



Executive Vice President Cathy Gassenheimer on Instructional Partners



Cathy Gassenheimer, Executive Vice President of the A+ Education Partnership and the Alabama Best Practices Center, talks about the Alabama Instructional Partners pilot project.

Tell us something about the background and vision for the Alabama Instructional Partners initiative.

Our Alabama Best Practices Center has a long history of working well with Alabama Department of Education initiatives. It's a close relationship that started more than a decade ago with the Alabama Reading Initiative, a program that's had a profound positive impact on literacy and the teaching of reading in our elementary schools. Several years ago we also began working with AMSTI -- the Alabama Math, Science and Technology Initiative, which aims to strengthen STEM-related instruction from preK to grade 12. Their staff has been involved in both our teacher-focused Powerful Conversations Network and Key Leaders Network, both of which bring together educators from across the state for in-depth collaboration and professional learning.

We've also provided professional development for AMSTI field staff around teacher coaching and best instructional practice. There are about 200 of these educators working at regional centers around the state, and they're expected to serve thousands of schools. And what we began hearing from them was some frustration about being able to serve schools well, when they might not be able to visit a school more than once every six weeks. It's hard to build relationships with math and science faculties under those conditions.

Then the economy hit the bottom, education budgets began to shrink, and there was not much hope that we'd have sufficient state resources to expand the AMSTI team. We had to begin to think about how -- under the conditions of this "new normal" -- we could respond to the need to provide just-in-time professional development support to teachers, and not just in some subjects but across the curriculum. This is a particularly pressing issue as Alabama begins to implement the Common Core State Standards, with all the challenging content and sophisticated teaching strategies it brings to the table.

It's also important to know something about the history of teacher coaching in Alabama's schools. While some districts and schools have had school-based instructional support for decades, it was not common before the turn of the 21st century, when the legislature approved funding through the Alabama Reading Initiative for a reading coach in every public school that included grades K-3. These were not cross-curricular instructional coaches but they did introduce the coaching concept to a large segment of teachers for the first time. Later, for several years, the state was able to fund an adolescent literacy program in some secondary schools, which supported coaches who *were* more cross-curricular.

So those are some of the contextual issues surrounding the development of the Alabama Instructional Partners pilot project. I think many of us felt we were on track to develop instructional coaching in all our schools, over time, but the national recession has not only stopped the spread but put existing resources for instructional support at some risk. The pilot project is an initiative of the State Department of Education to underscore the potential of the instructional coaching model to measurably improve student achievement and their success in meeting higher college and career readiness standards.

The project is overseen by an ALSDE task force, under the leadership of Judy Stone, coordinator of the Alabama Reading Initiative. We've started small, with 13 teachers from five school districts who were either in reading or instructional coaching roles. They are currently working as Instructional Partners (IPs) in elementary, middle or high schools and also immersed in a year of high-intensity professional learning, using a blended model that includes monthly meetings, several multi-day retreats, and a virtual community of practice.

The Alabama Best Practices Center is contracted to provide the professional learning experiences. My colleagues Jackie Walsh, Georgina Nelson and I are leading that effort, which is premised on the big idea (found in the work of Jim Knight and many others) that teachers in coaching roles will be most effective if they approach working with their colleagues as partners rather than "experts." School leaders are also an important part of this work, and they participate with their IPs in key portions of our PD experience.

You asked about the pilot project's vision. Without attempting to speak for the task force, I think we'd all agree that the largest share of the state's expenditure on

public education is invested in people -- teachers and administrators. To maximize that investment, it's very important to support the professional growth of those teachers and leaders so that they can become highly effective and create schools where students are successful.

So the question is, what can we learn from this pilot that will enhance the effectiveness of teachers and leaders across the state. We hypothesize that the shift from a curriculum expert (reading, science, math) to an expert on adult learning, data analysis and best teaching and leadership practices -- and a parallel shift from being viewed as an expert to becoming a partner in improving teacher and school practices -- can make a significant difference in student outcomes.

How do you see the 4C's fitting in to the pilot?

We really buy into the ideas we find in the P21 "rainbow" and Tony Wagner's 7 survival skills. So the four C's are fully embedded in our work with instructional coaches and the messages they communicate as they partner with teachers to align curriculum and instruction with the needs of 21st century students.

It's essential that students today get the kind of education where they are prepared to be problem solvers and collaborators, where they've developed the ability to take something they've learned and adapt that learning to new situations. It's not a surprise that creativity is found at the top of the revised Bloom's Taxonomy, because students need to develop their creativity to deal with the tremendous amount of ambiguity that characterizes our world of constant change.

