

# Tools FOR SCHOOLS

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS AND LEADERS

## Powerful coaching energizes learning

BY VALERIE VON FRANK

**M**arie Parker-McElroy remembers a dismal morning when, as a teacher leader, she headed a K-2nd grade-level team meeting for about 15 of her colleagues.

“I was reading the notes over from a leadership meeting — just reading it to them — and then asked if there were any questions,” she said. “They were polite; they just sat there. They had their jackets on. They were waiting for it to be over so they could go to their classrooms.”

Now an instructional coach in Fairfax County (Va.), Parker-McElroy’s leadership looks much different as she facilitates teams of three to 30 members in two elementary schools.

She recalls another recent meeting. She was

working with a group on guided reading and she sensed a drag on participants’ attention. So she immediately asked participants to create a metaphor for what they’d just learned and share it with a partner.

“And the whole energy of the room just shifted,” she said. “Instead of them just repeating what they were learning, they had to be higher-level thinkers. It brought the creative juices into the room. Whatever they said wasn’t going to be wrong and was going to be validated by their peers.”

The difference came over three intervening years in which Parker-McElroy learned about Adaptive Schools, participated in Cognitive Coaching training, and studied the work of

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# Powerful coaching energizes learning

## COACHING TIPS FROM MARIE PARKER-McELROY

- **Make the learning meaningful for everyone.**

Sometimes groups include different roles, such as instructional assistants, for whom the topic may not be as relevant.

- **Create intentionality.**

List expected outcomes, and tie the outcomes to student achievement.

- **Respect everybody's learning curve.**

- **Use an expert in the room** — an article, book, video clip.

- **Change the pace.**

- **Use active engagement.**

Find techniques to get laughter back in the room or energize the room again. "Energizing could be through a brain break or a comic I have ready to use if I need to, but most of the time it's interaction with colleagues."

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Joellen Killion and Ann Delehant, she said. She was accepted to the NSDC Academy.

In Fairfax County School District, coaches take part in a system of learning that helps them to understand adult learners' needs, learn to analyze data, and gain facilitation skills from creating agendas to using coaching language.

"We have time to practice and refine our skills," Parker-McElroy said. "The most important skills I learned were paraphrasing, using inquiring questions, staying focused, impartiality."

### A SYSTEM OF LEARNING

Tina Lane said the district's size was one reason leaders decided to emphasize coaches' learning after investing in the positions. With 41 schools throughout the county having coaches, the district hired her as instructional coach coordinator in the department of professional learning and training. Lane monitors the coaches' work in a nonevaluative capacity, and plans and facilitates their learning.

"It's really about trickle-down effect," Lane said. "Our No. 1 priority is to build capacity. We're too large to give all the teachers this professional learning, so the coaches get this professional learning and then they go back and model it in the schools."

Coaches receive extensive professional learning opportunities. The district schedules summer sessions for coaches' professional learning. New coaches meet for 11 days in the summer, experienced coaches for three. On the first day, both new and experienced coaches spend time celebrating past successes or achievements and learn about any changes in the district, such as a new assessment tool. New coaches then focus on needed skills, including working with adults, using data, and facilitating teams. Experienced coaches spend their time in sessions facilitated by other experienced coaches. Some

might present their learning from conferences or offer their knowledge in an area of particular expertise. Lane identifies coaches' needs and knowledge throughout the year, then matches the experts with possible offerings for the summer session.

In addition, coaches meet regularly together, weekly in the first semester, then at least biweekly for a full day of sharing and learning. Lane sets the agendas based on her observations in schools about what coaches may need to know, as well as from their feedback and

feedback from the district's cluster assistant superintendents.

The coaches have book studies and a supportive time to talk over successes and challenges. They use protocols that they can take back to their schools to use with learning teams. Perhaps the most essential part of the day is small group meetings in which each participant presents data assessing his or her impact on teacher and student learning.

The district requires that each coach set a SMART goal at each meeting, considering how to help their learning teams advance along a continuum of effectiveness. The coaches write strategies and determine what data they will share to demonstrate meeting the goal. Each goal is outlined on a form that Lane documents.

