Creating Community: The Spring Symposium on School Improvement

Carrie Brennan, Arizona

If we want to grow in our practice, we have two primary places to go: to the inner ground from which good teaching comes and to the community of fellow teachers from whom we can learn more about ourselves and our craft. — Parker Palmer, The Courage to Teach, 1998

Often in the day-to-day routines of teaching we have little time and energy to really talk with – and learn from – those around us. How do we begin to break down some of the isolation that exists within schools and across schools, in order to create Palmer's notion of a "community of fellow teachers" that can help us strengthen our teaching and improve student learning? One way is simply to carve out a time and a place to gather.

In the fall of 1996, a group of teachers in Tucson, Arizona – all members of the first Critical Friends Group at Catalina Foothills High School – returned from the Coalition of Essential Schools' Fall Forum in the neighboring state of New Mexico, inspired to reach out to other reform-minded educators in our region. We didn't want to wait another year for the opportunity to meet with educators from other schools, so we decided to organize a small grassroots conference ourselves. The goal was to establish a common time and place for teachers and administrators from a variety of Arizona schools to share, reflect, and learn together.

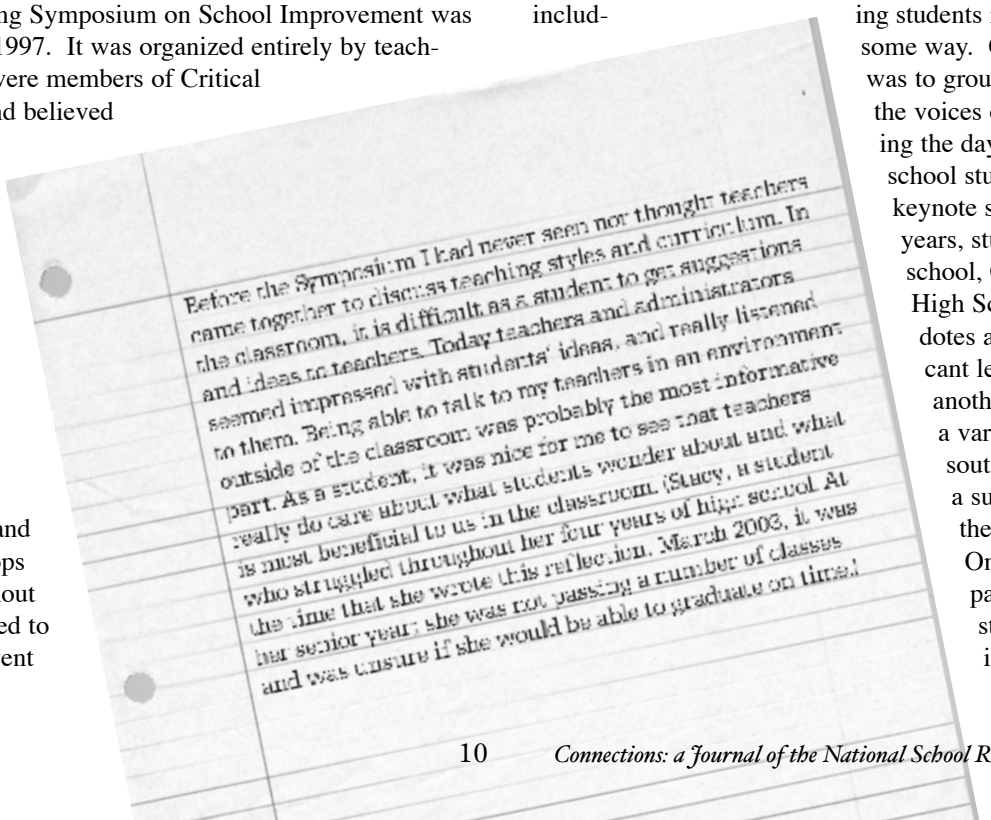
The first Spring Symposium on School Improvement was held in March of 1997. It was organized entirely by teachers, all of whom were members of Critical Friends Groups and believed strongly in the power of collaborative professional development. Initially the agenda for the Spring Symposium was modeled directly after the Fall Forum, with one-hour roundtables and two-hour workshops scheduled throughout the day. We wanted to create a similar event that was both practical and inspiring, but that was based locally, allowing participants to follow up on the connections they had made.

Over the years, as Critical Friends Group participation increased significantly in Arizona and the leadership of the Symposium broadened to include more and more CFG members and coaches, we revised the structure of the conference to reflect ideas learned through the National School Reform Faculty. Roundtables and workshops are still at the heart of the agenda, but Symposium participants now convene in home groups at the start and close of the one-day conference. The home groups, co-facilitated by CFG coaches and experienced CFG members, foster the formation of a learning community. They strengthen the connections participants make with one another and model the power of collaborative learning.

The morning home group sessions focus on the theme of the Symposium and engage participants in CFG-type experiences. In 2001, each home group explored the theme of "Learning in Community" through a chalk talk. The following year, when the theme was "Learning from Students," home group facilitators led their groups in a modified collaborative assessment conference in order to experience the power of looking closely at student work. This past year we used a text to explore the theme of "Inquiry: Wondering and Learning" in home groups; participants read Peggy Silva's short piece "What if …?" (Connections, Spring 2002) and then experienced a text rendering activity.

