

ISSUE BRIEF

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PRINCIPAL AS INSTRUCTIONAL LEADER Designing a Coaching Program That Fits

There is broad consensus in the literature that effective school leaders focus on tasks related to improving classroom instruction in addition to the time they spend on the managerial aspects of their jobs.¹ And yet, there is a growing recognition among scholars and practitioners in the field that the demands placed on administrators to become *instructional leaders* in their schools may be unrealistic if they cannot effectively delegate some aspects of their roles to others.²

One way that leaders can address this dilemma is by engaging the services of classroom-level instructional coaches. This division of labor allows school leaders to focus on other core tasks associated with effective leadership—setting a vision, fostering a sense of urgency and high expectations, creating a collaborative culture focused on student needs, and engaging the community³—as well as the managerial aspects of their jobs that cannot be shifted elsewhere.

This is not to say that school leaders simply can hire a coaching staff and turn their attention to other matters. For an instructional coaching program to be effective, school leaders need to play an active role in selecting trained coaches, developing a targeted coaching strategy, and evaluating whether coaches are having

the desired impact on teaching and learning. This issue brief focuses primarily on the second of these tasks—the principal's role in developing a targeted coaching strategy. For more information about training, selecting, and evaluating instructional coaches, see the previous issue brief: *Instructional Coaching*.

Because instructional coaching models vary tremendously, school leaders need to identify the coaching approach or program that will best meet their instructional goals. Initially, this means recognizing the differences between these various approaches. While some coaches train teachers how to use a particular approach within a content area, such as literacy or mathematics, others work to improve general instructional practices, such as data assessment and classroom management, or to promote a more collaborative culture among the faculty. In some cases, coaching programs have multiple goals. Whatever the design, it is clear that instructional coaching is not a program that simply can be adopted and “stamped” on a school. A successful effort requires shaping the program to meet teachers' needs and to address meaningful goals for student learning. This issue brief walks through the major steps in the design of a coaching program, including making an initial needs

assessment; choosing a coaching approach; and supporting the coaching program with adequate time, clear responsibilities, and visible support.

Assessing Needs and Goals: Critical First Steps

Critical first steps in designing an effective instructional coaching program are to set student learning goals and to assess the gap between the goals and current student performance. These steps enable the school leader (or leadership team) to design an instructional coaching strategy that best addresses the gaps.

- **SET CLEAR, SPECIFIC GOALS.** Starting with objectives for improved student learning helps ensure that the instructional coaching program is not just a one-shot staff development program, but a program that ultimately imparts a new strategy or skill that will have a measurable impact on student learning. Goals likely will be tied to district, state, or federal accountability targets, such as adequate yearly progress, but may be more specific (e.g., increasing reading proficiency among third-grade English language learners). Ultimately, goals should be defined by specific improvements in student achievement, as measured by annual assessments or other standards-based evaluations of performance.⁴
- **ASSESS WHAT KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS TEACHERS NEED TO MEET THOSE GOALS.** The next step is for the leader or leadership team to assess what teachers need to know and be able to do to meet student learning needs.⁵ Engaging in a needs-assessment process helps school leaders build on existing strengths and focus on the most pressing needs.⁶ In this

context, administrators should analyze current classroom practices to determine why there are gaps between what students should know and their current performance. Do teachers have insufficient *content* knowledge, for example, or do they lack sufficient *pedagogical* knowledge to convey content successfully? How profound is their lack of knowledge? Which specific teachers have particular knowledge and skill gaps? Are teachers failing to implement their knowledge consistently? Are broader issues in the school preventing teachers from applying their knowledge? Ultimately, school leaders should determine what their teachers need to be able to accomplish, what topics the coaches should address, and what their approach should be.

The types of approaches that best fit different professional development needs are explored in more detail in the following sections.

Selecting a Coaching Strategy

It is clear from the research literature that coaches engage with teachers in a variety of ways and often use multiple strategies over time. They often work with individual teachers to help them improve their practice, modeling instructional strategies, observing teachers, coteaching, coplanning lessons and units, and providing feedback.⁷ Many coaches also work with groups of teachers (e.g., grade-level teams, content-area specialists) to model instructional approaches, encourage reflection, conduct study groups, present new instructional or curricular materials, and analyze student work.⁸

Although the research base is by no means robust, there is growing evidence that among these various approaches, certain coaching practices do have a positive influence on

teachers' knowledge and skills and even, in a few cases, on student achievement. There is also some evidence to suggest that certain coaching styles, or approaches, are more suited to particular contexts.

