

# HORACE

## How Friends Can Be Critical As Schools Make Essential Changes

**When teachers regularly get honest, supportive feedback from valued peers, not only does their own practice benefit, but student achievement goes up, too. Across the country, Essential schools and Centers are finding ways to make and sustain these vital "critical friendships."**

BY KATHLEEN CUSHMAN

IT WAS THE END OF A STEAMY May Monday in Houston, and the teachers gathered in the library of Westbury High School were tired. Someone put out a box of doughnuts and a few who had missed lunch dug into it. Someone hurried in late, flushed from a strenuous band practice. Everyone knew each other well; everyone wanted the meeting to end on time.

But as their talk came quickly to the point, it revealed how much this working party mattered—not only to the teachers around the table, but also to their colleagues and students at this veteran Essential school.

On the coming Friday, this group was to lead a day-long faculty workshop aimed at revising the school's hallmark Graduation Exhibitions, creating similar performances for students in earlier grades, and supporting the new requirements with important curricular changes.

Charged by the whole staff with that mission, this cadre had been meeting together all year to look at student work and to examine the pros and cons of the current system. During five previous professional development days they had worked with the Westbury faculty on various aspects of the problem. And they had called on the expertise of the region's CES Center, whose director, Doris Rodgers Robins, had first prompted them to take the issue on.

So as they worked out the best

ways to engage their colleagues on Friday, they felt like veteran staff developers with an invaluable bead on what their group needed and wanted to know. "Nobody's going to be reading the newspaper in the back of *our* workshop," somebody joked, and everyone knew it was true. However tough the critique might get on Friday, it would take place among friends.

That dynamic of "critical friendship"—a term introduced in the late 1980s by those who devised CES's "Trek" as a school change experience—has been building in Houston as it has elsewhere in the country over the last several years.

On that same Monday, for instance, a team from Quest High School, a new small Essential school in greater Houston, paid an introductory visit to teachers at nearby Eisenhower High School, which is exploring CES membership. They listened to the larger school's plans to break into smaller learning units, spent an hour or two comparing notes, gave some encouragement, and invited a reciprocal visit.

Quest teachers also are meeting with other schools in their district to look at student work and see how their norms of academic rigor align with those of area colleagues. And across the Houston area's six independent school districts, the regional CES Center forges connections among reform-minded schools, through visits, inquiry groups, and

## Among Friends: Norms for Inquiry and Analysis

It isn't easy to be both critical and friendly while working collaboratively to make schools better. The Bay Area Coalition of Essential Schools has developed these norms to help its members as they jointly inquire about and analyze their work:

- **Describe only what you see.** Do not try to describe what you don't see; express what you don't see in the form of questions.
- **Resist the urge to work on "solutions"** until you are comfortable with what the data says and doesn't say.
- **Surface the perspectives and experiences** you bring to the analysis. Effective teams use these as strengths.
- **Seek to understand differences** of perception before trying to resolve them. Early consensus can inhibit depth and breadth of analysis. Hear from everybody.
- **Ask questions when you don't understand.** Find the answers together.
- **Surface assumptions** and use the data to challenge them. Look actively for both challenges and supports to what you believe is true.

the professional development that arises from needs people in the schools themselves identify.

All this emerges from the growing conviction that school change cannot succeed without sturdy, ongoing, reflective relationships among the people most directly involved.

Reforms take hold, research by Milbrey McLaughlin and others at Stanford's Center for Research on the Context of Secondary School Teaching shows, only when teachers operate within a strong professional community that supports adult learning. As they help each other find new ways to work more successfully with students, teachers' sense of efficacy rises—and so does student achievement, the evidence shows.

Building and sustaining those tough-minded and student-centered collaborative relationships has emerged as a key priority of the Coalition's second decade, underpinning its decentralization into regional Centers, its membership processes, and other key strategies for system-wide change.

## Who's Asking the Questions?

The best of these "critical friendships," according to those in Essential schools around the country, develop when participants come to the collaboration with their own questions they want to explore. The people closest to the action are the "experts" in this inquiry, setting its terms, agreeing on its conduct, owning and using its conclusions.

