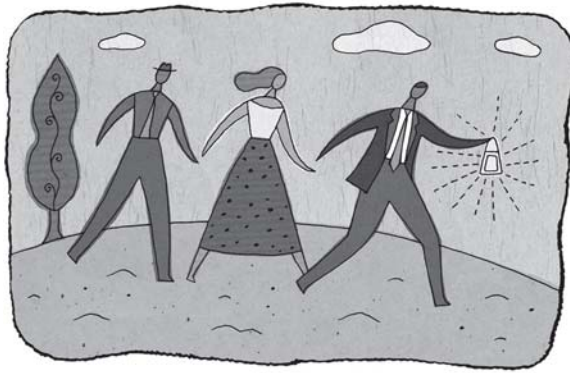# THE LEARNING
System

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

Selecting coaches

Hiring or selecting the right individuals to serve as coaches is critical to the success of any coaching efforts

BY JOELLEN KILLION AND CINDY HARRISON

Most schools and districts implement coaching to improve teaching and student learning. Sometimes, the main purpose of coaching is program implementation, such as a comprehensive school reform program. Sometimes, coaching is implemented to refine instruction in general or to support teachers in adapting instruction to meet the needs of certain groups of students, such as English language learners. Sometimes, coaching is intended to support a certain group of teachers, such as novice teachers. Still other coaching programs strive to improve student learning in a more general way.

Once a district decides the goals of coach-ing, other decisions are easier to make. One of the crucial decisions is whether to deploy coaches at the school or district level. This decision will impact the hiring and selection of coaches, supervision of coaches, standardizing the work of coaches, and establishing relationships with colleagues and supervisors.

DISTRICT-LEVEL DEPLOYMENT

Districts typically deploy coaches at the district level when they want to support implementation of a districtwide initiative. One district, for example, might want to support implementation of differentiation strategies. Another might be

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

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Senior Fellow

"Letting go" means school system leaders accept and shape new responsibilities, as well as empower educators at the school level.

'Letting go' is essential for growth

One challenging aspect of bringing NSDC's goal to fruition is "letting go." This phrase from psychological literature refers to not hanging on to relationships and feelings that have changed or ended. When a child enters adulthood, parents must "let go" or the young person will not become independent. When a marriage ends in divorce, each partner must "let go" before it is possible to develop a new relationship. When a person loses a loved one, "letting go" is the final step of grieving.

School systems must also "let go" in order to enable all teachers in all schools to experience high-quality professional learning as part of their daily work. Many systems have long decided what educators learn and when and how they should learn it. The system would decide, for example, to embrace a new curriculum and soon thereafter teachers would attend "training" to learn the curriculum and how to adapt their instruction. When a new superintendent took office, a new curricular or instructional initiative would follow. Each time, staff development would be key to the implementation.

For school systems to shift towards daily school-based professional learning, superintendents must "let go." They cannot hold onto their control of staff development and simultaneously embrace the new paradigm. School system leaders have a choice. They can expect and support teams of teachers in each school to collaborate in learning how to more effectively improve student performance, or central office can continue to drive professional development. The former is by far the better choice because there is little or no evidence the latter approach has improved student achievement.

Letting go is never easy. Familiar patterns are comfortable and secure. School system leaders may worry that school-based educators won't take professional learning responsibilities seriously or may abuse time provided for this purpose. But, accountability is an important element in public education and it should be no less so for school-based professional learning. School systems must know whether, how, and with what result educators in each school are learning together, and applying their learning to benefit students. School systems will want to understand how professional learning is working in each school, what problems occur, and what support will make it more effective. "Letting go" does not mean abdicating system leadership and support. These are all the more important to ensure the new approach to professional learning positively impacts educators and students.

As school systems transition to the new paradigm, a central office leader critical to its success is the person currently responsible for professional development. This person's job may include developing a catalog of staff development offerings, providing training, and planning professional development days. These roles should rapidly wither as the leader assists schools in launching school-based professional learning, monitors its implementation, identifies and helps resolve impediments, develops evaluation methodologies, and documents and reports on results manifest in classrooms. "Letting go" means system leaders accept and shape new responsibilities, as well as empower educators at the school level.

"Letting go," then, is characterized not only by releasing the system's grip on longstanding but ineffective methods of staff development. "Letting go" also requires moving towards growth and greater productivity. System leaders must meet this challenge to reap the benefits of all teachers in all schools experiencing high-quality professional learning as part of their daily work.

Staff development dividends

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

A friend of mine who serves as a staff development director recently lamented that her superintendent seemed more interested in the number of pages in the staff development catalog than whether these workshops and courses resulted in student learning. Despite all the conversations about effective professional development models and strategies, this superintendent seemed stuck in the paradigm that offering lots of workshops was the hallmark of high-quality professional development.

