HOW COACHING TAKES ROOT

3 KEY FACTORS LEAD TO SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION

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Nearly 60,000 educators serve as instructional coaches in schools today (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017), and other models of coaching, like leadership coaching and systems coaching, are taking hold as well (Freeman, Sugai, Simonsen, & Everett, 2017; Goff, Guthrie, Goldring, & Bickman, 2014).

The decades-long push to use coaching as a means to support teachers and leaders to improve student learning and close achievement gaps is driven in large part by research that shows coaching can lead to improved teaching and student learning (Kraft, Blazar, & Hogan, 2018), leadership skills (Goff

et al., 2017), and school infrastructure, such as effective allocation of resources (Freeman et al., 2017).

But simply hiring and funding coaches isn't sufficient to reach these positive outcomes.

The implementation of coaching, including the practices coaches use and the amount of time they allocate to sessions, matters. If coaching practices and dosage miss the mark, then teaching, leadership, and school infrastructure likely won't improve. Neither will student learning (Pierce, 2019).

And coaching that is not aligned with systemwide goals and infrastructure is hamstrung from the beginning. We can't expect coaching

to lead to desired outcomes if it is used in a less than systematic way (Pierce & Ferguson, n.d.).

The three of us have led and studied coaching across diverse settings and with educators at multiple levels, from classroom teachers to district and state leaders, and have observed that the need for a more strategic approach is a common theme. We draw on implementation science research to describe how to improve coaching across educational systems and share examples of how such a strategic approach is improving coaching, teaching, and learning.

IMPLEMENTING COACHING

Implementation science has

unraveled the numerous factors that shape successful uptake of practices, indicating that the successful implementation of *anything*, whether a math program or a coaching initiative, is fairly predictable (Nilson, 2015). At least three key drivers shape implementation success or failure (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005), and here we explain them as applied to coaching:

- **Competency:** the knowledge and skills coaches need;
- **Organization:** the infrastructure needed for coaching success; and,
- **Leadership:** the active role leaders play in supporting coaching (Pierce & Ferguson, n.d.).

Taking a strategic approach to implementing coaching means methodically addressing the three drivers so that coaching becomes deeply rooted into the system and leads to the desired outcomes (Pierce & Ferguson, n.d.).

To learn how two teams took a strategic approach to implementing coaching, we highlight two stories. In the first, state education leaders in Ohio applied the three implementation drivers (competency, organization, and leadership) to support improved student literacy outcomes. In the second, leaders working at the district level in the Navajo Nation in Arizona drew on the same three drivers to create a coordinated coaching program for principles.

THE OHIO STORY

In 2015, a team of general and special education leaders working at the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) outlined a State Systemic Improvement

Sources: Pierce, 2015, p. 27; Fixsen et al., 2005
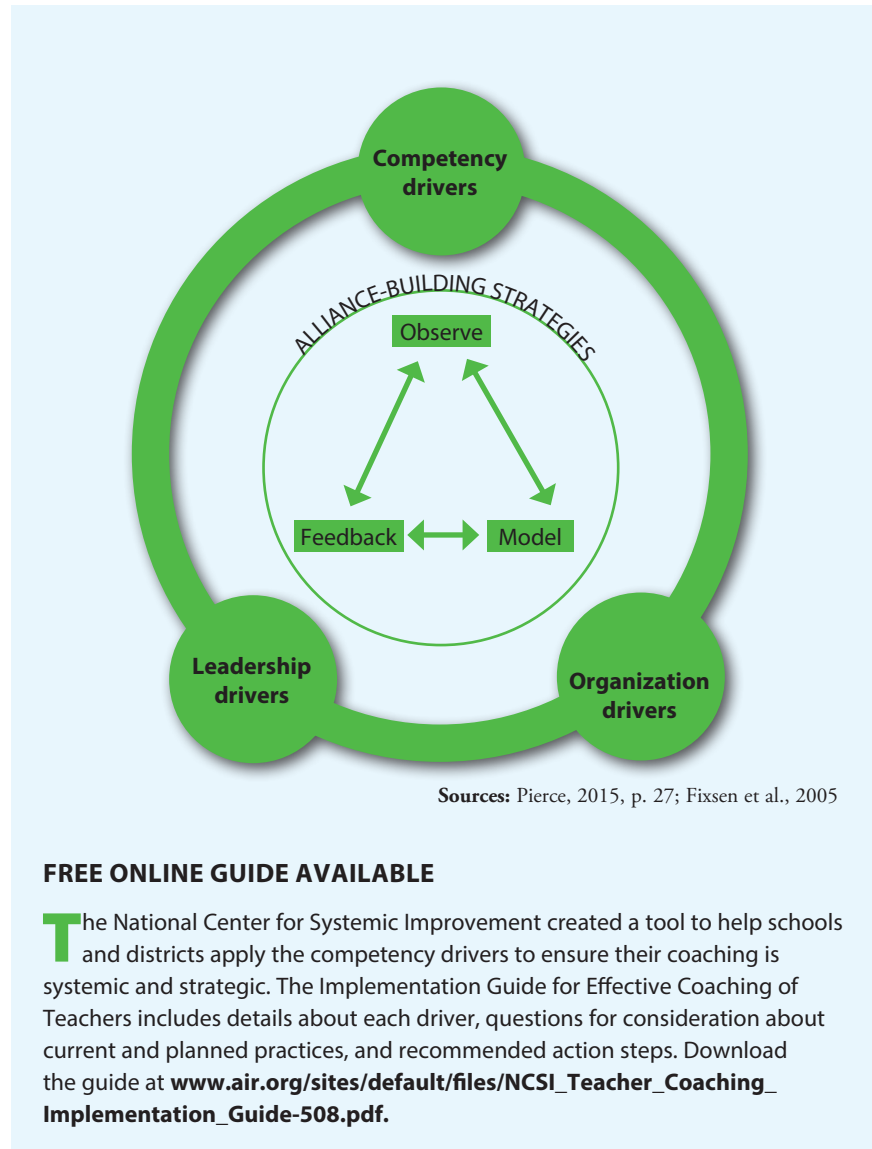
FREE ONLINE GUIDE AVAILABLE

