Coaching Isn't Just For Athletes

The Role of Teacher Leaders

In schools all over Boston, change coaches and content coaches are offering principals and teachers the kind of professional development that research says is most effective: ongoing, in school, high quality, focused on instruction. Ms. Guiney provides the details.

BY ELLEN GUINEY

THE shapes on the students' papers look like puffy clouds with spindly legs, hardly the stuff of which strong foundations are built. But looks can be deceiving. Inside these airy structures, students in Helen O'Malley's fourth-grade class are placing their most precious words, the ones

that will be the cornerstones of their writing adventures.

The words *My new neighborhood* find their home inside one girl's cloud. From its protruding stick-like legs, this fourth-grader hangs other phrases to help connect her thoughts:the dance studio, where the new neighborhood is,the way it is different, the places there. Each of these is a notation designed to prompt images that will emerge in her writing. Soon she writes: "I moved a couple of weeks ago. I'm kind of lonely because I haven't made any new friends yet. I used to live in Dorchester and have a lot of friends there. Now I live in Roslindale."

In Ms. O'Malley's room, now quieted by the industriousness of its occupants, Writers' Workshop is under way.

Helen O'Malley, now in her ninth year of teaching, her first in the Boston Public Schools, welcomes whatever advice Charlotte Teplow, Everett School's content coach, can offer. With Teplow's weekly guidance and instructional modeling, Writers' Workshop has become the tool that is propelling O'Malley's students to write with enthusiasm and demonstrate steady, measurable progress.

"Initially I was sort of anxious because I was not quite sure what Charlotte's role was going to be in my classroom," O'Malley says. "I thought she was going to be there critiquing my lessons,saying to me, 'We do this, this, and this in Writers' Workshop.' And it hasn't been like that at all. It has just developed into a collegial relationship. Charlotte is there to reassure me, to guide me. She offers me suggestions, but she does so in a manner that enables me, half the time, to feel that *I* am coming up with these wonderful ideas."

"You are!" Teplow responds.

In schools all over Boston, external coaches like Charlotte Teplow — often former teachers with expertise in school reform (change coaches) or literacy or math (content coaches) — are offering principals and teachers the kind of professional development that research says is most effective: ongoing, in school, high quality, focused on instruction. The one-day-a-week consultants are doing everything from leading teachers through Writers' Workshop training to helping them analyze results of newly implemented formative assessments. Each coach's work is grounded in Boston's districtwide reform effort but customized to the specific learning needs of the students and the adults in each school.

Superintendent Thomas Payzant's blueprint for standards-based, urban school reform aims to improve student performance by improving teaching, particularly for the estimated 30% of students who have routinely advanced in school without mastering the material. Boston's approach to whole-school improvement rests on two central strategies: 1) focus on instruction and on professional development to improve instruction; and 2) place an unwavering emphasis on helping teachers work together, make their work public, and end teacher isolation. In the process,teacher leadership emerges.

Coaching and Teacher Leadership

To support this kind of change, the Boston Public Schools created a new kind of professional development that integrates teachers' learning with teachers' practice, gives participants ongoing feedback, and makes these activities a whole-school,collegial endeavor. Crucial players are the coaches. They don't "teach" teachers. Instead, they do their work *with* teachers, helping them to imagine and create another reality, helping them to engage in regular, reflective discussions about instruction.

This is not work for the faint-hearted. To do it well requires a calm disposition and the trust-building skills of a mediator combined with the steely determination and perseverance of an innovator. Add to this mix the ability to know when to push and when to stand back and regroup in the long-term process of adopting new approaches to galvanize a school to function differently. To succeed, a coach must be a leader who is willing not to be recognized as such and, at the same time, who is able to foster leadership among teachers who rarely regard themselves as leaders.

"The crucial step in coaches' work is how they approach the faculty," says Richard Martin, who is the change coach at Everett and both the content and change coach at Hurley Elementary School. "In the beginning, coaches have to show what they can do, but the vibes they transmit must be very, very gentle. It's personal. Coaches need to engage in a number of situations that foster personal trust building. The aim is really trying to connect to the teaching soul."

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Given the delicacy of these coach/teacher and coach/administrator relationships, it is encouraging that the coaching model shows early evidence of success. Student scores on standardized tests are higher at many of the schools in which coaches have been longest at this task. Several schools have had dramatic increases on parts of the state's difficult test, the MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System) — increases that can be directly connected to teachers' work that was undertaken with their coaches. It's clear that,under the guidance of coaches,many teachers are adopting new strategies that appear to be resulting in improved student learning.

