

Staying in Touch

News from the Center for School Change in Rural Minnesota

Jan. 2003



Critical friends groups support positive changes in schools

Many teachers who planned school improvement projects in cooperation with the Center for School Change reported that one nice benefit was the chance to work with other teachers who shared similar dreams and expectations.

As reported in the CSC handbook *Schools and Communities Working Together*, the teamwork aspect of working on school change helped move teaching from a solitary to a collaborative experience.

Another kind of collaboration for school improvement is a critical friends group. As defined by the National School Reform Faculty, Bloomington, Ind., a critical friends group often includes eight to 12 individuals who:

- ▶ Agree to work together on a regular basis;
- ▶ Establish student learning goals;
- ▶ Help one another think about better teaching practices;
- ▶ Look closely at curriculum and student work; and
- ▶ Identify school culture issues that affect student achievement.

A critical friends group is assisted by a coach – from the school or outside – who helps members work together in positive ways. Participants learn a variety of techniques that encourage creative, useful and candid feedback within a safe environment.

Ultimately, teachers' ongoing process of reflection, action and feedback leads to improvements in their students' achievement.

During the past school year, Center for School Change outreach coordinators Terri Anderson and Vicki Nelson attended two coaches' training sessions sponsored by the Rural School and Community Trust and led by National School Reform Faculty staff members. Both will be happy to help create critical friends groups at former CSC sites as well as in other rural Minnesota schools where there is interest. Assistance is free, and is limited only by time available.

For additional information, contact Terri Anderson (218-473-2686) or Vicki Nelson (218-326-9044).

Helpful Resources

The Rural School and Community Trust – formerly known to many Center for School Change sites as the Annenburg Rural Challenge – continues to provide services and support that build ties between rural schools and communities.

In order to maintain contact with folks interested in "helping rural schools and communities get better together," the Trust encourages interested individuals and schools to become affiliates.

Benefits to affiliates include connection to a national place-based education network, the *Rural Roots* newsletter and invitations to conferences and special events. There is no fee for affiliation, though participants will be expected to share knowledge and expertise with others in the network.

Applications are available at www.ruraledu.org.

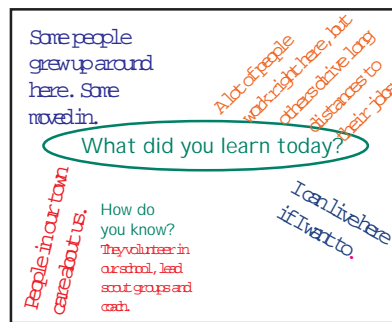
Chalk Talk

When it's time for a little *quiet* reflection, chalk talk is an effective activity for groups of students or adults.

Materials needed – A chalk board and chalk, or a large piece of paper taped to the wall and several markers.

Process – No one may talk. The facilitator starts the activity by writing a key question in the middle of the board or paper around which participants have gathered, and then makes chalk or markers available to everyone. Individuals respond as they are inspired, and may write thoughts about others' responses as well as the original question. The facilitator can stand back and watch or interact by adding comments or additional questions.

Time – There may be periods when no one writes. That's natural, so allow plenty of time before concluding the activity. When the facilitator ends chalk talk, it's done!



Borrowed from the Rural School and Community Trust Capacity-Building Program.

Great news!

Warren-Alvarado-Oslo and Yellow Medicine East High Schools were recently awarded GirlsBEST grants from the Women's Foundation of Minnesota. Each school will receive implementation funds to support projects over a four-year period.

In Warren-Alvarado-Oslo girls will learn entrepreneurship skills and develop leadership roles in their rural community; and at Yellow Medicine East (Granite Falls) girls will work with positive role models through an adult and peer mentorship program.

For information about the GirlsBEST program, visit the Women's Foundation Web site at www.wfmmn.org.

Published by the Center for School Change in Rural Minnesota, *Staying in Touch* provides a monthly connection between CSC and rural school sites. Material is prepared for publication by rural outreach coordinators Terri Anderson and Vicki Nelson. Copies are available by mail or at the CSC Web site, www.centerforschoolchange.org. Please send comments or questions to Vicki Nelson at 37848 Deer Lake Way, Grand Rapids, MN 55744 or vickinel@lcp2.net.

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