Changing the Work: A Report from the Houston Center of Activity

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"Looking at my work is hard: Changing my work is even harder," observed CFG Coach and high school art teacher Ron Venable when asked what was most surprising about participating in a Teacher as Researcher (TAR) CFG last year. Hard as it may be, changing the work of schools is the ongoing mission of the many CFG coaches and facilitators who practice in the Houston area.

As a not-for-profit public, private partnership, the Houston A+ Challenge advances Critical Friends Group work in Houston by sponsoring New Coach Training Seminars three times a year under the leadership of National Facilitator Michaelann Kelley, offering coaches clinics for experienced coaches, and supporting TAR grants for CFGs across the city.

Teacher as Researcher Karen North with a student at The Rice School/ La Escuela Rice

Teacher as Researcher Grants

One of the newer initiatives promoted by the Houston A+ Challenge is the TAR Grant. In March of 2004, a request for proposals was sent to every trained CFG Coach in the greater Houston area. Seven two-year, $10,000 grants were awarded, and five of these groups are still active. The action research questions that these CFGs have been studying include:

1. Can computer programming increase mastery of algebraic computation skills? led by Karen North, Westside H. S., Houston ISD
2. How can social studies teachers improve the academic achievement of our students who are non-native speakers of English? led by Peggy Given, Johnston M. S., Houston ISD
3. How can we better work with special populations such as severely handicapped, resource, content mastery, and English as a Second Language students to increase their literacy? led by Michaelann Kelley, Eisenhower H.S., Aldine ISD
4. How do CFGs impact student achievement in the core curriculum? led by Mary Matthews, Best Elementary, Alief ISD, and
5. How do teachers and administrators know that their individual practice impacts learning in aesthetics and literacy? a multidistrict, multi-institution group led by Gayle Curtis, Hamilton M. S., Houston ISD.

With a strong focus on equity, these five groups have collected data that shows that CFGs can have a huge effect on teacher and student learning.

For example, TAR participants reported that being in a CFG helped them focus on student needs and student achievement. The most powerful learning came with the realization that "[our group learned] to value our own knowledge." Being in the TAR CFGs has encouraged many members of the five inquiry groups to reach out to other educators and spread their knowledge by presenting at seminars and conferences such as the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and the NSRF Research Forum.

This growth in teacher learning affects student learning as well. Besides improvements in standardized test scores, the teacher researchers report that students are more engaged in classroom activities and more reflective in their work. Being in a CFG helps educators become more focused, collaborative, and reflective. These important habits are then passed on to students through such means as assignments that depend on collaboration and portfolios that develop skills in reflection. Thus, through the support of the TAR Grant, these CFGs have changed teacher practice and student work.

CFG Reunion

The Houston CFG Reunion was held on Saturday, February 25, at the University of Houston Hilton. Daniel Baron, Co-Director of NSRF *(continued on page 20)*

indicates wealth and inherited importance. Yet he also proves elemental and powerful like rain from the heavens. Rain as an image is both ordinary and holy because it defies human control, gives life, and yet forms an integral part of everyday existence. Craig Mack comes into the music community from a position of authority, as a sheriff and through the strength of his groove, defeating all challenges…

Hip-hop and its concomitant culture expose us to the underbelly of the poor urban experience. hip-hop presents, explains, and unapologetically exposes the lived experiences of urban east coast and west coast youth and their families and their communities. It is those lived experiences portrayed in their raw form that repel us. It is the engaging music, rhythms and beats that engage us. hip-hop music expresses a complex dichotomy which simultaneously speaks of love and hate; the high and low of human existence; the sacred and the profane. In spite of our annoyance with the many ways in which the lyrics and gestures of the rappers, Hip-hop dancers, "MCers" and "DJers" and other players and creators of the hip-hop culture and its music assault our sensibilities, in just as many ways the beat and the rhythm and the lyrics compel us and hold us in awe.

As an "old head," in hip-hop jargon, I am proud of the bridges I have been able to build between me and my love for jazz and the hip-hop generation. It is with the exchange of ideas and wisdom that reach across generations that I am able to make connections between teaching and learning, rigor, critical pedagogy and disengaged African American high school students.

