

So Many Hats, So Little Time: Working Smarter, Not Harder



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manage. More importantly, it negatively affected student learning and our district's ability to deliver quality special education services.

Teacher exit-survey information helped us to identify some of the reasons for the exodus. A sense of isolation, perceived lack of administrative support, and an increasingly more challenging student population were among the main reasons. We reached the conclusion that we needed to look at ourselves, by examining our department's organizational support structures, to see what we were doing or not doing to contribute to the problem.

Costs of Teacher Turnover

The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) reported that teacher isolation "is a factor driving many of our best teachers out of the classroom and driving new teachers from schools that need them the most." In addition, Luan Purcell, former assistant superintendent of the Houston County (Ga.) School District and now executive director of the Council of Administrators of Special Education, indicates that "no matter what teachers or speech pathologists have to do, if they perceive they are supported, genuinely supported, they stay!" She suggests that the number one reason special educators are not retained is not money, but rather the level of support they receive.

In evaluating the impact of teacher turnover, a recent NCTAF study (a full report is available at www.nctaf.org) found that "when a teacher leaves, the costs of recruiting, hiring, and training a replacement teacher are substantial. It is clear that thousands of dollars walk out the door each time a teacher leaves. The cost per teacher leaver ranged from \$4,366 in rural Jemez Valley to \$17,872 in Chicago. The total cost of turnover in the Chicago Public Schools is over \$86 million per year."

The NCTAF identifies another significant impact of teacher turnover—the effect it has on quality instruction and student learning:

Studies have shown that teacher effectiveness improves with experience during the early years of a teacher's career. New teachers struggle, but as they gain more knowledge and experience they are able to raise student achievement.

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Many Hats

The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins is a children's book, written by Dr. Seuss. Set in feudal times, the story begins in the Kingdom of Didd. On one particular day the king decides to ride through a street past Bartholomew Cubbins, a poor boy in the market. Bartholomew removes his hat, according to the laws, but another hat mysteriously appears; when he attempts to remove this one too, another one appears again, and this continues, even as he removes more and more hats. Eventually, as Bartholomew is being threatened with death, the 500th hat comes off and Bartholomew's head is bare again.

In your role as an administrator, a teacher, or related server, how many different hats do you wear? Does it sometimes seem that after taking one hat off, another one quickly takes its place? Unlike Bartholomew, however, the hats you wear may change, but are rarely removed.

Over eight years ago, as district administrators, we were doing our best to manage the many day-to-day challenges of making personnel, legal, and financial decisions; of helping teachers cope with paperwork and related compliance demands; and of juggling multiple other roles and responsibilities. Nevertheless, our frustration got the best of us when we realized that our annual special education teacher turnover rate, at the end of the 2001-2002 school year, exceeded 20%. We recognized that our struggle to retain good teachers impacted all of the other areas we were working so hard to

With the high rate of new teacher turnover, our education system is losing half of all teachers before they reach their peak effectiveness. Students, especially those in at-risk schools, are too often left with a passing parade of inexperienced teachers who leave before they become accomplished educators. Even without a price tag on lost teaching quality and student opportunities to learn, the message is clear: high teacher turnover is draining school districts of precious dollars that could be used to improve teaching quality and student learning.

The loss of an effective teacher has a ripple effect. Students, parents, principals, community members, district office personnel, and others feel the impact. The immediate monetary costs are great, but the long-term costs (e.g., the failure to teach a child how to read) are far greater.

Working Smarter

After carefully analyzing the problem and considering our options (including finding employment in a less stressful environment), we decided to make the “main thing the main thing.” That is, we placed greater emphasis on our roles as instructional leaders and identified as many ways as possible to remove some of our hats by delegating certain managerial responsibilities to other staff members.

We gradually began intensifying our efforts at providing teachers with ongoing, effective professional development combined with instructional coaching. We recognized that follow-up coaching support is positively correlated to lasting change (Bush, 1984; Showers, 1995).

