connections: a journal of the national school reform faculty
spring 2002

Editor's note: Practically speaking, what really makes an NSRF Center of Activity in Arizona for over 20 years and has strong connections throughout the educational community in our region. They have provided us with access to their extensive network, advertising the New Coaches’ Institute in their newsletters and on their website. SAWP has been generous with other resources as well. They have donated their extensive meeting space on the University of Arizona campus, which has helped keep down the cost of our institutes. In exchange for SAWP’s support and in an effort to strengthen the connection between Writing Project work and CFP work, we have set aside one free slot in each New Coaches’ Institute for someone nominated by the SAWP Board of Directors.

The collaboration with SAWP and our NSRF Center of Activity is growing deeper, as SAWP’s relatively new Teacher Research Institute develops into a long program and then will learn about facilitating collaborative learning communities through the New Coaches’ Institute.

This collaboration is still in the development stages in December 2000 and distributed by Phi Delta Kappa says it clearly: “Principals who failed to actively support the work of CFGs were the greatest hindrances to their success.” The Bulletin (http://pdkintl.org/edres/esbul28.htm) goes on to describe the commitment which was expected “…to support the CFP by providing time during the school day for the group to meet and by providing substitute teachers to cover classrooms when CFG teachers participated in peer observations.”

The message is clear—principals’ support for teacher learning is critical. This sounds like simplicity itself. But for a long time it wasn’t the norm. For a while, we thought the best thing a principal could do would be get out of the way. But now, it seems time to reconsider what “support” really means and can mean. We are starting to acknowledge that it goes beyond providing substitute teachers.

It’s unlikely that principals want to be unsupportive of teachers and their learning—but the support that principals can provide can take on different shapes and forms. As we all become more sophisticated, we see ways in which principals are an integral part of the process, not impediments to be worked around.

So, what are the levels of support that principals can provide? Level I — They can start, at the least, by doing that which is described above — getting out of the way, not making it hard for teachers to meet, not scheduling conflicting meetings and not patronizing the work of the CFG. They can even provide a little money, some cookies, some moral and spiritual support.

Level II — They can be cheerleaders, voicing their support of the work of the CFP. They can create opportunities for celebration and highlight the learning and changes in practice that are taking place.

Level III — They can form their own CFG, and/or attend a Facilitators Training Series — participating in the professional development program of the region and becoming facilitative leaders themselves. They may even be guides and spiritual support.

Level IV — They can, after attending their own Facilitators Training Series, become facilitative leaders themselves. They may even be coaches and principals in general and in-depth work-shops on protocols for looking at student work. In addition, inspired by the NSRF national meetings, we added home groups to the Symposium program starting last year. These groups co-facilitated by CFG members and coaches model and expose all Symposium participants to the concept of professional learning communities.

This year we will hold our first regional Critical Friends Group Retreat, as a pre-conference event for the Spring Symposium. This will provide CFG coaches, members, and principals in-depth time to share their experiences with establishing and sustaining professional learning communities in their schools and districts, hone their CFG practice, and begin to establish a regional network to support CFGs and other similar innovative professional development efforts. The event will be modeled after the NSRF Winter Coaches’ Meeting, but is open to experienced CFG members in addition to CFG coaches and principals.

For more information about Arizona’s Center of Activity contact: Carrie Brennan <carrie@fc.cfcl2122.ac.us> & JoAnn Groh <jgroh@FCMail.cfcl2122.ac.us>

What Makes Arizona a Viable Center of Activity?
Carrie Brennan & JoAnn Groh, Arizona

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Level IV — They can, after attending their own Facilitators Training Series, become facilitative leaders themselves. They can start using protocols and tools which make their work more coherent and the life of the principal less separate and lonely.

What is Real Support from Principals?
Nancy Mohr, New York