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

HIGH-IMPACT COACHING ENSURES MAXIMUM RESULTS

Build a strong infrastructure by clarifying program goals

BY JOELLEN KILLION

Many districts have implemented instructional coaching to improve teaching quality and student learning. While this intervention focuses intensive support squarely where it belongs — the classroom — districts sometimes find the student achievement results from coaching slow and disappointing. As a result of the slow return on their investment, the challenging economic situation, and insufficient evidence about the impact of coaching on student achievement, districts are reducing the number of coaches or eliminating them entirely.

Many districts, however, are unlikely to realize substantial gain from their coaching programs because their coaching programs lack elements required for maximum results. As district leaders consider coaching or refine their existing coaching programs, it is essential they take bold steps to define or refine the program's parameters, resources, and infrastructure to

ensure results for teachers and students.

The core decisions school systems make regarding coaching include the following: goals for the coaching program; clarity of roles for all involved; preparation of coaches, principals, and staff; deployment of coaches; ongoing support of coaches; and evaluation of coaching and coaches. When districts lack a solid infrastructure or framework for their coaching program,

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School systems can do themselves a favor by asking the hard questions first. Using an external perspective to examine the school system's assumptions and operations can spark necessary improvements.

We need to be prepared for the tough questions

For an enterprising reporter, there is no easier target than a school system that spends thousands of dollars to send educators to a professional development conference at a vacation destination. Even if the conference is worthwhile, the news story generates controversy.

What the public does not know is that the reporter has chosen the professional development story requiring minimum effort to attract maximum attention. If the questionable use of public funds is the real issue, there is greater potential in examining the *purpose, cost* and *results* of a school system's staff development. Exactly what is the public getting for its investment? What is the evidence that teachers are becoming more effective? Is student performance increasing? Obtaining and analyzing the information necessary to answer such questions is a labor-intensive process. Thus, news media seldom pursue these lines of inquiry.

Nevertheless, school systems should not assume that there will never come a time when either reporters, advocates, or researchers will raise questions about professional development. School systems can do themselves a favor by asking the hard questions first. Using an external perspective to examine the school system's assumptions and operations can spark necessary improvements.

For example, a fundamental question to ask is what is the purpose of a school system's professional development? A rationale such as "to keep our teachers, administrators, and staff up to date" is so vague that accountability is impossible. Some school systems lack a coherent focus for their professional development and place an emphasis on activities rather than results. Staff development should demonstrably improve the performance of those who participate in it. If that is not the observable, documentable result, then questioning the activity's purpose is not only appropriate but also necessary. A school system that cannot describe in detail how professional development benefits students risks exposure that may jeopardize public support.

Professional development is costly as most school systems currently configure it. School systems pay for teachers' and administrators' time to participate in many different types of staff development, from "training" to conferences to small learning communities, and there are additional costs for administrators, consultants, and materials. Yet most school systems have only a general idea of the total amount they are spending on professional development, across all schools, departments, programs, and functions. A school system that does not know what it is spending for professional development, and how the cost aligns with its purpose, is vulnerable to criticism that it is not efficiently managing its money.

The ultimate question is what a school system knows about the results of its professional development. In most school systems, evaluation of professional development is rudimentary, if not sloppy. Evaluations usually seek participants' opinions about the quality of the activity, rather than assessing what the participants learned and how well they learned it. Even more rare are efforts to determine if professional development participants applied their learning to their teaching or leadership, and, if so, to what effect. School system administrators are not entirely to blame. To date, neither the research community nor education organizations have developed practical, effective evaluation tools school systems will use. At the same time, few school systems (or states) have taken the initiative to even explore the issue of deeply evaluating professional development results. So long as that is the case, school systems will be hard pressed to respond to critics who question whether professional development is worth the cost when so little is known about the results.

A time for brilliant opportunities

O ne interpretation of the Chinese character for chaos is a place where brilliant dreams are born. Given the current economic situation, many schools and districts are feeling the chaos of budget cutbacks and loss of staff. While traditional, formal professional development may be curtailed, this is an ideal time for brilliant professional learning opportunities to emerge.

District office staff can use this chaotic time as an opportunity to **allocate resources to create staff development that uses a variety of activities/ models** (Roy & Hord, 2003, p. 125). Specifically, resources are **allocated to provide for school-based professional development that is supported by a system of learning teams**.

