

# THE PRINCIPAL'S COACH

ALIGNED, COHERENT SUPPORT  
BUILDS LEADERSHIP CAPACITY IN LOS ANGELES

BY MARCO A. NAVA, ILEANA M. DÁVALOS, MAURA CROSSIN,  
ANA ESCOBEDO, DELIA ESTRADA, HEATHER LOWER LOWE,  
APRIL RAMOS-OLONA, JOSE RODRIGUEZ,  
AND MARIA SOTOMAYOR

**A**s an administrator of instruction, one of Natividad Rozsa's primary responsibilities is to coach principals in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). Rozsa's goal is to shift the focus of coaching conversations from operations and compliance to problem-solving and capacity building, always focusing on student learning.

Her approach scaffolds principals so they can find their own solutions to persistent issues and problems — and also models for principals what effective coaching looks like and how they can provide it for their staff.

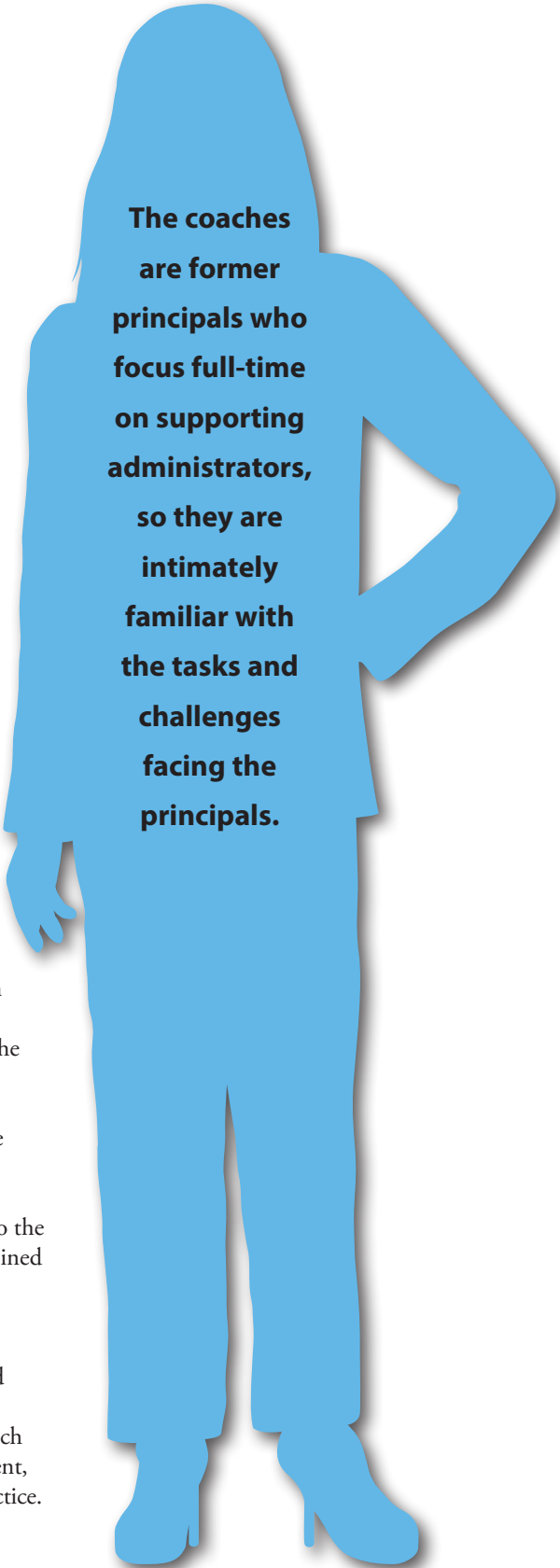
The administrators Rozsa coaches each work on a problem of practice for three years. "I facilitate and ask plenty

of questions to help them reflect on the identified problem of practice," she says. This allows them to own the improvement process, she explains.

She then reviews artifacts that principals submit on how they have addressed their problem of practice over the past year. She looks for evidence that they are connecting to the professional learning standards outlined in the LAUSD School Leadership Framework (Los Angeles Unified School District, 2019).

Next, she prepares clarifying and probing questions to ask during the coaching conversation to promote rich discussions on leadership development, capacity building, and reflective practice.

Rozsa's approach exemplifies a shift occurring across the district.



**The coaches are former principals who focus full-time on supporting administrators, so they are intimately familiar with the tasks and challenges facing the principals.**

## LOS ANGELES ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICES CREDENTIAL

LAASC is a two-year induction program focused on job-embedded, real-life learning combined with coach-based professional development (Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2018) for principals and new administrators.

The induction experience includes 60 to 90 hours of professional learning centered on coaching, reflection, professional development, and assessment. Induction

is anchored on six professional learning standards that describe critical areas of leadership that support and guide administrators into sustainable, effective practice.

The shift places a heavy emphasis on individualized coaching, 40 of the 60 hours, with the goal of developing leadership competency. The program seeks to spur much-needed systemic change throughout the district's schools by coaching them to think systemically and act strategically to empower

leadership teams to impact instructional quality and student achievement.

Coaches are intentional about data collection for program improvement. Data monitoring is critical to accomplish the program's goal of empowering educators to be courageous and transformational leaders. Since the program's start in 2015, 366 participants have cleared their administrative services credential coursework with support from nine coaches.

