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13 TEACHERS TEACHING TEACHERS™

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF TEACHER LEADERS

9 roles of the school-based coach

COMPLEX JOB IS A MIX OF TEACHER, LEADER, CHANGE AGENT, FACILITATOR

BY JOELLEN KILLION AND CYNTHIA HARRISON

In response to the new expectations for public education, some district and school administrators realize that students are not likely to perform at higher levels until teachers begin performing at higher levels. These

educators know they cannot wait for institutions of higher education and teacher preparation programs to change. Professional development is the only practical tool at their disposal to increase the instructional effectiveness of current classroom teachers. They also know, however, that traditional professional development is not up to this significant challenge. Most of it is sporadic and of low quality. Traditional professional development usually occurs away from the school site, separate from classroom contexts and challenges in which teachers are expected to apply what they learned, and often without the necessary support to facilitate transfer of learning.

An increasing number of school systems have carved a new professional role to address the weakness of professional development and to improve teacher and student learning. School systems and states call it by many different names and describe its purposes and functions differently. Some of the titles for this position are coach, literacy specialist, math coach,



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Role of the Learning Facilitator

Wearing this hat, the school-based coach designs professional learning.

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Our goal: All teachers in all schools will experience high-quality professional learning as part of their daily work.

instructional specialist, mentor, master teacher, or lead teacher. Whatever the name of this role, the job is complex. People in it are part teacher, part leader, part change agent, and part facilitator. Regardless of their title or job description, school-based coaches have at least two things in common. First, their mission is to assist teachers in learning and applying the new knowledge and skills necessary to improve the academic performance of all students. Second, instructional coaches spend a significant portion of their working day in direct contact with teachers, in their schools and classrooms.

These educators are the new pioneers in public education (Mizell, 2004). Yet they will not be successful unless they receive specialized professional development that builds their capability to serve in their new roles.

Emerging research indicates that school-based coaches contribute to the improvement of teaching and learning in schools. Studies about coaching in the Chicago, Boston, and Sacramento Public Schools in literacy, in South Carolina in math and science, and in numerous other districts demonstrate improved student performance when coaches work directly with teachers in their classrooms. School districts large and small are employing coaches to provide school-based professional development to teachers. Coaches are deployed throughout Florida; Montgomery County, Md.; Philadelphia; New York City; Springfield, Mo.; and many other districts throughout the country. School-based coaches are master teachers who have received specialized training to work with adult learners, design and facilitate professional learning, provide confidential classroom-based support, and assist the administrative team in reaching data-driven student achievement goals.

School-based coaches have complex, multifaceted roles. This is one challenge related to preparing coaches for their roles. In some schools, coaches serve primarily as classroom supporters, teachers who work side by side with other teachers to refine instruction. In other schools, coaches facilitate teacher learning by providing training and organizing other forms of professional learning. Still in other schools, coaches work with data and help teachers analyze

data about student learning and plan interventions for students. These are merely a few of the roles coaches fill.

This article explores the various dimensions of coaches' work. What is surprising about the role of coaches is that the specific job expectations differ dramatically from school to school based on the specific job description and performance expectations. Yet, among the differences, there are similarities.

We've identified nine roles of school-based coaches. These roles are at right.

The roles differ in terms of the knowledge and skills coaches employ in each role and the challenges each role presents. Yet, while the roles are distinct, in real life, coaches typically fill multiple roles simultaneously. For example, a coach who meets with the science department to analyze student achievement data may be a data coach, school leader, learning facilitator, and resource provider at the same time.

Considering the distinction among the roles of coaches is important for four reasons:

1. One is in defining the job expectations for coaches. Often coaches are given a direction to support teachers. Yet how coaches provide support may be unclear if not defined. The distinction among the roles helps district personnel and principals clarify expectations for coaches.

2. For those responsible for preparing coaches for their new roles, the distinction among the roles frames the knowledge and skills that become the content of professional development for novice coaches. Coaches might use the descriptions of the various roles to consider how best to serve teachers.

3. The roles will give them specific language to describe the types of services they may offer their teacher colleagues.

4. In addition, the roles provide a way to measure the effectiveness of coaches and hold them accountable for their work. Coaches may keep logs that document what roles they fill

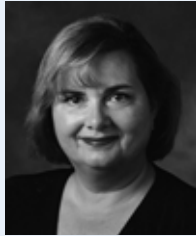
9 roles of the school-based coach

- Catalyst for change
- Classroom supporter
- Curriculum specialist
- Data coach
- Instructional specialist
- Learning facilitator
- Mentor
- Resource provider
- School leader

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Coaches often fill multiple roles simultaneously.

9 roles of the school-based coach

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when providing services to individuals or teams of teachers. This allows coaches to reflect on their work and assess the balance of roles and the effectiveness of each role.

It is essential to keep in mind that coaches often fill multiple roles simultaneously. Depending on their job descriptions and their

agreements with principals, district supervisors, and teachers whom they serve, coaches may fill some or all of the roles in a typical day. The complexity and challenge of determining what roles to fill, and when and where to fill them, are the most difficult aspects of coaches' work.

We will explore one of these roles in each issue of this newsletter. We begin on p. 3 with the role of the Learning Facilitator. ♦

Role: Learning facilitator

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assessing needs of teachers, designing learning and learning materials, differentiating for diverse learners, presenting skills, following up with learners, meeting management skills, and communicating effectively.

Challenges

Coaches face several challenges in this role. One challenge is ensuring that learning opportunities align with both learners' needs and the school's goals. Another challenge is resorting to whole group, one-size-fits-all training because it

is easier to organize than other designs for professional learning. While training is efficient and a relatively easy way to deliver information to the whole staff, training may be the least effective if the goal is change in practice. The coach knows that the power of shared learning is a factor that influences change in teacher practice. Another challenge is differentiating learning for teachers who may be at different points in their careers or who may have different levels of understanding or need to know. When coaches work with smaller groups of teachers, this problem is often mitigated. ♦