



Coaches from Fort Wayne Community Schools in Indiana work together in small-group learning communities during professional learning hosted by the district. From left: Kathy Gordon, Lisa Kelly, Jenny Relue, Rhian Crider Ferhl, Jana Laborde, and Faith Wise.

THE POWER OF COACHING

FORT WAYNE'S MODEL SHOWS WHAT AN INTENTIONAL LEARNING SYSTEM CAN ACCOMPLISH

BY KAY PSENCIK, VALERIE MITRANI, AND RAMONA COLEMAN

Effective coaches make time for their own learning. As they systematically engage in professional learning, they develop and deepen their knowledge in areas including the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011), adult learning principles, and research-based instructional practices.

This ongoing learning process

doesn't happen automatically. It takes intentional design and support at the district and school levels. When district leaders keep a vigilant, strong focus on the content and quality of professional learning, coaches develop common vocabulary and skills, which supports equity for all students (Hirsh, Psenick, & Brown, 2018). Coaches who are well-supported tend to be more engaged in their own learning

community than those who aren't.

Unfortunately, many coaches don't have access to this kind of support or meaningful professional learning. For example, 86% of schools have teacher leader roles, but only 32% offer specialized teacher leadership training (Valdez & Broin, 2015). Even in districts that offer professional learning for coaches, what coaches often experience is one-time training

and curriculum sharing rather than tools and ongoing conversations about improvement.

Fort Wayne Community Schools, the largest school district in Indiana, breaks that mold. A model of a districtwide learning system, Fort Wayne illustrates the central role of coaching in a systemic professional learning approach and what effective support for coaching looks like. We have worked with coaches throughout the district for many years and have seen firsthand how supporting coaches supports the entire system.

CORNERSTONES FOR IMPROVING INSTRUCTION

In 2014, Fort Wayne Community Schools set a goal to engage everyone in the district in excellent professional learning as the foundation for all significant implementation of innovations.

Deeply committed to learning for all, district leaders began with learning communities for academic services, interventionists, and instructional coaches as the start of a ripple effect to reach all leaders and educators (see sidebar at right).

They knew that instructional coaches were cornerstones for improving instructional practices, providing coherence in district expectations for curriculum, and building readiness to learn, and therefore for achieving equity. They designed a system of support that would focus on coaches learning from each other and experts in the field.

Two years ago, the district hired an external evaluator to assess the impact of the systemwide professional learning work. Those findings showed major positive shifts emerging in the district,



HOW FORT WAYNE BUILT A LEARNING SYSTEM

Beginning in 2001, Fort Wayne Community Schools participated in a Wallace Foundation grant to prepare and support school leaders. Through this work, district leaders saw the vital role of leadership development in transforming their schools.

Recognizing the need for continued development, superintendent Wendy Robinson established a partnership with Learning Forward in 2014 to rethink professional learning and redefine how her district leadership team would become the model of learning that she wanted to see throughout the district.

The district established a learning community of district cabinet leaders, made up of chief officers and directors from all aspects of the organization: finance, human capital management, social and emotional health, special education, and academic services.

Robinson stressed to them and everyone in the district the importance of professional learning because, as she said, they could not lead what they did not understand. Robinson considered it critical to engage central office leaders, including instructional and noninstructional staff, from the onset so that leaders had knowledge of and capacity for a continuous

improvement approach in schools and departments. And she was clear that the approach was not intended to be top-down but instead a way to build leadership capacity at all levels to sustain learning throughout the organization.

The cabinet's first focus was to explore effective strategies for implementing the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011). This meant making a shift from one-time professional development to ongoing, embedded, community-based professional learning. The cabinet team established definitions of leadership and professional learning to guide the work of implementing the standards.

While the district focused on professional learning as the approach to achieving its goals, Robinson realized that the district wasn't supporting instructional coaches enough to ensure their success in all schools. She challenged her cabinet leadership team to explore the most powerful ways to engage instructional coaches in ongoing professional learning and create a coaching framework and a professional learning plan to support them.

Learning Forward senior consultants and the district leadership team created a broad system for learning throughout the district that included principals, coaches, and teachers. The district's model is featured in the book *Becoming a Learning System* (Hirsh, Psencik, & Brown, 2018). Today, learning communities flourish throughout the district, from school professional learning communities of principals to the finance and human resources departments.

and coaches were a big part of these improvements (RTI International, 2018).

Here we describe lessons learned about the roles that coaches play and how the district supports them to thrive and make excellent teaching and learning possible.

Instructional coaches have clearly defined roles and responsibilities.

One of the first steps that ensured coaching success in the district was to establish a clear vision of what instructional coaches do and how they support and are supported by others. In Fort Wayne, everyone from the superintendent and principals to teachers understands the roles of instructional coaches.

Fort Wayne's instructional coaches are not just curriculum and instructional specialists or resource providers, although these are essential roles. Nor are they assistant principals or teacher substitutes.

Focused on student and adult learning in their buildings, instructional coaches are skilled in processes and systems that lead those they serve to learn and increase their effectiveness so significantly that student learning increases as well. These skilled coaches empower teachers to take ownership for their own learning and responsibility for their students' outcomes.

