School districts across the country have created a laser-like focus on improving student achievement, launching untold numbers and types of initiatives to address needs derived from their student achievement data. They have redirected resources and offered myriad professional learning opportunities for teachers to improve their instructional practices and to differentiate their instruction to meet the needs of a wide range of learners in their classrooms. All of these efforts and approaches are focused on positively impacting student achievement.

While some teachers return to their classrooms after professional development and make earnest attempts to use the information they learned, they frequently have little or no follow-up at their schools, or the follow-up that occurs is provided from the central office level. More often than not, teachers have a low level
of implementation of current initiatives or are unclear about what a high level of implementation looks like. As a result, even specially funded programs and new initiatives such as Title 1, STEM, and other intervention programs in many of the nation’s schools and districts are failing to impact student achievement to a high degree.

Other schools and districts have learned that professional learning is a powerful intervention for increasing teaching effectiveness and student learning if it incorporates classroom- and school-focused support in the form of coaching, that gives educators on-site and sometimes online support to integrate new curricula or pedagogies into their practice effectively and efficiently. Coaches, as members of the school leadership team, align teachers’ professional learning with school goals and facilitate the professional learning that occurs at the school.

Coaching influences teacher practice, and some studies have found that coaching also affects student achievement and school culture.

A coach personalizes teachers’ learning by understanding each teacher’s current state of practice and the conditions in which that teacher practices, and by having deep knowledge of the practices being implemented. With expertise in content, pedagogy, and coaching, a coach is able to support teachers in making desired changes in their knowledge, skills, practices, and dispositions and is able to contribute to creating a culture of collaboration and peer support.

Jane Creasy and Fred Paterson identify the key benefits of coaching as “improving a whole school or department, personalizing professional learning for staff, promoting self-directed professional learning, creating a learning-centered mode of professional dialogue, and building capacity for leadership” (2005, p. 20). Mary Jean Taylor (2008) notes that principals see additional benefits of coaching: “They reported seeing more conversations about instruction, more use of student data for instructional decisions, greater implementation of ideas and strategies presented in professional development, new teachers getting up to speed faster, and veteran teachers ‘modernizing’ their instructional strategies. They felt their decision making improved as a result of the coaches’ instructional expertise and depth of knowledge about teaching throughout the school. They felt better able to actually implement their school improvement strategies, more informed and connected to the district pool of professional development expertise, and more effective in guiding their staff” (p. 4).

Coaching alters many aspects of schools. Most notably, coaching influences teacher practice, and some studies have found that coaching also affects student achievement and school culture. (See sidebar pp. 10-12.)

Most who have participated in effective coaching programs — whether they are teachers, coaches, or principals — immediately are able to identify coaching’s benefits. Yet research over the last two decades is disparate and insufficient.

Some studies suggest that coaching makes little difference in increasing student achievement and improving teacher practice (Garet et al., 2008, 2010, 2011). Other studies provide a different view. What is evident across the various studies is that the practice of coaching varies substantially from situation to situation. The variations affect the work of coaches and the results of coaching. Whether coaching works, at this stage of the research, seems to depend on how coaching is implemented, the longevity of coaching practices, the support provided by principals, the culture of the school, and the preparation of coaches (Borman, Feger &
Kawakami, 2006). Done well, coaching works to change teacher practice and student achievement. Done inconsistently and inadequately, coaching seems to have little or no effect. The conditions in which coaching occurs matter as much as the design of the intervention.

Nations that outperform the United States on international assessments invest heavily in professional learning and build time within the workday for ongoing, sustained teacher development and collaboration.

The United States is far behind in providing public school teachers with opportunities to participate in extended learning opportunities and productive collaborative communities. Effective professional development:

- Is intensive, ongoing, and connected to practice;
- Focuses on the teaching and learning of specific academic content;
- Is connected to other school initiatives; and
- Builds strong working relationships among teachers.

Coaching supports teachers in examining their practice through intensive, ongoing professional learning. Coaching must be embedded into teachers’ daily lives, however, and considered part of their everyday work, not something extra or voluntary. This will require significant changes in how the school day is shaped so teachers can engage in learning, even while teaching students, and have adequate time to collaborate.

