



When principals and teacher leaders work together to build creative capacity and inspire change schoolwide, the results are tangible and sustainable. Establishing an intentional plan for coaching creates a collaborative culture that honors creativity and risk-taking. Peer coaching sets a tone of trust that enables educators to break out of the status

quo. Every school has pockets of innovation in which like-minded teachers thrive and support each other. However, to reach more deeply into and across the organization, the natural inclination to resist change must be addressed. Peer coaches help colleagues visualize new teaching strategies and pioneer pathways for schoolwide, transformative change.

Realities About Change

Change is incredibly difficult, no matter how necessary the transformation or how noble the aspiration. Consider Thomas Jefferson's insight in the Declaration of Independence: "... all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, when evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed."

Consider what science says about change. Physics explains the law of inertia as the tendency of an object to resist change. An object at rest will stay at rest, unless it is acted on by an external force. Objects in motion will continue to move in that straight line, only changing direction when friction or some other force interrupts the action. Apply the principles of inertia—the tendency to resist change—to pedagogy. What could break the status quo and interrupt outdated practices?

Even more than individuals, organizations inherently resist change. Institutions preserve themselves with incredibly strong immune systems—policies, schedules, and unwritten rules. All ecosystems are predisposed to protect themselves from interruptions. Historically, teachers have felt isolated within grade-level silos and individual classrooms, making schoolwide change even more tenuous.

Theo Quinones, principal of Governor Wolf Elementary School in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, intentionally structures teacher-coaching pairs to cross grade levels. "Observing the instructional practices of a colleague from a younger or older grade reminds teachers of the child

PEER COACHING *Drives Change*

Teacher leaders energize transformation



development continuum and helps them connect what they are doing with the student's previous and future experiences." Quinones continues, "As a profession, we talk about collaboration, but until principals intentionally provide coaching and observation time in the schedule, teachers do most of their work isolated in their rooms. I challenged my faculty to break those silos, first by observing each other in non-judgmental ways. 'Just be curious and open' is the expectation." After the observations, they engage in *Instructional Conversations About Peer Observation (ICAPO)*. Initially teachers—both observers and those being observed—feel vulnerable. Once they realize these conversations are not to isolate weaknesses, but to genuinely learn from each other, trust increases and the school climate flourishes.

Change Moves at the Speed of Trust

Change is intrinsically tied to school culture and requires courageous conversations. Peer coaching goes beyond polite, cordial conversations. To address students' needs, colleagues should be collegial, not congenial. Quinones points out that observation can help teachers honestly reflect on students' understanding. "I'm not impressed by pushing children beyond their developmental level, like having kindergartners memorize multiplication tables. I'm looking for deep understanding. We all need to remove our egos from this work. If children don't understand,

consider what could be improved in the instruction. Those insights don't have to come from me. Peers can deliver important messages very effectively."

Coaching that focuses on observation and reflection helps practitioners see their work through another lens. The OASIS protocol outlines steps that make the process less intimidating. Coaches look for evidence of engaged learning. The coach and peer recipient align on common objectives for the observation. They both self-reflect and review the experiences from multiple perspectives. They discuss the impact on learning, engagement, and culture. Coaching scaffolds learning experiences for teachers, similarly to how educators scaffold for students.

OASIS™: A Coaching Approach That Works

How can the OASIS protocol help establish a culture of trust and shared learning among faculty?

How does the metaphor of establishing a safe oasis build the desired culture?

O *Observe* with focus on evidence of engaged learning.

A *Align* on a common vision and objectives for the session.

S *Self-reflect* first before commenting. Consider the experience from multiple perspectives.

I *Impact*. Discuss the impact on learning, engagement, and culture.

S *Scaffold* to build upon this experience and plan next steps.



The Creative Path to School Change

Overcoming inertia can be achieved in random or systematic ways.

Unlike a pool cue that splits a rack of balls and sends them in every direction, school leaders must align stakeholders and help them move in the same direction. Principals can follow a series of steps that systematically shift the entire school toward desired outcomes:

1. Creative Leadership Team (CLT). Design a CLT that champions creative teaching and learning. Identify your school's pioneers and pilots. Who bravely explores uncharted territory? Who pilots new processes? Which faculty can convince others that creative teaching and learning matter? This team of peer coaches *goes first* and prepares the way for others. Coaching should be based on self-reflection and intentional listening—trusting others to see possibilities—not dictating solutions. Who on the faculty has this skill and mindset? Identify coaches who adopt a *whole school lens* and can guide others along the journey.

