

# CRITICAL FRIENDSHIP: LEADING FROM THE INSIDE OUT

By DANIEL BARON

**D**uring the last decade, teachers and principals have had so much training on so many programs, initiatives, and projects that many of them have been “inserviced” to the point of becoming skeptical about the implementation and sustainability of any new approach to teaching, leading, or learning. To make matters worse, outside “experts” who don’t know the teachers’ beliefs, the school’s identity, or the students conduct the preponderance of trainings.

When working with school faculties, I sometimes ask teachers and administrators to name the new initiatives they have had at their school during the last five years. More often than not, they can list more than 20. Then I ask the teachers to separate into small groups and rank each initiative’s level of implementation, including those that have been introduced without funding, training, or the necessary resources to achieve success as well as the initiatives that have become a significant part of the culture of the school. Often teachers do not know whether they are still expected to implement particular initiatives.

The purpose of this professional development exercise is twofold: First, teachers use it to identify the things that they are no longer accountable for so that they can take them off their plate and focus on what really matters, the academic success of each student. Second, and more important, teachers use it to analyze the successfully sustained initiatives so they and their administrators can learn what it takes to change teacher practice to improve student learning.

Inevitably, the programs that become embedded in a school’s culture are aligned with the school’s vision, mission, and moral purpose and are consistent with the beliefs of the school community. Vision, mission, and commonly held beliefs are the communal and public expression of a school’s moral purpose and identity. The alignment of the

pedagogical and leadership practices of the school with its commonly held beliefs determines the integrity of the school and the possibility of equitable outcomes for all students. Professional development programs that do not align with the core values and vision of the school are doomed to failure.

## **The Heart of Learning**

The key to changing teachers’ behaviors is to help them get in touch with their own beliefs and the commonly held beliefs of their learning community and identify the gaps in their own practice. It is the principal’s responsibility to uncover, recover, or discover the community’s core beliefs so the educational experience for students is cohesive, is intentional, and maintains a high level of professional integrity.

Once a school community is clear about its vision, mission, and moral purpose, it is not only possible but also highly likely that the community will found itself on critical friendship. Creating a culture of critical friendship and leading from the inside out intentionally connect principal and teacher practice to the core beliefs and moral purpose of the school community. Critical friendship is at the heart of a professional learning community in which members are committed to learning together and from one another.

Critical friends take an interest in one another’s core beliefs and the commonly held beliefs of the learning community. They support one another in closing the gap between their beliefs and practices and hold one another accountable for continually adapting their practice to meet the needs of all learners, sharing resources and ideas, and supporting one another as they take risks to improve their practices. They commit themselves to:

- Be reflective
- Make their practices public to one another

- Frame meaningful questions and ask for substantive feedback from one another
- Hold one another accountable for meeting the needs of students who struggle the most
- Ask the kinds of questions that provoke and challenge their assumptions and habits
- Believe that together they are more capable of knowing what they need to know and learning what they need to learn than they are alone.

To nurture a culture of critical friendship, the principal must model relationships with his or her faculty members that are founded on mutual trust and freedom from judgment. The principal must also support the teachers' ability to freely discuss one another's work with the intention of improving the learning for each student. Critical friendship starts from the inside of one's identity as an educator and develops into professional relationships that can last a lifetime.

### **Sustainable Reform**

New initiatives often do not outlive the average term of a superintendancy—three to four years. One of the surest ways to overcome the skepticism of so many teachers toward professional development is to base teacher development on the real work of teachers and the work of the students they serve. The power of critical friendship is that it is based on authentic questions that teachers and principals have about their practice or their students' learning.

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The National School Reform Faculty (NSRF) has developed a rich repertoire of protocols and processes that support the development of critical friendship. The protocols consist of commonly agreed-upon guidelines for specific purposes. They can be used for learning from looking at student and educator work, giving feedback, observing one another's teaching or leadership practice, or discussing professional articles. Educators can also use the protocols to build collegial skills and habits; ensure equity in participation; reflect and listen for understanding; and support the development of a sustainable, collaborative school culture.

The potential of job-embedded teacher development is that it provides the opportunity for teachers to collaborate on their own work and that of their students. School improvement is complicated and challenging, especially for the educators who work with traditionally disenfranchised students every day. The culture of most schools offers few opportunities for substantive professional collaboration designed to change teacher practice to ensure the success of each student. Each school's norms of time, privacy, practices and policies, and professional development can be powerful obstacles to meaningful, student-focused change.

Critical friendship has the potential to overcome these obstacles if the instructional leader of the school shares many if not all of NSRF's core beliefs about professional development, such as:

- Members of a school community, working together, can make real and lasting improvements in their own schools

- Teachers and administrators must help one another turn theories and beliefs into practice and standards and into actual student learning
- The key to this effort is the development of a learning community that is based on public, collaborative examination of adult and student work
- To create this community, practitioners need high-quality training and sustained support.

I encourage you to reflect on these beliefs as you plan your school's schedule and teacher development opportunities for the upcoming school year. Only you can establish the climate and the time and ultimately create a school culture in which teachers support one another's learning for the benefit of each student's success, regardless of race or socioeconomic factors.

Next year I will offer another set of NSRF protocols that focus on examining student and teacher work for the

purpose of getting feedback that fosters the success of all learners in school and in life.

I hope you find time this summer for well-deserved rest, recreation, reflection, and renewal.

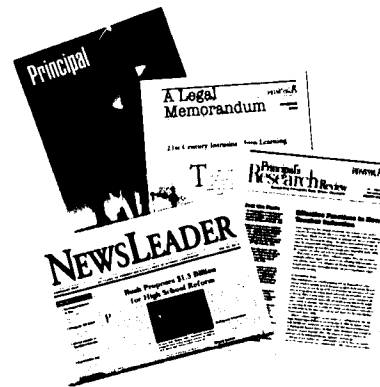
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Protocols are most powerful and effective when used within an ongoing professional learning community and facilitated by a skilled coach. To learn more about professional learning communities and seminars for new or experienced coaches, please visit [www.nsrffharmony.org](http://www.nsrffharmony.org).

## Time to renew your membership?

Continue to receive the tools you need to be an effective school leader. Keep your liability insurance, legal assistance, and other resources—including *Principal Leadership*—working for you. Look for your membership renewal notice in the mail and encourage others to become involved.



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