This contrasts directly with traditional methods of both research and professional development, in which outside experts arrive at schools to examine their innards and inject them with whatever ready-made remedies they think best.

Even so, it helps to have a partner who can lend a supportive hand in the techniques of data-gathering, group process, observing classroom practices, and documenting different perspectives. Many regional Centers and other CES school networks have stepped in to offer such help. And in the process, they often match up schools and teach them how to act as useful critical friends.

In Boston, for example, the Center for Collaborative Education sponsored five area Coalition mid-

dle schools in a year-long institute on building a professional collaborative culture. School teams of five to seven people gathered for three days in the summer and two school-year days scheduled before and after they traded visits with a partner school.

"Each school identified a key question they were grappling with in this area," says Dan French, who directs the Boston Center. "For instance, one school asked, 'Does our school reflect a tone of decency?'"

After two days spent shadowing students, interviewing teachers, observing classes and team meetings, and reviewing materials, each visiting team gave oral and written feedback on that question to its host school, which used the data in school-wide faculty discussion about the target issue.

"Participants said it was one of the most powerful professional development experiences they had ever had," says French—so successful, in fact, that the Center will bring in new teams from each school to the institute this year.



## HORACE

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Regional Coalition Centers in Maine, Michigan, New Mexico, and Missouri are among others that, like Boston, require a similar school-visit process or "school quality review" for schools exploring membership. (See sidebar, page 7, as well as *HORACE* 14:2.) In each case, the school must pose its own question for assessment, framing a cycle of continuous inquiry that will continue long after the visitors say their goodbyes.

But how does a school even get to the point where it can ask such a question, and ask it well? To address that question, Coalition staff in Providence in the late 1980s designed a process called the Trek—used still by Centers in California, Florida, Indiana, and elsewhere—in which a team of teachers and administrators learns to diagnose the work of its school and manage the change process through which it might be improved. (See sidebar, this page.)

"Trek participants start by looking at the work of their school in a number of dimensions and from a variety of perspectives," says Amy Gerstein, the Coalition's executive director, who helped develop the Trek and has led dozens of them in the last decade. "They do some envisioning of where they might like to go, and they think about how to get from here to there. But they don't charge back to school to *do something to* their colleagues, like organizing everybody into ten critical friends groups. That kind of 'action plan' approach would be disastrous."

Instead, she says, a Trek team learns "who else needs to be part of the process," and how to help create a school culture in which the hard questions can come out. For example, "One school was convinced that the solution to its terrible litter problem was to get more garbage cans," she observes. "Working with its Trek team, the staff realized that the garbage issue stood for deeper issues of respect, communication, roles, and ownership of the school."

## Collaborating in Research

Some Coalition schools also seek out friendly outsiders as partners in the "action research" that has gained currency in the past decade of education reform. In Philadelphia, the Center for Urban Ethnography (CUE) at the University of Pennsylvania teamed with a school study

team at the Academy for the Middle Years (AMY) Northwest, a Coalition member, in a project called Taking Stock, Making Change.

The university researchers taught AMY's parents and teachers to use ethnographic techniques as they investigated students' experience at school, asking, "Are we doing what we say we're doing?

## Essential Tools in the Trek Toward Change

Since its earliest years Essential Schools have used a professional development strategy they call the "Trek," in which a core team of teachers from a school develops the skills and knowledge to further the whole school's change process. But just what does that Essential school team need to know and be able to do if it is to succeed? California's Bay Area CES Center, which requires a Trek as a condition of membership, offers the list for which they aim:

### Essential School Ideas

- Ten Common Principles
- Eight Organizational Principles

### Collecting, Analyzing, and Using Data

- Collecting and using artifacts
- Engaging in blameless critique
- Using case studies
- Determining causality
- Generating descriptive statements
- Collecting evidence from five important "domains" [see below]
- Understanding what constitutes evidence
- Identifying the logic behind a school's assumptions, priorities, and compromises
- Generating problem statements
- Examining student work
- Using a T-chart
- Using the "tuning protocol"

