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Sustaining Educators Throughout Their Careers

By Marinel D. McGrath, MASCD President

This issue of Perspectives examines what sustains educators through the various stages of their careers. As the critical shortage of classroom educators and school leaders looms on the not so distant horizon, it becomes more apparent that sustaining educators is a responsibility to be shared by anyone who has an investment in educating our young people.

In her article, Kathleen Buckley asks us to reflect upon the reasons why we chose to become teachers and to remember what our hopes and dreams were in those early days of our careers. She suggests that perhaps in that reflection we will find the answers to what sustains one throughout a career. Susan Villani writes a dynamic article on how coaching helps to sustain teachers, while Pat DiPillo discusses critical friends groups as a significant contribution to the evolution of professional development. Elaine Pace grapples with what it means to collaborate. Sonia Gleason discusses challenges to implementing good coaching, and Cheryl Forster illustrates what a positive school culture looks like.

During the past three years, I have had the wonderful opportunity to spend time talking with teachers and school leaders who are retiring after 25-30 years. I ask them to tell me about the “magic” of those years so I can share what I learn with others. As their stories unfold, the common thread that seems to have sustained them all was a strong school culture that afforded them multiple opportunities to reassess and revitalize themselves at different stages of their careers—whether through a change in grade level or courses taught, through an opportunity for a teacher leadership role, through professional development opportunities, or through discussions among peers about teaching and student learning. In his/her own way, each person said that vital teaching requires a school culture that supports constant involvement in one’s own learning and teacher/learner reciprocity where one role creates a re-visioning of the other.

Sustaining educators through various career stages can only be realized if we accept responsibility for building cultures that keep the spark lit in everyone. The cultures we develop must recognize that, as adults, we experience different stages in our professional lives, and the culture will either enhance or impede those stages. Too often we assume that it is the sole responsibility of individual educators to keep their own interest alive and dynamic. My hope for this issue of Perspectives is that you will reflect upon the views shared by fellow educators about how to develop cultures and practices that enable teachers and school leaders to sustain the wonders of learning, teaching, and leading.
Stable but Stagnant Teachers- An Inevitable Career Stage?

By Kathleen Buckley

We've all met them, the teachers who early on in their careers were the shining stars: they served on committees, came early and stayed late, and planned exciting learning activities. Then, after years of this activity, they lost interest. Their classroom teaching became uninspired, they did only what was necessary and no more. Some say that they've retired on the job. School leaders and colleagues regard the situation as something to be expected and endured until real retirement finally arrives and the tired retiree can be replaced with a young, enthusiastic teacher who will be a new shining star, ready to repeat the cycle all over again. But is this transformation an inevitable stage in teaching?

It doesn't have to be. What's happened is that these teachers are going through a typical stage in a teaching career; they've entered what Fessler (1992) calls the "stable stage." By learning about this stage and doing some planning to meet needs that are typical at this point, both school leaders and the teachers themselves can prevent much of the decline.

Making a Difference

Understanding why people choose to become teachers and what their attitudes and expectations are as they start their careers is a good place to begin. Most teachers will say they chose the profession because they want to make a difference in the lives of young people. At the start of their careers, the idea that they are making that difference is very clear to them. As one teacher with two years of experience told me:

"Teaching has so many rewards. You have a child who comes into your class and can't read or do math, and at the end of the year, when you see how that child has developed, how he can understand what he reads and can put it into words, you rejoice. By the end of this year, my children were writing book reports that were fabulous. That was so rewarding."

This young teacher's enthusiasm is evident. The problem is that, over time, teachers sometimes fail to see how they are continuing to make that difference. They take for granted that most of their students are learning and shift their focus to what learning they don't see happening. This is evident in the words of another teacher with nineteen years of experience:

"Sometimes I feel as if I could just be talking to the wall. It's frustrating that I can't help everybody and that's disheartening. When you're teaching over a hundred students, there's no way you can help them all."

The Importance of Rejuvenation

What seems to happen is that, as teachers spend more and more years in the profession, many become less sure of their efficacy and, in their eyes, their victories get smaller and smaller. This information often surprises school administrators who may be thinking that experienced teachers are sure of themselves and their methods.

Most teachers want to use their skills and knowledge in a way that interests them and provides a sense of achievement when the task is accomplished. They want an engaging challenge. Because teaching can easily become routine, the challenge disappears and is replaced only by small victories. Some ask what happened to the challenge of reaching every student. The difficulty lies in the scope of the problem. As people get older, they still look for challenge, but they want that challenge to be within the scope of their grasp. A beginning teacher plans to change the world; an
experienced teacher is happy to change a little corner of that world, but he/she needs some help learning how to do this.

Meeting Challenges

The need for challenge can be met by providing opportunities for new roles and new learning. This is particularly important for mid-career teachers. Schien (1978) tells us that adults look for a way to exhibit and use their experience and wisdom. At a school where I was principal, I saw the results of this in action. The majority of the teachers were at or above the mid-career point. Many were obviously in Fessler’s stable stage. I was concerned because the school had a reputation for excellence, but I knew that wouldn’t last if many of the teachers became increasingly disengaged — only going through motions of teaching.

At faculty meetings, we discussed the importance of renewal and, after considering several ideas, the teachers agreed to form a professional development school partnership with a college, allowing the veterans to mentor prospective teachers. Our efforts worked to the point at which parents were asking me why the teachers seemed so energized. The teachers I worried about the most began to drop by my office to share stories of success or to ponder new methods they might use. They felt a responsibility to stay up on research, but also they knew that they were respected by their student teachers. They had a challenge they could meet and proof that they were making a difference.

