

October 2011  
Volume 2 - Issue 1

## Professional Development Dates:

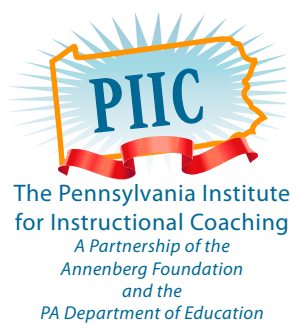
October 17-19, 2011  
Penn Stater  
Conference Center  
State College, PA

January 9-11, 2012  
Penn Stater  
Conference Center  
State College, PA

More information available on our website:  
[www.pacoaching.org](http://www.pacoaching.org)

[www.instituteforinstructionalcoaching.org](http://www.instituteforinstructionalcoaching.org)

*Instructional coaches provide professional development for teachers and school leaders focused on classroom practices to increase student engagement and improve student learning*



## Fostering Collaboration and Community: Establishing Study Groups

By Diane Hubona, IU 8 PIIC Mentor

An instructional coach acts as the primary catalyst for collaboration in a school. The development of study groups is the single most powerful collaboration tool in a coach’s toolbox. Many teachers who are reluctant to work with a coach will attend study groups. Perhaps there’s truth to the idiom, “There’s safety in numbers.”

Carlene Murphy, author of Whole-Faculty Study Groups: Creating Student-Based Professional Development states, “Whole-Faculty Study Groups (WFSGs) are a job-embedded, professional development system designed to build a community. This is accomplished as practitioners deepen their knowledge, reflect on practices, sharpen their skills, and take joint responsibility.”

Despite the mountains of research highlighting the benefits of study groups, why were so many of my first-year coaches so reluctant to develop these in their respective schools? I thought I’d survey them and ask.

- *Teachers won’t give up their free time/plan periods*
- *The teachers are not willing to share their ideas with others.*
- *I’m afraid I don’t know enough yet to prepare regular professional development for my teachers.*
- *There’s not one good time to catch all the teachers.*
- *If they’re voluntary, teachers don’t feel obligated to attend.*
- *If they’re mandated, teachers will attend but will be resistant learners.*

Once we had unearthed the reasons for the study group inertia, my coaches were well on their way, with a little push, to establishing study groups in their schools. Key elements to consider are logistics and relevance of topic to the teachers. I share the following thoughts from one of my coaches, Tammy Miller, who

initiated study groups for the first time last year.

“Food and opportunity are the two key ingredients for fostering collaboration and community at the Chestnut Ridge School District. The district’s team of instructional coaches utilizes the combination to host study group luncheons for interested teaching staff at the district’s elementary, middle and high schools.

Discussion topics have included the B,D,A cycle of consultation, Do Nows, and technology integration. The sessions hosted throughout the 2010-2011 school year had a cumulative focus which addressed project-based learning as a tool for 21st

century teaching and instruction. The content of last year’s study groups served as a tool for differentiated

professional development at this year’s opening in-service break-out sessions. Plans are being made to showcase teachers’ work during future in-service sessions, providing an opportunity for the modeling of 21st century instruction and learning.”

For optimal study group success, make sure to offer choices where possible. IU 8 coaches have tried before-school, after-school, lunchtime groups, online groups, and study group marathons that run every period of the day. Coaches have offered study groups that meet in the faculty room, library, classroom, coaching office, and even a local restaurant after school. The key is to survey teachers for their preferences and to honor their voices in the planning process.

A year after I introduced the notion of establishing study groups to my coaches, I am pleased to announce that all IU 8/PIIC schools offer regular study groups. Coaches have seen walls come down and teachers sharing best practices as a result of this collegial atmosphere.

***“The key is to survey teachers for their preferences and to honor their voices in the planning process.”***

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## Letter from PIIC's Executive Director

As the 2011-2012 school year begins, we need to reflect on the previous year and identify those practices that have worked well and abandon those that were ineffective. Certainly, we need to continue fostering communication and dialogue between and among interdisciplinary areas of study and link our work to evidence-based practice. In times of budgetary stress, we need to think about resourceful ways to help coaches, teachers, and administrators continue their collaborative work towards improved student learning.

One way to help continue the professional conversations is to implement a blended approach to communicating with coaches and mentors. We need an approach that is participatory and engaging while utilizing a variety of technologies to ensure that learning across all subject areas is differentiated, needs based, and ongoing.

As coaches and mentors, we can help teachers participate in ongoing professional development even when time to meet is challenged by their teaching/coaching schedules. We need to help teachers understand a blended model of support, especially when the economics of professional development have been stressed by the budgetary restraints. While

nothing takes the place of one-to-one, side-by-side learning with peers, the collaborative nature of professional learning communities (PLC) that are both in-person and online can help fill the void left by shrinking budgets.

With part-time coaching schedules, perhaps meeting with teachers virtually in PLCs may provide the flexibility and engagement that ongoing conversations with coaches cannot accomplish on a day-to-day basis. These online meetings, however, must be paired with monthly in-person meetings and opportunities to collaborate onsite. Coaches and teachers can support each other's learning and offer a variety of experiences that might not be possible if a creative alternative is not found. This can be accomplished while still following the B, D, A cycle of consultation and the core elements of the PIIC model.

