Students at the center

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 helps 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.

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 ing 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; a variety of schools in southern Arizona featured a successful program in their respective schools. One year we worked with the panel format with a student-produced video in which student work 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 grew stronger: Don’t we need to grow 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, and art, as well as 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); Teaching Students 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, 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 the themes of the conference and how they related to their own schools and classrooms.

A twenty-year veteran math teacher reflects at the end of the day, “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 ago commented in the profession, remarks, “I was surprised to hear that students want closer relationships with their teachers and were even more surprised by how many students shared this sentiment.” A middle school administrator, attending the Symposium for the first time, exclaimed, “I am awestruck at the strength in
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Pete Bermudez currently works as a member of a professional support team in Miami-Dade, Florida. His role is to provide curriculum support and professional development in the five-year federal grant intended to create six new Choice Zones in the Miami-Dade County Public School District.

I enjoyed my recent conversation about his experiences as a longtime member of the National School Reform Faculty.

How did you get involved with NSRF?

Well, I was trained as a coach in 1995, but I need to go back a bit to really explain how I got involved in this work. In 1993 I was involved in my second effort as part of a high school design team. The group was really fortunate to have a team of teachers in place with six months worth of “time to talk” of their experiences. We were exploring what we really wanted our new high school to be. Many of the ideas that were shared with me by my earlier, disappointing, first efforts to form a new high school. During that first project, I had served as a Department Head for a group of 38 Social Studies teachers in a school that grew to house over 5,000 students. I was adequately taken with the idea of redesigning the curriculum, but found that changing this or that piece of instruction wasn’t enough to really make an impact on the fundamental way kids were experiencing school in this large, comprehensive high school. However, while I was working at that school I met an intern who was reading Sizer’s book, Horace’s School, and she shared it with me. Reading Sizer’s work really informed my decision to leave that school.

What kinds of changes did you try to make as a result of reading Horace’s School?

After reading Horace’s School I joined the second design team and started advocating a small academy or “house” structure for the high school. I saw real possibilities in the Common Principles that CES (Coalition of Essential Schools, ed) was advocating. The whole notion of graduation by final exhibition reengendered my interest in curriculum design. I started teasing out my ideas of teaching, ideas about timing, topics, materials and assessment. The whole idea of developing assessments and then planning backwards with colleagues to design instruction was powerful. Around this time I attended an Authentic Assessment seminar at Brown University and I was really hooked! Our design efforts were often turbulent, but with the Common Principles as a guide we pressed on. At the end of that summer we opened our new high school, the first Vocational-Technical School in the District, and the first CES high school in Miami-Dade County.

So how did you connect with NSRF?

I really became a coach by default. The training opportunity was raised by a District colleague, whom I respected, but I declined because I really wanted to expand to work outside our district. However, when no one else volunteered, I decided to check out this thing called “CFG” training.

What’s Happening in the Chattanooga, Tennessee, Assistant Principal’s CFG Center of Activity Report - Vicki Anderson, Tennessee

Being 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 spend some time focusing on the ‘real’ work that we as administrators should do daily.

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, 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. Converging 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.

You appreciate converging with teachers on a more equal footing. As one student reflectively said, “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 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 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 understand that most that they can from 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 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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