The mentoring experience doesn’t have to be in a professional development school. The growing need of mid and late career teachers to help other teachers can be met by such activities as working with beginning teachers or with colleagues trying to master new techniques. These experiences also offer the recognition and motivation that the teachers in my school found in their professional development school.

Presenting at conferences or in professional development programs is another practice to consider. Professional development can support the changing of grade levels or the teaching of new courses as well as the acquisition of knowledge. These types of activities also provide some of the recognition that is rare in the field of education and is an important adult need for most experienced professionals. A teacher who has shared knowledge with colleagues returns to the classroom refreshed and more positive about what he or she is doing.

Promoting Efficacy

While there has been a trend in recent years to improve the professional development programs offered to educators, there is not much evidence that these activities are tailored to the needs of teachers at particular stages of their career development. A little effort in avoiding the “one size fits all” type of professional development can engage teachers at all stages and help them continue to learn and grow. One way to do this and to meet the experienced teachers’ need to realize their efficacy is to create teacher inquiry or study groups as part of professional development offerings. These groups, where teachers support one another, break down isolation and help teachers meet challenges that otherwise may seem overwhelming. Such dialogue puts
While there has been a trend in recent years to improve the professional development programs offered to educators, there is not much evidence that these activities are tailored to the needs of teachers at particular stages. Instructional challenges within the teacher's grasp and helps teachers to recognize their achievements and reflect on their practice.

Creative educators and good administrators will find additional ways to challenge teachers in the stable stage of their careers. Stagnation is not inevitable. If we pay attention to the needs of teachers, as well as of students, we can improve the learning environment for all.

Kathleen Buckley, Ed.D. is the coordinator of programs in school leadership at Cambridge College. She is a former assistant superintendent, principal, and teacher in Massachusetts public schools. She also has served as project director for a U.S. Department of Education Star Schools grant at the Massachusetts Center for Educational Telecommunications and was co-chair of the Principals' Center at Harvard advisory board. She became interested in the needs of career teachers while serving as a union president and went on to write her dissertation on the career maturation patterns of teachers at Boston College.


Additional resources for adult and teacher development:


Our country faces a daunting challenge: sustaining teachers in a profession that offers few avenues for advancement, questionable prestige, low salaries, and often poor working conditions. The turnover rate of teachers is 16 percent compared with 11 percent in most other professions. Nearly 50% of new teachers leave in their first five years, and experienced teachers are increasingly retiring early or leaving teaching and working in other fields. Fifty-one percent of teachers leave teaching because of job dissatisfaction or to pursue another job. (Ingersoll, 2001)

Isolation is the most frequently cited downside of teaching, notwithstanding the relatively low salary compared to other professions. Most teachers are often the only adults in their classrooms. Teaching is challenging work, and without anyone to share the highs and lows, it can be stressful and even demoralizing. What can school districts do to address this problem?

The Value of Mentoring and Coaching

Many school districts and state departments of education recognize that induction with mentoring programs are the most effective way to support new teachers. Mentoring programs with

Integrating Mentoring with Coaching: Unrealized Benefits

By Susan Villani

Mentoring programs with coaching components dramatically increase new teacher retention rates.
coaching components dramatically increase new teacher retention rates, sometimes doubling them from 45% to 90% in just one year. (Villani, 2002) However, programs that were developed to address the needs of new teachers have resulted in benefits for experienced faculty as well.

When mentors are trained to do coaching, the impact of the coaching on the mentors is as profound as it is on the new teachers. Mentors usually choose to mentor for altruistic reasons: they want to help a rookie have a less stressful beginning, they want to give back to the profession, or they simply want to be a good neighbor. Mentors are frequently surprised at how much they themselves gain, reporting that the experience of promoting another’s reflection enhances reflection on their own practice. Some mentors continue to do peer coaching with other mentors and colleagues after they are no longer mentors. Reflection on practice, self-esteem, and new learning are just a few rewards of mentoring. Regularly scheduled meetings also help to alleviate the isolation teachers sometimes feel and enhance the sense of the school as a community of learners.

These gains for mentors are often unrecognized, unmeasured, and underutilized in schools. These same gains could be available to other experienced teachers if coaching became part of their professional development. Studies indicate that peer coaching improves teacher performance. When peer coaching was the training component of professional development, 95% of participants attained knowledge, skills, and the ability to know when to use them. (Joyce and Showers (2002).

The Coaching Cycle

Cognitive coaching is a type of coaching that involves a non-judgmental, non-evaluative process in which one teacher helps another to analyze teaching practice by asking questions that promote reflection. This type of coaching has a profound effect on teachers’ practice. Coaching cycles include a planning conference, a classroom observation, and a reflecting conference. During the planning conference the coach also finds out what data the teacher would like collected during the observation. The key to this type of coaching is that the coach does not evaluate or make judgments. Coaches promote reflection by asking good questions and inviting the teacher to consider the data collected.

Implications for School Districts

What does this tell us about how to sustain teachers? By expanding teachers’ awareness of the benefits of coaching, from coaching in mentoring relationships to coaching teachers who aren’t mentors, entire faculties can be served. Mentoring and coaching help address teacher isolation and are an invitation for reflection, growth, and renewal. Cognitive coaching should be a major priority of district- and state-wide professional development offerings. Several exciting things happened next. The teachers who were videotaped were flattered to be chosen. The new teachers felt more comfortable asking to visit the classrooms of the teachers they viewed on the videos, and those teachers subsequently took more of an interest in supporting the mentor program. In addition, the lead mentors requested a substitute once a month and then walked around with a clipboard to invite mentors to sign-up for visits. The interest generated by videotaping colleagues for the after-school session for new teachers resulted in veteran teachers’ requesting substitute coverage so they could visit each other. By the end of the school year, the teachers and principal agreed that
there had been a change in school culture. Teachers were eager to see each other teach and to talk about their practice with each other.