The Four C's must be embedded in everything we do. If we're not successful in helping instructional partners and teachers change their practice so that students are well prepared for a connected and often frenetic world, then we will have failed. The Four C's represent the sense of urgency that is fueling this project, because we are well aware that many Alabama schools -- and certainly schools across the United States -- have not yet committed themselves to assuring that critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity are deeply embedded into everyday learning in every classroom.

From the beginning you envisioned this work reaching all aspects of a district's work—how have you challenged yourselves to work on the issue of bringing this work to scale in a district?

Among the five districts involved in the IP initiative right now, we can definitely say that we have the attention and interest of district-level leaders who understand the importance of using instructional partners as change agents.

All five of these districts are also involved in our Center's best-practice networks for teachers and administrators. And we work even more closely with several of them through regular professional learning workshops with their leadership teams. So we have the kinds of relationships that make scaling really do-able. This is not the kind of project that's "under the radar" at the central office.

Even at this early stage, Suzanne Lacey, the Talladega County superintendent (who attended the EdLeader21 conference in October) is talking to us about scaling the instructional partners initiative throughout her district -- which has 17 schools, including seven high schools. Talladega already has a program underway to convert all of their schools to a PBL instructional approach, so the school-based coaching model is a very good fit for them.

Another of the districts, Madison City, asked to involve a partner from every one of their elementary schools. The project design wouldn't allow it, but ALSDE did agree to invite four participants -- one from elementary, two from middle, and one from high school. As further evidence of scaling, Madison is already using their partners to do district-wide workshops, both with teachers and other coaches.

I talk some more about scaling issues in my answer to your last question.

How have you selected the individuals who act as instructional partners? What criteria have you used?

Last spring the ALSDE asked if we would be willing to help manage a pilot that would see what happened if a small group of reading coaches had their jobs restructured and broadened their focus to become schoolwide instructional coaches. We said yes, a task force was formed, and we agreed on five districts where ARI, AMSTI and the Alabama Best Practices Center had good relationships with leaders and a good general knowledge of the systems and schools. In each district we felt there was potential for a strong collaboration.

We asked those districts to select two reading coaches -- the original plan was to have 10 partners in the pilot. After Madison City made their request, we expanded to 13. As things worked out, we have nine teachers who were reading coaches and four who were already in more expanded roles as cross-curricular coaches. It's worth noting that these teachers didn't really volunteer for the project -- they were selected by their districts. We did ask the districts to choose schools where the principal was a strong instructional leader (or had that potential), and where the reading or instructional coach was someone leaders had a good deal of confidence in.

How have you used the online network to support the partner work?

Our plan from the outset was to combine face-to-face professional learning and a virtual community of practice. We'd had some significant experience through the Alabama Best Practices Center with virtual teacher communities, thanks to a three-year grant from Microsoft Partners in Learning in the mid-2000s. Those were much larger communities, but we learned some valuable lessons that we were able to apply here.

Our virtual COP exists in a private NING social networking site where membership is limited to the IPs, staff and consultants, and some key observers. The site was created for us by a brilliant young teacher named Beth Sanders who is a true digital native, and a connected educator who has her own high school students engaged

in global learning experiences. For us, Beth created a very user-friendly environment centered around a chat stream, with individual participant blogs, resources spaces for documents, videos and other sharing, and other engaging features.

She's also serving as the site's facilitator, helping everyone learn to use the NING tools effectively. She's also introduced us to Twitter hashtag groups and offered the IPs tips on how to build personal learning networks on the internet. They've been amazed at the way tools like Twitter and RSS can connect them to other professionals doing the same work, using hashtags like #edcoach and blog aggregators like Google Reader.

Our virtual COP has been a HUGE success -- far beyond my expectations at this point in the pilot project. It took off from the very beginning. I think there are at least three factors in its success: first, we got together in person for three days at the beginning of the work and built a solid foundation for a learning community. When we entered the NING experience, trust was already established. Second, Beth is tireless and savvy -- she's done an excellent job of setting up the space in ways that would draw people to the site immediately. At our kickoff retreat, one of our agenda activities was Beth introducing NING and getting them excited about the possibilities of learning together in a community of practice and creating their own personal learning networks in the larger education sphere.

And I think the third reason is simply that the people we invited to participate are very committed educators who are smart about teaching and learning and have the dispositions to support each other. That's certainly a trait one would look for when selecting an instructional coach and partner -- being supportive. But I think even given that, they are exceptional. They want to learn from each other.

What has been your biggest success with the work so far? (What has made you feel the most enthusiastic about it?)

The instructional partners really "get" the big ideas behind this project. They are applying what they are learning every day in their schools as they work with colleagues. They are finding out that being a "partner" rather than an "expert" is the key to opening classroom doors and being invited in. And that once these partnerships begin to emerge, their other important job -- nurturing schoolwide collaboration and true professional learning communities (not just a group that meets once every week or two from 11 until noon) -- becomes much more do-able.

