



Educator Barnes – 3/6/18

It takes hard work to build up teachers and improve their practice, but the work is even harder when teachers are displaced. This school year is my third year as an instructional coach and this year has been the most challenging. Due to decreasing enrollment, my school district, Indianapolis Public Schools, decided to eliminate three high school campuses, moving from seven to four. Instead of only teachers at the closing high school campuses being displaced, the school district decided to displace every high school employee, from the principals to the cafeteria workers. The district felt this was best because it would allow teachers to find their best fit school.

As you might have suspected this has caused anxiety, stress, and depression among some teachers. Teachers fear they either won't have a job or will be assigned to a school where a principal did not choose them. Some teachers have quit mid-year despite being offered a bonus of up to \$5,000 to stay until the end of the year. Others

have decided quit and stay; they are planning to finish the school year, but they have quit trying to be the best teachers they could be.

In the midst of this all, I have to coach teachers. I have to improve their practice and through them, I also have to improve our students' academic achievement. Although being displaced is not a situation any educator wants to face (and this is also my second displacement), this is a reality in many school districts across many states.

How do you coach teachers when they are part of a reality they do not like? Below, I have outlined what I am doing to coach teachers who are displaced.

Acknowledge their frustrations and then get to the work.

At first, when I had coaching sessions, I didn't talk about the situation that was all around us. It was this elephant sitting in the room during each coaching session. Even though I can't ease their anxiety, I can acknowledge their frustrations about the situation and tell them I appreciate their hard work and commitment to the coaching process.

Focus on what you can control.

When I taught middle school English, the English department chair would say at every meeting, "We are only going to focus on what we can control." I know that statement would burn people up sometimes especially when they were angry about a decision that was made. Being angry about a decision, such as your district displacing you is a valid feeling, but it is not okay to let your anger consume the entire time you should be working to improve your practice as a teacher. When I'm meeting with a teacher who is derailing our work by focusing on issues he or she can't control, I'll say, "Is there anything you can do about this?" If the answer is no, I'll direct the teacher back to what we were originally discussing.

Remind teachers why they entered the profession.

When teachers are fearful they either won't have a job next year or get placed in a school they did not choose, they may leave mid-year or put in minimal effort. Although, I respect the decision of teachers who leave mid-year (because I rather them leave and serve other students well rather than stay and just go through the motions), a teacher leaving or a teacher putting in minimal effort hurts students and puts an extra burden on other colleagues. When a teacher says, "Mr. Blacksmith is just sitting at his desk and passing out worksheets," I'll respond, "Do you want to be like him and is that good for your students?" Always bring it back to the students. I want my teachers to know it says more about their character when they teach well even in the face of uncertainty.

Encourage teachers to take care of themselves.

The foundation of good instructional coaching is trust. When teachers trust you, they might unload on you as if you are their therapist. If you are concerned about the mental health of the teachers you coach, refer them to someone who can help them. Don't try to provide answers or try to solve their problems.

Consistently offer support and observations.

I frequently tell teachers, "I want you to end this school year knowing you have improved because of your investment in this process." Teachers can only invest when you are also invested. When teachers are quitting, it is easy to get caught up in putting out fires and making sure those classes are okay instead of focusing on the teachers that are still there putting in the work. If I want teachers I coach to bring 100%, I also have to do the same. That means showing up consistently to observe their classrooms and providing the support they need.

Lift up the good.

Last and certainly not least, remind teachers of their progress. Highlight the improvements they are making. I was speaking to a teacher who was frustrated after I came to observe. She wanted her lesson to be better. I said, "No one was walking around the classroom, cursing at you, or throwing stuff. Your transitions were smooth and students could articulate what they were learning. Remember August?" After my feedback, a big smile appeared on her face. She was so caught up in what she perceived she did wrong that she didn't she was she was doing right.

At this time, I have no clue what I'm doing next year. I have not secured a job placement yet, but right now I'm trying to be the best coach I can be so my teachers can serve our students well this year and be prepared to serve students well next year in their new roles.