

One of the online commentaries in Education Week, November 29, 2010, is entitled, “The Science of Teacher Development.” In the article, the author echoes our PIIC motto... “Improving training and support for teachers is key to improving student learning.” As educators, we know that the point of impact for improved student learning is at the classroom level. Helping teachers refine their practices is the only way to improve the landscape of teaching and learning.

One of the ways that PIIC has provided appropriate “tools” for teachers is the ongoing statewide professional development offered four times a year. These “tools” are not just the materials and handouts gleaned from our learning opportunities. These “tools” are the networking opportunities that coaches experience when they collaborate with their colleagues. Those ongoing conversations, one at a time, create a culture of learning, caring, and sharing that accompany sustainable changes in schools.

In addition to these larger professional learning opportunities, smaller district and/or IU provided professional learning is a wonderful way to differentiate professional development and target it to the specific areas of need. Coaches can develop that culture of collegial sharing by making time for teachers to collaborate with their coaches and with each other. These professional conversations are critical opportunities to talk about student work, content-specific issues, data collection and analysis, study groups, and a plethora of other topics that are necessary for student growth and improved teaching.

Coaches are the key to making these ongoing professional learning opportunities the norm in schools. A recent study by Learning Forward and the Stanford Center on Opportunity Policy in Education (SCOPE) indicates that teachers receive less than eight hours of professional development on any topic. However, between 49 and 100 hours of intensive training in key areas is needed to impact student learning. Coaches are the perfect conduit to creating networks for increasing the number of hours teachers work together to learn from each other. They are the essential link for assisting teachers in creating a no-risk environment where teachers can talk about what they teach, how students learn, and why some strategies are more effective than others. Coaches are the necessary component in providing the “by-the-side” encouragement and support in real time; they make collaborating with peers a priority, not an “add-on.”

Working one-on-one with teachers and in small group professional development is vital for school improvement. Coaches need to focus on the B, D, A cycle of consultation, collaboration,

collective problem-solving and constructive feedback. Set a goal to meet regularly one-on-one with each of the teachers you coach. Create opportunities to provide “prep-time planning” where teachers can plan together and discuss the goals for a particular unit of study and then meet to debrief about what worked well; offer to co-facilitate with a teacher a session on the four lenses of learning or other best practices that can be shared in a 40 minute time slot. Whatever the content, coaches are the key to making time for collaboration and conversation. Without these elements, change is not likely.