



School Provision #106 –New Understandings & Approaches for School Success

I'm excited to share with you this interview with a graduate of the Evocative Coaching Training Program because it affirms, once again, what a positive difference this program makes in the way educational leaders and instructional coaches see themselves and go about their work in the world. That's particularly true for this issue's interviewee, Christina Efird, who serves as the Chief Academic Officer for her district. In that role, Christina has overseen the design and staffing of her district's instructional-coaching program. Two of the consultants that she retained to help with that program, both retired principals, brought Evocative Coaching into the picture as a book study.

That book study was part of the District's strategic plan, looking forward to 2018. The prior strategic plan sought to bring coaching into the District, carried out at different levels, in order to improve the instructional practices and performance of teachers. Our charge, as the Center for School Transformation (CST), was to train the District's instructional coaches in Evocative Coaching so as to provide them with a common language, framework and understanding vis-à-vis the work they were charged to do. So that's what led originally to the connection between Christina's District and the Center for School Transformation.

Recognizing that different people have different needs, perspectives, and approaches when it comes to how they carry themselves and go about their work in the world, the District offered Evocative Coaching as but one of several coaching models that people could choose to learn and utilize. Even though it is difficult for people to know ahead of time what coaching model will actually suit them best, it is nevertheless possible to provide people with enough of an overview so as to help them make intelligent decisions based upon their personality, background, training, and goals. That really worked out well for CST because so many people identified Evocative Coaching as the model they wanted to learn and to use.

Let's hear, then, a little of Christina's story when it comes to both her experience with the training program as well as with her use of Evocative Coaching in the field.

Bob: I'm thankful, Christina, that I have this opportunity to talk with you regarding your experience with the [Evocative Coaching Training Program](#). I hope people will read this and say, "Hey, if Christina developed her coaching skills so much through this Training Program maybe it could do that for me as well!"

Christina: Well, I'm still a "baby" coach-in-the-making. I'm learning a lot of exciting, new strategies and trying out a lot of different things, one step at a time. I'm making slow progress, not huge progress. But I am happy to share with those who might be interested in not only what I have been learning but also the joy of my learning.

Bob: That's a pretty strong affirmation for the program: good content, good experience, and good learning. That's our hope for everyone who goes through the Training Program. We want it to be a thing of value and joy.

Christina: And for the most part, I have to be honest, it works pretty well. It has certainly worked well for me. As the supervisor of a team of 15 people, all of whom work very closely together, I wear so many hats. Sometimes I am the boss, other times the coach, and still other times the evaluator. Wearing so many hats can be difficult; frankly, they interfere with each other at times. But after going through the [Evocative Coaching Training Program](#) I think I am doing better all the way around. I am better able to distinguish between when I am in the role of supervisor, holding people accountable, and when I am in the role of coach, evoking people's greatness. I can clearly see not only the difference now but also how to best relate these roles to each other.

Bob: So how does that work out in practice? How do things change between when you are serving in the role of supervisor and when you are serving as a coach?

Christina: One simple thing is to just be clear as to one's agenda. When I tell someone that this is an opportunity for coaching, people know that it is a time for brainstorming and problem-solving without any judgment or evaluation. It's just a matter of looking for solutions together. The ideas that come out are starting points, not mandates or finished products. This also lets them know that I recognize the many assets that they bring to the table. It's definitely non-judgmental and strengths-based. I'm very open-minded in listening to their ideas and to finding solutions together. This really changes the vantage point and even the initiative. By my taking that stance people end up being more likely to seek me out and to come to me when they're stuck.

Bob: That would certainly be a perfect opportunity for coaching. I'm glad they feel as though you can be helpful and that you are a "safe" person to come and talk with.

Christina: By using Evocative Coaching, those conversations now move better. People are more likely to get past barriers, for example, when their coach is a nonjudgmental partner who assists them with both the creative brainstorming of new ideas as well as with the development of specific plans for implementing those ideas. A good coach helps people to do all that by thinking outside the box. Those times work out better. And I'm doing that more consistently and effectively since learning Evocative Coaching. I'm more intentional and mindful in how I listen to and reflect the things that I am hearing from them.

That often involves a lot of stories. They share a lot of their stories with me and I pour out a lot of my stories to them. This sharing of stories helps us to get to the Golden Sigh that you and Megan write about in your book. That is the starting point and then we move along forward. That's when Evocative Coaching works best. Not when things are at a crisis point, not when the stakes are high, but when people have the time to do problem-solving, brainstorming, and experimenting. People can really learn, grow, and change when they have the time to try out different things and to make corrections or adjustments based upon their experiences without pressure or demand.

Bob: That's a beautiful way of putting our philosophy of and approach to coaching. Coaches are not supervisors or evaluators. We have our own niche as well as our own work to do.

