

# THE LEARNING System

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF DISTRICT LEADERS ENSURING SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

## ALL FIRED UP

*Team effort fuels growth  
in school-based coaching*

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

**S**erendipity has been Lea Arnau's best friend as she has tried to encourage school-based coaching in Gwinnett County Public Schools.

"Everything fell into place at the same time. The system wasn't clamoring for it, but it was ready for it," said Arnau, director of professional learning for the suburban Atlanta, Ga., school district.

Arnau has long been an advocate for coaching. She has promoted the value of school-based staff development and encouraged her district to adopt the NSDC goal — *All teachers in all schools will experience high-quality professional learning as part of their daily work.*

"I believe coaching makes a difference. Coaches are school improvement specialists who

can focus on that work from the moment they walk in that door until they leave the building at the end of the day," she said.

But not even an educator as talented and committed as Arnau can do the work alone in a district the size of Gwinnett — 152,000 students, 106 schools, 10,000 staff, including about 1,700 new teachers a year and dozens and dozens of school-based coaches.

Believing that coaching would make a difference and convincing Gwinnett principals to invest in coaching has been Arnau's greatest challenge.



Gwinnett has "philosophically committed itself to coaching," Arnau said, but the district also prides itself on its devotion to site-based management. The district provides no direct support for school-based coaches. Principals

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**When professional learning occurs “in all schools,” teachers have more control, their learning is more relevant to their classroom dilemmas, they are less isolated in their struggles to address these problems, and the outcomes are more readily apparent.**

## ‘All schools’ requires a shift in thinking and in practice

Some of the folk tales about perverse professional development practices relate to venue. Central office summons educators to a staff development session in a large auditorium or gymnasium. The public address system is inadequate, the acoustics terrible. There may be a one-size-fits-all speaker. No one knows if participants are listening. Worse, someone in charge assumed this was an effective way for educators to learn.

Though these practices are beginning to fade, they are one reason for NSDC’s goal: *All teachers in all schools will experience high-quality professional learning as part of their daily work.* The context in which learning occurs is an important variable, for educators as well as students. Educators reap huge benefits when their learning occurs where they will practice and apply what they learn. For most, that is the school where they teach or lead.

NSDC’s goal emphasizes “in all schools” because for professional development to produce maximum results, school systems must shift from district-based to school-based learning. Some school officials resist this approach because they can only conceive of staff development as school systems have traditionally “delivered” it. Typically, that model has three components: (1) central office identifies and organizes professional development it believes educators need, (2) external consultants “present,” and (3) educators from multiple schools participate as a largely passive audience. This may be a convenient way to disseminate information, but it’s unlikely to produce deep learning by teachers and administrators, or cause them to improve their practice.

Others argue that the traditional model is cost-effective. To the contrary, a model that fails to produce results that significantly benefit

educators or students is wasteful because it consumes resources that districts could spend on more effective professional learning.

High-quality professional learning “in all schools” offers advantages beyond improved practice. There is greater accountability when teachers collaborate to learn with and from each other every day. Teachers are more engaged with their colleagues, working to solve real problems of concern, thereby providing no incentive for teachers to simply “tune out” the professional development experience.

Teachers’ morale may also improve when systems expect and facilitate educators to work together to seek solutions to vexing issues of student performance. Teachers’ awareness of the links between their practice and student learning may also increase as they reflect on how their professional development has or has not impacted student achievement. In short, when professional learning occurs “in all schools,” teachers have more control, their learning is more relevant to their classroom dilemmas, they are less isolated in their struggles to address these problems, and the outcomes are more readily apparent.

NSDC’s focus on professional learning “in all schools” includes a value dimension as well. It cannot be optional. No school can be left out. This puts all schools on an equal footing, making their educators responsible for whatever is necessary to ensure that all teachers learn, practice, refine, and apply the knowledge and skills that enable all students to perform at the proficient level.

Shifting to school-based professional learning that impacts student performance will be challenging for many systems. But system leaders can ease the way if they begin now to move from *providing* staff development to *ensuring* that high-quality professional learning is a daily experience in all schools.



