



Teachers, from left, Jennifer Levy, Holly Procida, Laura Sullivan, and Amy Gamarello work together at the Northern Valley (N.J.) Coaching Academy in July 2012.

# EMPOWERMENT ZONE

COACHING ACADEMY PRIMES TEACHERS TO BECOME INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERS

By Linda Mayer

**A**veteran high school teacher, a mid-career 2nd-grade teacher, and a newly tenured middle school teacher carefully considered their applications for the Northern Valley Schools Curriculum Consortium's new Coaching Academy. A bit uncertain about what this opportunity could mean for them, the teachers submitted their applications along with recommendations from their administrators.

Within the consortium, which encompasses seven K-8 districts, two high schools, and a regional special needs center in northern New Jersey, the groundwork for a culture of teacher leadership had been growing over many years. While teachers and administrators had engaged in professional learning and interdistrict collaboration, coaching presented a new leadership opportunity.

These newly trained coaches would work with early career teachers. Teacher demand for coaching increased with an expansion of the regional new teacher induction program, evolving from a one-year course to a three-year sequence of professional learning.

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The new teacher induction program provides an effective learning design for teachers to enhance and refine their practice early in their careers. In response to the need for more coaches throughout the three-year program, and building on the knowledge that there is a greater likelihood that teacher practice will change if coaching is ongoing and directly related to classroom instruction (Rivera, Burley, & Sass, 2004), the Coaching Academy was born in July 2012.

### **INCREASE CLASSROOM SUPPORT**

The Coaching Academy's goal was to build a cadre of instructional coaches who could provide increased classroom support for teachers to navigate 21st-century educational demands. The instructional leadership team for this initiative included two regional office administrators, two instructional coaches, and one principal.

Inspiration for the Coaching Academy came from the knowledge and experiences shared by several leadership team members at the Learning Forward Academy, an extended professional learning experience in which members work collaboratively to gain knowledge to solve significant student learning problems in their schools, districts, or organizations.

Planning began with developing a common vision for a coaching structure that would be a growth model from the already established and embedded practice of coach-educators working exclusively for the regional office.

### **'A WIN-WIN FOR ALL INVOLVED'**

Administrative support was apparent right from the start. "Teacher-to-teacher coaching is the answer we've been looking for," said Superintendent Michael Fox. "This is a win-win for all involved. New teachers are given the opportunity for embedded coaching, and our more veteran teachers are embarking on a new level of teacher leadership."

The instructional leadership team designed a plan whereby trained coaches would be released from their teaching assignments for at least two days a year. Robert Price, director of curriculum and instruction, said that starting the program with two days of released time represented a huge culture shift.

Each coach was assigned to see two to three teachers, and most coaches reported that they stayed in touch after the visits through email. Coaches would travel to local schools and work with peers in a variety of roles. Coaching

was divided into four categories from which coaches could self-select an area of interest. Region-level administrators would serve as lead mentors to support groups of new coaches with scheduling, ongoing learning, and resources.

### **PROGRAM DESIGN**

At the start of the Coaching Academy, the leadership team hoped to attract 10 applicants. In fact, 40 teachers applied. Educators recognized the opportunity to experience an instructional leadership role while remaining in the classroom.

"I am a continuous learner and always looking for ways to grow professionally," said kindergarten teacher Connie Alcoser. "I thought I had exhausted all opportunities, but then the Coaching Academy presented a new avenue for professional growth."

Participants engaged in three consecutive days of learning, with the overall goal to build understanding about the why, what, and how of coaching. In his book *Drive* (Pink, 2009), Daniel Pink says that people are motivated by purpose, mastery, and autonomy. These teachers were motivated by their passion to help their peers succeed as well as their desire to gain an understanding of coaching skills and eagerness to work independently outside of their home school. One teacher said, "As a coach, my work not only improves my instruction for my students but gives me the opportunity to hopefully impact the learning of hundreds of other children as well. After all, that's why so many of us became teachers: to impact children."