At the same time that the Spring Symposium was evolving to reflect more of the collaborative learning structures and experiences we had learned through our work with Critical Friends Groups, another shift in the focus of the conference was occurring as well.

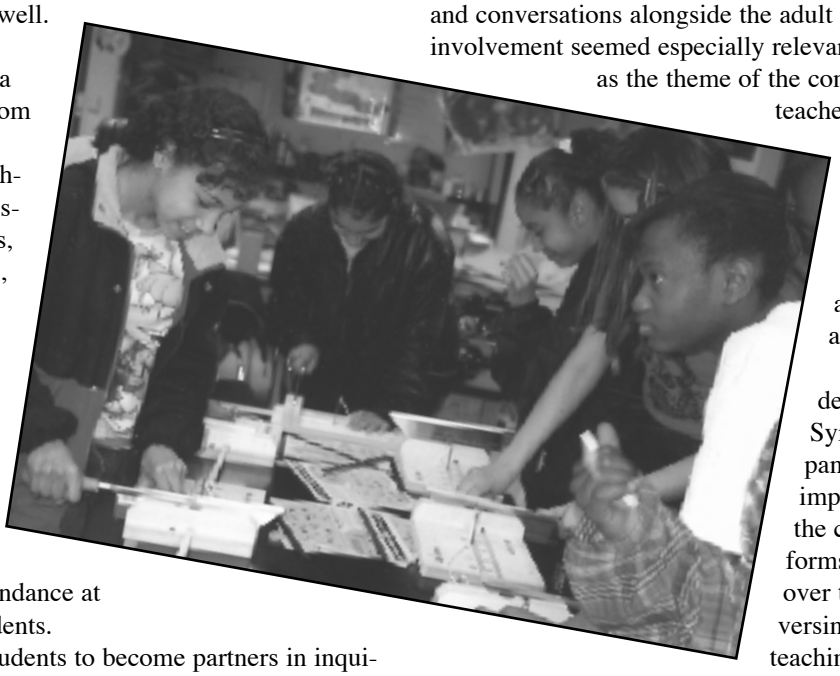
When we started the Symposium, we were committed to including students in the day's events in some way. Our initial approach was to ground the conference in the voices of students by opening the day with a panel of high school students (in lieu of a keynote speaker). A couple of years, students from the host school, Catalina Foothills High School, shared anecdotes about their own significant learning experiences; another year students from a variety of schools in southern Arizona featured a successful program in their respective schools. One year we varied the panel format with a student-produced video in which student work


Before the Symposium I had never seen nor thought teachers came together to discuss teaching styles and curriculum. In the classroom, it is difficult as a student to get suggestions and ideas on teachers. Today teachers and administrators seemed impressed with students' ideas, and really listened to them. Being able to talk to my teachers in an environment outside of the classroom was probably the most informative part. As a student, it was nice for me to see that teachers really do care about what students wonder about and what is most beneficial to us in the classroom. (Stacy, a student who struggled throughout her four years of high school. At the time that she wrote this reflection, March 2003, it was her senior year; she was not passing a number of classes and was unsure if she would be able to graduate on time.)

was showcased and students were interviewed about the work they had created.

The student-centered opening was always an inspiring way to start the day. It received high ratings in participant feedback; and, perhaps more telling than the ratings, each year the question and answer session following the panel extended well past the time we had scheduled. It was clear that the educators in the audience hungered to hear more from students. How do students perceive what is working and not working in our classrooms and schools? What do students experience and remember as powerful learning? Caring and committed educators come together at events like the Spring Symposium to learn from one another, but it became increasingly evident to us that there was a lot we all could learn from students as well.

This year's Symposium, the seventh annual, included a diverse group of educators from throughout southern Arizona. There were kindergarten teachers, community college professors, librarians from all levels, principals, district-level folks, and middle school and high school teachers; there were teachers from a variety of disciplines, including math, English, social studies, Spanish, performing arts, and science. But perhaps the participants who made the biggest impact were a contingent not usually in attendance at educational conferences: students.



"When teachers invite students to become partners in inquiry, to collaborate with them in wondering about what and how students are learning, schools become more thoughtful places." — Nancie Atwell, *Side by Side, Essays on Teaching to Learn*, 1991

Over the past few years, students have become an increasingly integral part of the Spring Symposium on School Improvement. We have moved beyond having students in the opening panel only and now encourage student participation in all aspects of the day. We have, as Nancie Atwell challenges us to do, invited students to become our "partners in inquiry" as we strive to improve teaching and learning in Arizona schools.

High school students have led roundtables or workshops on their own or in collaboration with a teacher at the past three conferences. The student-led sessions include: Fostering Intrinsic Motivation in the Classroom: A Student's Perspective (2001); Teacher-Student Communication and Conferencing (2002); Taking Risks in the Creative Writing Classroom (2002); A Question of Passion: What Students Want to Know (2003); Acting Out: Student Activism in School (2003); Connecting School and Self: Pursuing Research We Care About (2003).

