

Instructional COACHING

Seven factors for realizing better classroom teaching through support, feedback and intensive, individualized professional learning

BY JIM KNIGHT

The number of school districts using instructional coaches is growing at a staggering rate. Coaching is becoming popular, in part, because many educational leaders recognize the old form of professional development, built around in-service sessions for teachers, simply doesn't affect student achievement.

By offering support, feedback, and intensive, individualized professional learning, coaching promises to be a better way to improve instruction in schools. Indeed, preliminary research suggests that effective coaching programs make a difference.

For the past decade, researchers at the Kansas University Center for Research on Learning have been implementing, refining and evaluating instructional coaching programs. In the past year alone, our staff has provided professional development and consultation to programs in 14 states across the country. We've learned a few lessons while developing, studying and observing effective coaching programs. We believe superintendents and other educational leaders who consider these success factors will be better able to use valuable resources to realize the promise of instructional coaching.

No Quick Fix

Facing intense pressure to improve student achievement, it is tempting to try anything that promises a quick solution. However, the trouble with quick fixes is they often make things worse in the long run.

One common fix is what we refer to as the "attempt, attack, abandon cycle." During this vicious pattern, a new practice or program is introduced into a school and teachers make a half-hearted attempt to implement it. Then, before it has been implemented effectively, and for a sufficient length of time, various individuals in the school or district begin to attack the practice or program and, not surprisingly, many of the teachers implementing it begin to lose their will to stick with the program. Eventually, even though it never had a chance to be implemented well, leaders in the district reject the program as unsuccessful and abandon it, only to propose another approach that is soon pulled into the same vicious cycle. In this manner, schools stay on an unmerry-go-round of attempt, attack, abandon, without ever seeing any meaningful, sustained change in instruction taking place.

Instructional coaching represents one way to end this vicious cycle by providing sufficient support for real change to occur. Coaching is a non-evaluative,



learning relationship between a professional developer and a teacher, both of whom share the expressed goal of learning together, thereby improving instruction and student achievement.

Coaching requires a trusting relationship and sufficient time to provide the individualized professional learning that is most relevant to a teacher's needs. Coaches often employ collaborative conversations (sometimes referred to as conferences), model lessons, observations, and mutual problem solving to assist teachers in implementing and mastering new teaching practices.

Coaching can take many forms. We have found seven factors that can increase the likelihood that coaching will be a real fix for a school:

► *Sufficient time to work with teachers.*

To move a school forward, coaches must spend the bulk of their time working with teachers on instruction. This seems obvious, but the most frequent concern raised by the more than 300 instructional coaches we worked with in 2005 was that they are asked to complete so many non-instructional tasks they had little time left to work with teachers. Because coaches' job descriptions are often vague or non-existent and because their schedules are more flexible than the schedules of others, they often are asked to do many clerical or non-instructional tasks. Paying coaches to copy and bind standards documents or shop for math lab furniture or serve as a substitute teacher is a poor

way to spend money and perhaps an even poorer way to improve teaching practices in schools.

Some instructional coaches and principals in the 16,500-student Cecil County, Md., Public Schools have found a way to ensure their instructional coaches use their time productively. In Cecil County, where there is an instructional coach in each of the 17 elementary schools, the coaches and administrators draw up a pie chart that depicts exactly how much time they agree the coaches should spend on various tasks. Then, each week the coaches report to their principals how the time was spent. If necessary, this allows the coach and principal to adjust the time allocations so they can focus their efforts on improving instruction.

► *Proven research-based interventions.*

If instructional coaches are going to make a difference in the way teachers teach, they need to have scientifically proven practices to share. Hiring coaches but not ensuring they have proven practices is a bit like trying to paint a beautiful painting without any art supplies. Instructional coaches need to have a repertoire of tools to help them assist teachers in addressing their most pressing concerns.

Instructional coaches working with the Center for Research on Learning use interventions that address what we refer to as the "Big Four" areas of behavior, content knowledge, instruction and formative assessment. The coaches develop a deep understanding of scientifically proven practices they can share with teachers to help them improve in any or all of the four areas.

If an instructional coach and teacher agree to address content knowledge, the coach collaborates with teachers to develop critical questions, course and unit content maps and concept diagrams using scientifically proven "content enhancement routines" developed by Keith Lenz, Jan Bulgren and other researchers at the Kansas University Center for Research on Learning.

Similarly, if an instructional coach and teacher need to work on classroom management tactics, the coach can use the classroom expectations planning sheets from Randy Sprick's "CHAMPs: A proactive and positive approach to



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classroom management” as a tool for collaboratively developing a classroom management plan with the teacher. Among the tools in CHAMPs is a framework coaches can use to identify and explain what they expect from students in five important areas of behavior, encapsulated in the CHAMPs acronym. The areas of behavior are as follows: (a) Conversation, what kind of conversation is acceptable; (b) Help, how should students ask for help; (c) Activity, what should the student be doing; (d) Movement, what kind of movement, if any, is permitted, and (e) Participation, what does appropriate participation look like.

