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# A REPORT FROM THE FIELD: How Does CFG Coaches Training Impact Teachers' Practice and Student Success?

By Dave Lehman, Connections Editor, NSRF National Facilitator, and CFG Coach in Wisconsin, [davelehman@mac.com](mailto:davelehman@mac.com)

In the past three years I have worked with more than 50 teachers and other professionals of the Madison Metropolitan School District in Wisconsin, training them to be Critical Friends Group (CFG) Coaches. This has involved, in particular, three cohorts of a total of 38 teachers and other professionals of Madison East High School. The other groups have included Literacy Coaches from the other three Madison high schools, Support and Resource Teachers, and District Coordinators of professional development.

Although the typical National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) model for CFGs is to train Coaches to be facilitators of CFGs, in Madison the approach varied from this model as the trained Coaches used their newly acquired coaching skills with their colleagues in Department meetings, and in mixed-discipline PLC groups (Professional Learning Communities). The PLCs focused on topics generated by staff that met weekly during early release time, called "Professional Collaboration Time" (PCT). In addition, those trained as CFG Coaches frequently modified and used a variety of NSRF Protocols with their students in diverse subject areas. The PLCs focused on such topics as:

- Examining Our Instruction in Writing
- Examining Our Instruction in the Freshmen Academy
- Examining Student and Teacher Work
- Sharing Ideas, Best Practices, and Dilemmas in Classroom Management
- Examining Our Instruction with AVID Strategies
- Sharing Ideas, Best Practices, and Dilemmas in Using Multi-Media in the Classroom
- Sharing Specific Strategies for Helping African-American and Hispanic Students

We NSRF National Facilitators frequently ask ourselves, "Can we measure how CFG Coaches Training results in positive changes in teaching and/or professional practice? How can we demonstratively measure the impact, particularly on students?" In response to a questionnaire administered to all those trained in Madison over the past three years, 96% indicated that they have used things learned from the training with their high school students, whether in their classrooms or in their other professional responsibilities, i.e. as Counselors, Special Education Teachers, Dean of Students, Associate Principal, and Literacy Coaches. Such learning involved not only using various Protocols as new classroom teaching strategies, but frequently involved new ideas gleaned from colleagues, and ideas during Consultancy sessions devoted to teaching dilemmas. Some of the specific

Protocols used included the various Text-Based Discussion Protocols, Ice Breakers and Warm-ups, Hopes and Fears (particularly with students the first week of school in thinking about what lies ahead), the Feedback Carousel (with students giving and receiving feedback on their classroom projects), Compass Points, and particularly Chalk Talks, which were used by several teachers in a variety of classes and subject areas.

**"What evidence do you have that the changes you made in your practice led to greater student success?"**

In asking this question, participant replies include the following anecdotes:

- "greater participation from students"
- "students showed greater understanding from the use of quick writes and exit slips"
- [regarding Chalk Talks] "students were engaged, everyone participated, and enjoyed it [more than] hearing someone talk.... some were freer to express themselves"
- "students were more supportive of each other, less nasty talk"
- "[students] opened up, [became] more comfortable with classmates, more willing to take risks, didn't mind so much making mistakes [and learning from each other]"
- "students got good feedback" [Feedback Carousel]
- "students seemed more involved, more engaged"
- "I found that we were able to have conversations that we were never able to have before."
- "I think it simply improve[d] communication and deeper understanding of diverse groups of kids

*who could find common language together."*

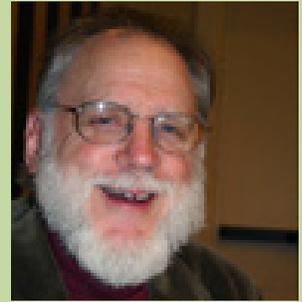
- "made them think and process well"

And there was this thoughtful example from a math Teacher who made a major change in her classroom practice as a result of ideas gained from her colleagues in her CFG Training:

*"Having students as facilitators in small groups, where students discuss and come up with answers to in-class investigations/worksheets and agree on common solutions. Having [these] discussions in*

**"[students] opened up, [became] more comfortable with classmates, more willing to take risks, didn't mind so much making mistakes [and learning from each other]"**

*small groups and teaching each other, has led the students to be more independent and focused. It has helped them to improve their skills. I have noticed that students who become facilitators enjoy and experience their leadership opportunities. Students who are struggling gain a lot from other students in their small groups. They observe the other students' work and ask them content-based questions. I have observed that students who would not be doing well have passing grades because they are learning from other students and they feel that they can approach students in their group more comfortably than asking questions as a whole class. They have more confidence*



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*in tackling challenging work.”*

And from a Dean of Students:

