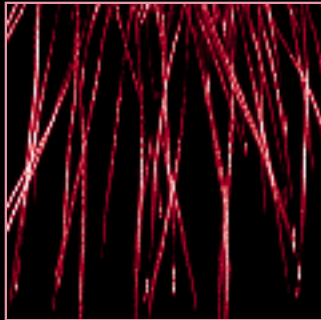


By
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John Dewey said the “chief aim of teacher education should not be immediate proficiency in technique, but rather thoughtful analysis and understanding.” Reflection is the “magic dust” for improvement. Individuals and schools who do not have time to reflect do not have time to improve.

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COACHING

DEFINITION

COACHING PROVIDES a model of respectful collegial reflection about instructional decisions. The benefits are seen in student learning gains, increased teacher efficacy, and increased satisfaction with one’s work and the collaborative culture found in the school.

WHAT IS COACHING?

Coaching is teachers talking and acting in a purposeful way, with the goal of continuously improving their teaching practice. A coach is a critical listener/observer, who asks questions, makes observations and offers suggestions that help a teacher grow and reflect and produce different decisions. Coaching activities provide a structure in which these interactions can take place.

IS COACHING THE SAME AS MENTORING?

Mentoring is one form of coaching, but not all coaching is mentoring. In general, mentoring is when an experienced teacher provides information to a newcomer, sharing experience and knowledge and expertise with someone who has less of these things. Coaching, on the other hand, is a continuous growth process for people of all experience levels.

WHAT MAKES SOMEONE A GOOD COACH?

How do you identify these people on your staff? Good coaches are good listeners. They don’t just dictate “the right answer;” they facilitate other people’s reflection. Find good coaches by looking around for the best teachers. Who listens to students? Who seeks to engender understanding in students, instead of looking for them to recite the right answers? The same behaviors make people good coaches.

METHOD

WHAT’S THE BEST WAY TO BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER FOR COACHING?

There’s no one best way. It varies among different schools and systems. Frequently, coaching partners find each other. It can start with a teacher who feels the need for feedback and seeks out a trusted, thoughtful colleague. In other cases, members of a teaching team could decide for themselves that they want to work in this fashion. Or perhaps a school or district will encourage coaching by providing an organizational framework that helps people find compatible colleagues with corresponding interests.

DOES COACHING REQUIRE ANY SPECIAL TRAINING?

Every coaching effort will benefit if participants are trained on effective coaching techniques and if they have time for study. Coaching is a learned skill, and even people who are “natural coaches” can improve by learning new techniques and practices. Reading professional literature on coaching can help identify techniques or programs suited to a particular school or district. (See Resources list.)

WHAT FORMS CAN COACHING TAKE?

Coaching can take place in many situations, including one-on-one conversations between colleagues, planned conferences, classroom observations, and group sessions

where coaches reflect on what they're learning and how they're growing.

It's important for schools to provide time for teachers to talk and interact, but with new demands continually being placed on teachers, it's often harder than ever to find this time. Administrators who support coaching can help by designating existing staff development time for coaching activities, for example, or providing non-teaching time for teachers by using substitutes, or releasing teachers from duties at lunch or other times.

Some of the best coaching occurs at the end of the school day, when the challenges and experiences of the day are still fresh in teachers' minds. Many teachers are tired at this point, but often they find

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that coaching, rather than requiring even more energy, is actually quite invigorating. That's because coaching is not a spectator activity. You can't sit quietly in the back of the room and grade papers or drift away. Coaching is an active discussion. Teachers are mentally stimulated, and frequently new ideas come to them and they're increasingly motivated.

Good coaching also means taking advantage of coaching opportunities that occur every day. You can have a meaningful discussion with a colleague during 10 minutes between classes, or while walking down the hall to a meeting. You can generate quality thinking and understanding by applying coaching skills to every conversation. ■