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Through the Lens of a Critical Friend

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Every student—and educator, too—needs a trusted person who will ask provocative questions and offer helpful critiques.

You are seated in the darkened "dilating" room, waiting for the ophthalmologist to bring you into the office. The routine is familiar. Sit in the chair. Place your forehead against the machine. Tell whether you see the letters better or worse as the doctor changes the focusing lenses. This could be an analogy for assessment.

It is only when you change the lens through which you view student learning—or your own practice—that you discover whether a new focus is better or worse. But if you never change the lens, you limit your vision.

Sometimes your frustration mounts and you ask, "Can't you just tell me the right prescription?" Furthermore, you need another person to continually change your focus, pushing you to look through multiple lenses in order to find that "just right" fit for you, the ultimate owner of the glasses. But it is not entirely a matter of science. It requires the subjective perspective, "Which looks better or worse to *you?*"

As we work to restructure schools, we must increasingly ask the right questions and collect the appropriate evidence; we are constantly refocusing our work. The visit to the ophthalmologist suggests that no one perspective on student learning will be sufficient to assess a student's capabilities and performances. It might also suggest that assessment feedback should provide as clear a vision as possible about the learning performance *in the eyes of the learner*. And, it illustrates how assessment requires someone who will provide new lenses through which learners can refocus on their work, namely, a critical friend.

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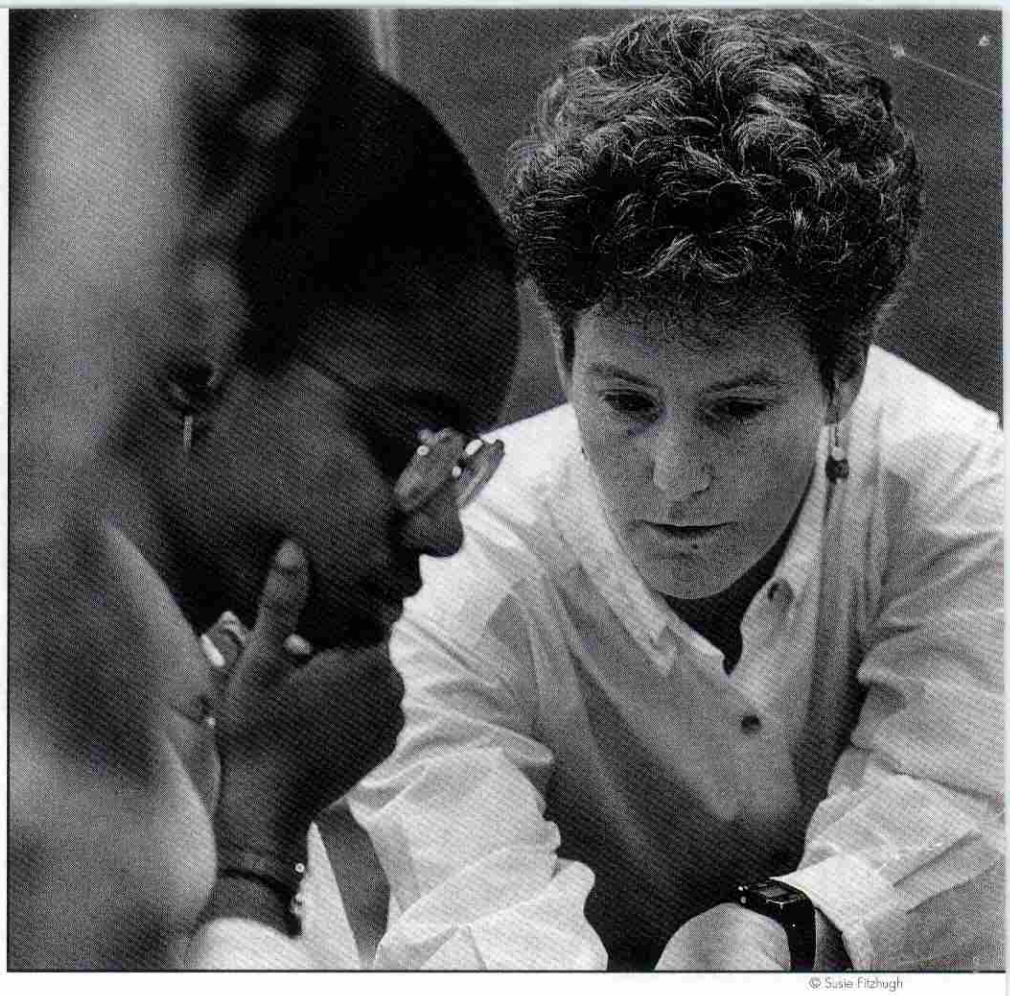
Critical Friends

The role of critical friend has been introduced in many school systems that see themselves as learning organizations and know that learning requires assessment feedback (Senge 1990). A critical friend provides such feedback to an individual—a student, a teacher, or an adminis-



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trator—or to a group. A critical friend, as the name suggests, is a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person's work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work.

