



# Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver

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*Just for the ASKing!* is a monthly column that addresses the needs of instructional leaders, particularly building level administrators. Each month, this column provides information, insights, and suggestions that help administrators as they strive to be instructional leaders in schools. This month's issue focuses on successful cultures for learning.

## Successful Cultures for Learning



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

Across the nation educators are working hard to create cultures for learning not only for the students but for adults as well. Many districts and schools are embracing Rick DuFour's approach to professional learning communities (PLCs). Others are developing learning communities via Critical Friends Groups (CFG), an approach originally designed by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University and now supported by the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) in Bloomington, Indiana. Stevi Quate and her colleagues at the University of Colorado, Denver have been particularly proactive in their work with this initiative. Shirley Hord, Michael Fullan, Andy Hargreaves, and Mike Schmoker have added mightily to the dialogue. All agree that creating a culture for learning requires leadership commitment, support, and understanding that it is neither an announcement nor an event but instead a complex journey to increased student learning.

From firsthand experience, I can attest to the power of professional learning communities. Prior to my retirement I had the opportunity to introduce DuFour's PLC concept at Thoreau Middle School, Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS), Virginia. Following several days of training with a team of teachers, I led small group discussions with staff members introducing them to the ideas and building a case for why PLCs had the potential to make a difference in student achievement. We began slowly at the mid-year point and I had the chance to watch the levels of conversations flourish. For the next school year, the teachers indicated that they wanted to continue meeting in curriculum teams but they needed time during the work day to meet and collaborate. As we began our second year, we developed a master schedule that allowed the teams to meet throughout the day. I felt that the level of commitment by the teachers had reached new heights when I realized I could drop in on a meeting and the high-powered conversations would continue. I was not someone who interrupted the meeting; the teachers came to understand that I was there to learn from them and to witness firsthand the excitement they brought to their collaborative efforts.

Brenda Kaylor, ASK Group Senior Consultant, and Stevi Quate are working with the leadership and teaching staff in Mesa County Valley School District #51 in Grand Junction, Colorado. The K-8 schools in that district have focused for the past two years on creating cultures for learning in a standards-based

environment. Well-versed in both the DuFour work and the Critical Friends work, Brenda and Stevi provide professional development support that is on-going, job embedded, and multifaceted through site-based coaching and structured training sessions. Vernann Raney, principal, and the staff of Dos Rios Elementary School in Grand Junction are in their first year of this work. They began by establishing norms of behavior for their grade level teams, examining current student data, and identifying one SMART goal for student learning based on the data analysis. When establishing their goal, the teachers participated in extended conversations to make sure the goal was SMART: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-oriented, and Time bound. The real excitement started happening when teachers developed common assessments and started discussions about how to ensure that there was inter-rater reliability as they assessed student learning. Using the protocols they learned through the Critical Friends work enables them to become much more consistent in their conclusions as they examine student work. When Vernann visits team meetings, she describes the work teachers are doing as unstoppable. Contact Brenda at [Brenda@askeducation.com](mailto:Brenda@askeducation.com) and Stevi at [stevi.quate@cudenver.edu](mailto:stevi.quate@cudenver.edu).

Darren Reed, principal at Cora Kelly Elementary School in Alexandria, Virginia, introduced the concept of learning communities to the Cora Kelly staff, set up training for the entire staff, and devised a master schedule that allowed grade level teachers common planning time during their work day. Each grade level team decided on a team leader and established norms of communication. As Darren visits team meetings, he has found that the conversations are much more focused on student learning. The teachers share responsibility for the tasks they undertake. For example, the third grade teachers worked collaboratively to create review materials for the annual state assessments. One kindergarten teacher who is a technology enthusiast has taken it upon herself to search the web for new ideas that she and her teammates can use to match the needs of their young students. When Darren finds a common area on which his teachers need additional training, he quickly arranges for the training to occur. For example, at a recent faculty meeting the staff focused on higher level questions and took time during the meeting to develop questions for an upcoming unit. Overall, the teams are thriving as they focus their conversations on best teaching practices, common assessments, and ways to support struggling students. The workload is shared equally among team members and, according to Darren, “their level of professionalism has reached new heights.” Contact Darren at [darren.reed@acps.k12.va.us](mailto:darren.reed@acps.k12.va.us).

At the middle school level, Mark Greenfelder, the current principal of Thoreau Middle School in FCPS, has put in place a system of electronic assessments that allows teachers to create and administer common assessments on a quarterly basis. After students complete the on-line assessments in math, science, social studies, and English, the teachers have instantaneous results. They are able to respond immediately and work with students who are not successful; additionally, students have additional chances to demonstrate mastery level learning. In addition to continuing and refining the previously mentioned master schedule, Mark applied for and received a teacher leader grant which provides financial compensation for their time used to examine the work they are doing and to develop plans to improve the learning for all students. An outgrowth of their work was the institution of the **Time to Soar** program in the middle of the school day. Any student who is not achieving at a passing level must work with an assigned teacher for a short period in the middle of the school day. In addition, all special education teachers have additional time to work with their students to reinforce learning that occurred during the regular class setting. Contact Mark at [mark.greenfelder@fcps.edu](mailto:mark.greenfelder@fcps.edu).

At George C. Marshall High School another Fairfax County Public School, Principal Jay Pearson and the Marshall staff have in place **Lunch and Learn**, an hour long period in the middle of the school day during which students participate in enrichment or intervention activities. This important inclusion in the school day has proven to be hugely successful in meeting the needs of a very diverse student population. In addition, all teachers at Marshall have uninterrupted time every Friday to work with fellow teachers who teach the same subjects; they use the time to create common assessments and determine how best to respond to the needs of individual students. These practices have become an essential part of the culture of the school and have

resulted in notable achievement gains for its students. Contact Jay at [jay.pearson@fcps.edu](mailto:jay.pearson@fcps.edu).

In order to create a strong culture for learning and have learning communities become a lasting part of the school's culture, the principal must make commitments which will allow the learning communities to flourish. Commitments from principals which have proven to be efficacious include:

- Providing time for teachers to meet in teams on a regular basis during the school day
- Implementing training for all participants and providing resources as identified by teams
- Protecting the school from competing initiatives
- Creating systems to give students additional time and support when they experience difficulty

**For further reading:**

Access information about **Critical Friends Groups** at  
[http://csss.dpsk12.org/secure/sec\\_studio/crit\\_friends\\_group.pdf](http://csss.dpsk12.org/secure/sec_studio/crit_friends_group.pdf)

Access a variety of protocols for discussion at  
<http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/profdev/resources/proflearn/samplepro>

Access **“Transform Your Group into a Team”** in NSDC's *Tools for Schools* at  
<http://www.nsd.org/members/tools/tools11-05.pdf>

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