



## **Reports from SERVE-Leads Districts**

### **Petal, MS**

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Because it is a small district, Petal School District can move quickly. In the last several years, district leaders have introduced school leaders to the idea of “working on the work” through group study of Dr. Schlechty’s book. Even though the district is a successful district (by state standards – receiving the highest state accreditation rating of 5), leaders realize that in terms of getting all students to the level of functioning that will bring them success in a post secondary setting, the district has much work to do. Group book studies and other strategies have been used to help school administrators and teachers realize the need to continuously improve.

While participating in a SERVE-Leads work session presented by Lindsay Clare of CRESST on using CRESST’s rubric to score samples of “typical” teacher assignments in reading comprehension and writing, Ione Bond (Assistant Superintendent) and Tricia Bridges (Secondary Instructional Specialist) saw a tool to help implement their district’s strategic plan. They quickly went to work. They wanted first to determine their teachers’ perceptions of what quality work meant and second to gather baseline data in order to measure subsequent teacher growth.

In the Spring of 2001, Dr. James Hutto (the superintendent), Bond, and Bridges asked all teachers to provide a list of attributes that characterize quality work. They decided that they would modify the CRESST process and ask teachers to submit a “quality” assignment instead of a “typical” assignment. Then they randomly selected teachers from each grade level and/or content area and asked them to submit an example of a quality assignment from their teaching with accompanying student work. Seventy-six percent of the teachers in the sample turned in assignments (with cover sheets describing the assignment).

Bond and Bridges then scored the assignments submitted using a rubric that a SERVE-Leads group had adapted from the CRESST rubric. The rubric they used had seven dimensions – level of thinking required by the assignment, clarity of instructional goals and match to actual task demands, alignment with state/district standards, appropriateness of task demands for age, value beyond school, quality of assessment process, and overall learning value of assignment. The average rating of all assignments submitted was a 2.47 (on a 3-point scale with 3 designating the highest quality). Considering that they used a 3-point scale, as used in the CRESST research, and that they asked teachers for a “quality” rather than a “typical” assignment, the results are not inconsistent with the CRESST findings in which higher-achieving schools had assignments averaging a 2.2 on a 4-point scale of quality.

Dr. Hutto, along with Bond and Bridges, then met with the teachers from each school who submitted assignments and gave them qualitative feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of the assignments submitted. Overall, the feedback given to teacher about their assignments was positive because many had submitted product-focused assignments, such as oral presentation and writing assignments that were cross-curricular in nature. One of the positive aspects of this initial

effort was to encourage all teachers to become familiar with the Quality Assignment Rubric used to score their assignments as a guide for future planning and development of assignments.

The feedback shared with the teachers included the following: At the lower elementary level, there were a few examples of authentic assessments submitted and a lack of clear criteria for assessing the work students produced, · At the upper elementary level, the review showed that some teachers were giving credit for just attempting the assignment, not holding students accountable and not applying the assessment criteria, · The greatest weakness at the middle school was not setting high expectations for students, and, in general, the quality of the assignments was weak. The high school did not participate well in this district endeavor, which was disappointing; however, it was evident that the vocational teachers and Special Education teaches were doing a good job with quality work.

Having successfully introduced the idea of providing constructive feedback to teachers on the quality of assignments they give students, the next step was to find ways that teachers could begin to offer each other feedback in “safe,” collegial settings. At a SERVE-Leads meeting in the fall of 2001, protocols developed by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform ([www.annenberginstitute.org](http://www.annenberginstitute.org)) for assisting teachers in structuring group feedback meetings were provided.

Beginning in the late fall of 2001, teachers volunteered to begin working in small groups to pilot the usefulness of “protocols” for looking at student work. Only a few volunteers shared teacher assignments and student work with their peers. The response from peer groups that participated was very positive. One teacher said: “By reviewing actual work samples, I was able to connect the definition of quality work to the rubric. The words [in the rubric] came to life in the form of authentic student work.” The volunteers who presented their assignments and samples of student work affirmed the value of this as a learning experience. One teacher presenter said: “Presenting this activity in front of my peers validated my understanding of quality work.” Following the initial work with looking at quality work by asking for the submission of work samples, the emphasis changed to focus on having teachers bring assignments and work samples to a group of peers for feedback on a problem they were experiencing. This shift in emphasis resulted in training teachers to be Facilitators for Critical Friends Groups.

The Assistant Superintendent and sixteen teachers from the district have been trained by SERVE to be Critical Friends Group Facilitators. This translates to four trained facilitators and four Critical Friends Groups at each school site. The trained facilitators have trained one or two additional teachers at each site who are also leading a CFG. All schools have scheduled a Fishbowl Activity of a protocol to encourage teachers to participate in a CFG. The facilitators also demonstrated a Fishbowl Activity for School Board members at the Spring Board Tour. This activity was well received by Board members (all professionals in their given field) who discussed how similar collaboration was a part of their workplace.

Critical Friends Groups will be a vital part of the 2004-2005 Professional Development Plan for the Petal School District. All principals are committed to “creating time” for groups to meet once a month for the purpose of looking collaboratively at student work. The administrators are convinced that teachers working together collaboratively for the purpose of improving the

quality of student work is the best professional development in which teachers can participate. The goal for the 2004-2005 school year is to have every teacher in the district involved in a Critical Friends Group and for each group to meet nine times during the year. Some of the things that have been done from the district level to support the formation of CFG's include:

- Development of forms—assignment sheets to be submitted by teachers, protocol for examining student work, audience worksheet
- Obtain support from the School Board
- Training for all facilitators (by SERVE or by using the train the trainer model)
- Provide ample opportunities for all teachers to observe a Fishbowl Activity
- Purchase three-ring binders for facilitators' use
- Work with principals to provide time for groups to meet
- Assist in the development of a Critical Friends web-site

Teachers who are involved in Critical Friends Groups are excited about their experiences. One teacher had this to say, "One suggestion from a fellow member can turn a good lesson into a quality lesson." Another said, "Members are learning from each other. The presenter isn't the only member who takes a new idea away from the meeting."