



Teachers in Charlottesville City Schools are benefitting from a little extra help this year.

A new initiative approved by the School Board during last year's budget talks now makes the division home to 11 instructional coaches — professional educators whose job is to help teachers grow and improve their classroom practices.

"Teaching is something that has become so complex, it's not just 'I'm giving you the material and I hope you get it,'" said Yvonne Howdysell, an instructional coach at Walker Upper Elementary School. "We really have to help one another prepare kids for the tasks ahead of them."

Each elementary school, including Walker Upper Elementary, has one coach, while Buford Middle and Charlottesville High schools have two coaches.

Schools officials said the move is the latest of many additions aimed at bolstering learning, such as making decisions based on data, improving intervention and remediation services and adding reading and math specialists in all elementary schools.

"Since the teacher is the most influential factor in improving student achievement, the next logical step

was for us to implement a model that provided more direct support to teachers,” said Gertrude Ivory, Charlottesville’s assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction.

*“There’s a feeling that the coach is just there to help with deficits, but that’s not all of it,” Hawdyshell said.*

“Great athletes and performers have coaches,” Ivory said. “The mission of our instructional coaching model [is that] we are all professionals. We all want to become better.”

So far, coaches have been observing teachers in action and offering professional development sessions, as well as modeling lessons for teachers and providing other services.

The coaches spend four days per week in classrooms at the schools and one day per week at the division level working with the other coaches, Ivory said.

“We’ve been in every high school teacher’s classroom to observe and provide feedback,” said Cathi Shefski, a coach at Charlottesville High School.

The coaches also created an in-house newsletter to spread best-practices throughout the school, she said.

Chandra Westerfield, a fifth grade math and science teacher at Walker Upper Elementary School, praised the initiative.

“The benefit is that the coach sees deficits that I wouldn’t see, so they give you feedback about how you can do things differently,” Westerfield said. “And it’s another set of eyes that can give you new strategies for how you can teach students who are struggling or who could even be pushed further.”

But the new model hasn’t come without its challenges.

Shefski said that the scope of the job is so large that determining how to prioritize time has been an issue.

“Also, getting the word out about how we can best be used by the teachers, and for the teachers to understand how we can facilitate their work [has been a challenge],” Shefski added.

“There’s a feeling that the coach is just there to help with deficits, but that’s not all of it,” Howdyshell said. “It’s really about how we can all grow, and that’s a different mindset than I think a lot of people are used to.”

Westerfield said that she appreciates being offered help instead of being told what to do.

“It was explicitly stated at the beginning of the year that they’re not coming into your room as an evaluator, and they’re not communicating what they’re seeing with administrative staff,” Westerfield said. “I think that issue of trust has been established.”

Albemarle County Public Schools has had instructional coaches since 2009. The program in the county schools has six lead coaches and 22 instructional coaches. Each instructional coach serves one school at

the elementary, middle and high school levels.

“Coaches are rotated through their roles, meaning they serve for a number of years and then return to the classroom,” Albemarle spokesman Phil Giaramita said.

Ivory said it’s too early to tell if Charlottesville’s coaches will return to teaching after a certain number of years, and said in the short term, it’s important for the coaches to focus on building relationships at their schools. What’s more, Ivory said, schools are already asking for additional coaches.

At the end of the day, Howdyshell characterized the new culture as a learning laboratory.

“We’re getting ideas from one another ... and figuring out how to better hone our craft,” Hawdyshell said.