



Michael Biondo is a districtwide instructional coach for District 207 and a social science teacher at Maine South High School in Park Ridge, Ill. You can contact him at mbiondo@maine207.org.

Give-and-take changes the climate

Q How is coaching changing your school?

We're working to change the climate. We have such a successful high school and academic program, successful teachers and students, but we're trying to encourage large-scale peer coaching, having teachers work with instructional coaches, but also having teachers work together.

I teach three periods rather than five out of a nine-period day, so for the first six, I'm available to work with and talk with teachers, to be a resource. Starting a new position that has never existed before, my co-instructional coach and I were wondering how people were going to react and how it would change our dynamics with friends and colleagues. It's been very positive. My co-coach is co-chair of the building social committee, working to bring teachers together to form relationships. She does it because she thinks it's important. That helps.

We've had great conversations with teachers about what's going on in their classrooms, and

about what's going on in our classrooms. They've taken things away from what we've done; we've taken things away from what they've done. Their ideas have been as beneficial as ones we've given them. It's the give-and-take that really gives you a relationship with people. And the fact that we're still teaching three classes a day grounds us in the day-to-day experiences. It shows that we're still out there, still one with the other teachers.

People are encouraged by good experiences with peer coaching. With the peer coaching we've done, we've modeled for other teachers what we're asking them to do with one another. We know they are strong professionals, and the ultimate goal is to have teachers spread the value of what they are learning.

This type of environment — the fact that teachers are leading this staff development — is so empowering because we're all equals, all working together for the common goal of improving instruction for our students, to enhance their lives and their futures. ♦

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Listening can cultivate growth

Q What did you do to overcome the challenge of resistance?

I always thought I was a good listener, but as I coached, I found out I wasn't. I was sitting with a teacher and he had a question. I anticipated the question and interjected. And he stopped me. At that point, I began wondering if I was not giving people a chance to ask me the questions on their minds. As much as I want to talk and share what I know, I had to learn to listen. There's something in listening that's greater than coming in and showing people. And the second thing is to keep it simple — offer something that the teacher can use the next day.

Many times, a teacher would say, "I've been doing this for 20 or 30 years and now the state is telling me what I'm doing is wrong." I had to tell them that no one is telling them they're wrong, just that there might be a better way to engage their

students. It's a lot of talking, of stroking, of giving alternatives. I'd ask, "Would you want to try ... ?" And I'd let the seed sit there rather than trying to plant the whole field at once.

To get through the rough times, I created a personal network. I started with teachers I knew. From there, I started to develop relationships with coaches from a lot of places through Twitter. I found them by clicking on my friends' names to see whom they follow and finding out who was a coach, then I'd follow them and they'd follow me back.

I might post something in a blog or on Twitter if I was down in the dumps and say, "I had this happen. What would you say to this person?" It was amazing the outpouring of support I got from friends and coaches in the same situation who'd say, "Why don't you try this? Here's what I did with a teacher like that and it helped." I built a great rapport with those colleagues and used those ideas. My personal network helped get me through. ♦

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Brian Young is administrator of teacher development and support for the Martin Behrman Charter Academy of Creative Arts and Sciences in New Orleans, La. You can contact him at nola70114@gmail.com.

We get rid of all of the excuses

Q How do you help teachers create a positive school climate for student achievement?

We have to have our children as No. 1. It starts with that mindset. We have to get rid of all the excuses. Our professional development must be academic and child-centered. That's not the time for us to talk about how old the building is or how we don't get parental involvement or, 'I don't have enough chairs.' It's not gripe-session time. Let's get the data about where our children are, identify their greatest needs, and decide how to attack the issues as a school. No teachers here work in isolation. No one goes into the classroom, shuts the door, and then that's their world. Everything is transparent. Teachers' classrooms are constantly visited.

Then, people at the top have to be role models for how we interact with our students and our parents, even when, at times, those are difficult peo-

ple. Even when they are angry or frustrated, we can't act in kind. Leaders model, "This is how I expect you to talk to this child when this child is having a bad day." I'm going to show how I expect a teacher to deal with an at-risk child or a difficult child, to talk to them — listen to them.

When we look at the plight of our urban communities, we have to look at teaching the whole child and not just the three Rs. When I consider some of the negative things that have gone on in my community, I know we cannot just sit back, relax, and say, "Well, that's not my kid." If what's happening is a part of this city, a part of this state, a part of this country, then we have a stake and a responsibility to try to do something to improve it. Since I don't have any control over what goes on at home, I have to do as much as I can, as often as I can, when I have these children in school. When we put the whole picture together, any educator sees that responsibility. ♦

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Luis Planas (lplanas@bridgeportedu.net) is a numeracy instructional coach at High Horizons Magnet Elementary School in Bridgeport, Conn.

Role of coach changes with time

Q What has nine years of experience taught you about coaching successfully?

When I first became a coach, the role was primarily a resource teacher — find out what materials teachers need and supply those, pull students out of the classroom to assist. Now, the role has changed significantly. The push is for in-class assistance, to work directly with teachers to hone their craft.

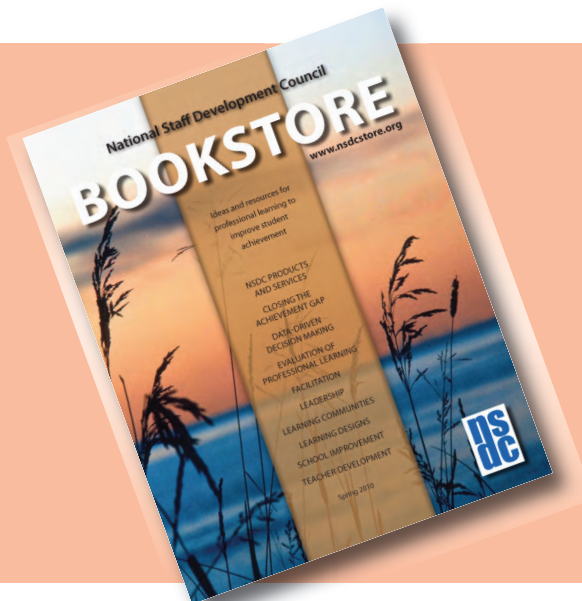
One of the key ingredients of coaching is establishing a focus for instructional help. It's really looking at what the data are saying to you. If we find in a particular grade level that students are not doing well in one area, this is a conversation you need to have with the staff. We need to find out why. Is it that the curriculum is not addressing that area well enough? Is the problem that we didn't have enough time to cover the topic? These data open up the door for me as a coach to provide professional development that teachers might need.

The teachers are very forthcoming at times in saying, "I wasn't sure how to teach that," or "I don't feel confident teaching that area." That's where I can come in and say, "Would you mind if we sit together? We can look at what you have already tried and I can give you a little background on this? Do you want me to model a lesson?" Data really open the door for a coach to know when to provide professional development..

I'm a believer in helping people. I always try to accommodate teachers into my schedule as much as I possibly can.

My feeling is that teachers need to know they can count on me, so I try my best to keep to the promises I make them. Teachers need to feel supported. When you go out of your way to help and you make promises and keep those promises, prove to them that when you say something you mean it, that goes a long way. People learn to trust you. They also need to see that you're good at what you do. These things build the relationship you need as a coach. That's what's been helpful to me. ♦

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