

CFG FAQs Source: www.nsrffharmony.org (National School Reform Faculty)

What is a CFG?

A CFG is a professional learning community consisting of approximately 8-12 educators who come together voluntarily at least once a month for about 2 hours. Group members are committed to improving their practice through collaborative learning.

How did the idea of Critical Friends Groups develop?

In 1994, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform designed a different approach to professional development, one that would be focused on the practitioner and on defining what will improve student learning. Since the summer of 2000, Critical Friends Groups training is coordinated by the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) at the Harmony Education Center in Bloomington, Indiana.

What are the purposes of a Critical Friends Group?

Critical Friends Groups are designed to

- Create a professional learning community
- Make teaching practice explicit and public by "talking about teaching"
- Help people involved in schools to work collaboratively in democratic, reflective communities
- Establish a foundation for sustained professional development based on a spirit of inquiry
- Provide a context to understand our work with students, our relationships with peers, and our thoughts, assumptions, and beliefs about teaching and learning
- Help educators help each other turn theories into practice and standards into actual student learning
- Improve teaching and learning

What are the characteristics of a professional learning community?

Professional learning communities are strong when teachers demonstrate

- Shared norms and values
- Collaboration
- Reflective dialogue
- Deprivatization of practice
- Collective focus on student learning
- Spirit of shared responsibility for the learning of all students

Professional learning communities can develop when there is

- Time to meet and talk
- Physical proximity
- Interdependent teaching roles
- Active communication structures
- Teacher empowerment and autonomy

A professional learning community is enhanced when there is

- Openness to improvement
- Trust and respect
- A foundation in the knowledge and skills of teaching
- Supportive leadership
- Socialization or school structures that encourage the sharing of the school's vision and mission

I felt uncomfortable at those sessions critiquing or criticizing a colleague's work. I have a hard time with the word "critical."

That is a common misconception about the word "critical." In CFG context, critical means "important," "key," "essential," or "urgent" such as in "critical care." Furthermore, when a group of educators develop a CFG, they begin by spending time discussing and developing norms about how to give feedback and how to question in a sensitive manner so that everyone feels comfortable. Trust and confidentiality are established among participants.

What might those norms be?

That depends on what the group decides. The norms might range from being on time, to watching air time, to confidentiality, to being prepared, or to challenging the thinking of group members.

What happens during a CFG session?

Lots of different activities may occur in the ongoing sessions, each of approximately 2 hours.

- The coach typically may facilitate one of several time-managed protocols (strategies or formal structures) for examining student work, brought to the group by one of its members.
- The coach may facilitate a protocol for examining teacher work, brought to the group by one of its members.
- Group members will support each other and improve their teaching by giving and receiving feedback, by questioning each other and themselves, by reflecting on their work or their students' work, by addressing dilemmas, by collaborating across disciplines, by confronting assumptions, mindsets, and expectations, but never by blaming students or social conditions.
- Members might maintain a reflective journal on a given prompt or around the more generic, "What am I thinking about now? What do I plan to do about it?"
- The coach may begin the session with, "So, what did we try or reconsider since the last meeting?"
- Group members might request a peer observer to help them improve a specific aspect of their teaching.
- The coach might facilitate a text-based discussion of a topic of concern or interest to the group.

Why do CFG participants say that CFG work is more satisfying when compared to other kinds of professional development?

- It is continual.
- It is focused on their own teaching and their own students' learning.
- It takes place in a small group of supportive and trusted colleagues within their own school.
- Participants have control over their own professional learning needs.
- What happens in the Critical Friends Group Coaches Training?
The purpose of the training is to train/prepare coaches/facilitators to coordinate honest and productive conversations with colleagues focused on improving student learning and improving teacher practices.
- Some of the skills the coaches practiced were:
 - Setting norms for working together
 - Active listening
 - Understanding guidelines for dialogue
 - Understanding the dynamics of offering and receiving warm (supportive) or cool feedback
 - Formulating clarifying and probing questions
 - Using protocols for examining student and teacher work, for solving problems, setting goals, observing peers, and building teams

Do I have to be trained as a CFG coach to participate in a CFG?

Absolutely not! To participate in a CFG you need to

- Be committed to improving your practice,
- agree to meet regularly,
- understand your responsibility for contributing to each member's learning, and
- adhere to the norms established by the individual CFG group.

If the facilitator and/or participant is an administrator, doesn't that bias the discussion?

No, but the administrators are sensitive to that perception. The question was discussed at the training. A CFG is composed of equal members where there is no "hierarchy of expertise" and it must be a democratic, reflective, and collaborative community of learners.

How large is a CFG?

A group of 8 - 12 is an ideal size. The composition of a group is ultimately up to those interested in starting a CFG. (*Small Schools Northwest recommends 6-10 participants.*)

What changes happen as a result of an individual's participation in a CFG?

Quoting Jon Appleby, a CFG coach in Maine, "I have been fortunate to experience what the support and push of a CFG can mean, and how powerful and accelerated our learning can be if we allow ourselves to both lead and follow, to question and to be questioned, as equals with thoughtful peers. I have also discovered, personally, that my energy and wellness as a teacher depend upon the revitalization that occurs when I share, among friends, in critical reflection and when I am, therefore, learning myself."

Research indicates that classrooms move from being teacher-centered toward student-centered. Furthermore, teachers are more thoughtful about connecting curriculum, assessment, and instruction. Teachers in CFG's believe that they can affect student achievement and these teachers have higher expectations for student learning, which, in turn, leads to greater student achievement.

Can you tell me more about the National School Reform Faculty?

NSRF promotes the values of reflective practice, collaboration, shared leadership, authentic pedagogy, democracy, equity in opportunity and achievement, and social justice to form the basis of a national movement that will result in improved teacher quality and improved learning for all students. More information is available at www.nsrffharmony.org.

LOCAL CFG INFORMATION and COACH TRAINING

Small Schools Northwest at Lewis & Clark College offers a 5-day institute to train a coach to facilitate and support a Critical Friends Group. The number of coaches a school needs depends on the number of groups they want to have in the school. This institute is recommended for administrators, teacher leaders, and district office personnel as the skills and tools in the training are immediately applicable to committee, leadership, and whole staff meetings in addition to teacher collaboration.

Lewis & Clark College offers **one semester hour of non-degree applicable graduate credit** to CFG participants. The requirements for receiving credit for the course include 1) participating in your CFG group for at least 15 hours throughout the school year and 2) writing a 1-2 page formal reflection paper on your participation in that group.

More information: <http://www.lclark.edu/~ssw/cfg.html>