

Professional Growth and Support through Peer Coaching

In a Sonoma County, California, school district, the spirit of companionship and experimentation created during coaching training has spilled over into daily life.

In 1985 the Old Adobe Union School District, in Sonoma County, California, implemented a peer coaching program to provide support to newly hired teachers and to offer leadership roles to experienced teachers.¹ The need for such a program first became evident when, after 10 years of declining enrollment, the district suddenly faced an increase that allowed the hiring of additional teachers. With enrollment increasing, the principals did not have time to give the new teachers the support they deserved and needed. As a result, many were overwhelmed by classroom demands. When one of them resigned after two months, citing undue stress as the reason, district administrators began searching for a solution.

At the time, Old Adobe District had in place a long-range plan to train teachers in instructional strategies. Between 1982 and 1985, all teachers had attended five-day workshops based on the Hunter model of teaching. Teachers and administrators therefore had a common language for talking about teaching; but there had been no follow-through to help them maintain their new skills, and they had found few opportunities to talk about teaching.

In 1983 another event had encour-

aged district officials to take action; California had enacted Senate Bill 813, requiring school districts to address the needs of probationary teachers. Old Adobe District elected to try to meet all these different needs—those of new teachers, those of probationary teachers, and those of experienced teachers—through peer coaching.

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Becoming Peer Coaches

In spring 1986, 11 teachers volunteered to become the first peer coaches. An additional 14 teachers received training the following spring. Under the direction of Pam Robbins, the training addressed seven major content areas (see fig. 1). On the first day, Robbins defined *colleague coaching* and presented its rationale and research base. She asked teachers and principals to envision *colleague coaching*, or *peer coaching*, in its ideal state—what it would look like, sound like, feel like. Their recorded responses became the ground rules that governed ensuing peer coaching activities and that eventually culminated in the program's being renamed "Peer Sharing and Caring."

Participants received intensive training in Cognitive Coaching (Costa and Garmston 1985), one of the exemplary models they surveyed. In Cognitive Coaching, during the preconference, the teacher makes explicit for the observer the intended purpose of the lesson, expected student outcomes and behaviors, planned teaching behaviors and strategies, any concerns about the lesson, and the desired focus of the observation. During the observation, the observer collects in-

formation about the instructional/curricular elements identified by the teacher. After the observation, the two discuss what actually happened during the lesson, as opposed to what was planned. The observer facilitates this analysis by asking questions that prompt the teacher to reflect on the lesson, recalling actual teacher and student behaviors. An integral part of the postconference is a discussion of what the observer did that facilitated or hindered the learning process for the teacher. Together they learn, each from a different perspective, about the business of teaching, observing, and supporting one another.

During the session, "Factors Influencing Peer Coaching Relationships," participants examined various elements (cognitive styles, educational beliefs, modality preferences) that influence what they value, how they communicate, and what they look for

during observations. From this exploration, the teachers gained an appreciation for the diverse ways a lesson can be planned, delivered, thought about, and discussed. They later reported that the session helped build trust and acceptance and increased their ability to concentrate on the *practice* of teaching, separate from the *person* doing the teaching.

Throughout all the sessions, the presenters provided theory, demonstration, practice opportunities, and feedback. Then the participants planned how they would implement the new strategies back in their schools. After practicing in groups of two or three to perfect their coaching skills, each experienced teacher was assigned a new teacher to coach.

Sharing and Caring

In the follow-up meetings, the teacher-coaches shared successes and grap-

pled with challenges, and a spirit of companionship and experimentation emerged. As they realized that others experienced the same frustrations and doubts, they became comfortable talking about difficult issues. Light-hearted humor was an integral part of every meeting. Being able to laugh and joke about mistakes facilitated shared examination of teaching, opportunities for reflection, self-analysis, and growth.

Coaching new teachers also sensitized the coaches to their own daily interactions with students. At one workshop, a teacher shared this experience:

During the presentation of new concepts, I caught myself in the middle of a monologue that went something like: "Matt, you *still don't understand*. I can't believe you don't get it. I've explained it three different ways, it's written on the board, and everyone else understands."

Suddenly, I became painfully aware that I was putting the student down. I caught my breath and said, "It's okay. This is really hard stuff. No one understands it. I don't know why I'm teaching it. I don't understand it—that's it." I threw the chalk down and said, "Let's go to recess."