Because the concept of critique often carries negative baggage, a critical friendship requires trust and a formal process. Many people equate *critique* with *judgment,* and when someone offers criticism, they brace themselves for negative comments. We often forget that Bloom refers to critique as a part of evaluation, the highest order of thinking (Bloom et al. 1956).

Critical friendships, therefore, must begin through building trust. The person or group needs to feel that the friend will:

- be clear about the nature of the relationship, and not use it for evaluation or judgment;
- listen well: clarifying ideas, encouraging specificity, and taking time to fully understand what is being presented;
- offer value judgments only upon request from the learner;
- respond to the learner's work with integrity; and
- be an advocate for the success of the work.

The Critical Friends Process

Once trust has been established, the critical friend and the learner meet together in a conference. Time for this conference is flexible, but we found it useful to limit the conference to 20 minutes. (Once critical friends are accustomed to the structure, the time may be shortened.) One successful process to facilitate conversation is the following:

1. *The learner* describes a practice and requests feedback. For example, a teacher might describe a new problem-solving technique, or a student might describe a project being considered.

2. *The critical friend* asks questions in order to understand the practice described and to clarify the context in which the practice takes place. For example, the friend may ask the learner, "How much time did you allow for the students to do problem solving?" or "What do you hope other people will learn from your project?"

3. *The learner* sets desired outcomes for this conference. This allows the learner to be in control of the feedback.

4. *The critical friend* provides feedback about what seems *significant* about the practice. This feedback provides more than cursory praise; it provides a lens that helps to elevate the work. For example, the teacher's critical friend might say, "I think it's significant that you're asking students to do problem solving because it will help them become more self-directed." The student's critical friend might say, "I think your project will be significant because you are trying to bring a new insight into the way people have understood the changing role of women in the United States."

5. *The critical friend* raises questions and critiques the work, nudging the learner to see the project from different perspectives. Typical queries might be, "What does the evidence from your students' work indicate to you about their capacity to do problem solving?" or "When you do this project, how will you help others follow your presentation?" One 2nd grade student said to his partner, "You might want to glue the objects. It needs to be neater."

6. *Both participants* reflect and write. The learner writes notes on the conference—an opportunity to think about points and suggestions raised. For example, the learner may reflect on questions such as, Will changes make this work better or worse? What have I learned from this refocusing process? The critical friend writes to the learner with suggestions or advice that seem appropriate to the desired outcome. This part of the process is different from typical feedback situa-

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tions in that the learner does not have to respond or make any decisions on the basis of the feedback. Instead, the learner reflects on the feedback without needing to defend the work to the critic.

Critical Friends in Many Settings

Critical friends are useful in various educational situations: in classrooms, in staff development meetings, and between administrators.

In the classroom. Students use the critical friends process in the classroom for feedback on their writing, project work, and oral presentations. The process provides a formal way for students to interact about the substantive quality of their work. They read one another's texts as peer editors and critics. Their conferences make the role of assessor part of the role of learner.

In staff development. Teachers use critical friends to plan and reflect on their own professional development. A critical friends group can consist of as many as six people who meet and share practices, perhaps every other week. Some teachers do this during their planning time. Although only one person may have time to share a practice in each meeting, instead of the usual show-and-tell sharing, the critical friends process allows teachers to understand one another's work at a deeper level.

Between administrators. Administrators often find themselves too busy to reflect on their practices. In addition, they are isolated from one another. To counteract these tendencies, some administrators have designed critical friendships into their working relationships, calling upon colleagues for critique. One superintendent called upon her board from time to time to be her critical friends.

The purpose of this new role of critical friend in assessment is to provide a context in which people receive both critical and supportive responses to their work. For example, a superintendent was recently called to make a presentation to her board. She was warned that certain members of the board were difficult. When she entered the meeting, the superintendent said that she hoped the board would not sit as a panel of judges but rather as a group of critical friends who would help her ask the best possible evaluation questions for the proposed project. The board, taken off guard, responded favorably. During reflection time, members were able to offer their concerns. As a result, in the privacy of the superintendent's own reflection, she was able to re-assess her work in light of the issues that were raised.

The art of criticism is often overlooked in school life. In theater, literature, and dance, a good critic can maintain and elevate the standards of performance. In fact, most performing artists have an outside editor built into their work, and over time, they internalize criticism sufficiently so that they are able to become more sharply self-evaluative (Perkins 1991).

Introducing the role of critical friends into the layers of a school system will build a greater capacity for self-evaluation as well as open-mindedness to the constructive thinking of others. As we begin to look through many lenses, we learn to ask the question, "Better or worse?" Critical friends help us change our lenses and ask this question. ■

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