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— A school-based coach

# Coaches' voices bring 6 lessons to light

BY CHERYL H. BRADY

In 1996, the Kansas City (Kan.) Public Schools, a largely poor, urban system, was facing a crisis. Graduation rates hovered around 50%. Students across the grades were behind in reading. Talk at local and state levels was about closing a number of poor-performing schools.

The district took matters in hand to make significant changes. Partnering with the local National Education Association leadership, administrators adopted a school reform model in which school-based staff development was a core component.

Every school in the district would have at least one staff developer, with two in each high school, who would work on a daily basis with principals, teachers, and other school staff to improve outcomes for students.

The district's overall staff

development program was based on these key assumptions:

- Advances in teaching provide the range of tools necessary to reach every child.
- Good teaching can dramatically improve learning among even the most disadvantaged students.
- If teachers receive the training and support in strategies proven to work with poor urban students, there will be no excuse for leaving any child behind.

## TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

District planners realized their school-based staff developers would be pioneering a new educational paradigm. The framework they selected for school reform highlighted conditions under which young people best develop and flourish. To create these conditions in schools, planners identified seven critical features from nine existing national school reforms. One of these was to “equip, empower, and expect all staff to improve instruction” (Institute for Research and Reform in Education, 2004). Unlike past reforms that used external consultants in the schools, planners placed internal consultants at the sites, but had them report to central office. In a critical action that shifted the whole system, the curriculum staff deployed to the schools as school improvement facilitators. Planners identified six critical areas of training and development as these facilitators became school-based coaches. These areas form the basis for lessons applicable to any system using site-based professional learning.

### 1. Establish trusting relationships and open communication.

*“You have to have good communication with the principal, while at the same time working to have the trust of the teachers. Don’t rat on the staff.”*

— A school-based coach

Coaches have to learn to discuss

instructional issues with each teacher in a way that enlightens without threatening or offending the teacher. The coach must establish and maintain the trust and respect of teachers. Teachers must trust coaches as another pair of eyes and ears gauging how their instruction affects learners — but without fear of punitive reporting to the principal. Principals must trust coaches to be their allies in raising student achievement, yet understand that coaches must honor teacher confidences.

To learn to build trusting relationships, district coaches have access to an external consultant. They can call on the consultant at any time — without requesting permission from a supervisor — to problem solve, role play, and mediate work conflicts as issues occur.

The consultant also works with each principal and coach to assess his or her work style preference since differences in work styles, which illustrate how one thinks and communicates, can prevent trusting relationships from developing. The consultant confers with each team’s members to chart how their approaches to work mesh and conflict. For example, a fast-paced, visionary principal may frustrate a coach who prefers analysis and detail. The consultant also helps the team explore ways to communicate that accommodate both their work styles.

### 2. Understand adult learners.

*“You can’t fix people or their problems.”*

— A school-based coach

School-based coaches must learn how to work with adults rather than children. Even a hint of condescen-

CHERYL H. BRADY works as a leadership development consultant. You can contact her at Cheryl Brady Associates, 330 W. 47th St., #208, Kansas City, MO 64112, 816-753-8838, fax 816-753-8839, e-mail: cba50@mindspring.com.

sion can erode the relationship, a relationship that is prerequisite to establishing an environment supporting professional growth. Coaches must demonstrate that they know how adults learn, give colleagues time to process new information, and resist sending the message that someone is trying to “fix” them.

In the Kansas district, school-based coaches study powerful designs for adult learning so their messages about effective teaching strategies are thoughtfully applied. Under the district’s model, staff developers spend four days, Monday through Thursday, in their assigned schools. Fridays are spent in training and development. The school-based coaches usually begin by meeting in grade-level groups. A typical Friday might include meeting with one’s learning team or a content or curriculum session, such as learning coordinated by a lead math or literacy coach; a district subcommittee meeting; networking over lunch; and an assessment update. Through study, dialogue, collaboration, modeling, planning, shadowing, meta-coaching and mentoring, school-based coaches learn, reflect, and commiserate as needed to re-energize for the week ahead.

