

# ROLE OF THE COACH: DREAM KEEPER, SUPPORTER, FRIEND

*On-site coach's job is wide-ranging and ever-changing*

*By Susan Herll with Brooke O'Drobinak*

As I sit at lunch to plan with my school's external reform coach, she asks me to describe my role as an on-site reform coach. We revisit my initial job description, which has clearly evolved. I have played the part of dream keeper, instructional leader, supporter, teacher, facilitator, friend, and reformer. As an on-site coach, I have had to adjust to the needs of those with whom I work and the dynamic nature of my school. Over these two years, I have come to realize that there are three important aspects to surviving and thriving as a coach: disposition, process, and prioritization.

## Disposition toward the work

I was a teacher for three years before being hired by my peers for this position. I had worked on three different grade-level teaching teams and served on many school committees. The teachers saw me as a colleague. I knew as I took this new position that I would have to become a coach who could handle the strong beliefs and ideas of the staff I was working with.

Once I became the on-site coach, I had to figure out how to work with my peers in a different way. I could not be perceived as a promoted peer who was deemed an expert in teaching and learning, or a favorite. I had to maintain a disposition of a fellow learner grappling with ways to best serve our students.

In my quest to become a fellow learner, I have come to recognize that being a good teacher and an effective team member do not necessarily equate to being a good and effective on-site coach. I soon realized adult learners possess a distinct set of characteristics that I needed to tend to in order to be useful. I immediately recalled two of Judith Warren Little's tenets on adult learning (1982): Adult learning is enhanced by behaviors that demonstrate respect, trust, and concern for the learner, and adults want to be the originators of their own learning--that is, involved in selecting objectives, content, activities, and assessment.

I began with building trust. I had to know my colleagues as people and as professionals, building their belief that I was on their team, ready and available to walk alongside them in their classrooms. I had to take time, lots of it, to listen to their concerns about teaching and learning, continually monitoring my disposition toward their requests and inquiries: Was I portraying that I knew it all, or was I approaching the issue with a genuine openness and mindfulness of the learning opportunity before me?

Knowing what my colleagues wanted to learn became important to my work. Supporting their professional development goals became my focus. I quickly learned that my notions of what teachers should be focusing on could not dictate my role. Although we had a schoolwide goal to improve literacy, I could not push what I thought they should be working on or what questions I thought they should have. There was no way I could make them own the vision that I possessed.

Although it was easy for me to get along with my colleagues, I found a challenge in facilitating their differences. Their viewpoints about how the reform should be implemented or what instructional practices best served students created some heated debates. I had to negotiate these rough waters, maintaining a neutral stance that made it safe for us as a staff to talk about these difficult issues. I set up regular time during team and faculty meetings to discuss issues. Typically in these meetings we would use

Overland Trail Middle School  
Brighton, CO

**Number of schools:** 41 elementary schools, 12 middle schools, five high schools, five special campuses

**Grades** 6-8

**Enrollment:** 600

**Staff:** 35

**Racial/ethnic mix:**

White: 54%

Black: 2%

Hispanic: 40%

Asian/Pacific Islander: 3%

Native American: 1%

Other: 0%

**Limited English proficient:** 25%

**Languages spoken:** English, Spanish

**Free/reduced lunch:** 36%

**Special education:** 11%

**Contact:**

Susan Herll,

In-house coach

455 N. 19<sup>th</sup> Ave.

Brighton, CO 80601

**Phone:** (303) 655-4000

**Fax:** (303) 655-2880

**E-mail:** sherll@brightonps27j.k12.co.us

conversation protocols that addressed a central question or concern. Resources from the Colorado Critical Friends Group, Turning Points Guides, and the National School Reform Faculty came in handy as I determined what activities and protocols would increase the likelihood of productive conversations.

## **Process of change**

Understanding the process of change--pinpointing exactly what areas our school was trying to change and how to prioritize these areas--has been my greatest learning curve. Gradually our focus became clearer as we as a staff asked questions and discussed what we wanted for our students. I continued to work with individual grade-level teams to define what they wanted their students to know and be able to do. We worked together to identify strategies that, as a team, they would implement. I provided research articles, books, and staff development opportunities to aid in their learning, observed individual teachers, and gave them feedback about whatever they had chosen to focus on to improve.

However, I recognized early on that I could not operate alone to facilitate the change process and address the multiple areas that needed improvement. I learned to rely heavily on a teacher leadership group, formed at the end of the first year of our schoolwide improvement effort. Our principal, our external reform coach, and I identified the need for a team of teacher leaders to build the capacity of the reform effort and sustain the effort over time, particularly after external support waned. A teacher from each grade-level team applied for the job. These teacher leaders help create improvement on their teams as they take the lead to learn and improve themselves. I organize a meeting once a month for us to learn together and plan. This group helps sustain the momentum of the schoolwide change process.

In addition, I make sure to consistently meet with each teacher leader individually to see what I can help with. I plan, co-teach, or demonstration teach, depending on what they want. I provide resources they would not normally know about. In addition, at our monthly teacher leader meetings we discuss their grade-level team meetings and how to make those meetings more relevant to student learning.

