

What Makes Arizona a Viable Center of Activity?

Carrie Brennan & JoAnn Groh, Arizona

Editor's note: Practically speaking, what really makes an NSRF Center of Activity? JoAnn Groh & Carrie Brennan write about the importance of institutional partnerships & an annual regional conference to their work in Arizona.

Institutional Partnerships

As veteran CFG coaches we have developed a network of partnerships over the last few years. Two of our longstanding partners are the Catalina School District and the Southern Arizona Writing Project.

Catalina Foothills School District has provided a lot of support for Critical Friends Groups and become somewhat of a "CFG hub" in the region. CFGs are part of the district's professional development program on three different levels: first — they are an integral part of the weekly on-site professional development release time at the district high school and one of the two middle schools, where approximately 75% of the staff is involved in CFGs; there are now 7 CFGs at the high school and 6 at the middle school; second — CFGs are a professional development option for staff who choose to participate after school; there are now 4 CFGs of this kind in three of the district elementary schools; third — CFGs are one of the options for the induction requirement for teachers new to the district; these district-wide CFGs for new teachers are short-term groups that meet either fall or spring semester.

The intense CFG activity in the Catalina Foothills School District has created a demand for CFG New Coaches' Institutes, assuring us enough participation to hold one Institute each year for the past 3 years. We have then advertised to a wider audience and drawn people in from other Districts.

The Southern Arizona Writing Project (SAWP), an affiliate of the National Writing Project, has been a very helpful partner. SAWP has

been promoting innovative professional development in Southern 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 CFG 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 full-fledged program. In the next few years, districts interested in starting collaborative teacher research groups in their schools will send teacher leaders to the SAWP Teacher Research Institute and the New Coaches' Institute. Participants will learn in-depth about teacher research through the year long program and then will learn about facilitating collaborative learning communities through the New Coaches' Institute.

This collaboration is still in the development stages and we will share more about the challenges and successes with the rest of the NSRF community around the country as we experience them.

Annual Conference

In 1997, a group of CFG members in the region started conference on school reform. 'The Spring Symposium on School Improvement has been an important venue for us to share the CFG model of professional development with the Arizona educational community. Every year CFG members and coaches from various schools have led sessions on CFGs in general and more in-depth workshops 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. The home 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. □

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