

THE LEARNING Principal®

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF SCHOOL LEADERS ENSURING SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

'HOPE IS NOT A STRATEGY'

*Coaching is effective at closing the gap
in Georgia school*

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

For four years, Dot Schoeller has invested heavily in school-based coaching for the teachers at Simonton Elementary School in suburban Atlanta.

During those years, Simonton has virtually closed the gaps between black and white students, Hispanic and white students, and students who qualify for free/reduced price lunches and those who do not — all while maintaining consistently high test scores. The gap between regular education students and special education students is Simonton's next target — and the school is very close to closing that gap as well. At the same time, the school has been more successful at retaining teachers, which has contributed to the expanding expertise of its staff.

The evolution of coaching at Simonton offers an example of what a committed principal can achieve and how coaching can change a

building's culture and its instruction to benefit students. "Everyone needs a coach to get better. Even Tiger Woods has a coach. Tiger may be a better player than his coach, but it takes the coach to make Tiger a better golfer. It's the same with teachers," Schoeller said.

**"There's a sense
of urgency in my
school. I don't have
a lot of time."**

— Dot Schoeller,
The Learning Principal,
Dec/Jan 2007

Schoeller introduced coaching to Simonton when she became principal at the Gwinnett County school in 2004. Her first step was transforming 11 literacy specialist who had been working primarily with students in pull-out programs into 11 literacy coaches who work primarily with teachers to improve their instruction.

By the 2006-07 school year, Schoeller had added more literacy coaches for a total of 17 literacy coaches. That same year, she converted the math specialist into a math coach. A year later, she added a second math coach. And a year after that, she added a third

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DAVID BERANEK

Principal, Marathon High School

District: Marathon, Wis.

Grades: 9-12

Enrollment: 300 students

Staff: 22 teachers

This small high school is about eight miles from Wausau in a rural area with an agricultural history, but now dominated by industry. Its Anglo-German Catholic heritage has remained largely intact, with two-parent households living close by extended family. Its student population is 98% white, with nearly 90% of graduates enrolling in postsecondary education. Marathon is a 2007 National Blue Ribbon School.

Q&A Continuous learning fuels school's success

BY VALERIE VON FRANK

Q: For the last three years, teachers have worked on individual professional learning plans. Why?

Our professional growth had been districtwide, one-size-fits-all, hire somebody to come in or a principal would deliver something. But the range at which teachers are on the professional development map is so wide.

Most teachers really know where they need to grow but are afraid. The principal has to support people and make them feel it's really OK. This is a focus on developing teacher leaders. As individuals, they talk with the principal and take complete ownership of their own plan for professional learning. By the second semester, they make an actual change in classroom practice. They collect data, have some kind of archival piece to show what they used to do, and reflect so at the end of the year, when we get back together, I can say, "How did it change your actual practice?"

Now that we've done it a few years, we have teachers saying we no longer need to send anybody out for training. Teachers can run classes to help peers.

Q: How did you help teachers feel comfortable?

Teachers have to trust the leader. It's a lot of contact, getting into the rooms, a lot of belief from the administrator, board, union representatives that professional learning is everything that we value, because if we're not going to focus on improving ourselves in the classroom, we can't expect the kids to get any better.

Q: It sounds like a lot of time on your part.

If you just want to do managerial paperwork, there's no end to it. If you force yourself to focus on student learning and teacher relationships, improving your classrooms, you'll be shocked at how, when teachers are working hard, connecting with kids, and learning in the classroom — those other things will take care of themselves.

Q: How do you find time for these conversations?

If you really want to get some work done, you can't have a staff meeting in the traditional sense where everybody is going to talk about this kid did this or managerial stuff. When we get together for a staff or site team meeting, our agendas are laid out to fit under our core beliefs, and if it doesn't fit under a vital sign, it doesn't get talked about.

"Most teachers really know where they need to grow but are afraid. The principal has to support people and make them feel it's really OK."

Q: You're a small, nondiverse school. Could your success translate to others?

I've been asked that before. I can't believe that if you *work things out* with teachers and not *do things to them* that people won't take part. Some say, "I've got 50% of my people that wouldn't do that." I say, "Then you've got 50% who would. Others would see the success of those 50% and it would build." I've never met a teacher who didn't want to get better, but I've met teachers who were afraid to try because they thought someone was out to get them. Who doesn't want to have time and opportunity to learn something new that will make life easier for them in the classroom? You have to invest in your best people, and the others will eventually come along.



Pat Roy is co-author of *Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards Into Practice: Innovation Configurations* (NSDC, 2003).

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Your choice: Minor course corrections or getting lost?

