

Principals Leading with a Coaching Lens

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Before becoming building principals, we were instructional coaches, each of us having coached either mathematics or ELA. Instruction was always the focus of our coaching work. After several years as principals, we realized that though supporting teaching and learning was a component of our work, it was no longer the focus. Once we came to that realization, we knew that we needed to make some changes.

At the end of the 2018–2019 school year, in anticipation of the next year, we took stock of what was going well with instruction in the classrooms. We reviewed the state data across the years and looked more closely at the district and building data. We also inquired about new instructional materials being purchased by the district and learned that the new materials were comprised mainly of tasks and texts of high-level cognitive demand. The insights we gained from this preliminary work suggested that students needed more rigorous learning opportunities and that teachers needed opportunities to learn about and refine their

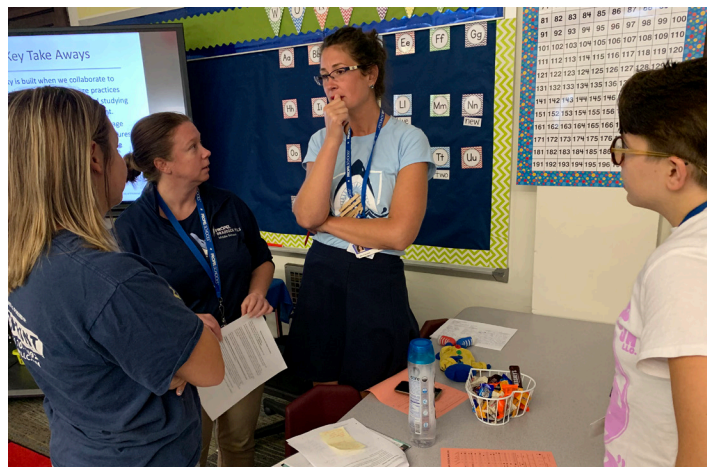
practices related to instructional conversations. It was at that moment that we committed to making support for instruction the priority, and in doing so, revived our coaching lens.

We engaged the Institute for Learning as a partner in education and began crafting a plan for the 2019–2020 school year. We started by conducting an asset walk, which allowed us to name aspects of classroom practice that could serve as the foundation on which to build. With the adoption of high-quality instructional materials, we decided that the best way to increase academic rigor and enhance the quality of scholar discourse was to focus on *Accountable Talk* practices.

We knew that as instructional leaders, the changes we sought would only happen if we maintained a laser-like focus on facilitating *Accountable Talk* discussions and supported teachers in both learning and refining their instructional practices. Although we were in the role of principals, we knew that putting on our “coaching hat” was key to supporting the teachers. With this in mind, we built a yearlong PD plan dedicated to the study of *Accountable Talk* practices. It included a series

of cross-content professional development sessions. The sessions provided educators opportunities to gain insights about high-leverage instructional practices of which facilitating *Accountable Talk* discussion is one, the dimensions of equity as related to equitable instruction, ways to support the development

implementation journeys. The work also includes learning labs so that classroom educators can see each other engage in planning for, facilitating, and reflecting on *Accountable Talk* discussions of high-level tasks. As a community of educators, everyone is encouraged to continuously look for and name what is working



Principal Ariane Watson talks to teachers.

of student agency, and the role of Socializing Intelligence. The plan allowed for frequent content-based professional learning communities (PLCs), so that *Accountable Talk* practices could be explored deeply within a content area. As part of the PLC work, educators coded classroom transcripts for *Accountable Talk* features to better understand what it takes to implement these practices and to track the implementation of these practices over time.

Since we know that refining practice doesn't just happen overnight, in addition to the work outlined in the PD calendar and plan, we also linked our walk-throughs and formal evaluations to the learning and insights gained by educators during PD sessions and PLCs. We also committed to providing time for classroom educators to reflect on practice through classroom case stories so that they can share their

related to the implementation of *Accountable Talk* practices, so there is regular feedback on our collective efforts. As part of the feedback (and central to improvement work), we wonder about and identify a specific aspect of practice for further inquiry. We know that sustainable change takes time, and we have committed to a three-year process to support classroom educators as they refine their professional skills and competencies related to content pedagogy.

Having the intentional focus of increasing academic rigor and the use of the high-leverage practice facilitating *Accountable Talk* discussions has allowed us to reclaim our coaching lens. And, in doing so, we have been able to more effectively support classroom educators as they refine their instructional practices to create more equitable learning environments. ■



Leading a discussion with teachers