► *Professional development for instructional coaches.*

Coaches need to understand the interventions they are sharing, and they need to understand how to productively employ the coaching process. Without their own professional development, instructional coaches run the risk of being ineffective, wasting time and money or even misinforming teachers. Therefore, coaches need to participate

in their own professional development to ensure they know how to coach and what to share when they coach teachers.

Professional development for coaches should address at least two subjects.

First, coaches should engage in various professional learning activities designed to improve their coaching practices. Specifically, instructional coaches affiliated with our center learn how to employ powerful, proven practices to (a) enroll teachers in coaching; (b) identify appropriate interventions for teachers to learn; (c) model and gather data in the classroom; and (d) engage in dialogue about classroom and other data. Additionally, the center’s instructional coaches improve their professional skills in areas such as communication, relationship building, change management and leadership.

Second, professional development for coaches should deepen their knowledge about the teaching practices they are sharing with teachers. Obviously, if coaches have a superficial knowledge of

the information they share with teachers, they will not know what to emphasize when they discuss, model or observe during professional learning with teachers. Indeed, coaches who do not deeply understand what they are sharing with teachers could misinform teachers and actually make things worse, not better, for students.

The Passport to Success statewide coaching program sponsored by the Maryland State Department of Education Division of Special Education emphasizes professional learning for coaches. Prior to starting their new role, the coaches receive two weeks of intensive professional development focusing on the theory, practice, teaching strategies and routines they will share with the teachers. Then, the Passport coaches participate in a week-long summer institute where they deepen their knowledge of the teaching practices they will share with teachers.

During the school year, the instructional coaches meet monthly with other coaches in a coaching professional learning community, and they also participate in formal professional learning sessions twice a semester. Additionally, Passport coaches read research articles and complete many learning tasks that enable them ultimately to become certified professional developers for the content enhancement routines and learning strategies they share with teachers.

► *Protecting the coaching relationship.*

Many, perhaps most, teachers see their profession as an integral part of their self-identity. Consequently, if coaches and others are careless with their comments or suggestions about teachers’ practices in the classroom, they run the risk of offending teachers, damaging relationships, or at the very least not being heard. Because teaching is such a personal activity, coaches need to win teachers’ trust. Trust is an essential component of an open coaching relationship.

Coaches who learn our center’s approach to instructional coaching define their relationship with teachers as a partnership. This partnership approach is based on the assumptions that (a) coaches and teachers are equal partners, (b) teachers should have a choice about what and how they learn, (c) teachers

should reflect and apply learning to their real-life practice as they are learning, (d) professional development should enable authentic dialogue and (e) coaches should respect and enable the voices of teachers.

Sue Woodruff, a leader of professional developers from Grand Rapids, Mich., considers the partnership principles to be a central part of her professional practice. "The principles really help me think through what should happen when I work with teachers," she says. "On those occasions when I don't feel I've been successful, I go back to the principles and I usually discover that I failed because I violated one of the principles."

To make it easier for coaches to work as partners with teachers, educational leaders must protect the coaching relationship. If leaders ask coaches to hold the dual role of administrator and coach, they put their coaches in a difficult situation. Administrators, by definition, are not peers. Usually people are more guarded when they talk with their bosses than when they talk with their peers. Coaches will find it easier to have open conversations about teaching practices if their collaborating teachers do not view them as bosses and, therefore, do not have to worry about how their comments might affect the way they will be evaluated.

► *Ensuring principals and coaches work together*

The instructional coach can be and should be the right-hand person of the principal when it comes to instructional leadership in schools, but the principal must remain the instructional leader. No matter how much a coach knows, and no matter how effective a coach is, the principal's voice is ultimately the voice most important to teachers. For that reason, coaches must understand fully what their principals' vision is for school improvement, and principals need to understand fully the interventions that



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their coach has to offer teachers.

One way to ensure principals get the most out of their instructional coaches is to provide them with sufficient training. Principals who do not understand the importance of protecting the coaching relationship may act in ways that make it difficult for a coach to be successful. Also, a principal who is unaware of the tools that an instructional coach can offer will be unable to suggest them to teachers who might benefit from learning them.

District administrators in Pflugerville, Texas, a district with three high schools, four middle and 15 elementary schools, address this issue by providing coaching professional development for administrators. In Pflugerville, middle and elementary principals, along with the directors of special education, language arts, mathematics and technology directors, attended sessions with their lead teachers and coaches to ensure that both administrators and coaches developed a shared understanding of each coach's goals, responsibilities and methods.

Another way to ensure principals are on the same page as their coaches has been adopted by principals working with instructional coaches from the center's Pathways to Success GEARUP project in Topeka, Kan. In Topeka, coaches and

principals from six middle schools and three high schools meet one-to-one each week for approximately 45 minutes.

The meetings usually follow the same format. First, the coach asks the principal to discuss her or his most pressing concerns; the issues discussed are usually a blend of long-term and short-term issues that most interest the principal. Second, the coach and principal solve problems together. Third, the coach reports on what she or he has done since the previous week's meeting. Fourth, the coach and principal discuss teaching practices they would like to share with each other.

