

How Coaches Can Maximize Student Learning

Heeding the roles and relationships of coaches enhances the likelihood that they will be able to influence school culture, professional learning, and, ultimately, student achievement.

By Jon Saphier and Lucy West

Schools throughout the nation are hiring “coaches” and deploying them in schools in a multitude of ways that may not improve instruction and that rarely affect student learning.

Regardless of the title given to the coach — instructional support specialist, mathematics or literacy resource teachers, curriculum specialists, etc. — this person performs many duties in the school, ranging from presenting demonstration lessons, distributing test prep and other materials, handling lunch and bus duty, assisting the principal, entering data from test scores and analyzing these scores, working with small groups of students who are failing, and buoying up the practice of ineffective teachers by teaching for them regularly or occasionally.

So, exactly what is the role of a coach? What, if any, of these activities will actually affect student learning and improve teaching practices?

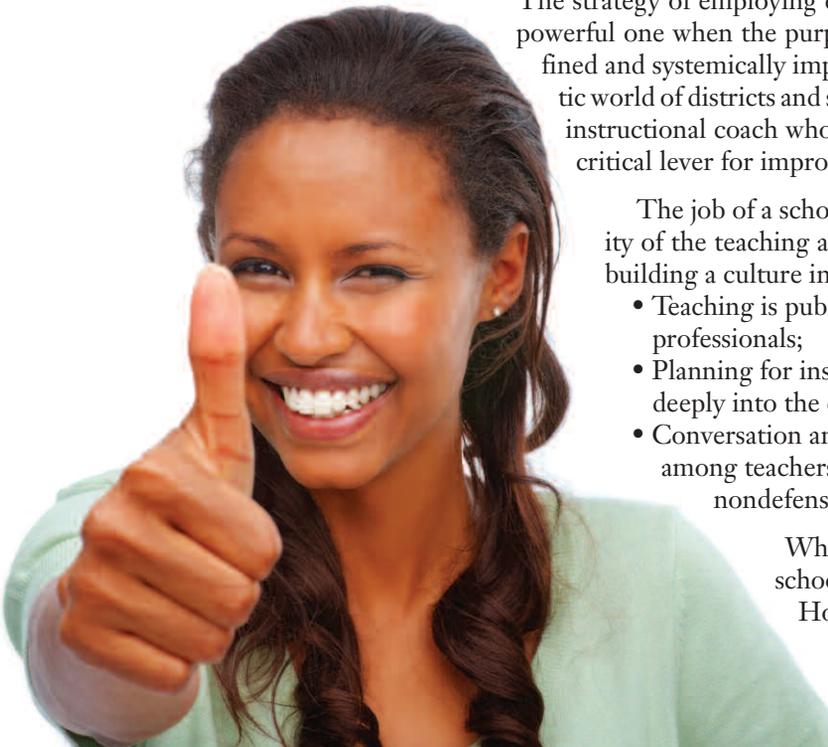
The strategy of employing coaches to upgrade teaching and learning can be a powerful one when the purpose and role of the coach have been carefully defined and systemically implemented. But this is a rare occurrence in the hectic world of districts and schools. We propose a definition for a school-based instructional coach who can be key to improving instruction, which is the critical lever for improving student learning.

The job of a school-based instructional coach is to raise the quality of the teaching and learning in every classroom in the school by building a culture in which:

- Teaching is public and itself the focus of study among professionals;
- Planning for instruction is thorough and collaborative and digs deeply into the content; and
- Conversation and questions about improving student results among teachers are constant, evidence-based, and nondefensive.

When building a dynamic learning culture is the focus, schools get better achievement for students (Hall and Hord 2006).

This outcome can't be accomplished by one-on-one coaching alone, though that is a part of it, and not by the coach as a solo agent. But the coach is in the pivotal position to build the norms above be-



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cause the coach holds the only position designed to have constant contact and classroom access to every teacher in the building *and* to have a primary focus on improving instruction to improve learning.

Although the principal's role as instructional leader also carries this mandate, the principal also wears other hats and is responsible for formally evaluating teacher performance. The evaluative role can sometimes short-circuit the learning aspect of observation and feedback. Therefore, the coach is the primary (and only) role in the present system designed specifically to improve instruction by working side by side with teachers on all aspects of the instructional core.