The National Center for Systemic Improvement created a tool to help schools and districts apply the competency drivers to ensure their coaching is systemic and strategic. The Implementation Guide for Effective Coaching of Teachers includes details about each driver, questions for consideration about current and planned practices, and recommended action steps. Download the guide at **www.air.org/sites/default/files/NCSI_Teacher_Coaching_ Implementation_Guide-508.pdf.**

Plan aimed at bolstering literacy instruction in preschool through grade 3, with a focus on improving outcomes among children with disabilities.

To support the plan's implementation, ODE leaders partnered with several districts to hire a cadre of coaches who were employed

as systems-level coaches, teacher-level coaches, or both.

Systems-level coaches helped school-level teams (e.g. a principal or team of lead teachers) develop a strong school infrastructure to sustain the use of the new literacy practices. Teacher-level coaches supported teachers in

participating schools. The ODE team wanted to take a methodical approach to using both types.

ENSURING COACH CAPACITY

ODE's first step was to provide capacity-building opportunities for those serving in the role. Coaches participated in two types of professional learning: one focused on literacy to enhance content knowledge and the other focused on developing expertise in conducting and supporting coaching cycles.

Coaches needed to hold clear expertise in literacy and have the skills to conduct powerful coaching sessions with teachers and school teams. In addition, ODE leaders also conducted monthly meetings so that coaches could collaboratively reflect on their work and identify remaining professional learning needs.

DATA COLLECTION

ODE quickly recognized the need to formally track what practices coaches were enacting with teachers and school teams to establish links between coaching and changes in school infrastructure, teacher practice, and student outcomes.

They needed a data collection system to inform and guide a continuous improvement cycle. ODE leaders shifted their attention to organizational drivers to coordinate coaching across the schools, focusing on two areas.

Installing a data dashboard. The data dashboard housed the coaching data where coaches entered data into the system, including: dose, duration, and frequency of coaching for each teacher and each school team; amount of time the coach allocated to the breadth of job responsibilities; the specific practices employed by the coach; and the topic covered during the coaching session.

Using data for continuous improvement. The ODE team and coaches then held monthly meetings to analyze the data and used information

to reflect on essential questions: How do coaches use their time with teachers? What transpires in systems coaching sessions with teams? They also used this time to identify coaching successes, areas for improvement, and factors (e.g. policies and cultural norms) that influenced coaches' work.

Developing their organization for more systematic use of coaching proved beneficial. The ODE team had real-time data from every coach working at a participating school and were situated to better understand the overall impact of coaching on teaching and learning. The data identified successes and challenges and informed the continuous improvement cycle.

The ODE team also used the data to establish coaching goals, including short- and long-term objectives. All in all, the data system and the resulting data-based problem-solving created a more coordinated implementation of coaching across participating schools.

WHAT MATTERS NOW NETWORK

Through participation in Learning Forward's What Matters Now Network, Ohio coaches and district leaders recently began to support several teacher-based teams and building leadership teams in three areas: identifying evidence-based strategies for at-risk students; using a targeted decision tool to plan for instruction; and using Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles to determine how students respond to instruction.

Here's how ODE leaders, in partnership with network facilitators, ensured strategic implementation of this new stream of coaching work:

- **Competency:** Coaches and district leaders need to have the capacity to support teacher-based teams and building leadership teams in identifying evidence-based strategies, using the decision tool, and conducting Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles. The What Matters Now Network offers professional learning in these three areas to coaches, district leaders, teacher-based teams, and building leadership teams.

- **Organization:** ODE leaders meet regularly with coaches, district leaders, teacher-based teams, and building leadership teams participating in the What Matters Now Network to build critical connections across all parts of the Ohio education system.

- **Leadership:** The What Matters Now Network requires shared leadership between coaches and district leaders. Therefore, both coaches and district leaders drive conversations at the teacher-team and building-team levels.