Characteristics of Effective Programs

While the ultimate goal of any instructional coaching strategy is to increase student learning, a coach's immediate goal is to improve teachers' instructional practice. The empirical evidence on instructional coaching is limited, but there are several studies indicating that one aspect of coaching, the degree to which coaches have direct interactions with teachers, is likely to lead to changes in teachers' instructional practice. The more removed coaches are from the actual work of teachers in classrooms, the less likely they are to have an impact on what it is teachers do there.⁹

There is very little research linking coaching directly to *student* learning (as opposed to teacher learning or behavior), although a few researchers have been able to document that coaching interventions lead to improved student learning—as measured by observation of student behaviors, such as on-task discussion and engagement,¹⁰ and increased complexity of oral language as measured by a behavior checklist.¹¹ The authors could not find any studies that sought to link coaching activities to student learning as measured by improved achievement scores on standardized assessments.

Fortunately, the design of coaching programs can be informed by the larger body of research on effective professional development, which suggests that certain activities do positively influence teacher and student learning, consistent with the findings described.¹² Broadly speaking, the research suggests that

an effective professional development program should have the following characteristics:

- Focused on subject-matter content.
- Aligned with other reform efforts.
- Focused on how students learn academic content.
- Ongoing, rather than short-term, with opportunities for feedback and reflection.¹³

This research on professional development is instructive with regard to designing and implementing an effective instructional coaching strategy. It reinforces the need to have coaches work directly with teachers over time, and it suggests that coaching activities focused on academic content have a stronger probability of impacting student learning—the overarching goal of all professional development activities. It also suggests that coaches are more effective when they are kept in the loop on other reform efforts so they can align their work with state and district priorities. This finding presents a scheduling challenge for administrators who wish to balance the need to have coaches attend meetings and be informed participants in overall reform efforts with the need to ensure that coaches have the time they need to work with teachers.

Approaches to Coaching

In the research literature and in practice, instructional coaching varies widely depending on the purpose of the coaching program and the style a coach adopts when working with teachers.¹⁴ The literature makes a distinction between coaching approaches that model *consulting* versus approaches that are more *confrontational*.¹⁵

- Coaches who act as *consultants* work at the behest of teachers to help them with

their own self-improvement efforts. Under this model, “Conferences are directed at strengthening the instructional competence of teachers, at professional growth, and at empowerment when the teacher expresses an interest in further instructional improvement.”¹⁶

- *Confronting* coaches, on the other hand, typically respond to performance problems by initiating conferences with teachers, sometimes at the request of a senior administrator. Coaches who take on this role often are more prescriptive in their approach. They are more likely to offer concrete advice and modeling about how to improve instruction, and they frequently are charged with the task of training teachers to implement a particular instructional program or approach.¹⁷

Several researchers maintain that the consulting approach is ultimately more effective than confronting.¹⁸ Indeed, there is some evidence in the research literature that coaches are more likely to have a lasting impact if they adopt a consultant approach and build capacity by enabling and encouraging teachers to be reflective practitioners who focus on ongoing improvement. According to the *consultant model*, the way to change teacher practice is to first change teachers’ thoughts and beliefs about their practice. By asking teachers to reflect on their decisions, and by jointly examining data about teachers’ current practice, for example, coaches can encourage teachers to examine areas that are not effective and determine for themselves how they can make adjustments and changes.¹⁹

Although this is the prevalent viewpoint in the literature, it is not the only perspective. Several researchers argue that the *confronting approach* is more likely to have an immediate impact on student learning. Proponents of the

confrontational approach maintain that changes in teacher practice are more likely to take place after teachers experience positive student outcomes, which come only after directed changes in their practice.²⁰ In other words, coaches who introduce teaching strategies that quickly lead to improved outcomes are able to get teachers to change their beliefs about teaching and learning. There is some support for this point of view in the literature on organizational improvement across industries where experience suggests that early and tangible wins often serve as a catalyst for staff to make additional positive changes.²¹

This latter perspective—changes in practice that get quick results lead to changes in belief—might be more attractive for schools facing sanctions under high-stakes accountability systems where there is pressure for fast and measurable improvement. School leaders wrestling with how to respond effectively and swiftly to low performance might decide to implement a confrontational coaching approach that relies on a series of small wins (i.e., providing instructional strategies that have a proven record of effectiveness) rather than invest in a coaching model that relies too heavily on first changing teachers’ beliefs.