Guskey (2002) also suggests that one of the best ways to learn is by observing others or by being observed and receiving specific feedback from the observation. Furthermore, teachers are likely to keep and use new strategies if they receive coaching (expert or peer) while they’re trying new ideas in their classrooms (Gschwend, 2000). When professional development moves away from isolation of teachers in the work place and moves toward collaboration, there is an increased likelihood of implementation (Joyce & Showers, 1980; Sparks & Hirsh, 1997). Teachers’ classroom practices greatly influence student achievement (Darling Hammond, 1997) and student achievement increases when students have teachers skilled in “how to teach.”

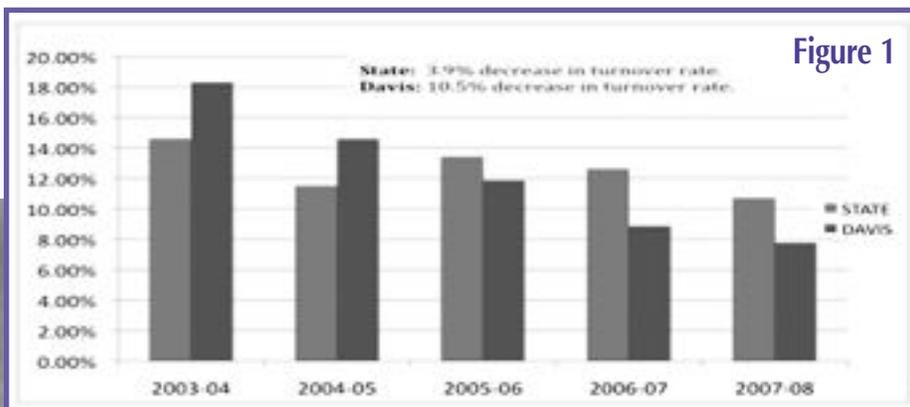
Our district professional development activities included sustained and intensive professional learning opportunities with follow-up support from coaches (i.e., full-time induction specialists and master special education teachers who were given release time to make classroom visits). In addition to the instruction and practice received during training sessions, participants observed their colleagues deliver a lesson, observed the instructional coach teaching in the coach’s classroom, and were observed in their own classrooms by their coaches. Throughout this process specific data were gathered, feedback about performance provided, and goals were established that focused on potential areas of improvement.

Teachers gradually became more skilled at effective teaching practices. Teachers and coaches alike identified other benefits from their coaching experience (e.g., relationships among professional peers were established and their sense of isolation was reduced).

As relationships between participants and coaches developed, critical technical support could be provided throughout the school year. Besides receiving assistance related to effective instructional practices and the implementation of research-based curricula, participants also received support in utilizing student data to make instructional decisions.

Observation data showed that skills learned during professional development activities were demonstrated in participant classrooms. Increased student response opportunities and praise statements, and improvements in error correction were also documented (See *The Utah Special Educator*, March 2009, page 43). Participants reported experiencing greater self-confidence and increased instructional effectiveness. Participants also enjoyed the opportunity to give and receive feedback from peers and experienced an increased sense of collegiality.

As administrators in a large school district, we noticed yet another important outcome of the coaching experience, which had powerful



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implications for long-term sustainability of effective teaching practices. A cadre of strong instructional leaders emerged. These coaches could now wear one of our many hats—providing instructional leadership and ongoing support to teachers.

In their book, *The Hero's Journey: How Educators Can Transform Schools and Improve Learning*, Brown and Moffett (1999) state:

We can no longer ignore the leadership capacity of teachers—the largest group of school employees and those closest to students. Empowered teachers bring an enormous resource for continually improving schools. School reform is dependent on teacher leadership being developed, nurtured and reinforced both in schools and throughout the district.

