



# MAKE THE CASE FOR COACHING

**BOLSTER SUPPORT WITH EVIDENCE THAT COACHING MAKES A DIFFERENCE**

**By Ellen Eisenberg and Elliott Medrich**

**I**t is not difficult to persuade school leaders and teachers that instructional coaching represents an important alternative to traditional teacher professional learning. Many recognize that job-embedded professional learning in the form of instructional coaching, aligned to a clear set of research-based practices, is nonevaluative, and, if provided with regularity, can help teachers become better at their craft. Real-time, side-by-side support is infinitely more effective than drop-in or drive-by professional learning that offers no opportunity for collaboration and collective problem solving.

There may be general agreement on this point, but that is not enough. In fact, a very important constituency — policymakers — has not been especially enthusiastic about the promise of coaching. Why is that? Policymakers want to see evidence that coaching makes a difference for teachers and students. To this group, making a difference means improving performance on standardized tests. In the current fiscal climate, leaders want to know not only that their investments are based on firm grounds theoretically, but also that instructional coaching works.

Our experience in Pennsylvania has been that evidence of positive gains in student outcomes is critical to getting attention from those whose support we need. As with any other form of effective professional learning, showing results is often the hardest thing to do. We think that our

initiatives work, we hear anecdotally that they work, but hard evidence? Often there isn't any. It's challenging, if not impossible, to show immediate results for students with a range of skills and a variety of needs.

Building the evidentiary base is a central preoccupation at the Pennsylvania Institute for Instructional Coaching, whose mission is to help teachers become better at their practice with the objective of improving student engagement and student outcomes. We live by a set of guidelines intended to provide constituents with the information they need in order to persuade school boards, superintendents, and school leaders that instructional coaching represents a good investment.

At the institute, we believe that we have an exceptional teacher professional learning support system. We believe that every teacher deserves a coach and that coaching helps teachers improve their practice, and, in turn, meet students' needs. At the same time, we recognize that moving the dial on student outcomes is difficult and that only with good data and thoughtful evaluation can we assure funders and those participating in our work that instructional coaching is a worthy teacher professional learning investment.

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**DON'T FORGET TO EVALUATE.**

1

Seems simple, but that's not always the case. With limited funds, program managers often treat evaluation as an afterthought — something to worry about after the hard work associated with design and implementation has been addressed. Evaluation, however, needs to live near the top of the list of things about which to worry. It is every bit as important as any other aspect of an instructional coaching initiative. Evaluation also matters in a more general sense in that others seeking to replicate an instructional coaching framework need evidence that it works, or else it will be difficult for them to gain the support of policymakers and practitioners.

**IF THE EVIDENTIARY BASE AROUND YOUR AREA OF WORK IS THIN OR NONEXISTENT, WORRY ABOUT HOW THIS WILL AFFECT YOUR FUNDING PROSPECTS.**

2

Why doesn't every school district jump at the chance to fund coaching? Because it's an investment — school districts are funding coaches *instead* of doing something else — those who must allocate scarce resources want to know that they are making a wise decision. If there isn't much in the way of evidence, it's hard to argue the case persuasively.

**RIGOR MATTERS.**

4

If you are bothering to do evaluation research, do it well. Be clear about what you are trying to measure. Be clear on what metrics matter. Craft good instrumentation. Undertake robust and appropriate analyses. Report results completely, not just the good bits. Tell the story, and be honest about what has been learned.

**LET EVALUATION DRIVE CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT.**

5

Evaluation is not scary. It should be your best friend. It should help you think and rethink what you are doing and recalibrate your work to improve the prospects of meeting your objectives. If you are afraid to critically evaluate what you are doing and how you are doing it, you are out of step with current funding philosophy. In the case of instructional coaching, we need to continue to build the evaluation portfolio so that others can learn how it can fit into the larger picture of professional learning and understand how to use instructional coaching to meet teacher and student needs.

**IF YOU EXPECT THAT ALL THE EVIDENCE WILL SHOW AMAZING, AWESOME RESULTS, YOU HAVEN'T BEEN PAYING ATTENTION TO EDUCATION EVALUATION LITERATURE.**

3

Smart policymakers know that outcomes are not all great and not always consistent. They know that even programs that work well in some circumstances may not work well in other settings or in the hands of other personnel. The trick is to have enough evidence available so that program managers can understand, as best as they can, which circumstances hold the best promise for success. In our work at the Pennsylvania Institute for Instructional Coaching, we recognize that certain kinds of supports are essential to a successful instructional coaching initiative. We do our best to help districts and schools create conditions that may lead to success. We use evaluations to help make these data-driven decisions.