



PSI Net

Project for School Innovation Winter Newsletter

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Greetings to all of our PSI colleagues & friends!

This issue of PSI Net is written in the spirit of a new year, where we anticipate tropical vacations and engaging, innovative collaborations to come in 2008. While academic achievement for each student is the common goal of every educator, the path to success can be lonely and difficult. In an effort to inspire and support those in our network and beyond, the focus of this issue is PEER COACHING. We offer a brief overview of coaching; highlight how coaching helped improve math performance at a Boston school through PSI's Support Network for School Excellence; and speak to an experienced coach about challenges and recommendations for schools looking to build coaching relationships.



At PSI, we know how challenging education can be. We also believe that by sharing effective practices, all educators can raise the achievement of their students. If you can accomplish so much in your own classroom, imagine the greater impact if you join forces for success through coaching and peer mentorship!

Speaking of great impact, don't forget to check our News and Events listings. Read about PSI's successful Learning Exchange, our newest book, a no-cost school improvement program, and more!

Ruth Feldman
Executive Director, PSI

Peer Coaching: *Knowledge without Borders*

"Professional Development" is the education buzzword of nearly every academic year - in part because so much of it doesn't work. Both research and anecdote show most PD to be too short in duration and inconsistently



implemented, so that teachers don't actually master and apply the skills that they learn. Fortunately, a professional development model has gained credence in recent years that puts actual teachers in charge of their own learning - peer coaching.

Peer coaches are teachers who come together to help each other improve. Unlike full-time specialists that schools sometimes employ, peer coaches are practicing classroom teachers with no special status, only a shared area of concern and an interest in structured school improvement. Often, this structure includes the study of current and topical research, frequent opportunities to discuss and plan together, in-classroom observations, and regular follow-ups.

Peer coaching, when carefully applied, can bring sustainable change to classrooms and schools. While specifics vary, a few common threads define the most successful coaching relationships:

- All participating teachers work together to select an area of focus (anything from ELL literacy strategies to managing severe behavior issues)
- Peer coaches access and study current research and diverse approaches regarding the area of focus
- Peer coaches meet regularly (at least bi-weekly) to discuss their research, plan, review student work, raise concerns and new ideas, and share successes around the area of focus
- Peer coaches observe each others' teaching, paying special attention to the area of focus, and take time after the evaluation to privately strategize issues and next steps
- Principal is supportive of the team, willing to provide leadership opportunities for teachers, and willing to adjust the school day to allow common planning and co-observation time

In addition to the above, coaching relationships respect and empower teachers. No outside experts are required to identify weaknesses or provide ideas, and teachers can collaborate with less fear of criticism or judgment. The openness promoted by peer coaching facilitates learning and improvement rather than evaluation, and allows teachers to decide independently which skills they would like to build, based on existing school resources and strengths.

Finally, peer coaches build real professional relationships. In contrast to one-time workshops, peer coaches develop new skills together, gradually and with depth. Teachers have time to incorporate new information into existing structures and practices, and have the support of the peer coaching team when problems or different ideas arise. This consistent cycle of feedback and refinement only ends when participants have each achieved genuine mastery, and can move forward, independently, with new skills for success.

Coaching in Action: *Math Binders*

Peer coaching works in practice as well as in theory. In 2005-06, the Ellis Mendell Elementary School used a coaching partnership with teachers from the Richard J. Murphy School and Roxbury Preparatory Charter School to improve student performance on vocabulary intensive math problems.

Prior to 2005, explains Mendell principal Vera Johnson, Mendell students struggled with both standardized and classroom math assessments. Close analysis revealed that much of the difficulty came on word problems, where students lacked the vocabulary to express mathematical terms in their own words. Furthermore, not all of the math teachers were in sync in their approach to math vocabulary, and there was no centralized location for completed student work.

After examining the data and discussing the Mendell's needs, Principal Johnson and her staff decided to use math binders to track each student's progress, but were unsure how to structure or implement the binders most effectively. Through a PSI-facilitated partnership, the Mendell was introduced to math teachers from the Murphy and Roxbury Prep, where different versions of binders were already employed.

