

VARIATIONS *on a* THEME

AS NEEDS CHANGE,
NEW MODELS
OF CRITICAL FRIENDS GROUPS
EMERGE

By Kevin Fahey and Jacy Ippolito

These days, there is a lot of talk in schools. There are conversations about research-based practices, authentic assessments, accountability, effective evaluation, standardized tests, and much more. In all of this chatter, three ideas are emerging:

1. For schools to become better places for kids to learn, adults have to continue learning — and at higher levels than ever. They have to learn to work together in unfamiliar ways, think differently about students, and even redefine fundamental assumptions (Breidenstein, Fahey, Glickman, & Hensley, 2012).
2. Many conversations in schools, even those that are specifically designed to support much-needed adult learning, have marginal impact (Guskey & Yoon, 2009).
3. Despite increasing evidence of the value of coherent, collaborative adult learning in schools (Bryk, Sebring,

Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010), schools often remain places that are characterized by “presentism, isolation, and conservatism” (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009).

Adult conversations that take place in schools where teachers work alone, solving only the most immediate and pressing problems, never build teachers’ collective capacity for reflecting on practice, shared understandings, or ability to collaboratively improve the learning of every student. Moreover, educators are often unsure about how to have the professional conversations they — and students — really need.

The Critical Friends Group, a highly articulated model of professional learning, posits that, in order for teachers to learn together in ways that change their practice, the content and nature of their conversations must change (National School Reform Faculty, 2012). The content needs to change from externally driven agendas that address (in a cursory way) their most immediate problems to sustained and rigorous examination of student work, their

own teaching practices, and the fundamental assumptions that guide their work. Not only what teachers talk about, but also how teachers talk needs to change.

What's more, the Critical Friends Group model holds that, for adults to do the challenging learning necessary to transform schools, they need to learn to be reflective, expose and explore fundamental assumptions, give and get feedback, and hold each other accountable for implementing what they have learned. However, talking and learning in this way often goes very much against the grain of how schools typically operate.

STRUCTURE FOR LEARNING

Critical Friends Groups are groups of educators who meet regularly with the intention of improving teaching and learning and are characterized by skilled facilitation and the use of protocols to guide learning (Breidenstein et al., 2012). Protocols push against the pull of how things are in schools, or how we typically talk, and they are the structures that help educators try on different ideas, examine assumptions, ask unsettling questions, and embrace discomfort in a way that is safe and manageable (McDonald, Mohr, Dichter, & McDonald, 2013).

Protocols are not easy answers, and they certainly don't facilitate themselves. However, because the forces that conspire against adult learning in schools are so strong, the efficacy of protocols in supporting adult learning is directly related to the degree to which they are supported by skilled facilitation. McDonald and colleagues (2013) suggest, "At its heart, facilitation is about participation, ensuring equity, and building trust (p.15)."

While the original Critical Friends Group model has existed since 1994, the changing demographics of students nationwide, widening gaps in student achievement, new national standards, and increased accountability pressures are pushing educators to innovate. Over the past few years, we — along with a number of colleagues — have been documenting and creating case studies of new iterations of the model (Breidenstein et al., 2012; Ippolito, 2013), trying to better understand how educators are meeting their

own individual professional learning needs and at the same time addressing a complicated set of external demands, policies, and practices that increasingly inform the work of schools.

Critical Friends Groups are typically used by groups of teachers in K-12 school settings for an increasingly broad range of purposes. However, more than 20 years after their emergence, Critical Friends Groups can now also be found in many forms: used by faculty in higher education settings, employed as bridges between university and district partnerships, developed by school leaders to meet across districts, and even taking the form of online virtual Critical Friends Groups.

NEW MODELS EMERGE

The twin pillars of the Critical Friends Group structure, skilled facilitation and structured conversations that support adults' collaborative learning, have proven to be quite generative, spawning multiple noteworthy iterations worth studying and replicating. While the Critical Friends Group model has been part of the professional development landscape for years, the new iterations we share here point to the continued power, versatility, and utility of Critical Friends Groups balancing the tension between collaborative and individual adult learning, which is particularly difficult in our era of increased standardization and accountability.

