



Role of teacher coaches might be evolving

Teacher survey finds some coaches lacking

By Diette Courrégé
The Post and Courier
Thursday, February 28, 2008

Coaches for teachers are supposed to be a resource for classroom teachers, whether that's helping plan a lesson or demonstrating instructional techniques.

But in many schools, they have become quasi-administrators who have limited time to help classroom teachers and who instead increase their workload.

"They've made teacher coaches more into paper-pushers than resources for teachers," said Kent Riddle, a kindergarten teacher and chairman of the Charleston Teacher Alliance, a teacher advocacy organization.

Charleston County schools Superintendent Nancy McGinley said she recognizes that it's time to modify the role of the district's 65 teacher coaches. She's heard middle and high school teachers express concerns about needing coaches who are experts in the subject they teach, and that it's difficult in larger schools for one coach to work with all teachers.

The coaches have been valuable in ensuring more teachers use the district's curriculum and students' test scores to guide instruction, but a potential \$23 million budget shortfall for next year means it's time for their jobs to evolve, she said.

"We have to make changes that will make things better," she said.

She envisions teacher coaches' roles becoming a hybrid of teachers who are responsible for certain classes and who also are coaching other teachers during the school day. Teacher coaches often are the most experienced teachers, and their absence from classrooms means students don't directly benefit from their talents, McGinley said. She wants as much support as possible going directly to students. At the middle and high school levels, McGinley said, teacher coaches are needed who have expertise in specific academic subjects rather than just general knowledge.

Results from a Charleston Teacher Alliance survey indicate that teachers would be open to the changing roles. Less than half of the county teachers who work with teacher coaches believe they have helped them become more effective teachers, according to a survey of 667 of the nearly 1,500 member alliance. Thirty-four percent of teachers who work with the coaches said

their coach hasn't spent time in their classroom.

Overall, the teachers surveyed were split in their opinions about teacher coaches, with some wanting to clone their coaches and others calling the positions a waste of money.

The alliance recommended restructuring the role of teacher coaches so they can focus on meeting teachers' needs rather than teachers meeting mandates set by teacher coaches. McGinley said the district already was in the process of making changes.

Julie Allan is a first-grade teacher at Laurel Hill Primary. She said her school's teacher coach, Carol Cook, is a valuable resource. She can talk to her on a professional level if she's struggling with an instructional question, and Cook saves her precious time by adeptly finding materials or lesson plans for her classroom, she said. Although Allen has her National Board Certification and 15 years of experience, it's helpful to have someone who can continue to help her learn.

"Any time teachers are given the opportunity to collaborate as professionals, it can help you grow as a professional," she said.

Cook said she also helps teachers by teaching one of their lessons with them watching or covering their class so they can observe another experienced teacher elsewhere in the school. She provides weekly newsletters with teaching tips, organizes and provides training sessions and records video demonstrations of lessons. Cook said she sees more teachers reflecting on what they are doing and talking to one another more about teaching, and the teacher coach helps stimulate those discussions.

Some of the money spent on coaches will be redirected, likely toward initiatives such as a stipend to pay for mileage for those who teach in rural areas, McGinley said.

The alliance's survey on the district's support for teachers also indicated that teachers wanted more communication from the district office, and they offered suggestions such as a teacher resource Web page and updated e-mails. McGinley said she is committed to finding ways to more directly communicate with teachers, and she plans to send more direct e-mails to teachers and start a teacher newsletter.

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