American education has long embraced a tradition of teacher isolation. This tradition can make high-quality collaborative work difficult to establish. District and school staff members need to build the skills required for productive working relationships so that teachers feel safe examining their individual practice in the company of their colleagues. According to Darling-Hammond, when productive working relationships do exist, "the benefits can include better instruction and more success in solving problems of practice" (Darling-Hammond, et al, 2009, p. 11).

Learning teams can also help to make professional learning more relevant, concrete, and anchored in the challenges "involved in teaching and learning specific academic subject matter" (Darling-Hammond, et al, 2009, p. 10). Learning teams provide educators with the opportunity for hands-on work that not only builds content knowledge and appropriate instructional skills

but that is sensitive to local requirements and conditions such as curriculum guidelines, accountability systems, and student demographics.

Learning teams, through their review and analysis of student achievement data and examples of student work, can identify specific priority skills and concepts that students need to learn as well as content objectives that are most difficult for their students to master. When teachers study the materials they want their students to learn, "improved teacher practice and student outcomes" resulted (Darling-Hammond, et al, 2009, p. 10).

Effective learning teams require a schedule that provides times for educators to meet during the day within grade-levels or content-areas. A recent compilation of strategies, articles, and tools concerning finding time for collaborative professional learning can be a helpful resource for the central office as they tackle the time issue (von Frank, 2008).

High-quality professional learning, according to Linda Darling-Hammond and associates, "helps teachers master content, hone teaching skills, evaluate their own and their students' performance, and address changes needed in teaching and learning in their schools" (Darling-Hammond, *et al*, 2009, p. 7). Collaborative professional learning approaches, such as learning teams, contribute to these results.

Brilliant dreams can be born during chaotic times; collaborative approaches to professional learning may well be the brilliant dream born of this time.

NSDC STANDARD

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

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

REFERENCES

Darling-Hammond, L., Wei, R.C., Andree, A., Richardson, N., & Orphanos, S. (2009). *Professional learning in the learning profession: A status report on teaching development in the United States and abroad.* Oxford, OH: NSDC.

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Learn more about NSDC's standards: www.nsdc.org/standards/index.cfm.

WHAT A DISTRICT LEADER NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT ...

School-based coaching logic model

Carefully considering the desired outcomes of a coaching initiative will assist in planning, implementation, and evaluation of the program. This sample logic model outlines key aspects of a coaching program along with the activities and outcomes believed to contribute to the ultimate goals — improved student achievement and a collaborative professional culture.

Input	Activities	Initial outcomes	Intermediate Outcomes	Intended outcomes
Program design	Design coaching initiative.	The school or district defines the role of coaches. The school or district creates a selection process.	The school or district has a clear and common understanding about the role of coaches in improving teaching and learning.	Increased student achievement ● Improved school culture
Personnel	Create selection process. Select and deploy coaches.	Coaches are placed in schools.	Coaches provide support to teachers.	
Professional development	Provide professional development for coaches and principals: • Prepare coaches; • Provide ongoing support to coaches; • Prepare principals; and • Provide ongoing support to principals.	Coaches acquire the knowledge, attitudes, skills, aspiration, and behaviors for their role. Principals acquire the knowledge, attitudes, skills, aspiration, and behaviors to support coaches.	Coaches demonstrate expertise in their interactions with teachers and principals. Principals demonstrate expertise in their support of coach and in integrating coaching services into the school.	
Coaching support	Coaches, together with their principal, form agreements about the coaches' work within the school and create a plan for providing services to teachers to improve instruction.	Coaches develop trusting, productive relationship with the teachers.	Teachers seek support from coaches. Teachers feel supported in their instructional decisions. Teachers demonstrate greater efficacy.	
Coaching	Coaches provide one-on one and team-based support to teachers in the areas of curriculum, instruction, and assessment.	Teaching quality (teachers' content knowledge, assessment, and instruction) improves.	Students participate in lessons designed to address their learning needs.	
Print and electronic resources	Coaches have access to print and electronic resources including school data.	With the coaches' support, teachers understand student needs within the school and their classrooms and plan instruction to target those needs.	Student performance on benchmark assessments increases.	
Evaluation of program and coaches	Formative and summative evaluation of coaching program and coaches occurs.	The quality of teaching and student learning increase. Teacher collaboration increases.	Student achievement increases. The culture of the school improves.	