In a relatively small community that loses many teachers to higher-paying school districts, mentors in a middle-high school were taught to do cognitive coaching. Soon new-teacher mentees were also provided with the same training.

The next year, I worked with the entire faculty at the beginning of the school year and continued with department chairs, specialists, and program leaders throughout the year. By the end of the second year, many teacher leaders who had been frustrated, angry, or cynical were invigorated by what they had accomplished and were ready to work on other school-wide issues. What had begun as mentor training evolved into much broader aspects of coaching, teacher leadership, and efforts to be a collaborative learning community.

Coaching may be the focus of professional development, or it may also be part of a broader initiative. In a grant-funded project that included public and private K-12 schools in a rural region, coaching was introduced as a way for teachers to support each other as they piloted the use of SmartBoards to improve literacy. Teachers learned to do cognitive coaching, but found it difficult to get to each other’s schools. So they videotaped themselves using the SmartBoard technology and then met for reflection in small groups. They concurred that understanding cognitive coaching and how to promote each other’s reflection was what made their meetings insightful and productive.

A teacher in a rural high school was just about to tell her building principal that she had decided to leave the school when he approached her to mentor a teacher in her building and participate in a two-year statewide program of training and support for alternate route teachers. As a result, the teacher agreed to remain on the job. The mentoring rejuvenated her teaching and strengthened her commitment to her school.

Success Stories

In one small, suburban community, a mentoring program for new teachers was developed and two teachers at the middle school. Stronger professional learning communities emerge when teachers make a commitment to improving student learning and teacher quality through sharing practices. These stories exemplify the impact that coaching can have on school communities.

Experienced staff engaged in new ways to reflect on their practice and share their craft-wisdom, as well as promote each other’s reflections.

In one rural school district, a teacher who had just retired from a long career in the district was recruited to mentor three new teachers. These teachers worked together with him and became a good team. They were so successful in promoting each other’s thinking and growth that the new teachers were asked to share their professional development paths with other new teachers the next year. The retired teacher was urged to organize and coordinate the mentor program for all new teachers in the district.

Teaching is a relatively flat career without much opportunity for advancement. If a classroom teacher wants to do something in addition to teaching, she/he may join a committee, create curriculum, or do professional development in the school district; otherwise there are not many options for integrating classroom teaching and work with adults. Middle and high school department chair positions offer some opportunity to combine teaching and coaching. Mentoring and coaching provide opportunities for more experienced teachers to work with adults while continuing to teach students. Thus there is tremendous potential for schools to sustain and invigorate their experienced staff by adding these roles to their teaching assignments.

The Requirements of Successful Coaching

Ongoing professional development is one of the basics of suc-
successful coaching. None of the success stories would have occurred without initial training and sustained support, but mentoring and coaching initiatives need not be expensive. Modest grant funding to pilot programs is useful, yet line items in existing school budgets often support successful mentoring and coaching programs.

Schools and districts can also facilitate coaching through structural changes. For example, making peer coaching part of a multi-year cycle of supervision and evaluation can enhance the likelihood that teachers will participate in this non-judgmental, non-evaluative dialogue with each other. Some administrators offer to cover classes for teachers so they may observe in each other’s classrooms. Other administrators reduce duty assignments as an incentive for participation in a coaching initiative. Administrators who support mentoring and coaching recognize the challenges of daily teaching and are better able to support and sustain the teachers they value.

**Teacher Retention Enhanced**

When good teachers leave the profession, students lose. There are financial costs as well. The replacement cost of teachers can be as little as 20% of their salaries and as much as 200%. (Norton, 1999 and Texas Center for Educational Research, 2000). Putting a fraction of those dollars into professional development that sustains the educators that school districts and states want to keep in the profession is a far better use of limited resources.

Sustaining teachers throughout their careers is a challenging and multi-faceted process. Coaching can be a key component in keeping teachers engaged and excited about their work.

Susan Villani, Ed.D. is a Senior Program/Research Associate at Learning Innovations at WestEd. She specializes in mentoring and induction of new teachers and new principals. She also works with educators to establish and enhance collaborative learning communities. She is the author of *Mentoring Programs for New Teachers: Models of Induction and Support*, *You’re Sure You’re the Principal: On Being an Authentic Leader*, and the recently released *Mentoring and Induction Programs that Support New Principals*. Susan welcomes your comments at svillani@wested.org or (781)-481-1112.


**Critical Friends: A Promise for the Future**

By Pat DiPillo

What would high schools be like if we worked effectively together every day? The answer may lie in the implementation of a critical friends’ group (CFG) (Dunne, Nave, & Lewis, 2000). A critical friends’ group is any group of educators who meet once or twice a month for the purpose of reviewing student work to determine classroom expectations and devise strategies to improve student performance. The CFG has shown itself to be a highly effective method of professional development. Embedded in the concept of the professional learning...
Demystifying Professional Development Through Teacher Collaboration

CFG teachers usually meet on a regular basis to discuss changes to their instructional practices. The CFG model is ideal because it occurs on site and relates specifically to the issues of each individual school. As a result of working with their peers and examining student work, teachers report making substantial alterations to their teaching practice.

