

Coach to the rescue

By Tracy Crow

Three years ago, Eileen Vanderheyden got a frantic call from her assistant principal. A teacher new to her school needed help adjusting to this new environment. Would

Vanderheyden step in? When she walked into the teacher's classroom, Vanderheyden could see that the teacher had a great math lesson but was overwhelmed by classroom management. On the spot, she was a coach.

Vanderheyden is a math teacher at Bloomfield Tech, a vocational school in Bloomfield, N.J., which serves about 500 students in grades 9-12. Bloomfield Tech didn't have a coaching program when Vanderheyden got tapped to coach. A mentoring program at the school provided support only for new teachers with no experience entering the school through an alternate route. More and more teachers are entering the profession via alternate routes, with older adults changing professions to become teachers and bypassing traditional preparatory experiences. School administrators learned that these teachers need support beyond that provided by mentoring and so a coaching model was adopted.

Becoming a supportive environment

Instructional coaches at Bloomfield Tech work one-on-one with teachers throughout the school year while maintaining a full teaching schedule. This year, the coaching program pairs six coaches with teachers. Vanderheyden says the school has typically paired teachers with coaches

who teach the same subjects, but not always (this year, an English teacher is working with a science teacher). Vanderheyden has always worked with other math teachers, drawing upon her 20-plus years of teaching experience.

How does a full-time high school math teacher find time to coach another full-time high school math teacher? Vanderheyden and her colleague meet whenever they can — before school, during their shared break period, after school — to talk about lessons and instructional practices. They visit one another's classrooms to observe lessons and then they talk about what happened later. The phone in Vanderheyden's classroom could ring anytime, even when she's in the middle of her own tough lesson.

Recently, she received such a call. The less experienced teacher called to say that her classroom was out of control and she didn't know how to get the lesson back on track. By the time, Vanderheyden could break away from her room, she found that the other classroom was quiet and the students were all working on their mathematics, she said. The teacher couldn't explain how it had all come together. "You got them engaged in the lesson; that's what happened," Vanderheyden told her.

Sometimes, it's a matter of confidence, Vanderheyden has noticed. Alternatively certified teachers don't have even the set of experiences that a 23-year-old education graduate would have because they haven't done student teaching



Eileen Vanderheyden

where they've been able to stand in front of students and teach lessons. The teacher also may not realize that there are always going to be tough days. One day, Vanderheyden invited her teacher in to observe a lesson and, to the amazement of the younger teacher, the students were just awful. "It was one of those days where everything was off," she said. Vanderheyden told her young colleague, "This is what happens when you're teaching. There are good days and bad days, and generally you have more good than bad."

Vanderheyden appreciates that her young colleague is open to conversation about what works in the classroom. That attitude isn't a given at the high school level, where teachers typically plan lessons on their own and keep their doors closed. Vanderheyden knows that such an attitude has to become a relic. New or inexperienced teachers aren't the only ones who need support. "We need to coach each other. Math teachers need to coach math teachers," said Vanderheyden, who envisions a time when any teacher, regardless of experience, can raise a question about how to best approach a particular concept in the classroom.

But Bloomfield Tech isn't quite there yet. "We're getting there," Vanderheyden said. "There's more trust now at math department meetings." A teacher can say "I did a really good lesson today" and people see it differently than they would have in the past. Teachers no longer perceive that as someone showing off or saying they're better than other teachers. Now, it's regarded as a generous sharing of good ideas.

The school administrators have learned to trust the work of coaches because they see results. Initially, Vanderheyden said some administrators seemed to expect her to talk about a teacher's mistakes. As a coach, she knew her job was to advocate for the teacher's development, not tattle about what they were doing wrong.

Becoming a coach

How did Vanderheyden prepare herself to become an effective coach? In addition to her varied teaching experiences, she was a member of NSDC's Coaches Academy, a year-long intense learning experience funded through a grant from Wachovia. About 45 teachers from

EILEEN VANDERHEYDEN

Position: High school math teacher and instructional coach

School: Bloomfield Tech High School

School district: Essex County Vocational Technical Schools

Professional history: Math teacher since 1964; math chairperson four years; professional development committee member; NSDC's Coaches Academy; instructional coach, three years.

Education: Bachelor's degree in mathematics, College of Saint Elizabeth; master's degree in mathematics education, New Jersey City University.

Alabama, Texas, and New Jersey were members of the learning cohort.

Vanderheyden remembers feeling absolutely clueless. "I was the only one in the group who didn't already have coaching responsibilities or experiences," she said. A key change for her was becoming an active listener. She realized that she often listened to the beginning of someone's story and then jumped in with her own experience.

How Vanderheyden teaches has also changed. She knows that engaging students requires more than "teaching by telling." But sometimes she would find herself teaching in the mode of expert at the front of the room, particularly in advanced math classes. Now, she never lets herself do that. As a classroom observer, "I can see when kids aren't learning; I know when I'm not learning," Vanderheyden said. Now in calculus class, "I'll sit there and wait ... and sometimes it's a long time, but eventually, they'll work out the answers for themselves."

Students "getting it" is what makes the work so worthwhile for Vanderheyden. "When those kids look at you and you realize that they've just learned something they never knew before — there's nothing else like that," she said. That's why she values being a coach. "I love teaching," Vanderheyden said. "With coaching, I am able to help somebody else love teaching. I can help them to realize that teaching is not just a job, this really is a vocation." ♦

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