Source: *Taking the Lead: New Roles for Teachers and School-Based Coaches,* by Joellen Killion and Cindy Harrison. Oxford, OH: NSDC, 2006.

Sample agenda for school-based coaches preparation training

The professional learning that systems ensure for coaches is critical; NSDC recommends that this learning be continuous. Outlined here is a sample agenda for eight days of coach preparation training.

Find comprehensive coaching guidance and additional tools in *Taking the Lead: New Roles for Teacher Leaders and School-Based Coaches,* by Joellen Killion and Cindy Harrison (NSDC, 2006). Available at www.nsdcstore.org, item #B352, $36 (member price), $45 (nonmember price).

	Day One	Day Two	Day Three	Day Four
MORNING	Student focus Success measures Self-assessment Teams and trust	The school or district defines the role of coaches. The school or district creates a selection process.	The school or district has a clear and common understanding about the role of coaches in improving teaching and learning.	School improvement planning Closing the achievement gap
AFTERNOON	Resistance Change Change theory	Coaches are placed in schools.	Coaches provide support to teachers.	Using data to drive instruction Protocols

	Day Five	Day Six	Day Seven	Day Eight
MORNING	Contracting 90-day plan Personal qualities of effective coaches	Coaching practice	NSDC's Standards for Staff Development Best practices in professional learning	Collaboration skills Meeting skills Communication Managing communication
AFTERNOON	Coaching skills Coaching continuum Coaches as learners Listening	Designs for professional learning	Facilitation skills	Time management Recording of services Organizational skills Prioritize Professionalism

The proposed agenda is adjusted so that it aligns with the specific job description and roles and responsibilities of the coaches who will participate in the training program. Some of the content in the training program may be expanded or included in follow-up sessions that occur throughout the school year.

Source: *Taking the Lead: New Roles for Teachers and School-Based Coaches,* by Joellen Killion and Cindy Harrison. Oxford, OH: NSDC, 2006.

High-impact coaching ensures maximum results

they depend too heavily on chance for results.

Districts weave together the infrastructure of their coaching programs in a series of interconnected decisions. Determining the goals of a coaching program – the first decision -- influences coaching services and the roles of coaches. With clear job descriptions and performance standards for coaches, districts select and prepare coaches for placement in schools. The best results from coaching occur when coaches are placed in schools with greatest academic needs; where principals are strong instructional leaders; and where teachers commit to refining their practice. To refine their practice, coaches require ongoing support in the form of professional learning, including their own coaching, and close supervision. Evaluation of coaches and the coaching program provides data to improve coaching services and results.

BUILDING A STRONG STRUCTURE

Districts weave into the infrastructure of successful coaching programs parameters that increase the likelihood of impact. For too many coaching programs, these attributes are ill-defined, contributing to delays in the impact systems hope for from such investments. These parameters include clarifying whether coaching is voluntary or required for the teachers in a building or system; whether coaches are school-based or district-based; who supervises coaches; how coaches decide what they do on a daily basis; what type of data are gathered about coaches' work without breaching confidentiality between coach and teacher; whether policies and collective bargaining agreements support coaching; and how to evaluate the coaching program and coaches and use the data to improve the coaching program.

School systems face both challenges and opportunities with coaching. Opportunities include classroom-based teacher support that is focused on the curriculum and instructional

NSDC'S BELIEF

Sustainable learning cultures require skillful leadership.

framework aligned with school and district priorities. Coaching offers differentiated roles for experienced teachers. Coaching also expands instructional leadership within schools and districts. These opportunities have the potential to improve dramatically teaching quality and student achievement.

Challenges related to coaching can limit results. For example, if a district invests in a coaching program, prepares and places coaches in schools in need of improvement, yet neglects to prepare principals to support and supervise coaches' work or clarify the coaching program for principals and staff, the investment may be lost. If the program lacks expectations or parameters for coach-teacher interactions, coaches may resort to working with volunteer teachers rather than working strategically with all teachers, grade levels, teams, or content areas. When coaches are timid about their roles and lack a clear goal or focus, their efforts may lead to teachers feeling supported, but without effecting any change in practice or student learning.