### Group Process and Format

- Decision-making strategies
- Analyzing evidence from diverse perspectives
- Generating and using feedback
- Fishbowl debriefing
- Making time for fun and games
- Techniques for facilitating and documenting meetings
- Setting and using norms
- Problem definition and problem solving
- Engaging in reflective dialogue

### Using Socratic seminars

- Team-building strategies
- Processes for developing a vision
- Using a "whip" format

### Reflective Practice and Self-Assessment

- Developing critical friend relationships
- Documenting events, processes, and decisions
- Setting up and conducting exhibitions
- Using journals for reflection
- Creating journey maps
- Constructing narratives
- Using educational research to reflect on practice
- Creating, updating, and using a school portfolio

### Five School Perspectives

- Community building
- Democracy
- Equity
- Personalization
- Systems change

### Five Domains of the School

- Learning and student experience
- Pedagogy and teacher experience
- School organizational capacity
- External supports or influences on the school

- Student achievement data

## Some Principles for Planning Effective School Visits

1. Build clarity around the purpose of the visit, among your critical friends and among colleagues, parents, and students in your school.
  - What questions do we have and how will a visit help uncover them?
  - What evidence will we ask our critical friends to look for or examine, to enable them to provide relevant feedback?
  - What steps should the school take in order to welcome the visitors and value their feedback?
  - What written background information will our visitors need? How can we use existing documents—the school's restructuring plan, for example—to give this information?
2. Structure a visit that gives critical friends access to the information and observations they need to help the school.
  - How will we make our visitors comfortable (location of restrooms, bell schedules, a meeting room, a student guide, access to coffee)?
  - How will the visitors get to talk to students, teachers, and parents about student work (focus groups, candid interviews, meetings with leadership)?
  - Will there be samples of student work to look at? What data and evidence should be available?
  - How will the visitors get the "feel" of the school (student shadowing, teacher shadowing, classroom observations)?
  - How will we handle lunch (ask visitors to mingle, assign them hosts, arrange focus-group lunches)?
  - How and when can the visitors offer ideas about the design of the day's activities?
3. Structure the feedback process so that as many people as possible can be involved in a non-threatening way.
  - Is there a time and a place in the agenda for visitors to discuss with each other what they have seen and talk about the feedback they want to give?
  - What will our grouping strategies be (team reports to staff, individuals to small groups, team reports to representatives)?
  - What data will we collect from our visitors (charted feedback, personal reflections, notes on the feedback)?
  - What will people need to feel safe in the feedback process (ground rules, facilitation, room set-up)?
  - Who needs to hear this feedback?
4. Think through the follow-up activities.
  - How will this feedback get to a wider audience?
  - How will we provide information to the visitors on the value of the visit and the quality of their feedback?
  - Will visitors need a room to debrief and plan following the visit?
  - How does this visit connect to the other visits the school will host?

*Thanks to the Bay Area Coalition of Essential Schools (BAYCES) for developing this material.*

How is AMY preparing students for high school, according to the outcomes stated in our learning plan?"

Using questionnaires, focus groups, classroom observations, and other means, the school study team began gathering the kind of ethnographic data that reveals patterns of school culture underlying student achievement. In the process, quite unexpectedly, AMY students moved from their initial position as "informants" to a more powerful role as co-researchers. They generated recommendations for the faculty about the school's assessment practices, and their participation significantly altered teachers' perceptions about the school's culture and mission.

"We have come to realize that two distinct realities function within the same space," said teacher Pat DeBrady, "and rarely do the inhabitants of either realm view the emperor's raiment with the same eyes."

As a school draws in such ways on new kinds of information from more kinds of people, it can develop new habits of collaboration and reflection in the midst of the action of everyday life, observe Jolley Christman and Frederick Erickson, the CUE researchers. By "paying attention that is closer than usual," they note, schools begin to develop a knowledge base for change.

Such self-scrutiny takes courage, they add, because it makes barriers to open communication more visible and more openly painful than before. In that situation, ongoing work with friendly outsiders—both from the university and from other schools—helps keep the momentum for change going, they conclude.

"As true friends, such outsiders provide both support and challenge," Christman and Erickson observe. "As outsiders who have come to possess local knowledge, they model views that are long and wide yet are realistic about specific difficulties that lie ahead."