Christina: Of course these roles overlap at times as we share our common commitment and capacity as teachers to help each other get better at our craft. Regardless of our role, however, we are all coaching each other to the same end. And it's easy, once we observe someone, to have an idea, to talk with them, and to start making suggestions as to how to change things. It is easy to think that is coaching. But top-down solutions never work. Generating brand new ways of doing things from the bottom up, ways that are owned fully by the people who use them, is a much more challenging project. But it's worth the effort to go down that road because it is also a much more dynamic, effective, and long-lasting approach.

Bob: So how are things going with that in your school district?

Christina: Well, the coaching model that we use here has evolved through the years. Sometimes our coaches are assigned to certain schools. Other times we rotate through different schools. I prefer the times when we are assigned to a certain school because that gives us a chance to build deeper relationships and to do side-by-side teaching. That's when the relationships deepen and the learning really takes off.

Bob: And how was it decided to bring in Evocative Coaching as a resource for your coaches to use?

Christina: It really came about through multiple strategic planning processes. The first one, for 2014, identified the needs of the district as well as some strategies for meeting those needs. Now we are into the strategic plan for 2018, and we have chosen Evocative Coaching as one of the models we want to be using. It is not *the* model, for example we also include Jim Knight's work on Constructive Coaching or Richard Elmore's work on Instructional Rounds, but Evocative Coaching is an important one.

Bob: That's our sense of things as well. Even people who have been at this a long time can learn, grow, and change when they learn a new model. That's when things really begin to take off and soar. How many people serve in this role at your school district?

Christina: Between coaches, facilitators, specialists, and other support personnel we're probably taking about 200-300 people.

Bob: Oh my goodness! That's a lot of people!

Christina: Too many, probably, but it does reflect our commitment here as well as our ability to find the resources for all this support personnel. In certain situations, Title One can fund the efforts of instructional coaches. Otherwise the efforts have to be funded on a district level.

Bob: And what do the coaches focus on when it comes to their training and preparation?

Christina: Sometime it's on the content of what our teachers are teaching while at other times it's on the process of how to coach. Most of the time it is a little of both. Evocative Coaching has proven to be very compatible with our own understandings and commitments: mindful listening, storytelling, non-judgmental strengths building, the vantage and the learning points. It's all there.

Evocative Coaching is also compatible with some of the other models, like Cognitive Coaching, that we have learned to utilize and practice. All the models have been super-useful to learn and they mesh so nicely with the understandings and commitments that we already had. The Evocative Coaching Training Program came around at just the right moment. I was looking for answers, for new understandings and approaches, and the Training Program provided them. It really gave me a new framework for coaching and it helped me to move forward. It took my coaching to another level.

Bob: So when have you found coaching to be most helpful in the field?

Christina: There's no way to generalize that. In response to new things coming down from the state? From the district? When a teacher or an administrator is facing a challenge that they are not sure how to deal with? When we are looking for new ways of doing things? When we are facing any challenge, in our schools or in any context really, all those represent great opportunities for coaching.

Bob: And how do coach-training programs fit into the picture?

Christina: They make us more aware of what we are doing, and they help us to develop our skills. Many people think they can coach just because they are told to or just because they want to help someone. But coaching is more than helping. It is a specific way of helping. And it takes us beyond minor tweaks. It really facilitates significant, heartfelt, positive change.

Bob: Is there anything else you would like to share with our readers?

Christina: Just that we are a very, very large district with more than 18,000 employees about half of whom are certified teachers and support staff. In such a large district, Professional Development is an extremely important and ongoing process. Evocative Coaching has been a valuable part of that equation. It has given us a clear and effective framework from which to coach. I hope more school districts, both large and small, will have the same opportunity as we have had. The Training Program has really made a difference. It has really improved the commitment to and the quality of our work. It has enabled us to really leverage our talent and resources on behalf of our students.

Bob: In the age of accountability, that is just so important. Your comments have made that very clear.

Christina: Utilizing the resources we already have and developing our abilities is just so important. Until and unless we believe that the people we are working with, the teachers, have what it takes to find their own answers and to figure things out for themselves, we will always strike that over-and-above stance. We will always take the expert stance. When we become partners, however, things begin to change more rapidly. People find their voice and realize their potential.

I grew up in Taiwan, where teachers are more compliance oriented, more like taskmasters. Here, however, I have enjoyed the freedom and the encouragement to experiment and to make things right. I find Evocative Coaching, as well as other coaching models, to offer helpful and effective resources for getting that done. I'm really motivated by doing research. What's out there and what works best? The more we know, the better our decisions will be. The more we practice, the better our work will be. It really comes down to that.

Bob: Christina, I treasure your reflections; they have been very helpful and supportive. Thanks.