

# THE SHIFT FROM 'ME' TO 'WE'



## SCHOOLS WITH A COACHING CULTURE BUILD INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE CAPACITY

By Holli Hanson and Christine Hoyos

**T**he athletic coach's focus is to develop individual skills as well as the collective capacity of the team to perform at the highest level. A coaching culture applies the same concept to schools. What might this dual approach to coaching — the individual and the collective — mean and look like in schools? How is it different than having a few specialized building-based coaches? How might a focus on individual and collective development affect a school's culture to impact student and adult learning?

Coaching in schools is not new. What is fundamentally different in a culture of coaching is that all members of the school community see themselves as coaches. While there may be formally appointed coaches and teacher leaders to lead the work, developing all staff to coach each other and making coaching the culture's norm accelerates adult learning which, in turn, accelerates student learning. Professional learning becomes human-centered, focusing on the human interaction of learning.

A coaching culture requires staff members to be aware of the duality of their roles and to know when to adopt a researcher's perspective before diving back in, as the educator, to impact the learning that's taking place. Developing this capacity, while challenging, is instrumental to a coaching culture. It's a culture that develops through powerful adult learning experiences that integrate collaboration, inquiry, and reflection.

### CREATING A COACHING CULTURE

A coaching culture is acquired through development, not training. Development is a learning process in adaptive work, whereas training is typically procedural in nature to address technical work.

An emphasis on development has implications for adult learning across the school and larger system. The shift to authentic, human-centered adult learning occurs through a discipline of inquiry, where the learner works from data and engages in rigorous content; multiple opportunities for reflection in ways that create relevance and insight to new content; and collaboration that is used to expand perspective, build sustainability, and move learning from "me" to "we" so that professional development



enables true organizational learning (Rasmussen, n.d.). Authentic professional development encourages risks and values mistakes as learning opportunities. Cultures that embrace this way of being know that these learning opportunities lead to creativity and innovation.

Developing a coaching culture happens in a variety of contexts through action learning. This shift in the way staff members interact puts pressure on the structures and processes in place, demanding that they evolve as well, to provide increased opportunities and time for adult learning to occur. A key factor in this process is job-embedded support, nested within the everyday reality of the school and its classrooms. What does job-embedded support of a coaching culture look like? Here are a few examples.

**Studio classrooms.** A colleague articulates a dilemma spurred by student and/or teacher evidence. The teacher invites peers to the classroom, where they note student evidence through the lens of the dilemma. The host teacher and his or her colleagues analyze the student evidence. Colleagues provide reflective feedback to the host teacher, who then reconsiders his or her practice.

**Instructional rounds.** The school identifies a problem of practice. Peers visit colleagues' classrooms, where

## USING COLLABORATION, INQUIRY, AND REFLECTION

**Collaboration:** Opportunities for adults to come together to discuss teaching and learning is critical in transformative work, and meaningful collaboration must focus on the relationship of the learner (or learners in a collaborative task) and the teacher (or designer of the learning experience) in the presence of content that needs to be learned. Often called the instructional core (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009), this is what matters most in affecting learning.

- *What do we notice about the learning that's taking place?*
- *What's our evidence?*
- *And then, what do we see that needs attention in the instructional core?*

**Inquiry:** Curiosity about teaching and learning is key to engaging learners in the work. Inquiry begins with information that sparks a question or dilemma. Analyzing information in order to make sense of a situation is key to being strategic in decision making. The next step is to make design decisions that can be put into practice for an improved learner experience.

- *What do I know about the learner?*
- *What am I wondering? How will this inform my practice?*

**Reflection:** For learning to be meaningful, learners need time to reflect. Reflective questions cause introspection — an impetus to describe or define what we do and why we do what we do. Considering what we know and do against the information we've gathered and examined gives the learner pause to reconsider practice.

- *What shifts, if any, will I need to make in my instructional practice?*
- *How will I know that what I've done is effective?*

they note student evidence related to the problem of practice. Through collaborative description and analysis of student evidence, they make sense of the evidence, looking for patterns and trends. This analysis leads to predictions about student knowledge and understanding as well as recommendations for professional learning.

**One-to-one coaching.** A teacher identifies a question or challenge in practice. A peer observes the interaction of teacher and student in the presence of content, noting student evidence. A reflective conversation, using student evidence, facilitates the consideration and reconsideration of teacher practice.

**Whole-group institutes.** Staff members come together to engage in adult learning that is collaborative, inquisitive, and reflective. Through their shared experiences, they develop common understandings about best practices and discuss ways to effectively implement them.

**Adult learning communities.** Colleagues learn together in teams using inquiry and reflection as guides for their collaborative work. Real-time student and teacher evidence are the vehicles for adult learning and refinement of classroom practice.