In the fall of 2005, teachers from the three schools met regularly to develop math binders. Once the Mendell team

had a general conception of a binder structure, they visited the Murphy to observe them in use. The visit, said Principal Johnson, was an "Eye opener...Seeing that work really crystallized what we could do at our school." Slowly, through a process of meetings, observations, examples, and feedback, the format for the math binders took shape. For each vocabulary-intensive math problem on a homework assignment or a test, students would complete the solution to the problem, a reflection on solving the problem, and record any difficult vocabulary. Each of these three components became a section in the math binder, and each teacher had a math binder for each student. The overall process, said Mendell teacher Brenda Murphy, "[allowed] the Mendell to come up with the blueprint, where we wanted to go, and [Roxbury and Murphy teachers] *assisted* us. They didn't tell us what to do, but they *assisted* us and when we ran into a roadblock they were there for us, making us think."

After working with teachers from the Murphy and Roxbury Prep, the Mendell team coached members of their own math faculty in developing binders. New teachers to the Mendell now receive instruction in employing math binders, and the binders themselves have been adjusted to the evolving needs of each grade (for example, lower grades use folders instead of binders to reflect a reduced workload). But most importantly, math instruction at the Mendell is more consistent and focused, and students are doing better on word problems. Students who master the formulas are less likely to be stopped by unfamiliar vocabulary, and the reflection and vocabulary sections of the math binders allow teachers to intervene more quickly when students begin to struggle.

Based on the success of the math binders, the Mendell will soon expand them to science, and other principals have asked Principal Johnson about implementing notebooks in their schools. Looking back on the process, Principal Johnson and Ms. Murphy both emphasize the discipline and structure that working with another school inspired. By meeting with qualified peers from another school, Ms. Murphy said, "You learn to think and [look at your work] more critically than if you had been sitting at a [traditional] professional development meeting." Furthermore, said Principal Johnson, it took *consistency* to bring a new practice into the building. "You have to start with a goal in mind, know[ing] that goal will be redefined, and relate it back to the needs of the school. [You have to] understand the empowerment and the time commitment. It won't be easy, it won't be soon, but every step is a step towards your goal."

Coaching for Success: *Interview with John Roberts*

PSI sat down with John Roberts to discuss what it really takes to share practices between schools. John is a former classroom teacher and was the Assistant Director at Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School; he has worked as a coach and consultant with a number of schools and organizations, particularly around education for high-risk youth; and he is currently pursuing a doctorate in education policy at Harvard University.

PSI: What one piece of advice would you offer to teachers who are sharing their own practices with another school team?

JR: Most of what we now know about how teachers learn new practices suggests that the closer the work is to the classroom and the content, the more likely it is the new practice will transfer to the teacher. In other words, to the extent that it is possible, try to share your practices in your school, in your classroom, during school hours while the school team observes. An effective alternative is to have the school team look at real student work that is produced as a result of the classroom practice you are sharing with the school team.

PSI: How about for the partnering school...one piece of advice?

JR: Before school teams agree to do this work, they should ask themselves this question: "What is the instructional problem that we are addressing?" There is often a great deal of disagreement within grade levels and school improvement teams about the answer to this question, which tends to make the work much more difficult.

PSI: When is a teacher ready to be an effective peer coach?

*JR: Effective teachers are always working as peer coaches within their schools. But, I think teachers are ready to work as coaches outside their own school when they have been able to guide their own grade level or school team through an instructional improvement process that has resulted in gains in student achievement. An effective peer coach should be able to guide school improvement teams through the following questions: 1) What is the problem we are addressing? 2) What is the evidence/data that suggests this is a problem? 3) What is the theory of action that will lead to gains in student achievement?**

PSI: What's the biggest challenge you've faced while

working as a school coach?

JR: Not surprisingly to most of you, schools in general are not organized to facilitate this type of work. The challenge is that we're often pushing against an organizational design that often isolates teachers and a culture that does not necessarily value instructional improvement as much as we would like.

PSI: *So what can peer coaches do to make sure that their work succeeds?*

JR: Coaches need to be aware that effective teachers will need to see a connection between what they do and gains in student performance before they will permanently change their classroom practice. Teachers are pragmatic people, but peer coaches won't change a teacher's behavior in the classroom just because she tells them to do so. We have to draw a straight line between what they do and student outcomes that they value.

