

Student as Learner, Teacher as Coach: Putting Collaboration to Work at S.A. Douglas High School

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The S.A. Douglas High School is a comprehensive small school located in Philadelphia. Approximately three fourths of the students at Douglas have Individualized Education Plans. The school's principal and two of the teachers are trained CFG coaches and have been introducing collaborative, reflective practices at the school.

Students who didn't read books a year ago are volunteering to read aloud in class. Those same students are writing book reviews for the monthly school journal. According to their teachers, these kids are asking for more and more books in their classroom libraries. According to the kids, they like the books and they feel successful reading now. In a recent conversation some students bragged to me about the numbers of books they've completed this year! Using a *Success Analysis* protocol, they talked about their independence, their small group work and their time with their teacher, but mostly they talked about their increased confidence as readers and learners. They also spoke candidly of their previous practice in school, of a time when they would just give up and wait for their teachers to tell them the answers. Some of the same students talked about putting their heads down or skipping school altogether in the past.

Now, students are winning awards for their original videos in city-wide competitions. Students are participating in school-wide surveys and they are graphing and interpreting their results. These young adults are writing across the content areas, composing mini-paragraphs at the start of many classes. So what happened? Why are all these positive changes taking place?

The staff at S.A. Douglas High School was the recipient of a three-year Comprehensive School Reform grant. The Douglas staff chose the Coalition of Essential Schools as their reform model, and for the past three years they have been engaged in a purposeful conversation about what works and what does not work for their students.

Armed with additional funds, the staff, some students and their families have attended retreats and planning sessions where they've explored the Common Principles of the Coalition, talking about a "tone of decency" and the need for "teachers to act as coaches while students act as workers."

In partnership with their School Council the staff has shared their vision for Douglas graduates and they have worked to make their common vision a reality.

While there have been many examples of the staff's and the community's commitment to their students' success, there are a few that really stand out. Last September the school principal, Patricia Parson, heard an inspirational speaker just days before school opened. She was both energized and worried. Energized because she knew she could buy a new reading program with the grant money, worried because wholesale changes in teacher assignment and classrooms at the start of the school year would be understandably unpopular with her staff.

After talking with her Assistant Principal, Michael Picardi, Pat decided to present her proposed changes on the first day of school. "Because of the kids" and led by their union representative, Ken Richardson, the staff decided to support Pat's proposed changes. With kids at the center, teachers



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opted to shift classrooms and teaching assignments and three READ 180 labs were established. The results have been stunning.

Students and teachers now speak openly about the benefits of small-group instruction. The kids like the individualized feedback and the teachers like the ability to offer the intensive support. Students also talk about being forced to master the content by the computer, a teacher who never gives them the answer, but always lets them try and try again. Students shared that they were more "confident in all of their classes now." Students really appreciated the ability to self correct, using help buttons on the computer, or to listen to books on tape. I heard over and over again that they enjoyed knowing, "You can do it for yourself!"

The seniors told me they were much more willing to write paragraphs now. The students' writing from READ 180 is connected to the second example I'd like to share. This spring, the staff at Douglas joined the staff at Jules E. Mastbaum, another CES school, to hear a Philadelphia teacher's presentation of his "Highly Effective Writing" program. Dr. Charles Payslay made his pitch and shared his student work with the combined staff of the two schools. Dr. Payslay isn't a publishing house representative, he's a Philadelphia high school teacher on a mission, and his dedication to his students' success is evident. With Dr. Payslay's blue booklets in hand, the Douglas staff hit the ground running. The writing program has exploded at Douglas. Students write in shop class and math class, social studies and technology. Students are writing everywhere at Douglas



and they are writing more effectively.

The final example I'd like to share is the initiation of a lunch group where teachers share their student work. Twice a month a group of teachers from different disciplines gathers in the conference room to reflect on their work. Using protocols that help to keep the conversation focused, these teachers act as critical friends, sharing their concerns and dilemmas about the lessons they hope to improve and the kids they want to reach.

Looking at Student Work (LASW) collaboratively signals a break from the isolated privacy experienced by most teachers. Gone are the gripe sessions as well. These teachers give and receive feedback with each other, and their students benefit from their collective expertise.

As an external coach at Douglas I have had the privilege of observing their three-year journey. They would never have written this article, they may even be a little embarrassed by my singing their praises. However, anyone who visits Douglas and talks to the students will see that this staff does "whatever it takes" to help their kids succeed. The grant monies may be dwindling, but the Douglas family is not slowing down. At a recent professional development session, the LASW group modeled a protocol for the entire staff in an effort to expand their collaborative practices to the staff as a whole. As the grant ends, the Douglas family is focused on sustaining their momentum with each other and, perhaps even more importantly, they are dedicated to sharing ownership of the process with their students and their parents. ■

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