Changes are also evident in things as difficult to quantify as the culture of a school. "Teachers now come up to me and say, 'Hey, I tried this and look what the kids did!' They want to share it with me and with each other," says Joyce Campbell,an administrator at Brighton High School. Before the coaches arrived, Campbell rarely heard teachers sharing this kind of constructive information with one another. If teachers passed anything along to colleagues, it was usually in the form of complaints — and those complaints rarely involved instructional matters. Indeed, most of the time teachers kept to themselves, isolated by long-established patterns in which teachers were expected to pay attention only to

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what went on inside their own classrooms. The notion that they could — as faculty members sharing teaching experiences — become instructional leaders in the school is one that has taken time to sink in and seems to emerge only with the focused and gentle prodding of capable coaches.

"To me, hearing teachers talk with each other in this way is very gratifying," Campbell says. "I don't hear them complain anymore. That has really been cut down. And the coaches have really helped with all of this. That's certain."

Brighton High School: Taking Best Writing Practices Schoolwide

"Our coaches have played a leadership role in what we are doing," says Charles Skidmore, headmaster of Brighton High School. "When our school decided to put a real emphasis on writing and on developing key questions for students, it was our coaches who were able to come in and with some authority say, 'Here is a good way to do it.' They didn't say, 'This is the only way to do it' or 'We have all the answers,' but they were willing to say, 'Tell us what you are doing and let us connect you to other people and show you other practices we've seen.' So we were able to really move."

In the initial stages of their work on whole-school improvement, Brighton's teachers made progress in developing district-required "key questions" — broad, open-ended queries that provide opportunities for students to display their writing skills while testing their knowledge of what has been taught. "What the teachers weren't able to do was come to any kind of agreement about how to judge the students' writing," Skidmore says. "It was our coaches who said, 'Well, there are some protocols you can look at for this.' These were ways to look at writing that helped us see that measuring quality was not subjective."

What followed was a lengthy, collaborative process involving teachers in the development of a schoolwide objective measurement of writing now known as Brighton High's writing rubric. Coaches are training teachers in using it as a tool to gauge how well students are able to transmit ideas through written words.

"The entire process involves a buy-in by teachers," Skidmore says. "And I think that is where the coaching really worked as coaching. If our teachers had looked at the protocol and said, 'No, we're not going to do that — we don't want that,' then the coaches would have said, 'We'll find something else, something that works for you.' "

Even though the protocols the coaches suggested for assessing student writing have worked at Brighton, along the way there has been resistance from some teachers, says Skidmore. "Teachers were saying, 'Why should I correct the same paper that somebody else corrected? And it's not even a paper that has anything to do with me. I teach history. Why should I look at English?' But the coaches were able to explain why they should do that."

Teachers' conversations about student work might, on the surface, appear to be about coming to agreement on scores. But what actually happens — when it is done well — is that teachers start talking among themselves about how they can teach so that their students can begin to achieve at higher levels. "It's this thinking about their practice that helps teachers to change their practice," says Otherine Neisler, the content coach at Brighton High. Skidmore adds, "The coaches have been able to say to our faculty members, 'Give a little bit more. Do a little bit more. Dig a little bit deeper, and see if you get something better for it.' "

"What we do is similar to what an athletic trainer does," says Roseanne Bacon Meade, Brighton's change coach. "We're like the person who says, 'You might find it easier to catch a fly ball to center if you did this or that in an exercise program.' "

"And to continue the analogy further," says Skidmore, "the suggestion comes from the coach. It is not coming from the teacher's department head or from his or her evaluator or principal. No one is saying, 'You have to do this' or 'I am going to judge you on it.' Instead, somebody is saying, 'Here is an idea. Give it a try . . .' And all of this sends a message that the focus at this school is on teaching and learning."

Shaw Middle School: Getting Assistance 'Over the Shoulder'

Audrey Friedman wrote a poem this morning. It was inspired by a plant that was dying from lack of water and by an eighth-grade teacher who had asked her, as the school's content coach, to demonstrate a method for engaging students in ways to help one another improve their poetry writing. Friedman's poem is projected onto the wall of the classroom, and she and the teacher, Meredith Toth, are helping students edit it.

