COACHING SIDE *by* SIDE

ONE-ON-ONE COLLABORATION CREATES CARING, CONNECTED TEACHERS

By Nancy Akhavan

Ask a teacher if he or she has ever been coached, and you are likely to first hear silence, then an answer that offers little information. "Why do you ask?" "There are coaches in my district." "I met with a coach once."

Teachers are programmed to make it look like they do it all on their own when it comes to professional learning. The problem is that this solo learner stance doesn't provide a helpful picture of teacher learning. Sometimes the answer is mixed up in what teachers think administrators want to hear about coaching.

Different coaching models have different attributes. Most coaching models fall into two types: districts and schools that implement coaching tied to one or more initiatives, and those that implement to improve teacher practice and teacher efficacy.

This story evolves from that second practice — coaching that improves teachers' belief in themselves and their ability to affect student learning, often employing a cycle of planning, modeling, observing, reflecting, and conferencing. This is the type of coaching that creates connected, caring teachers with the highest resiliency for making sure all students are learning.

Three years ago, as a school district administrator, I set out to find insights into optimal coaching experiences for classroom teachers. I asked, "What works for you, and why?" to groups of teachers across the United States who had received coaching in the previous school year. I wasn't just interested in learning what teachers thought. I wondered how coaching affects student learning. As I

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considered types of coaching models implemented across the United States, my inquiry evolved into three questions:

- Is there a difference in student achievement between teachers who are coached and those that aren't?
- What was coaching like for teachers, and why did it make a difference?
- What coaching model is best and why?

After examining articles and research on coaching, I decided to define coaching as a teacher who received some assistance to work on teaching practices to improve student learning. Armed with research on peer coaching, I became less concerned about a particular model of coaching and more concerned about whether a teacher believed he or she had been coached.

What's the difference? I wasn't asking systems to tell me if teachers received coaching. I was asking teachers if they had received coaching. I allowed teachers to decide if they had been coached from anyone in a role to talk with him or her about teaching practices (coaches, colleagues, peers, or administrators). This viewpoint emphasized the teacher's voice, allowing me to listen to what teachers were saying and then compare the findings to student achievement results.

KNOW WHAT WORKS IN COACHING MODELS

The majority of teacher change initiatives fail due to a lack of focus on teacher motivation and an understanding of change processes (Guskey, 1998; Sarason, 1990). Because coaching occurs in the classroom, it would seem to have a better prognosis in helping teachers improve their practice. But which type of coaching practice is best?

Sometimes *coaching* is a confusing term — and no wonder, as coaching can be considered to be consulting, mentoring, supporting, peer assistance, and even evaluating (Costa & Garmston, 2002). To make it more confusing, coaches are often working in a content area, calling themselves *instructional, academic, content, reading, literacy, intervention, math, data,* and *technology coaches.*

I knew that school leaders would want to know which type of coaching is best for supporting teachers and ensuring greater student learning (Akhavan, 2014).

I also knew that teachers who consistently get higher student achievement usually feel good about their teaching (Akhavan, 2004).

When getting to the essence of helping teachers feel more confident in their teaching, what coaches are doing is helping them have greater self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Tschannen-Moran and McMaster (2009) examined the relationship between teacher self-efficacy and formats of professional learning and found teacher self-efficacy to be one of the most powerful influences on receptivity to change.

One teacher said, "I didn't feel like she was the boss and she was in charge. She had an attitude of cooperating with us. For example, if she came in for a writing workshop, she would actually sit down with the kids and help them with their writing while I was going around and working with the kids also."

In order for any research on teacher coaching to inform professional development practices, I needed to define what I wanted to know. Teacher efficacy is important to think about in relation to teachers' daily practice. Knowing and understanding teacher efficacy reflects teachers' confidence about their ability to teach well. I chose to define coaching through teacher self-identification because of the unlikelihood of schools and districts across the United States using similar definitions or understanding of coaching.

I also needed to find a way to measure student achievement uniformly across states. This look at student achievement proved most challenging. It was not possible to gather individual teacher data, and the state tests in different states didn't measure the same information and skills, so I depended on state reports of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). I examined three years of data in order to identify any trends that exist in the fall or rise of student learning achievement scores on state high-stakes assessments.