1. The whole-school Critical Friends Group.



The International School of the Americas in San Antonio, Texas, has been using Critical Friends Groups to support the learning of every educator in the school since 2001, when several faculty were trained as coaches.

Principal Kathy Bieser says, "Teachers needed a conversation that was better than the five-minute consultation at the microwave or copying machine." Every teacher at the school is a member of a Critical Friends Group that meets regularly throughout the year

in order to look at student work, consider dilemmas of teaching practice, and give each other feedback.

The groups decide their own learning agendas and are led by an experienced facilitator who uses protocols to support learning-focused conversations among teachers. “Teachers value this work because they have built the capacity to name a question and figure out an answer in a safe, thoughtful environment, and then immediately transfer that answer to their teaching practice,” Bieser says.

2. Implementing a strategic plan.



In a very different setting, Packer Collegiate Institute in Brooklyn, New York, also has a long history with Critical Friends Groups. Since 1997, when faculty were first trained to facilitate Critical Friends Groups, the school has experimented with multiple forms of the concept.

However, a new iteration emerged after Packer adopted an ambitious strategic plan that asked teachers to think very differently about their practice, their school, and their students. Teri Schrader, principal of the upper school, says, “The strategic plan was so ambitious and so challenging — in a very good way — that we realized we needed to use our Critical Friends Group skills to build our capacity to work very differently with each other.”

During their regular Tuesday meetings, the entire faculty uses the skills and structures they have learned in their Critical Friends Group work to understand, work together, and implement the Packer strategic plan. Schrader says, “We need to work in this way — collaboratively, rigorously, and in a structured way — because there is no hierarchy of good ideas. They can come from anywhere, and we need them all.”

3. A content-area focus.



At Brookline High School in Brookline, Massachusetts, a group of teachers is using the tools of critical friendship to improve content-area instruction by adopting and refining disciplinary literacy practices (Ippolito, Charner-Laird, & Dobbs, 2014).

Aligning their instruction with new Common Core State Standards, the Content-Area Reading Initiative began as a group of 18 teachers (including three designated teacher leaders) who represented three departments: English, social studies, and world languages. The initial idea was to engage multiple departmental, Critical Friends Group-style learning communities in several two-year cycles of inquiry and instructional experimentation solely focused on improving how teachers supported students in becoming better content-area readers, writers, and communicators.

While each six-person departmental team could have easily

spent its weekly meetings blaming students and flawed school structures — the default position of many ineffective professional learning communities — the participants in the project adopted Critical Friends Group-structured discussion protocols and were coached in facilitation techniques.

Teachers in the project are not only benefitting from using Critical Friends Group practices with each other, but also experimenting with the use of protocols with students and other school leaders. One English teacher reflected, “When we do a protocol around a piece of evidence or an assignment or question that we have, that has always been really productive.”

The world languages teacher leader remarked, “We ran protocols during the year with other department heads, and there is no way I would have collaborated or had conversations like that unless I was doing this.”

4. Cross-district leadership Critical Friends Group.



Since 2000, a group of cross-district school leaders in Massachusetts has been meeting monthly in a Critical Friends Group designed to help school leaders have essential conversations that in general support their continued learning about leadership and more particularly help each other make meaning out of the complex world of standards, district policies, and bureaucratic demands that characterize the world in which they work (Fahey, 2011).

One principal describes the conversation this way: “Critical Friends Groups are places where you can test your hypotheses. It is the safest place. I do not know any other place where I can do that. I cannot do that with my staff. I cannot do it with my boss. And the only place where you will be taken seriously in this way is the Critical Friends Group” (Fahey, 2007, p. 12).

Over the years, this leadership Critical Friends Group has used different protocols, for example, to consider issues of supervision, school culture, and district politics. Group members also gave each other feedback on data analysis procedures, parental communications, school improvement plans, and faculty meeting agendas.

Ruben Carmona, principal of the Lincoln School in Lowell, Massachusetts, summed up the importance of these conversations: “Our Critical Friends Group is where you learn with other principals and don’t have to fake it — pretend to know the answer when you don’t” (Breidenstein et al., 2012, p. 68).

