

Critical Friends Group (or CFG[®]) communities provide professional development that leads to improved student learning, more effective collaboration between participants, and greater retention of staff. It's a particular variety of professional learning community (PLC) so unique that it has been registered as a trademark. Each CFG community consists of 5-12 members who commit to improving their practice through collaborative learning, the use of structured interactions (protocols), and meeting at least once a month for about two hours.

Critical Friends Group coaches lead their groups by creating an environment of trust that allows all participants to give and receive feedback more effectively, using NSRF protocols and activities to help teachers, administrators, and students create a culture of collaboration. CFG coaches are often a member of the faculty, but should not be a supervisor of the other participants – it's important that the coach is a neutral peer-leader and not “the boss.” When run with fidelity, these groups contribute to participants' professional growth and ensure that ALL members of the school community have a venue dedicated to continuously learn and grow.

Under the guidance of their CFG coach, Critical Friends Group members work together to:

- Replace assumed, unconscious norms with collaboratively-set agreements,
- Focus on student learning and work with specific objectives to improve outcomes,
- Make their practice public, including sharing imperfect work for group assistance,
- Engage in reflective dialogue and collaboration,
- Address complex professional dilemmas with fresh perspectives,
- Share and learn from successes,
- Interpret data in order to create effective next steps,
- Brainstorm and improve projects, plans or materials at any stage of progress,
- Inquire into, analyze, and reflect upon areas such as student work and adult work, data, best teaching practices, and equity issues,
- Learn from peer observations and debriefing, texts and other sources, and more.

Rather than following agendas that are driven solely by administrators, CFG meetings might accomplish any of the above tasks, or might focus on questions that are specific to student achievement. For example:

- What important tasks can't my students accomplish?
- Why can't my students accomplish these tasks?
- What does the student work tell us? What evidence do I have of students' understanding or lack of understanding?
- What have I or others done in the past to address this issue?

- How can we help my students accomplish the task?
- What multiple measures can we use to demonstrate students' mastery/growth of understanding?

CFG communities can also be created specifically for administrators and other non-teaching staff. Example questions in those groups might be:

- How can we improve communication with parents of students?
- What efforts might we take to help our students achieve better test scores?
- In what ways could we reduce stress for our teachers, supporting them in their work?

By acknowledging that all our work can be improved (growth mindset), Critical Friends Group members build trust with one another (belonging mindset), and bring forth the work and concerns that have been most troublesome to them (purpose & relevance mindset), to gain assistance from their trusted peers.

This collaboration has profound and universal effects:

- Each individual presenting their imperfect work or dilemmas receives personal attention and support.
- Other participants, processing their colleagues's work and dilemmas, pick up details they can apply to their own work.
- By helping our peers and trusting they will enjoy helping us with our own work, we build true collaboration, not just "congenial collegiality."
- Protocols and activities shared in the CFG meetings can often be adapted for use with students, engaging them in learning in new ways and building trust and a sense of belonging within the classroom.
- The student body, whether they experience protocols directly, will be better able to demonstrate their learning as the teachers' work is improved by their peers.

If you have questions about Critical Friends Group work or NSRF protocols and activities, please consult [our website](#) or call us for more information.