NSRF Mission

The National School Reform Faculty® empowers educators to create meaningful learning experiences for all, by collaborating effectively in reflective democratic communities that foster educational equity and social justice.

NSRF assists educators throughout the world by following these four beliefs:

- Working together, educators can make real and lasting improvements in their own schools.
- Educators must help each other turn theories into practice and standards into actual student learning.
- Key to these efforts is the development of Critical Friends Group® (CFG®) communities, a specific kind of professional learning group based on trust and collaboration built through protocol use.
- CFG participants need leadership from a certified CFG coach to build and protect that trust, and sustained support from their administrators to create and maintain these communities.

Critical Friends Group® work originated with the National School Reform Faculty® in 1994 as a specific type of professional learning community (PLC) focused on solving problems and accomplishing goals set by its participants. Led by an NSRF-certified CFG coach, each group consists of 5-12 educators who commit to learning together over time, as professionals in the service of student achievement.

Participants gather in CFG meetings at least once a month for about two hours at a time. As their CFG coach helps them build deeper confidence with one another, they can address bigger problems and achieve more powerful results.

In each meeting, participants present professional dilemmas or pieces of work that are troublesome in some way, and the group uses collaborative NSRF protocols to help the presenters find next steps and new ideas toward resolution.

Coaching these groups effectively requires specific skill sets, responsive facilitation, and fidelity around CFG work, so NSRF created a five-day training to prepare people who would like to become certified CFG coaches.

Our primary tools: Critical Friends Group® work and CFG® Coaches’ Trainings
Focused on delivering the results YOU desire

Not “just another meeting,” each Critical Friends Group gathering focuses on improving or resolving dilemmas and tangible work products brought by the participants. Rather than working in isolation, CFG participants enjoy the combined wisdom and commitment of the whole group toward resolving problems.

The end result is shared community, increased trust, improved school culture, focused problem-solving, and everyone helping everyone else become a better educator over time. Research shows that a well-working CFG culture helps schools retain their teaching staff and supports their teachers in continuous improvement.

Building a “CFG culture” requires collaboration and a commitment by administrators, teachers, and CFG coaches. Anyone can attend CFG coaches’ training, but for CFG work to have the greatest impact, these groups need sustained support by the larger school community, notably by their administrators. For CFG communities to thrive, educators to improve, and student achievement to rise, CFG groups need time, space, and support to meet monthly for at least two hours.

Ideally, schools need one coach per 6-10 educators so that everyone in the school can benefit from their own CFG community.
“Attending the NSRF coaches’ training was a seminal experience for me. The instruction was exceptional and the facilitators knew how to push participants toward deeper understanding through actively engaging us in the protocols. When I left my CFG Coaches’ training, I had the knowledge, and more importantly, the confidence to implement these strategies in my school.”

— Karen Cook, CFG coach, New York City Department of Education

In many protocols, the presenter temporarily sits outside the circle to listen and take notes, allowing participants to discuss their ideas freely and thoughtfully.

Helpful or provocative ideas shared during a protocol are noted by the presenter, giving them a great list of “next steps” to address the problem when they return to work.
What if we told you that CFG® Work isn’t “just one more thing on your plate” but is the “fork, spoon, and knife” to help you resolve everything already required of you? NSRF protocols (structured interactions) used within Critical Friends Group® communities provide the tools necessary to help you deal with all the demands of your job.

**Members commit**
- To be reflective,
- To make their practice public to one another,
- To adhere to group-developed norms and agreements,
- To request substantive, useable feedback from their colleagues, and provide it in return,
- To frame meaningful, critical questions around their work and others’,
- To hold each other accountable for meeting the needs and interests of each student,
- To ask the kinds of questions that provoke and challenge each other’s assumptions, habits, and perspectives,
- To expect the group to reveal its collective wisdom. By following the coach and the protocols, participants discover they already have a wealth of knowledge between them, and together, everyone can find the ideas and learning they need.

