



PRINCIPALS BOOST COACHING'S IMPACT

SCHOOL LEADERS' SUPPORT IS CRITICAL TO COLLABORATION

By Les Foltos

For the past 12 years, I have worked with peer coaches in more than 40 countries, and I have seen schools where peer coaches have collaborated with colleagues to improve teaching and learning in classrooms across the school. In other schools, coaches have played a critical role in creating a culture of collaboration that helps build the school's collective capacity to improve teaching and learning.

But in many schools, coaching is yet another small-scale, short-lived educational experiment. Explaining the differences in success is key to understanding how to implement coaching successfully.

Successful coaches know their effectiveness in collaborating with peers to improve teaching and learning hinges on the support of principals who control the budget and other key resources. Many coaches also understand that the leadership they provide plays an important role in creating the support needed to sustain coaching.

Their accomplishments, and their abilities to communicate them to their principal and colleagues, are essential to support and expand coaching in a school. Successful coaching is a result of an interdependent relationship between the principal and coaches.

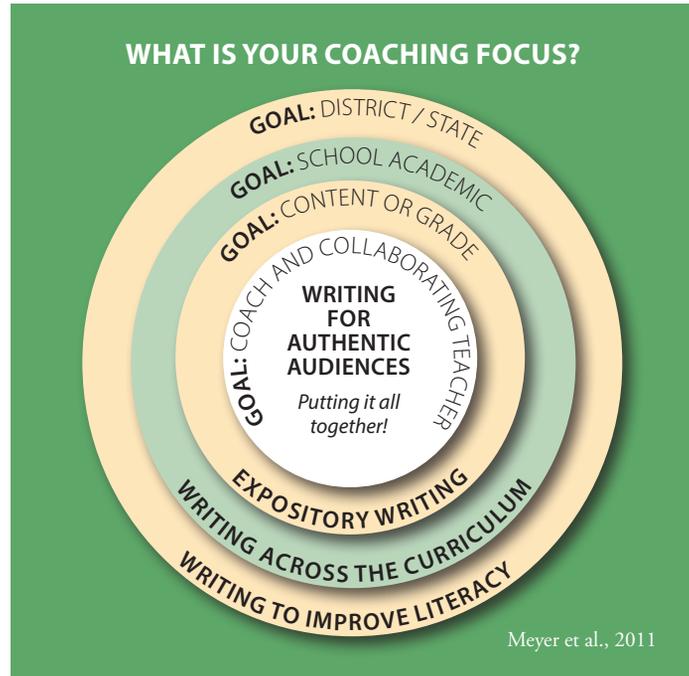
IS COACHING RIGHT FOR YOUR SCHOOL?

Coaching is a powerful strategy for schools that embrace these beliefs:

- Educators act on their understanding that ongoing collaboration among teachers is essential to improve teaching and learning.
- Collaboration aimed at improving learning is led by teacher leaders who are supported by the school's leadership. Improvement comes when it is both bottom-up and top-down (Fullan, 2001, 2011).
- Educators believe they are encouraged to innovate and take risks to improve teaching and learning.

CREATING SCHOOL SUPPORT

One proven way to assure school support is for the coach and principal to work together to shape a plan to implement coaching in the school. Experienced peer coaches



understand this collaborative process ensures the principal has a strong buy-in to coaching and the school provides the resources necessary to support it. Successful coaching plans address a few critical issues.

Align coaching with school or district goals.

No school has time for one more new thing. Initiatives — like coaching — need to align with existing school goals. The graphic above offers one example of how coaches align their work.

Start with willing partners.

Successful coaches start with the willing, or as Jerker Porat, a Swedish peer coach, puts it, “teachers who don’t know but want to know” (J. Porat, personal conversation, May 24, 2012). Coaches need assurance that their learning partners are open to collaboration to improve teaching and learning. This willingness to collaborate and improve is essential.

If peer coaches are full-time teachers, they typically choose to collaborate initially with only one or two teachers. This doesn’t limit the long-term impact of coaching. Effective coaches encourage their learning partners to share

what they are learning with and from their coach with other teachers. Success with one teacher can have a ripple effect that spreads coaching to include more teachers, even those who might have been resistant to the idea of coaching initially.

Define roles and responsibilities.

Coaches, their learning partners, and their principal must define the key roles the coach will play. These typically include co-planning learning activities, modeling or team teaching, and observing peers and reflecting afterward. Knight (2011) observed that, without agreement on roles, coaches are so often off task that some coaches “spend less than 25% of their time, often less than 10% ... on coaching” (p. 99).

It is equally important for collaborating teachers to define their roles so that they understand their responsibilities. Both partners must understand and act on their individual and collective responsibilities for coaching to be effective.

Measure success.