COACHING WITH PURPOSE

One of the greatest challenges districts face in the effectiveness of their coaching programs is establishing coaches' courage to maintain focus on program goals. In "Are you coaching heavy or light" (*Teachers Teaching Teachers*, May 2008), I described the difference between coaching heavy and coaching light. Coaching heavy usually engenders anxiety in coaches and teachers. Some worry that coaching heavy is directive. It need not be. Heavy coaching is purposeful, intentional, and results driven. Coaches cannot shy away from their primary goal of improving student achievement and teaching quality. When their interactions with teachers fail to examine the deep structure of effective instruction and teaching as the pathway to student learning, they miss opportunities to achieve the goals.

The best results from coaching occur when coaches are placed in schools with greatest academic needs; where principals are strong instructional leaders; and where teachers commit to refining their practice.

Coaching heavy, coaching light

When coaches are driven by the goal to be accepted by the peers they coach, they may be coaching light. They act to increase their perceived value to teachers by providing services and resources that facilitate a teacher's learning but without an expectation that the learning will be implemented.

While the relationships that a coach builds with a teacher are certainly important, they aren't the end goal of a coaching initiative. Coaching heavy requires that coach and teacher examine teaching and learning carefully, stretching beyond their comfort zones and bearing collective responsibility for student learning.

Examples of coaching light can include:
- Sharing publications or information about workshops.
- Repeated demonstration lessons.
- Finding web sites for students to use.

Examples of coaching heavy can include:
- Analyzing student data.
- Discussing beliefs and how they influence practice.
- Planning powerful instruction.

Learn more from "Are you coaching heavy or light?" at www.nsdc.org/news/issueDetails. cfm?issueID=239.

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In many coaching programs, including NSDC's Coaching Academy, coaches learn about the importance of building trusting relationships with teachers. Yet too often, coaches spend an entire year building relationships without engaging in a deep analysis of teaching and learning. Relationship building will not change teaching quality. While trust is a precursor to reshaping the culture of a school, alone it will not change teaching and learning. Trust coupled with collaborative and honest dialogue about teaching and learning allows a coach to identify gaps in student learning and work collaboratively with a teacher to address the gaps without worry that the relationship will be impaired or teachers being judged. Genuine trust allows coaching heavy in which coaches and teachers identify and tackle complex challenges related to student learning.

Coaches and the program supervisor have a responsibility to convey the significance of coaching. Coaching makes a difference for teachers and students every day, if it is not taken too lightly. Coaching heavy requires coaches and teachers to analyze teaching and student learning and to establish explicit goals for improvement. They work together to achieve those goals. Both coaches and teachers are accountable for student success.

To increase the likelihood of achieving coaching program goals, district staff that support coaches and oversee the coaching program must be ready to step in when the parameters of the coaching program are violated. Reaching the goals of teaching quality and increased student achievement will not happen if coaches serve as substitutes or handle administrative tasks on a regular basis. The investment in coaching is a significant one, and it cannot be minimized by distractions or competing commitments.

It is advantageous for districts to evaluate annually the impact of their coaching programs. That evaluation should include analyzing the number of teachers coaches touch; the kinds of interactions they have with teachers; the topics of those interactions; and changes in the culture of a school, teaching quality, and student achievement. Without evidence, it is difficult to tune up a coaching program that might be on automatic, providing support without transforming.

Coaching holds great opportunity and challenge. How districts construct the infrastructure of their program and clarify its parameters will determine whether coaching provides more opportunities than challenges.

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Killion, J. (2008,May). Are you coaching heavy or light? *Teachers Teaching Teachers, 3*(8), pp. 1-4. ■

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Wednesday Webinars series is under way

Each Wednesday from February through June, NSDC will present an hour-long webinar focusing on professional learning topics and NSDC member services. Join professional learning leaders for webinars on assessing professional development needs, designs for professional learning, designing professional development workshops, engaging adult learners, and more. NSDC staff members will also guide attendees through topics such as delivering great conference sessions, the online conference registration process, and exploring NSDC's web site.

Wednesday Webinars are hosted in the NSDC Learning Exchange, the online learning platform that features live meetings as well as discussion forums,

a resource library, live chats, and more. Following each live webinar, attendees can continue their learning experience by engaging facilitators in follow-up discussions in our forum.

Webinar attendees receive permanent access to the Learning Exchange public forums, where they can engage in conversations about professional learning topics and issues, network with like-minded professionals, and access valuable NSDC resources as a member of the Learning Exchange.

Several webinars will be offered at no charge, while others cost $69. NSDC members receive a discount, as do those who register for more than one paid webinar at a time.

To see the full schedule, visit www.nsdc.org/elearning/webinars/.