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The TIPSTER

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Valdosta State University
College of Education

Georgia Systemic Teacher Education Program

GSTEP Teacher Induction

Critical Friends Group (CFG): A Particular Kind of Learning Community

As a public school teacher, university professor, administrator or mentor, have you ever longed to work in collaboration with others in ways that truly made innovation seem possible and professional improvement a shared effort? Have you been hearing a lot of talk in your schools about developing learning communities and looking at student work? Participants in a Critical Friends Group Coaches Institute held this summer at Valdosta State University would like to talk to you!

July 2005 marked a turning point for many area educators who agreed to participate in a week-long institute sponsored by the Georgia Systemic Teacher Education Program (GSTEP) in association with the work of the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF). Participants claimed this experience as their most transformative professional development opportunity and left feeling very pleased they had devoted their last week of summer to this shared learning. Educators from Valdosta City Schools, Valdosta State University, J.L. Newbern Middle School, Cook County Schools, Clyattville Elementary School, the Schultz Center for Teaching and Leadership (a Florida-based initiative) and the Georgia Department of Education con-

cluded this week convinced they knew how to create and develop a professional learning community that could achieve the following goals:

- 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

The particular framework promoted during the summer institute has the unusual name – Critical Friends Groups – or CFGs. The term “critical” is interpreted within CFGs as both “essential” – in that

members of the group become essential to each others’ sense of professional relationships and growth as well as “critical” meaning we value shared critique from our professional “friends”. Supported by the development of shared “norms” within the group and protocols that structure our efforts to look and learn from student and adult work, we develop confidence that we really can participate in respectful and meaningful ways in a “real” learning community.

What happens in the Critical Friends Group Coaches Institute?

The purpose of the institute is to train/prepare coaches/facilitators to coordinate honest and productive conversations with colleagues focused on improving student learning and improving teacher practices. *(continued on page 4)*

Teacher, touch my mind,
and I will remember you.
Touch my heart, and I will
hold you close... always.

1998 Stephen D. Glass



The Principal's Perspective

First Day, First Week, First Month, First Year!

Whether it is the first day, first week, or first month, start the year off firm. In other words, smile only when it is necessary. Remember, you are not their friend, and do not try to be, you are their teacher. However, as a teacher you will wear many different hats.

As a first year teacher, you must not only be firm but fair as well. You must treat ALL students equally in the classroom, when administering discipline, and when grading papers. Students need to know that you do not have any teacher pets or class favorites. When designing your classroom management system, stay focus on the two c's: consistency and caring. If you need to, seek help from veteran teachers and administrators.

Other suggestions for a successful First Year:

Make sure you become friends with the school secretary, custodial staff, veteran teachers, and school nutrition---you will certainly need them!

Parent Involvement is critical in having a successful year—do not hesitate to make phone calls or schedule conferences.

Parents need to feel needed and important in their child's education. Get them on your side and let them know the good things as well as the not so good things!

Be prepared for each and every day—lesson plans must be completed and are important for a successful day which means a successful year! So, Plan, Plan, Plan, and then Plan some more!

Let students and parents see your enthusiasm for learning—glow and

show what you know!

Have a sense of laughter and do not hesitate to laugh at yourself and your mistakes. However, always learn from your mistakes.

Finally, take time for yourself—enjoy your weekends, holidays, and summer vacations. Besides, you deserve a break from all of the planning and classroom preparation.



Mrs. Creacy Sermons
Principal
Parker Mathis Elementary School
Lowndes County School System

Take time to read. It is the fountain of wisdom.
1998 Stephen D. Glass



TechnoInfo Corner

24 Hour Mentor: Online Professional Learning Communities

It is fall, the beginning of a new school year. It doesn't matter if you are a beginning teacher or a teacher with experience, it could be comforting to know some places to seek out information or mentors any time of the day for ideas, advice, or just to communicate with another teacher. Where can we find such places or groups of educators?

Some schools and communities have developed support groups for teachers. Often teachers have demanding schedules outside of the school day, they are not able to establish or participate in a time structured learning community. Online professional communities can provide mentoring with the convenience of the

twenty-four hour/seven days a week accessibility.

If you are looking for a 24 hour mentor and learning community, below are some suggestions of websites with descriptions that may fit your needs or interests.

