

March 2013  
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## Professional Development Dates:

April 22-24, 2013  
Penn Stater  
Conference Center  
State College, PA

October 29-31, 2013  
Penn Stater  
Conference Center  
State College, PA

More information available on our websites:  
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*Instructional coaches provide professional development for teachers and school leaders focused on classroom practices to increase student engagement and improve student learning.*

## Transforming Teaching and Learning, One Step at a Time

By Christina Cheffo, Hermitage School District Instructional Coach

Let's take a journey back in time. In the schools that most of us remember, each classroom was an island; doors remained closed and the only communication between teachers took place in the teachers' lounge. Teachers were not encouraged to communicate with colleagues or instructional coaches; principals only visited classrooms for the mandatory annual evaluation; and there was little "academic communication" taking place among educators. For a long time, the mentality among many educators was that as long as the door remained closed, things were okay. "My classroom, my kids, my way," was a teacher's mantra! Educators worked in isolation—that was just the way it was. Fortunately, this mind-set is starting to change with the advent of two concepts: Learning Walks and Walk-Throughs. Although different, they both have the same goals—creating professional learning communities of teachers.

***"If time and patience are given to both learning walks and walk throughs, these practices can have a transformative effect on schools."***

Learning Walks are opportunities for colleagues, teacher leaders, and instructional coaches to visit classrooms in a non-threatening capacity. Administrators are not usually involved in this process. It is a chance for teachers to view best practices and teaching strategies, as well as to collaborate with one another regarding increasing student achievement. Goals of learning walks include building public practice and the concepts of trust and team among teachers and their respective colleagues. Learning walks focus on two primary principles: how teachers teach and how students learn. This is a great opportunity to foster a sense of community among teachers through reflective conversations and to create a shared vision for every child in every classroom. In my experience as an instructional coach, it takes time for teachers to open the doors to colleagues and to view the process as a non-threatening

activity. Once learning walks start to catch on, the rewards are endless. Teachers exchanging strategies and techniques ranging from how to deal with an unruly student to differentiated instruction suddenly become common. In no time at all, professional learning communities of teachers can be built and this can transform schools.

Another way to raise student achievement comes in the form of a Walk-Through. These are done by administrators and are informal observations of teachers with the goal of using the data to make better instructional decisions. It seems the key to making a walk-through a worthwhile endeavor is to ensure that teachers are receiving feedback that they need and deserve. This means giving teachers relevant data on their instruction in a timely manner. Notifying teachers ahead of time of the impending walk-through is a courtesy that is appreciated. Another way to make sure that walk-throughs become a successful practice is by tracking the frequency of visits to specific teachers and content areas. Capitalizing on a teacher's strengths, yet still challenging them to grow, providing feedback to teachers, and being consistent, are all ways to build trust and a sense of importance for this practice.

If time and patience are given to both learning walks and walk-throughs, these practices can have a transformative effect on schools. The closed doors of the past can be opened to stimulating academic discussions, collaboration and a sense of teamwork. As a result, this change will have a profound impact on student achievement and school culture.

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## Letter from PIIC's Executive Director

In the February 14, 2013 Education Week blog by Rick Hess, he states that “professional development is nearly everyone’s favorite go-to” for school improvement. However “... the problem: most PD doesn’t pay off.” Rick Hess is right on the money. Hard to disagree when we know that job-embedded, side-by-side support is one of the keys to providing effective professional development that enhances instructional practice and improved student outcomes.

Unfortunately, we have to agree with Mr. Hess. It is unfortunate because our educational system does not see the value of teachers learning from each other. From our experience, we know that professional development that is informal, individual, and voluntary will not yield a positive impact on classroom practice. We know that if there is no standard for professional development, the time spent on these learning sessions is wasteful resulting in an apathetic and indifferent or worse, angry reaction from the professionals who are supposed to benefit from them. “...teachers are routinely subjected to fly-by consulting

or enthusiastic workshops, without any sustained focus on particular problems or figuring how to use time, talent, and tools to solve them.” *Drop-in* professional development is isolated, seldom related to instructional habits, froth with minutiae, and oftentimes the “flavor of the month” rather than a model for sustained professional learning designed to build capacity and strengthen practice.

We know how important teacher professional development is yet most districts are reluctant to problem solve ways to increase the opportunities for teachers to learn together and share their expertise. In contrast, teachers in Finland only spend four hours a day in classrooms and have two hours a week dedicated to professional development. Imagine the shared learning, the networking, the professional conversations and the change in culture that could result from an intentional plan to collectively problem solve on a daily/weekly schedule!