Understanding this important role, district-level directors and principals ensure that coaches coach. They also ensure that coaches engage in their own professional learning. They do not derail coaches' efforts with other responsibilities.

Furthermore, district leaders articulate to staff that instructional coaches' role is to ensure all innovations are implemented with fidelity through coaching rather than directives. Coaches come together as a community to develop competence in coaching, deeper understanding of adult learners, and common strategies all might use in facilitating professional learning and coaching.

Coaches practice the district's coaching cycle and support each other in solving issues arising in their schools, such as what to do when a team is not working well or how best to introduce new curriculum units or instructional practices to their teachers.

Ongoing professional learning strengthens coaching skills and instructional expertise.

Coaches, like teachers and principals, increase their effectiveness when they are engaged in ongoing, long-term, sustained professional learning throughout their careers. Fort Wayne leaders acknowledge the power of supporting coaches with ongoing professional learning. Superintendent Wendy Robinson insists that all coaches are present for their learning sessions and engage in their own learning communities.

She and other district leaders are clear with new coaches about the expected skills they will develop over time, and they are committed to ensuring the resources, including funding and time, to implement that support throughout coaches' careers.

Fort Wayne's process begins with effective onboarding of prospective and new coaches and continues with professional learning communities for all school-based instructional coaches. The content for these learning communities focuses on the instructional core, standards students are to master, and district curriculum and instructional materials, all to ensure excellent instructional practices.

Coaches practice coaching regularly.

No one gets better at something just by reading and talking about it. They may develop deeper understanding, but they must practice to increase their effectiveness. Effective practice increases effectiveness in coaching.

Fort Wayne's coaches reflect constantly on their practice and make adjustments to improve. They continuously set regular goals for themselves, learn through practice, and

reflect on progress.

Peer support is important to this process. Coaches support each other in reflection and practice by coaching each other on challenging issues in their schools or designing a challenging coaching session together. They observe each other coach. They share strategies with each other.

As instructional coaches work together, they feel a sense of community with their peers. They develop a strong sense of collective responsibility not only for the learning of their peer coaches, but also for teachers in their collective buildings.

THE CYCLE OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Engaging coaches in their own cycle of continuous improvement is essential for the success of coaches and the school as a whole. This cycle of setting adult learning goals, designing learning strategies, implementing those strategies, monitoring progress, and assessing the impact of their learning on teacher learning aligns with the cycle of continuous improvement that is at the heart of effective learning teams and systems (Hirsh & Crow, 2017).

Fort Wayne established a self-assessment and goal-setting process to help all coaches focus on their specific learning needs. The self-assessment not only caused instructional coaches to think deeply about their role and their learning needs but also painted a clear picture of what the district expected from coaches.

One of the challenges for Fort Wayne and many other districts is to monitor the effectiveness of instructional coaching on shifts in teacher practice and, ultimately, student achievement. Coaching is effective over time, as coaches build relationships, engender confidence in others, and develop their own competence (Psencik, 2011).

That makes it difficult to assess impact at a discrete point in time. And because a major aspect of coaching is building trusting relationships,

and because good coaches are deeply respectful of all classroom teachers, introducing evaluative assessment into the process can pose risks to the relationships.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE RTI STUDY

An evaluation study of Fort Wayne's districtwide professional learning system found that the district is "on track to building the desired capacity of system leaders to implement effective professional learning" and that teachers report this work is making a positive impact on their practice (RTI International, 2018).

The results also show:

- Nearly all coaches and principals reported feeling confident or very confident using the cycle of continuous improvement to make changes to professional learning (95% coaches, 97% principals). The majority agreed or strongly agreed that they understood how to use the district's theory of change and logic model to develop school improvement plans (96% coaches, 97% principals).
- Coaches and principals reported using more data to determine teachers' professional learning needs (93% coaches, 100% principals).
- Nearly all coaches and principals (93% coaches, 100% principals) either agreed or strongly agreed that they understand better how to design teacher learning opportunities using adult learning principles and how to provide learning opportunities over time to ensure new concepts become rooted in practice.

A major finding, according to



Eva Trout, left, and Angie Everly-Anderson analyze learning designs for coaching teachers in developing reliable student assessment strategies.

interviews and surveys, is that the Standards for Professional Learning are taking root in Fort Wayne. This appears to be having an impact.

Coaches say professional learning has positively impacted their practice and built their capacity to support teacher professional learning. Likewise, teachers remarked on the knowledge level of their coaches and described in depth how their coaches participated in the process of designing school-based curriculum with them.

The majority of teachers (83%) report using data more effectively to determine whether they are meeting student needs as a result of professional learning and coaching. Furthermore, principals and coaches say that district leaders are using a systematic approach to improve teaching and learning, which assists coaches and principals in ensuring equity across the district.

Coaching is a powerful professional learning process for facilitating others to make changes in their instructional

approaches that positively impact their teaching and student learning. When everyone understands the essential skills of instructional coaches and values the roles they play, coaches serve their purpose well.

Fort Wayne Community Schools offers an inspiring — and still growing — example of the power of coaching within an intentional professional learning system.

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