The Inspiring Teachers provides a message board developed for beginning teachers to communicate.

(www.inspiringteachers.com/community/index.html)

In addition, to assist teachers, especially new teachers, the Inspiring Teachers website also includes "Ask the Mentor." Teachers can send questions to a virtual mentor teacher and the mentor will reply.

(www.inspiringteachers.com/mentoring/index.html)

The Chatboard Network includes a bulletin board for posting information, questions, and receiving feedback on different grade

levels and subjects.

(www.teachers.net/chatboard)

The George Lucas Educational Foundation website, The New World of Learning, Edutopia, includes a variety of resources for educators and a link to "Edutopia," a weekly Internet radio talk show.

(www.edutopia.org/getstarted/educators.php)



Dr. Diane Judd
Early Childhood & Reading
Education
Chair, GSTEP Technology
Valdosta State University



“Keep Moving In Your Destiny”



Mrs. Kim Miller
J. L. Newbern Middle School
2005-2006 Teacher of the Year

Starting out as a beginning teacher can be an exciting, yet frightening experience. On one hand (with great enthusiasm) you think, “I’ve got my first teaching job! Hip, hip, hooray!” No one can stop the rays of sunshine that beam from your joyous smile and amazement. Occasionally, you even find yourself smiling at the very thought. You inform any and everyone that makes a difference in your life to let them know, you are employed as a “teacher”. Then, finally, something kicks in, and all kinds of questions, doubts, and fears begin to permeate your mind and challenge the initial joy you had once experienced so greatly. Can I really do this? Will my students like me? Will the other teachers like me? Will I be strong enough to manage my classroom? Will I make it until Christmas? Will my first day please hurry up and get here!?!?

These are just a few of the many questions and thoughts that continue to plague new teachers on assignment to their very, first teaching position. And yes, you are on as-

signment (a “tour of duty”). I am a strong believer that God, the Creator, created teachers for such an awesome ministry as caring for, shaping, molding, and guiding young individuals toward their destiny and purpose. Yet, many times this great call is overshadowed by the overwhelming and multiple tasks, duties and requirements placed upon; too plentiful for one person to accomplish all at once. Believe it or not, however, you can and will get it all done. And by the time you have accomplished it all, you will find yourself “stretched” to receive more and to do more, and with more enthusiasm. Since Rome wasn’t built in a day, neither will you get in all done in a day. Yes, you WILL think that you have lost your mind (and for a moment, you may), but you will also have grown and added wisdom to your first year’s experience through the many mistakes you will make and successes you will have.

I recall my very first teaching experience as a tenth grade English teacher. I had to commute 34 miles roundtrip each day. Road construction and bridge repairing was in progress on the road I traveled (kind of like beginning teaching-what an irony!). I had a child less than a year old in daycare (mommy worries, but thank God for an excellent child care owner). Plus, the students I looked so forward to teaching didn’t quite fit the “sweet, respectful, obedient” student-model I had envisioned. To

top all that, no one was officially assigned to assist (“hold my hand”) in this new position.

Thus, I had to rely on what I learned in college, and I found out it wasn’t sufficient. Yes, principles, theories, and concepts exist and are taught in education, but if you rarely have the opportunity to sincerely apply these theories along the way, they stay just that--theories. And although, teachers were saying, “Call on me, if you need anything”, some of my calls weren’t being answered. And, what do you do when you don’t know what you really need, and what happens when you call and you’re treated as if “you should know that!” Therefore, after about two or three weeks, amidst all the excitement I originally had, now existed uncertainties about whether or not I



wanted to continue in this field, and was this really the area in which I was destined to be.

Now, after 11 years of actual teaching and eighteen years of “pressing through”, many a day of crying, complaining, and learning from the multitudes of mistakes I made, I can

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Notes from the GSTEP Director’s Desk



Dr. Lynn Minor
GSTEP Director
Valdosta State University

I would like to begin this article by recognizing Dr. Pam Hertzog, director of VSU GSTEP, for her outstanding leadership during the past five years. During Dr. Hertzog’s tenure, members of the VSU faculty and P-12 teachers have worked collaboratively to provide services and support for teachers and students in our service region. Dr. Hertzog retired from VSU this past July, and we wish her all the best in her retirement.

