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Tool nr. 96 - material

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Name of the material

### Critical friend

#### Sources

Bambino, D. (2002). Critical Friends. *Redesigning Professional Development*, 59 (6), 25-27.

Costa, A & Kallick, B. (1993). Through the Lens of a Critical Friend. *Educational Leadership*, 51 (2), 49-51.

Network leadership in action: What does a critical friend do? NCSL [www.ncsl.org.uk](http://www.ncsl.org.uk)

#### Purpose of the material

In given material roles of critical friend in building and supporting a network (PLC) are described.

#### Material

A critical friend can be defined as a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critiques 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.

A critical friend is typically a **colleague** or other **educational professional** who is committed to helping an educator or school improve. A critical friend is someone who is encouraging and supportive, but who also provides honest and often frank feedback that may be uncomfortable or difficult to hear. In short, a critical friend is someone who agrees to speak truthfully, but constructively, about weaknesses, problems, and emotionally charged issues.

#### Critical friend – to whom, when and why?

Every student—and educator, too—needs a trusted person who will ask provocative questions and offer helpful critiques. We need another person to change our focus continually, pushing us to look through multiple lenses. Although we, the “ultimate owner of the glasses” decide on what “just right” fits for us.

We must increasingly ask the right questions and collect the appropriate evidence; we are constantly refocusing our work. No one perspective on student learning will be sufficient to assess a student's capabilities and performances. Assessment requires someone who will provide new lenses through which learners can refocus on their work. A critical friend provides such feedback to an individual—a student, a teacher, or an administrator—or to a group.



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

*In the classroom.* Students use the critical friend's 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.

*In staff development.* Teachers use critical friends to plan and reflect on their own professional development. The critical friend's 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.

### **Critique as part of evaluation versus judgment**

The art of criticism is often overlooked in school life. 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. 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;
- be an advocate for the success of the work.

### **Critical friends group – collaboration of peers**

By providing structures for effective feedback and strong support, Critical Friends Groups help teachers improve instruction and student learning. Critical friends:

- give feedback
- collaborate
- find new solutions



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- create community

#### How you can use this material in your practice

This material helps to reflect on the roles of critical friend and build critical friendship in your PLC.

#### Debrief - reflection and metacognition

### Sample critical friends group

#### *Deborah Bambino's experience*

*By providing structures for effective feedback and strong support, Critical Friends Groups help teachers improve instruction and student learning.*

*On Monday mornings, my students used to count on my trying out some new strategy that I had picked up at a teacher workshop the previous Saturday morning. Like Mary Poppins with her carpetbag of tricks, I often had a new warm-up or lesson at the start of each week. I spent part of many weekends at workshops in search of the perfect teaching technique that would motivate the unmotivated and awaken the curiosity of even my coolest-of-the-cool middle school students.*

*I don't regret the time that I spent in those sessions. I picked up a repertoire of activities and deepened my own curiosity about learning. What I regret is that my quest for the curricular cure-all was solitary and unconnected with my colleagues at school.*

*After eight years of this whirlwind, I signed up for something different—not a recipe-for-success workshop, but a coaches' training program for building collaboration and reflection among colleagues—a Critical Friends Group. Organized by the National School Reform Faculty, which is coordinated by the Harmony School Education Center in Bloomington, Indiana, Critical Friends Groups help people involved with schools to work collaboratively in democratic, reflective communities. The training focused on building the trust needed to engage in direct, honest, and productive conversations with colleagues about the complex art of teaching. Unwilling to blame the students' abilities or home environments for a lack of school success, we learned several protocols for collectively examining and discussing how to improve both the students' work and the teachers' approach. My initial training lasted just a week, but the lessons have changed my life.*

*The Critical Friends Group process acknowledges the complexity of teaching and provides structures for teachers to improve their teaching by giving and receiving feedback. Working together to improve the day-to-day learning of all students is crucial*



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*to the success of Critical Friends Groups.*

*When the members of our training group returned to our schools, we joined colleagues in forming Critical Friends Groups, each group with up to a dozen educators who were willing to meet monthly to examine both student work and the teacher work that prompted it.*

*For me, this process meant looking more deeply at both my assignments and my students' responses to them. I could no longer blame the weather, the full moon, or my students' hormones when a lesson failed to produce its intended results. Instead, I took the work to my Critical Friends Group and asked my colleagues what they saw, what they questioned, and, most important, what they saw missing in my teaching approach.*

*After sharing my work with my Critical Friends Group colleagues, I realized that I could share these feedback protocols with my students. Who better, if I really wanted to hear why a lesson wasn't working? Using my Critical Friends Group experience, I started designing rubrics and assignments with my students, watching as their motivation and grasp of the material grew.*

**Feedback on the use of the tool**