ENHANCING LEADERSHIP

ODE's effort to strategically implement coaching was not yet complete. The team acknowledged that participating schools held different expectations for coaching. Some teachers expected coaches to conduct literacy trainings only. Others expected systems coaches to work with teachers, not school teams.

The ODE team realized the need to communicate a common vision of coaching. Without a consistent expectation for what coaches would do, the work of coaches might not remain focused.

In collaboration with coaches, the ODE team drafted a definition of coaching using the tool Support Models: Matrix and Discussion Guide for K-12th Grade Systems (Pierce, 2018). The team shared the definition with teachers and principals, and it became rooted into the everyday work of coaches across participating schools.

THE CHINLE STORY

Chinle (Ch'ínílį̨) Unified School District is in the heart of the Navajo Nation in Arizona. There are seven schools and more than 3,647 students in the Chinle school district, making it the largest district in the Navajo Nation in student enrollment and geographic area.

In 2017, frequent principal leadership turnover at nearly all its schools posed a significant challenge for Chinle. Understanding the critical role leaders play in strong student achievement, Chinle leaders prioritized coaching for their principals.

ENSURING COACH CAPACITY

To implement coaching strategically, district leaders hired an external expert to serve as the coach. Hiring an external expert was imperative given that Chinle staff members were already stretched thin. Adding coaching to current job responsibilities seemed unreasonable.

District leaders also acknowledged that principals may be more comfortable working with a coach external to the Chinle system. As noted by a Chinle principal, coaching from an outside expert helped him develop new ways of working with teachers: "The system I have developed in consultation with [my leadership coach] to regularly monitor teacher performance on key indicators and encourage teachers to strive for higher student performance has been invaluable. Having a solid structure … seems to be moving us into new levels of discussion, motivation, and staff engagement that didn't exist previously."

ESTABLISHING SUPPORT

Chinle district leaders next shifted their attention to developing the overall system's support for principal coaching. Their work focused on two areas.

Cultivating a professional learning culture for leaders. In partnership with the coach, Chinle district leaders created a comprehensive professional learning approach in which principals could learn and practice effective leadership habits with their coach. This included monthly professional learning, on-site principal coaching, and bimonthly coaching.

This approach established a new organizational norm: Principals, not just teachers, enagage in ongoing professional learning linked to the overall district goal for improving student outcomes.

Aligning coaching sessions around research-based leadership habits. Research points to the critical role four leadership habits play in principal effectiveness: driving for results; influencing for results; problem-solving; and showing confidence to lead (Steiner, Hassel, & Hassel, 2008).

With the coach, principals engaged in self-assessment of these habits each quarter using formative assessment, attendance and discipline data, classroom walk-through data, and climate surveys from teachers. Coaching sessions allowed principals to reflect on their current practices and identify areas for growth.

Aligning principal coaching around the evidence-based leader habits provided school and district leaders with a common language, consistent approaches to problem-solving, and ongoing self-reflection and assessment.

COACHING PRINCIPALS

Chinle's intentional implementation of coaching then shifted to leadership drivers. Here, district leaders stressed that the primary purpose of principal coaching was to continuously improve leadership, not to evaluate.

District leaders and the external coach explicitly communicated to principals that all coaching conversations would remain between the coach and coachee. Setting the expectation that coaching was not linked to evaluation resulted in strong support among principals for participating in sessions.

Moreover, establishing coaching as nonevaluative freed principals to focus on continuously developing their leadership skills.

IMPACT

From 2017 to 2019, district proficiency rates in 8th-grade English language arts nearly doubled, from 10% in 2017 to 19% in 2019, while 8th-grade math proficiency rates nearly tripled, from 10% to 28% in the same time span.

In Ohio, the percentage of students with disabilities at participating sites achieving proficiency on the state's English language arts achievement test increased by 6.5% from 2015 to 2019. In addition, the percentage of all K-3rd-grade students at participating sites scoring proficient on state-approved reading assessments also increased by at least 3% in that same time frame.

While multiple variables may have influenced student achievement and we cannot directly link outcomes to coaching, achieving growth among typically marginalized student groups is a significant accomplishment that warrants attention.

Whether coaches engage with individual teachers, school teams, or school leaders, coaching can be a critical lever for improving a host of outcomes: teacher practice, leader practice, school infrastructure, and, most importantly, student learning. To achieve these goals, take the time to use coaching the right way: with methodical attention to implementation drivers. Achieving desired goals may very well depend on it.

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A window into teaching

and motivated, the quality of teacher interactions increased considerably, and the students' scores on state tests went up by 10 percentile points. And we didn't do anything with teachers' content, we just helped them learn how to engage students in ways that made the content more meaningful — make the content more conceptual, create a more active classroom, and attend to student perspectives.

Hirsh: What else do you want people to know about this work?

Pianta: We have a lot of examples of ways in which these tools have helped create life-changing teachers. We can all think of a teacher who empowered us and affected us. We need to think about all the children who haven't had those kind of teachers in their lives, and what could happen if they all had the opportunity to experience those kinds of teachers. To do that, we want more teachers to have the opportunity to experience the kind of improvement and growth that MyTeachingPartner can support so that they in turn can support every student.

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