This is How We Do It

The longer CFGs are in existence, the more influence they have over transforming school culture. James Gibbons says, “Reform must come from within, not from without.” Since school reform has accomplished so much since its inception, educators are more receptive to the potential benefits that a change in the learning environment can bring. The call for change necessitates the need for training facilitators to lead CFG groups. Teachers need to understand the process in order to effectively participate in group discussions. Ideally, this training might also involve the leadership of the high school, such as principals and curriculum specialists, to enable the process of building coalition and to ensure continued support.

Research states that when leadership changes, sometimes the valuable work of the CFG is negatively affected. The more universal the participation in CFG training, the more consistent and predictable the process becomes until the work of the CFG becomes an integral part of school culture. School culture can profit from continued reliance on CFGs to effect changes in instruction. The more time spent in collegial and collaborative inquiry, the more a CFG can hold and challenge school-wide norms. The CFG promotes a spirit of congeniality and optimistic camaraderie.

Teachers cite collaborative effort and collegiality as leading motivational factors and impetus for making decisions that impact changes in instruction.

We are now at a point where we must educate our children in what no one knew yesterday, and prepare our schools for what no one knows yet.

Margaret Mead

Teachers report that professional learning communities are motivational because they involve the collective efforts of entire school faculties. When teams of teachers work together, they more readily achieve common goals for student learning (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 1992). Since the concept of teacher collaboration is a dominant theme of the CFG, it becomes an important predictor of the changes in teachers’ instructional practices.

Planning time for teachers to collaborate has always been a challenge.

CFGs have been so successful that they have led high schools to redefine their thinking about supporting teachers, resulting in documented changes in classroom instruction. Through a CFG, teachers can address the words of Margaret Mead, “We are now at a point where we must educate our children in what no one knew yesterday, and prepare our schools for what no one knows yet.”
Time Is On Our Side

Planning time for teachers to collaborate has always been a challenge. When we consider all of the time constraints placed on students and educators because of scheduling, we see that little time is left for teachers to discuss their work with one another. The establishment of CFGs in high schools across the board should be a top priority.

How do we provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate and to work with their colleagues to effect change? One solution is to schedule the creative use of time into the day-to-day functions of the school. For example, faculty and departmental staff meetings can become the vehicles through which educators can talk with one another about their teaching and their students. In this way, teachers feel more successful about their teaching skills as they discuss their professional knowledge and methodologies.

What Others Are Doing

Readers may want to investigate the concept of Small Schools as a means to initiate CFGs. The concept of smaller units that allow for a more intimate approach to teaching are an ideal way to begin this process. Dr. Thomas Payzant of the Boston Public Schools has instituted Small Schools in some of the larger urban public high schools in the city. Another expert on this topic in Massachusetts is Dr. Bill Hart, principal of Leominster High School. Working with a sizable grant from the Gates Foundation, Leominster High School instituted Small Schools as a pilot program last year. This year, the entire high school is structured in smaller groups where CFGs work effectively. CFGs can also be found at Amesbury High School, Drury High School in North Adams, Monument Mountain High School in Great Barrington, and in the Worcester public high schools.

As DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker (2002) have stated, a sense of community is established through common values, shared mission and vision, and common goals for student learning. As the CFG continues to evolve and adapt to current needs and educational standards, advanced groups will undoubtedly look at changing instruction with an eye to sharing common qualities for all disciplines and levels. They will also establish further guidelines for standards and expectations as they refine and reflect on their thinking. Common goals are accomplished through constant and continuous team collaboration efforts. A cyclical and ongoing process of reflection, feedback, and renewal (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2002) can have deep implications for the future of educational efforts in the area of professional development. CFGs have made an important contribution to the evolution of professional development. The CFG model has the potential to become the vehicle through which the entire school organization accomplishes effective educational change and improvement.

Pat DiPillo has taught Foreign Languages throughout her teaching career. She has been an assessor for the National Board of Teaching Standards as well as for the Massachusetts MTEL Licensure Tests. In 1985, she was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship and studied at the American Academy in Rome, Italy. She can be reached at Perseus813@aol.com.


Coalition of Essential Schools: www.essentialschools.org

Special thanks to Susan Taber, Ed.M of The Institute of Learning and Development, 25 Hartwell Road, Lexington, Mass.
What do they mean when they tell us to collaborate?” a frustrated educator asks. “We’ve been collaborating for years!”

I listened to this familiar complaint from an Iowa teacher who was, at the time, preparing for the start of a new school year. I drew an imaginary line in my mind from Maryland to Pennsylvania to Ohio to New Jersey and back to Massachusetts. In all those states in which I worked at some point of my career, I had heard the same complaint: “We ARE collaborative.” So what is all the fuss about? Can the etymology of the word collaborative be so obscure?

Collaboration Defined

I went to Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary and found this definition: to work jointly with others, especially in an intellectual endeavor. The word collaborate derives from the Latin collaborare, to labor together. It seemed fairly straightforward to me. Teachers routinely worked together, despite the “one-room schoolhouse syndrome” where a few exceptions closed their doors and worked autonomously. Some arrived at school to share early coffee with their colleagues. Some met for team meetings before or after school. Some dedicated their preparation periods to plan lessons with others. Most, even the knitters, attended routine staff meetings at which, in the best of times, problems were discussed and resolved together and new learning was imparted. So what is all the fuss about?

