

“Students want to learn both content and appropriate behavior. And they can only do it in a safe, structured classroom.” (Rick Smith and Mary Lambert, Educational Leadership, September 2008.

Effective techniques for classroom management and classroom discipline are vital to success in any classroom. Students want to know that they are important to the classroom structure and that they are valuable contributors to the learning process. They need ownership and to be architects of their own learning. Teachers need to manage that process and create a safe environment where learning, collaboration and creativity thrive. At the same time, teachers must maintain a classroom environment where “no child is left behind” and must meet the individual needs of the students while establishing a mutually respectful and dignified atmosphere.

The PIIC mentors support coaches, share a plethora of strategies for engaging students, and help teachers teach in ways that focus on diverse learners. Working with coaches and mentors, teachers are provided with a multitude of instructional techniques to address a variety of classroom management and behavior issues. Coaches reinforce the notion that building relationships and making personal connections help generate positive learning. When students understand their expectations, are engaged in meaningful work, are assessed appropriately, and given the necessary tools to support their learning, the purpose of that learning becomes much clearer and more relevant.

When I began teaching in 1973, I was warned not to smile, laugh, or engage in niceties and maybe I'd last until April. If I passed that magic month, I'd probably last until June. After that, there were no guarantees! Those beginning months were brutal. I never realized that the disengaged students in my classroom were recipients of an irrelevant, unsophisticated, unchallenging set of arbitrary lessons I thought were so important. I did not have a mentor, coach, colleague or friend to help share new learnings or help me understand the current trends in education. What I had, though, was the sage advice of a wise man who asked me the same question every day, “Do you like the students you teach?”

At first, I answered emphatically, “Of course not. How can I like students who talk incessantly, refuse to complete homework assignments, argue with each other over coveted window seats, and seem apathetic about reading the great American novel?” Fortunately, I survived those trying times and began to see my students as people, as individuals who had a voice and who wanted to read to learn, not just learn to read. They wanted to share in the learnings of others, to be asked their opinions and to help make meaningful decisions. They wanted to be

recognized and welcomed into my classroom. They wanted me to care about them, their families and their thinking.

How much more successful and less stressful my beginning days would have been if I had a trusted educator by my side, someone who understood the importance of student engagement and constructive lesson design as a classroom management tool. How interesting my conversations would have been with colleagues if we practiced together in a non-threatening, risk-free environment.

The instructional coaches and PIIC mentors have fostered an ethic of caring in classrooms and schools; they have reiterated that content and process are undeniably important to the learning process. After all, without the appropriate tools, can the job be accomplished? They have also helped others to see not only the importance of pencil and paper assessments as tools to improve student outcomes but that developing caring relationships built on trust, respect, collaboration, and partnerships show that we believe in our students and their ability to learn.