Many schools measure success based on coaching’s impact on changing teacher practices. They want to know if peer coaches are helping teachers offer students learning activities that will help them master Common Core, state, or 21st-century standards. Other schools gather student work samples to see how their learning is changing as the coach and teacher collaborate over time or consider student achievement data.

Allocate resources — especially time.

The resources required for successful coaching vary widely from school to school, but time is the one commodity that is always in short supply. Time may be scarce, but creative principals and coaches follow strategies like those outlined by Killian and Hirsh (2013) because time is essential to coaching success.

Establish communication.

If a school wants to sustain and expand coaching, it is critical for the coach and principal to share their coaching plans with the school staff so they understand how coaching will be implemented, assessed, and aligned with the school’s educational goals. This step is critical to win support from the staff.

Another element in effective communication is routine, ongoing communication among the coach, collaborating teachers, and the principal. This communication can’t play a role in teacher evaluation, but it is critical for the principal to understand the impact of coaching and how it is achieving school goals.

Engage in ongoing professional learning.

Coaches need ongoing professional learning to sharpen their craft and fuel their continued growth. That learning might come from routine collaboration among a school’s coaches. Some districts provide ongoing professional learning for their coaches. Coaches are also likely to benefit from joining online

professional learning communities that focus on coaching.

Without this kind of careful planning, coaches might find they have the same feelings as coaches at a recent gathering who reported they felt “overworked,” that their work was “unfocused,” they were “stretched too thin,” and at times felt “ineffective.” Many coaches who have struggled to get their school leader’s support may be just one step from failure.

By contrast, coaches who collaborate closely with their principal in shaping and reshaping an implementation plan for coaching typically find they have the support needed to sustain and expand coaching. Many coaches report that sustained collaboration with peers produced significant improvements the learning activities for students when measured by indicators like critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration, and real-world connections.

Build foundations of collective capacity.

One outgrowth of this process of rethinking and revising coaching plans is that coaches and principals in many innovative schools have aligned the coaches’ work with efforts to build their school’s collective capacity to improve.

Coaches in Apache Junction, Arizona, worked with teachers in their schools to create a concrete norm that describes 21st-century teaching and learning. Coaches at the International School in Bellevue, Washington, and in the Everett School District are following that same process. In these schools, coaches and their learning partners use the norm when they co-plan learning activities or reflect after observations. There are clear rewards from creating and using clearly defined goals for teaching and learning.

Defining the norm creates a common language that fuels collaboration. Kathy Stilwell, secondary math instructional facilitator and coach from Everett, says, “The process of agreeing on what is vital to include in the norm was powerful. Instead of finding that teachers had very different meanings for the same term, they were developing a common language that makes for more efficient and effective collaboration to improve learning.”

The norm also provides a common goal for innovation among the school’s educators. Tony Byrd, associate superintendent for curriculum and assessment in Everett Schools, says, “We cannot transform learning without clearly defining what we mean by effective learning. It’s a step that is often overlooked in the rush to get things done. Having a norm is an essential first step toward transforming learning.”

Having a common goal is critical to reach broader school goals for Jennifer Rose, principal of the International School in the Bellevue School District. “Historically, teachers in secondary schools worked in silos,” Rose said. “They are very content-focused. Having agreement on the attributes of 21st-century teaching and learning allows the whole staff work toward common goals like our school’s goal of helping students develop critical thinking skills.”

As teachers and coaches apply the norm as they co-plan learning activities and reflect after observing each other, they expand their capacity to improve. Georgia Lindquist, literacy and humanities specialist and coach in Everett, says that by choosing one attribute from their norm that they want to incorporate into a learning activity, both coach and learning partner “have a starting point and a navigation system that leads to deeper thinking as they puzzle together how to reach their common goal.”

Tina Jada, math teacher and coach at Cactus Canyon Junior High School in Apache Junction, Arizona, uses her school's norm for 21st-century learning “to assess what's going well, and as a check system to see ways to improve.” With time and experience, Jada says, the norm becomes a tool for self-reflection that teachers use to assess and improve their own work.

Coaches at many schools have taught their peers a variety of communication and collaboration skills, such as paraphrasing, probing questions, or the use of protocols to structure safe discussions focused on student learning. Developing these skills fosters more effective collaboration and helps develop a school's collective capacity to improve teaching and learning. Lindquist helps teacher teams learn and use collaborative skills because “they allow people to truly hear one another and deepen understanding. Even adopting a single norm like presuming positive intentions can change the way a group interacts and works together.”

As head of the math department, Jada used her coaching skills to remake the department into a professional learning community. She realized her team “all worked really hard, but weren't always working toward the same goal.” To get them moving in the same direction, the professional learning community meets weekly to look at student data and develop strategies to assure they reach every student.

During these discussions, she uses active listening and paraphrasing to ensure her teammates know everyone's voice is heard and encourages her peers to do the same. She works to build relationships by celebrating when things go well and models risk taking by sharing when things she tried didn't succeed.