In a learning system, central office staff members **allocate resources to create staff development that uses a variety of activities/models** (Roy & Hord, 2003**)**. In the last 20 years, research and best practice have identified a variety of professional development strategies, beyond the workshop, that impact student learning outcomes. The use of these strategies has redefined professional development to include team-based, job-embedded interactions among colleagues who meet routinely during the workday. These job-embedded strategies have been described by Easton (2005) as:

• Connecting to and returning benefits to the real world of teaching and learning;
• Focusing on what is happening with both student and adult learners;
• Collaborative;
• Establishing a culture of quality among staff; and
• Allowing time for inquiry and reflection that promotes learning and application.

Experts who contributed to *Powerful Designs for Professional Learning* (Easton, 2004) described 21 job-embedded strategies. Each activity structures teacher interactions and creates opportunities for less-than-traditional conversations about the classroom and instruction.

Additionally, as far back as the early 1980s, a meta-analysis of the training model illustrated that there was little return on investment when workshops were not supported by follow-up and long-term support (Joyce & Showers, 1988). These "post-training" activities included activities that reinforced, bolstered, and enhanced skills learned during traditional training.

Accordingly, central office staff need **to allocate resources that provide for school-based follow-up coaching** for any major initiative identified by the district's strategic plan. Classroom-based coaching helps staff understand how to implement new knowledge and skills while adapting those new strategies to the unique conditions found within individual classrooms. Research has shown that colleagues can provide this coaching as powerfully as outside experts as long as they are knowledgeable about the innovation, skillful in collecting data and providing feedback, and are trusted and respected by their peers (Sparks, 1983).

With educational resources seeming to dwindle each year, central office staff must ensure that their limited resources are used well. Investing in job-embedded strategies is the most effective way to use professional development funds.

> **Resources:**
> Staff development that improves the learning of all students requires resources to support adult learning and collaboration.

> **Read more about NSDC's standards at www.nsdc.org/standards/index.cfm.**

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NAVIGATING THE MAZE

Purpose: This activity demonstrates the value of teamwork, sharpens a team's decision-making abilities and its communication skills.

Goal: The team must move through a maze by discovering and remembering the correct path. The mission of the team is to move everyone from one side of the maze to the other by finding the proper route.

Time: 50 minutes (10 minutes for planning, 20 minutes for crossing the maze, 20 minutes for debriefing the activity).

Preparation: Create a grid on a 10-foot by10-foot piece of plastic tarp by using masking tape or duct tape to mark out 12-inch squares. See illustration on next page.
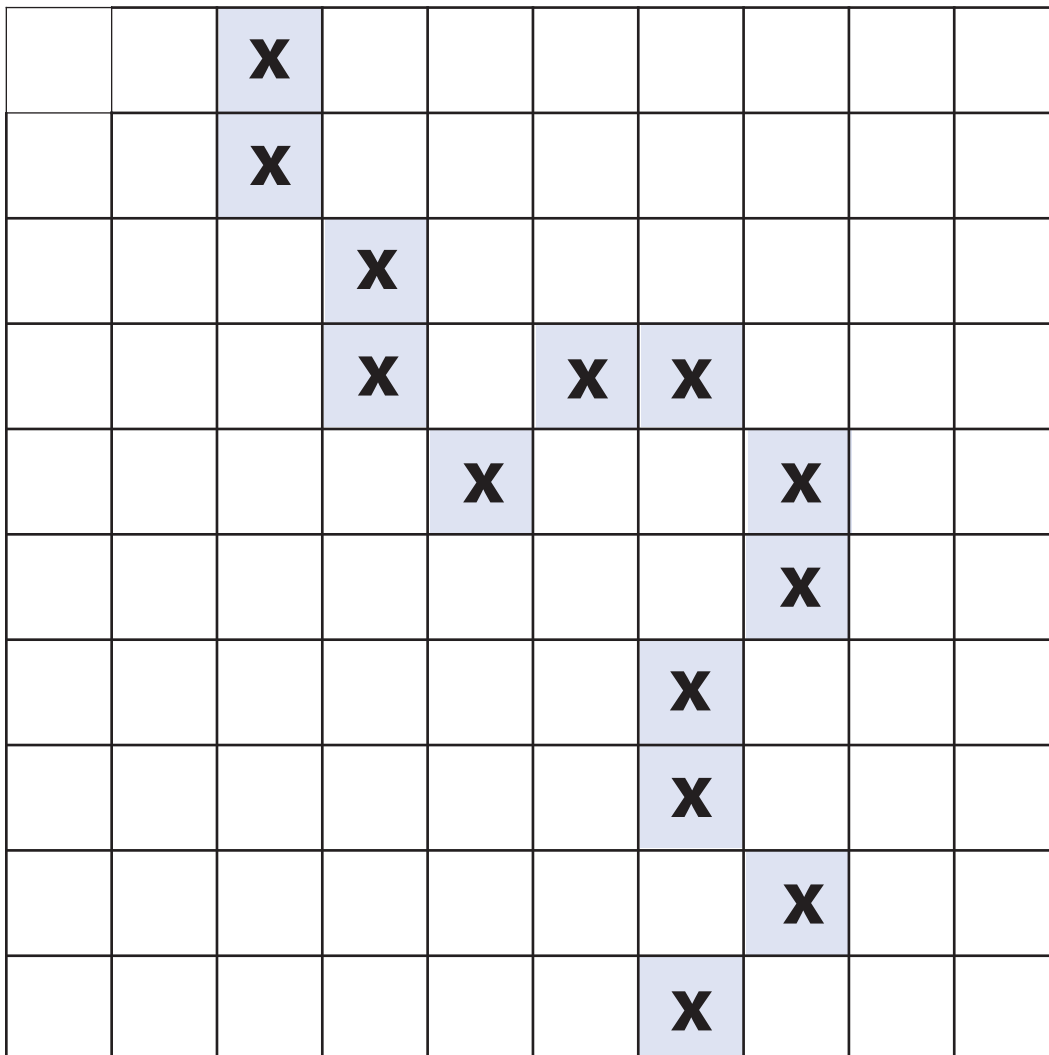
The facilitator must decide in advance the single correct route through the maze. Only the facilitator knows the one correct path through the maze.