**CFG coaches commit**
- To complete CFG Coaches’ Training, and use the Coaches’ Handbook and materials on the NSRF website,
- To survey members for their needs, and scaffold activities to build trust,
- To prepare thoroughly for each meeting,
- To preconference with participants presenting their work or dilemmas, selecting appropriate protocols for accomplishing the presenters’ goals,
- To advocate for each presenter’s needs within the meeting,
- To maintain equity of voice from participants,
- To coach with “compassionate unattachment,” rather than pushing their own agenda,
- To keep the group moving, make sure meetings begin and end on time, and to encourage development of all participants.

**Administrators commit**
- To rely on the groups and the coaches to work for the good of the organization and of the students,
- To encourage participation in Critical Friends Group communities,
- To help protect time for staff to attend monthly CFG meetings of at least two hours,
- When possible, to create and participate in their own CFG communities, improving their own work,
- To incorporate CFG work in budgets over time so that every educator within the school/district can be a part of at least one CFG community,
- When appropriate, to attend a CFG Training for Administrators to deepen their own understanding of the work and learn how to use it as an administrator,
- To refrain from blurring the line between CFG work and employee evaluation.

“**Essential**” not “**Extra**”

In NSRF terms, “critical” means “essential,” or “urgent.” What could be more important to a school’s success and the achievement of its students than structured, ongoing work to continuously improve everyone’s practice?

CFG work does not imply that participants engage in criticising group members or others outside the group.

“There are many advantages to having all school and district based instructional coaches trained in the use of protocols. District coaches use protocols at bi-monthly meetings with teacher leaders to nurture a culture of collaboration and trust. Teacher leaders then use protocols when working with individual teachers and PLCs. Using protocols encourages all participants in the discussion, to listen actively and respectfully, and to contribute constructive comments and feedback, keeping conversations focused. It’s the way we do business in Lee County School District!”

~ Helen Davis Martin, Coordinator, Teacher Incentive Fund Grant, Curriculum and Staff Development, School District of Lee County.
Research on professional learning communities suggests that well-developed PLCs have a positive impact on both teaching practice and student learning. More specific research on Critical Friends Group communities shows dramatic improvement in teacher retention, collaboration, and satisfaction.

What’s the difference between CFG communities and other PLCs? Many professional learning communities focus on standards, with the goal of students performing well on standardized tests. Critical Friends Group meetings emphasize real learning that extends far beyond the boundaries of high-stakes assessments. In fact, many schools that establish PLCs will often hire NSRF later to train their PLC leaders as CFG coaches; CFG work gives the participants actual tools to improve learning in their own and in their students’ lives.

The bottom line: CFG communities engage educators in true collaboration — working together to improve their work and that of their students, continually striving for excellence through shared goals, norms, and values.

Why are Critical Friends Group® communities vital to professional learning and student achievement?

Critical adj: imperative, necessary, vital
Trained Critical Friends Group coaches create a foundation of trust and effectiveness within CFG meetings by using a series of specific protocols. But our library of protocols can also be used effectively in many other settings, including classrooms, department meetings, and even gatherings of parents or school boards.

Carefully structured conversations (what we call protocols) promote meaningful and efficient communication, problem-solving, and learning. Protocols focus participants’ attention on a specific area for improvement or discussion, and keep the participants oriented toward the outcomes desired by the presenter.

Without structure, including knowing the expected outcome needed by the presenter, “regular” conversations typically do not deliver a satisfying result. Unless you’re using protocols led by a skilled coach, you very well may experience “just another meeting where nothing happens.”

Groups of all sorts find that protocols help them build the skills and culture needed for successful collaboration: honest, deeply meaningful, professional conversations leading to actionable results. In classroom settings, teachers may use protocols to assess student learning on a given topic, to reveal a variety of perspectives from students, to allow equity of voice in audible and silent “conversations,” and much more.

Protocols function broadly, not just within CFG meetings

Protocols provide structure in group communication to deliver new insights and next steps in any situation over which you have some control: classroom teaching, staff meetings, parent meetings, department meetings, strategic planning sessions, study groups, etc.

