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Best Practices/Tom Many, EdD and Susan Sparks



Making the Case for Coaching Collaborative Teams

“Seeking to improve instructional practice and, ultimately, student learning, districts across the country have embraced an old idea [coaching] and given it a new application [collaborative teams].” - Neufeld and Roper, (2003, p. 1)

Whenever a group of teachers is asked, “Where did you learn more? In the four years you spent taking education classes at the university? Or, during your first four weeks of teaching in your own classroom?” The response is **always**, “during my first four weeks of teaching!”

Carrie R. Leana sought to confirm the notion that teachers learn best from one another. She was interested in identifying not only **what** teachers knew in terms of pedagogy, but more importantly, **where** teachers went to get ideas about how to improve their practice. What she discovered provides support for schools shifting from coaching individual teachers to coaching collaborative teams.

“Our research suggests that talking to peers about the complex task of instructing students is an integral part of every teacher’s job and results in rising student achievement.” - Leana, (2011, p. 35)

Leana and her colleagues studied teacher effectiveness in more than 1,200 classrooms. When they asked teachers where they went to find answers to questions about their own practice, researchers discovered teachers did not cite workshops or working with external consultants as their top choice. Nor did they indicate articles or research journals were particularly helpful. Teachers also acknowledged they did not seek help from district level curriculum experts or their principals. They didn’t even mention popular internet resources like Pinterest or Teacher-Pay-Teacher as the best source of new ideas. What researchers found was, “A teacher is, in fact, most likely to gather her knowledge about teaching from fellow teachers.” (Basileo, 2016, p. 3)

Leana reported “teachers were almost twice as likely to turn to their peers as the experts designated by the school district [content or curriculum coordinators] and four times more likely to seek advice from one another than

from the principal.” They concluded teachers, “rarely go to an outside resource to enhance their knowledge of teaching and go even less often to their administrator. A teacher is, in fact, most likely to gather knowledge about teaching from fellow teachers.” Basileo (2011 p. 3)

These findings have significant implications for those seeking to improve student achievement in their schools. If colleagues are a teacher’s primary source of ideas to improve their instructional practice, “it seemed clear that a high functioning PLC focused on the right work will act, in essence, as a kind of knowledge-generating system for teachers, where the effect of professional development is accelerated and refined through collective focus on learning within the teams.” (Basileo, 2016 p. 3)

“Teaching is not an isolated activity. If it’s going to be done well, it has to be done collaboratively.”
- Leana (2011, p.33)

Kim Marshall (2017, p. 3) argues, “Professional development is most effective when it involves groups of teachers at the same grade, subject, or school in interactive learning communities.” He continued, “Coaches can play an important role facilitating discussions of progress monitoring, effective classroom strategies, student work and data, and curriculum unit and lesson planning.”

Not long ago, the textbook was the curriculum, there were no standards to guide the work, and evidence of progress was based on teacher intuition. Districts responded to this situation by hiring specialists who focused on developing expertise in specific content areas. The emphasis of the curriculum specialists’ work was on improving a teacher’s understanding of curriculum, which theoretically, improved a teacher’s instructional practice.

While principals reminded the faculty, “you teach students, not content,” curriculum coordinators were encouraged to do just the opposite. They focused on coaching content and curriculum, not teachers. It should have been obvious at the time, but what no one seemed to recognize was that content expertise was of little value if that expertise remained within the purview of a limited number of district curriculum coordinators. We now understand all too well that, “Good teaching can overcome poor curriculum, but good curriculum cannot overcome poor teaching.” (Marzano, 2017).

Conditions in schools have changed a lot; textbooks are now viewed as a resource to support the curriculum, standards help identify what all students should know and be able to do, and evidence of growth is based on results from a combination of local, state, and national assessments. The

focus of coaching has also changed, shifting from specific areas of the curriculum to improving a teacher’s instructional practice, still, the most effective schools are challenging the prevailing assumptions and making one more adjustment; they are moving from coaching **individual** teachers to coaching **teams** of teachers.

According to Desimone and Pak, “The presence of a coach in these grade-level meetings is useful when teachers look for expert opinion in navigating the technical challenges of implementing new instructional approaches or in gaining deeper understanding of ways to reconstruct their practice.” Teachers need coaches who understand good curriculum matters, but that good instruction matters more.

“In trying to improve American public schools, educators, policy makers, and philanthropists are overselling the role of the highly skilled individual teacher and undervaluing the benefits that come from teacher collaborations that strengthen skills, competence, and a school’s overall social capital.” - Carrie R. Leana (2011, p. 30)

Leana’s findings add weight to the argument in support of coaching collaborative teams. If, as Leana and her colleagues suggest, a teacher’s primary source of ideas to improve their instructional practice is other teachers, then the value of a highly effective collaborative team takes on even greater importance. In light of this insight, schools should be encouraged to explore the idea of redirecting their coaching resources to improving the productivity of collaborative teams in professional learning communities. ■

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Resources

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- Leana, C. (2011, Fall). “The Missing Link in School Reform”. *The Stanford Social Innovation Review*. Available at https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_missing_link_in_school_reform.
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