COLLECTING THE DATA

To collect data, I contacted district leaders across the United States, asking for teachers to participate in the study. Participants came from four regions of the United States: the West, Midwest, South, and Northeast.

Next, I surveyed and interviewed teachers. Teachers completed the survey by email, and I selected four or five teachers from each of the four regions for focus group interviews. To examine student achievement, I reviewed AYP reports available on state assessment websites.

As I interviewed teachers, I dug at knowing what really worked and why. I asked:

- How has coaching changed your teaching?
- What did the coach do that made a difference for you?
- What do you value about the coach's expertise?
- Do you identify with the coach? If yes, in what ways?
- What is the best thing the coach did?
- What could the coach have done differently?

UNDERSTANDING THE FINDINGS

Two hundred forty-three teachers took the survey, and 26 teachers volunteered to participate in focus group interviews. The findings were important: Coaching had positive impact for teachers and student learning.

An analysis of Adequate Yearly Progress results over three years supports the qualitative findings of this study. Data were coded by amount of change from no change to substantial change. I conducted statistical analysis and compared the means and standard deviations between AYP results. The results showed a significant difference in student achievement, with coached teachers having higher student achievement than noncoached teachers.

The study found five important attributes that should be embedded in all coaching experiences. The coach needs:

- People skills and a good working relationship with the teacher;
- To focus on the personal development of each teacher versus rote implementation of programs;
- Time to be available to each teacher;
- The ability to help teachers understand the use of data to plan instruction; and
- To focus the coaching work in each school in a side-by-side setting.

COACHING SIDE BY SIDE

Being side by side was a theme in teacher surveys as well as comments from the interviews and the observations. Sitting side by side was defined as coaches and teachers having:

- Opportunities to learn something new together;
- Time to reflect openly on what is occurring during instruction;
- Cooperation and teamwork;
- Teacher and coach as equals.

Teachers found sitting side by side to be a symbolic action of respect, care, and equality. Teachers want their coaches to be equal with them and not above them. The responses show that teachers are willing to learn and try new instructional practices with a person beside them who won't judge their teaching. They need someone who encourages and accepts them as they are. Sitting side by side makes the coach vulnerable to the teacher and the experience of coaching as well.

One teacher said, "I didn't feel like she was the boss and she was in charge. She had an attitude of cooperating with us. For example, if she came in for a writing workshop, she would actually sit down with the kids and help them with their writing while I was going around and working with the kids also."

Another person said, "One of the things [my coach] has done for me is the infinite amount of patience she has for me.

… We learn in different ways — some are slower and some are faster. … It takes me much longer to keep in my head [new information], and she doesn't get upset or angry. She has the patience that helped us grow, and we have grown a lot."

Another teacher said: "I think the biggest thing [about coaching] is having somebody with expertise who knows the students to sit side by side [with me] and take a look at what instruction looks like and help [teachers] be reflective."

Coaches had a similar perspective about sitting side by side with teachers. This form of guidance was powerful also for the coach. One coach said, "I think the coaching, especially if you have the opportunity to coach the teacher side by side at the beginning, is to learn something new and then have those opportunities to stand back and reflect. I think it has great impact on driving instruction forward in positive ways."

PERSONALITY FIT

Fit is key, participating teachers said. Many teachers shared emotional stories about how they felt when the fit between coach and teacher was not effective for the teacher. One teacher reported, "The first couple of years that I was with a [coach], I wanted to run away and head for the hills. … You had to do things a certain way, and I began to feel [unhappy] ... but now ... I feel like I can enjoy what I'm doing again. ... So I think that this has really helped me to feel better about what I am doing and helped me to enjoy myself better."

Additionally, the coach's openness to help and focus on developing a positive comfort level for the coached teacher was critical for the coaching experience to positively impact teachers and coaches.

One teacher said, "No one should ever feel alone or unsupported. We have most of the answers sitting around the table if we care to look, listen, and try. So that's been the biggest thing to help and ... [have a] connection to a coach."

Another teacher said, "I think that [the coach's] expertise helped me to be a more effective teacher. Because doing stuff in the classroom, you try and it's not working. You're frustrated because the kids aren't getting it, but looking at it from somebody else's perspective helps."

