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 interview with Wilma.

Wilma answered her telephone the first time I attempted to contact her for an interview. I met her at 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 had 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.

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 case conferences a focus area of its work for the final year of the 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 election 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 hidden 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, 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 without expert knowledge about special education services her son had received.

Implications for Educators

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 will enhance the power of interpretation in meaningful learning with colleagues that they can see benefit their practices and student learning.
- Thoughtful and careful implementation of this or any professional development is critical, and administrative support is important.
- When implemented via mandatory measures, CFGs may lose their potential, resemble other problematic staff development, and even be rejected by teachers.

As other school campuses in the greater San Antonio area learned about ISA’s success with new coaches seminars, facilitative leader training, and professional development, they began to make special education one of its focus areas. 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 election making process, and supporting school staff and families as they negotiate the legal system together to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

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M any 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.

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. In order 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 workshops 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 (Aline ISD) in the summer of 1998. I was one of five or six coaches on my campus, which was named a Beacon School by the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) of 1998. I was one of five or six coaches on the faculty in these schools really focus on equity and it was created in the recognition of the fact that strong schools don’t exist without strong teacher leaders.

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

What is your vision for CFG work in Houston?

The notion of Professional Learning Community is really starting to take hold here in Houston and that looks different in different contexts. I think Critical Friends gives legs to the theory of Professional Learning Communities.

We’re going to be designing at A+ is really an expanded tool kit that a CFG coach might use, that contains some unique, context-specific tools. It could be different readings or it (continued on page 15)

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, 20 critical friends, 150 coaches, and 50 critical friends. 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, and continue to write about their CFG work, sharing it with area teachers and administrators.

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 “Understanding 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 researchers 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.

Ileana Liberatore can be reached at ileana.liberatore@trinity.edu

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 School Reform Faculty and Critical Friends at Winter Meetings and share responsibility for attending the annual Facilitator and Center Meetings.

For me personally, I think I’ve learned to listen and ask much better questions.

Tim Martindell can be contacted at tmartindell@houstonaplus.org. Donna Reid can be contacted at cfgcoach@robreid.com