The laughter shared over this reflection was very different from the nervous laughter that sometimes occurs in groups where the members do not allow themselves to be vulnerable for fear of being judged less competent than others. By modeling that it is okay to experiment and not to be perfect, Robbins had set a tone of trust and acceptance; and the group had maintained the feeling "we're all in this together."

As the project progressed, the teachers expressed the idea that the term *coaching* implied an unequal relationship. Thus, they unanimously supported changing the name of the program from "Peer Coaching" to "Peer Sharing and Caring," which implied equality, safety, and support.

Making Peer Coaching Work

In Old Adobe, several factors were critical to the success of Peer Sharing and Caring. Participation was, of course, voluntary, and the training empowered teachers as well as equipping them with an expanded repertoire of coaching skills. Further, the training was ongoing; the coaches continued to meet as a group to learn from each other. Above all, the atmosphere was

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|----------------|---|
| Session 1: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overview of the research on peer coaching • A context for peer coaching <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — collaborative goal structures in schools — peer coaching, school norms, and culture — social and technical principles of coaching — organizing for peer coaching • Exemplary peer coaching models |
| Sessions 2, 3: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overview of observation instruments for coaching: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — from mirroring to coaching — interaction analysis — time-off-task — drop-in observation — cognitive coaching — script-taping — checklists |
| Session 4: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Factors influencing peer coaching relationships: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — how we look, what we value • A model of factors influencing teacher thinking and behavior <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — modality preferences — educational beliefs — cognitive style |
| Session 5: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advanced conferencing skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — preconferencing — observing — postconferencing |
| Session 6: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fine-tuning communication skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — mediational questions — probing for specificity — identifying and staying aware of presuppositions |
| Session 7: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change theory and effective staff development practices <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — what the research says — implications for peer coaching — planning for maintenance |

Fig. 1. Overview of Peer Coaching Training Sessions

Aurora Chase and Pat Wolfe

supportive, so that teachers felt they could take risks. As one teacher said, "Anything worth doing is worth doing poorly, at first."

Beyond the training itself, financial and logistical support from the district was essential. Our superintendent and principals allocated funds for training, released time, and follow-up activities. To solve the problem of conflicts between meetings, for example, in 1987-88 the district scheduled peer coaching meetings monthly on faculty meeting days. And the principals agreed not to schedule staff meetings on the second Wednesday of each month to free that time for peer coaches from all four schools to meet together.

Further, the principals provided direction for the program by attending workshops with the coaches, modeling coaching behaviors, and responding to coaches' concerns. They also "ran interference" to free up time for teachers to coach and to be observed and saw that agreements and timelines were established and that coaches followed through on commitments.

Reaping the Benefits

The spirit that characterized the training environment has now become a part of the school culture. Coaching—or "Peer Sharing and Caring"—is a norm in Old Adobe. Each new teacher is assigned a coach who assists with instruction and introduces him or her to the way things are done at the school. Twenty-one new and probationary teachers have served since the program was initiated.

Prior to the program, parents as well as experienced teachers and the staff had voiced concerns about newly hired teachers. The overall impression was that, as a result of lack of experience, new teachers were covering the material too fast, that they were not assigning appropriate amounts of homework, and that the children were not achieving their potential. As peer coaches began spending time with the new teachers, these complaints decreased, and the new teachers also reported feeling less overwhelmed and stressed.

As a result of Peer Caring and Sharing, topics of conversation in the staff room are less often about personal matters and more frequently about the

"Peer coaching lets me take greater risks in teaching—now I can try out new strategies and get feedback on whether they're working."

"If the support for peer coaching were to end tomorrow, I guess we'd just continue it subversively."

"We have a lot of activities now that get teachers together, focusing on what goes on in the classroom."

In schools across the nation, teachers and administrators are singing the praises of peer coaching. This innovation promises to reduce teachers' isolation, to create a collegial and professional environment in the school, and to promote the transfer of skills from training to the workplace. To help peer coaching achieve these results, educators may find these guidelines useful.

- *Know what peer coaching is and what it is not.* Peer coaching is a confidential arrangement between peers that includes a focused classroom observation and feedback on that observation. It is not evaluation; it does not certify a teacher's effectiveness. Instead, coaching provides teachers a means of examining and reflecting on what they do in a psychologically safe environment where it is all right to experiment, fail, revise, and try again.