Collaboration Mandated

I recall a particular New Jersey city whose school system had been taken over by the State for five years as a result of poor performance, even after one of its principals gained notoriety for being “strong enough to make a difference.” The grant dollars poured in for this “needy” district. “How do we spend it all?” the administrators pondered, as some of the money was dedicated to technology upgrades and the rest dedicated to staff development. The question of collaboration was raised again. This time each school in the city was required to select an endorsed program that fostered collaboration among school, home, and community. Collaborative meetings were mandated by each endorsed program. Meetings were to become more meaningful. More principals met with more teachers; more teachers met with more parents; community representatives met with administrators; school boards met with superintendents; focus groups were organized. Gone was the philosophy of my first principal who insisted, in 1968, “Don’t have any meetings. That’s my secret to success. You get people together, you get trouble.”

No Child Left Behind affirms the importance of collaboration. Parent power is increased. Standards are confirmed. Targets are set. School data is aired to the community and to the nation. Consequences are clear. Collaborate or else. So what’s the problem? Why are test scores still remarkably low in our country? Why are teachers and administrators de-energized? Doesn’t positive collaboration support and encourage better performance? What’s wrong?

“Don’t have any meetings. That’s my secret to success. You get people together, you get trouble.”

What’s wrong,” the Iowa teacher complained, “is that now we need agendas and minutes for all our meetings. Too much paperwork. Busy work. I want to be with the kids. I don’t want to be in meetings. Can you imagine that my new principal has mandated that we meet every Wednesday from 9 to 10 a.m. all year! She’s robbing us of prime teaching time. I don’t want to give my students to a substitute every Wednesday. Kindergarteners need structure. They need me with them!”
Why Collaborate?

Therein may lie one secret to the collaboration conundrum. For what purpose is the collaboration to happen? Is the collaboration required so that superintendents and administrators save face, so that test scores look better, so that grant and other spending is justified to dubious taxpayers? Or is the collaboration required so that we can better help our children?

Collaboration At Its Best

I once worked in a school where the special services department modeled excellent collaboration. The director was attuned to his staff in a personal as well as a professional way. The staff, overloaded with needy children to support, discussed their challenges in constructive ways. They, too, ran their meetings with agendas, with focus, with outcomes, but the outcomes always centered on how the children could best be served. The staff understood the quirky personalities of certain faculty members but were determined to work with these personalities. They met weekly with every grade level. They brainstormed together how certain difficult children could better be managed, how parents could better be engaged, how support staff could be mobilized to help special needs children.

Collaboration as a Threat

In addition to the many mandated meetings, the special services department got together before school weekly in my school. Every special services staff member came. The counselors were there as well. Some brought homemade coffee cakes or fresh fruit. The principal was invited to join the meetings as a participant, not as a regulator. The special education director would drop in every now and then. Teachers would ask one another to spend preparation periods observing and helping their colleagues. No compensation was ever asked for working above and beyond contractual hours, for giving up prep periods, for returning to school late in the day to accommodate a working parent. The reward was clear: students thrived. Difficult students became more manageable. Difficult families were assisted productively. Special needs students developed self-confidence and attained success in the most traditional of ways. The special needs students in this school scored higher on State exams than the average of the regular education students across the State during the years when I worked in that school. This is what “collegial” looked like in action. This was successful collaboration.

There was only one problem with the model of this special services team - they didn't want too many people to know how successfully they worked together. They were too humble, too afraid to ‘toot their horn,’ too sensitive to the union chant that work-without-pay made others look bad.

This brings to mind another dimension of collaboration - the dance of those who try to collaborate versus those who refuse to collaborate or are threatened by collaboration.

Why should I share my lesson? one irritated staff member complains. She'll do it then. It's mine.

Why should I listen to the reading specialist? I've been teaching reading for 30 years. She has a nerve telling me what to do.

A new math program? No, I don't want to meet to talk about that. I know how to teach math. Timed tests worked for me. They work for my students too.

Why are the teachers meeting with the superintendent? The superintendent isn't supposed to meet with teachers - she's supposed to meet with the board.
What are they doing every week meeting with the principal? What are they talking about?

This last chant refers to a leadership team of ten professionals who met weekly with their principal to try to promote a collaborative culture in a school that was fragmented by cliques and superstars and interpersonal difficulties among staff members. The team functioned for three years. Their productivity could not be measured because it was “soft” data—the data of interactions, the data of honest confrontation, the data of mutual support. But the team members strengthened their self-confidence and their own resolve. They learned that their voices could create as much impact as the loud and clamorous ones. They learned to reflect in constructive ways on their practice and on the practices of the school. Unlike the collaboration of the special services staff, the collaboration of this group wasn’t directly related to children, but it was clearly related to affecting the environment in which teachers worked. This team had great courage because they were visible and threatening to the power brokers on the staff, even though those power brokers were invited to join the team and the door of the meetings was always left open.

Key Questions

Collaboration, to labor together. Suddenly it seems less straightforward. Or perhaps it’s simpler than we think. The teams that I’ve seen function successfully during my career of more than 25 years in education are those that function with the passionate goal of making schools better, not for themselves, but for others.

If children are being better served, if communication is being improved, if understanding is promoted, if the staff is energized, then collaboration is successful. If not, collaboration is just another word for having a cup of coffee together in the morning.

