Over the past five years at the American Community Schools of Athens (ACS) we have worked to create an environment of collaborative professional development with NSRF’s Critical Friends Group® work at its core. As co-coordinators of the initiative, we simultaneously studied the impact of the expanding CFG® work among faculty through our own Action Research. In this two-part series, we’d like to share some of the steps that we took, a few snippets from our findings, some setbacks that we built upon, and most importantly, the successes that our school celebrates.

ACS Athens is a student-centered international school serving not only American families but also the wider international community who live and work here in Athens, Greece. Founded in 1946, ACS Athens is part of a wider network of international schools throughout the world providing quality education. The school accepts students from junior kindergarten (JK) through 12th grade. All lessons are taught in English and the school embraces American educational philosophy. We are accredited by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, and are authorized by the International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) to offer the IB Diploma Program.

Our faculty and administration are committed to implementing best practices, and so we have established what we call Collaborative Learning Communities (CLCs), wholly based on Critical Friends Group work. Since their inception, these groups have become a driving force in professional development within this JK–12 International School in Athens.

The ACS community recently completed a four-year self-study through school-wide Action Research projects as part of the pioneering implementation of a freshly designed accreditation protocol through the Middle States Association, known as “Sustaining Excellence.” Our research focused on the CLC and its impact on the faculty and led us to identify three core beliefs that underlie why teachers feel that these meetings offer something unique:

1. the CFG processes used in the meetings inspire risk-taking, empathy, and growth;
2. the diverse makeup of the groups generate a high level of creativity;
3. the focus on inquiry is key to successful problem solving.

For the past five years, CLCs have been developed at ACS Athens by teachers for teachers. Participation remains voluntary and 65% of our faculty have chosen to join a CLC group. The CLCs meet monthly in 80–90-minute sessions after school, holding time dedicated to professional develop-
These teachers choose CLCs rather than using that time to work on individual projects independently.

We have held four coaches’ trainings at the school and currently have a core group of 13 trained coaches who help co-facilitate the four CLC groups. (Our CLCs, which each have around fifteen participants with three coaches, work on a somewhat different model than traditional CFG groups coached by a single person.) While teachers frequently present classic CFG material, such as student work, instructional designs, and dilemmas, at ACS Athens teachers have also used the collective power of the CLC “think tank” to refine and improve their Action Research designs.

CLCs are a thriving and vital part of professional growth at our school and their impact has gone beyond the dedicated CLC time. As one of our trained coaches, Ginger Carlson, commented, “There is a cross-pollination of both ideas and the tools that are used and they have impacted faculty meetings, small groups, and classroom teaching.”

Lessons Learned:

So what factors have contributed to the successful growth of the CFG concept within our school? What lessons can we share with other teachers who seek to create thriving CFG communities?

First, if you hope to start CFG meetings in your school, find yourself an ally: a new idea is a fragile spark and as they say, “it takes one to light the candle and one to protect the flame.” Share the idea with a few more like-minded people. Start it on your own time because it brings joy and reinvigorates your teaching. (It’s a good excuse to spend time with the colleagues you really admire, talking about your shared passion for education.) Let the group be a sandbox. Play and have fun!

Second, keep it voluntary. Nothing kills fun and passion as fast as people who feel mandated to do something they don’t want to do and don’t see the value in. Start out small, but think big. Avoid using what sometimes can be seen as “off-putting jargon” that excludes the uninitiated; “protocol” sounds faintly threatening and “process” is a softer term that everyone understands. Make occasional presentations, not only to faculty but also to administration, about what the group is doing and why, and use the opportunities to solicit more volunteers.

Pitfalls:

Not everything we tried worked as well as we’d hoped. For instance a couple of years ago, we ran a Fishbowl Technique around the Issaquah Protocol (now the Dilemma Analysis Protocol), adding the complication of observers to one of the most complex protocols that NSRF offers (5 “leaves” out of 5 on our Facilitation Difficulty scale). Being unfamiliar with CFG work, our observers found the process incomprehensible, the strict format of questioning irritating, and the time constraints bizarre. At the same time, even this misstep was a compliment to our open lines of communication—we could hear the feedback without taking it personally, and shift our approach for the future. We had clear evidence of advice shared in CFG Coaches’ Training: it’s ill-advised to attempt dilemma protocols outside of a trusted, established CFG group.

