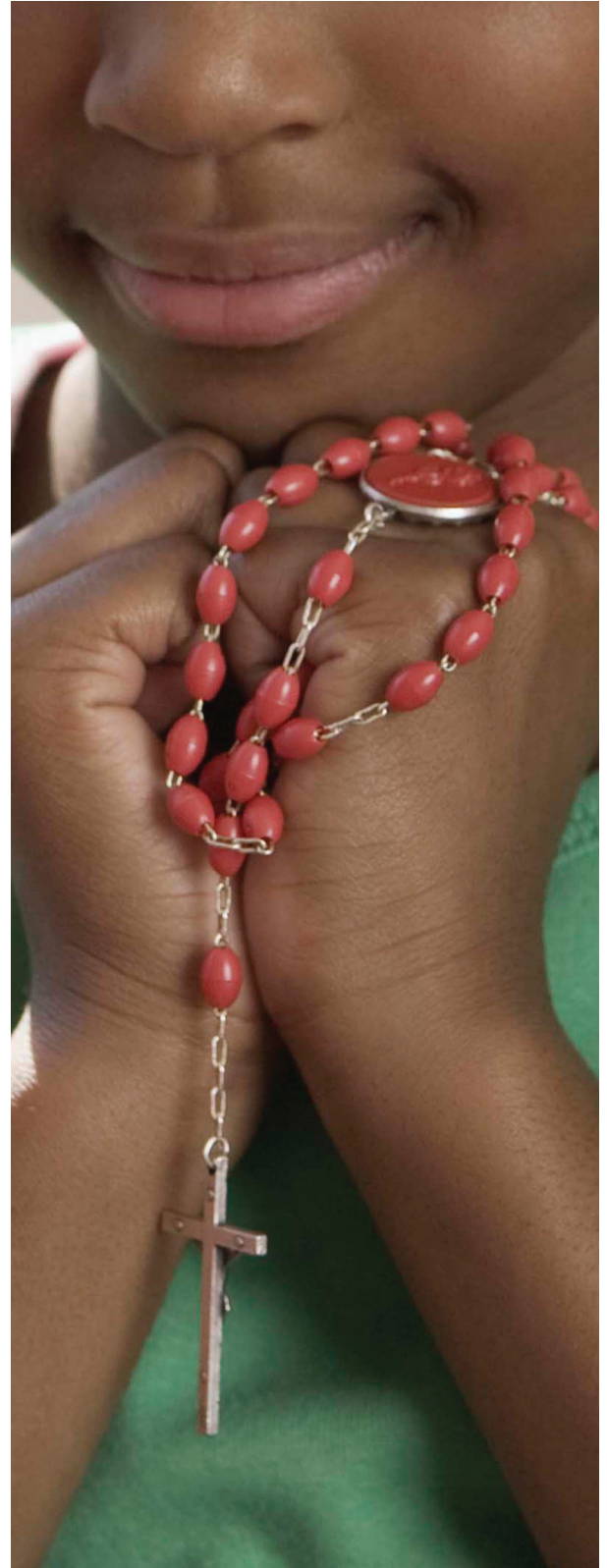


ARCHDIOCESE PUTS ITS FAITH IN EXTERNAL COACHES

By Carol Cary and Maria Lamattina

In today's workplace, the ability to solve complex problems, think critically, and engage in continuous, self-directed learning is essential. Recognizing that providing the kind of education that fosters such abilities necessitated considerable change in its schools, the Archdiocese of Philadelphia's Office of Catholic Education developed a strategic plan focusing on the 21st-century learner.

The plan focuses on three areas for growth: Catholic identity, academic excellence, and sustainability. Within academic excellence, the plan targets transforming classroom practice, emphasizing rigorous and relevant instruction, interdisciplinary learning, and the use of data to inform instruction. Teachers are the linchpins to the plan's success.



Over the years, the Office of Catholic Education has been intentional about its approach to professional development, regularly hosting universal staff development sessions for all of its almost 1,000 secondary school educators. Although such large-scale development efforts are typical and offered with the best intentions, “good intentions are insufficient to lead to worthwhile professional learning” (Reeves, 2010, p. 2). Recently, for example, professional development for secondary teachers focused on the International Center for Leadership in Education’s rigor and relevance model. Presentations described the concepts of the rigor and relevance framework. However, these presentations didn’t change classroom instruction.

