

Rochester City School District

2013-2014



Office of Professional Learning

Professional Learning Methods

Critical Friends Group

Format for Learning Method



Description



Benefits



Roles



Norms



Implementation



Forms



Outcomes-Impact

Critical Friends Group

Description:

A Critical Friends Group (CFG) is a professional learning community consisting of a small group (6-8 educators) who come together voluntarily to meet regularly to have structured professional conversations about their work. The purpose of a CFG is to provide professional development that translates into improved student learning. This adult learning is accomplished through formal, ongoing interactions of small groups of staff that participate voluntarily. One person, a member of the faculty, facilitates the CFG. A CFG can generate effective practices for teachers to share materials, develop support systems, and promote and define holistic approaches to meet the teaching and learning needs of schools around the nation (Cromwell, 1999). During the meetings the participants practice techniques for examining student work and observing their colleagues during their lessons. As colleagues, CFG members help each other make choices on how to introduce concepts, uncover evidence that students are demonstrating growth, or have mastered a concept, rule, or strategy (Silva, 2003). A CFG promotes collegiality and provides a way for staff members to be reflective in their practice.

A Circumstance for Using a Critical Friends Group

- Dealing with issues and dilemmas related to the profession
- Looking at, analyzing and learning from student work
- Peer observations and debriefs
- Looking at and reflecting on teacher or group work/project. (E.g. strategic plan, school improvement plan, department policy, etc.)
- Examine an issue that is reoccurring across one or multiple grade levels

The Goals of a Critical Friends Group:

1. Improve teacher practice
2. Improve student learning
3. Contribute to the participants' professional growth
4. Strengthen the school and district's capacity to function as learning communities

Benefits of a Critical Friends Group:

1. Provides structure for effective feedback and support
 2. Participants improve instruction and student learning
 3. Participants build a shared knowledge base
 4. Opportunity to talk in depth about student work, teacher tasks and professional issues
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Roles:

Facilitator: The facilitator of a Critical Friends Group reviews the process for the group. She/he sets time limits and carefully keeps track of time. Depending on the participation, time may be adjusted. The facilitator ensures that the designated topic is adhered to. She/he leads the discussion, takes part in it and allows for all in the group to participate. The facilitator also leads the debriefing process. The facilitator also keeps accurate records: Attendance/Participation Log, and Outcomes–Impact Report (See Forms A, B, C on pages 6-11).

Presenter: The presenter prepares an issue for discussion or brings an artifact for tuning or consultation. She/he brings a clear developed request with specific questions that should be addressed. The presenter does not enter into the actual discussion but takes notes regarding the feedback. She /he reflects on the discussion and is specific about what was helpful.

Observer: The observer observes the group as they interact and notes the dynamics of how the group works together. What are the interactions, is there someone that emerges as a leader, an antagonist, etc. The observer speaks first during the debriefing and reports the observations noted.

Critical friends: (Discussants) All participants address the issue or the artifact and are present throughout the discussion. They listen carefully and encourage specificity. They respond with integrity and act as advocates for the work. The feedback is both positive and critical. The suggestions are supportive and practical. They are collaborative and helpful as they work together.

Norms:

It is important that participants establish norms that are a consistent part of the process. Below is an example of possible norms. The group may decide on their own preferred set of norms. The norms may include being on time, remaining confidential, being prepared, etc.

Example of Possible Norms:

It is extremely important to maintain a positive and honest group dynamic in your Circle.

1. Practice “Active Listening”. Listen, carefully, thoughtfully and openly.
2. Participation is expected, valued, and recognized.
3. Ask thoughtful questions. Analyze and reflect.
4. Recognize and contribute to ideas of others.
5. Maintain a positive attitude.
6. Respect differences; focus on the student work or issue at hand.
7. Build trust and maintain confidentiality.

Preparation:

The most effective CFG meetings are those in which all participants come prepared.

The facilitator:

- Plans the meeting
- Secures a location
- Distributes the agenda, possible articles to discuss, handouts, etc.
- Arranges for one member of the CFG to present a dilemma, project, or student work.
- Meets with presenter to discuss what will be presented.