Elaine M. Pace, Ed.D. has served as a superintendent of schools, an assistant superintendent, a principal, and a director of staff development in New Jersey and in Massachusetts. She is a member of the board of directors of the Massachusetts Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. She works as a consultant in leadership development, mentoring, and strategic planning. Her e-mail address is epace614@adelphia.net.
Coaching: A New Tool for the School

By Sonia Caus Gleason

An increasing number of districts are reacting to poor test scores by hiring school-based professional developers to improve math and literacy results. Often called “coaches,” these professional developers give on-the-job support with the goal of improving instruction through better data collection, planning, and analysis. Coaching is an excellent tool to help sustain educators. Coaching replaces piecemeal teacher professional development presented by people unfamiliar with specific school context. Because coaches typically rise from the teaching ranks, they understand the culture of the school. They can offer “just in time learning” for teachers by providing ongoing support one-on-one or in groups. Over time coaches can become an important part of a professional community. At their best, coaches hone in on a singular school-wide focus and promote continuous professional learning. Getting to know teachers as learners, coaches can identify strategies that help to incorporate high standards into the classroom and into the school. But this process must be carefully crafted. This article discusses district and school-based danger zones that need to be considered to maximize the use of a coach.

District Danger Zones

While districts are getting unprecedented pressure to respond to narrowly defined achievement gaps, they continue to have the responsibility to develop the capacity of teachers and school systems. In this situation, several challenges can surface.

The role of coaches, and what they are expected to deliver and accomplish, is not made equally clear to principals, teachers, and coaches. Districts must be clear about the role of coaches, particularly with regard to the responsibility for changes in teacher, student, and/or school performance. The amount of time spent supporting teacher practice or on student remediation must be established from the start. In the absence of defined expectations, schools may be tempted to deploy coaches to work only in response to short term needs. Clarity at the district level can help all the stakeholders focus on how coaches can be instrumental in improving student and teacher success.

District and/or school cultures may not accept having peers in classrooms. Collaboration is not automatic; there is a need for deliberate groundwork in changing school cultures, especially in regard to having visitors in the classroom. The district has a responsibility to clarify the difference between supervisory visits and professional development observations. Supervisors then need to promise that professional development observations and advice will not ooze into the evaluation process. Districts, desperate for data beyond test scores, may ask for feedback from coaches on teacher and school performance. A coach’s credibility depends on his/her ability to maintain confidential exchanges with teachers and with observations of their work. Breaks in confidentiality can sabotage the coach-teacher relationship, and professional collaboration across the district or school. Tracking trends about professional practices can be managed while anonymity is maintained. Data that will be used to judge a school or teacher must come from a source other than the coach.

A coach accountability system may not be in place. Coaches must be accountable to their supervisors, especially when engaged as change agents in evolving and sometimes amorphous work. Even in a fledgling initiative, is it possible to articulate start-up expectations. These expectations, and their follow-up, extend the work of initial job definition and show that the
effort is serious. As the expectations become clearer, there is a need for building the coach’s skills in areas where weaknesses have been identified. Because coaches and/or supervisors may determine that the job is not a good fit, clear mechanisms are needed to address how coaches can shift to a different role when necessary.

School Danger Zones

When schools interpret and implement district policy and expectations, other dangers may also surface. Several are listed below.

An acceptance of coaching is not created at the school level. As a result, coaches are not welcomed as peer leaders. Without authority, the coaches have trouble changing practice. In this situation, a person who could be the answer to everyone’s professional development dreams (an in-house, ongoing professional developer) is perceived as an interloper. The school community needs to be clear about what support is needed in a content area and in the overall work of professional development; then the coach can be recognized as a response to those needs.

School operational demands divert coaching efforts. With the shortage of human and other resources in many schools, it is easy for coaches to try to make themselves useful by doing work that is not related to coaching. These tasks— from laminating materials to doing paper work to covering classes— may be useful and may help build trust for the short term. But if they start to take up a significant part of the coaches’ days, teachers and administrators may be less likely to turn to coaches as a professional development resource and more as a general curriculum or administrative resource. As a result, the intended improvement in student learning or instructional capacity is not achieved.

Principals must recognize how their daily practices are critical to the success of coaches. Coaches cannot singularly win over teachers with powers of persuasion, charm, and curriculum materials. Principals must provide specific kinds of leverage and support. For example, crafting good schedules and providing teacher coverage facilitate the coach’s presence with individuals and instructional teams. Principals should also be clear about their expectations of concrete shifts in instructional practice and of the types of collaboration. Informal conversations, reviewing expectations, and walkthroughs, are three simple ways to let teachers know that the stated expectations are serious. Frequent conversations between principals and coaches to follow up on expectations can sustain alignment among goals, messages and actions. The principal’s coach’s efforts are reinforced. Principals must be judicious in selecting the teachers to be coached. It is easy to want all teachers to be coached from the onset to maximize the coaching resource. But coach time can’t be distributed evenly with the expectation that everyone will take early advantage of that resource. Because individuals accept innovations at different rates, principals should not force teachers to take advantage of coaching. At the onset, it will be important for the coach to establish some successful models of coaching, so that the entire community can create a mental model of how coaching looks.

Principals can make compelling arguments for engaging coaches and can identify specific actions that the coach can undertake as part of a prescription for improving practice. If teachers are encouraged to initiate contact with the coach, rather than having coaches approach the teachers at the principal’s command, there is a greater likelihood that a teacher will engage the available support.

Principals initially may not be eager to share the coaching function. Some principals’ main strength is coaching and professional development. Sharing the role may be challenging, and deciding how to divide the work may take time and additional energy. Some teachers prefer to work with the principal, and in this case the coach may play the supporting role by providing resources or materials as needed. Conversely, the teacher may be more forthright in discussing strengths and weaknesses of instructional practice with a knowledgeable person who is divorced from the supervision process.

Coaches cannot singularly win over teachers with powers of persuasion, charm, and curriculum materials.
The coaching required for the improving of scores in the short term is often quite different from that required for improving instructional capacity overall.

