MOVE BEYOND MANAGEMENT
Coaching for school leaders translates into student improvement

By Valerie von Frank

As a first-year principal in one of Indiana's lowest-performing elementary schools, Robin Peterman faced the challenge of dramatically restructuring the school. With two-thirds of student families not speaking English, she needed to overcome barriers of language and poverty to raise student achievement, and she had little time for a learning curve as a new leader. The state's pressure to reform was immediate.

Finding her footing and the confidence to admit that she didn't know it all wasn't easy. But it was made easier by the support put in place by her district. Rather than just leave her leadership to a traditional sink-or-swim model, Ft. Wayne Community Schools offered Peterman and a handful of other principals in the district's lowest performing schools a critical experience not often available to school leaders — coaching.

While instructional coaches for teachers have become more prevalent around the country, school leaders seldom have the same support.

"Districts often don't assign principals coaches because educators lack a clear vision of the power of coaching to help principals gain skills," writes Kay Psencik, a leadership coach and author of *The Coach's Craft: Powerful Practices to Support School Leaders* (2011, p. 12). "Although the nation has developed an intense focus on instructional coaching and teacher leadership, which are essential to teacher learning, leadership development and principal coaching have received less attention."

Most principals, according to Psencik, may at best have a mentor who helps them figure out mainly the managerial skills — how to set up the teaching schedule, how to make sure the PTO runs effectively, how to forge bonds with the community. Principals may attend conferences for professional learning, she said, but that's not all the support they need. Coaches, Psencik said, are able to ask strategic, focused questions at critical moments that lead the principals to grow in knowledge and understanding of their role.

Coaching provides benefits that can translate into student improvement, Psencik said. Although she notes that

Align your professional learning resources when facing limited budgets

Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results is sometimes referred to as insanity.

Although the psychology community has not adopted this popular definition commonly attributed to Albert Einstein (among others), it's certainly one that gets quoted often. Perhaps one of the reasons we routinely refer to this adage is our human nature to live it. We eat the same fatty foods, get little exercise, and get frustrated when we're not losing weight. We hit the snooze button several times each morning, take the same traffic-heavy route to work, and fret about being late. What about us enlightened educators? When resources get tight and we hear calls for fiscal responsibility, district and building school leaders tend to follow the same strategy over and over: cutting the budget for professional learning while at the same time wondering why effective teaching is waning and fewer students are learning at high levels.

In each example above, there's research and data that should push us to make better choices. Doctors and nutritionists have laid out clear formulas for losing weight. Data collected over the years should convince anyone it makes sense to travel to work at times and via routes that are less popular. When it comes to teaching and learning, research and years of practice have been sending consistent messages as well:

- The effectiveness of the classroom teacher is the #1 school-related factor that contributes to how well students do in school; and
- One of the most powerful strategies school systems have at their disposal to improve teacher effectiveness is high-quality professional learning.

Given what we know about the critical link between professional learning, teacher effectiveness, and student achievement, it's fascinating to me how quickly districts take the misguided approach and immediately slash their professional learning budgets when times get tough … essentially doing the same thing over and over again while expecting that teachers will do just fine without continuing their learning.

I do not want to give the impression I'm naïve to the realities facing many district and school leaders. I fully recognize there will be moments when resources are limited and choices need to be made. So how should school leaders respond when resources become limited and there are calls to trim the budgets? I offer the following suggestions:

1. Stop spending money on ineffective professional learning; bringing in speakers and haphazardly sending people to conferences and institutes without plans for follow-up or sharing what's learned rarely bring about long-term changes in practice.

2. Think differently about how teacher leaders are used to support the learning of their colleagues, how veteran teachers support the learning of novices, and how coaches and department chairs support the learning of their teams.

3. Restructure the school day so grade-level and subject-area teams have time to meet and develop structures that hold all accountable for demonstrating their learning and its impact on students.

4. Examine how current technology is used to support professional learning to ensure that technology solutions are aligned in principle with the Standards for Professional Learning.

Yes, we can always use additional resources to effectively do this endeavor we call teaching and learning. However, much of what we need is right at our fingertips. We just need to harness it much more effectively in order to avoid repeating past mistakes over and over again.

