



Photo by EMILY SCHUELLER, student

Instructional coach Marit Nierman, right, works with teacher Beth Clearman.

# Coach lends them her ears

By Tracy Crow

Instructional coach Marit Nierman approaches her job with teachers this way: “I’m the person in this building who gets to roll up my sleeves and help you do this — I am an extra set of ears,” Nierman describes. When she looks to the future, one of her questions is how long will the district need a coaching program? Nierman asks, “Will teachers get to a point where they coach each other? Or will we always need an extra pair of ears?”

Nierman works at Garrison Middle School in Walla Walla (Wash.) Public Schools. She has worked in the past as a reading specialist in a traditional pullout model. Now, as part of a dis-

trictwide literacy initiative, she is a coach who works with teachers in grades 6-8. The school has about 600 students and 40 teachers.

Building relationships was — and still is — a major goal for Nierman. She was new to the district when she became Garrison’s instructional coach. “I know I was lucky; this school already had an extremely positive culture,” she said. “The staff is a highly collaborative group; there are many entry points for my work and a lot of information about what is needed.”

The trust level at Garrison is high and teachers are willing to receive feedback. Typically, Nierman helps teachers plan lessons and she talks with them after they’ve taught certain lessons so they can reflect upon the experience.

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Nierman also helps teachers “connect the dots.” “There are many things going on in the district. How are these all supposed to connect and work together?” she said.

The Walla Walla district is focused on literacy in all content areas so Nierman and three other coaches collaborate to build a comprehensive coaching and professional development program to address literacy across content areas at the secondary level. Each year, the coaches work with a cohort of teachers to develop common lesson structures and integrate specific instructional strategies.

Literacy is “the ability to read, write, and communicate at a level that allows you to participate in society,” Nierman said. For content-area teachers, this means being able to read and write like a mathematician or to read and write like a scientist. For math and science teachers in particular, emphasizing thinking skills and information processing skills is more meaningful than just an emphasis on reading and writing, Nierman has learned.

Because of the instructional strategies and common lesson planning structures, “our culture has changed,” Nierman said. “Now we have conversations that go across departments.”

The district has also adjusted schedules to enable every teacher to have an hour of collaboration every week. At Garrison, students arrive an hour late each Wednesday in order to provide this time for teachers.

Much of Nierman’s learning occurs as the secondary coaches meet weekly to plan the work and hone their skills. They discuss how to integrate literacy strategies throughout the secondary curriculum. They discuss what a year’s worth of professional development should look like. To “build our toolbox,” Nierman said, “we pair up, we practice reflective conversations, and we role-play different strategies that we want teachers to use.”

Nierman has worked at strengthening her communication skills. “I thought I was already pretty good in that area, but the more you learn, the more you realize you don’t know,” she said. “Instead of being the expert, I needed to become more refined in the art of listening and questioning.”

### **MARIT NIERMAN**

**Position:** Instructional coach

**School:** Garrison Middle School

**School district:** Walla Walla (Wash.) Public Schools

**Professional history:** Taught 1st grade, (2 years); 2nd grade (1 year); Title I reading specialist (6 years); instructional coach (2 years)

**Education:** Bachelor’s degree in education, Pacific Lutheran University; master’s degree in curriculum and instruction, Lesley University

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Nierman particularly values the collaborative work the coaches do to articulate their vision for the Walla Walla coaching model. Her biggest challenge is “having an idea where we’d like to see the staff grow, in terms of instruction, in terms of culture, and figuring how to get there slowly. How do we scaffold this work, what do we do first? We see where we want to get. What is the road we take to get there?” Nierman said.

The Walla Walla coaches have worked intensely with Joellen Killion, NSDC’s director of special projects, and this summer will work with Jim Knight, a researcher at the University of Kansas and a leading voice in the field of instructional coaching. Nierman has found this type of assistance critical to the growth of the coaching program.

The district’s support has also been significant. The coaches’ principals join them in the collaborative work once a month. “Our administrators are incredibly involved – as much as they can be with all of their responsibilities,” said Nierman. ♦

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