

As the new year begins, memories of the summer fade away and are replaced with thoughts about common core, educator effectiveness, keystone exams, differentiated instruction, and a host of other initiatives that give teachers, students, parents, school administrators, coaches and mentors lots to think about but little time to do anything but think about it. We know that the rationale behind sharing yet another one or two new endeavors for the school year is to promote the overall success of students and to triangulate the data among student achievement, teacher performance and the school/district “standings.” Yet, having a standardized plan delineating what to do about successfully implementing those undertakings still elude many of us.

Having said that, I wonder how/why we still miss the big idea...that is, teachers need to work together in teams and one-on-one with instructional coaches so they can design interdisciplinary units of study, collaborate about effective instructional strategies, and connect the dots between instruction and assessment. They need time to talk to one another in a no-risk environment where ideas can be shared without fear of failure. Teachers need time to collectively problem-solve and think through the issues of content, delivery, and reflective practice. They need time to practice with each other under the guidance of an instructional coach who can help practitioners ask themselves important questions that shape the thinking, teaching, and learning in classrooms.

Instructional coaching is a system that offers guided support in a non-threatening environment; it is an opportunity for colleagues to work together without worrying about what they don't know. It is a time and place for critical friends to communicate openly, frequently, and without reprisal. It is a space for colleagues to reinforce their listening and questioning skills, to co-construct and challenge thinking, and to work towards common goals and a shared vision for success.

There are many questions to think about and answer as you begin to plan your work with teachers and other school leaders: 1) if instructional coaching is new to this school, how will we tell the staff about instructional coaching and how coaches are integral to the educator effectiveness process; 2) how will we begin to work together, honoring each teacher's voice and choice; 3) what are some effective ways to provide ongoing professional learning in small groups as you build trust and familiarity with one-on-one coaching; 4) if coaching has already been implemented in this school, how will this year's implementation be different than last year's; 5) as a returning coach, how can you collaborate with your colleagues to follow up and build on the previous year's successes; 6) how do we work together to co-plan a sustainable professional learning proposal so that the opportunities to nourish our collective and individual growth are deliberate, persistent, and systemic; 7) how do we ensure that learning is before, during, and after the school day, not just bell-to-bell and not just for students; 8) how do we

organize professional learning communities that focus on student and teacher learning; 9) how do we continue to build awareness that the more colleagues work and learn together, the more their students (and each other) will benefit; and 10) how do coaches remind others that we all have two ears and one mouth for a very good reason!

Start the year with short term, mid-year and end of year goals. Make sure you design a plan to work one-on-one and in small groups with your colleagues that includes collecting, analyzing and using data effectively. Make sure teachers understand what is meant by a literacy-rich environment with speaking, listening, thinking, reading and writing as expectations in all classrooms. Help teachers understand the importance of reflecting in, on, and about action... and most of all, begin and finish each day by answering these questions:

1. 1) "What am I doing as a coach to help teachers change and improve their practice?"
2. 2) "What am I doing as a coach to help teachers improve student engagement and outcomes?"

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