It is important to note that these two perspectives are not mutually exclusive. There are coaches who approach their work at many points along the continuum between consulting and confronting and between initially changing beliefs and initially changing practice—matching their strategies to the needs of the specific teachers they are coaching. Teachers who eagerly seek to improve their practice and embrace the coaching process may be the best candidates for the consulting model; recalcitrant teachers may benefit less from it. Likewise, different approaches might be warranted for newer teachers who do not have the experience

to define instructional problems and may therefore need more upfront guidance. These are all important considerations for instructional leaders as they design a coaching program that best meets their teachers' strengths and their students' needs.

Implementing a Coaching Program

A consistent finding in the literature on instructional coaching is the importance of environmental factors in shaping implementation and effectiveness. This is not easy work—case studies that examine the coaching role in depth document the myriad responsibilities, the time pressure, the interpersonal challenges, and the frustration with the slow pace of change that many, if not all, coaches experience. The importance of support from school and district leaders under these demanding circumstances cannot be emphasized enough. In and of itself, this support might not be enough to make a coaching effort successful, but without it many otherwise promising efforts have been known to falter.²² The literature suggests that school and district leaders need to take the following steps.

Clarify Coaches' Roles

In addition to clarifying school goals, administrators also should set clear and consistent guidelines about coaches' responsibilities and the limits of their responsibilities. Problems that are noted in the research literature include coaches who are responsible for multiple school sites, have burdensome administrative responsibilities (e.g., ordering materials, test administration), and take on student tutoring responsibilities.²³ Administrators should ask the following questions and use the responses to help define the coaches' roles: How much initiative will coaches have in selecting their own strategies and approaches? What other

responsibilities will they be expected to balance? Do we expect them to keep their conversations and observations confidential?

Structure Time Strategically

In their survey of 1,100 randomly selected teachers in the Los Angeles Unified School District, Ai and Rivera found that a high percentage of respondents did not think there was enough time scheduled for participating in coaching activities. This finding is reflected in numerous studies throughout the literature.²⁴ Classroom observation time is not as difficult to arrange, but finding time outside of the classroom for professional discussion and reflection appears to be a common problem, particularly in elementary schools.²⁵ Because of the varied nature of coaching tasks, there is little agreement in the literature about how much time is optimal, although the inadequacy of time frequently is cited and suggests that many administrators fail to set aside regular and sufficient time for coaching tasks. Administrators have responded to this dilemma in several ways, including implementing late arrival or early release days for students a few times a month.

Provide Clear, Visible Support

Another prevalent theme in the literature is teacher resistance to coaching efforts.²⁶ In some cases this seems to be related to the mandated nature of the coaching program; in other situations it is related to teachers' unease at being observed and judged. Administrators who are transparent about the purposes of the coaching program, who provide clear support for the initiative, and who indicate through their words and actions that the initiative represents a long-term commitment of human and financial resources are more likely to reassure staff members who are committed to improvement. This type of visible and transparent support also might encourage staff members truly averse to change to leave.



Conclusion

The research evidence suggests that strong instructional leaders greatly can impact teaching and learning. There also is increasing recognition that instructional coaches can play an effective role in improving classroom-level practices. A natural way for school leaders to take on the role of instructional leader is to serve as a “chief” coach for teachers by designing and supporting strong classroom-level instructional coaching. As explored in the previous issue brief, it is important to carefully select capable coaches and provide them with appropriate training. But no element of an instructional coaching program is more important than its design and fit with the particular needs of each school, its faculty, and its students. Engaging in the processes outlined previously—determining goals and needs, selecting a coaching approach that meets these needs, and sustaining the program with time and support—will help ensure that a coaching program improves classroom instruction and, ultimately, student learning. It also builds a principal’s instructional leadership capacity by helping the principal understand the needs of students and teachers and the best strategies to meet these needs.

Endnotes

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This is one of two in a series of issue briefs to be written for The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement. These commentaries are meant to help readers think beyond simple compliance with federal law or basic implementation of programs: What unacknowledged challenges must educators and leaders confront to help schools operate more effectively and to sustain improvement over the long run? In what ways does the conventional wisdom about teaching, learning, and school improvement run counter to current research and get in the way of making good decisions? What are the emerging next-generation issues that educators will face next year and five years from now? Readers can visit www.centerforsri.org to obtain other papers in this series and to access additional information on school reform and improvement.



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