The first day began with a community-building protocol, followed by a discussion of a preassigned lecture by Simon Sinek that delved into the realm of leaders who inspire others with providing the "why" for the vision (Sinek, 2010).

Program leaders spoke of their deep and heartfelt passion for coaching. Patty McGee, coordinator of professional development in literacy and a member of the instructional leadership team, told participants, "Coaching brings me to a new level of supporting student achievement, the passion that I entered this profession with."

Throughout the three days, teachers remained in communication remotely through an online bulletin board, called a wallwisher, available at [www.padlet.com](http://www.padlet.com). Participants' comments provided reflection and enhancements to the speakers, assigned articles, and the study of educational

NORTHERN VALLEY  
COACHING ACADEMY 2012  
**SAMPLE WALLWISHER  
COMMENTS**

**Linda M.:** Is anyone else thinking about Steve Barkley's suggestion of coaching "the best" teachers first?

**Bob Price:** Add your thoughts. I want to learn more about CBAM and how this is important to any school change initiative.

**M. Signore:** "The best" teachers first also stuck with me. What a great way to get teachers to view working with a coach as positive. I'll be using that strategy.

**A. B-Thumm:** Coaching the "best teachers" first certainly resonates. Not only does it promote "buy-in," it works to deepen the pool of professional "go-to" teachers.

**Abg:** The Skype with SB was great; biggest takeaway was starting with the "top 5" first ... think the recognition from the principal will be great way to open pathways.

**Anonymous:** Our table decided that we liked the idea of starting with the top five teachers. It was a surprising idea that really seems to make a lot of sense to us.

**Jr:** I was fascinated by the idea that we should coach the best teachers first. Perhaps we should begin with this group.

**Bob Price:** Take a look at this important article about coaching from a noneducator, surgeon Atul Gawande.

**Door table:** In the "Why Coaching" article, we were struck by the impact of feedback on the coaching process and how it affects the transfer of skills.

**oflynn@nvnet.org:** Opening our doors to other teachers and visiting other classrooms. Most skilled teachers being coached first; then work outward. Going from good to great.

**Anonymous:** I went home thinking about the learning dip, being uncomfortable and making others uncomfortable. Approaching the best teachers first may provide an in as well.

**Anonymous:** Keep focus on student learning. Fine line between administration and teachers. Will this group meet again during the year? We hope so!

**Chris Nagy:** Emerson once said: "Do not go where the path may lead. Go instead where there is no path and leave a trail." You are the trailblazers and coaching linchpins.

coaching. (See sample above.)

Teachers watched as Principal Christopher Kirkby led a skit dramatizing the importance of confidentiality. The skit portrayed a well-intentioned coach who unwittingly mentions something she had observed in a new teacher's classroom. The remarks made their way to some parents and to the teacher being unfairly portrayed as an ineffective educator. Understanding the critical importance of keeping confidences, Academy coaches made their pledge and signed a confidentiality agreement. (See sample confidentiality agreement on p. 33.)

Participants also heard from prominent education leaders. Via Skype, education coach and consultant Steve Barkley told the group to establish the value and benefits of coaching by beginning the process with high-performing educators. Learning Forward Senior Advisor Joellen Killion helped the group to establish deeper understanding of the coach's role in student achievement.

Kathleen O'Flynn, coordinator of professional development, said that Killion "really focused on the idea that student achievement is at the heart of all conversations." One participant said, "I think teachers often get in their own way, looking for systems and projects that do nothing to further student achievement. Joellen Killion's message of streamlining our focus to our ultimate goal — student achievement — was huge."

Learning Forward Senior Consultant Victoria Duff, formerly with New Jersey Department of Education, discussed the Teacher Leader Model Standards, which can be used to guide the preparation of experienced teachers to assume leadership roles.

Michael Cohan, New Jersey Education Association professional development and instructional issues director, addressed

the importance of coaching as a teacher leadership role and the association's adoption of Learning Forward's definition of professional development.

At the closing ceremony, graduates expressed a renewed spirit of possibilities. Jonathan Regan, a middle school social studies teacher, said, "I love the idea that we are at the forefront of coaching in education. I think it is a very powerful tool for school improvement and can lead us in many different directions in our careers."