The facilitator should designate a starting square on each side of the grid.

DIRECTIONS

1. Divide the group into two groups of equal size. One group stands on one side of the maze; the second group on the opposite side.

2. Before beginning, each team decides the order in which team members will attempt to cross the grid. Only one person at a time is allowed on the grid.

3. The first team member from each group steps onto the squares designated by the facilitator. Each team member's second step must be onto any contiguous square. A team member may not step over or skip a square.

4. When a team member has put <u>both</u> feet into the square, the facilitator will indicate whether it is a correct square. If it is incorrect, the facilitator will indicate this with a noisemaker, such as a bell or a kazoo. If a team member steps off the correct route, he or she must return to the beginning via the same route and the next person in sequence attempts to cross the maze.

5. Team members may not write down the path and they may not speak to each other while a team member is crossing. However, they may use hand signals and facial expressions (nods, shakes of the head, frowns, smiles, etc.) to indicate their interpretation of the team member's movement.

Group A begins here ⬇

		X								
		X								
			X							
			X		X	X				
				X			X			
							X			
						X				
						X				
							X			
						X				

Group B begins here ⬆

DEBRIEFING

Begin this discussion by asking team members to recount what happened.

- What helped them learn the path through the maze?
- What inhibited them from learning the path through the maze?
- What would have enabled them to learn the correct route more quickly or with less frustration?
- How were they affected by the other group's attempt to solve the problem?
- What did this experience teach them about solving problems?
- How does this experience apply to their daily work?

Selecting coaches: School-based vs. district-based

SCHOOL-BASED COACHES

Advantages

- Relationship with teachers at site
- Knowledge of school context
- In classrooms on a regular basis
- Trust with teachers
- Familiarity with students

Disadvantages

- Balancing perspectives of coach, administration, and teachers
- Being perceived as an evaluator of teachers
- Being an expert in all areas that the school needs
- Not spending time in the role

implementing a new curriculum. Sometimes, a district with limited funds hires several district-level coaches to support all schools. Some states and even districts have implemented coaching support for targeted schools.

District-based coaches offer the advantage of:
- Standardizing program implementation throughout a district;
- Targeting intervention support to schools with the greatest need;
- Building deep expertise with a smaller group of staff;
- Ensuring consistency of message and support; and
- Ensuring that coaches are providing the designated services.

Central office staff typically supervises district-deployed coaches. With accountability to central office, providing ongoing professional development and support to coaches may be easier.

But district-deployed coaches come with disadvantages too. They may not develop ongoing, deep relationships with individual staff members. As a result, teachers may view district coaches more as monitors than as supporters. District-deployed coaches are likely to be in schools only occasionally and therefore have less opportunity to provide sustained support over time, the kind of support often associated with changing classroom instruction.

District-deployed coaches have less familiarity with the culture of the schools they visit because they are not members of the community. They hold status as a visitor to rather than a member of the community.

A district with many such coaches may also find it difficult to ensure that services are distributed equitably throughout the district. Principals and school leadership teams may not view district-deployed coaches as partners in the school improvement process. Therefore, the

Excerpted from *Taking the lead: New roles for teachers and school-based coaches,* **by Joellen Killion and Cindy Harrson. (NSDC, 2006). Available through the NSDC Online Bookstore, store.nsdc.org.**

innovation those coaches support may not be viewed as an integral part of the school's program of improvement.