PLCs that utilize both in-person and online communication provide the forum for colleagues to learn together and to discuss ways that improve student learning and increase student engagement. Focusing on topics of interest, articles, chapters, and books gives educators an opportunity to nourish their own professional growth and to engage in professional conversations about student learning.

It is also a venue that supports teachers, coaches, administrators, and mentors to explore ways that reflect new technologies in a risk-free environment. Teachers and coaches can experiment with different literacies and become familiar with techniques and strategies they might not attempt in a classroom. Once the teachers feel more comfortable applying new learning in their own situations, they may be more likely to adopt those same learnings in classrooms with their students.

Skype calls, videoconferencing through Skype, using PAIU net, GoogleDocs, Wikis, and a multitude of other electronic communication devices/techniques can enhance professional learning communities and strengthen the commitment to collaborative learning and making those connections between and among our colleagues. Partnering these techniques with face-to-face communication should become a priority when designing ongoing professional learning opportunities to support continuous improvement in leadership, teaching, and student learning.

Wishing everyone a successful school year,

*Allen B. Eisenberg*

## Becoming a Literacy Leader: Supporting Learning and Change

Book Review by Kim Swanson and Heidi Blatchley, Bradford Area School District Instructional Coaches

*Becoming a Literacy Leader: Supporting Learning and Change* by Jennifer Allen is a research based, yet practical guide to creating a school climate in which teachers know what they need in terms of professional development, and from a literacy leader who is there to support and foster the growth of all faculty members.

Within the book, *Chapter 4 Study Groups: Developing Voluntary Professional Development Programs*, is a compilation of how to implement study groups to meet the professional development needs of teachers. The premise of the chapter is based on Richard Allington's quote, "...The focus of school change has to be on supporting teachers in their efforts to become more expert and reorganizing all the aspects of the educational

system so that they can teach as expertly as they know how." According to Allen, professional development topics need to be based on teacher choice and interest. The remainder of the chapter is devoted to finding resources, planning and scheduling and establishing a routine for study groups.

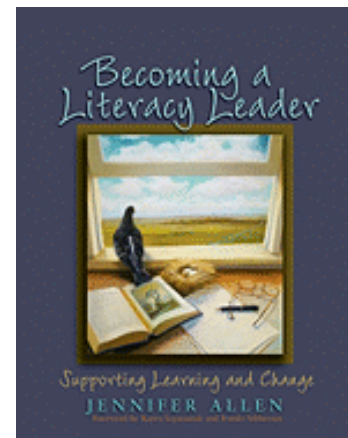
**"...if we know how kids learn best and methods that match, teachers must be informed and practice must change."**

*Practical Applications: Establishing Study Groups at George G. Blaisdell Elementary School, Bradford, PA*

Realizing that teachers must be given the opportunity to partake in professional development that meets their individual needs, study groups were established based on student data and teacher input. The instructional coach served as the organizer of the group. Once topics were identified, the instructional coach placed five professional books in the faculty room for teachers to preview and

*Continued on page 3, Literacy*

determine their desire to participate in one or all of the study groups. Members of each book club determined the meeting time for their group. Although each group was given the opportunity to meet before, during or after school, all groups met before school. The groups met twice a month for 45 minutes following our professional study group protocol. This protocol has four components. First, participants build their knowledge base by sharing quotes, questions or “ahas” from the reading. Next, participants reflect upon their own practice and make connections to their curriculum. Then, participants review ways to integrate ideas gathered from the study group into their current practice. Finally, participants share positive and challenging experiences from classroom application of ideas gleaned from the study group. The professional study groups based on teacher input that have been established at George G. Blaisdell have proven to empower teachers, foster collaboration and improve the culture of the school.



*Sustaining a focus of study over time encourages teachers to develop new understandings in ways that are meaningful and purposeful.*

*-Becoming a Literacy Leader*

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

## The Power of the Connected Teacher, Classroom, Coach, Mentor

By Virginia Glatzer, PIIC Regional Mentor Coordinator

Most of us are busy people who are overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of information available to us. We want to keep up. We want to stay connected. However, we are not sure how to do it. This year, consider experimenting with how your PLC can extend its learning through your individual connections to a global Personal Learning Network (PLN). Begin your PLN experiment by connecting with those who share a passion with you. It may be education, biking, or quilting, but make it a topic you want to explore.

### To tweet or not to tweet

When you first start using Twitter, you'll be overwhelmed. However, once you find the right tool for following Twitter, you'll discover thought-provoking questions, links to articles, research, resources, sharing of successes, and requests for collaboration. The best way to start is to just jump in.

### Who's talking?

World-renowned experts, classroom teachers, principals, and coaches are blogging. Some of them have a lot of great insights to share. It's worth your time to explore a handful. However,

what really makes a blog interesting – and beyond an online journal – is the comments. Did you ever read an article and wish you could tell the author what you were thinking in response to what he or she wrote? Blogs give readers the chance to do just that.