#### SUSTAIN EMERGING LEADERS

The role of teacher leader differs from that of other school leaders. Teachers need to be accepted as leaders by their peers and provided with recognized responsibilities that are communicated to the entire school community (Killion, Harrison, Bryan, & Clifton, 2012).

The clarification of roles is best established through collaboration with administrators. Administrators and coaches need to have ongoing dialogue concerning their roles and responsibilities and outcomes. It must be clear that coaches maintain the confidences of the teachers with whom they work, and it must also be stated that the purpose of coaching is student achievement. To ensure success, coaches need to participate in formal learning as well as informal peer-to-peer meetings.

Professional development for administrators is also key to effective implementation. Through shared readings and discussions, presentations, workshops, and coaching, administrators learn to articulate a clearly communicated purpose for coaching, outline coach and teacher expectations, and hold educators ac-

countable for identified outcomes.

Educators in different roles have different responsibilities for coaching, and these are outlined in Innovation Configuration (IC) maps developed by Learning Forward (Learning Forward, 2012, 2013). IC maps identify and describe the major components of Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011) in operation.

The consortium's administrative teams used the IC maps for school-based coaches and teacher leaders in *Taking the Lead* (Killion & Harrison, 2006) to get an understanding of what the individual roles looked like in practice. At regional meetings, district administrators read and discussed the coaching implementation role expectations and reflected on their current state. The professional development supervisor provided ongoing individual coaching for administrators.

### HEIGHTENED INTEREST IN LEADERSHIP

In June 2013, coaches gathered to evaluate their experiences and identify areas of growth. Their stories revealed increased efficacy, mutual learning, cross-pollination of school practices, and a breakdown of hierarchical barriers.

Holly Procida, a 5th-grade teacher, said, "My coaching experience cemented the idea that working with teachers was as fulfilling as working with students. We have so much to learn and share with each other. Without worrying about how our roles fit together and just concentrating on pure instruction, so much honest reflection can take place."

One 2nd-grade teacher went to a high school teacher's classroom to facilitate a cooperative learning experience and left realizing that best practices can improve student and teacher engagement regardless of the grade level.

Teachers reported a heightened interest in tackling new leadership tasks in their districts and beyond, such as opening their class for a lab site and offering regional workshops.

Christopher Nagy, Northern Valley Regional High Schools superintendent, has incorporated instructional coaching as part of the new supervisory structure. In-district math and language arts teachers were hired and their schedules modified to provide part-time coaching support for their peers. In addition, newly hired math and language arts supervisors' responsibilities include working collaboratively with the coaches.

Nagy recognizes that coaching is a powerful school improvement intervention that allows educators to make desired changes in their knowledge, skills, and practices (Killion et al., 2012).

The Coaching Academy was a call to action. Coaches who participated in the academy are now confident and eager to become school-based coaches.

One teacher summarized it best: "At first, I felt trepidation about the practice of instructional coaching, as it was a change in our culture. Coaching has proven to be a powerful, sustained professional learning experience for everyone involved. The necessary ingredients are trust, training, and time. Mix them to-

### CONFIDENTIALITY PLEDGE

Northern Valley Schools Consortium, July 2012

*One of the most important foundational beliefs of the coaching relationship is trust. The Northern Valley Schools Consortium Coaching Academy adheres to this idea and builds all strategies, skills, and philosophies around this important tenet. In order to clearly state this conviction to the teachers that will be coached, the following statement has been created to support clarity and confidence.*

I, \_\_\_\_\_, as part of the Coaching Academy, support and promote the idea of building trust through confidentiality. The role of the coach is one of support, to help teachers continue to be successful and effective educators. The role of coach is not to be an evaluator, but to be a partner in learning and growth. As an educational coach, I will adhere to and support the philosophies related to confidentiality as outlined by the Coaching Academy.

gether, and the result is a collaborative environment that values reflection and teacher ownership of professional development."

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