Building-based coaches and other teacher leaders working in skillful and negotiated relationship with principals are the fulcrum for building this culture. The culture, in turn, is the soil in which seeds are planted in order to improve teaching and learning for both adults and students.

DEFINING COACHING

Coaching is more than just a role with a job description that one person carries out in a school. Coaching is a strategic, systemic approach to improving student learning that has these purposes and practices:

- Coaches and teachers engage in public teaching in front of one another, with the expectation and practice of giving and receiving rigorous feedback aimed at improving student learning.
- Staff members regularly consult and ask each other for help.
- Staff meet in regular groups to discuss how to improve instruction of specific concepts and skills in their curriculum as evidenced in student learning. They do so with honesty and nondefensive self-examination, inquiring into their practices and preferences to study the effect they have on students.
- Questions related to practice permeate adult discourse, and they are authentic questions centering on the most tenacious and ubiquitous issues of teaching and learning. Thus the culture is characterized by inquiry and dialogue (for example, how do we improve student learning while focusing on improving test scores and implementing pacing calendars and other policies that seem out of alignment?).
- Staff members use daily and weekly formative data about student learning (as well as larger interim assessments) to do error analysis, design reteaching, and focus instruction on student needs.

The “coach” is not the only person working to make all this a reality, though the primary purpose of the coach's role is to focus on creating that reality. The whole role — its activities, the coach's schedule, the connections, and the working relationship with other adults (especially the principal) — are all aimed at cultivating these elements of adult culture and instructional practice.

BUILD FROM STRENGTH

The instructional experts/coaches should build from strength, starting with the strongest teachers in their assigned buildings and using their rooms as sites for building the culture of public teaching and joint inquiry into teaching practices. These lead teachers are also a tacit farm team for future coaches. They are the next tier of capacity builders in the system. If the coach focuses on teachers whose practice is close to where the district is heading and brings these teachers into collaboration, as well as deepens their capacity to articulate their pedagogical moves and strengthens their lesson designing habits, then this first round of lead teachers can be partnered with other faculty members, and the coaching strategy becomes one of “peer coaching.” The instructional coach can work with a new crop of teachers in year two, and the teacher leaders can continue their work and double its impact by sharing their practice with one other teacher. This is a capacity-building process that grows exponentially, requiring about three or four years to get every teacher fully engaged with new instructional practices. Three or four years may sound like an eternity, but in fact, most districts begin new programs every couple of years with little or no success from the previous programs. When coupled with systems thinking, coaching is a strategy that can lead to sustainable improvement across a school or district.

The coach needs a few teachers who can be allies to orchestrate these activities. When we start from strength, we find teachers who are open and willing to have others view and critique their teaching and walk the talk of learners. These pioneers will be demonstration teachers not necessarily of exemplary teaching, but they will be exemplars of nondefensive self-examination of their practice in relation to evidence of student learning. Once a few people begin to take a risk and find it valuable, then teachers who are hesitant about all of this “professional culture stuff” will be more likely to participate in a productive planning and debriefing cycle hosted in the room of a lead teacher.

Schools err when they focus coaching on the weakest teachers and ask coaches to “fix” these teachers' practice. Schools should not ignore teachers with

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weak skills, but focusing on the neediest teachers does not build systemic capacity. It also perpetuates the notion that coaches are for failing or new and unskilled teachers. (This is an odd notion that permeates education more than other fields. In most fields, top-level professionals hire coaches to help them refine their skills.) If a school makes working with the weakest people a top priority for the coach, then teachers will soon believe that a visit from the coach means a teacher is in trouble. “Oh, her job is to fix problem people.” Schools want to avoid having teachers thinking and saying, “Oh, I’m fine. Why don’t you get back to the people with *real* problems?”

INDIVIDUAL PLANNING CONFERENCES

Coaches should spend a good deal of their time in planning conferences with teachers as a priority over observation and feedback conferences. Especially during the early days of building a coaching relationship, planning conferences offer more potential for improving instruction. Many teaching problems begin when teachers don’t anticipate student confusions, can’t figure out how to scaffold needed prior knowledge, and don’t carefully think out experiences that would allow students to access new knowledge. In other words, many teaching problems begin with inadequate and unskilled planning (Saphier, Haley, and Gower 2008).