### If I could just remember to read it...

So, maybe you've selected a few blogs to follow. Or maybe you have a favorite column in your online newspaper that you'd like to read when something new gets added. When you use an RSS Reader (RSS = Really Simple Syndication), the information comes to you. This avoids the need to constantly go back (or the infamous forgetting to go back) to see if there is something new.

### Info, Info, Info

Now that you've found all of these great online resources, what do you do with them? You can bookmark them and share your bookmarks using a Social Bookmarking site like Diigo. So, if you find an online resource, bookmark it in Diigo. Then categorize it into a list. Finally, if you think your PIIC friends would be interested in seeing it, add it to the

PIIC Mentors and Coaches group on Diigo. You may also want to create a group, so you can share with your PLC.

### ***PIIC's Expansion and Organization***

PIIC has recently expanded from 10 to 22 of the 29 Intermediate Units in Pennsylvania. With the expansion comes new coaches, mentors, and an additional layer of support, the Regional Mentor Coordinators (RMCs). RMCs will each work with 5-6 IU mentors in a specific region by modeling both the BDA cycle of consultation and the PIIC 4 Core Components of Effective Coaching.

#### **PIIC RMCs:**

Charles Territo - IUs 1, 3, 4, 5, and 27

Kathy Gori - IUs 7, 8, 9, 10, and 28

Tom Sebastian - IUs 12, 13,

15, 22, 23, and 24

Gen Battisto - IUs 14, 16, 17, 18, 20, and 29

Virginia Glatzer - helping us explore ways to reflect new technologies with mentors

# Start Small: Study Groups for Systemic Change

By Laura Cipriano, Riverside Beaver High School Librarian/Instructional Coach

A few years ago, more than 250 teachers at Parkland High School in Allentown, Pennsylvania, gathered for the start of another school year in traditional fashion: the opening in-service. In that darkened auditorium, teachers speculated on the latest initiative that would be introduced, and shortly thereafter, Mr. Richard Sniscak, then high school principal, stood with his team of administrators, a PowerPoint presentation prepared and glowing behind them, excited to embark on an idea that would transform the nature of instruction in a high school that educated 3,200 students.

Because of the sheer size of the school, along with the demands of a typical school day, many teachers found few opportunities to work together on a meaningful level. So, when the idea of professional learning communities was introduced, there was hesitation and doubt. Sniscak told the group, “There WILL be growing pains in implementing this process and we, as administrators, expect that. However, we need you to work with us and assist us in finding solutions to our students’ academic needs.”

While I have since transferred from PHS, I was privileged to be a part of that faculty that initiated PLCs. There were certainly growing pains in the implementation of PLCs within such a large body of teachers, but it doesn’t always have to be that way. Supported by coaches, a clear understanding of the idea of PLCs among all those who participate can eliminate much of the trepidation and confusion that can result. In addition, starting with small study groups and simple goals can ease the tension, and actually lead to the same result: systemic change.

Ultimately, PLCs and small study groups examine student work, explore instructional design, address problems, and engage colleagues in discussion – the same types of reflective practice found in PIIC’s model for instructional coaching. Small study groups encourage honesty, trust, discussion, and a common goal: increased student achievement. The educational research community supports this premise and the literature further purports that the right kind of continuous and structured teacher collaboration improves student learning, improves the quality of instruction, and improves professional morale.

Instructional coaches have yet another real opportunity to lead. PLCs and small study groups can take on several forms and after assessing the school climate, coaches can determine the best format for this type of collaboration. Book studies are among the most non-intimidating approaches to PLCs and can be easily planned and facilitated. It may be necessary, at first, to offer some incentives for participation, such as offering Act 48 hours or arranging a common planning time during the school day to meet. The studies themselves can range in complexity: from a small group reading a work of high-interest fiction and discussing its relevance to the curriculum to an entire faculty reading a professional text and analyzing its strategies and recommendations for school improvement. For the latter, see [nsdtech.wikispaces.com/NWHTYS](https://nsdtech.wikispaces.com/NWHTYS) for an example of an online study that took place among a small faculty who, together, read and debated *Never Work Harder Than Your Students* by Robyn R. Jackson. For

either kind of book study, it is important to establish norms and/or protocols for when and how the discussions will occur.

Typically, the most effective way to approach book studies

is to meet at least once a month after deciding the purpose and goals of the study group. Perhaps the group could start with books with broad appeal and use them as a platform for discussing student needs, and then, as the group becomes more comfortable with one another, the group could become more differentiated in the type of reading material and goals.

Regardless of the approach to the implementation of PLCs and small study groups, it is essential that the groups meet regularly, document their meetings, reflect on the reading, apply it to the curriculum, and compile any data that may result in changes in teaching and learning. Finally, groups must SHARE experiences and successes with other colleagues, enjoying and building the collegiality that is directly linked to effective schools (Johnson 1986; Glatthorn and Fox 1996).

Though the book study as a PLC may seem a “small” start, it is one in the right direction toward systemic change. And, in this economic environment, one that promotes collaboration in doable ways.

**“Small study groups encourage honesty, trust, discussion, and a common goal: increased student achievement**

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