**Professional development leadership teams.** A representative group of staff members uses real-time information to design and implement adult learning in service of student learning and achievement. Patterns and trends in student evidence become possibilities for adult learning.

Developing the individual and the collective nurtures both personal and collective responsibility and action (Abelman & Elmore, 1999), fostering a can-do attitude and a growth mindset across a team and school. A culture of coaching causes a shift from compliance to commitment, from external accountability to collective responsibility, from “us” and “them” to “we” and “our,” to everybody’s success.

Two schools in Aurora, Colorado, and Tacoma, Washington, illustrate this culture shift.

## ARKANSAS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL AURORA, COLORADO

At Arkansas Elementary School in Aurora, Colorado, principal Kevin Shrum is working to develop a staff that collectively is responsible for student learning. With challenges stemming in part from high mobility among its teaching staff, Arkansas began its transformation work with a baseline goal of enabling teachers to learn from one another.

Reinvention needed to address the school’s weakest link: culture and community. Focusing on these aspects allowed adult relationships within the community to take center stage as the reinvention work progresses. Arkansas put into place new structures designed to foster key relationships: adult-to-adult, adult-to-student, and student-to-student.

**Adult-to-adult relationships** are developed through grade-level instructional planning using professional learning community processes as well as structured vertical planning focused on

reading development and writing units of study. The school also uses whole-group professional learning as a structure to learn and share across teams and grade levels. Adult learning designed to position teachers as researchers is empowering staff to learn with and from one another.

**Adult-to-student relationships** are nurtured throughout the day, but one critical structure is the paraeducator connected to each grade level. These staff members are dedicated to supporting positive behavior choices as well as an academic focus of support with small-group and one-on-one instruction. Paraeducators also connect with students outside the classroom at recess and lunch. Relationships are fostered through coaching conversations with students so that they, too, can be more reflective on their practice as learner and community member.

**Adult-to-student and student-to-student relationships** are further strengthened through multigrade-level academic communities. These communities foster vertical conversations among teachers, mentoring between intermediate and primary students, and support for the school’s positive choices program. Teachers in the community support each other and students by connecting with students and building relationships over the years.

This collaborative work supports an articulated perspective of how students do — and should — progress through their elementary education experience. It also enables key conversations and mentoring relationships via inquiry and reflection across grade levels.

Arkansas’ focus on culture and community is strengthening relationships and has resulted in a decrease in behavior incidents, allowing for a focus on learning and instruction. For a school identified by the Colorado Department of Education as turnaround (low academic achievement and low growth), this is critical.

Teachers now monitor student learning at greater levels and with more specificity than before and, as a result, a higher percentage of students are growing in their acquisition of critical content and skills. After three years in turnaround status, the school moved up two levels to improvement status and is still going strong in its efforts to provide a quality education for students.

School leaders anticipate that, through deliberate use of adult collaboration, inquiry, and reflection, facilitated by teachers, instructional practices will continue to improve and be shared.

“We have a collective responsibility to accelerate the learning for every Arkansas student every day,” Shrum says. “In order for this to happen, we have to accelerate the learning of every Arkansas teacher. Every adult takes personal responsibility for teaching and learning.”

Shrum credits coaching, both formal and informal, for making this happen. “We reflect on student data, summative and formative,” he says. “We reflect on our instructional practices and how they impact student learning. We leave each

learning meeting with a clear and focused next instructional step. Over the course of the week, we implement, we try things on, we take risks. Again, the focus is on how our actions impact student learning.”

Support is a key part of the school’s coaching culture. Shrum says teachers receive support from administration, instructional coaches, colleagues on the grade-level team, and from peers within the academic community through dialogue and feedback. Teachers make their instructional practice public and act as critical friends for each other, reflecting on the cause and effects of teaching and learning to refine practice.

## LINCOLN HIGH SCHOOL

### TACOMA, WASHINGTON

Several years ago, Lincoln High School, a highly diverse urban high school in Tacoma, Washington, began to take a close look at the skills needed for teaching urban students and how to match their instruction to student needs.

By engaging in inquiry around instructional improvement, they began to realize that, in order to make progress, they needed to shift their thinking about adult learning and collaboration. No longer could each teacher function independently. To be successful, they had to develop ways in which they could support each other as researchers into their own practice, exploring strong instructional practices, analyzing data differently, and acting on what emerged from the data.

School leaders recognized that they, too, would be required to reconsider how they supported staff as adult learners. The first step was to listen to teachers to determine what they needed from professional learning. That established the basis for creating structures and the time for adult learning to take place. And they had to be learners alongside the staff, engaging in inquiry into their own practice.