Coaching can produce results

Coaching as a school improvement intervention has tremendous potential but requires significant support to deliver on its promise. Although not all coaching programs are effective, most coaches influence teaching, student learning, and school culture. Simply identifying a willing candidate and calling him or her coach, however, won’t lead to success. 

Success comes from developing the coach’s expertise, providing ongoing support and supervision, and rigorously monitoring and evaluating coaches’ work and effects. When coaching programs are less effective, many will question the benefits of coaching.

Quality coaching is an expensive intervention. As school boards and school system leaders make difficult budgetary decisions, they certainly will question the investment in coaching even while human capital constitutes the greatest percentage of school system budgets — often 80% or more. However, school systems that have in place clearly articulated coaching programs are rarely disappointed in the results. Coaches’ work contributes to better teaching, improved student learning, and a culture of continuous improvement.

Creating a sound infrastructure, practices, parameters, and relationships significantly increases the likelihood that coaching will work. To realize the full potential of coaching as a professional learning model that will produce results for teachers and students, district and school leaders must invest in creating the environment, structures, and conditions for coaches and coaching to succeed.

Coaches are vital to school and instructional improvement. They are the intermediaries between administrators who expect high-level student results and the teachers who must bring about those results.

Coaching can result in increased student achievement, changed teacher practice, and improved school culture if school and district leaders, coaches, and teachers attend to the conditions for success.

Coaching matters.
Coaching research and evaluations
Research and evaluations point out what is known about effective coaching.

Coaching affects teacher practice.
• A 1984 study of 80 schools with peer coaching found that “(d)escription, modeling, practice, and feedback resulted in a 16% to 19% transfer of skill to classroom use. … However, when coaching was added to the staff development, approximately 95% of the teachers implemented the new skills in their classrooms” (Bush, 1984, p. 197).
• William T. Truesdale (2003) found that after 15 weeks, teachers who did not receive coaching stopped using the new learning, while those who received coaching increased the transfer of the training to their classrooms.
• In a review (2010) of the instructional coaching program in Jeffco (Jefferson County, Colo.) Public Schools, Cindy Harrison, Heather Clifton, and Chris Bryan found that the majority of teachers and principals who participated in the study reported that instructional coaching affected teacher practice.
• Jim Knight (2007) found a 70% increase in instructional practices modeled by coaches. Similar results occur in other studies Knight conducted (2004, 2006).
• Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers (1995) reported that the likelihood of transferring new learning from professional development into practice increases nearly 80% when coaching is added to an explanation of theory, demonstration, and low-risk practice.
• Showers (1982, 1984) states that teachers who receive coaching are more likely to incorporate new teaching practices into their classrooms than teachers who are not coached. In addition, students of teachers who were coached showed significantly higher gains in achievement test scores than did students whose teachers had not been coached.

Coaching can have an effect on student achievement.
• A 2006 study by The Learning Network reported steady growth in student achievement over five years in 4th-grade student reading scores when teacher leaders worked as literacy coaches in their schools: from 29% achieving proficiency in 1999 to 86% proficient on state standardized exams in 2004. (However, the research design makes it difficult to determine whether the teacher leader coaches were responsible for improved student performance.)
• A study of math and science coaching in South Carolina schools showed substantial increases in student achievement on state assessments (South Carolina’s Coalition for Math & Science, 2008).
• A randomized control study examined the effects of a coaching program for secondary teachers on improving teacher-student interactions to address student motivation, effort, and achievement. The study found that students of teachers who received coaching “had a significant net gain relative to the control group … (that) equates to an average increase in student achievement from the 50th to the 59th percentile” (Allen et al., 2011, p. 1035).
• Gina Biancarosa, Anthony Bryk, and Emily Dexter’s 2010 study of instructional coaching found that coaching contributed to a 32% increase in student learning gains after the third year. The study tracked student achievement from one year before coaching began through the third year of implementation.

• Underperforming students in Texas increased their achievement significantly when their teachers experienced coaching (Redell, 2004).

• South Carolina students in a statewide math and science initiative showed a 27% increase in the number scoring proficient and advanced in a single school year in one elementary school where teachers received coaching and no other changes were made (Dempsey, 2007).

Coaching’s effect may take time.

