

SUSSEX COUNTY SCHOOLS

How Leadership Performance Coaching Changed Adult Behaviors, Resulting in Significant School Improvement

By Dr. Al Thompson, *Professional Development Associate*
Principals: Susan Nancarrow, Ann Fontaine Lewis, Todd Fishburn

*“The research is undeniable—verbal persuasion alone never is sufficient; any sustainable change requires follow-up and coaching.” (Reeves, *Leading to Change: Coaching Myths and Realities*, 2007.)*

THROUGH THE SUPPORT OF LEADERSHIP Performance Coaching, principals in the Delaware Leadership Performance Coaching project radically changed their leadership behaviors and led significant school improvement in their buildings. There were three key components of Leadership Performance Coaching that drove these changes in behavior that produced positive results: positive, productive relationships with their coach; the power of active listening; and a laser-like focus for professional decision-making and actions.

Located in the mid-Atlantic region, the State of Delaware encompasses the entire range of rural to urban school districts, including rural districts with urban challenges. Among the twenty-plus principals who were assigned leadership coaches during this project were three in Sussex County schools assigned to School Leadership Performance Coach Al Thompson. These three principals included an elementary principal with ten years of experience in the same school, a veteran educator returning to administration to lead a turnaround school, and a novice elementary administrator assigned his first year as a high school principal.

Susan Nancarrow served as the Principal of Blades Elementary School and West Seaford Elementary School in Seaford, Delaware during her participation in the Delaware Leadership Performance Coaching project. In her tenth year of “managing” her school, Ms. Nancarrow had little idea of what it meant to be an instructional leader. Frustrated by the ever-present pressure to improve student achievement and having no clear focus on how to make that happen, Ms. Nancarrow was hungry for change.

Ann Fontaine Lewis, veteran educator with several years as a principal and curriculum supervisor, was asked to take over a failing middle school in the middle of the school year. When asked if she would like an assigned Leadership Performance Coach for the coming year, Ann welcomed the opportunity to have a professional thought partner to join her in the challenge of turning around a school.

In 2012–13, Todd Fishburn, previously a novice elementary principal, moved to the position of Principal at Seaford High School, a low-performing school that had experienced numerous principals over a short period of time. For many, the challenges he faced would have been overwhelming. Transitioning from elementary to secondary, he was eager to continue his second year of applying what he was learning through Leadership Performance Coaching in a high school setting.

Little did they know how their professional practices, and their personal lives, were about to change as a result of Leadership Performance Coaching.

FIRST IMPACT: BUILD STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

*“Every relationship is really just a series of conversations. If a relationship is important, treat every conversation like it matters.” (P. Axtell, *Listen... Just Listen*, 2002.)*

Perhaps the first area of Leadership Performance Coaching that made an undeniable impact on school improvement was the building of strong relationships. Building positive, productive coaching relationships is one of the intentional strategies in the Leadership Performance Coaching process. This strategy is utilized with principals as a model for how

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they can, in turn, create relationships with staff. Characterized by encouragement, collaboration, challenge, collegial support, motivation, and servant leadership, the relationship between Leadership Performance Coach and principal is tailored to the individual personality and characteristics of each principal. These coaching relationships are developed over time to promote and support the changes in adult actions, necessary to increasing student achievement. As they reflected about their experiences, these three principals identified specific needs that they wanted to address with their coaches.

CHANGE IS DIFFICULT

Elementary school principal Susan Nancarrow identified her need for a colleague she could trust who would offer her the respect she yearned for in her leadership position. Coach Al Thompson recalls, “When I first met Ms. Nancarrow, she was very closed, not open to collaborating with staff, and had minimal training in school leadership. I had to be guarded in my questioning related to planning, organization, and reflection because these weren’t yet part of her daily practice. Therefore, I could have been seen more as a threat, an interrogator, rather than a support. This would have destroyed any opportunity for building a relationship.”

Ms. Nancarrow confirms that perception, “When I first met Dr. Thompson, I was cautious and, although eager for someone to talk with and learn from, I was not yet able to believe that such a person really was available to me. Through Dr. Thompson’s questioning, reassurance, and validation, I realized over time how much I anticipated our Thursday sessions and evening phone conversations. As I revealed my fears, I became more comfortable with sharing my thoughts and accepting his coaching. Once I asked Dr. Thompson, ‘Where is it that we are going?’ He explained that there are no shortcuts. I learned to trust, and it was obvious that he did have a plan to lead my growth as an administrator. I was able to release my fears and insecurities; that paved the way for changing my leadership actions.”