NSRF protocols work most effectively to improve school culture and individuals’ professional work when they are led by an NSRF-certified CFG coach, and used within a trusted Critical Friends Group® community.

Universe of NSRF Protocols

Issues or work products that can be improved with NSRF protocols

- Redefine, resolve, or improve upon a Professional dilemma
- Analyze, improve, or make progress on Projects or materials
- Examine and learn from Student Work
- Interpret and skillfully use Data without blame
- Structure conversations around Inquiry
- Use a Text to expand thinking, find essential messages, or discover other perspectives
- Share and learn from Successes or other experiences
- Introduce ideas, topics, or programs
- Create or improve Equity in classrooms and meetings
- Improve teaching, coaching, or a workspace through Peer Observation
- Review, brainstorm around, or improve Strategic or project plans
- Examine and learn from Student Work
In this context, we define “everyone” very broadly:

- Faculty, administrators, coaches, support staff and other staff,
- Parents involved in classrooms or school meetings, including Professional Learning Communities,
- Educators within early childhood, special needs, K-12, or higher education institutions,
- Public, charter, independent, and international schools,
- The deeply impoverished, comfortably affluent, and everyone in-between,
- From across the United States and around the world.

**Experiential:**
CFG Coaches’ Training is not “sit and get.” Just as the new coaches will later introduce CFG work to their peers, an experienced NSRF National Facilitator leads everyone through a series of protocols and activities in a specific order designed to build collegiality and trust in their colleagues, leading to trust in the work through experience.

**Transparent:**
Participants reflect on each experience within training, and, together with the facilitator, understand elements that aren’t written on the protocol page. Learning to give and receive feedback effectively is key, as is maintaining equity in the work.

**Equitable:**
Coaches learn protocols and techniques to ensure that all voices are heard, each presenter’s needs are protected, and no one or handful of people dominate any conversation. Plus, coaches learn how to manage work that is sometimes emotionally charged, and to leave their personal agendas out of the conversations, truly facilitating equitable conversations.

**Real world work:**
Everyone brings their own real dilemmas and work artifacts to the training, just as they will in the CFG communities they will eventually join. Throughout the week we run protocols on that work rather than on hypothetical examples. Participants learn not only how and why the protocols work, but they learn how a single protocol can work effectively on a range of problems. And they leave the training with actionable steps on the work they brought to training!

**Cumulative effect:**
The agenda demonstrates a particular sequence of activities, transparently communicating a deep understanding of the difference between “protocol use” and “CFG work.” Each protocol or activity builds upon earlier ones, culminating in a broad knowledge of how to use a library of tools to promote best practices within a CFG community and in other environments.

**Collegial:**
Participants in CFG Coaches’ Training experience a variety of protocols for themselves, and learn to create the deep trust necessary for great work within a Critical Friends Group community. Participants learn more about their colleagues in a brief period of time and, through their own experience, discover resources and collaborators who they will turn to, again and again, throughout an extended professional relationship.

**Equipped:**
Last, in NSRF Critical Friends Group Coaches’ Training, all participants return to their jobs equipped with a toolkit of dozens of NSRF protocols and activities to accomplish their own goals and the goals of their colleagues. New CFG coaches leave the training with clear guidance on how to select and use protocols, with specific, actionable plans to create and support CFG work in their schools, and with specific steps to resolve their own problems and improve their own practice!
What will I learn in CFG Coaches’ Training?

- Find next steps to resolving dilemmas
- Analyze data without shame or blame
- Elevate school culture
- Make meetings productive (finally!)
- Discover a new outlook on a problem
- Choose the right protocol for the work (and when NOT to use protocols)
- What to do next to help a particular student
- Improve my lesson plans
- Set our own agreements rather than being handed “rules”
- Plan for rollout of new initiative
- Fast-track my leadership skills
- Accomplish a LOT in just 30 minutes!
- Learn from our successes
- Discuss texts meaningfully!
Options for CFG Coaches’ Training
give you three main options: open, on-site, and on-site+open trainings. Each has its own advantages.