These sessions have proven to be very popular, some of them filling up to standing-room-only status. Adults and kids alike are eager to listen to students talk about their own perspectives and experiences regarding teaching and learning. And now they no longer have to rely only on a panel at the beginning of the conference to hear these voices.

At the most recent Spring Symposium, in March 2003, close to a quarter of the 100 or so participants were high school students. Some led sessions like those listed above, but many just attended the day's events – including the opening session, home group meetings, roundtables and workshops, and the conference closing — engaging fully in the learning and conversations alongside the adult participants. Student involvement seemed especially relevant this year with inquiry as the theme of the conference. Students and teachers were able to engage in in-depth conversations about how our schools and classrooms can become more infused with the wonder and curiosity that drive authentic learning.

Raising students' status at the Spring Symposium to full participants has had a significant impact on all involved. On the conference feedback forms that adults filled out over the past three years, conversing with students about teaching and learning was mentioned more often than any other aspect of the event. Regardless of their grade levels, disciplines, years of experience, or roles, educators seem to gain new insights about their practice from listening to young people. A twenty-year veteran math teacher reflects at the end of the day: "Listening to what [students] said today made me think: I need to be very aware of where my students are coming from and then go from there. Somehow I need to make it more interesting. It made me stop and think, How *do* I motivate students?" A kindergarten teacher writes, "I appreciated hearing the voices of students at the Symposium. Seeing such bright kids question the worth of rote learning that might not have carry over or application to their futures was thought-provoking." A high school humanities teacher, two years into the profession, remarks, "I was surprised to hear that students want closer relationships with their teachers – and I was even more surprised by how many students shared this sentiment." A middle school administrator, attending the Symposium for the first time, exclaims, "I am awestruck at the strength in

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What's Happening in the Chattanooga, Tennessee, Assistant Principal's CFG

Center of Activity Report - Vicki Anderson, Tennessee

Being at an assistant principal CFG meeting in Chattanooga, Tennessee is like being a thirsty camel at a big oasis! Each month, around 17 busy assistant principals get together and spend some time focusing on the 'real' work that we as administrators should do each day.

This year, the Assistant Principal CFG in Chattanooga centered on ways to raise student achievement through supporting teachers in our buildings. We decided to focus on how to help raise teacher expectation of student achievement. We started the process with a text-based discussion using an article about highly effective teachers titled "Teacher Effectiveness: Improving Instruction One Classroom at a Time" by James H. Stronge from the College of William and Mary.

We then went back to our buildings and looked for folks in whom we could identify some of the characteristics that we discussed from the article. We met the next month and did a success analysis protocol and developed a list of qualities that our own highly effective teachers possessed. We looked at the list and teased out the qualities to which we, as assistant principals, could lend support. The qualities on our current working list are: organization, planning, modeling, teaching strategies, time for reflection, effective procedures and routines, and expecting high expectations. We intend to look at this list and focus on these issues in our buildings to encourage all teachers to expect the most that they can from our students.

As colleagues, we enjoy the increased trust and communication that we have developed this year as a result of doing the hard work of a CFG. It is a wonderful thing to be able to speak honestly and know that you are supported and encouraged to be successful. ■

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character of the students who attended, and their genuine desire to share, collaborate, and take risks. BRAVO!"

Obviously students gain a tremendous amount from being involved in the Symposium as well. Conversing with teachers in a context that looks so familiar (the conference is held at a school, sessions take place in classrooms) but at the same time is so removed from the usual teacher-student classroom dynamics is a powerful experience for the young people who participate. They appreciate conversing with teachers on a more equal footing. As one student reflected, "It's good to have students and teachers interact outside our normal environment … we can have real conversations, not as friends really but as peers or colleagues in some way." Another student, who perhaps had had few opportunities to connect personally with her teachers in the past, writes "Sitting down for lunch with students and teachers together was probably the best part of the day." Students also get a behind-the-scenes look at teaching and gain a new appreciation for the challenges of the job. One student noted that he got to "see what teachers do, and how they feel." Another writes, the day "gave me a new perspective on education." In addition to the new insights they offer one another, adults and students talking together about teaching and learning can inspire one another – and perhaps this result is the most exciting. A student writes about the most recent Symposium, "Today was about creating and caring. It motivated me to want to learn and that makes me happy. Thank you!"

The Spring Symposium on School Improvement was started originally to help strengthen, in Palmer's words, "the community of fellow teachers from whom we can learn more about ourselves and our craft." We have found that when we extend this community to include our students we learn even more. If we heed Atwell's advice and involve students in the dialogue of school reform, we create a learning community with all perspectives included – adult and child alike. The experience transcends the traditional notion of professional development and has the power to transform not only teacher practice but schooling in general. ■

Carrie Brennan taught at Catalina Foothills High School from '92-'03. She now directs a new Tucson charter high school opening next fall. For more information about the Spring Symposium contact Carrie Brennan at carrie@cityhighschool.org or JoAnn Groh at jo@cfsd.k12.az.us.