Final Thoughts

This article points out how to make coaching expectations clear and how to follow through on them at the district and school levels. Such clarity can be helpful whether a district places its primary coaching focus on raising test scores quickly or on improving teaching capacity over the long term. Avoiding the danger zones is vitally important for districts which have identified the improvement of long-term instructional capacity as a primary focus. If a annual Yearly Progress is not the immediate goal, then what is, and how does coaching support the broader and deeper goal of instructional improvement? The coaching required for the improving of scores in the short term is often quite different from that required for improving instructional capacity overall. It is the responsibility of individual districts to determine how coaching strategies align with their instructional improvement plans. Then teachers can begin to engage with the coaches in a way that will serve students and the school.

Sonia Caus Gleason works with districts to strengthen academic achievement and design professional development for a range of instructional leaders, including school coaches. She has coached and consulted to schools and districts for fifteen years. She may be reached at Sc.gleason@verizon.net.


Conga Lines and Culture

By Cheryl Forster

Picture this. It is the first faculty meeting of the year, and teachers have cards hanging around their necks resting on their backs. The cards read: “What I like about you” and there are five spaces to write good things. Conga lines of 10-12 people are everywhere with people writing, touching each other’s shoulders, and laughing. I have a hard time quieting them down and they ask if they can read what has been written on their backs. It gets quiet, and they look around the room to see who might have written something that is “good” about them. School has begun.
We really like each other—and it shows. It is all about the people. The success of a school is all too often measured by test scores and bubble charts.

Making Faculty Meetings Fun

We’ve had faculty meetings in a castle at the beach, on duck boats in Boston, at the bowling alley, and on a boat cruising up and down the Merrimack River. Here at the Ipswich Middle School, we really like each other—and it shows. It is all about the people. The success of a school is all too often measured by test scores and bubble charts. While high academic standards are important, there are other ways to see how success is measured—faculty turnover, for example. Is staff staying or leaving? Does it feel easy and relaxed in the classrooms and halls? Do you hear lively chatter in the classrooms? Are the students happy when they arrive and still smiling when they leave? Are the bathrooms free of graffiti because the students take care of them? Do some teachers actually carry around pictures of kids in their wallets? Are celebrations held on a regular basis? Do people feel joy? Is the setting an easy place in which to be good? A good teacher; a good student; a good administrator.

Our behavior reflects our culture—it shows how we view ourselves and how we want to be perceived. Culture is the life-blood of the school—it provides the support we need on a daily basis and the energy to keep going in a positive vein, no matter what the challenges.

Supporting Teachers

I began my career in education as a substitute teacher and only lasted full time in the classroom for three years—it was just too hard. Too hard to be ready every day, too hard to have my curriculum fresh and innovative, too hard to have it all corrected and recorded. I believe teaching to be the most difficult job in education, much harder than what I do now as a middle school principal. The energy, guts and courage that go into 180 days require stamina, resiliency, and an open heart. Teachers need support around every corner, both professionally and personally. I have come to believe that if teachers feel they are being taken care of, they will in turn, take care of their students. We all are aware of the power every teacher has in his or her classroom to make or break a student’s day and life.

Important Perks

There is always too much to do and never enough time to do it. At the Ipswich Middle School we would not think of holding a faculty meeting without food. At the end of a very busy day, with more work ahead in the evening, refreshments say “thank you.” A little nourishment helps us to shift gears and get into the mind-set of a peaceful and constructive business meeting. Before we begin our business, though, we give balloons to those who are celebrating birthdays, and a door prize is hidden under someone’s seat. When the business part of the meeting is over, I close with a poem and a quiet note of reflection. On a chosen dismal day in the winter, my assistant principal and I go around with a goodies cart. Everyone gets a long stem rose and we serve them coffee, juice, fruit, pastries and a thank you hug. Our simple efforts are appreciated. Students and teachers alike need to feel appreciated and valued. It is a powerful learning tool for students to see how much the faculty and administration enjoy each other. We can still disagree, negotiate, and struggle to find solutions to difficult problems. Collegiality and camaraderie should be automatic, whether we are in a Fortune 500 office or in our schools. We are partners, we are family, and we are here for one another. Whatever internal or external disaster may arise, the person-to-person connection always pulls us through.

The Children are Watching

The children are watching. We are modeling what successful people look like, how we solve problems, how we handle stress, where we go for help, and whether or not we get it. Not all students have the
Collegiality and camaraderie should be automatic, whether we are in a Fortune 500 office or in our schools.

Luxury of learning this at home. Some students must unlearn how to treat people. Both adults and children need to learn how to belong and how not to push people away.

Cheryl Forster is the principal of the Ipswich Middle School where she has served for the past eleven years. She previously served as Ipswich’s first technology integration director and assistant principal of Ipswich High. She is the recipient of the MassCUE Pathfinder Award, the Apple Computer Visionary Administrator Award, and the NASSP HighWired Excellence in Technology Award from AOL. Cheryl sits on the MA DOE Educational Technology Advisory Council and is an adjunct professor at Harvard and Cambridge Colleges. Cheryl may be reached at cforster@ipswichschools.org or cherylf@aol.com.

Already in the Budget

There are so many things we cannot control in our lives and in our jobs. We are over-tested, over-worked and sometimes just plain over-the-top. Kindness, caring, and laughter are free. They are already in the budget.

The cost of not being kind or caring, of not laughing and celebrating together, is huge.

Bridging Education Policy and Practice: From Beacon Hill to Capitol Hill

ASCD held its first annual Leadership for Effective Advocacy and Practice (LEAP) Institute in Washington, DC September 17-20. MASCD President Marinel McGrath, Executive Director Mary Forte Hayes, and Influence and Advocacy Committee Chair Peter Badalament attended this invitation-only event. Peter is one of a small cadre of emerging leaders selected by ASCD.