## Critical Friends' Groups

Many Essential school teachers have used avenues other than the university to learn the habit of gathering and analyzing data with an eye to improving their schools. Some train, for example, to coach colleagues in "critical friends groups"—either through the National School Reform Faculty at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, based at Brown University, or in institutes offered by regional Coalition Centers. (Michigan's institute is described in HORACE 14:4.)

A critical friends group (CFG) coach typically facilitates monthly meetings with six to eight colleagues who have agreed to look closely at one another's practice and at student work. The group tries to articulate what constitutes good teaching and learning, calling on both outside sources and their own experience.

Members visit each other's classes, give feedback on each other's teaching strategies or curricula, and gather evidence of what works best for student learning. Some compile portfolios to demonstrate and reflect on that evidence; others meet with groups from different schools to share insights and dilemmas.

Teachers in a CFG at Philadelphia's Taylor Elementary School, for instance, have been working for years to enrich the array of assessments with which they keep track of student progress in reading. Using "running records" and a variety of other methods, and teaching in multi-age groups, they have a vivid sense of what each child from this largely Latino, extremely transient neighborhood knows and can do.

So when Federal regulations insisted that they report out student reading scores in some standardized form to qualify for Title I funds,

these teachers worried about subjecting their students to a testing experience they believed demeaned the painstaking progress they had already made. They laid out the dilemma and brought it to a recent institute of similar teams focusing on using data to improve schools.

"Do we really have to force a child who reads at a grade one level to spend two weeks staring at a grade four text," Damaris Cortez asked the group, "even if that undermines all the Essential School principles we believe in? Our whole school sent us here to ask you that!"

After two hours of carefully structured discussion, they got their answer from the two other school teams around the table—but it came in the form of a new question.

"What counts as evidence?" one respondent asked. "Can you turn this requirement around, so that the evidence you are already gathering

## A Teacher's Tool for Observing Peers in the Classroom

Teachers in the critical friends group at the Watkinson School in Hartford, Connecticut developed a tool to record their observations, impressions, and questions when visiting each other's classrooms. Their ongoing conversation about teaching standards had drawn extensively on Fred Newmann's "indicators of classroom thoughtfulness," and from these

they created key categories under which they could group their observations. To avoid judgments about the relative value of these categories, they arrayed them on an 11" by 17" sheet (condensed in the space below), with one corner area marked off for questions and another for sketches or other visual impressions of the classroom.

|                              |                            |  |
|------------------------------|----------------------------|--|
| Questions                    | Tone of Class              | Class: _____ # of students _____<br>Date: _____ Time _____ |
| Dissemination of Information | Types of Questions         | Aural Happenings   |
| Absence/Presence of Struggle | Leadership/Ownership       | Level of Participation                                     |
| Special Considerations       | Visual Happenings          | Centrality of Teachers                                     |
| Modes/Types of Work          | Research Methods           | Congeniality/Collegiality                                  |
| Centrality of Student        | Groups/Clusters of Workers |  |

translates into a grade level equivalent?" Maybe Taylor's teachers had more latitude than they believed, the group suggested, encouraging them to take advantage of the high-quality data about student performance they already had in their possession.

It was a prime example of the usefulness of the critical friend relationship between schools.

"People who work within the school community understand their context better than anyone else," says Steve Jubb, who directs the Bay Area Coalition of Essential Schools. "So as critical friends we do not offer advice; rather we ask questions that promote further inquiry on the part of those in the school community. Critical friends recognize what's

positive in the work and help imagine its potential."

### Learning to Inquire Together

Within a school setting, one of the hardest ways for teachers to carry out that delicate task is by sitting in on each other's classes, taking thoughtful note of what they see and offering their observations to their colleagues. (See sidebar, page 5.) Many Essential school critical friends groups take a whole year of building understanding in other ways before they have the trust to open their doors to each other.

They may practice using the "protocols" that Essential school people and others have developed as a means of looking collaboratively at student work or teacher practice. (Several of these are described in HORACE 13:2.) These carefully structured formats for response, facilitated by someone trained in such discussions, aim to create a sense of emotional safety for the presenter, at the same time encouraging the new perspectives and probing critiques of their peers. Typically they require the presenter to remain silent at some point, while the respondents talk among themselves about what they have seen.

