

Well, here it is February and some coaches continue to be challenged in their quest to support teachers across all content areas and their administrators. They continue to be stretched thin as they try to support classroom teachers in school, district and statewide initiatives. In some cases, they are charged with providing the support to staff members and accepting the responsibility to offer them ongoing professional learning opportunities without the daily flexibility in their schedules to provide the side by side encouragement that is needed to create change.

With support from their PIIC mentors, instructional coaches generate their coaching schedules so that they meet the needs of their teachers and reinforce the notion that teachers have a voice in making classroom decisions. Coaches meet with teachers around the BDA cycle of coaching; that is, coaches and teachers meet together prior to classroom visits to collaborate on their instructional practices and decisions. Coaches help teachers think about their thinking and offer feedback that is critical for change. We recognize that when teachers are given the opportunity to reflect and determine what worked well in their classrooms, discuss their instructional habits with their coach, make adjustments where necessary and plan for next steps, the instructional quality is enhanced and student learning improves. The instructional quality improves not just for the teacher who worked with the coach but with the teachers' other colleagues as well.

Coaches must continue their efforts to meet one-on-one and in small groups to support their colleagues. They must make intentional time to collaborate with their colleagues and engage in professional conversations about student learning. As Costa, Garmston, and Zimmerman suggest, "With regular coaching, teachers develop a strong internal sense of control or efficacy through reflecting on their classroom decisions. When teachers are reflective, flexible, and adaptive, students learn more and professional knowledge expands" (Teacher Quality: Investing in What Matters, EdWeek Commentary November 13, 2012).

So, how do they do that with little time and big responsibilities? One way to work through the process is to provide short lessons focused on one or two literacy strategies that can be implemented in any classroom. Choose one day a week for your "Mini PD Cycle" and offer the PD throughout the day. If possible, invite another colleague to co-facilitate one of those sessions. This is doable if the person is prepared to share his/her prep with colleagues.) If you generate a needs assessment prior to the start, you can have quite a list of topics. Then you can ask colleagues who would like to "sign up" and collaborate with you to co-plan and co-facilitate topics determined by the staff. This can even occur at a study group if that time is more user-friendly.

Another way to engage your colleagues is to develop the cohort approach to instructional coaching. Many have tried this approach and find it very effective. A coach identifies groups of teachers (~5-6) and forms teacher teams. Among the many advantages of this approach, two critical things happen: they continue to network about issues and ideas with each other and they work with the coach for a finite period of time implementing the full B,D,A cycle of coaching with small groups of teachers. The cohort meets for 6-7 weeks and then the coach works with the next cohort of teachers. Each cohort of teachers becomes "buddies" for each other and their support with, and for, each other expands. The coach moves from cohort to cohort differentiating the support as the professional learning communities nourish their own professional growth.

Coaches help teachers set their own professional goals and give the support to help them achieve those goals. They nag and nurture, pat and push to help teachers identify evidence-based instructional strategies that are appropriate to use and offer non-evaluative feedback once those strategies are tried in the classroom. They help teachers explore a variety of resources to determine what fits best into the specific classroom structure. They help teachers discover protocols for instruction that foster collective problem solving and critical thinking skills for all students, not just for some. They help teachers find their voices and help them recognize that students have voices too. And, coaches help teachers do what teachers need to do... not only understand the CCSS, the educator effectiveness process, how to use data, and plan engaging lessons, etc., ...coaches help teachers think about their own thinking and help teachers move from isolation to collaboration so that they don't teach in a vacuum. They help them live the adage, "two heads are truly better than one."