

freedom to the fullness of a democracy of justice and joy! How could there, therefore, be any question of "public" education? And, shouldn't all children, all youth have the same quality schools to which Arnie Duncan and Barrack Obama send their children? Bill urged us to continue to use the power of the neighborhood, the community - and not to count on the President and those to whom we really don't have access - to "Occupy Wall Street," to fight back, to re-frame, to re-think our schools and the education of our children and youth, continuing to draw on **Rethinking Schools** which **is, and has been**, the public square!

So **HAPPY 25th Rethinking Schools! carry on!** And for those of you who may not yet be familiar with **Rethinking Schools**, go to their website at www.rethinkingschools.org and subscribe to their wonderful magazine, purchase their tremendously useful, teacher-friendly, student-centered resource books - and in the holiday spirit, make a donation to help sustain their work!

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“ONLY ONE OPPORTUNITY TO MAKE A FIRST IMPRESSION” HOW WE INTRODUCED STAFF TO THE POWER OF COLLABORATIVE GROUPS BY DAVID NELSON, TEACHER, AMERICAN COMMUNITY SCHOOLS (ACS) OF ATHENS, GREECE

David Nelson brings 21 years of teaching experience to his high school Social Studies classrooms at ACS Athens, where he has taught for the past eleven years. Originally from the Hillsboro School District in Oregon, he has experienced a wide variety of administrative styles that empower faculty and seek to improve student learning. As a building coordinator for professional development at ACS Athens, he is applying his research and CFG coaches training to help establish “Collaborative Learning Communities” in his school.

We've all witnessed conference presenters who contend that they have the answers to the latest best educational practices, yet they don't seem to get one thing: they talk the talk but they don't ... *you know the rest*. Teachers keenly understand the power of experiential learning and can quickly spot professional presenters who practice the same. Our aim as teachers at ACS Athens was to introduce

the philosophy and goals of Collaborative Learning Communities (CLCs), fundamentally *Critical Friends Groups*, to the school faculty so that they could experience the organizational philosophy of CFGs and consider their potential. With the cyclical changes in education rampant, teams striving to start CFGs in their schools must remember the power of first impressions and find an optimal way to introduce their



goals. With the help of some CFG "tuning" and collaboration with colleagues, we found one such way that I'd like share with those of you

hoping to start CFGs or similar groups in your schools.

I returned to Athens, Greece after spending seven days in Bloomington, Indiana, the home of the National School Reform Faculty and the Harmony School, where I had embarked on a different kind of journey: I had joined a group of highly professional educators from around the United States to explore the power of the CFG model and to become a trained coach. Before the training I had researched quite extensively and I knew that I wanted to introduce a similar collaborative model to our school; however, after experiencing numerous protocols in the CFG training, I left the USA with even more tools than I had hoped.

Before sharing what our school's "kick-off" looked like, I'd like to give credit to my CFG group from the last day of the training, where I presented with the use of the Issaquah Protocol, used in that setting as a type of "tuning" for my plan for kicking-off CFGs in our school. The team not only helped me to better understand my own goals, but also honed in on the methodology for introducing

CFGs to a faculty and offered numerous suggestions. With the added advice of Michele Mattoon, NSRF Director and former teacher, I began to sharpen the plan. Her guidance in the training and her tips for initiating a CFG have been invaluable to the process.

Our goal this year is to initiate a pilot Collaborative Learning Community and then to train those participants from each of the schools, Elementary, Middle and High, to initiate their own collaborative groups next year. Our school created the title Collaborative Learning Communities or CLCs because it mirrors our schools' goals and allows us to integrate methods from a variety of PLCs, chiefly the CFG model.

Unquestionably the protocols and publications from NSRF maintain the CFG title and are vital tools in the process.

Our kick-off involved 110 faculty members from each of the three schools and took place in the library, close to nine break-out rooms essential to our activities. We had 70 minutes to establish our first impressions. As teachers entered at 3:45, classical music played in the background,

refreshments were served and teachers were handed a response card with one of nine colors and one of twelve concepts; the atmosphere already helped them to adjust their state of mind after the full teaching day.

The goals of the meeting were framed as a four-fold of opportunities: to get to know each other better, to explore alternative ways for teachers to collaborate, to discuss what makes for the most productive gathering of teachers, and to learn how to maximize the professional conferences offered in Athens this year.



One of our colleagues, who is a Mindfulness practitioner, brought the staff through a five-minute relaxation and focusing exercise, freeing them from their day. On their response cards, each faculty member was then asked to record his/her own vision of an ideal gathering, or meeting of

educators, who come together with the goal to improve student learning. Soft music still played in the background as teachers jotted down their ideas.

Three minutes passed and the teachers were then asked to focus on the role that their concepts, the ones given to them when they entered, might play in an ideal meeting of educators. These carefully chosen words or phrases are



philosophical elements of what we see as critical to the success of CLCs and instrumental to CFGs: collaborative, inclusive, interactive, reflective, engaging, “teacher inspired,” “mutual support,” relevant, synergy, “give and receive feedback,” “cycle of inquiry, action and reflection,” and “center of improving teaching & learning.”