"Something happens to me while I am playing fly on the wall," says Kathy Juarez, a teacher at Piner High School in Santa Rosa, California who has used such protocols for many years. "I have the rare opportunity to hear people talking seriously about my questions—and I know I will get to think out loud about some of the issues they raise."

Or they may build a year-long conversation around readings that inform their practice. If they choose texts around a key theme, such as equity, this can provide a framework for later discussions based on classroom experience and the work of students.

### Feedback's 3 Flavors: Warm, Cool, Hard

Essential school teachers have adopted terms suggested by former CES researcher Joseph McDonald in providing feedback to each other during the structured response sessions called "protocols" (of which the "tuning protocol" is only one; see HORACE 13:2). They often group responses, for example, in these ways:

- "Warm" feedback consists of supportive, appreciative statements about the work presented.
- "Cool" or more distanced feedback offers different ways to think about the work presented, raises questions.
- "Hard" feedback challenges and extends the presenter's thinking, raises concerns.

### Norms for Sharing Work

To create trust among those sharing their work for critique, many teachers begin by agreeing on clear norms of behavior within the group, which they post for reference during the discussion that follows. One group's norms read:

- Give honest feedback, both supportive and more distanced.
- Allow sufficient time to get to know the work.
- Be specific; tie your feedback to the work, and refer to its place in the portfolio.
- Presenter and participants may safely express their confusion, stress, or needs; be sensitive to them.
- Keep comments within the room. If you don't say it to the presenter, don't say it.
- Start with a question; check for understanding.
- Use probing questions, not leading questions; don't jump to solutions.
- Monitor your air time so others have equal chance to speak. Take time to listen.
- Be flexible, balancing spontaneity with equal access to speak.
- Debrief what was helpful or not in the feedback process.

Over time, these shared activities foster a sense of common purpose at the same time that they honor differences in their members' styles of teaching and learning, CFG participants say.

Because such sessions intend to enlighten, not to evaluate, at their best they take on the air of professional seminars—like a group of doctors, lawyers, or architects puzzling over a case together, or like an independent graduate seminar in which teachers could explore their deepest concerns and interests. As group members push toward a deeper reading of the evidence before them, their learning extends beyond addressing the question of the hour, to sharpen the inquiry skills of every participant.

When the time does come to observe each other's classrooms, the habits of inquiry developed through such activities can sustain teachers through the trepidation they often feel. They can focus the visit on a specific question posed by the teacher being observed (such as "How are my students using evi-

dence in this class?" or "Am I meeting students at the different challenge levels they require?"). And they can structure the feedback in a way that both supports their efforts and provokes new ideas.

### What Difference It Makes

How does one measure the impact of such critical friendships on student learning? Do test scores rise or graduation rates improve when teachers begin to act like a professional community?

They do, according to both large-scale quantitative studies of school restructuring and more focused, qualitative analyses of the links between better teaching and student achievement.

A huge statistical survey of student achievement in restructuring high schools, published in 1993 by University of Michigan professor Valerie Lee and Julia Smith of the University of Rochester, showed that a more personal, "communal" organizational style as opposed to a more traditional, bureaucratic one contributes to student achievement gains across the spectrum of socioeconomic and other differences.

And Milbrey McLaughlin's Stanford research concludes that networks of all kinds—among schools or among teachers exploring new ways—contribute to deeper student learning. Especially important to successful teaching, she notes, is "a supportive professional community that discusses new teaching materials and strategies and that supports the risk-taking and struggle entailed in transforming practice."

The critical friend approach bears particular promise in the current high-stakes accountability climate, and not just because it fosters among school people a sense of mutual responsibility for improving teaching and learning. If teachers spend time looking closely at how their practice affects student learn-

### The Other Side of the Fence: A Visiting Team's Norms for Gathering Evidence

Before Michigan schools may join the Coalition, they must first compile a portfolio demonstrating the school's learning about the Ten Common Principles; present an exhibition about that work to parents and community members; host Essential school colleagues from around the state as they visit classrooms and meet students and faculty; and present a dilemma to the visiting team for its help and feedback.