In the beginning, I attended every grade-level team meeting each week. I helped teacher leaders plan the meetings and also facilitated quite a few. This had both positive and negative effects. By being at each grade-level meeting, I was able to model for the teacher leaders options and ideas they could use. It enabled me to work with every teacher and was an easy way to find out how I could assist each person. The teachers didn't see me as a threat. They saw I was ready to roll up my sleeves and dig in. On the downside, I spent most of my time preparing for meetings. I didn't have time to work with teachers in their classrooms or to plan for instruction. I soon had to ask, "Where would my work be most beneficial?" Since I had been working with the teacher leaders, building their knowledge and capacity, I began using most of my time with those teachers and their students in the classroom. I still spend time in team meetings and facilitate meetings when the teacher leaders ask, either to help with a challenge or to try a new discussion technique. However, my focus has changed to working more one-on-one.

In our second year, we increased the teacher leader's role. Each one is now also a "department chair" for each subject area in the middle school. The idea behind subject-area learning groups is to discuss the vertical alignment of each curriculum, as well as to look at student work and learning. The departments meet each month, and these meetings look much like team meetings--focusing the work around learning, teaching, and assessment within the classroom. We still are changing our strategies and perfecting the role of the teacher leader. Together the teacher leaders and I, the on-site coach, constitute a strong leadership component in whole school reform.

I now spend most of my time supporting teachers in their classrooms. I work with any teacher who has expressed interest; however, I focus on teacher leaders as an important part of building their capacities as instructional leaders. I continue to delve deep into research about what are considered best instructional and schoolwide practices. I set up and participate in book studies. I continue to identify professional development opportunities and the funds to provide them to teachers across the school. I work with the teacher leader team to explore school structures such as effective teaming practices, peer classroom observation, internal classroom labs, looking at student work, and block scheduling.

My favorite part of the job as on-site coach is my work in the classrooms. In our first year, I observed all the teachers in the school. I did not judge their teaching. A nonevaluative approach gave me an in with the teachers. In an immediate post-conference, I described for them the effective practices I

saw. Eventually, as they began to view me as a support person rather than evaluator, I was invited to coach them in areas they wanted to work on, such as conferring with students, matching students to text, reading in science, and authentic assessment. I now look for specific practices in the teachers' classrooms that are guided by their inquiries, which are based on school improvement goals. After I observe, we debrief, revisiting the lesson and noting both the strengths and areas for refinement. The teacher then creates a plan of action to improve his or her instruction. In addition, I give each teacher a short write-up in which I compliment and challenge the teacher. Occasionally, a teacher asks me to co-teach a lesson or demonstrate a particular strategy. These opportunities keep my feet wet. I believe my most measurable difference can be made in the classroom with the teacher and students.

### **Prioritizing content**

Within the change process lies the heart of reform. Priority areas that drive the change are often tricky to define. Early on, our school wanted to focus on several areas: the meaning of school reform; practices in math, reading, and writing; data-driven decision making; community; and professional development. We quickly realized our initial goals were unrealistic. We could not work on all of these areas or do them well at the same time. We had to prioritize.

I spent time with each grade-level team facilitating discussions that led to the teams deciding to focus on three areas, based on what they wanted to examine and what they would be willing to participate in. We chose to focus on the change process, classroom practice, and professional development.

Our professional development plan grows and changes. We knew in the beginning that, in addition to in-classroom support, to make our professional development days truly effective, we needed to create activities our staff wanted and needed. At the beginning of the year, I surveyed teachers to assess what they wanted to learn. During one districtwide professional development day, each workshop at our school was taught by one of our own staff members. I helped teachers identify their strengths and encouraged them to share their expertise. The teacher leaders then were able to follow up on the sessions within their own team meetings. The learning was ongoing, rather than a one-time sit-and-get experience.

As the on-site coach, I am constantly changing to meet the changing needs of our school. It has taken some juggling and a great deal of learning. I am certain, and my external change coach tells me, that if I did not continually work to keep my disposition as a fellow learner, neither my knowledge about the process nor knowledge of the content would matter.

### **References**

Little, J.W. (1982). Norms of collegiality and experimentation: Workplace conditions of school success. *American Educational Research Journal*, 19(3), 325-340.

### **Resources:**

- Colorado Critical Friends Group, [www.coloradocfg.org](http://www.coloradocfg.org)
- Turning Points: Transforming Middle Schools, [www.turningpts.org](http://www.turningpts.org)
- National School Reform Faculty: Looking at Student Work, [www.lasw.org](http://www.lasw.org)

### About the Authors

Susan Herll is an on-site facilitator at Overland Trail Middle School. You can contact her at the Brighton School District, 455 N. 19th Ave., Brighton, CO 80601, (303) 655-4000, fax (303) 655-2880, e-mail: [sherll@brightonps27j.k12.co.us](mailto:sherll@brightonps27j.k12.co.us).

Brooke O'Drobinak is a Turning Points coach with the Public Education & Business Coalition. You can contact her at 1410 Grant St., Suite A-101, Denver, CO 80220, (303) 861-8661, fax (303) 861-1501, e-mail: [bodrobinak@pebc.org](mailto:bodrobinak@pebc.org).