Instructional coaching is not a deficit model for supporting teachers and

administrators. When coaches are highly skilled, they understand the nuances of their own learning and strive to help others reach their full potential. They continue to refine their own instructional practice and remove obstacles that prevent others from participating in their own learning. They understand that by helping teachers improve their own knowledge, they help improve the students’ knowledge. By improving school practices and by providing continued and ongoing opportunities to network, they help create an environment that is conducive to change.

Instructional coaches understand that lack of time and lack of valid “activities” to improve practice makes a difference in a busy schedule. They ensure that the onsite support is collaborative, consultative, and confidential.

Sincerely,



Please access PIIC's online resource, *The Instructional Coaching Resource Guide*:  
[www.instituteforinstructionalcoaching.org](http://www.instituteforinstructionalcoaching.org)

## Pathways to the Common Core: Accelerating Achievement

Book Review by Lindsey O'Shane-Shimrack, Mohawk School District Instructional Coach

“*Pathways to the Common Core* is written for teachers, literacy coaches, and school leaders who want to grasp what the standards say and imply---as well as what they do not say—deeply enough that they can join in the work of interpreting the standards for the classroom and in questioning interpretations others may make (p. 1).”

Instructional coaches follow PIIC’s model of effective coaching to assist teachers in classrooms. Calkins’ book is an excellent resource for coaches (as well as teachers and school leaders)

to examine current school-wide practices regarding the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The book acknowledges that the CCSS are part of the biggest reform that education in the United States has undertaken. Forty-five states have adopted the standards to date.

**“Calkins’ book is an excellent resource for coaches (as well as teachers and school leaders) to examine current school-wide practices regarding the Common Core State Standards.”**

The authors briefly, but thoroughly, explain the CCSS as ten standards, “which are really nine skills since standard 10 calls for the ability to perform standards 1 through 9 on grade level texts (p. 24).” The book “illuminates” the standards and helps readers gain insight how to implement the CCSS in their schools or classrooms. The chapters in

the book look at which standard is best used to ratchet up student performance and how each standard can be implemented to best teach students. It gives teachers a pathway to implementation and demonstrates what the standards could

look like in their classrooms.

Coaches and teachers across the content areas can benefit from this book. The Common Core places equal focus on fiction and nonfiction literature. Because of this equal focus, it must be a shared responsibility in content-area

*Continued on page 3, Questioning*

classroom to help meet the following suggestions:

- 50% literary texts and 50% informational texts at fourth grade
- 45% literary texts and 55% informational texts at eighth grade
- 30% literary texts and 70% informational texts at twelfth grade

This book can be read from cover to cover or one chapter at a time. It would also be great for a study group of coaches, school leaders, and teachers. The book helps teachers and school leaders examine current literacy goals and can help fill in the gaps where schools are falling short of teaching our students to achieve according to the CCSS. For change to take place, Calkins bullets these first steps towards creating a culture and context for making meaningful school reform.

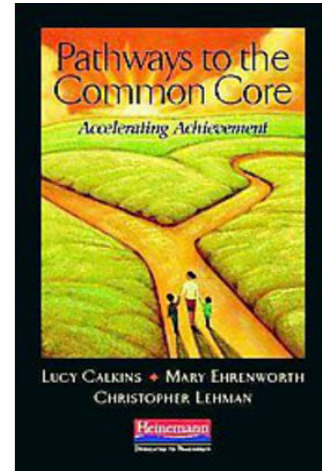
- *Don't interpret the CCSS as a mandate to shoehorn; more stuff into an already overcrowded curriculum;*
- *Choose priorities, drawing on the school's strengths;*
- *Implement the selected reforms fully and seriously, then learn from that process and extend it to new areas.*

By using the book with its great examples and specifics about

what the CCSS say and do not say, a school will be able to begin to find its individual pathway to the Common Core.

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*"It is safe to say that across the entire history of American education, no single document will have played a more influential role over what is taught in our schools."*

*-Pathways to the Common Core: Accelerating Achievement*

## Instructional Learning Visits

By Bruce Eisenberg, PIIC Associate Director, and Skip McCann, Educational Consultant

Participants of the January 2013 PIIC Professional Learning Opportunity (PLO) were offered a session introducing a process that we have named Instructional Learning Visits (ILVs). Twenty-three of the conference participants attended the breakout session to find out about ILVs and how they can move towards designing and implementing an effective ILV in their school/district. At the April PIIC PLO, we will again offer the introductory session for those interested in exploring the idea of ILVs, as well as offer a Part II session for those January participants who want to begin designing an appropriate kind of ILV for their school and/or district.

