

Time on Task... coaching or providing test-taking support?

Springtime always brings plenty of sunshine and a renewed spirit after the long, dreary, snowy winter. Unfortunately, it also brings the time of year for test taking and the incredible stress it generates for students, teachers, parents, administrators and instructional coaches. Everyone involved wants the testing process to be manageable without creating huge gaps in teaching and learning. Parents want their children to score in the proficient and advanced categories, taught by teachers who want to work diligently on the curricular issues that are important to the content areas. Administrators want their schools identified as highly performing so that their communities recognize that their districts have designed curriculum and instruction to meet or exceed the academic standards for proficiency. And, of course, instructional coaches want to continue working with teachers in ways that influence instructional practices and improve student learning.

On the other hand, we all know what is at stake for schools. We understand why regular instruction "shuts down" and teachers become testing taskmasters. Testing eligible content identifies what a student should know and be able to do at varying grade levels. It's not the content that is disagreeable or the idea of measuring what students know; what is objectionable is what happens during the testing cycle.

For coaches, the question is all about managing time to collaborate with teachers if the coaching role has changed from the "side-by-side support" of teachers to a one-person system for test planning, distribution, administration, and collection of testing materials. For many coaches, there has been a shift in practice - becoming the owner of the testing cycle has eliminated the classroom and instructional support that has shown such promising results in their work with teachers. In addition, students often view the testing process as the culmination of teaching and learning for the year; in fact, several believe that the school year ends with the completion of the PSSA. They have been conditioned to think that from mid-March to mid-April, the only productive activities are those around the PSSA. Rather than helping students see the testing process as a reflection on what they know and are able to do, testing has become a venue where the only thing that matters is being present for the test and being offered various incentives to increase scores.

So, what's a coach to do? First, coaches must continue to support good instruction. They must help teachers stay focused on delivering relevant content in appropriate ways, continuing to address the diverse learning styles in classrooms. Teachers collaborating with each other

around student work, engaging in study groups around effective instruction, and communicating their shared vision and high expectations will help keep everyone attentive attuned to student learning. Coaches should try to enlist the support of other staff members to form a testing committee so that the responsibilities are shared and coaches can resume their one-on-one work with teachers and other school leaders to support school improvement. As a systems approach to student testing, it is not an isolated task for one or two people. Perhaps each PLC can offer time for testing as a collaborative group effort.

Providing whole school or small group professional development around evidence-based literacy strategies and other research-based instructional techniques will help all stakeholders stay involved in teaching and learning, not just springtime testing. Testing will not go away; how we approach the process and work to maintain a high level of instructional integrity will serve students much better.