

COACHING MOVES BEYOND THE GYM

Successful site-based coaching offers lessons

By Ruth Galm and George S. Perry Jr.

The word "coach" in school used to mean only the person who taught gym class. Today, dozens of teacher leaders who coach adults as on-site staff developers are at work in three districts that are part of a program launched in 1994 by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation. The program, aimed at helping districts improve middle school achievement, has successfully used school-based staff developers to improve both teacher and student learning.

The three urban, ethnically diverse districts, all with large populations of poor students and English language learners, have shown positive results. At three of the traditionally lowest-performing middle schools in San Diego, Calif., for example, standardized test scores are up significantly. Two of the three schools more than doubled the state-set targeted increase in test scores between 2002 and 2003.

Five middle schools in Corpus Christi, Texas, that participated in the initiative each increased the percentage of students passing the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) by 3% to 15% between 2001 and 2002. In 2003, students exceeded expectations for performance in the first year of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) by 2% to 40%. Between 22% and 35% of students in the cohort group at these schools increased their reading comprehension test scores more than three grade levels in three years. And each school reversed the trend of middle school students losing ground in reading comprehension.

In the third district, Long Beach, Calif., coaching was implemented in low-performing "focus" schools, but not across all middle schools. Schools that used coaches along with other initiatives showed improvement.

The Clark Foundation hired two independent consulting and research organizations to help the three districts and schools develop site-based staff development: Perry and Associates, which provided support and feedback, and Education Matters, which prepared formative evaluations on the implementation of the site-based staff development model in San Diego. Those evaluations and years of experience have yielded valuable information.

Lessons learned

The experiences in the districts using on-site staff developers taught those involved in the program the following:

1. Start with a focus on student achievement goals and teacher performance objectives.

When staff developers are given and assume responsibility for creating improvement plans, changes in teacher practice accelerate. The on-site developers worked with teachers to identify objectives for improving teaching practices and then finalized the plan with the principal. Results were best when ownership for the plans shifted from principals to staff developers and teachers.

CREATE AND ENVIRONMENT WHERE COACHING THRIVES

A checklist for schools

- **Select** staff developers comfortable with conflict, resistance, and multiple demands on their time.
- **Be clear** on the mission, role, and development of site-based staff developers.
- **Help** staff developers have a greater impact by focusing them on one or two goals within the school's overall mission.
- **Get** external support on the content, process, and implementation of coaching from critical friends such as school district administrators (long-term) or outside consultants (short-term).
- **Create** ways to collaborate. Constructive feedback between critical friends and staff developers helps create a supportive environment.
- **Focus** resources on training coaches in both the knowledge of the curriculum content to be improved (e.g. math instruction) and the coaching process.
- **Offer** new coaches guidance from mentor staff developers including teacher leaders or veteran staff developers

Corpus Christi and San Diego schools had difficulty clearly defining and sticking to specific student achievement goals. Attempts to create professional development plans that linked the staff developers' work to changes in teaching practice and ultimately improvements in student performance were initially unsuccessful. While all schools set goals for improving reading comprehension, they often had to rethink their goals and respond to changing requirements on state tests or new knowledge they developed about teaching literacy.

2. Be clear about the staff developer's mission and role.

Site-based staff developers were most effective when principals set clear expectations for how the staff developers should work with teachers, communicated with the staff developers regularly, and gave them discretion in working with individual teachers.

In some schools, staff developers followed the principal's direction completely and reported daily on their work with teachers. In other schools, staff developers met with the principal only infrequently. Both extremes undermined the staff developers' effectiveness, and they had a more difficult time taking the initiative to either coach teachers or design professional development programs.

A strong administrative presence and clearly defined roles helped staff developers build and sustain confidentiality and trust. In schools where teachers heard regularly from the principal that staff developers were there to support and not to evaluate them, the staff developers were able to more easily build trusting relationships. Principals reinforced the importance of the work by participating in classrooms with the staff developers, talking to teachers about instruction, and encouraging teachers to work with the staff developers.

In addition, principals had to avoid asking staff developers to substitute teach, manage materials, or administer tests. "A principal needs to protect time during and outside the day so nothing interferes with administrators, coaches, and teachers having conversations" about coaching, said Rheba Jones, principal at Martin Middle School in Corpus Christi, now in its third year of site-based staff development. "That is how you convey to people what you want out of the work."