For example, one coach wanted each of her school's learning teams to write a SMART goal. She collected the teams' goals and shared those with the coaching team at the next meeting. At that meeting, she decided the next level was to have the grade-level learning teams create work plans to meet their goals, and the completed plans were evidence of that accomplishment. Next, she worked with the teacher teams to unpack the standards and create curriculum maps for their grade level, bringing the curriculum maps to the coaches' third meeting for discussion.

*Continued on p. 3*

### NSDC'S BELIEF

Schools' most complex problems are best solved by educators collaborating and learning together.

## Readings for Fairfax County coaches

Coaches in Fairfax County regularly discuss professional reading during scheduled days for their own learning, to assess where the teams they work with are, and to share with those teams. A few recent readings are:

- *Becoming a learning school*, by Joellen Killion and Patricia Roy (NSDC, 2009).
- *Data-driven dialogue: A facilitator's guide to collaborative inquiry*, by Bruce Wellman and Laura Lipton (MiraVia, 2004).
- *Fierce conversations: Achieving success at work and in life, one conversation at a time*, by Susan Scott (Penguin Group, 2002).
- *The five dysfunctions of a team: A leadership fable*, by Patrick Lencioni (Jossey-Bass, 2002).
- *The handbook for SMART school teams*, by Anne Conzemius and Jan O'Neill (Solution Tree, 2002).
- *Leading for results: Transforming teaching, learning, and relationships in schools*, by Dennis Sparks (NSDC & Corwin Press, 2004).
- *Learning by doing: The handbook for professional learning communities at work*, by Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Thomas Many (Solution Tree, 2006).
- "The never evers of workshop facilitation," by Peggy A. Sharp. *Tools for Schools*, Dec. 1999/Jan. 2000, Vol. 3, No. 3.
- *Taking the lead: New roles for teachers and school-based coaches*, by Joellen Killion and Cindy Harrison (NSDC, 2006).
- *Trust matters: Leadership for successful schools*, by Megan Tschannen-Moran (Jossey-Bass, 2004).

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Another coach created a colorful way to analyze student testing results on a districtwide common assessment and shared the results — and her method — with her colleagues.

"Those conversations bring lots of opportunities for us to hear about our peers' work and to brainstorm," Parker-McElroy said. "We'll have consultancy trios or cognitive coaches so the coach comes up with her own ideas." She said the groups may be those at the same school level or within a cluster, a division of the countywide system that includes feeder schools. Sometimes the small groups are divided to focus on similar challenges or goals.

Additional factors that have helped coaches succeed, according to Lane and Parker-McElroy, are requirements that principals participate in professional development alongside coaches, that coaches and principals meet weekly, and that principals attend learning team meetings to observe.

"Having my principal reflect with me helps me think of things in a different way," Parker-McElroy said. "She'll say, 'I wonder what would have happened if you had let that go?' Or 'I wonder what would have happened if you had used a flexible question?' After meetings, the reflective

conversations and feedback she gives me is the most beneficial job-embedded learning I have."

### SEEING THE EFFECT

Why spend so much time on coaches' professional learning?

Parker-McElroy said school-level learning team meetings have a new meaning. Instead of looking at problem students, she now has protocols to use with teams and assesses the impact of members' discussion. She said the team meetings are making more of a difference and building efficacy.

Lane noted that five years after beginning the intensive training, the coaches' turnaround training is evident among teacher leaders in the schools. She recounted a recent observation when a coach and teacher leader were cofacilitating a learning team meeting.

"It was obvious (the teacher leader) had listened and watched" her coach in action, Lane said. "Most people jump in and offer solutions. She was using coaching language and paraphrasing and asking meditational questions.

"We tell the coaches you need to build capacity so that if you were to walk out tomorrow, you have a school of coaches who can do what you've been doing." ■

## COACHING TIPS FROM MARIE PARKER-McElROY

- **Address potential challenges.** "When I know a meeting is going to be more of a challenge, I make sure there's going to be movement and that resisters are spread throughout the room instead of in one area."
- **Help teachers leave with a practical strategy** to use the next time they're in the classroom.
- **Include reflection time at the close.** Get feedback to make adjustments for the next time the group meets.

## Coach needs assessment

Use or adapt this needs assessment to gather information about coaches' learning needs.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ School \_\_\_\_\_

Please check the appropriate rating for each area. Return your completed survey to Staff Development.