*“I have used co-generative dialogue [learned from text-based discussion of an article] as well as a multi-cultural approach to creating meaningful relationships with students, helping to further engage them with school. After monitoring the progress of certain students, our interactions have helped students feel more engaged and safer in school allowing for better engagement in classes and better grades.”*

### **"Have you used any of the CFG Coaches Training with your colleagues (e.g. in department meetings, facilitating PCT-PLCs, etc.?)"**

In response to this question, 92% indicated they had, and are continuing to do so, particularly those who are Chair Persons of their Departments. A major goal of this CFG Coaches Training with the different cohorts was to expand the leadership capacity among more staff and to build a “culture of collaboration,” so these responses stood out:

- *“new ideas to use with an assignment or issue”*
- *“cohesion and team spirit within the department”*
- *“teachers ask me [Department Chair] for copies of Protocols to use in class”*
- *[when doing classroom observations/evaluations as Department Chair] “see Protocols being used in classrooms, written on board”*
- *“engaged staff, took pressure off of people with sensitive data, focused meetings”*
- *“peer observations within the Department [World Languages]; after observing a colleague, creating my own similar activity”*
- *“teachers asked for information, expressed interest in doing more with the topic”*
- *“definitely impacted the quality of conversations we had [have] as professionals in a positive way”*
- *“best part [was] sharing best practices [on classroom management] in non-threatening environment”*
- *“allowed for more structured conversations and more points of view”*
- *“makes meetings run more smoothly and keep people on task, makes sure everyone’s voice is heard”*

- *“They [members of the Department] are quiet and thoughtful instead of chatty and off-task.”*

- *“It helped [helps] all voices to be heard in a manner that also allowed us to accomplish what we needed to accomplish.”*

- *“Used strategies for developing tutor training, tutor debriefings, evaluating students work, AVID/TOPS Site Team meetings, PCT – [positive responses on] Tutor satisfaction surveys, AVID/TOPS [students’] course grades and improvement.” (TOPS Coordinator in AVID/TOPS Program)*

- *“Protocols, and the philosophy behind CFG training, have led to open, reflective consideration of how to support students, rather than blaming them, their families, or their perceived deficits.”*

And this from one of the Associate Principals:

*“When evaluating staff – [particularly] how do staff work with minority students? – a helpful tool has been the Tuning Protocol, with warm/cool feedback; I’ve learned to see classrooms through that lens.”*

Additionally, we heard responses from a Literacy Coach about major changes in their staff culture, and from a REal Grant Coordinator about how extensive use of Protocols helps create a collaborative, learning staff. The below reference to “AVID-9 kids” refers to a group primarily consisting of students of color, low income students, and English Language Learners, all enrolled in a college-readiness program:

*“I work with both adults and with children. Protocols and the sharing of student work have helped model equitable and inclusive teaching and learning. CFG work is essential to [our high school] having feedback on a recent district survey that 86% of our staff are comfortable sharing work; 85% feel safe to push each other professionally. Collaborative sharing is beginning to lead to results for more kids – 50 AVID-9 kids made gains that exceeded national benchmark rates, and are beginning to close the achievement gap...students’ learning is showing dramatic promise, as evidenced by multiple measures.”*

*“I use CFG protocols all of the time in my work [professional development]. It has become the vehicle for running meetings for me. I use tuning protocols as we bring both warm and cool feedback and suggestions for improvement to all of the work we do in Leadership Team, other school improvement teams, and school-wide*

professional development. We have used text-based protocols to dialogue around texts that are relevant to our work. We use consultancy protocols to bring dilemmas to share about how we might improve our work with students. We have used data-based protocols to guide effective conversations around data. We have also learned a variety of team-building activities and structures to help facilitate effective meetings. If I were still in the classroom, I would use many of these activities.”

### **"What additional comments would you add were you to recommend CFG Coaches Training to a colleague?"**

Lastly, in response to the final question on the questionnaire, 100% recommended CFG Coaches Training for more of their colleagues. Their responses included the following:

- “I usually tell people that I find it very helpful – especially the safe environment in which you can look at students’ work and your own teaching practices. I also feel it is helpful in creating bonds with other people in the building.” [Culinary Arts Teacher]
- “CFG is a great framework for team-building and building trust amongst working professionals. It provides a safe structure for asking and giving advice amongst colleagues and sharing our successes and skills.” [Art Teacher]
- “CFG training has given me the knowledge, skills and tools to become a better teacher in the classroom as well as a better group facilitator (which is very similar to being a classroom teacher) by being able to engage more people in a systematic, research-based method that increases learning and understanding of all involved.” [Technology and Engineering Education Teacher and Department Chair]
- “I really appreciate the training I received and it has helped me lead better meetings with my colleagues. I feel that we get more accomplished and our time is better structured and use[d].” [Special Education Teacher]
- “The coaching is a great experience to share success and frustrations, but also to share solutions. The Protocols have been very helpful in department meetings.” [Spanish Teacher]
- “It was quite possibly the best training. You get to work with, and get to know, colleagues across the

school.” [ESL Teacher]