Principals place **implementation** at the top of the list of nagging issues related to professional development. These administrators recognize that they cannot expect a change in student learning unless there are concomitant changes in classroom practices. Yet, they are baffled by the lack of use of new strategies that would help students learn more.

I ask them to compare learning new classroom (or leadership) practices to a cross-country journey that probably includes lots of detours and construction zones without the use of a GPS. Minimally, they all admit they would need to know key points along the way where they could check to make sure they were on the right track. Those benchmarks would allow them to make minor course corrections early in the process rather than waiting to find out they made the wrong turn in Kankakee and are now wildly off course.

Many of the changes in practice we ask educators to make are also without detailed maps and filled with detours and construction. They also need checkpoints along the way to determine whether they are on course. They can also determine whether they need to make small course corrections as well.

The principal **needs to collect, use, and disseminate data that monitor the accomplishment of schoolwide goals** (Roy & Hord, 2003, p. 75). First, an action plan should ensure that **student and teacher data are collected and analyzed at least four times a year to monitor the accomplishment of schoolwide goals**. Many districts and schools are using formal or informal interim assessments each nine weeks to determine whether appropriate progress is being

made in student learning. Teacher data would include observation of classroom practices collected by classroom walk-throughs or self-assessments to determine barriers preventing the use of new practices.

Kanter (2002) advises administrators and staff to create and publicize mileposts so that staff members can check their own journey toward improved practice. This requires that the school **uses baseline data to monitor improvements within the school year**. Every staff member needs to know where the starting line is in order to judge individual and collective progress. This kind of monitoring allows the administrator and staff also to **celebrate improvements and accomplishments based on data**.

These data can also provide the evidence that students are making progress. The data need to be **reported to parents and the community throughout the year, as well as results required by the state or district**. One school I worked with wrote articles for the school newsletter using longitudinal data they had collected to provide evidence to parents that student learning was improving in their school as a result of educators' efforts. The newsletter was also sent to staff members and became the basis of a staff celebration of progress — complete with sparkling apple juice and a beautifully decorated sheet cake!

Monitoring progress has been identified as one of six essential practices required for any school improvement effort (Tobia & Hord, 2001). Regular, consistent monitoring of student and teacher change can determine whether a school will be able to make minor course corrections or get lost in a morass of confusion.

Data-Driven: Staff development that improves the learning of all students uses disaggregated student data to determine adult learning priorities, monitor progress, and help sustain continuous improvement.

OBSERVING A MEETING

“Efficiency is doing the thing right; effectiveness is doing the right thing.”

— Peter Drucker

A process observer can help a group that is working hard but not reaching its desired objectives, writes meetings expert Ann Delephant, author of *Making Meetings Work* (Corwin, 2007). In her book, she shares this anecdote about the kind of difference that a process observer can make for a team:

“One middle school learning team was

focused on student management. This discrepancy between the members’ actions and the group’s stated goal brought about a discussion that eventually resulted in the group getting back on track and focusing on learning issues that led to improved student performance” (p. 74).

The process observer can be a member of the group who temporarily steps aside to observe and offer feedback or an external party who joins

the group temporarily to observe and offer feedback. The observer must be discreet and able to use good judgment about which observations should be shared with the group and which should be shared privately with individuals. Delephant writes that a process observer must be an insightful observer with experience working with collaborative processes and teams and someone who is willing to provide difficult feedback.

A process observer typically uses an observation form, such as the one on Page 5 of this newsletter, to collect data during a meeting. An audio or video record of the meeting might also be used to collect information.

However the data are collected, the group will want to schedule a time to learn about the process observer’s feedback. The group should listen and avoid arguing with the observer about the feedback. After discussing the observations, the group decides whether changes in behavior, interactions, or processes are warranted. Delephant cautions that groups should not use process observers unless they are willing to engage in the reflective practice of listening and determining necessary changes.



“A meeting is an event where minutes are taken and hours are wasted.”

— James T. Kirk

committed to improving student achievement in language arts and met regularly to plan how to accomplish the goal. After many meetings, members hadn’t noticed any real improvement in student learning. The process observer gathered evaluations in which the members rated their communication as being highly effective. When the process observer attended the meeting, however, she heard conversations that mainly

- To learn more about effective meetings, order ***Making Meetings Work*** by Ann Delephant (Corwin with NSDC, 2007) from the NSDC Online Bookstore, <http://store.nsd.org>.