We're able to trace their growing enthusiasm about the IP approach in part by following their private electronic journals. This is something else Beth created for us -- a private space for each participant, where they share their thinking about their coaching experiences during the week. We read all of their observations and respond to each post; most often we pose at least one reflective question for them.

Their job satisfaction is growing as they delve deeply into the dynamics of this partnership approach to coaching. A lot of them would tell you that they love their jobs a heck of a lot more than they did at the beginning of the year, and a lot of them loved their jobs then.

What "aha!" moments have you encountered along the way?

I think there are several:

(1) The lateral learning that's going on in our virtual community of practice is just fabulous. Most of the resources being shared on the NING site are coming from the partners themselves, as they've begun to use social media and build personal learning networks on the Web. Not only do the participants point each other to thoughtful articles and useful tools they've discovered, they also have "open" blogs where they write about topics of interest and comment on each other's posts. The lateral learning far exceeds what we thought would be happening at this point in the project. They are digging much deeper into questions of coaching and teaching practice than we would have predicted after only a few months of working together.

(2) Another aha! has been our growing understanding that every partner is at a different place and we need to honor where they are and nurture their growth at a pace that is manageable. The mantra is that "sometimes you go slow to go fast" -- that change is hard and takes time and being patient is important. It's easy for us to be impatient; the urgency of this work is ever present. But we have to understand that these are human beings who deserve our empathy as they learn to do this very hard job. We have to make the genuine commitment to be their partners and to model the kind of servant leadership we encourage them to adopt in their own work.

(3) This is less an "aha" than a confirmation of what we believe to be true about working with educators around an agenda of change. Too often (not just in Alabama but across the nation) we jump way too quickly to the *how* of change and give very little emphasis to the *what* and *why*. To change, people need to know the what and the why. When the partners walked into the first day of our kickoff retreat, some of them were very unhappy to be there. They didn't know what was happening to their job, they hadn't volunteered for this, they didn't want to be there. One of them was so angry she was almost beside herself. We've devoted a lot of time talking with them about the what and why of the instructional partner concept. And that incredibly angry teacher is now among the IP concept's strongest advocates. It's a reminder that you always have to put yourself in the mindset of the people who have been told to be there. You have to attend to the what and the why, as well as the how.

What other question should we have asked you?

The question on the minds of some of your community members may be: *What happens next?*

We can already see how much we have to learn. There will be a second year in our pilot when I expect that a lot of time will be spent exploring the state's role in supporting the instructional partner model and how to grow an initiative like this. And I think the pilot will also continue to consider the types of support instructional partners need, both from their school leaders and through professional development activities. It's likely that we'll use some of our partners from Year One as trainers in Year Two, and they'll be active in engaging new participants in our virtual Community of Practice as well, perhaps paired as mentors.

The other another important issue to pursue is the scaling question. I'm sure everyone knows of Chris Dede at Harvard and his innovative thinking around issues of scaling educational innovation. The Alabama Best Practices Center had the opportunity to work with Chris through a Microsoft Partners in Learning grant several years ago. Assistant state superintendent Sherrill Parrish and I have talked with Chris, and thanks to the generosity of Microsoft PiL, when we're ready to have this part of the conversation he is going to be consulting with us to really help us think through how we scale this initiative.

So the first-year pilot has been successful, and the Department has asked the task force to plan for a second year with an expanded number of schools and districts. One very important issue as you scale is that you're not going to always be able to work with principals who have a deep understanding of the role of an instructional leader. Or coaches who have already experienced some of the quality training and support they need to be successful. So we need to find out what more we can learn from working with a larger and more diverse group of schools, at different levels in the school improvement cycle. Because if this initiative is going to be scaled, we need to know what kinds of interventions and strategies are most likely to make scaling successful.

I think we have to be willing to work with districts that are at different levels of school improvement and that might not have all the optimal conditions. One of the five districts in our first-year pilot is Tarrant City Schools, a high poverty district in metro Birmingham. But it's a relatively small district with strong leadership at all key positions, and it's an easier situation with which to work. There are children in other high poverty districts where the circumstances are not as favorable as in Tarrant, and we need to figure out how we can be effective in developing strong instructional partnerships in those districts, because their kids deserve the same excellent education.

My current favorite story about that comes from the office of our new state superintendent of education Tommy Bice. When you enter his office, the first thing you see is a child-sized chair. He says he put it there to remind himself and all his visitors that everything we do, we do on behalf of students, and the better our initiatives reflect an understanding of what really goes on in the classroom, the more impact they will have on Alabama's children.

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