- “CFG [training] can help you become a better person conversationally, professionally, and academically. It will help you become the flexible teacher that we all strive to be.” [Math Teacher]
- “I think that all staff (administrators, teachers, support staff, etc.) should get trained because we all work with one another and with students. If we are all on the same page, we’ll get better outcomes with ourselves and with our students.” [ESL and Hmong Teacher]
- “Formative assessment, reflection, learning from one another, bringing individual teaching dilemmas. CFG Protocols facilitate professional learning communities where teachers reflect and learn from one another. They delve more deeply into the issues in their classrooms and strive to improve learning for all students. In my mind, this is the most powerful PD a teacher can have if they take advantage of it. CFGs have done wonderful things for teachers and instruction at East High School. It has created the foundation for effective collaboration, work on equity issues, and improving outcomes for all.” [REal Grant Coordinator]

## **100% of respondents say they would recommend CFG Coaches Training to a colleague**

Based on these survey results and more, I believe we have clear evidence that the CFG Coaches trained in Madison, Wisconsin have made—and are making—a substantial difference. They’re creating and embedding a culture of collaboration within and among the staff. Teachers making changes in their practice are resulting in improved student learning.

Granted, all Madison high schools have a Federal Small Learning Community grant which has paid for much of the CFG Coaches Training. Other positive factors likely contributing to the effectiveness at

Madison East High School include the support of their Principal and my on-going consulting – co-facilitating weekly meetings with their Leadership Team and with individual Department Chairpersons. Additionally, I met frequently with La Follette High School's Innovation Team, REal Grant Coordinator, and Literacy Coach, and did a series of half-day workshops with them over the past three years.

I invite Connections readers to explore more fully how to sustain our work with schools and/or a school district over an extended period of time in order to have a more lasting impact. We know that an initial five-day CFG Coaches Training, while powerful, is only the beginning for the new coaches. For maximum impact to improve teacher practice and student learning, these coaches need to participate in CFGs and the use of Protocols in a consistent, sustained manner over a number of years.

So, my fellow NSRF members, National Facilitators, and CFG Coaches, how can we help existing Critical Friends Groups maintain and build their effectiveness? How can we better encourage new, spin-off CFGs to be created? How can we support schools and districts in learning new Protocols to “refresh” their experience, reinvigorate excitement in those familiar with CFGs and extend that experience to new faces?

The survey can be found [here on the NSRF Website](#). We encourage you to download it, use it with your group, and share the results with us.



## BUILDING A COLLEGIAL COMMUNITY: A Lead Teacher's Experience with Protocols

By Shelley van Benschop, NSRF CFG Coach in Toronto, Ontario, [SvanBenschop@bss.on.ca](mailto:SvanBenschop@bss.on.ca)

Let me share a bit about our school context. I work in the Junior School of a JK-Grade 12 independent, all girls day and boarding school in Toronto, Ontario. For over a decade now we have been pursuing a Reggio Emilia-inspired approach with a focus on inquiry, research and project work. Our school has a history of innovation and consistently strives to research and implement practices that support the mission, vision and values of our school.

As a Junior School faculty with a focus on inquiry, emergent curriculum and collaboration, we have been looking for scaffolding that supports collaboration, supporting the teacher as a researcher and looking for multiple perspectives to enrich both student and teacher work.

This endeavor has led our school to create new positions intentionally to support this goal, including my role: Lead Teacher-Research & Inquiry. My task is to support teachers in reflecting upon and refining their pedagogical practices focused on grades 2-4. The Lead Teachers focus on pedagogical documentation and provide an objective perspective when analyzing data and we contribute to decisions about ongoing investigations and project work occurring in the classrooms.

With this shift in thinking and classroom practice, we have found it necessary to also shift our meeting culture. Traditionally our meeting structure was often a place to share information with the entire faculty. We have since moved to a balanced approach with some whole school faculty, some Junior School faculty and most often, grade floor meetings (ex. Our Floor meeting invites Grade 2-4 classroom teachers and all specialists who can make it). Our meetings have changed to be more reflective of our pedagogical practices of research, reflection, refinement and collaboration. In order to support this change we brought in experts to support us as we shift from congenial relationships to more collaborative collegial relationships<sup>1</sup> (Evans, 2012).

The Middle and Senior School has built a relation-