

One-on-One Coaching

In a third-grade classroom, Ms. Kelly numbers off students into groups and directs them to re-read a short story aloud and find examples of cause and effect. Coach Long observes, circulates, and assists students as needed. By the end of class, Coach Long has observational notes, questions, and ideas. Later that day during a scheduled teacher-coach meeting, Ms. Kelly explains to Coach Long that she wants students to act out scenes to reinforce the concept of cause and effect. Coach Long suggests they offer additional choices, such as drawing and writing. Ms. Kelly is interested in expanding the options. A survey, Coach Long adds, will show specific students' preferences for acting, speaking, writing, and drawing. With the survey data, they can match the students to the roles of actors, artists, and reporters and then assign groups to scenes of different levels. Coach Long is prepared to model and guide Ms. Kelly through the process. Ms. Kelly is excited to try the approach and grateful for the hands-on guidance; it is more complex than she had imagined or would have done on her own.

This vignette provides perspective of our roles as differentiation coaches for the Chicago Public Schools (CPS). The Chicago Differentiation Coach initiative promotes professional, on-site, job-embedded learning of differentiated instruction for principals.

The Initiative

The CPS Office of Academic Enhancement, now called the Office of Access and Enrollment, created the Differentiation Coach initiative to support K-8 schools with Comprehensive Gifted Programs. Many CPS principals were interested in the initiative.

Differentiation coaches were experienced teachers who understood inner-city schools, understood educational best practices, and possessed a master's degree or doctorate in education. The CPS Office of Academic Enhancement provided training and support for coaches in the form of in-services, conferences, courses, workshops, and institutes. The coaches met monthly to discuss progress, difficulties, and concerns in their work with teachers and students. They shared strategies, materials, and resources about coaching, differentiation, and best practices in education.

What Differentiation Coaches Do

As differentiation coaches, we worked with teachers on-site daily.

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We listened, asked questions, discussed options, and made recommendations that we believed would work best for the teachers and students. Coaches provoked teachers' knowledge and understanding of differentiated instruction to facilitate deep, sustainable change from the inside out. We helped teachers create learning environments that were challenging, active, engaging, varied, and flexible, with the teacher responding purposefully—through data—to students' readiness, interests, and learning styles.

Coaches modeled and guided teachers to differentiate content, process, and products at various degrees of complexity: low (e.g., graphic organizers and graffiti activities), medium (e.g., independent reading activities and choice boards/menus), and high (e.g., literature circles, learning stations, and tiered activities).

Observation and Analysis. During the first stage, most coaches observed and analyzed their assigned teachers' classrooms. They familiarized themselves with each teacher's curriculum, teaching style, and personality. Coaches assessed each teacher's level and depth of differentiating content, process, and products. Coaches also learned about the uniqueness of each teacher's students.

To work in a productive, collaborative manner, this stage was imperative to start the program well. Within the first few weeks, coaches developed a short- and long-term plan to facilitate each teacher's growth in understanding and applying the principles of differentiated instruction.

Discussion and Collaboration. Upon identifying goals, coaches discussed and collaborated with teachers about implementing differentiated instruction, beginning with the use of pre-assessments and formative assessments to determine students' readiness level, interests, and learning preferences. During planning meetings, coaches helped teachers use data to make purposeful decisions about monitoring and adjusting pace and instruction, employing flexible grouping, determining students' options and choices, and providing various levels of challenge.

Modeling, Co-teaching, and Independent Teacher Practice. After engaging in the planning process together, coaches modeled and co-taught differentiated lessons with the teachers. The use of a particular technique depended on the teacher's readiness level, the content that was being taught within the unit plan, and the students' needs. Once teachers saw how students responded to differentiation, they became more interested in implementing higher preparation strategies within an aligned unit plan. Using Backwards Design, coaches and teachers developed units driven by content standards, essential questions, and enduring understandings. Coaches helped teachers design authentic

assessments to replace or supplement traditional tests. Coaches had to strike a balance so that teachers were challenged but not overwhelmed, and so they could grow toward independence and become building ambassadors of differentiation.

Recommendations

As a principal, if you desire improved learning for all students in your building, we recommend hiring a differentiation coach who can lead teachers to the next level through on-site job-embedded professional development. Principals hosting differentiation coaches should choose open-minded, collaborative, and motivated teachers who are willing to share their classrooms with another educator on a daily basis, and who would be positive future mentors for other colleagues.

Some reflection questions for principals who would consider adding differentiation coaches to their staff include:

- Are most of your teachers “teaching up” or “teaching to the middle”?
- How do your teachers plan? Do they rely on textbooks or do they create curriculum based on standards and students?
- How are your teachers assessing students? Do they use tests, quizzes, and worksheets, or are they asking students to create authentic products and performances?

Administrators, teachers, and coaches must remember that change takes time. Deep, inherent change requires multiple experiences, ongoing reflection, revision of beliefs, and a system of accountability. Job-embedded professional development reaches and challenges teachers’ mindsets and practice in a more immediate, enduring, and meaningful way. ▀

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