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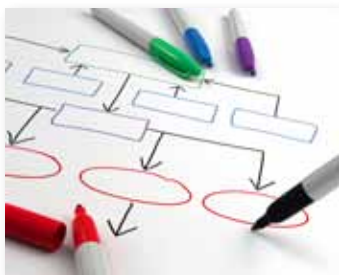
From 60 course failures to 4: Learning communities bring gains in student success

As told to Anthony Armstrong

Over the last two years, we have gone from being a traditional school to a competency-based grading and reporting school that thinks very differently philosophically. For example, our big focus has been on rethinking what it means to be "proficient" or "competent" for a particular course or subject. When you ask, do kids have the right to fail or is failure not an option, it dictates the teaching and grading practices that a teacher will employ and what the teacher will do to support kids who are struggling. We believe that learning is for all, so failure is not an option. Teaching is about student performance, so we have moved away from the age-old teacher philosophy that "I taught it, but they didn't learn it." This has been a huge change for our school and staff. When we started this change a few years ago, some were on board, some were hesitant, and some were very much against it.

We wanted to create a system that would be able to guarantee parents and students that it didn't matter which teacher students had; they would have the same access to curriculum and support for learning. In traditional systems, a student may get a teacher that really values homework, or one that gives a lot of extra credit, but these are all things that have nothing to do with the learning that students should be mastering and demonstrating. We focused our work on developing schoolwide

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grading practices that support learning and separate the "behavioral" aspects of a grade.

LEARNING COMMUNITIES HELP FACILITATE CHANGE

We have been piloting teacher and student learning community teams for our freshman class. Our professional development has shifted to support for professional learning communities. We focus on teams of teachers, making sure that they plan together and are functioning at a high level and are able to talk about student learning and student performance. We have been making adjustments in what we do as building administrators so that teachers have the structure they need to support this model.

One of the reasons why it works so well is that we have dedicated time built into our schedule for teachers to meet regularly and plan regularly, very much like a middle school model. Freshman teachers have daily team time. It's a collaborative model now, with 90 minutes of time every day.

We use coaching models more than anything else because one-and-done training doesn't get you anywhere. Any time we take on an initiative, we look at a coaching model and professional development that is ongoing and embedded into the work

that our teachers do every day.

Over time, as the teams get stronger and more self-sufficient, the professional development has become more varied and less structured. It was more structured and top-down in the beginning, but now it is diversified to accommodate different needs.

The biggest resistance to working in teams is that it is not what the teachers grew up with. There is some perception that the teachers are losing

autonomy or decision making. However, teachers in the team model have been receptive to the work. They like the collaboration and collegiality.

Thanks to our pilot program of teacher teams over the last three years, we have almost eliminated our failure rate for freshman, which went from 60 course failures the first year to 30 the second year, and then to just 3 or 4 failures last year; so that data showed that what we were doing was working, which was giving teachers opportunities to plan and work together.

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From left: Principal Brian M. Stack with assistant principals Ann Hadwen and Michael Turmelle at Sanborn Regional High School in Kingston, N.H.

no formal studies of school leadership coaching have yet been done, research on the impact of coaching on business executives implementing change has shown good effects (Grant, Curtaynes, & Burton, 2009; Moen, Skaalvik, & Hacker, 2009).

Peterman said coaching helped her grab the reins in her first year. "When you're brand new and coming into a failing situation, you can doubt yourself a lot and second-guess your decisions," she said. "You don't really have anything to compare to except what you've seen from the teacher seat.

"Through coaching, you gain confidence. It releases some of the pressure, because you realize it's all about growth, about professional learning."

A THEORY OF CHANGE FOR LEADERSHIP LEARNING

Coaching is as beneficial to principals' professional learning, Psencik said, as it is to solidifying teacher learning. She defines coaching as "just-in-time, personalized support" (2011, p. 30).