And successes:

Without a doubt, we learn best by doing and we found tremendous success in using protocols in faculty meetings that directly involved everyone and modeled the processes. We facilitated versions of Success Analysis in each of our respective schools, and applied the Text Rendering Protocol and Save the Last Word to the school-wide effort to conceptualize constructivist theories of education. The Future Protocol helped the elementary faculty to envision Design Time, in which students pursue projects of their own creation weekly (akin to Genius Hour or Passion Projects). Both the Future Protocol and the Data Analysis Protocol (used to examine school-wide MAP scores measuring academic progress broadened the CLCs’ appeal and helped communicate the potential of CLCs more effectively. The data protocol, led by CFG coaches, modeled a non-threatening approach to open dialogue about sensitive material. All of these experiences were insights into the power, productivity and fun of using structured meeting processes and brought

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Quotes with photos taken from video presentation by David Nelson and Penny Kynigou:

us many eager recruits.

Administrative support: Getting administrators on our side was critical, and not always easy, given that initially none of them had a background in CFG work.

How did we get started? Just by asking, initially; the president of ACS Athens, Dr. Stefanos Gialamas supported us as a sort of start-up, allowing core faculty to exchange a day of work on Saturday to attend our Critical Friends Group orientation for a professional day during the year. Perhaps we were seen as hobbyists at first, but soon our participants turned from hobbyists to lobbyists, sharing their enthusiasm for our groups with their administrators during the end of the year evaluation meetings.

We also made repeated presentations to administration, first bringing in NSRF Director Michele Mattoon to lead an initial admin training, and then, as David Nelson became a National Facilitator, offered more training to the wider school community, encouraging the development of more CLC groups.

As we coaches and facilitators were invited to lead protocols outside the CLC meetings (such as during faculty and department meetings), our administrators saw and appreciated the equity the processes offered and the value of the trained facilitators’ skills—this was especially significant during the roll-out of the Action Research process. In many ways, as the administration helped us to achieve our goals, we helped them to achieve theirs.

More pitfalls: The first time we attempted to roll out the CFG work school-wide and were granted a monthly meeting time, we found ourselves hindered as meetings were repeatedly postponed and rescheduled, and then postponed again. The school was focused on the truly massive project of mapping out its own curriculum standards and benchmarks that would fit the unique nature of an international school. Somewhat baffled by the mixed messages we were receiving, we decided to put the roll-out on hold and go back to holding a core group with those who valued the process so much that they were willing to give up their own time to participate.

Protocols to the rescue! Proactively, we brought the dilemma of how to secure administrative support to the core group. Two key ideas surfaced through the process: first, we reframed our perspective, presuming positive intent and recognizing that with curriculum mapping as a priority for accreditation, the truth was that there was little time in the schedule; second, we wondered if there was a way to invite our school president and the dean of academic affairs to actually participate in a protocol themselves.

Choosing the Future Protocol and aligning with the school’s mission of creating a constructivist school with students as architects of their own learning, we invited the president and dean of academic affairs to participate in envisioning what ACS Athens might look like in five years. As David facilitated the process, ideas flowed so thick and fast that Penny’s hand hurt as she transcribed to the butcher paper—the room was electric, brimming with vision and collaboration! The following fall, when we once again presented the school-wide roll-out of the CLC to the Academic Leadership team, we now had significant allies in the room!

Fine-tuning the plan: With CLC meetings firmly on the agenda for the coming school year, we returned to the core group to tune our year-long plan. We wanted to prioritize by scaffolding the trust-building activities and structures, including Setting Agreements in the initial meetings, then scaffold the development of feedback and questioning skills as we led the participants deeper into the work of the CFG.

We have found the existence of the core group of trained coaches essential for planning and supporting the roll-out of the school-wide CLC. Working together to preview protocols, brainstorm solutions to our own dilemmas (such as soliciting presenters for sessions), and develop timelines, helps us to norm the groups. As coordinators we provide support with preconferences, prepare the materials, plans and even debrief sessions.