Data obtained using an online classroom walk-through instrument indicated that traditional, 20th-century instructional strategies prevailed in almost all of the secondary classrooms, which serve 16,000 students in the five-county Philadelphia region. The Office of Catholic Education, along with local administrators, analyzed the classroom walk-through data and established goals designed to transform classrooms into 21st-century learning centers. With enrollment trends in decline and tuition costs increasing, the Office of Catholic Education set out to reaffirm its reputation of educating students for college, work, and life.

Additional data obtained from teacher surveys indicated the need for dialogue between teachers and administrators on creating a common vision, collaborative decision making, expectations for student achievement, and teacher accountability. To become centers of academic excellence, the schools would have to build professional learning communities that would support such dialogue.

High-quality, focused, ongoing, embedded professional development and the establishment of professional learning communities both within and among the schools were identified as keys to bringing about the desired change.

To align professional development with the strategic plan, the Office of Catholic Education partnered with Catapult Learning, a professional development services provider, to design a comprehensive, three-year plan to support teachers and administrators as they learned new approaches and put their learning into action. The initial plan called for combining large-group professional learning institutes and on-site, one-on-one, instructional coaching. If the desired outcome was to transform classroom practice and improve student learning, then a long-term approach was clearly necessary.

Each element provided distinct benefits that would further the archdiocese’s goal. The institutes would give teachers an opportunity to gain new knowledge while also serving as a means for networking across schools and dis-

ciplines, thus setting the stage for building professional learning communities. The instructional coaching would support teachers as they worked to incorporate innovative teaching techniques into their daily classroom practice. Five of the archdiocese’s eight urban high schools were selected to participate in the first year of the plan.

LAYING THE FOUNDATION

According to Douglas Reeves, “a vision represents a compelling picture of the ideal state” (2010, p. 59). Early in the school year, principals and assistant principals involved in the initiative participated in a visioning exercise. Individually, they were asked to write statements describing what they were seeing as they walked through the classrooms in their buildings. Each descriptor was written on a sticky note that they then placed on a chart labeled “as is.” Working together, they read the descriptors and clustered them into categories, creating charts for each.

Next, the Catapult Learning facilitator asked the group to picture a “flawless future,” to write descriptions of what they would ideally see in classrooms on sticky notes, and place them on a chart labeled “to be.” As before, the administrators read through the descriptors and clustered them into categories.

The group examined the differences between the two states, and identified steps needed to close the gaps between “as is” and “to be.” For example, principals wanted to see things like a move from teacher-centered to student-centered classrooms, and a move from a textbook-driven curriculum toward an inquiry-based curriculum. This exercise helped initiative leaders outline the broad themes for the first formal institute day.

IDENTIFYING TEACHER NEEDS

Using the themes established by the visioning exercise, the external facilitator designed a needs analysis survey that was sent to all teachers who would be attending the first institute. The survey asked teachers to indicate the extent to which they wanted to learn more about various strategies, such as formative assessment, adapting instruction to

Archdiocese of Philadelphia Secondary School System

Philadelphia, Pa.
(System includes Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery, and Philadelphia counties)

Number of schools: **17**

Enrollment: **16,507**

Staff: **800**

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	76%
* Minority:	24%

* Limited English proficient: **NA**

* Languages spoken: **NA**

* Free/reduced lunch: **NA**

* Special education: **NA**

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* The Archdiocese of Philadelphia collects a limited portion of the data typically available for schools and districts featured in *JSD*.

accommodate different learning styles, strategies to help students develop critical thinking skills, and integrating the use of technology.

In addition to teacher surveys, principals participated in individual meetings with Catapult Learning, whose representatives asked:

- What measurable instructional goals would you like to set for this year?
- What professional development do you believe will support these goals?
- To what level of accountability will you hold teachers?

These questions were not only intended to provide input for the design of the institute, but also to raise awareness of the importance of establishing and maintaining accountability for the success of any change effort.

Based on these two data points — the teacher needs analysis survey and the individual meetings with administrators — the first institute focused on student-centered learning. The keynote speaker addressed why individual teachers should invest time and effort in changing their professional practice. Breakout sessions revolved around designing inquiry-based units of study, active learning and questioning strategies, and using data to inform instruction.

