

CIRCLES *of* LEADERSHIP

**OREGON DISTRICT REDEFINES COACHING ROLES TO FIND
A BALANCE BETWEEN SCHOOL AND DISTRICT GOALS**

By Amy D. Petti

I was sitting cross-legged, sticky notes and pen in hand, leaning in to listen to the instructional coach whisper to the classroom teacher as her students assembled on the rug. Along with the teacher, coach, 20 kindergarteners, and me were six observers — pairs of principals and coaches, an administrative intern, and a visiting teacher. I was coaching the coach, and the coach was coaching the teacher in the presence of these observers. We were learning with the teacher and her students. We were collaborating in practice, observing the teacher during instruction. Listening and anticipating our turn to teach or coach, we'd immediately practice the writing conference she modeled in triads of principal, coach, and student.

As director of improvement for North Clackamas School District in Milwaukie, Ore., near Portland, my role of coaching the coach was new, and the coaches welcomed the immediate feedback. Before class started, the coach met with us to set the context and purpose. We'd observe the teacher's minilesson and a student writing conference, then triads would practice a writing conference with a student. Students looked forward to their guest teachers practicing their teaching. This experience, called a lab site, culminated four years of redefining the roles of site-based coach, principal, and central office staff. We achieved a balance between district initiatives — the goal was to implement writing workshops — and site-based professional learning.

In our district, we started by exploring literacy coaching as professional development and expanded our efforts to transform the leadership landscape to include teachers, instructional coaches, principals, and central office staff collaborating in practice.

This redefinition of roles and collaboration during instruction penetrated the “core technology” of teaching — what happens between teachers and students in the

classroom (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009; Bodilly, 1998; Garmston & Wellman, 1999).

Throughout our improvement effort, we learned to:

- Build capacity from the top down, middle out, and bottom up;
- Invest in the professional development of professional developers;
- Align professional development of coaches and principals; and
- Affect instruction, beyond common planning and assessment.

We are the sixth-largest district in the state, serving more than 17,000 students. Our coaching model became the cornerstone of a five-year instructional improvement and professional development plan. We believed teachers would best improve by collaborating with other effective teachers, or coaches.

GETTING STARTED

We'd dabbled in collaborative planning and developing common assessments, we'd observed teachers, but five years ago, no one ventured into another teacher's classroom to participate in her practice. Our students' reading and writing performance was unacceptable, especially English language learners and those with disabilities.

Based on district data, we knew:

1. There was no consistency in reading instruction, lesson architecture, time spent in reading instruction or practice, and use of curriculum or assessment; and
2. Our district was moving forward with Oregon's Response to Intervention (RTI) Initiative based on effective core instruction, assessment, progress monitoring, and support for students who struggled in reading.

In order to comply with RTI, we needed a core reading program. A core program was either a common philosophy with strategies and methods for teaching reading or a common reading curriculum. Our district had neither.

Survey and observation data indicated teachers were in charge of determining all aspects of instruction in their classrooms. Teachers within the same school were not consistent in their decisions about instruction. Yet we were at a confluence of state and federal mandates to be more consistent, especially with assessment and core curriculum.

In previous years, the central office initiated improvement strategies, then disseminated them to principals to implement. We had not yet implemented any type of monitoring with walk-throughs, learning walks, or rounds. Our principals shouldered the burden of implementation, often experiencing tension between district initiatives and site-based decision making and culture. Our data indicated teachers were sole practitioners and chief instructional decision makers.

Our new central office goal for literacy was to become both consistent and creative. Principals and coaches were expected to ensure consistency with curriculum and assessment and encourage creativity in best practices for student engagement. DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Karhanek (2004) and DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2006) describe this dilemma as tight/loose in professional learning communities. I prefer the terms consistent/creative, as tight/loose conjures up visions of a noose. This quandary is best addressed with teams of leadership at school sites. Our teams began with principals and coaches and grew to include teacher leaders.

