

From April 22-24, 2013, PIIC hosted the third statewide professional learning opportunity of the school year. Several instructional coaches, mentors, administrators and other school leaders shared the learning and collaborated in ways that provided multiple opportunities to network, offered numerous chances to connect with colleagues in professional conversations, and engaged in a multitude of ways to receive personalized feedback and talk about issues of common interest. Throughout the entire conference, one theme kept emerging... coaches were meeting and working with a variety of teachers, all of whom wanted to practice their craft better and help students improve their skills.

Instructional coaches are tasked with working with colleagues who may or may not welcome the prospect of collaborating with each other or sharing a collective vision of how to make changes that result in the implementation of effective instructional practices and improved literacy learning. They must listen with the intent to understand how the leadership of the school/district views effective practice and, at the same time, advocate for teachers and support their efforts to improve their own skills while promoting school change. They must continue to communicate effectively, help staff and students think critically and collectively problem solve. They create a platform for individualized learning, share effective instructional practices, help establish professional learning communities and keep the idea of ongoing professional learning first and foremost so all are members in a community of learning and practice.

And soon, instructional coaches will be evaluated on how effective they are in changing lives!

As you know, coaches are on the side of helping teachers implement effective instructional practices. They will work with teachers to help them identify goals for growth and collaborate on ways to accomplish those goals. Much of what they do will be "offstage" since their work is primarily to engage with adult learners and help them become reflective practitioners and metacognitive about the work they do.

As instructional coaches move forward in their practice and help shape how classroom practices, individual practices, school wide practices, and ongoing professional learning are reflected in student outcomes, they need to keep two questions front and center: *"What am I doing as a coach to help teachers change and improve their practice"*

and

"What am I doing as a coach to help teachers improve student engagement and student outcomes?"

These are the

essential questions

that need to guide all thinking, planning, problem-solving, classroom visitations, and debriefing when working one-on-one and in small groups. It's not just about how a teacher or coach or principal will be evaluated... it's all about how we create an environment that is flexible and conducive to change; supportive of a multitude of learning styles; and non-threatening for students, teachers, coaches and administrators. We need a place where all stakeholders take ownership of their learning and are active participants in establishing relationships and partnerships that are safe, respectful, and intentional; we need environments that are responsive to a variety of learners and honor the skill set of the students and staff; we need to focus on how the lives of students and staff are changed through the practices that are habitual, thoughtful, collaborative, and consistent. We need instructional coaches to work side-by-side as elbow partners to reflect with colleagues and make changes that generate positive student and staff interactions. We need innovation, creativity, critical thinking skills and open communication to remove the obstacles that impede progress. At the same time, we must recognize that change takes time and going from "good to great" is a labor of love for instructional coaches... let them do their job.

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