Toth sought out Friedman's coaching assistance when it became apparent that her students were not able to move from draft to draft when they wrote poetry. And though she tried to teach them how, her lessons were not working. "They don't believe they can change anything," Toth told Friedman after she'd reviewed the work of the students in the poetry unit she was teaching. Nor had she been able to convince them that they could help one another to do so.

This kind of instructional analysis, which results in a teacher's seeking coaching help to improve her classroom technique in order to strengthen student performance, is one of the benefits of looking at student work collaboratively and comparing that work to standards. Out of that process at Shaw, there developed teacher-to-teacher and teacher-to-coach discussions about what constitutes high-quality writing across the grades. "The only correlate between faculty planning time and improved student achievement is when teachers are talking with one another about instruction, curriculum, and assessment," says Dan French, the change coach at Shaw, where teachers have common planning sessions every day and coaches attend once a week.

"When I first started here, Shaw was at the bottom of the bottom in Stanford 9 scores for the middle schools in this district," French notes. "This year it's in the top quartile of the middle schools, and those that are above it have advanced-work classes and this school doesn't. The school is not where I think it should be, but it has made significant progress in student achieve-

ment. The teachers and coaches can see this when we analyze samples of student writing and assess their quality."

In Toth's classroom, Friedman begins modeling the poetry lesson by asking the students, "Can you make suggestions about changes I might make?" As she starts to toss out a few ideas about what she might do differently and why, the students enthusiastically offer suggestions.

One student comes up with the idea of adding "-ing"to a few of the words to vary the sounds. Another wants to add some alliteration, a term Friedman reviewed with them during this process. She makes their suggested changes, then steps back and admires the revision. "When we work together in conferencing, we ask each other for help," she explains. "I would never have come up with the '-ing'ending for those words. Thank you." The students appear pleased with the result and happy to have helped.

Friedman then shows them how another class revised the same poem. They used a similar process but arrived at a different result. And that is just her point. Poems can be revised in many different ways, but those who write them rework their words through several drafts, and writers can help one another improve.

During the next few weeks, Friedman and Toth will teach this lesson together again, and then Toth will walk through it with Friedman observing. "Meredith is the kind of teacher who will do this with her kids tomorrow, whereas with some teachers you model for, you know it won't happen until you come back," Friedman says. "Meredith takes it, uses it, and comes back to me and says,'Maybe we should tweak this, switch that.' And that is exactly what I want."

What Happens Next?

What happens next with coaching in Boston's schools depends on what happens in the schools. Already the original plan — which called for change coaches to be phased out after the second year of reform — has been shelved, as recognition grows of the continuing need for the kind of expert guidance that coaches offer. Education Matters,an independent evaluator of the first two "cohorts" of schools undertaking whole-school improvement,observed in its 1999 report that "the work of reform gets more complex as implementation proceeds" and that even at schools in which progress on reform is going well,it would "likely halt without the continuing presence of the coach."

Some schools, however, may now be ready to continue the work on their own, in part because the roles that change coaches play are being effectively internalized, and strong instructional leaders are emerging. At these schools,principals and teachers feel they have acquired the skills to take over from the coaches and continue to develop among the faculty and administrators the leadership capacity that is necessary to move reform measures ahead.

Even if the change coach is ready to be phased out of a school,Education Matters has found that "no one thinks it is time for content coaches to end their work with the schools." The ongoing, in-house professional development that these coaches provide teachers — modeling classroom teaching strategies, spearheading collaborative engagement in evaluating student work, connecting staff to the most recent research on best practice — turns out to be an invaluable tool in the district's commitment to improving student achievement.

Challenges abound, however. Is one day per week enough time for coaches to have an impact, especially in schools in which principals and teachers are less willing to do what it takes to become committed to the process of whole-school reform? What kind of professional development do coaches need to continue to do the work they do? How can Boston take advantage of teachers who want both to teach and to coach? How can the district sustain coaches in their work when they enter a school with high expectations and yet see few results?

One thing is clear: when a teacher confronts a situation such as Toth faced but lacks a coach to go to, it's unlikely that she will change her instructional method. "The teachers will either not try it because it is just too difficult, or they will try to do better what they have always done rather than changing," Friedman says. And when teachers aren't able to improve their teaching to reach every student, students don't learn enough to reach standards.

Standards-based reform in Boston is not only getting to scale across all schools; it is also becoming deeply rooted through improved instruction. There is momentum now, great momentum, and coaches are an indispensable part of that movement. K