BUILDING CAPACITY

I met our six literacy coaches for the first time two weeks before school was out for the summer, the day after I was told I was moving to the central office from being a principal. My new job was to lead professional development in reading for coaches and principals and align the reading program to state standards. We were also considering selecting new reading materials.

As I participated in this journey, I found that I needed to build capacity for myself in the shift from leading a building to leading from central office. During the summer, I invested in my own professional development, building capacity from the top down. I read research about coaching, revisited NSDC's Standards for Staff Development, reviewed my dissertation on teacher learning, and networked via e-mail with colleagues about coaching.

The initial plan for building capacity districtwide was to develop learning communities of coaches and principals; use data to make research-based decisions; and collaborate to improve content knowledge in reading and coaching. We also brought together several high-performing teachers to study the current reading program and student performance data. We simultaneously built capacity from the *top down* (principals and central office staff), the *middle out* (coaches), and the *bottom up* (teachers).

Principals and central office staff participated in bimonthly professional development meetings. Coaches met monthly. Our professional development centered on analyzing student reading data and exploring reading content, assessment, and instruction. After three years, we shifted our coaching and learning emphases more to writing. We were able to improve student achievement in literacy by improving teacher and principal literacy knowledge.

FROM ISOLATION TO CONSISTENCY

As we began, we encountered a major challenge when the reading alignment committee of 40 teachers, coaches,



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specialists, and principals made three recommendations: implement at least 90 minutes of reading instruction each day; adopt a new core program; and implement a common reading assessment. These three recommendations were in stark contrast to the current practice of each teacher making independent decisions about instruction. The highly successful teachers from the reading committee were adamant about these recommendations.

Half the elementary principals did not believe their teachers would implement 90 minutes for reading with a core program and a common assessment.

North Clackamas School District

Milwaukie, Ore.

Number of schools: **32**

Enrollment: **17,508**

Staff: **2,126**

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	72%
Black:	3%
Hispanic:	13%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	8%
Native American:	2%
Other:	2%

Limited English proficient: **13%**

Languages spoken: **64**

Free/reduced lunch: **35%**

Special education: **12%**

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The other half believed the teachers could and should. We were a house divided. For three months, principals were engaged in reading professional development for 90 minutes at each meeting. At the end of the nine hours of professional development, the principals agreed to endorse all three recommendations.

With these agreements, coaches shifted their focus from building relationships to learning a new reading program, as they were responsible for the on-site professional development for the program. Every principal

wanted coaches for onsite professional development, but the district couldn't afford to fund this request. We increased coaching positions with one for every Title I school and a single shared coach for the non-Title I schools, funded by Title II. The entire K-6 district would implement a common core reading curriculum. The leadership challenge was to bring all schools from compliance to commitment.

LEARNING FOR ALL

Coaches, teacher leaders, and administrators participated in professional development on the new reading program. The first training in the summer was not enough learning time, so coaches designed multiple voluntary summer workshops. Principals participated in additional training to increase their confidence in reading content and strategies embedded in the program. City et al. (2009) agrees training administrators without their subordinates is effective initial professional development, since they can be reluctant to take risks or raise questions in front of teachers they evaluate.

Every teacher went home for the summer with a teacher's guide to the new reading program and an opportunity to participate in summer workshops using the new reading materials. More than 100 teachers (30% of our teachers) participated in

these coach-led workshops, allowing teachers to collaborate with coaches before implementing the reading program. Coach/teacher leader pairs designed August half-day mandatory trainings for every teacher.

Each successive year, coaches and principals collaborated with more precision. Learning walks, collaborative planning, and common lesson architecture became more common. Yet at this point, coach-teacher collaboration around instruction remained rare. We continued to provide on-site coaching, summer workshops, and book studies enhancing teacher learning.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPERS

We invested in the coaches' professional development, enhancing capacity from the middle out. Throughout the five years, book studies for coaches, curriculum development and support, and sharing coaching strategies became common coaching practices. Coaches' monthly full-day professional development meetings and two-day retreat included more than 80 hours of professional development and supported three goals:

- Implement the district's continuous improvement plan around literacy and the implementation of RTI;
- Increase our professional knowledge and skills around coaching; and
- Ensure consistent communication across the schools.