The school created a professional development leadership team, which developed an ongoing shared vision and plan for professional learning. The group’s work focuses on a simple inquiry question: How do we design and support high-quality professional learning that honors teachers as professionals, supports immediate instructional needs, and increases student learning?

What has emerged is a dramatic cultural shift. As one example, inquiry groups, functioning as a type of professional learning community, meet weekly. Inquiry groups focus on a common inquiry question but with more specific questions guiding each group’s research and examination of student data. Members provide feedback to one another related to lesson design, instructional practice, and a deeper connection to standards such as Common Core. They are each other’s real-time coaches.

Large-group professional learning, facilitated by various staff members, is a way to share and develop a common understanding. These experiences are no longer stand-and-deliver. Instead, they are interactive, well-designed learning experiences that incorporate collaboration, inquiry, and reflective practice. Across

Coaching culture is ...	Coaching culture is not ...
An ongoing use of inquiry to learn about individual and collective practice.	Event-driven or sporadic.
Inclusive of all levels.	Hierarchical or selective.
Supported by clear structures and processes.	Forms and checklists.
A shift in the type of collaboration as collective ownership (and authorship) and accountability (responsibility).	A singular process between coach and teacher.
About research into practice.	Evaluative.

the school, there is an increase in collective ownership of instruction, peer observation, peer coaching, and student success.

“In the same way that we need to have the locus of control of the knowledge to be with the students, the locus of control of the work in professional development needs to be with the teachers,” says Lincoln instructional coach TJ Purdy. “We embrace the Coalition of Essential Schools principle of ‘teacher as coach, student as worker.’ In the classroom and during professional development sessions, in whole- or small-group settings, the principle shifts to ‘teacher as worker, coach/admin as lead learner.’ I, as the instructional coach, act as an inquirer, wanting to know more about what a teacher is willing to adjust, try, and reflect on to improve the learning for all students.”

Lincoln’s science department exemplifies collaboration and providing feedback on each other’s practice. They engage in the studio model three times a year but also meet quarterly to analyze state test data, create common assessments, and discuss vertical alignment of strategies and vocabulary between the different courses. The individuals embody a growth mindset necessary to improve practice for student success.

Collaborative meetings are energizing, and everyone’s voice is heard and respected. As a result, members have adopted similar management strategies, such as interactive notebooks and using Process Oriented Guided Inquiry Learning (POGIL). In addition, the group attends regional science conferences together in order to implement new strategies, whether content-specific or applicable to any classroom.

As they have begun to see one another as teammates on a mission to increase student achievement, the school’s state test data for science has grown tremendously — from 8.5% of students meeting standard in science in 2007 to 47% of students meeting standard on the biology end-of-course assessment in 2014, with a steady 7% growth in the last three years.

One of the most powerful things that has emerged is the practice of teachers asking students to be their coaches, helping them think differently about their teaching and be more reflec-

tive about what is effective and meaningful in the classroom. With this increase in collective ownership has come an increase in student success. Graduation rates are on the rise, climbing from 46.3% in 2010 to 65.7% in 2013. The number of students enrolled in AP courses has increased from 137 in 2010 to 536 in 2014. College-ready transcripts increased from 29% in 2008 to 59.4% in 2013.

“If we see ourselves as a team that is going to be successful year after year, we need to embrace a culture where it is OK to rely on each other as coaches, supporting our growth individually and collectively,” says principal Pat Erwin. “As the leader, it is my charge to empower all teachers to focus on what is happening in the classroom and their own learning, which includes risk taking and making mistakes, often revealing new opportunities for growth and learning.”

This changing culture has also meant changes for school leaders. For Erwin, that means becoming a partner in learning. “I must model being coached and being a coach to my staff,” Erwin says. “I have to be transparent about my inquiry questions. I must take time to be reflective and to be a collaborative partner, which can mean allowing my ideas and assumptions to be challenged. I have to invest in the intellectual and social capital of my staff. An interesting byproduct is that, as the adults in the school, teachers feel honored as professionals and a deeper sense of ownership and commitment to each other and our students.”

#### COLLEGIALITY AS THE NORM

Both of these school examples point to adult interaction based on deep professional inquiry, strong collaborative prac-

tices, and time and space for individual and collective reflection. This form of collegiality is the norm and way of doing business in these schools.

By developing sustainable structures and processes that support adult learning focused through collaboration, inquiry, and reflection, the capacity to maintain a coaching culture is strong enough to withstand the external factors and changes that systems continually face. By accelerating adult learning, these schools accelerate student learning and, in both cases, student achievement is increasing.

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#### Data drive these coaches

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