

In every classroom across the nation, terms like teacher evaluation, teacher assessments, performance assessments, classroom evaluations and teacher observations create anxiety on the part of the teachers. What coaching aims to do is to remove the evaluative terminology, generate an atmosphere that is conducive to teacher learning, and provide support in a risk-free environment.

As a catalyst for change, the coach focuses on improving instruction, curriculum, and student learning by collecting data and collaborating with teachers during the pre-conference or “before” planning time in ways that will help identify those classroom practices that need strengthening. Coaches visit classrooms in the “during” segment, focus on the predetermined set of skills (content, student behavior, and/or teacher behavior), and arrange for a feedback session following the class visitation. This feedback session or “after” provides an opportunity for the teacher to evaluate his/her own performance and plan ways to move forward with the goals of increasing student engagement and improving student achievement.

But, what happens when the teacher doesn’t recognize when changes are needed or thinks that okay is “good enough”? Where and how does a coach begin a conversation with a teacher who does not realize what is essential for student learning?

First things first... only focus on the one or two topics that were determined during the pre-conference. Of course, coaches may need to be proactive and make sure that the lesson design is an area of concentration for the visitation and feedback session. That way, the discussion can focus on the components of the lesson and the students’ responses to those components. Looking at student work is a great access point. The question can always center on what the goals of the lesson were and how the teacher knows if the students achieved those goals. Asking the question, “What would you do differently the next time you teach the concept?” is a powerful learning tool.

There are many ways to follow this classroom visitation. After the debriefing session, the coach needs to schedule another “before” session to plan the next classroom visitation. The conversation should include a reminder of the previous discussion and any new areas of focus for the visitation. In the interim, the coach should involve the teacher in other supportive activities, i.e., classroom visitation to another teacher’s classroom; small group PD where collegial sharing demonstrates how an effective literacy practice worked well in a class; and networking opportunities with teachers from their own schools or from other schools. In some cases, the teacher does not know what an effective lesson looks like so he/she cannot work towards that goal until that modeling takes place. Teachers may not automatically know what works well and what does not until the lesson design component is shared in a very deliberate way.