

A District-Wide Instructional Coaching Professional Development Process: Bellingham, Washington

by Marsha Riddle Buly

Read about the growth of an instructional coaching-focused professional development process that began with 12 elementary teachers attending one summer workshop and, over 10 years, has developed into a successful district process that has been recognized by the Gates Foundation and is gaining evidence as an effective approach to personalizing learning for both students and teachers.

Student Demographics:

Urban, university town

10,000+ students

13 elementary schools

4 middle schools

3 comprehensive high schools

1 alternative high school

82% Caucasian

7% Hispanic

6% Asian

2% African American

3% American Indian

History

The Bellingham School District has used the coaching process as part of its instructional professional development for several years now. It all began close to 10 years ago, when a few schools with low student achievement explored methods to increase teachers' knowledge about literacy instruction. This exploration eventually resulted in a school board policy that supported—and expected—job-embedded professional development.

Twelve elementary teachers attended a summer institute called Literacy Learning in the Classroom, offered by Richard C. Owen Publishers (www.rcowen.com). The focus of the institute was on developing teachers' understandings about literacy. In the bigger picture, the summer institute workshops were part of a professional development approach with reflective coaching as a central element. Following the summer institute, the 12 attendees returned to their schools excited to pursue strategies to implement the full literacy process. Three schools in the district came on board by identifying teachers to become coaches, and the three began the instructional coaching process. The results were impressive: The schools, all in demographically diverse areas and with solid coaching in place, experienced increased student achievement. Instructional coaching appeared to be making a difference.

District Definition of Coaching

Having a clear and shared understanding of what coaching is and is not is critical to the success of any coaching process. In Bellingham Public Schools, they use the following definition:

Coaching is “working alongside” colleagues to support their learning. This means supporting/coaching the teacher who is interacting with students and engaging in active learning and reflection. In order to construct knowledge about instructional practices that improve student learning, coaches provide personalized support based on the goals and identified needs of the individuals. The coach will not be involved in the supervision or evaluation of any teachers.

Type of Approach

The original coaching process has now been transformed into a district-wide instructional coaching professional development process. The process focuses on values outlined by the National Staff Development Council and incorporates aspects of the original Learning Network (<http://www.rcowen.com/rcoprfdv.htm>), the University of Santa Cruz new teacher mentoring program (<http://www.newteachercenter.org>), Critical Friends (<http://www.nsrffharmony.org/>), Cognitive Coaching (<http://www.cognitivecoaching.cc/>), and Washington State’s “Mentoring Matters.”

The coaching components of the Bellingham professional development process are three-tiered. There is a school coach, a district coach, and an outside consulting coach. The school coach works with classroom teachers, the district coach coaches the school coach, and the outside consulting coach provides support for the district coaches. One of the district-level literacy coaches describes her role as follows:

There is an intensive focus on instructional coaching in that we do try to support the teacher in refining classroom instruction—ultimately for student improvement. My job isn’t to come in and tell teachers what to do or . . . how to change things. And my job isn’t to be the evaluator. My job is to be the facilitator of learning and thinking and reflecting.

Current Practice

Several elements are critical to the district’s professional development process:

1. Coaching is based on teacher inquiry. The teacher being coached identifies a question that he or she wants to research or dig deeper into about effective teaching and learning.
2. Coaches visit the teacher’s classroom and observe based on the teacher’s self-determined goal. This is outlined in a Learning Focus Plan and later summarized in a Learning Focus Summary.
3. Learning between the coach and the teacher is focused around a learning conversation or dialogue following the observation. This is called “instructional dialogue.”
4. Coaching is job-embedded and ongoing over time.
5. Coaches support schools in understanding and moving forward on school and district goals that are outlined in strategic plans. So although there are common elements in the district process, the content of the elements is locally modified based on each school’s population, goals, and staff needs. See <http://www.bham.wednet.edu/departments/currdept/profdev/pdcoach.htm> for more

information on the values behind the Instructional Professional Development Coaching process and the Essential Components of Coaching embraced by Bellingham Public Schools.

One component that makes a significant difference is the gift of time given to teachers and coaches. In a coach's first year, he or she remains in the classroom full-time and works with the district coach to develop and refine instructional practice while preparing to coach other teachers. The second-year coaches continue to receive support in their own classrooms, as well as support as they begin to coach colleagues. In the third year and beyond, the coach's role expands to support school data analysis and school professional development.

One first-year teacher told us that, through coaching, she has learned to focus on and identify small areas where she can direct her energy. This teacher knew that the coach was there to help with any items, especially those that the teacher was not very comfortable with, and she was able to share those because of the trust that developed between her coach and herself.

Suggestions for Getting Started

There are several suggestions from this veteran coaching district that might help others start smoothly on the road (or refine their journey) to successful instructional coaching. First, suggested by teachers, coaches, and administrators, is the critical importance of understanding your definition of coaching and emphasizing the *non-evaluative, non-supervisory* role of the coach.

A second piece of advice is to carefully think about the reasons for considering a coaching model and then to have a plan to involve the entire staff. Without staff buy-in, the plan just won't work. In thinking about buy-in, it's important to recognize that not everybody will feel excited about being coached or believe that they are receiving benefits from it. This is the time to consider, and discuss, the change process described by Michael Fullan in *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (1991). It is also the time to begin to recognize and value the different ways in which people move into change: some will be initial adopters who are incredibly enthusiastic and others will be late implementers, slow to embrace change. The perspectives of all concerned are important to changing successfully. At the same time, it's critically important for the teachers involved to model the learning that they want to have happen in the classroom. If a goal is for students to inquire, reflect, and construct meaning, then teachers must be involved in the same.

Third, but not least, is to carefully decide how coaches will be selected. Most schools have a nomination and selection process in place. When possible, coaches are selected from within the school. The selected coach must be a teacher who has excellent instructional practices in place, but equally important is that he or she be able to work effectively with others and garner respect from both fellow teachers and administrators. Bellingham School District borrowed some of their ideas, especially about a Leadership Survey, from Linda Lambert's book *Leadership Capacity for Lasting School Improvement* (2003). According to the district's professional development director, "The bottom line for selection is the principal." More information on the Bellingham Public Schools' selection process can be found on the district's Web site at <http://www.bham.wednet.edu/departments/currdept/profdev/pdcoach.htm>.

This district's professional development approach has proved to be so successful that the district has been identified in a research study done by Duane Baker (*From Compliance to Commitment: A Report on Effective School Districts in Washington State*, in press) as an effective district in

the state of Washington. In addition, the district has used a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (as well as funds from Title II) as an impetus to accelerate the development of the district coaching process in elementary schools and throughout middle and high schools. Figuring out how to make the process work without the grant was important because the district wanted to be sure that they would have sustainability beyond the granting period. Bellingham Public Schools has worked long and hard to develop an instructional coaching professional development process that works for them; perhaps a similar approach will work for you!

For more information on coaching, see the “From the Coaches” column in NCTE’s *Voices from the Middle*.

For more information on Bellingham Public Schools’ program, visit their Web site at <http://www.bham.wednet.edu/departments/currdept/profdev/pdcoach.htm>, or contact Adrienne Nelson, Curriculum Director, at anelson@bham.wednet.edu.

Marsha Riddle Buly can be contacted at Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington, at Marsha.RiddleBuly@wwu.edu