FOCUS OF OBSERVATION	BEHAVIORS OBSERVED
<p>Participation Did all members participate? Did all have an opportunity to participate? Did anyone dominate? Did anyone remain silent? Who kept things moving? Did anyone make an effort to include a reluctant participant?</p>	
<p>Decision making Did the group determine the decision-making process before the discussion? What processes did the group use to come to a decision? Did everyone accept the decision? How did members influence the decision?</p>	
<p>Communication What verbal behaviors were apparent:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposing • Building • Supporting • Seeking information • Giving information • Summarizing • Attacking <p>Did members interrupt one another? Did members bring others into the discussion? Did members demonstrate active listening? Was anyone ignored? What nonverbal communication was present?</p>	
<p>Group leadership How did the leaders assure involvement? Did informal leaders emerge? How and when? How did the recorder and timekeeper support the group in its task?</p>	

DIRECTIONS:

Remove yourself from the group. Sit slightly behind group members but close enough to hear all of the conversations and observe the nonverbal interactions. In each of the categories, note behaviors by group members. Write each observation as a separate entry, and remember to write only objective information.

Coaching closes the gap at Georgia school

► Read the Dec/Jan 2007 issue of *The Learning Principal* to learn more about coaching at Simonton Elementary School.

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math coach. That brought the number of coaches to 20.

During the 2007-08 school year, Simonton made another big leap in coaching when math and literacy coaches shared techniques with the school's six ELL teachers and its 10 special education teachers. "They were feeling very isolated from classroom teachers and separated from coaching. I was trying to bring them all together," Schoeller said.

What is evolving is a transformation from what was only co-teaching to a practice that focuses more on sharing practices through coaching. ELL teachers and special education

teachers pair up with regular classroom teachers and coach them in strategies that are most effective with English language learners and special education students.

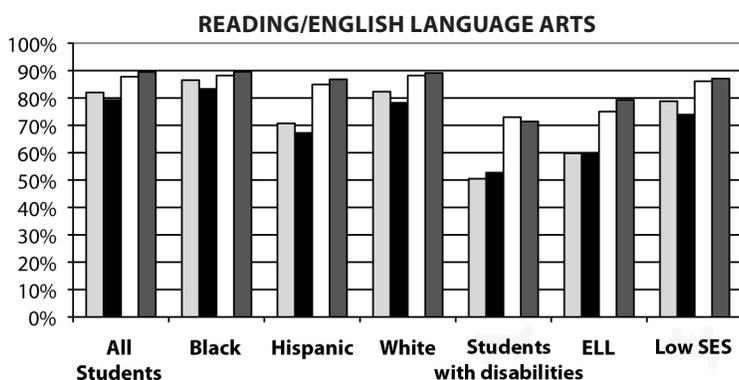
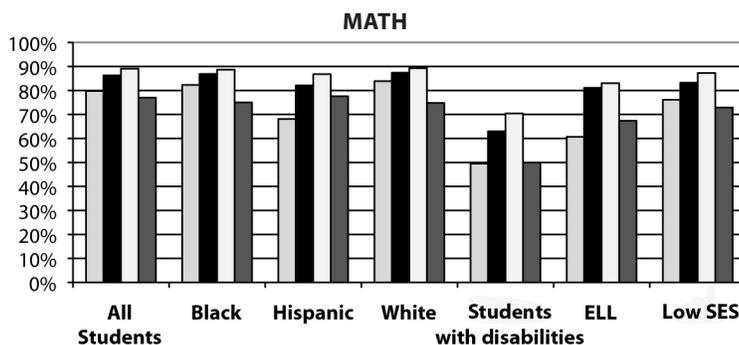
"There are times when a classroom teacher might have an ELL teacher and a math coach in the room with her. Teachers know that they have their grade-level friends plus these coaches who know and care about their kids. It's less isolating for everybody," she said.

Schoeller believes this infusion of coaching support is a major factor in increases in both teacher and student attendance which are now around 97%. "That's because instruction is so much more engaging for both students and teachers. Both students and teachers have another caring adult in the room. In terms of relationships, that's good for everyone," Schoeller said.

Another outcome from co-teaching has been a drop in special education referrals for learning disabilities and behavioral disabilities. "We have so many interventions that kids are responding positively. Everybody's trying to work with them to figure out how they learn best. It used to be that teachers blamed the kid when their strategies weren't working. Now, they're asking for new strategies," she said.

2005-08 COMPARISON FOR GRADES 3, 4, AND 5 (COMPILED) ON THE CRITERION-REFERENCED COMPETENCY TEST

(State standardized exam)



*40 students per category minimum for reporting

2005 = 2007 =
 2006 = 2008 =

CONVINCING TEACHERS

As much as Schoeller believed in coaching, she knew that she had to sell the concept to teachers in the beginning.