The visiting team, too, has its obligations: to gather evidence of school-wide commitment to implementing the Common Principles; to analyze its capacity for self-analysis and collaborative problem-solving; and to observe its commitment to documenting the impact of its efforts on student learning.

Just as the host school must think through its visit (see sidebar, page 4), so the visitors must prepare for their evidence-gathering. One Michigan visiting team, for example, came up with the following agreements beforehand:

The purpose of our evidence-gathering is not to compare or evaluate, but to provide the school with accurate information they can use to decide "next steps" in their quest to become an excellent school.

We are "critical friends," no more experts than the folks at the school we are visiting. We only provide an external and more objective "lens" through which they can view their own progress, their strengths, and the challenges that lie ahead for them.

Try to enter the process as a "tabula rasa," a blank slate. Avoid imposing your own philosophy, pedagogy, or practices on the school.

Think in terms of *teaching* and *learning*, not teachers and students.

The evidence we seek consists of:

- Factual data you are given or told about (for example, "68 percent of our students take part in some extracurricular activity").
- Concrete observations you can describe ("Students in ninth-grade math worked in groups of four on a statistics problem using graphing calculators," for example, or "Samples of illustrated student essays were displayed in hallways.")
- Direct quotes (avoid paraphrases) taken in context (for example, "There appears to be strong support for reform at our school, though not everyone is on board").

Evidence must be in written form, gathered in notebooks and posted for all team members to see.

The team must agree on any and all evidence that will be presented to the school. Any team member may challenge a piece of evidence. The team will discuss the challenged evidence and come to consensus about its inclusion.

When all evidence is gathered, posted, and agreed on, the team will form summary statements that reflect the weight of the available evidence.

The team will finally develop a set of questions to leave with the school, related to the Ten Common Principles, the school's mission statement, or both, and intended to guide its further growth.

ing, they might also start to turn an impossible array of externally imposed standards into more powerful, personal measures that they generate from their own work and carry in their heads every day.

The sense of mission that results across a school will directly help its students to achieve at higher levels, other research indicates. In their studies of Catholic schools and of small schools in the Chicago area and elsewhere, Anthony Bryk and his colleagues found that any strong shared ethos in a school makes students take their work more seriously and do better at it.

Critical friendships also can take place on a larger canvas. A cluster of independent schools involved in the Coalition has met for years to help each other in their work, and now is launching a CES Center. A group of Essential school librarians conducts a virtual critical friends group over the Internet, coached by Mark Gordon in Santa Cruz, California. On-line discussion groups thrive among members of CFGs who have met at regional and national institutes and follow up by exchanging everything from reading lists to lesson plans.

## Taking the Next Step

The power of such experiences to make change on a larger scale is striking. Where once only a few teachers at Houston's Westbury High School took part in the regional Center's critical friends training, now fully a third of the faculty has chosen to join such collegial groups. And while once their professional development came largely from outside, now it almost always takes advantage of expertise within the school.

But supporting this kind of horizontal learning requires new, non-hierarchical structures that few schools or districts yet display, points out Theodore R. Sizer, the Coalition's Chairman.

"The research shows us that it works," he says. "So why do teachers still have to fight for the time to work together in these ways? Why do schools and policymakers still operate on the assumption that outsiders know best?"

The system must no longer work that way, he argues. Only when teachers together explore the most fundamental aspects of their work and its results, so as to make

changes that support student learning, will they move beyond mere technical fixes to a professional culture of continuous inquiry and improvement. They will begin changing *how they understand*, not just *what they do*.

Against all odds, Essential school people are making that transformation. And as they take charge of their own professional growth, they are supporting each other in the process as good school friends have always done. □

## Let Us Hear Your Voice

You can lend your own voice to the Essential School conversation about critical friendships, by going to the CES Web site at <http://www.essentialschools.org>

There you will find not only the text and research citations for this issue, but more resources on critical friendships; suggestions as to how to use this HORACE as a tool for further discussion with teachers and the public; and the opportunity for an electronic conversation with other teachers about the issues raised here.

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