5. A higher education Critical Friends Group.



In 2008, the faculty in the Department of Adolescent Education and Leadership at Salem State University in Salem, Massachusetts, began an experiment in which a few faculty meetings each semester were organized as Critical Friends Groups. In these

meetings, like most Critical Friends Groups, faculty presented problems of teaching practice, looked at student work, and gave each other feedback.

Jaime Wurzel, one of the department's senior faculty, described how different this conversation was: "In over 20 years as a university faculty member, I do not think I ever had a focused conversation on teaching practice. These were amazing meetings." In this case, the Critical Friends Group created a conversation that had never happened before.

In 2012, Michelle Pierce, the department chair, reserved half of the year's faculty meeting time for Critical Friends Group work. "A university is still a school, and professors are still teachers," she said. "We need to focus persistently on becoming better teachers and helping our students learn at deeper levels. We need a more meaningful conversation about instruction."

In this case, the department's traditional focus on policy, university governance, and regulation had supplanted the important conversations about instruction. The Critical Friends Group structure helped the department reclaim it.

6. A district-university Critical Friends Group.

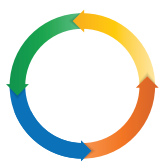


In 2011, the cross-district leadership Critical Friends Group, searching for ways to bring a broader, more theoretical element to its conversations, invited faculty from Salem State University to join its Critical Friends Group. The offer was accepted by four faculty who understood there is often an impoverished relationship between K-12 leaders charged with building collaborative, reflective schools and university faculty who research, report on, and evaluate those efforts.

After a few meetings, the university faculty reported that the use of protocols had enabled a group with no experience in dealing with substantive issues together to move quickly from the "very topical, parallel play that does not push us forward" to "sustained conversations that center on real issues" (Fahey & Ippolito, 2013, p. 11).

In this iteration of the Critical Friends Group model, university faculty and practicing principals, groups with little authentic experience talking to each other, were able to build very important, useful conversations that informed each member's practice.

7. A virtual Critical Friends Group.



Four years ago, Julie Moore from Kennesaw State University in Georgia realized that many of the teachers she knew wanted to have more learning-focused conversations, often connected to the complex standards that they were charged with implementing in their classrooms. The problem was that her colleagues were spread out across the country, from Maine to Hawaii.

Moore's answer was an iCFG — a virtual Critical Friends

Group. Beginning in 2009, eight educators met regularly as part of an iCFG using Google Hangouts technology to learn together, use protocols to closely examine their own practice, and challenge each other's thinking. Learning the technology was easier because the members of the group were already familiar with Critical Friends Group processes and to some degree with each other (Moore, 2012). As one member summed it up, "We would find a way to do our Critical Friends Group, even if we had to do it in Morse code." Ultimately, the iCFG was propelled by the conversation, not the technology.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

The simple conclusion after reviewing these iterations is: Educators really want to talk. But the more complicated conclusion is that they want something more than a check-in while using the copying machine or heating up their lunch at the microwave.

In increasingly complex environments governed by district goals and state standards, teachers want their conversations to make a difference — in their teaching practice and for their students. Yet having such conversations remains a challenge in schools.

Across states and school districts, balancing group and individual professional learning needs relies on facilitated conversations and structured discussion protocols — the simple and powerful ideas behind Critical Friends Groups. Moreover, teachers are adopting and adapting these structures in many new and exciting ways.

These iterations suggest that conversations that make a difference require structure, persistence, good facilitation, and courage to work and learn in unfamiliar ways. Experimenting with variations on these themes is where we need to head next. It's not easy, but it's worth it.

REFERENCES

- Breidenstein, A., Fahey, K., Glickman, C., & Hensley, F. (2012).** *Leading for powerful learning: A guide for instructional leaders*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Bryk, A.S., Sebring, P.B., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S., & Easton, J.Q. (2010).** *Organizing schools for improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Fahey, K. (2007).** *Leadership learning: What happens after they get the license?* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL.
- Fahey, K. (2011).** Still learning about leading: A leadership Critical Friends Group. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 6(1), 1-35.
- Fahey, K. & Ippolito, J. (2013).** *Learning about leading across the K-12 and higher education divide: The power of combining principal and university Critical Friends Groups*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American

Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA.

