

As the winter months remind us that "...the weather outside is frightful," we need to continually find ways to keep learning fresh by supporting best practices in all school communities. We need to keep students at the center by helping their teachers and other school leaders stimulate thought, motivate students, increase student engagement, and build teacher capacity, all at the same time.

Instructional coaches are motivators, classroom supporters, confidantes and critical friends. They are both the sounds of encouragement and the voices of reality in a risk-free environment. After all, where else do teachers have an opportunity to learn about innovative instructional strategies, plan and discuss the lesson design and the effectiveness of the strategies, role-play the delivery of these strategies, reflect internally about the use and delivery of those strategies, and discuss with an experienced collaborator if the expectations and goals were met with success? Most important to this kind of learning is how to continually set high expectations about student learning and to provide a plethora of opportunities for school staff to collaborate about what worked well and how to go from "good to great" in implementing practical, effective instructional practices.

Instructional coaches are positioned to help teachers implement effective instructional practices, not to evaluate whether or not teachers are effective. School communities must make every effort to plan intentional time for peer collaboration via one-on-one support and in small groups. Both environs are valuable venues to inspire learning and promote community *as long as the learners decide which environment is appropriate for the occasion.*

(Imagine if doctors provided group consultations for everyone suffering from the same symptoms. So sorry... today everyone with flu-like symptoms, please meet in Consultation Room 1 for analysis, diagnosis and treatment.)

The reality, however, is not so simple. You are a part-time coach; so what does that mean to your practice? How do you encourage classroom support and strengthen learning if you are coaching from the classroom?

1. Start small and continue to build an evidentiary trail about working with teachers and changing practice. (Distributing books and tutoring students are important but do not change teacher practice. And, contrary to some beliefs, just because a teacher went to college doesn't mean s/he doesn't need opportunities to refine and enhance the art and science of teaching.)

2. Build awareness that instructional coaches nurture communication skills, promote student learning, and enhance teacher professional development

3. Learning is contagious...open your classroom and invite your colleagues to visit you in “real” time. Following the visit, provide opportunities to share the learning with your peers;

4. Start a book talk/book walk through a book club... great to discuss books with educational theory but this is more about building relationships. As William Glasser said, “We can teach a lot of things, but if the teacher can’t relate by talking to a group of friendly students, s/he will never be a competent teacher.” Teachers are students, too.

5. Ask your school administrator for one day a month release time specifically to provide PD during the day. Collaborate with one (or more) of your colleagues and provide PD each period of the day. Invite teachers to “float” into the prep period PD where you and a colleague share an instructional strategy, suggest materials to promote that strategy, and discuss ways to collect data to determine its usefulness and effectiveness. Short bursts of specific content can be very effective, especially if there is an opportunity to elicit feedback and engage in professional conversation.

Every school stakeholder – parents, students, community members, business owners, teachers, administrators, colleges, universities, instructional coaches and mentors – wants our youth to be better educated than the previous generation. Instructional coaching is one way to take action and promote job-embedded professional development that increases student learning and ensures long-term change.