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Resiliency and Instructional Coaching: Sustaining a Positive Mindset in Unpredictable Times

By Dawn Butt, Meghan Hooper, Laura Mandell, and Laura Mitchley: Instructional Coaches, Ephrata Area School District



TPIIC is a 501 (c) 3 supporting a multi-level system of educator-centered instructional coaching that builds teacher capacity and improves student outcomes.

As coaches in the Ephrata Area School District, we are blessed with the opportunity to guide large-scale professional development. We were called upon to design and facilitate professional learning experiences pre-pandemic, and our involvement has continued through the school closure (virtual learning) and into the reopening of our schools (blended learning).

When we were asked to write this article about helping teachers stay positive in uncertain

times, we compiled a list of things we have done: modeling consistent lesson structure; sharing strategies enhanced by digital tools; using creative themes like mixtapes,

hashtags, and photography to guide learning and reflection. In unpredictable times, surely these seemingly “big things” are what educators have needed most.

But when we asked our colleagues what they have valued most in the time since March 13, no one mentioned mixtape reflections or professional learning on Schoology. Instead, they said:

- “When we were literally losing all hope, you let us know you were there.”
- “It has been nice to know that we can go to our coaches at any time. I appreciate bouncing ideas off you.”
- “While I don't click on all the links or look at all the training videos you send, I have benefited from the things I have chosen to explore, which I think was the idea.”
- “You meet us at our own personal point of learning without degrading us or making us feel inferior.”
- “Knowing that I can depend on you all (as needed) is the ultimate confidence booster. I want to be good at what I do, and I feel

like I can take it to a new level. It's like walking on a tightrope knowing there is a king size comfy bed with a glass of wine waiting if I fall.”

- “Your empathy to what we are going through as teachers is amazing.”
- “The biggest support is that you celebrate our successes, which is so often lost in a crisis.”

“Professional learning is no longer something that is done to us; it's something done with us.”

Turns out, our colleagues have needed a coach - in the truest sense of the definition. Coaches offer support. Coaches partner with teachers in planning, implementation, and re-

reflection. Coaches listen and ask questions. Coaches show empathy, and intentionally communicate care to colleagues.

It has never been more evident that coaches are not the experts. We are all first-year teachers again, and we are all learning and growing together. Pandemic teaching has created a sense of urgency for all of us to do and try new things. Professional learning is no longer something done to us; it's something done with us.

As coaches, we are less focused on developing trainings and more focused on connecting teachers to each other, compiling our colleagues' new learning, and curating resources that will be ready for teachers when they need them. Our tip to sustaining a positive mindset during unpredictable times is to remember that *we, as coaches, don't always have the answers. What teachers really need is to feel supported.*

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Tune in to our “Behind the Instructional Coaching Curtain” podcast: tpiic.podbean.com

TPIIC's vision is to support effective instructional practices that increase student engagement and improve student learning.

Letter from TPIIC’s Executive Director

The new realities of COVID 19 are now our norm... at least for the present and immediate future. We are experiencing store closures, transportation issues, unemployment, remote school, hybrid environments, business losses, little or no social interactions, increasing physical and mental health challenges, shrunken physical contact, and the constant worry for vulnerable populations. Sports, music, and other performing arts have suffered just as much. We must maintain our social distancing and at the same time, increase our emotional connections while we navigate these disruptions to everyday living. That doesn’t even sound easy!

“More information is always better than less. When people know the reason things are happening, even if it’s bad news, they can adjust their expectations and react accordingly. Keeping people in the dark only serves to stir negative emotions” says Simon Sinek. Unfortunately, we still don’t have enough data about COVID 19 to truly understand the impact on the human psyche. We try to control our emotions when we recognize the obvious; that is, we are aware of how the virus attacks the respiratory system with some patients being more ill than others. We know wearing masks, washing our hands, maintaining physical distancing, and reducing large, crowded venues minimize the risk for the disease. What we still don’t know, however, is why some become infected and some do not, all with a varying degree of severity. That creates angst and anxiety.

Watching the news media can make us anxious. Yet, we want to be informed. But does the plethora of information create the problem or the solution? Can symptoms of post-traumatic stress be exacerbated because of the amount of news we either hear or watch? How do we stay informed and on top of this global health crisis if we are not connected to the sources of information? As a result, some may not listen to the news, view social media posts, or discuss the health emergency with

friends or family. Perhaps a little bit of “head stuck in the sand” mentality may be welcoming to some. The danger, of course, is not being informed.

Conversely, can too much information be a bad thing?

Recently, CNN health news reported that consuming news and information is both a blessing and a curse. On one hand, we are consuming up-to-date facts and statistics that help guide our actions. On the other hand, some of us are so attached to the reports that we become news “junkies” and stay tethered to our devices all day. I think we can all stay tuned so we can *“turn uncertainty into a tangible set of calculated risks we can manage”* (<https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/02/health/coronavirus-social-distancing-resilience-wellness/index.html>).