LIVE IN ALL YOUR CLASSROOMS

Ms. Nancarrow’s first actions included the establishment of a learning walk protocol in which she visited all classrooms regularly and met with teachers to provide feedback about what she had seen during their instruction. She remembers her initial hesitance to visit certain teachers—those from which she anticipated resistance or confrontation. Previous to her coaching experience, she had only visited classrooms in which she had a good relationship with the teacher, and had avoided the others. Dr. Thompson coached, “Live in all of your classrooms!” He reminded her that all students matter. He accompanied her on learning walks, sat in on feedback conferences, and then coached Ms. Nancarrow in ways to improve her feedback to teachers. As teachers began to see her as an instructional partner who was willing and able to give feedback in response to the learning walks, she said, “Teachers began to come to me for suggestions and advice—and began to see me differently, not just as someone who made the schedule. Through the support of teachers’ instruction, I was building strong relationships with staff.”

Blades Elementary School

Fall 2011–Spring 2012

- All underperforming subgroups’ (ELL, minority, special education) scores increased by at least 50%.
- 4th-grade math proficiency increased by 68%.

West Seaford Elementary School

Fall 2012–Spring 2013

- WSES was identified as a Focus School for not meeting proficiency targets in the poverty sub-groups for several years. (88% Free and Reduced Meals.)
- In spring 2013, achievement targets for students in the poverty sub-groups were met in both math and reading.
- 3rd-grade reading scores increased by 160%.

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LISTEN, JUST LISTEN

“Listening is the most important technique a coach can apply.” (Allison, Leadership Performance Coaching Training Manual, 2010.)

A second area of Leadership Performance Coaching that made an equally significant impact on school improvement was “Listen, Just Listen.” Leadership performance coaches focus completely on what a principal is saying and is not saying in order to understand the meaning of what is said in the context of the principal’s goals and to support the principal’s ability for self-expression. As school leaders experience this aspect of the coaching process, they begin to see how the coach’s listening to understand, rather than to respond, can have immensely productive results for reflection and problem solving.

Ann Fontaine Lewis, principal of a turnaround middle school, remembers the gratifying prospect of a thought partner in the leadership process. She was eager for collegial “brain dialogue.” Dr. Thompson says that when he first met Mrs. Lewis it was apparent from the outset that she was on board with the Delaware Leadership Coaching Project if it would help kids. Dr. Thompson remembers, “As I explained to Ann that our relationship would be characterized by 5% mentoring, 5% consulting, and 90% coaching, I strategically shared that listening is the most important technique a coach can apply. I saw her eyes light up at the promise of thinking out loud with a powerful listener.”

Their ensuing spirited conversations often focused on theory and research. Because of her past administrative/supervisory roles in various districts and states, she had seen success and failure and wondered, “What works?” Their conversations explored the most applicable research to guide Mrs. Lewis’s leadership actions as she and her leadership coach reflected about what really makes schools successful. “As I learned more about those schools that are the most successful and explored that research during Dr. Thompson’s visits, I was immersed in a thinking out loud/listening experience like I had never experienced before,” says Ann. “He would listen without interrupting as I talked about what I had read. Just when I thought I had nothing more to say, he would prompt, ‘Tell me more,’ and I would think of additional

details that contributed to my understanding of the research. On other occasions, he would ask me to clarify something I had said or mirror back to me what conclusion I had just described from the theory.” Ultimately, through this listening process, Mrs. Lewis was led to discover the needs of her school—this drove her leadership action to implement distributed leadership through the redesign of the school’s PLCs into true Data Teams®.

Laurel Middle School

Fall 2011–Spring 2013

- In spring 2012, all sixteen sub-groups met or exceeded proficiency targets on the state test.
- From fall 2012 to spring 2013...
 - Low SES in 7th-grade reading increased 140%;
 - African Americans in 7th-grade reading increased by 130%;
 - Females in 7th-grade math increased by 100%;
 - Low SES in 8th-grade math increased by 140%;
 - Special education in 8th-grade reading increased by 140%.