Prominent, world-renowned authors and educator activists spoke at the institute, each providing expertise and perspectives related to ASCD positions on the whole child, health in education, high stakes testing, and the achievement gap. The speakers inspired and challenged attendees as they illuminated some of the underlying issues and complexities of the ASCD positions.

The institute was a great success. One of the high points was a day on Capitol Hill. On Monday, September 19, the MASCD team met with education advisors to Senators Kennedy and Kerry and Congressmen Markey, Neal and Tierney. The team stressed the need for a balanced assessment system and attention to the whole child to close the achievement gap, and cited stories from MA schools to illustrate the harm of testing as it currently exists. In addition, MASCD leaders shared their work on MA H.4157, the Educator Quality Bill that MASCD has helped to develop and support.

- Educator activist Deborah Meier addressed how schools can ensure that the most vulnerable children get what is necessary to nourish their nation’s democracy.
- Economist Richard Rothstein discussed implications for public policy relating to the social, economic and educational conditions that contribute to the achievement gap.
- Harvard University Kennedy School of Government professor Ronald Ferguson explored usable, practical strategies to address achievement gap issues in schools.
- ASCD leader Frances Faircloth Jones offered her special voice of passion and experience as the closing speaker.
Perspectives Themes and Focus Questions for 2006

Massachusetts educators are encouraged to contribute to an upcoming issue of MASCD’s Perspectives. Authors who wish to contribute to any of the following issues should send to the publications chair (epace614@adelphia.net) a brief description of the proposed article. If your article is accepted for publication, the completed draft will be due by the deadline dates listed below. We encourage authors to submit photographs, charts, and other graphics with their articles.

May 2006
THE MARRIAGE OF POLITICS AND EDUCATION

2. How can politics and education improve their marriage?
3. What is the role of lobbies? By whom? For whom?
4. What motivates educators to become more involved in the political arena?
5. What legal and cultural issues must educators consider when they make their voices heard in the political arena?
6. What challenges are faced by educators who are also politicians (Ex: teachers who serve on school committees, etc.)?

Articles due January 7, 2006

September 2006
DESIGNS FOR LEARNING

1. Does school structure/design determine student destiny?
2. What can high schools adopt from elementary and middle school design?
3. How do the values of educators and communities affect school design?
4. What mental models affect our conceptions about how schools should be designed and run? (Ex: tracking, traditional requirements, sequential courses, physical constraints, etc.)
5. What can we learn from alternative learning designs – schools without walls, mentorships, charter school structures, etc.? non-graded classrooms, looping, schools within schools
6. What does the current research show about the effectiveness of high schools in America?
7. What is the impact thus far of the Gates Foundation grants?

Articles due May 1, 2006

Readers of Perspectives are urged to support House Bill 4157, An Act Relative to Teacher and Administrator Quality Throughout the Commonwealth.
Mentor Award Recipients Guide New Teachers

Shelley Blanchard has been a special education teacher for over 25 years. She frequently volunteers for special projects, and has contributed significantly to the TEAM PRO Mentor Program at Massachusetts Hospital School. Shelley highlights the benefits of collaboration, “Another very important benefit of participating in a successful mentoring relationship is that it encourages the mentor to be empathetic, and to continually assess things from the point of view of the new teacher. Developing and implementing this skill leads to a more positive relationship not just with the new teacher, but also with other teachers and colleagues in the school.”

Liz Loughran suggests the powerful impact a mentor can have, “There are certain people in life that make you want to strive to be your best and work to your full potential. Shelley is one of those people in my life. I admire the teacher and person that she is. Seeing the way she teaches and conducts her classroom makes me want to be the best teacher I can be each day.”

As recipients of the Mentor Award, Desdie and Shelley receive complimentary MASCD membership and registration for themselves and the new teachers they are mentoring at the MASCD institute of their choice.

Nominate a colleague for the 2006 Mentor Award. Application will be available at www.mascd.org after January 1.

Dine and Discuss
Value-added Assessment
January 12, 2006 4-7 pm Andover Public Schools
All Dine & Discuss events are $25 members / $50 non-members and include a light supper.

MASCD Programs
Visit mascd.org for details and registration!

Fall and Winter Institutes

Classroom Walk Throughs
Jerry Goldberg, Teachers
November 4 & 18, 2005
Millennium School (behind Abbott Elem.)
23 Depot Street, Westford, MA 01886

Peer Coaching for Teacher Leaders
Lyndy Johnson, Teachers
January 18 & February 1, 2006
The Millennium School, Westford

Keeping Learning Communities
Focused on Student Achievement
Jill Mirman, Teachers
January 13 & 27, 2006
The Education Cooperative, 1112 High Street
Dedham, MA 02026

Transforming Learning Communities
Matt King, Teachers
March 10 & 24, 2006
Northshore Consortium, 112 Sohier Road
Beverly, MA 01915
Repeat of June 2005 Institute

9th Annual Northeast Annual ASCD Affiliate Conference in Boston
Leading and Learning: Deep and Lasting Improvement
December 2-3, 2005 Pre-Conference: Dec 1, 2005
Michael Fullan, Rick & Becky DuFour, Karen Tankersley and MORE!

Two day institutes are $260 members / $305 nonmembers.
Fee includes training, materials, coffee, pastries and lunch. Team discounts are available.
Coffee and registration at 8:00; program 8:30- 3:30