

Put energy where results are most likely

When I first started working as a literacy coach in schools, I was equitable about how I spent my time. I believed in trying to get every single teacher “on board” with our literacy vision. The same was true when I began doing teaching and coaching residencies. In fact, in my first residencies, the host teacher, in whose classroom I did demonstration teaching and coaching for observing teachers, was often a weak teacher. I initially had to spend so much time on management that I wasn’t able to teach with a sense of urgency or demonstrate all I had planned. More important, the host teacher wasn’t strong enough to move forward after the residency, on her own, let alone mentor others.

Here’s what I’ve learned: We can exhaust ourselves trying to work with colleagues who for various reasons, are very slow to change. My husband Frank helped me shift my thinking. He said, “You know how we both love to eat pistachio nuts. Well, when you come across that nut that’s hard to crack, you can either break your fingernails trying to crack it or set it aside and move on. There’s a whole bowl waiting for you.” Today, I ask the principal to place me with the strongest teachers or teachers demonstrating high potential. In that way, we can maximize our teaching and learning time and have an impact on more teachers on staff. I coach the host teachers to take on what they’ve learned and to share it with others—that is, to be agreeable to opening their classrooms to all willing colleagues, to coplan and coteach, and to become literacy leaders in their schools.

Along the same lines, we must use caution and common sense on how much time we put into learning how to use and apply new district-mandated programs, new standards, and resources. All the time and energy it takes to learn new techniques and approaches must be worth our investment and the students.’ The new resources must align with our beliefs, practices, and curriculum and not the other way around.

With our students, of course, it’s our responsibility to reach and teach every one. To get great results, we need first-rate resources, expert teaching skills, additional support, and more. We also need to acknowledge that there is no “quick fix” in making the transition to more effective practices and that, in fact, it can take several years to see full benefits (see “Focus on the essential ingredients,” p. 84). Some needed support in accelerating literacy achievement can come from peers or students in upper grades, such as when an upper grade class partners

weekly with a primary-grade class in reading. “Each one, teach one” is a great philosophy as long as the person doing the teaching is knowledgeable and able to work well with others. We have only so much time and energy, and we must apportion it wisely and where it does the most good. Not only that, but also staying positive and optimistic about our daily work is essential to our overall effectiveness and well-being.