3. Support the staff developers.

Staff developers in the program wanted to have greater content knowledge and to improve their coaching skills. They needed to know how to engage and work with adults. Those hired as staff developers were not always the strongest teachers in their content areas, and none of them had experience coaching adults. Their strengths were their willingness to learn and to work with other adults, and their ability to collaborate with the principal.

The San Diego district set regular professional learning sessions for the staff developers. The sessions focused almost exclusively on strengthening content knowledge and instructional strategies.

SETTING UP ON-SITE DEVELOPMENT

The commitment to using staff developers differed in the three districts:

- ◆ Corpus Christi: Staff developers were established first in three middle schools, and the practice spread to include one or two staff developers in about half of the district's 13 middle schools.
- ◆ Long Beach: Academic coaching positions were created in low-performing or focus schools, but did not become a practice across all middle schools.
- ◆ San Diego: All of the middle schools have staff developer/peer coach positions, and four to six staff developers worked in each of three Clark-funded schools.

Each school within the districts structured its site-based staff development differently.

- ◆ Some have staff developers who, in addition to their regular teaching schedule, act as peer coaches for one or two colleagues once a week.
- ◆ In other schools, full-time staff developers work with teachers one-on-one and in groups for periodic cycles of intensive modeling and collaboration.
- ◆ In many schools, staff developers lead professional development sessions at grade-level, department, or faculty meetings. They also coach teachers and coordinate professional development resources.

The Clark foundation helped fund some of this work, but the school districts--and in some cases individual schools--began over time to fund the positions themselves.

Staff developers with strong subject matter backgrounds seemed to have more confidence and enjoyed immediate credibility with teachers. However, many continued to worry about their colleagues' perception of them. Most at some point wanted to teach part-time to apply new strategies and learning in real situations.

The schools used multiple strategies to build the staff developers' coaching skills, including cognitive coaching exercises. In all schools, principals and consultants designed and facilitated ways to help staff developers in and between schools rely on each other for ideas on how to support and reach teachers. Principals scheduled regular meetings for staff developers between schools. The staff developers benefited from structured opportunities to meet and talk with one another. The collaboration between schools helped improve each person's skills, particularly when a principal and staff developer set targets for their own learning and asked for feedback on their progress in reaching their targets.

Attempts to have principals and staff developers partner with schools experienced in implementing on-site staff development met with uneven success. In general, principals and staff developers were busy with their own programs and did not want to be away from their schools.

In San Diego and Corpus Christi, consultants who were veteran staff developers helped school and district staff think about and model coaching practices. After initial resistance, San Diego staff developers began to value sessions with an external facilitator in which they critiqued their own coaching and presentations. Cynthia Terry, co-principal of Cabrillo High School in Long Beach, Calif., said, "Having a coach for my coaches has made the difference in developing coaches who build capacity among teachers instead of enabling them to continue as they are."

4. Build relationships with district staff and other schools.

Not only is trust important within the school, but trust between schools and with district administrators also are essential for building communities of learners. Ideally, district leaders must be willing to set up a system of two-way communication where administrators and staff developers can talk freely about a coaching technique that is not working or give critical feedback after applying it in schools.

In all three districts in the program, the districts' role in building trust and communication evolved over time. The Clark foundation funded district-school study groups in each district that met regularly to discuss district initiatives. In Long Beach, the deputy superintendent organized quarterly meetings of the central office leaders of the curriculum, professional development, research and assessment, and middle school offices with middle school principals and teachers to discuss implementing the literacy initiative. Also, Long Beach's deputy superintendent started principal meetings, in which principals would meet informally to talk about instruction and share what they learned with each other and then with other middle schools. The practice continues because participants value it.

In San Diego, the superintendent, chief academic officer, and other central office leaders began meeting monthly in 2003 with principals from the three Clark-funded middle schools to look at the schools' experiences with selecting, training, and using staff developers and how to measure staff developers' effectiveness. San Diego district leaders also convene principal study groups on instruction. In Corpus Christi, consultants worked with staff to establish standards for staff development, including the roles of staff developers. In each case, two-way communication and trust building were among the intended outcomes.