Open
NSRF holds “Open” Trainings (open to any individual who wishes to attend) throughout the United States and abroad.

Advantages
1) A wide variety of participants provides more diverse perspectives and wisdom to help you resolve the dilemmas and work problems you present at the training.
2) Open to any individual or small group from a school who may wish to start small, or to try CFG work before engaging their full staff.

Open Trainings uniquely provide opportunities for meaningful interactions with a plethora of education professionals outside your workplace. Educators attend from across (and even outside) the country, from all sorts of educational institutions (K-12 independent schools, public schools, universities, seminaries, etc.), as well as roles ranging from classroom teacher or professor, to HR director, to school administrator, etc.

Costs
range from $850-$1000 per person, depending on space, transportation, and food costs where the training is being held. This fee generally includes a light breakfast, lunch, and all the materials you need for the training. (Participants’ travel, lodging and other meals are not included in this price.)

For details on scheduled open trainings, visit our website Upcoming Events page.

On-site
If you have a number of people to train at once, NSRF can bring our trainings to you.

Advantages
1) No added travel costs means lower cost-per-person.
2) Choose ideal dates and training location for your staff.
3) Select five sequential days or a 3/2-day split depending on your group’s needs (see next page for details).
4) Your training is tailored to fit your specific school’s or district’s situation (e.g., focus on equity issues, tie-in with growth mindset or other directives, include tools for peer observation, etc.)

Costs
for five-day On-Site Trainings run anywhere from $790-$975 per person (assuming you fill the training with 15 participants). Because NSRF tries to keep costs as low as possible, prices shift depending on where you live in the country. International rates may deviate from this scale.

On-Site + Open
If you have five to nine people to train, we may be able to “open up” your training to others from outside your school, giving you the best of both options. Let’s talk.

To discuss on-site possibilities for your school, call NSRF at 812-330-2702, visit our website to complete our contact form online, or email us at nsrf@nsrfharmony.org.
Everyone completing a five-day CFG Coaches’ Training (open or on-site, consecutive or split schedule) receives:

- One copy of the **Critical Friends Group Coaches’ Handbook**, which contains:
  - all the foundational and most-used protocols and activities from the NSRF library,
  - a table-of-contents organized by protocol topic or use,
  - a detailed index,
  - multiple references for matching protocols to pieces of work,
  - a 40+ page section devoted to helping new coaches get their groups off the ground.

- A frameable certificate stating that the participant is certified as a CFG coach by NSRF,

- One year’s coach membership to NSRF, allowing access to all current and newly added coaches’ materials on our website and a discount on purchases of materials or additional trainings,

- Email and phone access to the National Facilitator who trained you, as well as the NSRF office — we are always happy to answer any questions CFG coaches might have about protocol use or Critical Friends Group work,

- Our **NSRF Connections** newsletter, published electronically six times per year.

**Scheduling options to meet your needs**

Coaches’ Trainings consist of five hands-on (and mentally “on”) days of learning and improving the participants’ work products. We typically begin at 8:30 a.m. and run til 4, with an hourlong lunch break. On the last day of each training segment, we take a shorter lunch and end at 2 p.m. to allow for travel back home.

On-site trainings may be run five consecutive days (typically in the summertime or on a school break), or in a “three/two split” in which the facilitator comes for three days, then returns about six weeks later for the last two days of training.

Administrators’ training, for those who will not coach CFG groups, is a three-consecutive-day action-packed, hands-on event with a similar daily schedule.

**Five consecutive days**

**Advantages**
1) Maintained momentum for entire training sends new certified coaches back to their work feeling empowered and enthusiastic.
2) Slightly less expensive than a split schedule training.
3) A few hours more practice time than the 3/2 split since we end early only one day instead of two.

**3/2 split schedule**

**Advantages**
1) Easier during academic year, to avoid five consecutive days out of the classroom/away from the office.
2) Allows participants to practice protocols in the field before returning to finalize training.
3) Certification with 30.5 hours of training.

