



Create a culture of meaningful conversations

As told to Valerie von Frank

Coaches have three challenges teachers must work through. The biggest is a culture that promotes artificial conversation and has a social agreement not to talk about “the biggies,” one of which is our own practice, our successes and failures in our own classrooms. A second is the structure of time, which makes it difficult for teachers to have quality time to sit and reflect, to talk with one another in an unhurried and systematic manner. The third is diversity. Urban teaching is about being able to use teaching strategies to treat diversity as a strength as opposed to a deficit.

A big part of urban teaching is being able to build communities and help students get to know each other better. That classroom approach parallels what coaches try to nurture at the professional level.

I’ve used a walk-through model

to help. First, we have several staff conversations about what teaching looks like in this building. We brainstorm what a snapshot would look like of quality teaching and learning. From those conversations, I fashion a focused walk-through in which I spend about 15 to 20 minutes in each classroom looking for those elements that we discussed as a staff.

I put the data in a spreadsheet, and we reflect on that in a staff meeting. We discuss what we think the data will show. I share the data, then we analyze it. I ask for reactions, what surprised them. We begin the conversation then in a very nonthreatening way, looking at how teachers and students are experiencing instruction. That allows us to discuss as a staff what our goals are for instruction and which areas might have the greatest impact on student achievement. The conversation opens up teachers to invite coaching — sometimes across instructional areas, sometimes within a team, or sometimes individually. The

process is an efficient entry into the work.

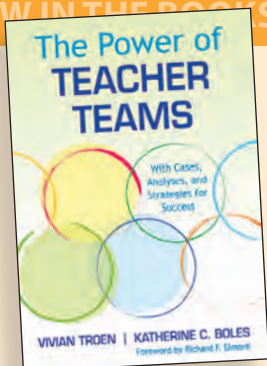
I have also tried creating a coach’s placemat — a paper I put down at each place for staff meetings with tips on a current issue, such as behavior management or information from Learning Forward.

The placemats are just there to stimulate thinking. I follow up with voluntary weekly lunches where teachers can bring their lunch, talk about the issue, and brainstorm strategies. The discussion empowers teachers. I just facilitate or prompt by questioning. It’s important as a coach to be seen as a nonjudgmental listener.

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