"Coaching, in its pure definition, is a person in relationship with the coachee in a way that the coach is able to ask strategic, focused questions that lead the coachees to learn and to make decisions for themselves," Psencik said. "The coach is honing the skills of the coachees so they are strong leaders."
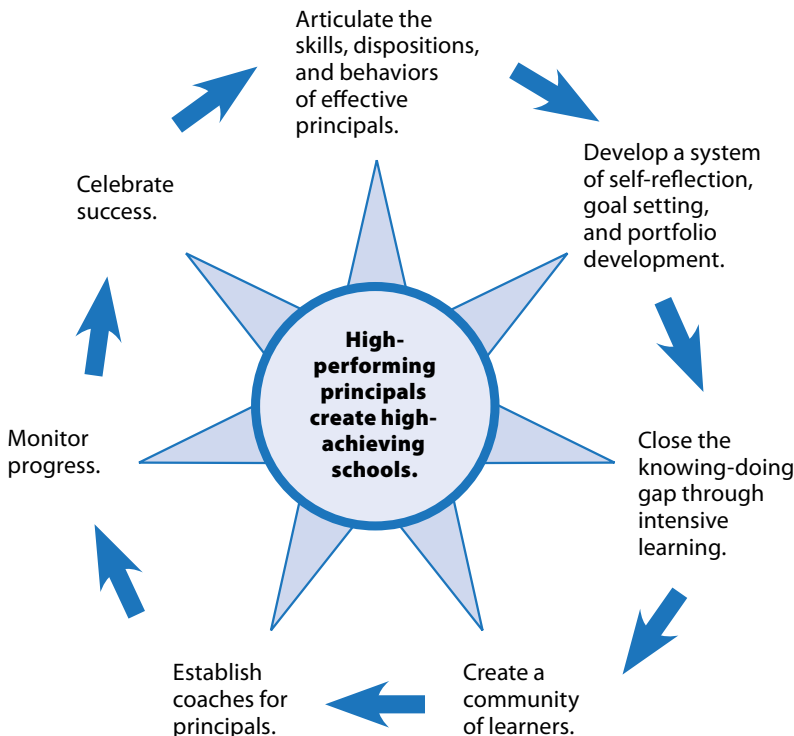
Coaching is a critical element of Psencik's theory of change for principals' learning and professional growth. The essential elements of the theory are:

1. **Articulate the skills, dispositions, and behaviors of effective principals.** Psencik says district leadership teams should define a limited list of skills, based on research, that principals should have. They might begin with the stem: "In this district, our principals will…"
2. **Develop a system of self-reflection, goal setting, and portfolio development.** Principals then assess their own effectiveness using focus groups of staff, students, parents, and community members; perception inventories; or other tools.
3. **Close the knowing-doing gap through intensive learning.** Principals spend time learning in depth about topics needed to strengthen their leadership, such as building trust or creating effective collaboration.
4. **Create a community of learners.** Principals become less isolated by creating their own learning communities to support one another.
5. **Establish coaches for principals.** Coaches help leaders change behaviors and develop new skills and strategies. Without coaching, Psencik writes (2011, p. 32), past experience has shown that other learning is "insufficient and likely will fail to lead to principals learning new skills."
6. **Monitor progress.** Principals establish measures of effectiveness, such as portfolios, that can help answer questions such as, "What new behaviors am I using in school? What effect are those behaviors having on teacher practice? What are the results in student learning?"
7. **Celebrate success.** Publicly sharing accomplishments and the effects of the learning creates an image of the leader as learner and brings the cycle to the beginning of the circle again.

In Ft. Wayne, Psencik used the cycle in her work with a small cohort of principals of low-performing schools during six days of summer professional learning. Psencik worked as a leadership coach with each principal during this time, as well as with the group. She also helped the leaders plan the professional learning that they would lead in their own schools and helped them learn leadership skills by sharing facilitation of the sessions.

In breakout sessions, the principals worked with their

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> Sustainable learning cultures require skillful leadership.

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Celebrate success.

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High-performing principals create high-achieving schools.

Establish coaches for principals.

Create a community of learners.

Continued from p. 4

staffs to develop vision and mission statements, set professional learning goals for the year, and develop specific ideas of what success in practice would look like.

"Other professional learning often is (listening to) an expert and then you have to assimilate for yourself how that can integrate into your everyday practice," Peterman noted. "With a coach, it's more about service and what you need in your particular situation."

THE VALUE OF A COACH

Peterman said Psencik's facilitative approach allowed her to define her own issues and needs, then work to define goals.

"I said, 'These are the three things on my mind,' and Kay said, 'Let's plot that out. How do you see it? If the year goes the way you want it to, what will it look like?' "

Peterman developed areas of focus, including improving data-driven decision making, student behavior, and academic expectations. She identified what improvement would look like in a month, at the end of a semester, and at the end of a year, with measurements to monitor progress.

"What Kay did was show me and my staff how to take responsibility for what we have control over," Peterman said. "If our instruction is slow and not rigorous, if the pace is slow, if our transitions are ineffective, if our relationships aren't strong with our children, then it's not the kids' fault that no one's paying attention. It was changing the mindset and saying, 'What can we control?'

"Through making me articulate where I wanted to get to and having me be part of the process of the steps I was going to take and how I would measure getting there, it made me feel that it was all possible," Peterman continued.

For Peterman, two years after taking the lead at Abbett Elementary, those decisions have proved to be good ones.

