The beginning of any school year is full of anticipation, anxiety, and assumptions. The anticipation and anxiety are reduced as the year progresses. Plans are made and networking occurs so that teachers re-establish their relationships and begin collaborating again after a summer of relaxation and rejuvenation. They think about their plans from the previous year identifying which ones need to be revised, which ones need to be strengthened, and which ones were positive so they can build on those successes.

The assumptions, however, are another thing entirely!

Coaches need to position themselves in ways that help teachers freely share their assumptions and beliefs. They need to promote a positive environment that reinforces confidentiality, trust, and a shared vision for school wide improvement. They need to share their assumptions about student and teacher learning, and create an environment where the teachers share their assumptions about student learning without fear of negative judgements. Teachers must trust the coaches and be trusted in return. They must be honored, respectful, and have a voice that is respected.

At the same time, however, teachers need to recognize that their own beliefs and assumptions dictate what happens in their classrooms. They need to understand that their beliefs and assumptions about learning determines their professional practice. An instructional coach helps teachers focus on their instructional decisions and are equipped to help teachers reflect on their practices to make instructional decisions that are appropriate for their classroom environment.

Program implementation is coaching light. A coach and teacher talk about a particular aspect of a curriculum, a reading or math series, or grade level concept. The coach helps the teacher implement something specific and both feel good about his/her productivity. But, has this changed how students learn other things? Does this change how the teacher teaches other content? Has this questioned a belief or assumption?

Coaches create a quiet disturbance by asking questions that result in meditative conversations. They help teachers really think about their thinking and sometimes, these conversations challenge teachers to re-examine their assumptions and beliefs. These beliefs may be about specific content, intended outcomes, or instructional delivery. And, they may be the same conversations that cause some teachers to resist working with coaches. To address this,

coaches need to help those teachers see these deeper conversations as a challenge and opportunity for growth rather than an example of what they fear is wrong.

These conversations about beliefs and student learning are developmental; they may happen in the *before* but most likely happen in the *after* as coaches help teachers reflect *on*, *in*, and *abou t*
action. Elizabeth Davis (
Teacher Beliefs,
www.education.com) makes three recommendations about reflection and teacher beliefs:

1. 1) Teachers should be encouraged to move beyond describing what they see and experience to analyzing what is happening in their classrooms;
2. 2) Teachers should be encouraged to think about problems from an alternate perspective, particularly their students'; and
3. 3) Teachers should be encouraged to let go of their former ideas and create space for new solutions.

Teachers who are willing to explore their beliefs and how their beliefs are linked to practice, use these beliefs to promote students' growth, voice, reciprocity, and equity in their classrooms. In addition, they foster the opportunity for their own growth by accepting new ideas and concepts that yield positive student outcomes.

As a coach, ensure that teachers have multiple opportunities to discuss their beliefs and assumptions. Help them understand that changing beliefs create changes in professional practice. Build an environment that is conductive to collaboration, consistency, camaraderie, and community. Don't take "no" for an answer but rather provide space for teachers to develop together and engage in ongoing professional learning; understand that offering professional development is not enough. There must be transparency and open dialog to talk about what was learned and how those learnings can be applied in the classroom. Helping teachers understand their beliefs and how those beliefs determine practice will make a difference in student learning and both the coach's and teacher's own professional growth.