### 3. Continually update knowledge about subject content and instructional best practices.

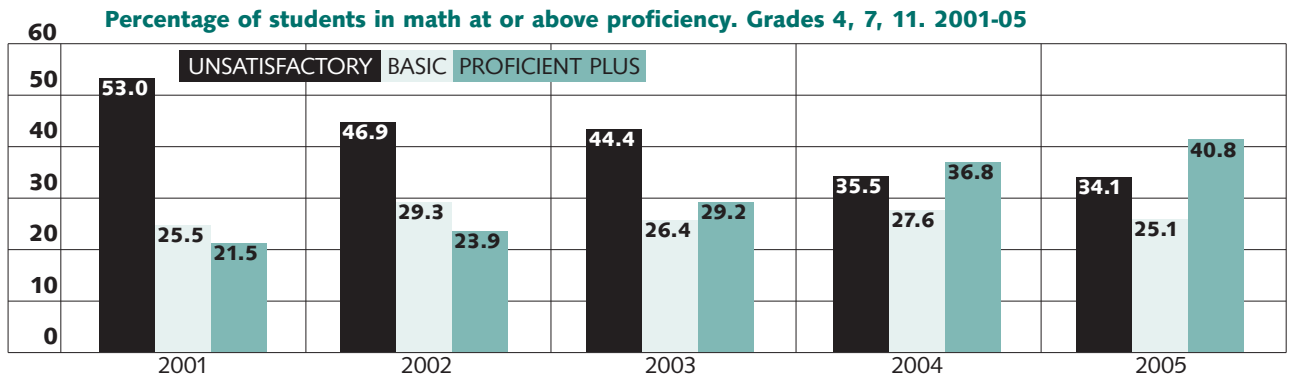
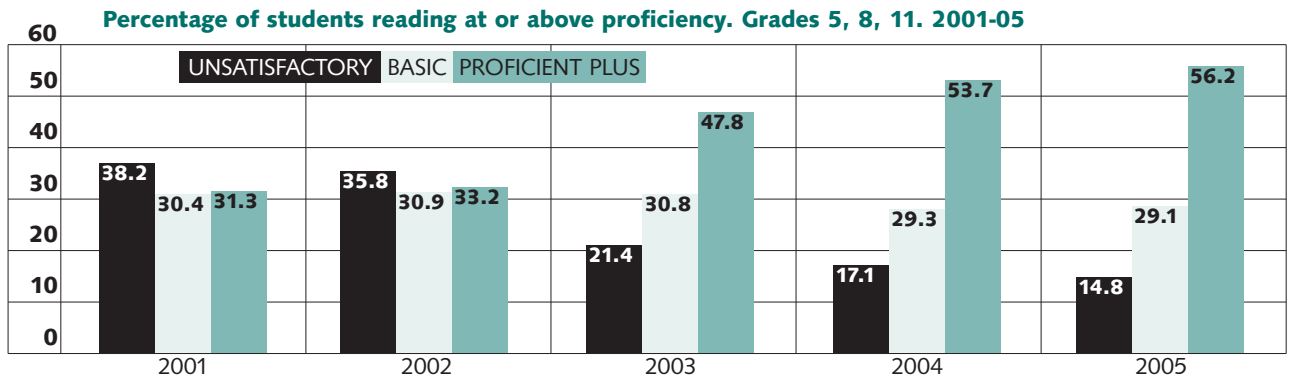
*“Opportunities for learning come as we work with outside content consultants. It should at times cause disruption, make your head hurt, and make you smarter.”*

— A school-based coach

The district works with school-based coaches in content and best practice instructional strategies.

**“You have to have good communication with the principal, while at the same time working to have the trust of the teachers. Don’t rat on the staff.”**

— A school-based coach



Source: Center for Educational Testing, University of Kansas

Initially, external consultants provided training and returned to observe and support the coaches and teachers implementing the new instructional strategies. As coaches gain expertise, they lead the training. For example, 10 elementary school-based coaches learned about balanced literacy, then shared the information with other district coaches, developing a system to train teachers districtwide in reading strategies for emerging readers.

**4. Master the art of coaching.**

*“You can’t do this alone. You have to build the capacity of others.”*

– A school-based coach

Coaches and their principals must be ahead of the curve in learning how to help a teacher in a nonthreatening way to dissect a lesson and promote internal reflection and problem solving. The goal is to build teachers’ capacity to analyze what they are doing in the classroom so they can expand on what works and change

what doesn’t.

