

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

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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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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
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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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