One size fits one so each individual needs to gather the collective wisdom of great minds and make decisions that work based on something other than just opinion, superstition, heresy, or habit. Whatever the news source, as members in a community of learning and practice, our actions need to take an additional responsibility. We are responsible for the health, welfare, and social emotional security of the individuals in our charge.

Much has been written about the school community coping with the trauma resulting from socially distancing quarantining, and the educational deficits this virus has caused. Little can be done to restore our physical restrictions until a vaccine and treatment are readily available for all. In the meantime, we must ensure to some extent that our students can experience a modicum of consistency, predictability, and normalcy. Loss at every level has occurred and many are suffering from grief, fear, and isolation; every one of these emotions is expected. The key is to move beyond these worries and recognize that these conditions will not last forever.

They are present hear and now; they are real, but they are not permanent.

For several years, the concept that has invaded every educator’s lexicon is the idea of a growth mindset. That’s the “belief that our basic abilities can be developed and improved through dedication and hard work” (psychologytoday.com). But at the current time, a growth mindset is not enough to change what happens in the classroom whether it’s a face-to-face environment or a remote one. What is needed now is a huge dose of common sense (even though common sense is not really common), positive reinforcement, dependability, and compassion. Will our students lag behind in their achievement efforts? Absolutely... along with every other student across the globe. Will our students suffer from a socially restrictive environment? Without a doubt... but we want them to be around for a really long time so being careful now is okay. Will our families endure a financial loss? Unfortunately, yes... and we hope that a responsible political decision will validate the financial struggles many are experiencing and address them.

However, there are some silver linings as well. Our schools are becoming more efficient with technology and the technological demands of the 21st century, opening up the door to a plethora of effective online platforms and tools; many of our business environments have shifted so work can be completed both inside and outside of the traditional work settings; some of us have learned that we don’t need as many “things” but rather more “social interaction”; we’ve learned to be more creative and to adopt the “I can” attitude that makes our accomplishments so meaningful. And, perhaps, the biggest “aha” moment for us may be the difference between “just in time” and “just in case.”

Sincerely,
Allen B. Eisenberg

Look for *Instructional Coaching in Action: An Integrated Approach That Transforms Thinking, Practice, and Schools.* Available through ASCD.org and Amazon.com!

Sustaining a Positive Mindset in Unpredictable Times

By Dennine Cecala Leschinsky: Instructional Specialist and Coach, East Penn School District

Several years ago, I experienced a serious health issue and was supported by a wonderful doctor. Each day he smiled, despite the tragedies he encountered. How does this man, with all his experiences, manage to smile and interact with his patients? He is a fantastic coach role model because that is what coaches do, especially during times such as these.

“When teachers have changed their mindset from what they teach to whom they teach, the real work comes into focus.”

He listens to his patients and asks questions. He shows compassion and empathy while providing humor to lighten the load. This idea of emotional resilience is critical for every school stakeholder’s mental health. Coaches play a perhaps quiet, but vital role in creating a positive environment for our entire school community. What can coaches do to foster a positive culture

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within the school setting? This calls for CLEAN Coaching: Compassion, Listening, Energy, Authentic and Nourishment/Needs.

In his book, *Personal & Authentic*, Thomas C. Murray says that when teachers have changed their mindset from what they teach to whom they teach, the real work comes into focus. We need to show compassion and focus on who we are coaching right now. Relationships are key now more than ever; we need to focus our attention on building and creating those connections with our teachers and model what that looks like so they can replicate our actions with students.

Creating opportunities for teachers to feel appreciated and nourished are especially important right now. Coaches can use their positive energy to care for teachers and our administrators. Each month, I offer “*Care from Your Coach*.” This month, I made a simple ticket with options, e.g. coffee delivery, candy, a salty snack, and covering a class, so that teachers could take a walk or mask break. I gave a ticket to each teacher and administrator asking them to select an option and return it. When the coach schedules or delivers the service, it allows for one-on-one conversations with teachers to assess their feelings and needs. In a remote setting, offering to cover classes and engaging in one-on-one meetings with teachers to touch base may be appreciated.

This is another opportunity for reflective listening and can be arranged through virtual communication.

Working as a team with your administrator is critical. The administrator has a different pulse on the building and can help establish a positive environment. Coaches need to communicate to their administrators what they are sensing from teachers as a whole without crossing the confidentiality line. For example, teachers may ask for more collaborative team time and that shared with the principal could result in building collaboration times into the schedule. Truly listening and giving teachers what they need can be a deposit in their emotional bank account.

At the same time, we cannot give as coaches if our tank is empty. It is critical that we carve out time for what we love to do each day even for just five minutes. If our bodies and brains are nourished, we can focus on other aspects of our role.

By caring for ourselves, we can establish a culture that fosters positivity. We may not have control over many things right now, but as my principal says, “We can choose our lens.” If we choose a positive lens while maintaining our authentic self as a coach, we will create a ripple effect that will impact our entire school community and create those moments where everyone thrives.