The foundational design for ILVs needs to be a grass roots effort, directly connected to the current efforts of coaches and their teachers to improve literacy-related instruction in ways that increase student learning and achievement with respect to specific common core standards. The goal of the ILV is to promote collective problem solving and collaborative work. Coaches

and their teachers need to consider how their improvement work might be strengthened through collaborative work that includes planning visits to each other's classrooms, reflecting on what was observed during those visits, and deciding how what was observed could inform cycles of collaborative activities aimed at increasing the effectiveness of the day-to-day work of teachers and their students.

***"...all participants must agree that the central purpose of the collaborative work is to foster each other's professional learning and that none of the work should be used for 'evaluation' purposes."***

For such collaboration to work, the same rules that govern the relationships between coaches and their teachers must apply to everyone participating in the collaboration. For example, what is planned, observed, and discussed must be kept confidential, except when all participants are comfortable about sharing specific plans, observations, and reflections with colleagues as part of joint professional development

activities. In addition, all participants must agree that the central purpose of the collaborative work is to foster each other's professional learning and that none of that work should be used for "evaluation" purposes. To fulfill this intent, all participants in the collaboration must be willing to help each other to become more skilled in using descriptive language in their day-to-day collaboration, instead of judgmental language.

The ILV breakout session offers examples of how specific schools/districts and developers have designed collaborative activities, along with information of the unique contexts and experiences of specific schools/districts. In fact, the lesson that seems to be learned again and again is that developing an effective collaboration is an iterative process and that anyone who takes on such a task should expect to make adjustments and adaptations following each collaborative effort.

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# Walk the Walk: The Power of Learning Through a Visit

By Andrea Conrad, Altoona Area School District (AASD) Instructional Coach

To understand the true meanings of walkthroughs and learning walks, the labels for these visits must not be used interchangeably. The similarities and differences boil down to a few specifics. Although the data collected is typically used for a variety of reasons and collected by a different audience, the information accrued from each visit is equally invaluable for all involved.

Walkthroughs and learning walks are classroom visits that provide information for curious eyes. One notable revelation is that the data collected from these visits provide information about the classroom procedures, management, and environment. The onlooker may also concentrate interest on student engagement, typical routines, and teaching styles as well.

*"As educators, we must familiarize ourselves with the resources available to us which are oftentimes our peers."*

The differences begin with the bystander and his or her objective. Administrators, such as principals, typically perform walkthroughs. The classic fashion of a walkthrough is a spontaneous visit from the administrator seeking to familiarize themselves with the teaching practices occurring within the school. However, teachers, instructional coaches, and other members of a professional learning community (PLC) may also be the audience during a learning walk. Often the members of the PLC are attempting to gain new insight on instructional strategies, or best practices from a qualified teacher to utilize in their own classroom. Furthermore, the members of the PLC are invited into the classroom by the teacher to watch these practices in action, while leaving all judgment at the door.

Both the administrator and the teacher benefit from the data gathered during a walkthrough. The principals may perform walkthroughs in a formal or informal fashion. It is commonplace for my principal to conduct daily, informal walkthroughs in the classrooms to gain insight to the overall environment. S/he concentrates on the students and teachers, identifying what each individual is doing at that particular moment, a snapshot. Student engagement and participation as well as the types of materials being utilized are priority. When appropriate, open opportunities may arise to talk with students to learn more about the lesson being taught and student understanding. Formal walkthroughs focus

on similar items and a checklist is additionally completed and placed on file. These checklists are informational for the principal as well as for the teacher observed. Formal walkthroughs are completed on teachers weekly.

When learning walks were just a contemporary buzzword to our AASD coaching team, our mentor provided us with hands on opportunities to explore the unknown. Teachers left their doors ajar for our coaches and mentor to enter their classrooms as silent spectators. These learning walks not only provided us with a wealth of knowledge and clarification of the jargon, but also resulted in recognizing the evident power of educators and their willingness to grow and share their expertise.

As PIIC often shows us through our triannual professional learning opportunities, collaboration is essential to thinking outside the box. As educators, we must familiarize ourselves with the resources available to us which are oftentimes our peers. The more we are able to collaborate, the better we are able to think beyond our own depth of knowledge and dig deeper. Learning walks and walkthroughs are powerful visits providing informational data for all involved. Teach your best, take constructive criticism, have a willingness to learn, and walk the walk to grow!

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## The PIIC 4 Quadrant Framework

PIIC advocates **one-on-one and small group support** for teachers, coaches, and school leaders.

PIIC focuses on **collecting, analyzing, and using data** to identify student needs, assess changes in classroom instructional practice and measure student progress.

PIIC emphasizes the use of **evidence-based literacy practices** and research-based instructional techniques.

PIIC supports **reflective and non-evaluative** practices.

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