The Kansas City schools hired consultants Bruce Wellman and Laura Lipton to spend eight days over two years helping coach and principal teams become adept at talking with teachers about their instruction and its impact on students. Coaches and principals all participated in practicing conversations with teachers using role playing and analyzing scenarios. They pushed each other to differentiate between supervising and coaching, knowledge they used in classroom walk-throughs.

**5. Link student work to data and assessments so teachers will modify instruction.**

*“You have to start fires sometimes.”*

– A school-based coach

The coach at times must confront a reluctant teacher with hard data to demonstrate that a teacher’s instructional style is not promoting learning among his or her students. Kansas

City coaches practiced with consultants how to use student data to light fires under teachers who needed to adjust their teaching strategies. The coaches learned to use a variety of data, including student work and local assessments, as neutral comparison points in a discussion with a teacher. This fact-based, nonjudgmental approach made it easier for reluctant teachers to accept that some or all of their students were not learning enough and set the stage for discussions about alternative teaching strategies.

In the Kansas district, for example, faculty rooms often have charts on the walls showing student names on sticky notes. As students progress in reading and math, teachers move the tiny pieces of paper ahead. Sticky notes that don’t advance are like red flags identifying students who are falling behind. Coaches then help staff plan additional instruction and tutoring for these students.

## Characteristics and challenges of the school-based staff developer

What kind of person has the skills and temperament to be an effective school-based staff developer?

Central office curriculum specialists did not necessarily make the best school-based coaches, the Kansas City (Kan.) Public Schools found.

A study identified a number of characteristics of high-performing school-based coaches. In a series of meetings over seven months, 13 K-12 coaches, nominated by their peers and supervisors as go-to people, identified the top problems school-based staff developers faced and characteristics of effective school-based staff developers.

### Behavior characteristics of the high-performing coach

- Confident.
- Demonstrated leadership.
- Open communicator.
- Collaborative.
- Relationship savvy.
- Persistent.
- Inquiry oriented.
- Authentic (in fighting the school bureaucracy).
- Organized.
- Resourceful.
- Optimistic.
- Compassionate, yet focused on student data.

### Top 10 problems of the school-based coach

- Supporting new teachers in professional growth and improved practice.
- Supporting veteran teachers in professional growth and improved practice.
- Keeping a positive relationship with the principal.
- Navigating the role as it relates to teachers; having no formal authority.
- Managing time and multiple priorities.
- Developing a positive school culture and organizational supports.
- Keeping current with latest best practices and content.
- Maintaining personal confidence and network of support to fulfill the role.
- Working with adult learners in research-based professional development formats.
- Advocating for students with a focus on student achievement.

Source: Brady, C. (2005). *School-Based Staff Developers in High-Poverty Schools: A Report to the Kauffman Foundation*. Kansas City, MO: Cheryl Brady Associates.

## 6. Network with others who do the same work.

*“No one else has the answers, either, so you have to create the network to figure it out.”*

— A school-based coach

The best instructional approach for a difficult teaching problem is not always immediately apparent. Successful coaches learn to use this ambiguity to fuel their work — to ask questions when they don't know the answers. They develop a strong

network of learning and mutual support, drawing on others' expertise, phoning others frequently to confer, and huddling in Friday coaching meetings to learn together. These support networks allow coaches to remain grounded in the work of student achievement and operate strategically as catalysts for change.

### PLEASED, NOT SATISFIED

Since the district implemented the changes, students have made

impressive gains. For example, between 2001 and 2004, the percent of elementary, middle, and high school students who scored proficient or better in reading increased districtwide from 30% to 53%. In addition, math achievement, attendance, and graduation rates all rose (see charts on p. 48). An independent evaluation found that the district's school-based staff development program was a major factor in these improvements (Gambone, Klem, Summers, Akey, & Sipe, 2004).

Recognizing the critical role school-based coaches play in every school's bottom line — improved student learning — district leaders today have established a year-long Aspiring Instructional Coach Academy to prepare candidates for the work ahead. The district's focus now is on closing remaining gaps in achievement among all students, with school-based coaches a driving force in accomplishing the goal.

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