

Coach, Collaborator, Learner

Veteran teachers offer one-on-one support

By GINO SANGIULIANO

For the better part of the last two decades, when I was asked what I did for a living, the answer was simple, “I’m a teacher.” Some years were spent teaching 5th grade, others it was 4th, and for a time I was even in a 1st-, 2nd-, and 3rd-grade multiage classroom. Until recently, I had no

reason to believe I would ever leave the classroom. That changed when Rhode Island used a portion of its Race to the Top grant to launch a statewide induction program aimed at supporting first-year educators. The state enlisted the services of the New Teacher Center, a national nonprofit whose philosophy is simple: to accelerate the effectiveness of new teachers. Through the induction program, carefully selected and trained veteran teachers provide weekly sessions of one-on-one mentoring to those new to the classroom.

In a matter of weeks, I went from delivering lessons to observing them. I was visiting classrooms, not managing them. My focus shifted from employing strategies that engage student learning to providing the tools for a new teacher to do the same. In short, this teacher had become a coach.

I wanted to experience the same level of success I had as a teacher in my new role as an induction coach, but I wasn’t sure what that would look or feel like. It was important that I obtain tangible evidence that my work was having a positive impact on teacher success and ultimately student achievement. What I have seen and learned so far has affirmed my core beliefs about teaching.

Effective teachers are reflective. Every time I enter Michaela’s kindergarten class, waiting on her desk is the composition notebook I gave her at our first meeting. While observing her teach, I read her thoughtful reflections and questions, and the joys and concerns she has taken the time to record. I respond with words of encouragement, advice, and questions of my own. When the children are packed up and on their way, we talk about the day’s lessons. She opens up about her students, her strengths, and her challenges. We analyze the data as a snapshot of her instruction but also discuss how they fit in the context of her overall professional growth. She exhibits a consistent willingness to examine her own practice and is guided by what she learns.

Teachers need support in order to take risks. Pam is a 3rd-grade teacher who didn’t take long to establish routines



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Recognizing one’s own limitations is the underpinning for growth.

that help her classroom run effectively and efficiently. Recently I spent a morning scripting (taking notes on what I see and hear) as she delivered a reading lesson. After the students had left the room for lunch, we took the opportunity to look at my notes. Pam quickly noticed that the majority of her time was spent asking recall questions and seeing the same hands in the air. She was determined to increase student participation but was unsure about ways to do so. A discussion ensued about literature circles and the various ways teachers manage them. She decided to try a new approach that very afternoon and asked me to stay and offer feedback.

Teachers grow through collaboration. Professional relationships thrive when individuals share common experiences and learn from one another. I find this to be especially true when working with Amanda, a beginning teacher in a Developmental Learning Program. Given my limited experience in special education, supporting her work with three- to five-year-old nonverbal learners is a challenge. Week after

week, I watch Amanda shine. And I learn, as she engages students in meaningful activities. Our work is often centered on communicating with parents, managing the teaching assistants and specialists working in the class, and advocating for her students. Recognizing one’s own limitations is a very uncomfortable place to be, but it is the underpinning for growth.

Having a coach and being a coach both present real challenges. The professional relationship may evolve over time, as roles are continuously redefined based on needs, circumstances, personalities, beliefs, and philosophies. But throughout, the goals and benefits of mentoring are clear: moving our profession forward with better-prepared and more-effective teachers in our classrooms.

Gino Sangiuliano teaches in Barrington, Rhode Island, and is supporting 15 beginning teachers in his second year as an induction coach.