



Questions lead to analysis of instructional practice

By Valerie von Frank

Q What do coaches need to know and do to best support teachers?

Teachers have to practice reflecting. I tell teachers, “A student is going to sit there and let you teach your heart out, but those students already had an idea of how to do the problem before coming into the classroom.” I help them create a thorough baseline, looking at the cognitive complexity of their questions so they’re not just asking yes and no, Jeopardy-type questions. We want to know if they’re having students do a lot of cognitive work, whether they’re asking the right questions, both formally and informally.

In Duval County, we take teachers through an actual process and have them identify what level of complexity they want a question to be. I put it on trial then, and say, “Prove to me that this is a moderate level question.”


I may agree with the teacher, but it helps them analyze their instructional practice and what they feel is right. Questioning gets them to reflect.

They know I’m going to ask questions and keep asking. I start with an idea, a goal, and ask questions to have them think in ways that lead them toward that way of teaching and thinking. I read the research on the topic and have a thorough understanding so I’m not just asking generic questions, but am very specific. I spend a half-hour to an hour a day on professional reading.

The most challenging aspect of coaching for me was my youth. A lot of times, veteran teachers just don’t want to hear it, especially about mathematics. They think, “Why can’t we just teach the way we were taught?” They’re hesitant to listen to new practices and strategies, so I introduce readings that back up what I’m presenting — from research, articles, books, journals. Sometimes I use the materials as a pre-read; other times, I

give them to teachers to read after I’ve introduced the topic. They can check the article for what I’m talking about to try to build buy-in and show them the benefits of the idea so they won’t say I’m just giving them something else to do.

Of course, you have to build trust first and be careful to observe the atmosphere and what’s going on. And I always let the teacher start with a clean slate. I take whatever I may have heard and just put it away in my back pocket, then try to pull out the positive in whatever that teacher may be doing and build from there.

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