By Walt Frank
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BELLWOOD -- Bellwood-Antis High School students are thriving today in a learning environment that is quite different from when their parents attended school.

‘‘When I first came here [in 2003], there was a lot of straight lecture. Students were not energized and active learners. That couldn't go on," Superintendent Brian Toth said. ‘‘We weren't keeping pace with the changing education world around us."

Under Toth's leadership, Bellwood-Antis became one of 26 school districts selected to participate in the Pennsylvania High School Coaching Initiative, which is centered on instructional coaching and mentoring. It was developed to improve student achievement.

‘‘Teacher coaching teaches teachers how to improve instruction," Toth said.

Under the program, the district was required to select teachers who would be trained to serve as literacy and math coaches, then in turn ‘‘coach" the other teachers in the school.

At the encouragement of their colleagues, Lisa Hartsock agreed to serve as math coach and Diane Hubona as literacy coach.

‘‘It was hard for me to leave the classroom, but I saw what I could do to help in a different practice. I realized I could have more impact on how kids learn and succeed," said Hartsock, who taught math for 15 years. She now is the high school assistant principal.

The focus of the initiative is to improve literacy and student achievement. As a result, Bellwood-Antis teachers are using a different philosophy in their instruction.

‘‘Previously, it was totally teacher-centered. Teachers are now just the guide. It has gone from teacher-centered to student-centered 100 percent," Hubona said. ‘‘It is a more active environment, not the passivity of the traditional high school classroom."

Hartsock agreed, saying it is a more engaging approach for students.

"It is a way to take learning and make it real for the kids. It is more about the students and less about the teachers," she said. ‘‘We encourage them to read, write, listen and interact rather than just listen to a teacher."

District officials are seeing significant changes among teachers and students. Hartsock said teachers are sharing resources more, and students are conducting study and discussion groups.

She said another benefit is the increase in the math scores on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment.

‘‘The mantra is it is all about creating lessons that highly engage students. The teacher is a facilitator guiding the process. It is the neatest thing I have ever seen," said Hubona, who is in her 25th year of teaching.

By the end of the 2008-09 school year, all of the high school teachers will have completed the training, which is funded by grant money. Training also has begun in the middle and elementary schools.

The district hopes to obtain additional grant money to complete the training, Toth said.

Mirror Staff Writer Walt Frank is at 946-7467.

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