

How Are CFGs Different From PLCs?

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Rick DuFour says, "To create a professional learning community, focus on learning rather than teaching, work collectively, and hold yourself accountable for results." His PLCs are groups where teachers get together to do the following:

1. Study state and national standards, the district curriculum guide, student achievement data, etc... and then agree upon outcomes that each student should achieve for every subject.
2. Develop assessments to monitor each student's mastery of the outcomes.
3. Analyze student performance based on these assessments.
4. Discuss new strategies to implement to raise student achievement.

So, DuFour's work is very focused—make sure the kids do well on the agreed upon assessments and if they don't, require the students to put more time into learning what they didn't get the first time around.

But, **how** are teachers supposed to work together to help students do better on the next round of assessments? DuFour states that teachers need to "develop norms or protocols to clarify expectations regarding roles, responsibilities, and relationships among the team members."

During the NSRF's New Coaches Critical Friends Groups training, we actually teach you the tools that you need to collaborate with your colleagues to improve student outcomes through CFGs. We also teach you how to improve your faculty meetings, classroom practices, parent conferences, cabinet meetings, strategic planning sessions, inquiry groups, and study groups.

Critical Friends Groups are a type of ongoing, job-embedded, democratic professional learning community (PLC) that focus on:

- Improving students' learning and success.
- Building trust by engaging in significant work while providing a safe environment for taking risks.
- Making teachers' work public by collaboratively examining their work and their students' work and then improving that work through a process of deep reflection, analysis and focused, usable feedback.
- Encouraging the diversity of thought, experience and perspective.
- Developing and sharing leadership within the group.
- Continuously challenging one another to adopt practices that foster educational and social equity.
- Continuously working to make sure that every child succeeds in school.

How do CFGs accomplish these goals? CFGs use specific activities and protocols—structured processes or a set of guidelines to promote meaningful and efficient communication, problem solving and learning. Protocols give time for active listening and reflection so all voices in the group are heard and honored. NSRF has over 100 protocols and activities that can be used to support, restructure or improve schools, adult and/or student work.

NSRF has a long and successful record working with schools that value 21st century skills or wish to restructure their school's culture to reflect this value. The reason for this fit is obvious. These schools know what data on standardized tests doesn't show: students need both subject content **and skills** to apply this content to real world situations to be successful in life. These schools strive to put a value on 21st century skills that include the ability for students to work together efficiently and effectively on projects using their

problem solving skills to research, analyze and create solutions.

The same skills we want our students to learn in school are being modeled whenever we, as educators, do CFG work: critical thinking, problem solving skills, creative thinking outside the box, focused communication, and effective collaboration. CFGs are structured so that we:

1. De-privatize our work to share new and proven methods of teaching and learning.
2. Reflect deeply about our work and analyze what is and is not working well.
3. Collaborate with our colleagues on how to improve our work and strive for excellence through shared goals, norms and values.

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