Pat Roy is co-author of *Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards Into Practice: Innovation Configurations* (NSDC, 2003)

## Everyone has a role in improving instruction

**W**e all have stories of a low-achieving school that was turned around by the heroic efforts of the principal and staff. We applaud their success and admire their incredible efforts. Yet, a study by the Learning First Alliance challenges us to not be lured into complacency by these random “islands of excellence” (Togneri & Anderson, 2003, p. 1). This study examined the role of district staff in developing all of their schools into sites where high levels of learning took place on a continuous basis.

One of the lessons learned was that “Everyone has a role to play in improving instruction” (p. 49). They found that no single group within the system has the sole responsibility to lead instructional reform. Leadership was shared with different groups specializing in areas where they could be most effective. While principals and teacher leaders worked directly with school staff, district office supported principals to become instructional leaders, built and financed networks of teacher leaders, and facilitated structures that encouraged collaboration (p. 50).

In concert with the Learning First Alliance findings, NSDC’s innovation configurations for its standards recommend that central office staff **develop teachers to serve as instructional leaders**. This task can be accomplished by **developing teachers to chair districtwide committees that make decisions about curriculum, instruction, resources, and professional development**. When teachers are authentic leaders of committees that make critical systemwide decisions, teachers develop their leadership skills and model teacher participation

in decision making.

Central office staff also need to **create guidelines that support these new leadership development practices**. These guidelines might include identifying ways to share financial responsibility with schools concerning teacher leaders, providing teachers with job-embedded professional development about leadership skills, and evaluating principals based on their ability to build teacher leadership capacity.

Central office staff can also encourage

schools to **develop teachers to take on formal leadership positions at the grade level or within the content area**.

Traditionally, these roles have focused on management rather than instructional leadership. Central office should help define and develop the capacity of teacher leaders to provide an instructional focus

### Leadership:

Staff development that improves the learning of all students requires skillful school and district leaders who guide continuous instructional improvement.

within the school.

Finally, central office should **support and develop the capacity of teachers to serve as mentors, master teachers, and instructional coaches**. These roles have been viewed as an important bridge between administration and staff which must be done skillfully in order to have the desired impact on student learning. Just creating the system is not enough.

Central office staff are in a strategic position to ensure that teachers play a strong role in developing instructional excellence.

### REFERENCE

Togneri, W. & Anderson, S. (2003). *Beyond islands of excellence: What districts can do to improve instruction and achievement in all schools*. Washington, DC: Learning First Alliance. [www.learningfirst.org](http://www.learningfirst.org)

Read more about NSDC’s standards at [www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm](http://www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm).

## SELF-ASSESSMENT OF COACHING PROGRAM

One of the primary roles of the district in any coaching program is to ensure that the coach's work is evaluated.

Evaluation is necessary both for the individual coach and for the coaching program.

One of the tools that could be used in a district's evaluation is a survey of staff who worked with coaches.

**Please complete the following survey. Your honest responses are important. The surveys are anonymous and will be compiled by the school secretary. Please turn in your completed survey to the secretary by \_\_\_\_\_ (date).**

1. In what ways has the coach helped you refine your teaching practice?

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2. What new skills and knowledge has the coach helped you with this year?

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3. What professional development goals have you been able to accomplish as a result of your work with the coach?

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4. What barriers or obstacles interfered with your work with the coach?

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5. What strategies or approaches have you used in your teaching as a result of working with the coach?

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6. What strategies or approaches recommended by the coach have you *not* used?

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To learn more about school-based coaching each month, consider adding *Teachers Teaching Teachers (T3)*, NSDC's monthly e-newsletter, to your membership package.

Details about all of NSDC's membership options are available at [www.nsd.org/connect/membership.cfm](http://www.nsd.org/connect/membership.cfm).

7. What worked well with the coaching program this year?

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8. What revisions do you recommend for next year?

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9. What services did you receive from the coach this year?