To discuss scheduling possibilities for your school, call NSRF at 812-330-2702 or email us at nsrf@nsrfharmony.org.
Testimonials from newly trained coaches and administrators

After every training, we ask for three pieces of feedback: what did you think of this training? How was your facilitator? How could we improve? We read every one of these reflections, every time, and discuss every suggestion, always wanting to improve our own work. Here are some recent, typical responses.

“Critical Friends Group work combats the loneliness of leadership, allowing for purposeful work in a trusting learning community. Our CFG work represents the basic unit of support for educators engaged in improving schools and increasing student achievement.

As a result of CFG training, leaders are consistently using strategies to build trust, plan effective meetings, facilitate meaningful professional learning, and guide communities of learners to nurture seed ideas and examine student work, professional practice, and dilemmas.” ~ Mary Gaskins, Director of Professional Learning, Lexington 1 School District, South Carolina

“This training was very well planned and executed. We were treated as professionals and our time was respected. This will be extremely helpful in the work that our school does around consensus building for improvement.” ~ Carrie Horton, English teacher, Vernon Malone College and Career Academy, North Carolina

“Facilitators did a terrific job creating a safe, productive learning community for all in our Open Training! The elements that made this work so powerful for me were equality, choice, voice, dialogue, reflection, praxis, and reciprocity. Thank you for fostering this opportunity to think deeply about the principles we embrace. I felt like I was a part of a collaborative culture that was truly willing to learn and grow along side one another.” ~ Kim Mitchell, Middle School teacher, McDonogh School

“I am especially grateful for the opportunity to create action plans. Ours is not just “in the works” but is now a living thing: we have put the plan into action, meeting with staff, exploring our plan for the upcoming school year regarding our peer learning experience. It was a great opportunity for us to put our training from this CFG into practice right away!” ~ Michelle Kanipes, Secondary Resource Specialist, Southern Door County School District, Wisconsin

“This work seems to touch the whole community in a way that goes beyond dedicated CFG work or our carved out Collaborative Community time. There is a cross-pollination of ideas, tools, and language that impact structured meetings, small groups, and classroom teaching... it affects and positively contributes to the whole organizational experience.”
~ Ginger Carlson, Director of Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning, American School of Guatemala

“In my experience with CFG work, teachers found it to be one of their most valuable and enriching professional experiences. Rather than feeling they were simply fulfilling an institutional requirement, their wholehearted involvement was always authentically motivated by teachers’ real needs and concerns. This sense of genuine purpose and shared focus helped create a very powerful space, both fun and incredibly useful.”
~ Raphael Raphael, Author, Lecturer, University of Hawaii at Manoa

“We have been working with NSRF since 2012 and many of us believe this training has been instrumental in transforming our school culture. We have been able to increase our skill-base as active listeners, observers, and facilitators, build bonds across all departments and gain an understanding of the dilemmas faced by colleagues in different areas of the school. The use of protocols has introduced a degree of efficiency and also de-privatized practice. They are now embedded in our daily work as a professional learning community.”
~ Barbara McLean, Assistant Head, Human Resources and Professional Growth, The Bishop Strachan School, Toronto, Canada

“This is one of the top trainings I’ve ever attended, and 40+ colleagues agree. The five days provided skills, techniques, and resources to create a true collaborative learning group focused on real community and real change.” ~ Gail S. Widner, Project Director, Carolina Consortium for Enterprise Learning (CCEL)
Beyond coaches’ training: more options and best practices

Over time, we have learned some best practices for introducing and expanding Critical Friends Group work throughout your culture. After you have one or more CFG communities working together, each led by a certified CFG coach, you have several options for extending and deepening the work to achieve the most powerful effects for your school population.

**Scale up or go all-in**

Some schools find themselves in circumstances in which they want or need to dramatically improve their school culture and student achievement as quickly as possible. Some have received extra federal or grant funding, and want to train their entire staff at once or over a short period of time.