In this way, the coach and principal fully understand all the tools they have at their command to help students.

► *Hiring the right instructional coaches.*

All the factors described here will not yield success if the wrong people are hired to be coaches. Indeed, the most critical factor related to the success or failure of a coaching program may be the skills and attributes of the instructional coach.

First off, instructional coaches must be excellent teachers, particularly because they will likely provide model lessons in other teachers' classrooms. They also need to be flexible since their job requires them to change their plans almost daily to meet the changing needs of teachers.

Also, coaches should be highly skilled at building relationships. In our experience, whether a teacher adopts a new teaching practice has as much to do with the instructional coach's communication skills as with whatever intervention the coach has to share. Simply put, if teachers like a coach, they usually will try out what the coach suggests. If they don't like the coach, they'll even resist helpful teaching practices.

Jim Collins' study of great organizations in *Good to Great* offers additional insight into the desirable attributes of an

effective coach. Great leaders, Collins writes, “are ambitious first and foremost for the cause, the movement, the mission, the work — not themselves — and they have the will to do whatever it takes to ... make good on that ambition.”

The attributes Collins identifies in great leaders are also found in the best instructional coaches. They need to be ambitious for change in their schools and willing to do, as Collins emphasizes, “whatever it takes” to improve teaching practices. If a coach is too passive about change, chances are that little will happen in the school. At the same time, if a coach is too self-centered or aggressive there is a good chance the coach will push teachers away.

Effective coaches embody what Collins describes as a “compelling combination of personal humility and professional will.” They are affirmative, humble and deeply respectful of teachers, but they are unwilling to rest unless they achieve significant improvements in teaching and learning in their schools.

Evaluating Coaches

Evaluation is a major mechanism for continuous improvement of any coaching program. Evaluating instructional

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coaches can offer unique challenges because no one in a district, including the principal, may ever have been a coach before and there may be no guidelines for evaluating coaches.

One way to address this challenge is to involve coaches in the process of creating guidelines, standards and tools to be used for their evaluation. Instructional coaches and the leaders of the Pathways to Success project in Topeka, Kan., have done just this. Specifically, project leaders and coaches have collaborated to spell

out in detail the knowledge coaches need to have about the various scientifically proven teaching practices they are sharing with teachers. Additionally, project leaders and instructional coaches together have described the skills necessary to build relationships and effectively execute the components of the coaching process.

Involving coaches in the process of writing their evaluation guidelines accomplishes at least three goals. First, it enables school districts to develop a rubric for evaluating coaches that is especially designed for coaches. Second, it increases coaches’ buy-in to the guidelines and the process of being evaluated since they created them. Third, the dialogue coaches have while creating the guidelines is an excellent form of professional development.

Coaching Fixes

School district leaders can increase the likelihood that their instructional coaching program will be successful if they ensure their coaches have sufficient time to work on instruction with teachers and their coaches know how to coach and what to share with teachers. Additionally, leaders can make it easier for coaches to succeed by protecting the coaching relationship and by preparing coaches and principals to work together effectively. Finally, the effectiveness and continual improvement of any coaching program hinges on hiring the right people and evaluating them professionally.

Instructional coaching holds much potential for improving the way teachers teach and the way students learn, but that potential will only be realized if leaders plan their coaching program with care. Coaching is not a quick fix, but it can be a real fix — a powerful way to help teachers and students be more successful. When planned carefully and the success factors are addressed, instructional coaching can begin to deliver on the promise of making a real difference in schools. ■

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Additional Resources

Two research studies conducted at the Kansas University Center for Research on Learning suggest why coaching is becoming popular.

In one study of implementation rates after summer workshops, we found that within six weeks of the start of school in Unified School District 501 in Topeka, Kan., 85 percent of teachers who worked with instructional coaches already were implementing at least one teaching practice they had learned in the summer. In contrast, earlier research suggested traditional in-service programs with no follow-up is likely to get no better than a 10 percent implementation rate.

In a second study, we surveyed teachers in Topeka who have watched a coach provide a model lesson to better understand how coaches help teachers. Teachers strongly agreed that watching an instructional coach made it easier for them to implement a given teaching practice, increased their fidelity to the instructional model, increased their confidence and enabled them to learn

other teaching techniques. From the teachers’ perspective, watching a coach in the classroom was an important aid for professional learning.

More details on these two studies can be obtained at www.instructionalcoach.org.

Here are a few other resources that I recommend on instructional coaching:

“A Primer on Instructional Coaches” by Jim Knight, *Principal Leadership*, High School edition, May 2005, www.nassp.org

“Instructional Coaches Make Progress Through Partnership” by Jim Knight, *Journal of Staff Development*, www.nsdc.org/library/publications/jsd/index.cfm

“Standards for Middle and High School Literacy Coaches,” available from the International Reading Association, www.reading.org/resources/issues/reports/coaching.html

“Standards for Staff Development,” revised edition, available from the National Staff Development Council, www.nsdc.org

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