Throughout the entire process of building collaboration in the CLCs, open reflection and dialogue have been the

Wordle based on the faculty's observations of Chalk Talk Question #1 What did you get out of CLCs this year?
most important elements in their creation. After the initial year of rolling out the CLC to the wider school, we decided to make the final meeting of the year an all-CLC debrief session, bringing together all the membership to reflect on the year. We sought complete transparency with the faculty, emphasizing that the CLCs are a work-in-progress and something that teachers are doing for teachers to collectively improve our craft. We wanted to solicit input in such a way that everyone could feel free to add suggestions for improvement for the following year. To do so, we created three large Chalk Talks to collect feedback on these key questions:

1. What did you get out of CLCs this year?
2. Based on your needs, what do you see as the potential for CLCs next year?
3. What elements need to exist to maximize the potential of CLCs to help us to improve our work and to improve student learning?

Encouraging small groups of diverse teachers to interpret each Chalk Talk, we provided a method for the faculty members to reach wide consensus on the goals, outcomes and potential for CLC meetings. Specifically, participants first had time to add their voices to each Chalk Talk and then move into triads to observe and analyze trends in the data. These triads then reported their observations to the whole group, thus depersonalizing comments while still getting them out on the table. During the debrief, members themselves addressed the few negative comments that had emerged by urging each other to be proactive and share concerns directly with their coaches, to commit to the CLC process through regular attendance, and to present work in order to see the benefits of the process.

There was a strong up-swell of positive feeling shared in this CLC-wide debrief session. We were able to collect the distilled observations on the Chalk Talks, create a Wordle (see image on previous page), and use the information as data. We then shared this with the administrative team as we planned together to continue CLC groups in the following year.

Our willingness to be transparent, open and responsive has been key to building trust both with our membership and with the administrative team. We are fortunate that our administration has realized that just as teachers need to change their role in the classroom to become facilitators of their students’ learning, administrators, too, need to take that leap of faith to become facilitators (rather than directors) of teachers’ continuing professional growth. Our dean of academic affairs, Steve Medeiros, often uses the metaphor of fractals when describing the ideal working relationships within schools. In our experience, there’s little doubt that there has to be a fractal relationship between learners at all levels of the school, with teacher learning communities mirroring the ideal conditions for learning in the classroom.

At the recent ACS Colloquium last month where teachers shared the results of their Action Research in a conference-style gathering of MSA Accreditors, visiting educators from around the world, and parents and students alike, we presented the findings of our Action Research into the impact of the CLC at ACS. We invite you to watch our presentation here.

Every school has its own unique story and we share our experience at ACS Athens as a vignette of our practice not a sole recipe for success. As National Facilitators ourselves who sometimes lead trainings for participants outside of ACS Athens, we sometimes hear comments from participants who feel alone as the one or two new CFG coaches within their school. We would like to remind them and other readers of Connections that our process, too, began with just the two of us and a shared idea. David attended a Bloomington open training for new CFG coaches and returned to ACS Athens eager to put CFG work in place. Penny, who is a natural born collaborator and has always sought to develop close collaboration with her teaching partners, leapt at the chance to participate in the development of CLCs. We pooled our ideas and enthusiasm, and together we began to develop the CLC rollout. Penny took her CFG coaches’ training with David as facilitator in 2013, and most recently she interned with Michele Mattoon.

Instrumental to our success with the CLCs has been our ability to build capacity through offering more trainings for new coaches. In total we have had four trainings at our school since we’ve begun. Remember too, that each of our CFG trainings equipped us with numerous resources: our initial school rollout plan was tuned for the first time within that open training that led to David becoming a CFG coach! That plan is still in use today. Our facilitator’s guidance was invaluable and the Tip Sheet that now appears on page 106 of the Critical Friends Group Coaches Handbook came to life. As she always said, “Trust the process” and we did!

Part two of this two-part series will feature findings from David and Penny’s Action Research, revealing how this work is impacting their schools and teachers. Look for it in the next issue of Connections, coming in August 2016.