



Coaching as a continuous improvement tool

If Disney movies have taught me anything, it is the importance of a wise and trusty sidekick. Jiminy Cricket has often been perched on my shoulder to guide me to making a better decision, particularly when the shortcutting side of my nature would rather push ahead and get something done quickly.

The practice of coaching is far more complex than the work that Jiminy Cricket does for Pinocchio — or for me, for that matter. What coaches share with Jiminy Cricket is a commitment to offering their best thinking to those they counsel. Those effectively filling the coaching role in education, whatever their job title, have deep expertise in communication, collaboration, facilitation, planning, instruction and curriculum, reflection, and feedback, to name just a few.

In this issue of *JSD*, we see coaching examples and strategies that align with these areas and more. When I look at the larger picture portrayed here, however, I am struck by the crucial role of coaching in the cycle of continuous improvement. It is exciting to see the many ways that schools and districts embed a cycle of continuous improvement into any improvement agenda. When organizations are intentional about continuous

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improvement, how do they best support it? Coaching is key.

Cycles of continuous improvement take many forms. There is more than one model portrayed in this issue, whether explicitly or implicitly. In “3 steps to great coaching: A simple but powerful instructional coaching cycle nets results” (p. 10), the authors talk about an identify-learn-improve cycle applied specifically to coaching practice. At its simplest is the plan-do-reflect cycle. The cycle of continuous improvement embedded in our Standards for Professional Learning and definition of professional learning includes seven steps, starting with collecting data and cycling through evaluation of results.

Throughout this issue, consider how coaching supports the high-fidelity implementation of a learning cycle. In “Talking points: Data displays are an effective way to engage teachers” (p. 24), for example, the authors highlight how coaches help educators understand and use data meaningfully — an essential part of any planning step. The educators in “What we learned from a tomato: Partnering with a content expert plants new ideas for instruction” (p. 30) dig deep into content specifics to refine instructional practices, supporting both learning and implementation steps. Those responsible for coaching will learn about effective feedback and reflection strategies vital to keeping learning continuous in “Clear goals, clear results:



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Content-focused routines support learning for everyone — including coaches” (p. 34).

Clearly, coaching can be useful at any or every step in a learning cycle, often assisting learners to understand the very notion of continuous learning and how it works in practice. When schools and systems are intentional about the effective use of coaching, they ensure support from a skilled coach at the points that educators need it most and demonstrate their commitment to operate as a learning organization.

Who is it that sits on your shoulder, offering advice or an opportunity to reflect on what you already know and believe? I consider myself quite fortunate to have had Jiminy Cricket supplanted by better coaches, both professional and personal.

Whether we rely on those who coach us as trusted advisers or go-to experts, anyone committed to performing better each day benefits from such support. ■