Guskey, T.R. & Yoon, K.S. (2009). What works in professional development? *Phi Delta Kappan*, 90(7), 495-500.

Hargreaves, A. & Shirley, D. (2009). The persistence of presentism. *Teachers College Record*, 111(11), 2505-2534.

Ippolito, J. (2013). Professional learning as the key to linking content and literacy instruction. In J. Ippolito, J.F. Lawrence, & C. Zaller (Eds.), *Adolescent literacy in the era of the Common Core: From research into practice* (pp. 235-249). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Ippolito, J., Charner-Laird, M., & Dobbs, C. (2014, June). Bridge builders: Teacher leaders forge connections and bring coherence to literacy initiative. *JSD*, 35(3), 4.

McDonald, J.P., Mohr, N., Dichter, A., & McDonald, E.C. (2013). *The power of protocols: An educator's guide to*

better practice (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Moore, J. (2012). *Online teacher professional learning communities: Lessons learned from a virtual Critical Friends Group*. Paper presented at the annual convention of the Association for Educational Communications and Technology, Louisville, KY.

National School Reform Faculty. (2012). *NSRF self-guided tour of Critical Friends Groups*. Bloomington, IN: Author.

•
Kevin Fahey (kfahey@salemstate.edu) is a professor and Jacy Ippolito (jippolito@salemstate.edu) is an associate professor at Salem State University in Salem, Massachusetts. ■

Focus first on outcomes

Continued from p. 47

Awareness opens the door for thinking differently and changing mindsets. Now, mindsets shift to thinking about results first, then activities to achieve results.

Shifting language requires a shift in the difference in action words used to describe outcomes versus activities. Neil Mercer says that, in a community, “language for collective thinking depends on the shared, continuing activities of established groups with common interests and goals” (Mercer, 2000). Educators are in a habit of thinking about activities first when faced with a problem or challenge and, therefore, are quick to jump to solutions by setting process goals.

Teachers need to recognize the relationship between professional learning and student results and understand how logic models serve as road maps to reach intended goals. This opens the door to a new way of thinking and planning with a focus on the desired outcomes first.

Learning is the key to change. As stated in *Standards for Professional Learning*, “Standards for school and system leaders, like teacher standards, describe what effective leaders know and do so that every student and educator performs at high levels” (Learning Forward, 2011). The challenge becomes knowing how to use language to clearly articulate the desired outcomes so that everyone shares the same mental images of expectations.

Educators must build a coherent way of thinking and use language to connect the dots, following this path: data that identify what students need, clear articulation of what educators need to change based on student needs, an image of what it looks like in action in the classroom, ways teachers gain the knowledge and skills to make the changes in their practice, and, finally, activities to reach the desired outcomes.

REFERENCES

Dweck, C. (2007). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.

Killion, J. (2008). *Assessing impact: Evaluating staff development* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Learning Forward. (2011). *Standards for Professional Learning*. Oxford, OH: Author.

Lindsey, D.B., Lindsey, R.B., Hord, S., & von Frank, V. (2015). *Reach the highest standard in professional learning: Outcomes*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press & Learning Forward.

Love, N., Stiles, K., Mundry, S., & DiRanna, K. (2008). *The data coach's guide to improving learning for all students*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Mazur, E. (2012). *The scientific approach to teaching: Research as a basis for course design*. Keynote presented at the 2012 Association for Learning Technology conference at the University of Manchester, United Kingdom.

McCawley, P. (n.d.). *The logic model for program planning and evaluation*. Moscow, ID: University of Idaho. Available at www.cals.uidaho.edu/edcomm/pdf/CIS/CIS1097.pdf.

Mercer, N. (2000). *Words and minds: How we use language to think together*. New York, NY: Routledge.

•
Janice Bradley (jbradley@nmsu.edu) is a research assistant professor at New Mexico State University. Linda Munger (linda@mungeredu.com) is a senior consultant for Learning Forward. Shirley Hord (shirley.hord@learningforward.org) is Learning Forward's scholar laureate. ■