Over the years, teachers expressed appreciation for the quality professional development activities, curricular materials, and coaching support. The investment in our teachers paid off in other ways as well! Our department was successful at reducing the turnover rate by 10.5% (51 leavers in 2003-04 and only 23 leavers in 2007-08) over a five-year period (See Figure 1).

The Utah Coaching Network

Given the success we experienced with coaching, we were eager to support other districts across the state with growing their own coaching model. Consequently, the UPDC began the Utah Coaching Network (UCN). The vision of the UCN is to work with Local Education Agencies (LEAs) in order to do the following:

- Help grow district capacity for sustaining effective practices through coaching
- Improve instructional coaches' skills
- Increase coaching skills in specific content areas (e.g., curriculum-based measurement and direct instruction)
- Enhance skills in identifying and using evidence-based practices, and in using student data to make instructional decisions

We recognized that instructional coaching was occurring in many LEAs. Some coaching practices were highly developed while others were just emerging. Through the UCN, the UPDC could assist LEAs in moving forward regardless of where they were at in the process.

Each district has the capacity for effective coaching, but it requires thinking systemically and acting systematically. It may also require making a few changes to district support structures. This concept is reflected in the following quote:

Organizations are living systems that grow, learn, change, and adapt to their environments. A change in one part of the system (no matter how small) automatically affects all other parts of the system. For example, the simple act of one teacher's reaching out to a colleague to share ideas and information can have a ripple effect throughout a grade level, an entire school, and—most important—on the students in each of those teachers' classrooms. Thinking systemically means analyzing whether all parts of the system are aligned to mutually support one another...Thinking systemically means that all members of the system are moving in the same direction, guided by a shared vision and a common operating language about what constitutes quality curriculum and instruction. (Brown & Moffet, 1999)

The “common language” of the UCN is reflected in the motto: “Where Learning Happens!” The essential elements of our work can be summarized in the acronym F.A.C.T.S.:

F – Feedback – prompts & corrections
A – Adjusted – differentiated based on need
C – Context – on-site, in real time
T – Time – repeated, ongoing practice
S – Student-focused, data-driven decisions

The UCN is working to assist LEAs throughout the state with the important work of developing a district infrastructure designed to support effective coaching. Despite the inherent challenges of such an undertaking, our vision for supporting teachers and improving student outcomes has helped us maintain our focus on what matters most.

To date, the UPDC has sponsored three UCN sessions in Southern Utah (UCN South) with over 70 participants from six LEAs receiving training in Cedar City (see Peggy Childs' article in this issue). UCN North, held in Provo, had their first two-day training session November 16-17. The second two-day session was held January 21-22 and the third session will be held March 25-26. There are over 200 participants from thirty-three LEAs participating in the UCN North. Participants for the UCN include special educators with coaching experience (recommended by their Special Education Directors), individuals considered to be the change agents in their organization (special and general education), and administrators.

These professional learning opportunities will allow instructional coaches to learn and practice a variety of coaching skills (i.e., the coaching cycle, using instructional routines, increasing the effectiveness of praise statements, increasing students' opportunities to respond, and effectively correcting behavior).

Summary

According to the *Annenberg Institute for School Reform*, “When employed and supported effectively, instructional coaching enhances district professional development systems by providing school and central office personnel with sustained, targeted supports to build knowledge, improve practice, and promote student achievement.” Killion and Harrison (2006) remind us that, “Coaching is not the panacea for all the ills of education and the challenges related to student learning...However, coaching contributes to change—in student learning, in teaching, in professionalism, and in school culture...Coaching reinforces the importance of precise instruction and high-quality professional learning.”

The UPDC is committed to providing services to LEAs through Universal, Targeted, and Intensive professional learning opportunities. Our services are designed to facilitate positive outcomes for students with disabilities and help build local capacity. An important focus of the UPDC is on assisting LEAs, through the Utah Coaching Network, with implementing a differentiated coaching model to help support school personnel in using evidence-based practices. We believe that coaching is all about working smarter, not harder. ■