2. Become Personally Engaged in the Transformation. Every principal comes to the job with a unique set of beliefs and experiences. Quinones' passion about creativity is rooted in his undergraduate studies as an artist and early career experiences as an art teacher. His doctoral dissertation is on the power of art-integration to transform learning and school culture. He turns the coaching reins over to teacher leaders because he believes they can and should teach each other. His commitment to the Creative Leadership Team is palpable.

"Because my art teacher is such a valuable resource to colleagues, we make sure she has time for co-planning art-integration projects with classroom teachers. So I step in and relieve her of some of her other duties, including some of her classes." Quinones continues, "And I bring in substitutes to free up time for

teachers to collaborate and have deep conversations with each other. Quick hallway chats are not robust collaboration. Teachers need time together to have significant conversations."

When Pattie Barnes became principal of Spring Ridge Elementary School in Frederick, Maryland, the school had already been focused on arts integration for three years. "Using the arts as a focal instructional strategy to drive cross-curricular understanding was new to me," Barnes says. She now provides guidance for principals who find themselves in similar situations. Her advice is to **ASK:**

- **Accept** that this approach will look different from traditional planning and instruction.
- **Allow** yourself time to learn with and from your staff.
- **Appreciate** your own learning curve as a newcomer to this approach.
- **Seek** out resources from other principals who lead arts-integration schools.
- **Support** the journey as a personal and schoolwide experience.
- **Stay** open to changes in the schedule, staffing model, and any potential barriers.
- **Keep** the main thing the main thing. Help others stay focused on why we use this approach—to engage students in deep learning.
- **Kindle** and nourish your own curiosity by learning more about arts integration and creative thinking.
- **Kindness** and compassion are important whenever people learn new ways to change. Trust that others have positive intentions.

3. Vision and Culture. Creative leadership teams help colleagues align on the school's purpose—long-term vision and current mission. Use visualization and sketching exercises at staff meetings or coaching sessions so everyone's ideas can be seen. Ask teachers to sketch what matters most for the success of students. Which





Participate fully so teachers can see what you, as the principal, bravely want to let go of, what you think is outdated, and how you envision preparing students for the future.

traditions should we challenge? What must we do differently? Ask teachers to draw what the school culture feels like. How does communication flow within the school? Where does it get stuck? Where does creative energy radiate or feel dim? Draw what is celebrated and valued. Make sure every stakeholder's vision of the school and sketch of the culture are valued. Set up safe ways to share—anonously if that would help generate honest views. Making thinking visible helps identify patterns and gaps. Participate fully so teachers can see what you bravely want to let go of, what you think is outdated, and how you envision preparing students for the future.

4. Build Creative Capacity.

Teachers have varying levels of creative confidence and knowledge of artistic processes. Professional development that focuses on artful thinking and studio habits of mind (as defined by Harvard University's Project Zero) builds teachers' creative capacity. Diane Chamberlain, principal of Fort River Elementary School in Amherst, Massachusetts, relies on her school's creative leadership team to provide workshops for faculty and families that show how each artistic standard strand, Create-Present-Respond-Connect, pertains to all teaching and learning. "When teachers see artistic connections in their math lessons, language arts, and STEAM projects, they overcome fears and realize the joy is worth the mess," explains Chamberlain.

5. Policies and Structures.

Though unintentional, schedules and policies can stall innovations. Stakeholders know what is blocking change. Ask teachers to use sketches and idea maps to visualize policies that advance or hold back the desired outcomes. When staff sketch their views of school priorities, principals see multiple perspectives and how aligned the team is. Consider what schedule changes would improve collaboration and in-depth projects. Sketch the current structure of professional learning communities (PLCs). Are they siloed or blended? Do vertical teams and specialists share expertise? What do the sketches say about the school's hub of creative thinking?

When change is both procedural and pedagogical, the results can be highly successful. Principals who embrace distributed leadership find that when teacher leaders coach colleagues, teaching practices and school culture improve. Teacher leaders co-design new blueprints for schools and coach peers along the bumpy journey called change. Mahatma Gandhi advised that "every worthwhile accomplishment, big or little, has its stages of drudgery and triumph: a beginning, a struggle, and a victory." Peer coaches will help your victory be realized, therefore benefiting students within and beyond your school.

Cheri Sterman is the Crayola director of education and vice chair of the Partnership for 21st Century Learning.