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10. What services did you want that you did *not* receive from the coach this year?

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**Comments:**

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**Please rate the coaching program support you received (1 = low; 2 = basic; 3 = high)**

	1	2	3
<b>Help with problem solving</b>			
<b>Building trust</b>			
<b>Support based on my needs and desired outcomes</b>			
<b>Availability of coach</b>			

**Source:** *Taking the lead: New roles for teachers and school-based coaches*, by Joellen Killion and Cindy Harrison. NSDC, 2006. Available through [store.nsd.org](http://store.nsd.org).

## Team effort fuels interest in coaches

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receive a number of points (FTEs) according to the number and needs of their students. In the absence of a clear mandate from the district or the state to invest in coaches, Gwinnett principals balance many competing desires as they decide how to allocate those points among their staff.

“Principals make their own decisions about how many and what kind of coaches they’re going to have. There is no pattern here. It varies building to building,” Arnau said.

The story of coaching in Gwinnett County provides lessons about how states, funders, and professional associations can work together to confront shared obstacles and achieve a common goal.

### COACHING ALLIES

Arnau has had several allies who, knowingly or unknowingly, conspired with her to boost the number of coaches in Gwinnett schools.

The first ally was the National Staff Development Council which applied for and received funding from the Wachovia Teachers and Teaching Initiative. Wachovia’s Leadership Performance Coaching Grant was intended to enhance teacher recruitment, development, support, and retention with the ultimate goal of increasing student achievement. In its application for the grant, NSDC said it would train coaches in five states that had strong alliances between the state education agency and the state NSDC affiliate. Georgia was one of those states.

During the 2004-05 school year, 18 coaches from Georgia school districts attended three two-day training sessions taught by Joellen Killion, NSDC’s director of special projects.

An evaluation of the NSDC/Wachovia coaching program revealed deep impact in Georgia. “This has rocketed the idea, development, and implementation of a coaches’ academy into being in the state of Georgia,” said one participant. “It is the spark that will create a massive fire (in a fabulous sense!),” said another.

But Arnau and others in Georgia knew the

few Wachovia-trained coaches could not, by themselves, stimulate a movement to coaching. They would have to create another mechanism in the state to ensure that the momentum created by NSDC/Wachovia was expanded throughout Georgia.

Arnau’s second ally was the Georgia Department of Education. At the state level, active proponents of professional learning and school-based coaching were working on several fronts to create a context for coaching and structures that would enable coaching, both managed by the state and by the districts.

One of the state’s secret weapons in the effort to spread the practice of coaching was its Master Teacher legislation. In early 2005, the Georgia legislature established the Georgia Master Teacher Certification and Academic Coach Program to recognize public school teachers with three years’ experience who consistently demonstrate excellence in the classroom that is linked to gains in student achievement. The first group of 199 master teachers was announced in September 2006. Those teachers are now eligible to become Academic Coaches, a state-level coaching intervention for low-performing schools in Georgia.

If coaching would help improve the quality of teaching and if districts believed that the quality of teaching would improve student learning, perhaps it made sense to believe that investing in coaches would do both. As a matter of pride, both schools and districts wanted to boast about the number of Master Teachers on their staffs. The state had suddenly created an external prod to boost interest in coaching.

Arnau’s third ally in the spread of coaching has been the Georgia Staff Development Council. She has been president of GSDC for two years.

A year after the Wachovia training ended, the state education agency and the NSDC affiliate organized the Academic and Instructional Coaching Academy as a way to expand services to coaches throughout the state. The Academy

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See the December/January 2007 issue of *The Learning Principal* to read about the commitment that one Gwinnett County elementary school principal has made to school-based coaching.

See the December/January 2007 issue of *Teachers Teaching Teachers (T3)* for a profile of a pair of Gwinnett County math coaches.



## Team effort fuels interest in coaches

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was offered at no charge to interested educators. In the first year, the state trained 700 coaches, including 200 from Gwinnett. The five days of training were spread throughout the school year and included many assignments that coaches or aspiring coaches would complete in their schools, such as observing teachers, collecting data, or doing demonstration lessons.

