." At this point I knew all students understood that removal of growths is not always successful because cancer cells enter the blood stream and show up at other points in the body. There was a pause in the conversation. So I asked probing questions to get students to think about why removal of skin growths is sometimes successful. I asked, "How can this be successful sometimes? What are the possibilities?" One student was then able to explain to the class that if you can catch the cancer before it spreads to the blood stream, then you can successfully treat the cancer.

One method to ensure fairness that I employed for this discussion was to make 100% participation a requirement. To ensure equity, I set up the discussion so that the presenter would have the right to the last word on the topic that they brought to the class. By doing this I allowed the presenter to clarify their understanding, restate their opinion, and/or simply acknowledge new information.

Closing Reflection

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 to them.

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 entire discussion. I

(continued on page 19)

implied that this case was more involved and time consuming because Wilma was non-responsive and not a good parent. She sarcastically wished me luck in my attempts to set up an interview with Wilma.

Wilma answered her telephone the first time I attempted to contact her for an interview. I met her at her house after she had dropped her children off at school on a Tuesday morning. She invited me into her home and spoke freely about her experiences with the school. She shared her frustration with the system and a desire to move out of the district because of the legal issues that had come up over the alleged truancy. Wilma had sat next to me in the case conference and asked if I could join her at the upcoming truancy court date. She wanted another witness because none of the school personnel would agree to go with her to help explain to the judge that this was the school's paperwork mistake.

At our final interview, Wilma explained that the court resolved the truancy issue and shared her relief that she was able to afford a new home in a neighboring district. Wilma was disappointed about moving because she and her husband had both attended this school as teenagers. However, she had decided to move her family, in large part because of the issues she had experienced with the special education services her son had received.

Implications for Educators

School leaders must be advocates for students, families, and staff. The leaders from this case conference should have stopped the proceedings when they realized the conference was disrespectful and not working in compliance with the law. Even without expert knowledge about special education, a leader can do many things in a case conference to make the process productive and meaningful. Leaders should make sure everyone in the room feels comfortable and informed by asking clarifying questions as the meeting proceeds. Leaders should request that only people who work directly with the student be in the meeting so the conference does not feel overwhelming. Leaders should remind everyone in the room that they are on the same team, merely playing different roles, with the common goal of developing a plan that is best for the student. Leaders should remind everyone (families, students, and staff) that they each bring a valuable voice to the process and ensure that each is heard. Leaders should encourage families to sit together so they feel more comfortable in a room of "professionals." Leaders have the power to make sure case conferences like the one described in this narrative never happen to a family in their schools.

After more data and experiences similar to those shared here emerged, the high school transformation team working with the district decided to make special education one of its focus areas for the final year of their Gates small school initiative. The team hired outside special education consultants to offer support to the district and families by providing special education focused professional development for administrators of small schools, offering perspective to the transformation team in the decision making process, and supporting school staff and families as they negotiate the legal system together to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

While the implementation of the small school initiative actually brought to light many special education issues that had been hiding under the surface of this large high school, it did not solve these problems. It is harder for poor practices to go unnoticed in these more personalized settings. Teacher bias, lack of knowledge of legal requirements by administration, disregard for best practice, and a blatant break down of communication all emerged as obstacles to meeting the needs of the student and his family in this case.

I want to commend the participants of this study. By allowing their personal and professional experiences to be studied and shared, they have helped the field of education to grow and improve widespread practice. I share their experiences to encourage other administrators and teachers to reflect on their own practice in case conferences. I believe the small school initiative taking place in this district has and will continue to enhance the possibility for the interruption of inequities in the delivery of services being offered to students and families - if the teachers and administrators have the will to do so.

I also share this as a call to action for those engaged in equity work. Naming and identifying inequity is only the first step of the struggle. We need to push ourselves to not just name inequity, but to also dissect the process within which it happens and interrupt that practice. We must begin to build a more equitable system. To this end, I am extending an opportunity to the readers of *Connections*. I want to work collaboratively with educators to develop a protocol specific to

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Consenting Adults...
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IEP meetings and try it out in a variety of states. If you are interested in being part of this collaborative effort, please contact me. ■

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

and be explicit about the tensions regarding power and agency that inevitably surface when CFGs are introduced in a school. Our sustainability depends upon it. We must continue to set our own agendas and plans, and we must be accountable for revising and implementing those agendas and plans to meet the needs of our students. We cannot afford to settle for PLCs that are nothing more than grade or departmental groups with new names. Our students' success depends on our willingness to disturb the status quo, and CFGs are a big first step on the journey. ■

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Protocols in Practice...
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did not have one discipline problem. I did not have to remind students to complete an assignment. I could keep even the most talkative student in check by simply asking if his comment had anything to do with the discussion.

I learned that our daily Connection time has paid off in terms of student respectfulness. This is a rowdy, talkative bunch of students. But by following our expectation of respectful behavior while someone is talking, on a daily basis, this class has learned the concept of control. They were able to honor one another as they raised their hands to speak and waited to be called upon. I can't begin to say how proud I am of these students.

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 challenge 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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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 RoLesia Holman of North Carolina. - *Connections* Editorial Board

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