Initially, she hired teachers with an eye toward who would fit in a coaching environment and gambled that teachers who experienced coaching would come to value it. "When I interview, I tell them that we're going to be around you all the time. If you're not comfortable with that, then don't come to this school," she said.

In her first year, she hired 39 teachers and in her second year, 29. By the third year, she hired only 18 teachers and for the 2008-09 school year, only two. "That's the difference coaching has made. They don't want to leave," she said. Schoeller has employed two other strategies to

Continued on p. 7

17 Under 7

Principals from 17 Title I schools in Gwinnett County Public Schools have joined forces to support each other in meeting the goals of No Child Left Behind sooner than the 2014 deadline set by the legislation.

The group came together in 2007, thus the goal of 17 reaching the goal in less than seven years.

"We're all always in danger of not making AYP. We're always trying to figure out what to do next, so we've become a kind of critical friends group to support each other," said Dot Schoeller, who assembled the principals. She modeled the group after NSDC's 12 Under 12 initiative after observing one of its meetings at an NSDC conference.

The Gwinnett principals voluntarily meet monthly "to talk about what we're trying, what's working, what's not working," Schoeller said. The principals and other staff from their buildings frequently visit other participating schools and have developed their own protocol about what to look for during those visits.

"I never walk away from anything not learning something," Schoeller said. "When I go to one of these meetings, my staff always knows I'm coming back with something new."

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build support among teachers.

The first is that she deployed coaches by grade level. Each coach works with two grade levels, usually with five teachers she sees every day. Since each grade level has daily common planning time, the coach can easily meet with two grade levels each day and still find opportunities to observe, co-teach, and demonstrate lessons during the remaining hours of the day.

"Coaches develop expertise in that grade level. They really get to know those standards, and that's very valuable. But a lot of coaching is really about building relationships so the teachers trust the coach and they trust other teachers. As they coach, they really are bonding with each other. They actually become pretty good friends," she said.

The grade-level plan also allows the coach to recognize which teachers will benefit most from observing and which are best suited for demonstrating various strategies. Because the coach works on a similar schedule, she can easily fill in and free a teacher to observe in another classroom.

Another Schoeller strategy has been her approach to summer school and after-school tutorials for which teachers volunteer and earn extra money. To get a summer school or after-school assignment, Simonton teachers must agree to participate in coaching. That boosts their extra

duty pay from \$25 an hour to \$40 an hour. "I had to sweeten this in the beginning because some were resistant. Some didn't need the money; they jumped right in. That has changed over time, but I still offer the incentive," she said.

Working with a coach under these circumstances means planning lessons with the coach and then reflecting afterwards about what went right, what didn't go as expected, and how the lesson might be modified for future use. "Teachers like this because they're trying strategies on kids who aren't technically 'their' students. They're assisting kids from multiple classrooms. If the strategies work, they're more likely to try them in their classroom with their own kids," Schoeller said.

COACHING'S FUTURE

Although Simonton has demonstrated success with coaching, Schoeller has her sights set on the next move. The experience with co-teaching has convinced her that all coaches should become instructional coaches capable of supporting teachers in a variety of subjects and strategies. "We'll still have building experts, but cross-training will allow us to use each other's knowledge more effectively," she said.

"You can't be a singleton anymore. You can't attack a kid one subject at a time. You have to tackle the whole kid when you need massive change," she said. ■

COVER STORY

SIMONTON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Lawrenceville, Ga.

District: Gwinnett County (Ga.) Public Schools

Grades: K-5

Enrollment: 1,536

Staff: 186

Racial/ethnic mix:

White: 14%

Black: 48%

Hispanic: 30%

Asian: 4%

Multiracial: 4%

Limited English

proficient: 27%

Languages

spoken: 47

(Students born in 58 different countries.)

Free/reduced

lunch: 69%

Special

education: 13%

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Everybody's trying

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— Dot Schoeller

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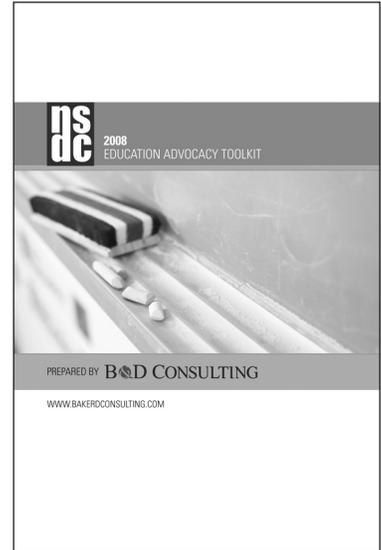
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- What your message should be; and
- How you can most effectively deliver your message.

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