We identified strong classroom teachers willing to work with coaches. These partnerships usually featured coaches demonstrating in the cooperating teacher's classroom or teachers allowing coaches to observe. This one-to-one coaching built trust. Coaches and teachers began to plan together. Coaching meetings expanded to include special education and English language development leaders.

Coaches were breaking down barriers and collaborating in the act of co-teaching and planning with successful teachers. What began as a model where coaches were perceived as experts who worked with struggling teachers (a misconception that persisted throughout our first year) evolved to a partnership model (Knight, 2007). Coaches participated in a book study of Knight's book, *Instructional Coaching*, and three of us attended Columbia University Teachers College Coaching Institute. At the institute, we participated in a lab site, where the classroom became an engaging learning environment for everyone involved — teachers, students, coaches, and administrators. The experience was transformational. We had to bring this robust collaboration during instruction to our district. We chose to combine the best of Knight's work with the Teachers College coaching lab site model to fit our district's and schools' culture and goals.

ALIGN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF COACHES AND PRINCIPALS

At central office, my role shifted toward aligning coach and principal professional development. I frequently reminded

STUDENT PERFORMANCE RESULTS 2008-09

Reading scores	State Percent meet or exceed	District Percent meet or exceed 35% poverty	Clackamas Elementary (Title I) 75% poverty	Campbell Elementary (Title I) 44% poverty
Grade 3	83%	85%	More than 95%	93%
Grade 4	84%	86%	92%	95%
Grade 5	77%	81%	82%	83%
Grade 6	77%	83%	71%	85%

Since the implementation of coaching and lab sites, the district consistently outperforms the state averages in reading and math. The two elementary schools using lab sites most consistently outperform the district averages as well. (Clackamas' success at grade 3 includes more than 95% meeting or exceeding in math as well.)

coaches not to get ahead of their principals. Coaches were natural initiators, and they needed to align in practice with their principals or communication became strained. At the central office, we changed thinking and roles to envision coaches and principals learning in the same room. This was by no means natural for many and required a lot of trust between coaches and principals. At the beginning of the fourth year, we brought all principals and coaches together for a three-day workshop on instructional coaching led by Jim Knight. It was no small task to corral principals and their coaches for three days. It proved to be the tipping point for collaboration among coaches and principals. As a result, the job title of literacy coach shifted to instructional coach, as coaching became transferrable to other subjects. If I could start over, I would have included principals and coaches earlier and more often in shared professional development. The principal's role is too complex and demanding to do it alone. Principals viewed their coach as an ally, and all saw the coach as essential for site-based learning. Coach/principal teams eventually communicated and balanced district initiatives and school-based learning.

COMMITMENT TO ONGOING IMPROVEMENT

It took four years for all these professional development efforts to penetrate classrooms with a lab site model. Coaches successfully co-taught and worked one-on-one with teachers. We conducted learning walks and observed instruction. We implemented common planning and assessment. But the lab site brought teachers, coaches, and principals into effective teachers' rooms to learn and practice together, raising the quality of instruction for all participants. See chart above.

Coaches were fully funded from Title I and Title II funds. During the unprecedented 2009 budget reductions, we asked principals: "What one expenditure must stay, even at the ex-

pense of other programs?" Their unanimous response was "coaching positions." Retaining coaches was principals' No. 1 priority after four years. Principals and coaches improved teacher performance and student achievement. That sunlit morning in kindergarten, our district demonstrated commitment to remaining in practice — teachers, coaches, principals, and central office invested in improving student learning through teachers' practice.

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