• A series of studies of reading and math intervention programs using professional development that included traditional workshops, coaching, and collaborative teacher work found no statistically significant effects of the intervention on student achievement or changes in teacher practice. The studies examined the effects of the professional development intervention over two years (Garet et al., 2011).

• A comprehensive study of the effects of Florida’s middle school literacy program, which included coaching, reports that while peers and principals view coaches as having a positive effect on their schools, they had little effect on student achievement (Marsh et al., 2008). The program studied provided important information on what matters in coaching, however. For example, the length of time a school had a coach had a statistically significant effect on student achievement. This finding suggests that coaching’s effects are greater over time. District and state leaders have used this study to strengthen the features of their coaching programs.

• Patricia Campbell and Nathaniel Malkus concluded at the end of a three-year study that students who were in schools with an elementary mathematics coach had significantly higher scores on their state’s mathematics achievement tests (grades 3 through 5) than did students in the control schools without coaches (2011). “This effect only emerged as knowledgeable specialists gained experience and as schools’ instructional and administrative staffs learned and worked together,” they write. “Simply allocating funds and then filling the position of an elementary mathematics specialist in a school will not yield increased student achievement. The specialists in this study influenced the beliefs about mathematics teaching and learning held by the teachers with whom they were highly engaged” (Campbell & Malkus, 2010, pp. 25-26).

The way coaching occurs matters.

• A study in Los Angeles found that direct coach-teacher interactions were more likely to lead to changes in teacher practice than small group interactions. “Coaching that was ongoing and directly related to classroom instruction,” the research team reports, “provided greater evidence of potential and actual improvement than did irregular interactions or activities directed at larger group meetings” (Rivera, Burley, & Sass, 2004, p. 5).
A study of instructional coaching in high schools from 2005-10 concluded that the frequency of principal and coach meetings was related to student achievement. The district demonstrating the most significant growth in student achievement had almost daily interaction between the coach and principal (Sumner, 2011, p. 8).

Coaching improved teacher practice in the Washoe County (Nev.) School District, an evaluation found. A triangulation study verified a relationship among: the frequency of coaching, the program’s duration, and coach experience and student achievement. In addition, the evaluation concluded, “The district plays an important role in shaping and supporting ICoach program effectiveness by: 1) articulating clear expectations related to student achievement and helping schools and coaches focus coaching on achieving those expectations, and 2) providing ongoing support for the selection, professional development, and evaluation of coaching” (Taylor, 2008, p. 4).

Another study (Biancarosa, Bryk, Atteberry, & Hough, 2010) found a difference in schools based on the number of coaching sessions teachers received. “In the ‘high-coaching’ school, although value-added scores started out below average, they increased during the study,” the authors write. “In the ‘low-coaching’ school, school-level value-added scores were above average but subsequently declined. … The ‘high-coaching’ school also saw … teaching (become) more equitably effective for students, while in the ‘low-coaching’ school, variation among teachers increased so that teaching effectiveness became more inequitably distributed” (p. 3).

Allison Atteberry and Anthony Bryk (2011) report that school factors influenced teacher engagement in coaching. They found that teachers who acknowledged a strong sense of responsibility toward fellow teachers and were more committed to their school participated in more coaching regardless of the school’s size. Principal support of professional development also correlated with more coaching.

Liz Browne evaluated a subject-specific peer coaching program in the United Kingdom and concluded: “The peer coaching approach has been shown to encourage professional dialogue and practitioner confidence. This in turn has impacted on learner knowledge and skills leading to innovative and exciting practice” (2006, p. 42).

An evaluation of the Pennsylvania High School Coaching Initiative showed that coaching influences teacher practice and student achievement. Coaches build a sense of community and a culture of improvement that produce schoolwide improvement and student achievement (Brown et al., 2007). The evaluators note that coaching works through the phases of teacher growth and change before it affects student achievement.

In a study comparing six schools in the Fairfax (Va.) County Public Schools district with high implementation of coaching and five schools rated as low implementers, high-implementing schools demonstrated significantly higher pass rates on Virginia’s math benchmarks than the low-implementing schools, even though the schools had no significant differences in baseline rates. These findings suggest that instructional coaches had a positive effect on school culture and academics, and that their level of impact varied with the way coaches were used (Fairfax County Public Schools, 2008).