Area	Huh, What? 1	I know just a little. 2	I want to learn more. 3	I use it in my work. 4	I could teach this. 5
Facilitation skills					
School improvement process					
Presentation skills					
Cognitive coaching					
9 McREL instructional strategies					
Differentiation strategies					
Instructional strategies for teaching special needs students					
Knowledge of special education processes and procedures					
Strategies for supporting teachers who have mainstreamed special needs students					
Teaching gifted and talented students					
Designing accommodations for verbal, quantitative, and nonverbal strengths in students					
Instructional strategies for teaching English language learners					
Sheltered English instruction					
Strategies for supporting teachers in delivering effective instruction for English language learners					

**Source:** *Taking the Lead: New Roles for Teachers and School-Based Coaches*, by Joellen Killion and Cindy Harrison. Oxford, OH: NSDC, 2006.

## Critical events analysis

Use this either as an individual reflection guide or in discussion with other coaches to deeply examine a recent coaching interaction.

### DESCRIBE

Describe a recent experience that had a profound impact on you. The impact might be positive or negative. Write as much detail as you can about the experience. Include the basics of who, what, where, when, and how. Focus on yourself in the experience.

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### ANALYZE

Examine the experience more deeply to understand it more thoroughly. Explain how things happened? How are the people, actions, and reactions connected? How were you impacted by the experience? How were others impacted?

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### CONCLUDE

Write a conclusion that can be drawn from this situation that will help you in future similar situations. What learning are you taking away from the critical event analysis?

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**Source:** *Taking the Lead: New Roles for Teachers and School-Based Coaches*, by Joellen Killion and Cindy Harrison. Oxford, OH: NSDC, 2006.

## Left-hand column process

This form offers a reflection opportunity for individuals or teams investigating their coaching practices in order to improve.

Select a specific situation in which you interacted with another person (or several) in a way you felt was not as successful as you hoped it would be. In the right column, write the dialogue of that interaction as you remember it. Try to capture at least three exchanges. After you have written the dialogue, in the left column write what you wanted to say but did not.

After you have finished, reflect on what may have caused you to say what you did instead of what you wanted to say.

What you didn't say	What was said

### POSSIBLE CAUSES

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**Source:** *Taking the Lead: New Roles for Teachers and School-Based Coaches*, by Joellen Killion and Cindy Harrison. Oxford, OH: NSDC, 2006.

## Feedback protocol

**To gather feedback from teachers as individuals or in teams about your coaching, use the following protocol to gather some information to use as you consider your strengths and areas for improvement as a coach.**

Tell me what I do that helps you be the best teacher you can be. Give me one specific example of how I helped you improve your teaching or student learning.

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Tell me what I can do to serve you better as a coach. What strategies have I used that have *not* been useful to you? Give me a specific example of a time when I was *not* helpful to you. Tell me what you would have preferred me to do in that situation.

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Describe what other ways you want me to help you.

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Please share your ideas about ways that I can be a better coach to serve you or the school.

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Thank you.

**Source:** *Taking the Lead: New Roles for Teachers and School-Based Coaches*, by Joellen Killion and Cindy Harrison. Oxford, OH: NSDC, 2006.

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## Wednesday Webinars series is under way

Each Wednesday from February through June, NSDC will present an hour-long webinar focusing on professional learning topics and NSDC member services. Join professional learning leaders for webinars on assessing professional development needs, designs for professional learning, designing professional development workshops, engaging adult learners, and more. NSDC staff members will also guide attendees through topics such as delivering great conference sessions, the online conference registration process, and exploring NSDC's web site.

Wednesday Webinars are hosted in the NSDC Learning Exchange, the online learning platform that features live meetings as well as discussion forums,

a resource library, live chats, and more. Following each live webinar, attendees can continue their learning experience by engaging facilitators in follow-up discussions in our forum.

Webinar attendees receive permanent access to the Learning Exchange public forums, where they can engage in conversations about professional learning topics and issues, network with like-minded professionals, and access valuable NSDC resources as a member of the Learning Exchange.

Several webinars will be offered at no charge, while others cost \$69. NSDC members receive a discount, as do those who register for more than one paid webinar at a time.

To see the full schedule, visit [www.nsdc.org/elearning/webinars/](http://www.nsdc.org/elearning/webinars/).