Although we will complete the final year of the GSTEP grant this month, I am pleased to report

that the University of Georgia and Valdosta State University have been awarded an extension to continue working on the GSTEP initiatives already in place. At VSU, we will continue our work on the validation of the Accomplished Teacher Self Assessment Tool and Teacher Observation Instrument, teacher induction, teacher recruitment, writing support groups, collaboration with state agencies to adopt the Accomplished Teacher Framework and assessments, and development of the BRIDGE online resource.

This past summer, a committee comprised of P-12 public school teachers and VSU faculty worked to submit and review resources for the GSTEP BRIDGE (Building Resources: Induction and Development of Georgia Educators). The BRIDGE is an online resource

and community for all teachers. It is an excellent resource for new teachers because resources can be accessed by questions that were created by a large panel of new teachers. These questions are called the “Beginning Teacher Questions”.

All resources on the BRIDGE have been peer reviewed by educators just like you. These resources are easy to access and provide credible, high quality materials for your professional development. The BRIDGE also offers opportunities for you to become involved in sharing your professional expertise by submitting resources you

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Critical Friends Group (CFG): A Particular Kind of Learning Community

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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 feedback
- Formulating clarifying and probing questions
- Using protocols for examining student and teacher work, for solving problems, setting goals, observing peers, and building teams

The process is premised on the concept of developing facilitative leadership skills for participants who are preparing to “coach” a CFG. We have learned that Critical Friendship, an essential ingredient for learning communities, is best achieved through providing deliberate time and structures to promote adult growth that are directly linked to student learning. Facilitative Leadership skills are needed to engage school communities in this practice, and are valuable for all leaders—school lead-

ers, classroom teachers and district administrators

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. Jon Appleby, a CFG coach in Maine, explained the power of this process in this way, "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."

The group completing the institute in Valdosta earned membership in this national organization and, I'm sure, would concur with Jon's insights about how CFGs make a real difference in how we perceive the potential in our profession.

For additional information about NSRF, please roam our website www.nsrffharmony.org. Some segments of this article were taken directly from our documentation on this cite.

Submitted by

Dr. Betty Shockley Bisplinghoff
National Facilitator with the National School Reform Faculty
Associate Professor
Department of Elementary and Social Studies Education
University of Georgia

EVENTS

VSU 2005 Fall Term

- * First Class Day
August 15
- * Midterm
October 5
- * Education Career Day
November 22 - 10:00am - 2:00pm
PE Complex
- * Last Class Day
December 5
- * Graduation - December 10

Notes from the GSTEP Director's Desk...

(continued from page 3)

think are helpful to teachers, becoming a reviewer, publishing your own work, and becoming involved in an online learning community.

Ms. Vallye Blanton (Teacher) and Dr. David Monetti (VSU Faculty) serve as the VSU editors for the BRIDGE. The BRIDGE is available at www.teachersbridge.org.

If you have previously accessed the BRIDGE, be sure to check out all the new resources that have been added this summer through the efforts of GSTEP partners at UGA and VSU. I encourage all of you to take advantage of this excellent resource for all teachers.

PRISM Helps Elementary Teachers become Highly Qualified

Valdosta State University's Departments of Early Childhood and Reading Education and Mathematics and Computer Science are collaborating to provide Early Childhood educators in the region with the P-5 Mathematics Endorsement through the PRISM project. The Georgia Partnership for Reform in Science and Mathematics (PRISM) is an initiative funded by the National Science Foundation designed to increase science and mathematics achievement for all P-12 students in order to improve their readiness for post-secondary education and careers by enhancing teacher quality, raising expectations for all stakeholders, and closing the achievement gaps through the collaboration of P-16 partners.

Teachers participating in this innovative project can apply to take the four graduate course sequence leading to the Math Endorsement. Through PRISM, tuition, fees and books are provided to 30 teachers per semester. All four courses are offered through web delivery and face to face format. Teachers are able to complete the endorsement in one year. The

four courses in the endorsement include:

- * MATH 5165 Understanding Geometry
- * MATH 5166 Understanding Data Analysis and Probability
- * MATH 5163 Numbers and Operations
- * MATH 5164 Understanding Algebra

Drs. Peggy Moch and Sandy Trowell are the PRISM program faculty teaching the courses. Students enrolled in the coursework are presented with an in-depth look at the content of the Georgia Performance Standards in P-5 mathematics. The courses are especially designed for teachers who have been teaching for a number of years and graduated from a program that did not provide the math concentration presently included in the ECED program of study. Several graduate programs at VSU have included these courses as an optional emphasis area for

M.Ed. programs.