SCHOOL-LEVEL DEPLOYMENT

Districts typically decide to deploy coaches at the school level because they believe that frequent access to coaching will improve teaching and learning. The authors confess a strong preference for this design.
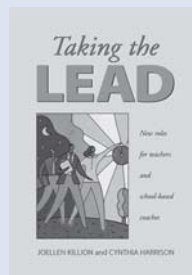
When coaches are part of a school's staff, they develop trusting and productive relationships with staff members and the principal. Principals typically prefer having coaches assigned full-time to their school so that the coach develops a deep understanding of the school's culture and provides sustained support to teachers over time. Coaches who are in a school full-time can influence change and feel greater responsibility and accountability for improving teaching and student learning. They are invited into classrooms to provide support and to work with teams of teachers in planning learning. They are more aware of the learning needs of teachers and can provide multiple opportunities for "at-the-elbow" learning. School-based coaches also know the students and therefore are likely to have fewer behavior management issues when modeling in classrooms. Teachers view building-based coaches as partners "in the trenches" with them rather than visitors from central office.

Several potential disadvantages of building-based coaches exist. Coaches who reside in one building can be pulled into other duties, such as substituting, when there is a shortage of relief teachers or covering recess/lunch duty when someone is missing or an emergency occurs. They are often pulled into other work that is not part of their primary responsibilities because they

Selecting coaches: School-based vs. district-based

are accessible and sometimes coaches' work is viewed as unessential.

Building-based coaches sometimes are viewed as an extension of the administration because coaches frequently interact with principals to plan and coordinate their work, an essential task for coaches if they want to be effective. Depending on the staff's relationship with the school's administration, this may negatively impact the coach's ability to develop trusting relationships.

If the coach was a teacher in the building, teachers may have difficulty shifting their perception of the coach in his or her new role.

COMBINED APPROACH

Another way to deploy coaches is by combining district and building deployed coaches. Some districts select a pool of coaches, engage principals in identifying candidates for their schools, and then assigning coaches from among that pool. In this case, supervision of coaches can become a district, principal, or shared responsibility.

Adams12 Five Star Schools in Thornton, Colo., began its coaching model by deploying coaches from the district level. There was a belief that content-area expertise was the most important factor for impacting student achievement. After several years and multiple evaluations, the district could not show a correlation between coaching and student achievement. They identified changes in teacher practice but the changes were not district- or even schoolwide. They learned that some schools used the services of coaches appropriately while other schools did not use coaching services or used them inappropriately. They also learned that there was limited connection between coaches and all the schools they served, even though the district worked hard to maintain consistency of coaching assignment and to ensure that coaches met frequently to reflect on their work and to learn from one another. After several years, the district switched to school-based coaches. To accomplish this, the district invested more funds to provide more

coaches. Principals received support in how to deploy coaches within their school in order to help coaches impact student achievement. These "student achievement coaches" received more support from both district and school staff to ensure their success.

When this shift occurred, the program was more successful. Evaluation of the coaching program after the change indicated an increased use of coaches, greater principal and teacher satisfaction with the program, and increased use of data to drive instruction by school staff members. Adams 12 was also identified as making the greatest improvement in state student achievement tests among all districts in metropolitan Denver. While the evaluation does not allow for conclusions that coaching caused increases in student achievement, it does allow for a conclusion that coaching contributed, since the greatest achievement gains occurred in math, the same content area in which coaches did most of their work.

OTHER DECISIONS

Regardless of how coaches are deployed, districts must also determine whether coaches work in one school or multiple schools. If coaches work in a single school, they can become deeply immersed in the school culture, develop strong relationships with the staff, and provide consistent, ever-present support. If coaches work in multiple schools, developing strong relationships and providing consistent support may be more challenging, especially if they are in the school only part time. Scheduling and providing follow-up become more challenging, although not impossible.

Another decision is whether coaches are full-time or part-time. Full-time coaches obviously have more time allocated to accomplish the job. But, because they are not actively teaching, other teachers may not view them as credible. When coaches are teaching the same grade or content in which they provide support for teachers, they always have current examples, understand the real challenges of the classroom teacher, and can model "best practices" in their own classrooms.■

DISTRICT-BASED COACHES

Advantages
- Deep expertise in area of support
- Ability to directly relate to central office counterparts
- Requires limited funds
- Coach roles and central office communication common across all schools

Disadvantages
- Lack of ongoing relationship with teachers
- Being able to support teachers often enough to ensure instructional practices are in place
- Too many people to serve with multiple site assignment
- Who is the real boss? Building level or district?

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• You can demonstrate that high-quality professional learning has made a difference in student learning.

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Fill her e-mail box with your stories today!