I then explained to the staff the tradition of an American Block Party, a spin-off of the CFG Block Party Protocol. The faculty was instructed to find another staff member who carried the same concept and pair up to share their thoughts. As “Cool and the Gang” livened up the airwaves, some teachers danced across the library searching for another with the same concept card. Faculty members were encouraged to use only future tense in their discussions, to avoid observations of the present, and to utilize “I wonder” and “I believe” in their exchange. Teachers were refining and expanding their understanding of the concepts, and only minutes had passed. My colleague and co-coach Penny Kynigou noticed that a few pairs were bringing in some negativity and comments of forces out of their control. With police siren ready, I sounded the alarm and gathered everyone’s attention. I humorously explained that the “police” had broken up the block party because the local “noise”

ordinance had been broken. We reminded everyone to speak only in future tense and to focus on their beliefs about the concept. The music started up again, and the block party continued as faculty members sought out a different partner.

Soon into the process, nine faculty volunteers held up large Colored Cards, which they had cleverly identified as matching something of their own personalities. All staff members with the same color, followed their color-coded group facilitator to a break out room, where each member paired up with someone whom he/she knew the least for an interview. The facilitators instructed the members that they would introduce their partners after the interview and especially that they were to explain their partner’s beliefs about the concept on their card, all of which were represented in each color coded group. The randomly formed, largely diverse groups, created a unique opportunity for staff members to meet others from across campus.

As the introductions commenced, the facilitators took brief notes of each member's beliefs about his/her concept. Sitting in small relaxed circles, faculty members in the break-out groups listened intently. Once the introductions were complete, the group facilitator constructed one-two sentences that represented the group's beliefs about the key elements of effective meetings, based on their concepts. Collaboratively, the members discussed, briefly edited the phrase, and agreed on its wording that would later

be shared with everyone. In sync we reconvened in the library where each facilitator shared the group's phrase. In a very short period of time, everyone had been heard, everyone's ideas had been incorporated; above all, those ideas were not only being celebrated but also validated as themes emerged from among the groups. Below are four of the group's statements:

After only 70 minutes the faculty had been invited to think about possibilities, share insights, learn about their colleagues, and collaborate on a theme. That theme,

which had become evident, offered an alternative way for faculty members to collaborate. We had demonstrated the basis of our Collaborative Learning Communities and we had utilized the best of the CFG protocols. Teachers better understood our goals, while many also became more intrigued with the possibilities. Closing the meeting, we offered two answers as to what the meeting could mean for them:

One, teachers were invited to participate in our pilot CLC group at ACS Athens

Purple Group- "We envision meetings where inspired and energized educators share issues and concerns to come up with practical solutions in a collaborative and supportive environment."

Pink Group- "Our group envisions ACS as a place with the sharing of best practices, in a calm, informal setting, where teachers collaborate with each other and see each other more often in order to work towards the student's best interest."

Green Group- "We wonder what it would be like if we had the time, as teachers, across grade levels and subject areas, to meet in a safe environment where each member played an important part in a common goal: the children."

Blue Group- "We need time to discuss and share ideas across disciplines and grades to create engaging lessons through cooperative interactions, which lead to support and acceptance of each student." Collaboration among teachers in a non-intimidating, inspiring environment, can lead to authentic, meaningful teaching and learning experiences.

and meet at least once monthly throughout the year. We received interest from nearly twice the number of teachers who could be accommodated in the pilot group, but have since developed ways to narrow the field while involving everyone in some capacity. Secondly, the faculty members were invited to participate in focus groups that will utilize specific protocols so that faculty members can take full advantage of the professional development conferences that are being offered in Athens this year. All interested teachers will meet in collaborative groups to review professional offerings at three local conferences prior to the sessions. In these focus groups, teachers will share their goals and key outcomes from the conferences. After having implemented one or more of the new ideas gained from the workshops, teachers will have

the opportunity to share the impact of those practices with their colleagues in those groups.

We are three months into the school year and our pilot group has a firm base, one made possible with strong administrative support, time in the regular meeting schedule, and willingness of teachers to explore. The group met during one professional day to “break the ice,” to establish the group’s understandings, and to create a foundation of questioning skills so crucial to CFG protocols. We understand that some of the best professional development comes when teachers have time to share and focus on their practices to improve student learning. The first impressions that our faculty had of Collaborative



Learning Communities resulted in greater interest and increased potential. Teachers were not told of the possibilities that CLCs offered, rather they experienced the collaborative potential that groups like CFGs hold. We look forward to collaborating with NSRF and other schools in our region as we seek to realize the full potential of our collaborative groups.

A special thank you to Penny Kynigou, ACS Elementary School Teacher and co-organizer.

Questions or Comments? Contact David Nelson at nelsond@acs.gr.

BOOK REVIEW: MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION AND THE INTERNET: INTERSECTIONS AND INTEGRATIONS, 2ND EDITION BY PAUL GORSKI BY DAVE LEHMAN, CONNECTIONS EDITOR, NATIONAL FACILITATOR

Readers of Connections may remember Paul Gorski from the outstanding interview done by Camilla Greene in the

Fall 2007 issue in which Gorski – Founder of the websites, EdChange and the Multicultural Pavilion, and

Assistant Professor of Integrative Studies at George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia - presented a