

From isolation to collaboration

“My favorite person in the group is the naysayer. They show me where the holes are in a new practice or idea. They keep me on my toes.”

BY TRACY CROW

Diana Lee, a school-based professional development specialist in Shelby County, Ala., isn't afraid to take on a new challenge if she thinks it will make a difference for the 52 teachers in her school.

Three years ago, Lee's district had no school-based coaches. With the No Child Left Behind Act, Lee's principal was struggling to help teachers cope with AYP and other provisions of the law.

When Lee brought her principal an article about the difference such professionals were making in a California district, he responded, “This is a great idea — why don't you write up a job description?”

Lee remembers that her job description was quite vague; she laughs that about the only real detail was “master's degree required.” Today, she would have a difficult time detailing everything her job demands of her. In any given day, she helps with literacy fluency testing, teaching demonstration lessons or co-teaching, helping teachers build their professional portfolios, coordinating new teacher mentors, tracking down grant funds, and leading study groups.

Before she became a school-based coach, Lee was a high school English teacher with some leadership experience. However, she knew few other teachers, certainly none in the middle grades. Vincent Middle/High School serves 530 students in grades 6-12 and employs 52 teachers. Now she knows all of the teachers — and they're getting to know each other in ways that they didn't before.

She was surprised by how eager the teachers



were for assistance. Lee expected teachers to be reluctant to accept help, but once trust was established, “there were not enough hours in the day,” she said. “Because teachers have so few opportunities to work with other adults, the opportunity to collaborate met a real need.” She also believes that the teachers have embraced what she does because all of the professional development was “conducted on their home turf, in their classrooms, and it was planned to meet their particular needs.”

The first thing Lee learned on the job is that she needed a different set of skills to work effectively with adults. She started her learning-to-work-with-adults process by reading books like *How to Win Friends and Influence People* and *Dealing with Difficult People*. She is quick to note that even though it sounds like her teachers are tough to work with, “they aren't at all ... as a teacher, I was just so isolated from other teachers.”

As for developing trust, that was a matter of time. During her first year as a coach, Lee could

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tell that teachers were cautious about approaching her. By the second year, teachers realized that Lee could be a real resource and advocate in their quest to pull the school out of improvement status. These days, she has frequent unannounced visits from other teachers observing the two high school English classes that she still teaches and many requests from teachers for individual assistance, from preparing for evaluations to locating resources.

Lee also works with teachers to keep track of their students' progress by examining data about student learning. "Absolutely everything we do is data-driven," said Lee. "They call me the data queen. I went from being an English teacher to working with all of these statistics and spreadsheets." This year, Lee gave all teachers of grades 6-8 an indicator-by-indicator analysis for each student in their classes. "Teachers know what the students need the minute they walk in the door, she said."

Three years later, the culture of the school is changing and is reflected in the school's motto — Exponential Potential. The motto means that teachers "working together increases our potential exponentially," said Lee. For example, when all teachers work to incorporate writing assignments weekly, the school "reinforces those skills with a much stronger impact than one teacher doing the same thing in isolation."

Teachers now collaborate throughout the year. Teachers are organized into small professional learning communities that meet monthly. New teachers meet with Lee monthly to talk about their challenges and to participate in book discussions; Lee leads the new teacher mentors as well.

Lee said "teachers are more willing to try new things because they know they have support. They know that I'll be right there with them." Recent new initiatives have included a state math, science, and technology project that requires teachers to spend two weeks in intensive training in the summer. Three years ago, teachers wouldn't have been willing to invest their time this way, Lee said.

Lee is alert for opportunities for her teachers to receive the recognition they deserve. This year, a teacher at Vincent Middle/High won the

DIANA LEE

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School: Vincent Middle/High School, Vincent, Ala.

District: Shelby County, Ala.

Professional history: Taught middle and high school English in Shelby County Schools from 1989 to 2004. Became professional development coach in 2004.

Education: Earned her bachelor's degree from Auburn University, master's degree from the University of Alabama at Birmingham, and her Ed.D in a joint program from Universities of Alabama at Birmingham and Tuscaloosa.

Honors/accomplishments: Faculty service award, 2005 and 2006; Golden Apple award, 2006; 2005-06 grant received from Greater Shelby County Education Foundation, American Library Association, and Community Outreach Partnership Center.

Professional service: 21st Century Learning Schools committee chair, school improvement committee chair (2002-present); mentor coordinator; governing board member, University of Montevallo department of education inservice center (2004-present).

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American Star of Teaching Award from the U.S. Department of Education; one teacher in each state is selected for this honor. Lee has created a newsletter to keep teachers and central office staff informed about what other teachers are doing and she believes that contributes to the developing sense of community and collaboration. She notes that the recognition teachers receive for their accomplishments "really motivates them."

Today, the data show that Vincent Middle/High is improving. The school has moved from the bottom of the district in terms of test scores to the middle range. They have met AYP and are no longer in school improvement status. That achievement has been important to a school that Lee noted is less affluent than other schools in the county.

Lee can't stress enough that her favorite part of the job is seeing teachers be successful and to provide help when she can to get them there. She realizes why it is ultimately so valuable to see teachers reaching new heights. "I know that the direct benefits go to the students." ♦

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