Collaborative planning sessions are more likely to ensure that lessons presented to students will center on important concepts related to the academic area. In these planning conferences, the coach encourages the teacher to take an analytical stance toward the written curriculum and empowers the teacher to actively engage with the curriculum — from teaching as *mechanically implementing* curriculum to teaching as *mindfully using curriculum* (West and Staub 2003: 5).

GROUP PLANNING MEETINGS

Teachers must have substantial time for collaborative planning at least every week. This means the school needs to provide common preparation periods of at least one hour for teachers in one content area or one grade. This time allows teachers to meet with the coach and dive into mindful planning of lessons that can be worked on across the grade. The planning needs to address issues mentioned above in the individual planning sessions and differences in beliefs and practices among teachers. The coach leads the planning and debating of lesson designs and instructional strategies by *groups* of teachers and weighs in when differences arise. These discussions should be guided by some tool or set of tools that

encourage people to stay focused on the important variables that must be considered to ensure robust lesson design.

In order for all of these activities to occur regularly and professionally, the coach must rely on and assist the principal and her designees in creating a schedule that provides the necessary talk times. The coach also needs a principal who gives the clear message that she values this work.

PUBLIC TEACHING

Coaches should start their work with the strongest teachers in the school, not the weakest. The coach organizes public teaching and critiques for the improvement of teaching and learning by identifying “lead teachers” for the content area. These lead teachers host collaboration classrooms — not “model” classrooms — in which they nondefensively demonstrate risk taking, public teaching, and self-examination of their own practice. These events can happen a couple of times a year in small groups, or the coach and lead teachers can include individual teachers as needed in a planning, teaching, reflection cycle throughout the year. Eventually, all classes should be open to adult visitation and reflection. Getting to this point depends on the culture of the school when the coaching strategy was implemented. It may take three to five years before all teachers are fully participating in all aspects of professional learning in this public way, but getting there is vital.

The practice of “public teaching” combined with common planning includes two of the threads of what is commonly referred to as lesson study. The coach organizes study lesson cycles for groups of teachers as soon as possible; sometimes, the coach teaches a co-created lesson (a good way to break the ice and gain credibility) with everyone watching. Then everyone examines evidence of student learning. Finally, together they decide what and how to reteach which students and perhaps which pedagogical practices they want to try in their own classes.

COACH AND THE PRINCIPAL

The principal and the coach together in each building and the relationship they have with one another are the main catalysts for improving teaching in the building. We make this claim because they are the people who have the most interaction directly with the teachers — all the teachers. The coach should have a partner relationship with the principal in which they:

- Observe classes together often so as to build a common image of good teaching and learning and share both their process and evolving vision with the whole staff.

- Observe classes together so the coach can teach the principal explicitly what good instruction looks and sounds like in the coach's specialty area if the principal is less familiar with that content.

- Make an initial plan for where to begin, with which teachers, and in what formats, giving thought to how the principal will introduce the coach to the staff and how teachers might be engaged in the work.

- Meet weekly to compare notes on individual teachers and on instructional improvement efforts in the building.

COACH AND THE DISTRICT

The coach should report to a district curriculum director, not the building principal, and be assigned to one large school or two to three small schools. Coaching is a strategy to improve schools across the district, not just to develop a few model classrooms or a lighthouse school. While lab classrooms or schools might be an initial strategy for deploying coaches, developing model classrooms should not be an end in itself. Systems often get stuck at this plateau of improvement. When district leaders understand that the long-term goal is coherence and sustainable improvement across the district, then they will engage coaches and principals in dialogue

about the big picture.

District leadership can provide time and resources for coaches to become a high-powered team with one another, sharing a common vision and mutual purpose. Simultaneously, the district leadership needs to engage principals in the same dialogue and then set the stage for coaches to interact with principals in new and powerful ways that blur the lines of authority and put the focus on teaching and learning.