In a school whose students had the lowest 4th-grade scores in the state in 2008-09, with only 4% meeting standards in math and language arts, student achievement has rocketed to 55% of the student body meeting standards on both sections of the exam.

A NEW ROLE FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

Psencik notes that the role of the principal has changed from being a good manager to being a good instructional leader. The shift has made the job increasingly complex.

Meanwhile, as the current population of school leaders grows older (Gates, Ringel, Santibanez, Ross, & Chung, 2003) and leaves the profession, Psencik said new principals more often have less classroom experience and lack deep understanding of instructional practices and curriculum design based on experience rather than textbook learning.

"As principals face greater demands and pressure to

Attributes of a coach

Kay Psencik suggests that principals can seek out coaching if district support is not available, but should look for leaders with proven achievement and the personal attributes that make a good coach. Ask questions to determine whether the coach has these six attributes:

- **Self-awareness:** What drives the coach? What inspires her?
- **Honesty:** How does what the coach thinks, does, and says align with his stated values?
- **Sincerity:** How do the coach's actions reflect her stated intentions?
- **Competence:** How credible is the coach?
- **Reliability:** Does the coach keep her promises?
- **Intentional:** Is the coach interested in me and what I have to say?

Source: Adapted from *The Coach's Craft: Powerful Practices to Support School Leaders,* by Kay Psencik. (Learning Forward, 2011, pp. 89-92.)

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have all students reach higher levels of achievement, leading is increasingly challenging," Psencik writes (2011, p. 10). "The leader's role is pivotal to schools becoming communities of learners in which teachers continuously improve their practice so they can enable students to succeed at high levels."

Peterman, who put in place a weekly 45-minute all-staff professional learning time at her school, said it succinctly: "True coaching is about how the coach can help me do what needs to be done to help children."

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Theory of change and logic model

Use these tools to develop a shared vision and goals to help your organization move from its current condition to its desired outcome, and define the essential steps and possible challenges that may arise.

THEORY OF CHANGE

Learning strategies reflect a thoughtful, grounded theory of change. The strategies answer the questions:

* How will we get from where we are to where we want to be?
* What will it take for me and my leadership team to authentically incorporate our new learning into our everyday work?

Expected impact on my leadership, teacher practice, and student learning:

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LOGIC MODEL

Principals set a logical pathway or model for accomplishing their goals by breaking their theory of change into checkpoints.

10 MONTHS FROM NOW	7 MONTHS FROM NOW	3 MONTHS FROM NOW	ESSENTIAL RESOURCES	INPUTS
Long-term outcomes (student achievement gains expected and shifts in teacher practices)	Intermediate goals	Short-term goals		
Measures of effectiveness				
Artifacts				

BENEFITS	IMPEDIMENTS TO ACCOMPLISHING MY GOAL(S)	ESSENTIAL INVOLVEMENT I NEED FROM OTHERS
To students		
To me		
To the school team		
CHECKPOINTS FOR ASCERTAINING PROGRESS	**EVIDENCE I WILL ACCEPT THAT I AM ACHIEVING MY GOAL(S)**	**THOUGHTS ABOUT MY PORTFOLIO**

Source: **Psencik, K. (2011).** *The coach's craft: Powerful practices to support school leaders.* Oxford, OH: Learning Forward.

THE COACH'S CRAFT: POWERFUL PRACTICES TO SUPPORT SCHOOL LEADERS
By Kay Psencik
    Explore ways to improve the coaching practices of listening, observing, planning and committing to new action. Included in the book is an Innovation Configuration map of effective coaching. With a self-assessment tool, coaches can hone in on their own strengths and weaknesses to find ways to support leaders in improving schools.
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What's happening online: Investing in conversations

Excerpt from Learning Forward's blog, PD Watch:

"Conversations are the lifeblood of a school. An integral part of the educator's job is communicating with students, parents, and other staff. These conversations range from team curriculum meetings, coaching conversations with staff and students, and, of course, some confrontation conversations.

"Parents, students, and community members all have an expectation that administrators and teachers know how to have these conversations well.

"The problem is that many education institutions don't dedicate time or resources to the development of staff in the area of communication. Other professional development priorities often take precedence.

"But we miss a critical opportunity to provide a constructive socio and emotional skill set for school staff and the chance for staff to communicate openly and authentically. When a school is operating with a higher awareness around conversations, it creates a solid foundation for the transfer of learning to happen and the implementation of academic programs to be successful."

— *Janet Irving, director of education partnerships*
Fierce in the Schools

Visit www.learningforward.org/blog to read the full entry.