Consider whether your goals, your physical facility, and your staff preferences lead you toward one concerted week in which multiple cohorts are trained in parallel, or whether you want to offer trainings in different weeks or months to allow for individual scheduling preferences. **CFG training is designed to fast-track community-building and collaboration. Once your whole team has a common language and common set of positive experiences to draw on, deeper collaboration and problem-solving can happen very quickly.** In the meantime, you may hire NSRF to lead a schoolwide launch or an introductory workshop for trained and untrained staff over one or two days. Clients have reported that this experiential workshop creates a sense of “one school” and improves collegiality.

**Other possibilities**

- **Partnered CFG Coaches’ Trainings** in which our protocols and philosophies are paired with Growth Mindset, Mindfulness, Peer Observations, or other initiatives.
- **Experienced Coaches’ Training** for already certified coaches.
- **Meeting facilitation** around large, complex dilemmas or conflicts. An outside facilitator who is skilled in using structures to manage conversations can help participants “feel heard” without overwhelming or “jumping on” anyone who may be at risk.

**Going pro with NSRF**

Many CFG coaches feel so excited about and committed to the work that they ask about becoming NSRF National Facilitators so they may train others within their districts and beyond to become coaches. **A district can significantly reduce the cost of training CFG coaches over time by cultivating one or more of your own National Facilitators.** Bringing CFG training in-house by working with us means your new coaches will have the guidance and support of the NSRF, and will be able to maintain coach membership, receiving access to new materials over time.

For coaches considering this path, your first tasks are to complete the five-day training and then lead a CFG community for a year. Keep copies of your CFG meeting agendas and your reflections after each meeting in a file. Then talk with us or visit our FAQ for next steps.
Why should I pay for training when NSRF offers so many free protocols?

Using NSRF protocols and activities without training can be very much like trying to cook a gourmet meal without ever taking a cooking lesson. You may be able to “consume” the result, but chances are it won’t look and taste the way it would if a trained chef had whipped it up. The (O) protocols freely available have recently been “tuned” and improved graphically and instructionally, and the resulting new materials are only available to current members and coach-members.

The newer materials, when led by a certified CFG coach, demonstrate the true potential of protocol use — structure that deepens understanding, allows all voices to be heard and honored, helps improve work, and reveals better ways for student learning and achievement.

But the instructions written in each protocol are only the basic information needed to run them effectively. Without having completed coaches’ training and learning why you are doing what you’re doing in each step, you’re unlikely to achieve the best possible result.

NSRF-certified coaches learn how and why to employ essential scaffolding activities to build trust before using particular protocols. Without that scaffolding, your finished product may fall short of your expectations. In fact, without CFG coaches’ training, you may wind up with the equivalent of a mild form of “food poisoning” — giving participants such a bad experience that they never want to try another protocol again!

In CFG coaches’ or administrator’s training, you will experience the power of individual protocols as they were intended.

But even more importantly, you will enjoy the benefits of a true Critical Friends Group community firsthand. CFG work depends upon a committed group of caring professionals who learn to deeply trust one another.
“Critical Friends Group” and “CFG” are trademarked.

The NSRF® organization owns the registered servicemark for Critical Friends Group® and CFG®. This means that only our organization may train others to become CFG coaches.

Here’s why that’s important for you.

Just as you want to know what taste and texture to expect when you open your preferred brand of peanut butter, you should always expect the highest quality experience when receiving training from an NSRF-certified National Facilitator. If someone offers you a “CFG” or “protocol” training and they aren’t current with their NSRF National Facilitator’s certification, we cannot guarantee the training they might provide. Nor could we, in good conscience, offer the training participants the benefits available to our certified coaches including membership and access to our website.

Who We Are

The National School Reform Faculty is an organization focused on adult learning in the service of school achievement. NSRF was formed in 1994 when the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University designed a different approach to professional development, one that would focus on the knowledge and abilities of the practitioners and on creating practices that actually improve student learning. This led to the development of protocols and activities that were taught to others through Critical Friends Group training. Since the summer of 2000, NSRF has been based in Bloomington, Indiana as a division of the Harmony Education Center.
Adult learning
in the service of
student achievement

For more information
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