EMBEDDING THE LEARNING

The plan included coaching as a means of embedding what would be learned from the institute into teachers' daily practice. To underscore this, learning facilitators asked principals who attended the visioning session about the types of feedback they receive from teachers after they attend a district-mandated workshop, as well as what they observe in terms of instructional changes. It became clear that the impact of such events was minimal, and those participating in the learning initiatives discussed the hallmarks of effective professional development, the general benefits of coaching, as well as the specifics of how it would work for the archdiocese.

Shortly after the first institute, coaches met with principals of the various schools to identify specific goals and to determine how teachers would be selected for coaching. There was little variation in goals from one school to the other, as the initial visioning exercise and subsequent institute content drove the focus. In general, the effort began with teachers who volunteered. Only a small group of teachers at each school was involved, and each of these teachers worked with a coach to prioritize his or her own learning needs relative to the school's goals. Various disciplines were represented, and, whenever possible, coaches made themselves available for department meetings or informal discussions with teachers who were not part of their assigned group.

Catapult Learning provided the coaches who worked with teachers, on-site, spending considerable time co-planning units and lessons, working side-by-side with teachers in their class-

rooms, and engaging them in the kinds of reflective conversations that encourage teachers to think about what they do, why they do it, the results they get, and what else they might do.

THE RESULTS

As intended, the initial institute created a feeling of connectedness within individual schools as well as across the five urban high schools. Catapult Learning representatives solicited feedback immediately, through written surveys, and, later, through informal conversations with teachers and administrators. The institute had hit the mark — teachers realized they had the support of their administrators and colleagues, and a sense of collegiality was the descriptor most often used by teachers as they discussed their experience that day.

The coaching was also well-received. While there is much discussion about the role of coaching in professional development, leveraging coaching as an instrument of change in classroom practice and philosophy is no small challenge. Adult learning theory indicates that choice is a positive motivator (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2009) and the coaching model that these schools adopted provided teachers with choices that motivated them to try new strategies in their classrooms.

These teachers were excited to work one-on-one with a coach and reported that any initial anxieties they had vanished quickly as coaches and teachers developed open, supportive lines of communication.

The changes were tangible. Teachers who had never considered implementing differentiated instruction strategies began to do so without reluctance. Teachers who had always arranged the physical environment of their classrooms in teacher-directed or even theater-style seating tried new arrangements conducive to small-group instruction and discussion. Teachers commented on how they collaborated with their coaches, discussing new approaches, co-planning lessons and assessments, conferencing on results, and reflecting on new experiences. To quote one teacher's feedback, "The one thing I will take away is the importance of reflecting. I was reminded ... to look back on my lesson and evaluate it." That teacher's principal emphasized the fact that the coach had made it safe for her teachers to take risks — and to fail.

Building-level administrators received positive feedback from all teachers involved in the coaching process. Several administrators commented how teachers who were not in the official coaching program inquired about having access to the coaching at some point.

The coaching experience had done exactly what it was supposed to do — envelop teachers in a risk-free, collaborative process that would transform classrooms and empower teachers to make professional decisions to improve their practice. While coaching provided teachers with an intimate experience, it also helped the teachers view themselves as part of the bigger picture, of a large urban constituency.

The Office of Catholic Education, in collaboration with local administrators, continues to evaluate classroom walk-through data to determine changes in instructional practice. Observations reveal an increase in student-directed lessons, small-group and paired-group assignments, and use of technology by teachers and students, all leading to the desired outcome — increased student engagement.

MOVING FORWARD

After the great success that the program achieved initially, the effort continues this year in the five initial schools, and has been expanded — the three remaining urban high schools in the archdiocese have become part of the process. Teachers who worked with coaches in the first year are building on what they learned and continuing the transformation of their classrooms and their respective schools.

Noticing the positive changes in their colleagues' classrooms, many teachers who were reluctant to work with a coach last year are now seeking out the coaches, creating the need for establishing cohorts of teachers at some schools. In addition, some teachers who are still not part of the regular coaching program are taking advantage of the coaches' expertise during

prep periods, lunch breaks, and before and after school.

Committed to the goal of transforming its schools, the Archdiocese of Philadelphia's Office of Catholic Education remains steadfast in its pursuit of focused professional development that supports teachers as leaders and learners within a professional learning community, and where the journey from "as is" is essential to the dream of "to be."

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