LESSONS LEARNED

I found many similarities between the research findings and my own practice as a principal and district leader, but having the empirical results in hand has helped me implement research-based practices to improve teaching and learning. The results of this study show that a teacher who has received more coaching than other teachers has statistically significant positive changes in student achievement. This is the theory-in-action that many school and district leaders lean on when implementing coaching, and now, we know it works.

Additionally, I found that how teachers believe in their ability to impact student achievement is important. Teachers who have been coached believe that they affect student achievement at a greater rate than teachers who are not coached. The coaches' ability to focus on individual teacher needs impacted the openness of the coached teacher to the experience, increased the teacher's ability to identify with the coach, and helped the teacher own the professional learning. These are all wins that I strive for when working with teachers and school leaders.

THE BOTTOM LINE: TEACHERS NEED TO TAKE CHARGE

I learned lessons about what works in coaching, but I also learned some lessons about what doesn't work. The findings revealed a negative side to coaching as well, and this is a cautionary tale. Teachers who had negative coaching experiences reported that coaching was disempowering. In fact, teachers said that they were often receivers of what others thought they needed, and they were rarely asked about what would help them learn and grow as teachers.

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Teachers also reported that this desire to know, and respond to, teacher need wasn't important, and what was more important was implementing a new initiative. This type of coaching doesn't inspire teachers to better practice, nor does it inspire the sustained reflection on teaching practices necessary to improve student learning.

In their book *The Leadership Challenge*, Kouzes and Posner (2008) talk about encouraging the heart of employees. School leaders can encourage the heart of teachers by focusing on having good coaching models in their schools. Coaching encourages the heart of teachers. It provides teachers and coaches opportunities for:

- Sharing experiences;
- Developing a perspective of student learning;
- Providing resources to ensure learning; and
- Developing openness and opportunity for a comfort level for the hard work of improving practice to ensure student learning.

So what is the real work of coaching? Allowing teachers to be in control of their own learning. Coaching provides this opportunity. Through coaching, teachers and coaches appear to share experiences that make both individuals better at their jobs.

Teachers learn how to handle issues in their classrooms, and coaches learn what works for an individual teacher in a given situation and then offer that advice to other teachers in similar situations. One coach said, "We all face challenges every day, and by just sharing those out, we understand each other. While that what may not be the exact same thing [as improving instruction], we understand each other, and I can learn how they

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teacher is aware of his assumptions, in itself an empowering presupposition that may encourage him to take a second look at his thinking. Or you might ask, "What makes you feel the situation is hopeless?" This might provide some insight into why the teacher feels so discouraged. Once the assumption is out in the open, the group can use communication skills to help the teacher explore its validity.

Another way to ask someone to examine his or her assumptions or beliefs in a nonthreatening manner is to ask the person to consider alternative perspectives — different ways of interpreting the same experience. Consider the case of a middle school teacher who says, "The mother doesn't care about her daughter's education because she never comes to parent conferences." The teacher seems to be making the assumption that parents who don't attend conferences don't value their children's education.

In this case, you might ask, "What other explanations might there be for the mother not attending conferences?" This is a gentle way of calling into question the teacher's beliefs. If the teacher shows little willingness to see the situation differently, you might tell the group that the teacher has said the mother doesn't care about her child's schooling and ask, "How do the rest of us see that?"

The group can then explore other explanations for the mother not attending conferences — for example, that the mother works at the scheduled time, that she may have had bad experiences with school personnel as a child and is not comfortable coming to school, or that she is from another country and doesn't understand what is being asked of her. After the group discussion, the teacher may find that another interpretation of the mother's behavior is more fitting.

Viewing the world from someone else's perspective helps teachers challenge their own beliefs. You might ask, "How do you think the mother thinks or feels about this issue?" This kind of probe asks the teacher to look at the situation from the perspective of the mother and may yield useful insights — for example, that the mother is intimidated and needs more guidance. Viewing the world from multiple perspectives increases a teacher's *cultural proficiency.* It also helps the teacher to learn that there may be many different causes for the same behaviors.

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handle things and my teachers can learn to handle things. In the end, the kids win."

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