FOCUS FOR GROWTH

“Leadership focus is a pre-requisite for every other element of leadership.” (Reeves, Finding Your Leadership Focus, 2010.)

A third area of Leadership Performance Coaching that made a profound impact on school improvement was a strategic and limited focus for growth. Demonstrated through the work of the 90/90/90 SchoolsSM and supported by its research, a laser-like focus on high performance teaching and learning has been proven to result in high student achievement across all sub-groups. In the face of significant challenges, schools that focus their expertise, energy, and efforts in a single, strategically selected area make clear and measurable growth.

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Todd Fishburn, elementary turned high school principal, recalled his need to slow down in order to think. From their initial meetings, Dr. Thompson remembers how extremely well-read Dr. Fishburn was, how he voraciously and indiscriminately sought any new information available about the work of successful schools. “The one thing I recognized,” said Dr. Thompson, “was that Dr. Fishburn knew a lot; but,” he wondered, “how can I validate all of his reading and knowledge and still get him to ‘ride the right horse in the race’? How can I help him turn knowledge into strategic, research-based action?”

Dr. Fishburn acknowledges, “I knew there were too many initiatives and we were going in too many directions at the same time—I just didn’t know what to do about it.” Then Dr. Thompson offered an opportunity for principals in the Delaware School Leadership Performance Coaching project to attend the Leadership Summit in Denver sponsored by The Leadership and Learning Center. Dr. Fishburn was one of the principals who took advantage of that opportunity.

One evening following that conference, as Dr. Thompson was coaching, Dr. Fishburn declared, “No matter what session I attended, I heard the same message.”

“What was that?” questioned Dr. Thompson.

“Focus!” Dr. Fishburn replied. He had his answer!

Dr. Fishburn was astounded at the simplicity of the answer, particularly in light of his original skepticism about his involvement in the coaching project. He shares, “I wasn’t too sure about this coaching thing in the beginning. Who is this guy, I thought. I guess I have to do it—whatever! However, my epiphany during that coaching experience was that successful schools focus on instruction. Why would I do anything else?” With coaching, Dr. Fishburn took strategic action to communicate to both staff and students that high-performing teaching and learning would be their focus. He began to cultivate a “laser-like focus” on instruction through purposeful, professional decision-making, self-reporting grades, and strategic feedback to teachers.

Seaford High School

Fall 2012–Spring 2013

- The school made A.Y.P. for the first time in 10 years.
- The growth on 10th-grade reading on the state test was the second highest in the state.
- The number of African American students proficient in 10th-grade reading on the state test increased by 40%.
- The number of all students proficient in 10th-grade reading increased by 34%.

THE COMMON THREAD AND UNCOMMON SUCCESS

“When focus is combined with other variables, student achievement gains are more than five times greater.”
(Reeves, *Finding Your Leadership Focus*, 2010.)

Although it would be safe to say that the challenge of raising student learning and achievement was shared by these three principals, their needs as educational leaders; the needs of their teachers, students, and school community; and the strategic and intentional actions they ultimately implemented, varied greatly. The common thread among them was their coaching experience through the Delaware Leadership Performance Coaching project ...and their uncommon success.

FEEDBACK FROM DELAWARE EDUCATIONAL LEADERS ABOUT LEADERSHIP PERFORMANCE COACHING

“This school works. This is a model for the other Focus schools around the state.”

Keith Sanders, Chief Officer of the Turnaround Unit, Delaware Department of Education, during a visit to West Seaford Elementary School, Seaford, DE

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“After entering the building, I was immediately struck by the strong, positive culture of this school. The high standards for instruction were evident in every classroom I visited.”

Jack Markell, Governor, State of Delaware during a visit to Laurel Middle School, Laurel, DE

“The Seaford School District has seen great results through our Leadership Coaches. All of our schools demonstrated dramatic growth, including our high school achieving AYP for the first time in 10 years. Leadership coaching provided our principals clear, focused, research-based feedback as they navigated the challenges of educational administration. We would not have been able to accomplish so much, in such a short time, without the support of our Leadership Coaches. They provided both the technical expertise and the emotional support that all principals needed.”

Shawn Joseph, Superintendent, Seaford School District, Seaford, DE



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