

Peer Coaching Advances Collaboration and Technology-Enriched Learning Activities at Edmonds School District

Partners in Learning Customer Reference

Participation in the Microsoft Peer Coaching Program has helped the Edmonds School District create an integrated professional development program that promotes better collaboration among instructors and the effective use of technology in the classroom to meet learning objectives.

Edmonds School District

Web site:

<http://www.edmonds.wednet.edu/>

Organization size: 34 schools

Country: United States

Peer Coaching Program

Peer Coaching trains teachers to assist their peers in developing engaging, technology-rich learning activities that align with learning standards and objectives. The program curriculum focuses on three distinct areas: technology skills, instructional strategy, and peer coaching skills.

Customer Needs

Providing a learning environment that empowers students and staff members to maximize their personal, creative, and academic potential is the mission and vision of the Edmonds School District, one of the largest districts in Washington state. With over 1200 classroom teachers serving 20,000 students in 34 schools, the district is constantly challenged to maintain a vibrant professional development program that leads to better overall classroom instruction and higher academic achievement.

But well-structured programs for teachers can be expensive. Without adequate funding to support large-scale professional development on effective use of technology in the classroom, Kim Mathey, Manager of Instructional Technology at the school district, struggled to work with teachers in the district one-by-one. Towing a laptop lab to the classroom, Mathey would collaborate with a teacher on a class plan, do some model teaching, and then head to the next classroom.

“With so many teachers and only one of me, I just couldn’t make a very big difference,” says Mathey. “Sure the teachers I worked with had a good experience, but then I would leave, and without ongoing support, they couldn’t sustain the momentum.”

After reading about the effectiveness of a peer coaching model, Mathey became interested in creating a similar job-embedded professional development program to help Edmonds teachers better utilize technology to engage students in learning. Ultimately, she wanted to find a model for the district that would move teachers along faster than she could do all by herself—by helping teachers to help each other.

That’s when she discovered Microsoft Peer Coaching, then called the Teaching & Technology Coaching Initiative, or T2CI. Mathey recognized the program’s potential and jumped at the opportunity to participate in a pilot project.

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Kim Mathey, *Manager of Instructional Technology, Edmonds School District.*

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Lori Soderberg, *Instructional Technology Coordinator, Edmonds School District*

Solution

Peer Coaching trains teacher leaders to coach teaching colleagues in the development of technology-rich learning activities. The mission of the program is to provide school-based professional development that enhances standards-based instruction through engaged learning and technology integration. Initially funded by a United States Department of Education Technology Innovation Grant and piloted in Washington State, the program is now sponsored by Microsoft Partners in Learning and available throughout the United States.

Districts that participate in the Peer Coaching program receive a modular curriculum for training teachers in coaching skills, lesson design, and technology integration. The program is flexible, so districts can structure the training, including coaching recruitment and release time, to meet the unique needs of their staff and schools.

“We’ve used quite a bit of the curriculum, but we’ve adapted it too,” says Mathey.

Teacher leaders at the Edmonds School District are compensated for the time they spend training to become coaches. In addition, the district provides each coaching team (comprised of a coach and his or her mentee) with a total of nine days of flexible release time to collaborate on applying technology to classroom projects. Schools in the district are also encouraged to support the program by giving coaching teams common planning periods or additional release time whenever possible. Finally, the district brings all the coaches together up to four times a year for ongoing professional development.

In recognition of the investment it is making in training teachers, Edmonds requires each coach to make a three-year commitment to the program.

“If you look at the change process, it takes more than a year to create and sustain change,” says Mathey. “And we wanted to ensure that our coaches were committed to the program and to achieving results with their mentees.”

In fact, the program has been all about achieving results. “Peer coaching has positively affected the district at every level, from students and teachers to principals and superintendent staff, says Mathey.


Promotes Effective Lesson Design

From the outset, Mathey wanted a professional development program that focused on using instructional technology to teach a content area, not just on teaching technology as an end in itself. The Peer Coaching program, she found, did exactly that.

“Our coaches focus on improving lessons and aligning them to our standards and curriculum frameworks, then they integrate technology wherever it is appropriate,” says Mathey.

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To underscore the importance of focusing on learning standards, the Edmonds School District has mandated that all coaching activities revolve around improving lessons to help meet each individual school's improvement goals in literacy and math, thereby shifting the focus from technology to the learning objective. Coaches are also required to keep logs in which they record who they worked with, the learning activity, the specific School Improvement Plan (SIP) goal that the activity addressed, and the impact of the activity on student learning. Such logs serve many purposes: they encourage coaches to reflect on their practices; they ensure accountability; and they enable Mathey to assess how coaching teams are progressing and if a team requires some additional support.

"Technology may be the carrot to initiate collaboration, but really it is about aligning lessons to learning objectives and strengthening teacher practices," says Lori Soderberg, a fifth grade teacher who participated in the first Peer Coaching training at Edmonds and now trains peer coaches in her capacity as Instructional Technology Coordinator at the district. "It gives teachers permission to use technology in the classroom only when it is the most effective thing to do—the lessons don't always have to involve it," she adds.

Provides Integrated Professional Development

Like many school districts, Edmonds had no formal coaching opportunities before they participated in the Peer Coaching program. Since its inception in 2002, however, the program has become the model for professional development throughout the district, extending far beyond technology training.


"People see that this is actually the way we can change teaching practices," says Soderberg. "The program trains teachers to leverage all the tools at their disposal to get to student learning."

The program has been so influential, in fact, that the district has hired half-time instructional coaches for their secondary schools and literacy coaches for their elementary schools. Participation in Peer Coaching at the Edmonds School District has grown from a mere six teachers in five schools to 63 coaches in 31 schools in just four years. By 2006-2007, the district will train 15 new coaches for a total of 80 coaches.

Creates a Collaborative Learning Environment

Perhaps the most fundamental and ultimately long-lasting change resulting from the Peer Coaching program is that it has nurtured a more collaborative learning environment in the Edmonds School District.

"Teaching can be such an isolated profession," says Soderberg. "This program encourages teachers to open their doors to one another, to share what they've been teaching, and to work together to get to where they need to be."



To foster this collaboration, the district provides opportunity for coaches and their mentees to share ideas at professional development days throughout the year. For example, coaches have been asked to share one sample of student work that resulted from a collaborative teaching experience with their coaching peers. Together they review the work, and provide the coach with valuable feedback on what went well and what they could improve upon.

“It’s a great avenue for sharing and getting new ideas,” says Soderberg.

Coaching teams are also required to put together a portfolio of classroom artifacts that demonstrate how their collaborative work has positively impacted student learning. These portfolios, Mathey notes, serve the dual purpose of encouraging teachers to reflect on their teaching practices and ensuring program accountability.

“We keep these portfolios in binders, and when it comes time for funding, we just bring these to the school board or the superintendent and say, ‘Here’s proof that this program is making a change in teacher practices and impacting student learning.’”

In fact, few people at Edmonds need to be convinced that Peer Coaching has had an impact.

“This project hasn’t been easy, and there have been some headaches, but it feels like it is worth it,” Soderberg concludes. “We know it is making a difference.”