The facilitator and the presenter:

- Meet ahead of time to discuss the student work or issue that is to be presented.
- Select questions that best fit the work or the dilemma and will guide the discussion
- Select a protocol to match the work

Possible circumstances for reflection through the use of a Critical Friends Group:

1. To improve teacher practice and enhance student learning- analyzing student work or teacher lessons;

Guiding questions:

- What important tasks are my students struggling with?
- Why are my students unable to accomplish these tasks?
- What does the student work show us? What evidence do I have of the extent of students' understanding?
- What have I done to address the issue?
- How can we improve students understanding and ability to successfully complete the task/tasks?
- What measures are we going to use to measure the mastery of understandings?

2. To deal with an issue or dilemma (something that is puzzling or a struggle), to solve a problem;

Guiding questions:

- What is your real dilemma?
- Is it something important to you that you are willing to work on?
- Why is it a dilemma for you? Can you explain it?
- What is your focus question that will get at the heart of the matter?
- Does your question relate to the importance of teacher practice, of student learning, to others in the profession?

Choosing the Protocols to Facilitate the Work

There are various protocols to select when working in a CFG. It is important to choose one that will match the work and best guide the structure of the meeting.

(See resources)

Implementation:

Steps:

1. Facilitator Overview (3 minutes)

- Review process
- Set time limits

2. Presenter Overview (10 minutes)

- Share issue and provides context
- Frames a focus question for specific consideration
- Group members ask more questions to learn about the issue
- Reminder, this is not a time to give advice or get into the discussion

3. Critical Friends Group Discussion (15-30 minutes depending on the “work”/ protocol)

- Group discusses issue (uses critical and positive feedback)
- Presenter sits outside of the group and remains silent , takes notes
- Observer records group interactions
- Group addresses possible suggestions related to the issue

4. Presenter Response (5 minutes)

- Presenter responds to group feedback and summarizes the thoughts and impressions of the discussion.

5. Debriefing (5 minutes)

- Facilitator leads discussion, critiques the process

6. Planning (for next meeting) (10-15 min minutes)

- Focus on the when, where, what, and who for the next meeting. Facilitator

Reflection: As your Critical Friends Groups develop, reflect upon your discussions process. Participants may choose to keep a personal journal to reflect ideas, thoughts, feelings and noticings.

Guiding questions:

How has this Critical Friends Group promoted reflection regarding educational practice or issues?

How has it promoted a collaborative school culture?

How has it affected relationships within the environment?

How has it affected teacher practice?

How has it enhanced instruction in the classroom?

How has it increased student achievement?

Evaluation of Success: What data will be collected and used to support the impact of the Critical Friends Group?

Considerations: As a result of this Critical Friends Group, demonstrate the following:

- Evidence that what you have learned has enhanced instruction and/or refined your professional practice.
 - Evidence that student learning and achievement has increased.
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Forms: Form A- Critical Friends Group Participation Log

Please use the following attendance log or attach AVATAR attendance log.

Critical Friends Group Participation Log

Participants	Dates and Times of Meetings											
1.												
2.												
3.												
4.												
5.												
6.												
7.												
8.												

Please Note: A log sheet must be filled out for each session.

Critical Friends Group Meeting Log

Facilitator: _____ **Date:** _____

Sign-In:

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Summary of Session:

Next Meeting (agenda items, action items): _____

Resources needed for next meeting:

Please Note: The following Final Report should be handed into the Office of Professional Learning and your School Based Planning Team.

Critical Friends Group Outcomes-Impact Report

Title of Circle: _____

Beginning Date: _____ **End Date:** _____ **Number of Hours:** _____

Please attach copies of the following to this report:

- *Critical Friends Group Participation Log*
- *Critical Friends Group Meeting Record*
- *Log of Strategies Implemented*
- *Samples of implementation (e.g. strategies or student work samples)*
- *Data to support outcomes*

CRITICAL FRIENDS GROUP DESCRIPTION: What were the objectives of this Critical Friends Group?

FINAL OUTCOMES: Were the outcomes/goals of this Critical Friends Group met? Explain.

How did the Critical Friends Group assess whether the outcome was met?

How did your work within this Critical Friends Group impact teaching/learning? Include implementation samples; student work samples, lesson plans, observations, peer reviews, etc.

Critical Friends Group

Provide evidence that as a result of this professional learning you have improved/enhanced your practice and more effectively addressed student learning.

Provide evidence that this experience has had an impact on student learning and achievement has increased.

Comments/additional information to share, final product, etc.