*Adapted from Richard Elmore's work on supporting teachers for instructional improvement.

PSI News & Events

Learning Exchange Conference a Rousing Success!

Thanks to all who attended PSI's 2nd annual Learning Exchange Conference on February 9th! The event brought together approximately 70 educators from district



schools, charter schools, and other education programs across Massachusetts to share effective practices and new ideas. Nine teacher teams from seven PSI Model Schools presented on topics ranging from inclusion to at-risk education to community schools to cross-curricular literacy. All presenting schools are available for follow-up coaching and customized partnerships.

Stay tuned for the announcement of PSI's 3rd annual Learning Exchange next year!

Alternative Education - Help Build a Statewide Network

Join the MA Department of Education and Project for School Innovation for a half-day event that will build and develop an Alternative Education Network across Massachusetts. This workshop is based on feedback from a diverse group of educators, and will include time for sharing ideas and action planning. There are two locations and dates for this event:

- 1) March 10th: Bentley College (Waltham)
- 2) March 20th: Meline Kasparian Professional Development Center (Springfield)

For agenda and registration:

<http://www.doe.mass.edu/conference/?ConferenceID=451>

Keeping the Promise - Statewide Dissemination Project

PSI is a key partner in *Keeping the Promise*, a federally funded initiative to share best practices from five highly successful charter schools in order to improve all Massachusetts public schools. This program will offer schools in need of improvement a no-cost portfolio of tools and support, including:

- Peer Coaching
- School Tours
- Technical Assistance
- On-Site Professional Development
- Network-Wide Forums

Participating schools will be required to replicate at least one practice in their 2009 school improvement plan. Recruitment is now underway for participation; to learn more about the project, please visit:

<http://www.mccpse.org/>

New PSI Publication!

PSI is proud to release *Supporting Students to Reach High Standards*. This teacher-authored guide is based on effective practices at the Academy of the Pacific Rim Charter Public School, where Eastern values such as *gambatte* (persistence) and *kaizen* (continual improvement of the community) blend with Western practices to build a "culture of achievement" that emphasizes hard work and respect. The book explores specific practices and systems

that give each student the support he or she needs to strive for and reach rigorous academic goals. Books will be available soon at:

http://psinnovation.org/what_we_do/dissemination/books

In Memoriam: U.T. Saunders

U.T. Saunders, founding facilitator of the Support Network for Innovative Principals and mentor to countless educators, passed away this January after a struggle with cancer. Since 2002, U.T. guided the leadership development of over 50 SNIP educators with understanding, grace, authenticity, and impeccable style. He will be greatly missed. A memorial will be held March 1st at Arlington Street Church in Boston. Details [here](#).



Support PSI Online

Helping PSI to transform education is only one click away -

Here are two simple ways to help support PSI's mission of transforming education by sharing success through your everyday, online activity. Both sites are free to use, and allow you to indirectly donate to PSI.

GOOD SEARCH (www.goodsearch.com) There is a new and easy way to raise money for PSI just by searching the Internet with GoodSearch.com.

It's simple. You use GoodSearch.com like any other search engine - the site is powered by Yahoo! - but each time you do, money is generated for PSI.

Last year, search engines generated close to \$6 billion in revenue from advertisers. With GoodSearch, part of this advertising revenue will now be directed to PSI.

We hope that not only will you use GoodSearch as your main search engine from here on out, but will also pass this message on to your friends and family. The more people who use this, the more money will go to PSI.

DO GREAT STUFF (www.dogreatstuff.com) Another easy way to raise money for PSI is by completing online purchases through many major merchants at DoGreatStuff.com.

With your help, it's really quite simple. Online merchants are willing to pay commissions to sites that bring them customers, because they really want your business. Merchants will know that you have come to them through Do Great Stuff and pay commissions to Do Great Stuff when you buy. Do Great Stuff uses those commissions to make it possible for you to support a cause you care about. You still get access to all the merchant's great offers, free shipping programs or any other specials.

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