today's situation/
LIVING UP TO THE CODE

Talk to the principal about a breach in the code of conduct

In the last issue, readers met Rachel Montoya, a school-based coach whose code of conduct provides a safety net for teachers. The code specifies that coaches work in teachers’ classrooms at their request. Montoya's principal asked her to help a teacher he identified as “in trouble.” Montoya is not certain about approaching the teacher if the teacher has not asked for support.

PRINCIPAL

A principal writes: “Montoya appears to be in a difficult situation. Sometimes as a principal, I find that I do not know everything I want to know, especially when something new comes into the school. I would be grateful to Montoya if she came and talked with me about the apparent breach of her code of conduct. The principal in this scenario makes. When the district placed literacy coaches in our schools, the coach and I both had much to learn about our expectations of one another and the roles and responsibilities of literacy coaches.”

STAFF DEVELOPER

A staff developer says: “Both principals and coaches need training before coaches are assigned to schools. We learned this the hard way in my district. Initially, coaches received training for a half day a week. Soon their expertise in coaching and support exceeded that of their principals. Principals, as a result, are uneasy about what coaches are doing in their schools. Principals are uncomfortable asking their coaches for help or acknowledging that they do not have all the information. We’ve done training with coaches and principals together once a month and recommend that coaches and principals meet in their school weekly to talk about the coach’s work.”

MATH COACH

A math coach says: “Montoya is between the proverbial rock and a hard spot. Many of my coach colleagues feel the way she does. I have been fortunate. My principal and I sat down from the beginning and talked about my job, the district’s expectations of us, the conditions established in the teacher contract about not being an evaluator, etc. Without openness and trust, I might be where Montoya is. In the middle school, math teachers perceive the math coach as an administrator or supervisor, and their perception limits what she is able to do with teachers. In my school, teachers perceive me as their supporter, cheerleader, colleague, and teacher. We have a strong, trusting relationship, and, as a result, I think I am more effective in my work than my middle school colleague.”

STAFF DEVELOPER

A staff developer writes: “Montoya has responsibility to uphold her code of conduct, yet she can’t do that if her principal is uninformed. A coach’s effectiveness in a school depends on the strength between doing what the principal asks of her and following the established guidelines of her role. I recommend that Montoya talk with her principal immediately, express her appreciation for his confidence in her abilities, and explain the code of conduct and how important she believes it is in providing the safety net teachers want.”

next situation/
TURNING TEAMMATES INTO TEAM PLAYERS

The new school year is well under way for novice middle school science and social studies teacher Jamal Williams. He found the first few weeks challenging as he established his authority with his 7th graders and found the right balance between delivering content and helping students use their newly acquired knowledge. He is grateful for the support he receives from the school’s new principal and the mentor assigned to him during the new teacher induction program. His mentor helps him locate resource materials. The principal replaced missing laboratory equipment for his classroom and even found a computer to move into the classroom.

When Williams was hired in this urban middle school, he understood the school’s goals to improve student per-
formance in science and math, especially for high-poverty
students, and signed on committed to do everything within
his power to make that happen. With a major in social
studies, Williams knows that he will be spending long
hours preparing science lessons for his students. Even
more, Williams worries about managing discipline in his
classroom.

Williams accepted the teaching position in the middle
school instead of the high school because he learned in the
interview that teachers meet in learning teams to support
one another and to improve their teaching practices. He is
hoping he will be able to get help from his teammates in
managing some challenging student behaviors. From his
fellow science teachers, he is hoping to deepen his under-
standing of the content standards and to learn ways to
teach those standards to students. However, during the
first few months of the school year, Williams has been dis-
appointed that these team meetings have been sporadic.

Susan Grimes, the new principal, requires teaching
to teams to meet three times a week and content-specific
teams to meet every other week. Williams and his teaching
partners gather at 10:40 a.m. Mondays, Wednesdays, and
Thursdays for their meetings. However, to date, the meet-
ings are not what Williams hoped for. Teachers have spent
the hour complaining about students or the school’s
administration. On a few occasions when Williams asks
specific questions about how to handle problems with stu-
ents or to learn how other teachers handled specific stu-
dents, his colleagues dismissed his inquiries. The senior
member of his team tells Williams, “We all learned the
hard way, and you will, too. You just have to tough it out.
There are no shortcuts in this business. What works for me
isn’t likely to work for you. You have to keep the kids in
fear. When they are afraid of you, you won’t have any dis-
cipline problems in your classroom.”

Confident that a fear-based approach to discipline is not
what he wants in his classrooms, Williams asked other new
teachers in the school how they manage discipline. Williams
learned from them that their team meetings are incredibly
helpful. He wants the same opportunity for professional col-
aboration and wonders how he can encourage his team-
mates to transform their meetings into the kind of meetings
he thought they would be. His science department meetings
are enormously helpful. When they meet biweekly, science
teachers bring examples of student work, lesson plans, and
unit plans and talk about the strengths and weaknesses of
each. In these meetings, Williams has received enormous
support from his colleagues and some insight into the rea-
sons his team is so dysfunctional.

From other teachers, Williams learns that the senior
member of his team strongly opposes team teaching and
has felt this way since its inception six years ago. The other

JOIN THE DISCUSSION
Readers are urged to share their comments
about the situation online at
www.nsd.org/library/ethics.cfm or with Joellen
Killion directly at NSDKillio@aol.com.

QUESTIONS

• What is the principal’s role in establishing the cul-
ture for professional collaboration within the
school, team, and department?
• What is the principal’s role in monitoring the use
of professional collaboration time?
• What is Williams’ role as a new teacher in con-
tributing to the development of a culture for pro-
fessional collaboration within his school, team, and
department?
• What responsibility do Williams’ teammates have
to use their collaborative time to improve teaching
and learning?
• In this situation, what benefits and liabilities are
there for both Grimes and Williams in confronting
the team’s use of collaboration time?