Teachers interested in the PRISM program should contact Julie Reffel (jreffel@valdosta.edu) in the Department of Early Childhood and Reading Education (229-333-5929). You must apply for admission (Non-Degree) to the VSU Graduate School. For further information contact: **The Graduate School**, Valdosta State University, Valdosta, GA 31698-0005. More information about the University System of Georgia PRISM Initiative can be found at <http://gaprism.org/>.



Dr. Julia Reffel
Department Head
Early Childhood & Reading
Valdosta State University

Planting a Seed

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unreservedly say that education was and is most definitely a major part of my destiny.

It is here, however, that I must make mention that even though no official person assigned anyone to me, God had already made the preparations through an assistant principal name Mrs. Edna Stephens. She didn't become my "buddy", but she became so much more to me by listening to me, supporting me, encouraging me, and giving me the much needed correction and guidance. And, to add icing on the cake, she was an English teacher before she was an administrator! In retrospect, I learned that we become so focused on what we think "should be", that we miss what actually has already been pre-determined and prepared for us by a much wiser, higher, and omniscient power.

What is that preparation set aside and still being developed now for new and beginning teachers? Mentoring. At that time, it did not carry that name or was not organized as such, but the impact it had can still carry a "powerful punch" in any school system today. Think about it, its influence has existed throughout times through mothers, fathers, grandmas, granddads, "Aunt Ethel's", previous teachers, etc. You know, all those people who at the time you may not have appreciated their intervention, but you now can fall back on their wisdom to help you through almost any situation? Yes, those people fall into this great hall of fame known as mentors.

Realistically, however, some systems don't officially have mentoring programs in place. What can beginning teachers do in this case? Observe and see who is open to helping others. Don't be shy or afraid! Tell "someone", "Hey, I need some help. I don't know what all I need, but I need something!" Then, be willing to listen. You may not need all that they offer, but take what is beneficial to you and apply it.

A word of caution is needed here, though: Don't get caught in the "gripping and complaining syndrome". Sadly, you will find that this condition does exist with many veteran teachers. It starts to occur somewhere around year five or six (sometimes earlier, sometimes later). And although occasionally everyone needs to "vent", it should not exist every time you come in contact with someone.

As all educators should do, beginning teachers must always refer to the original plan-- to continuously grow in the process of effectively teaching and guiding young impressionable minds toward their educational destiny of success. In order, to do that, new teachers, remind yourself that you are **in** the right place (your destiny), at the right time, and you have been commissioned to accomplish your purpose on your "tour of duty" in education. So, don't feel rejected or neglected; you have the power to empower yourself! If no mentor is assigned to you, find you one (or two), and keep on moving "in" your destiny.

How Many Nails Have You Hammered Today?

There once was a little boy who had a bad temper. His Father gave him a bag of nails and told him that every time he lost his temper, he must hammer a nail into the back of the fence. The first day the boy had driven 37 nails into the fence. Over the next few weeks, as he learned to control his anger, the number of nails hammered daily gradually dwindled down. He discovered it was easier to hold his temper than to drive those nails into the fence....

Finally the day came when the boy didn't lose his temper at all. He told his father about it and the father suggested that the boy now pull out one nail for each day that he was able to hold his temper. The day passed and the young boy was finally able to tell his father that all the nails were gone. The father took his son by the hand and led him to the fence. He said, "You have done well, my son, but look at the holes in the fence. The fence will never be the same. When you say things in anger, they leave a scar just like this one. You can put a knife in a man and draw it out. It won't matter how many times you say I'm sorry, the wound is still there."

~ A verbal wound is as bad as a physical one ~

Author Unknown

Greetings from the Editor

It is hard to believe the Tipster is going into the fourth year of publication. We look forward to continuing to bring you information and articles from veteran teachers, administrators, and experts in the field of education.

As autumn is sometimes a time for reflection, think back to your philosophy of education and the reason(s) you decided to go into teaching. Has your philosophy about education and students changed? Do your actions in the classroom portray what you believe about students, learning, and best teaching practices?



*Shirley Andrews
Editor*

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