

Coaching Program Leads to Spirited After-School Group Sessions

One could say teachers were among the first entrepreneurs. They came out West, opened a one-room schoolhouse and began teaching what and how they liked.

Of course those days are long gone. Yet teachers still enter a classroom, close the door behind them, and teach primarily on their own. They teach as best they can, relying on their years of education and experience. Sometimes, though, it helps to have a little help from your friends — support from peers and bosses alike.

At Winter Park Tech in Orange County, Florida, teachers and administrators decided to circle the wagons and work with each other to improve everyone's professional abilities. Winter Park is essentially two schools in one, with an academic track and an occupational track. There was a perceived need to build stronger connections between the teaching staffs and administrators in the school.

Several faculty members took staff development training on coaching skills from Performance Learning Systems, Inc. (PLS), a national provider of training for teachers and administrators. Techniques they learned included a prescriptive process for communicating with a colleague. Participants also develop skills to build rapport among colleagues, resulting in positive instructional change and enhanced self-esteem. Eventually all faculty — teachers and administrators alike — took the PLS coaching program.

Borne of those staff development sessions was the idea of taking the coaching concepts taught and encouraging further support among faculty in



a more informal setting. Thus was formed the “collegial coaching group.” The response was tremendous. Twenty of the 45 faculty members showed up at the initial meeting and immediately wanted to continue the process and meet every other week.

“The coaching process opens communication,” says Judy Sheehan, Curriculum Resource Director at Winter Park Tech and facilitator of the collegial coaching sessions. “We really talk to one another using the coaching concepts we learned. We’re not just broad-brushing our feedback by saying, ‘oh, you did fine’ or ‘that was nice.’ It’s specific, and the focus is always on the one being coached,” she adds.

The 30-minute sessions are publicized and held after school. Topics discussed include classroom management, communication, presentation skills, team building activities, use of peer evaluations, and student motivation techniques. The results for each session are summarized and emailed to all faculty members.

“The benefit of the collegial coaching group is that teachers and administrators share ideas, brainstorm solutions to common teaching challenges,

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learn from one another,” says Winter Park Director Diane Culpepper. “Where they didn’t mingle much before, now they are mixing together, visiting each other’s classrooms.”

Projects have emerged as a result of the sessions. A Medical Assisting program for English as a Second Language students, begun prior to the sessions, was significantly improved. Using the skills of coaching, teachers were able to enhance the program to include blood pressure monitoring stations.

“Faculty support has been pleasantly surprising,” says Sheehan. “There has been a lot of attendance by highly experienced teachers willing to share with more beginning teachers. The meetings have almost taken on the dynamics of group therapy sessions,” she laughs. “We sit in a circle and share our ideas and experiences in a non-threatening atmosphere. It’s really a far cry from more rigid coaching techniques. This coaching program has been a great boon to our school.”

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