What we've done in some larger districts is to form a team of all of the coaches from the different geographic zones, sometimes in just one content area and sometimes across content areas. The coaching team then works together to strengthen the skills of all coaches, to build coherent images of effective instruction, and to collaboratively determine what constitutes evidence of student learning. When a coaching team has consistent leadership, a coherent definition and role can evolve that benefits the whole system. Principals must be part of the conversation about the role of coaches and the most productive relationship between principals and coaches. This can be accomplished by having principals and coaches meet during regularly scheduled principal meetings to ensure that there are feedback loops that allow the

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emerging promising practices of coaches in one building to spread to other schools.

The job description, hiring criteria, and hiring process for the coach should emphasize the partnership described above and these values:

- Inquiry;
- Deep collaboration;
- Collective responsibility for student learning;
- Teacher as decision maker;
- Curriculum as a tool for good instruction, not as a prescription for instruction;
- Continual adult learning; and
- Adult norms of dialogue and debate at the same time as sharing and mutual support.

When coaches report to the district, the district can also specify what coaches cannot do. For example, principals often want assistance and are generally short staffed. When the role of the coach is evolving in a district, and when the coach reports to the principal, the principal has a great deal of latitude in how to employ the coach. In many instances, coaches can be found doing lunch or bus duty, working with only the most unskilled teachers, and doing administrative tasks, and they are often given virtually no time to plan with teachers and prepare for working with teachers. Often, principals are unclear how to best use a coach's services and end up using this precious and expensive resource in ways that don't yield much gain. Sometimes, principals need assistance as instructional leaders in determining what effective instruction and evidence of significant learning in a particular content area (for example, mathematics) might entail. Most principals will probably find it easier to seek that help from educators who don't report directly to them, another reason why coaches should report to the district.

Coach selection and deployment is a perfect opportunity for the district to encourage the coach and principal to partner in their quest to improve teaching and learning across a school by recommending that the coach include the principal in planning sessions, informal observations, discussions, and the like to create common images and differentiated professional learning plans for each teacher.

COACHES AND OTHER COACHES

Coaches need training and weekly time with coaches from other schools. In order to have the wherewithal to assist teachers and principals to improve instruction and learning, coaches need a great deal of expertise in a wide variety of things: content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, change theory, interpersonal skills, big-picture/long-term visioning and planning, etc. An individual is unlikely to have such a complete skill set at the onset of a coach-

ing initiative; therefore, the district will want to set up systems so coaches can learn from their coaching colleagues, the leadership team, and outside consultants. By tapping into each other's passions, expertise, questions, needs, frustrations, and artistry, coaches improve collective and individual capacity to impact student success. In order to do this, coaches must come to see each other as resources and must learn to reach out to one another.

When coaches immerse themselves in communities of practice, experience vulnerability as a positive and productive step on the journey toward developing competence in new skill sets, and even share their incompetence in front of their peers, they are contributing to the development of a high-powered supportive learning community that can, in turn, bring these gifts to the schools and districts where they work. Ironically, when we willingly admit what we don't know and allow others to support us through the learning process, we become sensitive to what it takes to push through resistance and to grow. When we face resistance in the field, we will then be more confident in how to help others push through it. Creating this kind of learning environment is difficult if you've never been a member of a learning team as an adult learner.

CONCLUSION

For a corps of coaches in a school district to significantly influence student achievement, the role of the coach must be construed as a change agent and culture builder for professional learning of all adults in the building. This role translates into very specific activities and careful sequencing of entry steps for the coach.

For the coach to operate successfully in that role, the coach and the principal must be in true partnership and focused on the learning environment for adults, with clear ideas of how each plays a part in building the practices of such a culture and how they support one another.

For the two operating principles above to be actualized, the highest levels of district leadership need to think systemically about their interactions with one another and about their supervision of principals.

The coach needs to focus on improved instruction and evidence of student learning of important ideas and rigorous content — the instructional core. Focusing just on pedagogy without content or just on content without pedagogy is insufficient. Focusing just on increasing test scores or implementing new materials is not only insufficient, but can actually undermine the long-term vision of increased and informed professional instructional capacity to improve student achievement. 

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