In order to embrace hip-hop culture, we must come to grips with its cooptation. The worst images of a very complex art form are nurtured and presented for public consumption and "enjoyment." The media powers, who regulate what sells and gets airtime, are dominant culture folks who have their own agendas that have nothing to do with the uplifting of the black race. A critical study and analysis of hip-hop and the powers who promote it with our students would allow us to build a strong literacy program that would develop the skills and competencies of our reluctant, disengaged urban learners. Are we willing to be disturbed for the sake of the urban learner in our classrooms? ■ *(continued on page 22)*

and one of the facilitators of the first CFG training in Houston, co-facilitated with Donna Reid and Tim Martindell. Thirty-five area coaches participated in a full-day program that allowed for people to reconnect with each other as well as reconnect with the work. The morning session included Connections, a text rendering of "Am I willing to reclaim time to think?" by Margaret Wheatley, a Chalk Talk with the prompts "What role do CFGs play in your professional life?" and "What barriers and obstacles do you face?", and an introduction to Discourse I and II.

The afternoon session of the CFG Reunion focused on the dilemma "How do we build capacity to deepen and sustain CFG work in Houston?" By combining the Issaquah protocol with the Charette, the participants not only practiced asking questions and surfacing assumptions, but took ownership of the dilemma and offered solutions.

As a result of that reunion, CFG facilitators in Houston are changing the model used for supporting CFG coaches. Instead of offering a series of stand-alone clinics throughout the year, we will sponsor CFGs for coaches, both new and experienced, where they can bring their own coaching dilemmas and build relationships with critical friends from across the region.

Reforming Schools Summer Institute

The Houston A+ Challenge also nurtures CFG habits such as collaboration and reflection by hosting the Reforming Schools Summer Institute (RSSI). During this annual institute, almost 400 teachers, administrators, parents, and community members gather for two days in July for new learning in seminars as well as smaller home groups or learning communities. Facilitated mostly by experienced CFG coaches, these learning communities model how to build professional relationships.

One participant summed up his RSSI experience this way: "I learned that change (reform) must come from within. Whether the focus of that change is a school district, a campus, a department, a lesson, or a student's own achievement, no expert can walk in and say, 'Here is your answer.' Instead, change is a process initiated and followed through by the stakeholders themselves."

The 2006 RSSI featured keynote addresses from Tony Wagner, author of Change Leadership and George Thompson, from the Schlechty Center, which recently published Working on the Work. *(continued on page 22)*

Hip-Hop...
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Additional Resources:

Parmar, P. & Bain, B. (forthcoming, December 2006) "Spoken word and Hip Hop: The power of urban art and culture," (three-part series). In J.L. Kincheloe & K. Hayes(Eds). City Kids: Understanding, Appreciating, and Teaching Them. *New York: Peter Lang Publishing,*

Pough, Gwendolyn, Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere*, 2004, Northeastern University Press.*

Ptah, Heru, A Hip Hop Story*, 2002, Pocket Books, NY.*

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NSRF's Living History...
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strands within NSRF. For example, there is no one definition of a Center of Activity, so it is hard to design strategies to support the various applications of the work for vastly different centers.

The creative tension we feel as a very small staff is to support the ever-expanding work with our limited resources. We are proud of our work, and delighted when people seek us out to thank us for our support.

When not working for NSRF, what makes up your life?

My husband, my daughter Cecilia, stepdaughter Emilie, and I spend time each winter on our working farm in Jamaica. We have chickens and goats. We grow pineapples, mangoes, ginger, potatoes, and cabbage. This farm has been in my husband's family for many generations. My life is rich in love and family. ■

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The mission of the National School Reform Faculty is to foster educational and social equity by empowering all people involved with schools to work collaboratively in reflective democratic communities that create and support powerful learning experiences for everyone.

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The National School Reform Faculty is rooted in four beliefs:

- School people, working together, can make real and lasting improvements in their own schools;
- Teachers and administrators must help each other turn theories into practice and standards into actual student learning;
- The key to this effort is the development of a "learning community" based on public, collaborative examination of both adult and student work;
- To create this community, practitioners need high-quality training and sustained support.