5. Acknowledge mismatches and be willing to make changes.

Coaching adults is difficult and not for everyone. Staff developers must be comfortable with conflict, resistance, and multiple demands on their time. They must be able to work in a collaborative, nonconfrontational way and operate as colleagues, rather than administrators. As leaders, staff developers must be willing to model reflective practice for teachers and be prepared to develop expertise in their new roles.

In each of the program schools across the three districts, teachers who became staff developers struggled with their new role, particularly in the first six months. Most had taught full-time before becoming staff developers. Principal and mentor support helped many of the staff developers succeed. However, some were uncertain about the job, and others did not get the support they needed to be successful. Several staff developers simply turned out not to be a good fit for the position. In those cases, the school leader and the individual agreed on an exit strategy to create a smooth transition into another position in the school or in the district.

<p>Corpus Christi Independent School District Corpus Christi, Texas</p> <p>Number of schools: 41 elementary schools, 12 middle schools, five high schools, five special campuses</p> <p>Enrollment: 39,394</p> <p>Staff: 2,597</p> <p>Racial/ethnic mix:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> White: 20.8% Black: 5.6% Hispanic: 71.9% Asian/Pacific Islander: 1.3% Native American: 0.3% Other: 0% <p>Limited English proficient: 7.5%</p> <p>Languages spoken: 26</p> <p>Free/reduced lunch: 59.7%</p> <p>Special education: 14.2%</p> <p>Contact:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Jesus Chavez, Superintendent 801 Leopard St. Corpus Christi, TX 78401</p> <p>Phone: (361) 886-9002</p> <p>Fax: (361) 886-9101</p> <p>E-mail: jhchavez@admin.corpus-christi.k12.tx.us</p>	<p>San Diego City Schools San Diego, Calif.</p> <p>Number of schools: 123 elementary schools, 23 middle schools, 18 high schools, 13 facilities with atypical grade configuration (K-6, 10-12); and 10 alternative schools</p> <p>Enrollment: 140,743</p> <p>Staff: 17,705 full-time equivalent teachers</p> <p>Racial/ethnic mix:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> White: 26.6% Black: 15.6% Hispanic: 39.7% Asian/Pacific Islander: 16.4% Native American: N/A Other: 1.7% <p>Limited English proficient: 29.4%</p> <p>Languages spoken: 64 other than English</p> <p>Free/reduced lunch: 56.4%</p> <p>Special education: 10.7%</p> <p>Contact:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Alan Bersin, Superintendent 4100 Normal St. San Diego, CA 92103</p> <p>Phone: (619) 725-5578 (Communications Dept.)</p> <p>Fax: (619) 725-5578</p> <p>E-mail: abersin@mail.sandi.net</p>	<p>Long Beach Unified School District Long Beach, Calif.</p> <p>Number of schools: 60 elementary schools, 15 middle schools, 10 high schools, one K-12, two alternative schools, and one continuation school for those over 16 to finish high school</p> <p>Enrollment: 97,454</p> <p>Staff: 4,585</p> <p>Racial/ethnic mix:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> White: 17.1% Black: 18.8% Hispanic: 48.1% Asian/Pacific Islander: 15.6% Native American: 0.3% Other: 0% <p>Limited English proficient: 32.8%</p> <p>Languages spoken: 31</p> <p>Free/reduced lunch: 66.4%</p> <p>Special education: 7.6%</p> <p>Contact:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Lynn Winters, assistant superintendent 1515 Hughes Way Long Beach, CA 90810</p> <p>Phone: (562) 997-8226</p> <p>Fax: (562) 997-8289</p> <p>E-mail: lwinters@lbusd.k12.ca.us</p>
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Final Thoughts

Improving and changing teaching so all children learn to high levels is intense and complex work. We found no way to shortcut intensive, coordinated, and continuous attention to improving teaching and learning. Teachers and administrators also need a system of support tailored to the specific strengths and needs of schools and of individual teachers.

Site-based staff developers who devote time and expertise to coach individual teachers in their classrooms on a regular basis offer one of the most powerful types of professional development. The experiences of the three school systems supported by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation's Program for Student Achievement show that site-based staff developers may hold the best promise for helping teachers strengthen their practice and raise student achievement.

About the Authors -

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