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Everything I Learned About Coaching Came From TPIIC and Bob Ross

By Amy Walker, TPIIC Educational Consultant and former IU Instructional Mentor

Remember the PBS painter, Bob Ross? With his signature afro and hypnotic voice, Bob Ross created a different “world” in his painting studio in just 60 minutes. He often reminded his fellow painters that “it really is just that easy” to paint “happy little trees” and clouds on their canvases. He exhorted home painters to make choices and use colors that suited their visions of the landscape because it was “their world.”

Well, I propose that the Bob Ross philosophy of art has great application to Instructional Coaching. I often hear coaches say, “I am just not sure that I am doing this right.” Bob Ross would say that it is “your world” and there are no mistakes, only “happy accidents.” To successfully paint using the Bob Ross Method, budding artists learn to use proper painting techniques. Bob stressed the importance of holding the brush correctly, choosing color effectively, and loading the brush on the various tools efficiently. He offered home painters a model to follow, but frequently reminded them that in their worlds



they could decide where to paint a “Happy little tree” or place a majestic mountain. Success depended on creativity and application of the method. You could place “happy clouds,” trees, birds, or mountains anywhere on the canvas based on the needs in the painter’s world. And if one of those trees or clouds wasn’t meeting the artist’s vision for the canvas, it was OK. That “happy accident” could easily become a bird, flower, bush, or mountain that would only make the world on the canvas richer.

This philosophy has a great deal of application to Educator Centered Instructional Coaching as advocated by The Professional Institute of Instructional Coaching in Pennsylvania (TPIIC).

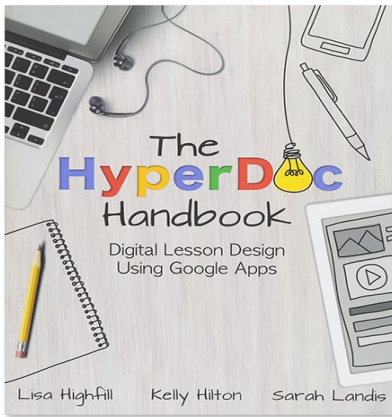
Continued on p. 4, Bob Ross...

Bob Ross provided a model of art created with his proven techniques, and TPIIC helps instructional coaches blend the art and science of Instructional Coaching by providing a model built around research-based tools and techniques. TPIIC offers opportunities to collaborate with fellow instructional coaches and mentors in local, regional and statewide learning events where instructional coaches can learn and practice techniques and tools in a safe space. Instructional coaches can take their learning back to their schools and collaborate with their faculty and administrators to create “happy little worlds” and make decisions

based on the needs of their world to define how coaching will function. There will be missteps. Those missteps can become “happy accidents” with reflection and revision in concert with non-evaluative listeners who help the coach find solutions to enrich their practice. Coaching tools, techniques, and reflective practices learned in collaboration with other instructional coaches, can be applied in infinite ways to paint successful coaching programs that meet the needs of the various educational worlds found across the commonwealth.

“There will be missteps. Those missteps can become ‘happy accidents’ with reflection and revision in concert with non-evaluative listeners who help the coach find solutions to enrich their practice.”

The Book Nook by Jackie Wynkoop, Melissa Duckworth, and Nicole Kohlhepp: Instructional Coaches, Bellefonte Area School District



The HyperDoc Handbook: Digital Lesson Design Using Google Apps by Lisa Highfill, Kelly Hilton, and Sarah Landis

It’s time to rethink how we design our lessons to meet the needs of a virtual or hybrid environment.

HyperDocs are all the rage right now! These “one-stop-shop” digital lesson plans help teachers (and students) successfully navigate the virtual learning environment and are a

great instructional tool for asynchronous learning experiences. In this book, educators will explore best practices for digital lesson design, learn a step-by-step process for creating HyperDocs, select tech tools that are the right fit for lessons, and much more! While the book is a great resource, tons of information can also be found online about HyperDocs. There’s even a study guide for this book as well. Reach out to one of us at Bellefonte if you’d like to learn more about how to get started!

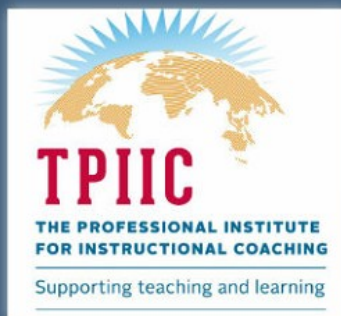
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The Educator-Centered Instructional Coaching (ECIC) Framework

ECIC advocates one-on-one and small group support for teachers, coaches, and school leaders using the BDA cycle of consultation	ECIC focuses on collecting, analyzing, and using data to identify student needs, assess changes in classroom instructional practice, and measure student progress
ECIC emphasizes using evidence-based literacy practices across all content areas to help students process information	ECIC supports reflective, confidential, and non-evaluative practices

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