In the beginning, Jada says, “teachers thought working in a team meant more time and effort —just one more thing to add to their plate. Now, they understand the value of collaboration: better ideas, better products, and less work in the long run.” Another indicator of success Jada notes is her peers' “willingness to ask for help when things aren't going right.”

COLLABORATION IN ACTION

A growing number of schools have adopted a collaborative culture where teachers assume a collective responsibility for the success of all students and routinely collaborate to assure the success of each teacher and each student. Coaching is part of the DNA that supports this culture and is a powerful tool that drives systemic improvement across the school. What follows is an example of coaching in a culture of collaboration.

When Valerie Karaitiana became principal at Dallas Pri-

mary School, in Dallas, Australia, several years ago, the school had some of the lowest test scores in the state. Dallas Primary is a high-poverty school where few of the students speak English at home. She and her leadership team decided that one solution to improve learning was to emphasize collaboration.

Today, when you walk into the school's classrooms, it is clear that collaboration is part of daily life for students and teachers. There are constant collaborative conversations going on between students, between students and educators, and among educators. When you talk to the school's leaders, they will tell you that the school's six teaching and learning coaches have played a central role in building the school's capacity to improve teaching and learning and the school's test scores, which are now near the midpoint for schools across the state.

Their success led the state to ask the school to combine with another nearby school, with Karaitiana and her team providing leadership for Dallas Brooks Community Primary School.

A closer look at the school reveals a culture that drives improvement in student achievement and coaching success. That culture rests on four principles:

- Students' needs will continue to change.
- We are all learners and will be for life.
- Everyone is likely to need support to help every student reach his or her goals.
- Everyone is a leader. We all have different skills sets and can use those to help everyone succeed. It's not about you or me; it's about us.

Karaitiana and assistant principals Lynne Gunning and Amanda Henning knew that if teacher isolation was the enemy and collaboration needed to be part of the daily professional practice of all teachers, they had to set the expectation that all teachers would collaborate with a coach, budget for coach training, and provide time for teachers to collaborate regularly with one of the school's coaches. They wove coaching into the culture of collaboration by assigning coaches a role in each of the school's data professional learning teams.

The coaches promote professional dialogue at weekly data professional learning team meetings, where teachers analyze student data for the cohort of students they teach (e.g. the grade 3 students). These teams also define the goals, strategies, and resources they need to support each group, and may ask the coach to serve as a resource by modeling the strategy the team wants to adopt.

Coaches then join teaching teams in weekly planning sessions to provide support while teachers develop curriculum plans that align with the work of the data professional learning teams. Once the learning activities are created, coaches observe the teachers to give feedback within a coaching conversation and participate in the evaluation of the unit of work. At this point, the cycle begins again.

In some schools, peer coaches have been so successful at en-

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to improved achievement and results is grounded in the use of data, open dialogue, courageous conversations, and interpersonal accountability.

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Barbara Deane-Williams (barb.deane-williams@greececsd.org) is superintendent of schools, Shaun Nelms (shaun.nelms@greececsd.org) is deputy superintendent of schools, and Sheila B. Robinson (sheila.robinson@greececsd.org) is a teacher on special assignment for Greece Central School District in New York. ■

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encouraging collaboration that I have been asked if coaching can transform school culture. Dallas Brooks' experience answers the question. Teachers tell visitors that coaching has helped them improve their practice and student learning. But the coaches quickly point out that their success rested on the vision, guidance, and support of the principal and assistant principals (Foltos, 2013).

BUILDING BLOCKS OF SUPPORT

Dallas Brooks offers one model of a culture of collaboration. The culture in collaborative schools is often shaped by new roles for the school's principal as lead learner or lead coach. In some schools, teachers are encouraged to have fun.

Many schools, such as Silverton Primary in Noble Park, Australia, have added another building block to the foundation of collaboration. Recognizing that teachers may feel uneasy about innovation and the mistakes that often come with it, principal Tony Bryant encourages teachers to take risks, try new things, and even fail. The only thing they can't do is move backward to traditional instruction.

When new practices don't work as expected, teachers at Silverton are encouraged to learn from failures and use that learning to continue to move toward innovative practices.

Today, the baseline for effective coaching is a school with a principal and coaches who have a clear plan that aligns the work of the coach and learning partners to the school's educational goals and provides ongoing support. But the bar is being raised.

The new model for schools to work toward is one where

school leaders encourage coaches to serve as catalysts for a collaborative culture and create the collective capacity essential to assure success for all teachers and students.

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Les Foltos (lfoltos@peer-ed.com) is founder and director of Peer-Ed, which helps teacher leaders develop the skills they need to coach colleagues. This article is adapted from his book, *Peer Coaching: Unlocking the Power of Collaboration* (Corwin Press, 2013). ■