

Building confidence is part of the coach's job

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

After four years as an instructional coach, Ric Palma said he often believes his most important contribution may simply be helping teachers believe in themselves.

“Teachers tend to forget about so much that they do right. They get so discouraged. I think most teachers are pretty self-reflective. But they tend to focus on what’s gone wrong instead of what they do that’s right,” he said.

“Teachers usually come in pretty starry-eyed. Then they get a tough group of kids and they lose heart. They need a boost to keep them going,” he said.

When he encounters a teacher like that, Palma said he starts by trying to get them to remember why they began teaching. “And then I try to give them something that they can use right away, something that I know will produce some quick results for them. If they see the effect with kids, they feel better about themselves and they’re more likely to try other new ideas,” he said.

Palma is one of nine instructional coaches in Topeka (Kansas) Public Schools USD 501, but the only one working with the 125 teachers at Topeka High School. He had spent 15 years as an English teacher at the high school before becoming a coach four years ago.

Palma is part of the Pathways to Success program, a multiyear partnership between the



Kansas University Center for Research on Learning, the Topeka district, and the International Telementor Program. Pathways is funded through the U.S. Department of Education’s Gear-Up program whose mission is to significantly increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education.

Palma and the other coaches are actually university employees, a situation which allows the coaches to avoid being entangled in many

Ric Palma, an instructional coach at Topeka High School, is an employee of Kansas University.

RIC PALMA**Position:** Instructional coach**School:** Topeka High School**School district:** Topeka Unified School District
501, Topeka, Kansas**Professional history:** Taught English, language arts at Topeka High School for 15 years and adult education classes during summers. Coached high school baseball team for five years. Became instructional coach in 2002.**Education:** Earned his bachelor's degree in education from Kansas State University. Currently working towards master's degree at Baker University.

school tasks since they are not employees of the school or district.

Palma's week begins every Monday morning by meeting with 15 other leaders at his school, including the principal, assistant principals, student achievement coordinator, social worker, and others. Following a protocol established by Pathways for Success, he asks the group about the most pressing concern for the week and then talks with them about options for addressing the concern. Palma also describes work he did during the previous week. This weekly meeting ensures that there is good communication between building administrators and the coach about the coach's work.

Each Monday afternoon, Palma works with the other instructional coaches in the district, typically focusing on a series of research-based instructional and behavior management strategies that have proven effective with at-risk students.

The rest of the week "depends on where I'm needed," he said. He estimates that he spends 15 to 20% of his time modeling lessons or observing teachers and about a quarter of his time talking one on one with teachers. He does a "little more clerical work than I would like," identifying materials, copying materials, and running them over to teachers' classrooms.

"We're charting our time now to see exactly how we are spending our time," he said.

Teachers who want to meet with him simply email him or leave a message for him on the white board attached to his office door. Typically,

they present a problem they want help solving or simply express a desire to try something new. Palma meets individually with the teacher. "I get as much background as I can. Then I get back with them about a strategy they might want to try," he said.

Once he's introduced the teacher to the strategy, the teacher can either try it alone or invite Palma to model it in the classroom. "Teachers like to have me model it for them because kids generally pay a little more attention when the instructional coach is there. That means they get a pretty good handle on what we're trying to do. That helps the teacher two ways. Then, the teacher will use the strategy and we'll meet for a follow-up. I'll ask questions like, 'what did you do well, what areas do you need to work on,'" he said.

When he observes classrooms, Palma often audio- or videotapes the teachers he's observing. Frequently, he leaves the tape with the teacher to look at alone. "I've learned that, as soon as they see it, they can see what's going on. It seems to work better if they watch it alone," he said.

"This job has really taught me the importance of self-reflection. For the most part, teachers do that naturally. They may know that a lesson didn't work but they haven't identified a method for improving their work. That's where I come in," he said.

Palma estimates that about half of what he does is relatively informal work. "It's just listening and holding up a mirror so teachers can see themselves," he said.

"You'd be surprised how much a little confidence helps improve someone's teaching," he said. ♦

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