The state education agency encouraged principals to accompany coaches to the coach training. “In the metro area, that very seldom happened,” Arnau said.

Gwinnett County built on the work of the statewide academy by creating its own local coaches’ academy. The first year of the local academy attracted another 200 coaches and potential coaches. “I’m encouraging principals to send grade-level chairs and department chairs to our coaches training because it’s all about school-based staff development. That’s one reason we have such large numbers,” Arnau said.

Having a larger number of teachers in a building who are familiar with and supportive of coaching is part of Arnau’s strategy for spreading the practice throughout the district. “We’re relying on the coaches (to teach their principals). When it comes down to the daily work, the principals aren’t always sure exactly what a coach does. But they trust in the system enough to give them the rein they need to do the work,” Arnau said.

The coaching concept in Gwinnett has proven popular enough that Arnau is now teaching an advanced coaching academy for about 75 coaches.

A final unwitting ally for Arnau was the state’s investment in NSDC’s Standards Assessment Inventory (SAI). Georgia was the first state to provide the SAI online so every school would have easy access to it. Georgia does not require schools to take the SAI but having it available electronically made it so accessible that 1,400 of the state’s 2,015 schools took the survey during the first year it was offered. (See the March 2006 issue of *The Learning System* for more on this

project.) The applicability of the SAI results to NCLB requirements also made it an attractive tool for Georgia schools.

When the SAI results were reported for each district, Gwinnett learned it had scored lowest on the Learning Communities and Evaluation standards. Specifically, their lowest score came on this statement: “We observe each other’s classroom instruction as one way to improve our teaching.”

This investment in the SAI preceded the coaching academies and the state legislation and provided one of those unintended allies in the quest for school-based coaching. As Arnau shared SAI results with principals, “I made the link to coaching as an avenue for addressing this,” she said.

“I’d like to think that the reason the work of coaching is bubbling up more and more is because of the SAI results and because of the Joyce and Showers research that says coaching works,” Arnau said.

### COACHING IN PRACTICE

Coaching trickled down into dozens of Gwinnett schools because a context conducive to coaching was created largely through the efforts of high-level policy makers in the Georgia legislature and the Georgia Department of Education. Both the national and the state professional development associations linked arms with a savvy funder to develop the tools that would be necessary to grow coaching in that fruitful soil. Then local leadership in Gwinnett pulled all of it into a package that respects the culture and practices of that district.

As much as Arnau wants a school-based coach in every Gwinnett school, she knows she must work within the realities of the system. She has no illusions about the possibility that Gwinnett will soon be able to fund coaches throughout the district and she says she’s okay with that. “I know that the grassroots movement will work. I’ve seen it work here. And I know that the people who believe in this will make it happen. Besides, I can’t wait for the budget to catch up to our dream.” ■

**See Pages 4 and 5 for a tool that districts can use in their evaluation of school-based coaching programs.**

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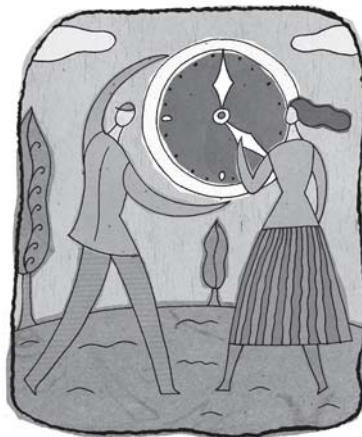
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**Feb. 5-6:** *Leading for Results* workshop with NSDC Executive Director Dennis Sparks, Jackson, Miss. For information, see [www.nsdcof.org/connect/workshops.cfm](http://www.nsdcof.org/connect/workshops.cfm).

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**Feb. 15:** Deadline for manuscripts for Fall 2007 *JSD*. Theme: Teaching English language learners. For information, see [www.nsdcof.org/library/publications/jsd/themes.cfm](http://www.nsdcof.org/library/publications/jsd/themes.cfm).

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