- *Develop a clear understanding of the various forms of peer coaching.* The interaction between teacher and observer generally falls into one of three categories: mirroring, in which the coach records but does not interpret classroom action; collaborative coaching, in which the observer collects and helps analyze the data; or expert coaching, in which the observer gives feedback to help the teacher learn or refine particular skills. Typically, too, peer coaching models follow the familiar steps of preconference, classroom observation, collection of data, data analysis, and postconference.

- *Assess your school's culture.* Each school has its own set of conditions, norms, values, and beliefs. Consequently, a peer coaching program that has succeeded in a neighboring district may be inappropriate for your school. Trust levels, administrative support, the history of past change efforts, the role of the teachers' union, the experience of the staff, the size of the school—all will influence a program's acceptance and growth.

- *Design your program and its implementation around the characteristics of your school.* Begin planning with knowledge of your school's culture in mind, and build in flexibility and sensitivity to staff needs so that changes can be made as the program evolves. Extend your planning by looking at practical matters. Your budget, for example, will influence how much training you can provide and how much time you can free up for observations and conferences. Staff size and number of grade levels will affect coaching arrangements. Trust levels will influence the composition and selection of coaching teams, and the history of past efforts will influence the kinds of support required.

Whatever their differences from school to school, successful peer coaching programs share these conditions: verbal and tangible support from administrators, adequate training in coaching skills, trust among participants, and program adjustments responsive to the changing needs of staff members. Successful programs help new teachers learn the norms of professionalism and help all teachers develop collegiality.

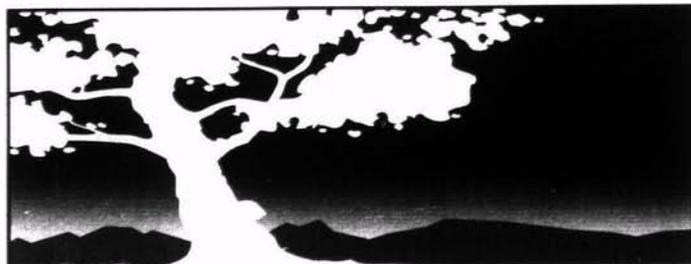
Like many innovations, peer coaching is more complex than it appears at first glance, but a well-grounded, flexible program based on a match between coaching models and each school's needs offers unparalleled support to teachers in their efforts to find new and better ways to educate children.

Aurora Chase is a Staff Development Specialist, Fairfax County Public Schools, 7423 Camp Alger Ave., Falls Church, VA 22042. **Pat Wolfe** is an Educational Consultant, 555 Randolph St., Napa, CA 94559.

act of teaching and classroom management. Many teachers say they have been able to let go of "having to be perfect," realizing that it is okay to let their rough edges show. There is an atmosphere of experimentation and openness to new ideas. Teachers eagerly consult their colleagues for assistance and share their own expertise. "In our diversity," one teacher remarked, "we are richer and can offer

more to each other and to our students."

In addition to promoting collegiality and providing new teachers the support they so urgently need, the program has had beneficial effects on experienced teachers. The act of coaching gives the teacher-coach an opportunity to observe a classroom from an objective perspective. The in-



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sights a teacher gains during these observations often have applicability to his or her own classroom. In one teacher's words: "I learned more from my observation of others than I did from being observed and receiving feedback."

Exploring New Avenues

Peer Sharing and Caring has opened up avenues of communication between teachers from different grade levels and schools, between specialists and classroom teachers. Talking about teaching—reflecting on how they do what they do—has helped teachers develop a genuine appreciation and acceptance of others. Feelings of isolation and passivity have given way to an environment of collaboration and professional growth. In short, the norm has changed from "What others do is not my business" to "What we do here at school is everybody's business, and *business is booming.*" □

1. The Old Adobe Union School District based its peer coaching program on the research of Joyce and Showers (1982), Little (1982), and Showers (1982, 1984, 1985).

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Patricia Rancy is Principal, Miwok Valley Elementary School, Union School District, 1010 St. Francis Dr., Petaluma, CA 94952. **Pam Robbins** is Director, Special Projects and Research, Office of the Superintendent, Napa County Schools, 4032 Maher St., Napa, CA 94558-2296.



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