Of the 366 participants, 243 have been school site administrators, 123 have

been administrators at central offices and local districts, and 32 participants have successfully been promoted into a school administrative leadership position.

The most current data from the survey candidates complete at the end of their first year in the program reports that 94.6% of participants found their coach had been instrumental to their growth as a leader, and 100% said their coach guided them to find their own solutions.

Administrators at all levels, across different programs and departments, engage in coaching with a set of common goals and principles. The coaching is designed to not only help them grow professionally but also build their capacity to coach those they supervise, including teachers and staff.

### FOUR-STEP APPROACH

LAUSD's approach to coaching for leadership development can be summarized in four steps:

1. Help leaders align their own core values with the district's and school's vision.
2. Build coherence in coaching throughout the system.
3. Ground coaching in a districtwide framework.
4. Build coaching capacity through responsive practice.

#### Align core values

Just as architects begin construction by laying a sturdy foundation to withstand extreme challenges, we begin by encouraging school leaders to establish personal and professional core values that support the work and withstand challenges. Unlike a structural foundation, a school leader's

core values can be difficult to see. Doing so requires a skilled coach to probe for stability and potential cracks.

In our administrator induction program, the Los Angeles Administrative Services Credential (see sidebar above), coaches engage in this probing with candidates.

The coaches are former principals who focus full-time on supporting administrators, so they are intimately familiar with the tasks and challenges facing the principals and with the California Professional Standards for Education Leaders (Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2018), to which they are expected to connect their work with the principals.

After discussion and personal reflection, each administrator drafts his or her *whys* (Sinek, 2009), and we highlight them as the drivers of *how* to approach the work. Coaches then guide principals in connecting their personal core values to the mission and vision of the school site.

This alignment helps principals stay motivated and keep the learning needs of students at the forefront. Principals also report that, when they share their leadership stories and core values, parents tend to perceive them as more

approachable, and teachers tend to view them as more trustworthy.

#### Build coherence

LAUSD leaders recognize the importance of working together as a collective toward common goals. The leadership coaching therefore prioritizes coherence, applying the work of Fullan and Quinn (2015), who outline four components of coherence: focusing direction, cultivating collaborative cultures, deepening learning, and securing accountability.

To help build coherence, district leaders developed a common, intentional language about coaching, teaching, and leadership practices, and they reinforce it throughout the district. District administrators learn this language and common frameworks when they participate in professional learning, where they observe videos of coaching conversations and engage in role-play to build their coaching knowledge and skills.

Principal supervisors also learn to use this language and process. As part of their certification process, they videotape themselves coaching a school leader, and this is monitored for alignment. These professional learning

opportunities build coherence and performance across all levels.

### **Ground coaching in a consistent framework**

To create more consistency in coaching — not just for principals, but at all levels — the district developed the Coaching Competencies Cycle (LAUSD, 2015) framework and an accompanying Coaching Competencies Rubric to examine and reflect on alignment with the framework.

The framework and rubric are used in all administrator professional learning programs and are at the heart of coaching and supervisory practices across levels. Principal supervisors use it when overseeing administrators, and principals use it with teachers.

For example, April Ramos provides coaching support to school principals. To improve her practice, an external observer gives her actionable feedback. “The feedback I received provided me with a blueprint toward refining my practice by highlighting the questions I was asking and the questions I was not asking of principals,” Ramos says. “He noted I was asking good questions but at times didn’t build on the last question. It helped me reflect on my pre-coaching conversation preparation and to start writing a variety of questions that build on themselves by digging deeper.”

Ramos and the other coaches in her department meet on a weekly basis to share best coaching practices. Their conversation includes the coaching feedback they each have received. Colleagues offer advice and suggestions, and the coaches make a plan to implement the new learning.

This has increased the quality of coaching they provide to principals and other school leaders. In a recent survey, 99% of 158 coaching recipients reported that their coach guided them to find their own solutions to issues or concerns they faced.

### **Building capacity responsively**

Drawing from the tenets of adult

learning theory principles (Vella, 2016), district leaders recognize that an important step in building capacity is identifying and responding to specific challenges and needs.

For example, principals requested targeted professional learning on how to support teachers in problem-solving. To address this, 215 school leaders participated in professional learning over the course of five Saturdays on guiding teachers with targeted coaching.

We designed these Saturday sessions to provide coaching fundamentals, strategies for differentiated coaching, and opportunities to role-play and practice. We then offered a follow-up course, attended by 100 leaders.

This kind of responsive professional learning occurs at all levels. For example, principal supervisors also expressed an interest in continuing to develop their coaching abilities. Using online technology, we designed professional learning to enhance their ability to support and guide principals.

Afterward, each principal supervisor conducted a coaching conversation with a principal and captured it using video software. An external partner analyzed the video using the Coaching Competencies Rubric and offered the principal supervisor feedback highlighting areas of strength and areas for growth.

This learning design created a safe environment to explore growing coaching competencies with an outside, nonevaluative partner. Principal supervisors receive confidential feedback, and district personnel do not have access to the video, analyses, or feedback. Principal supervisors were able to be vulnerable, discuss performance, and refine their skills without judgement from their supervisors. As of this writing, 58 out of 64 principal supervisors have engaged in this process, and many have requested additional opportunities with the video exercise.

### **COACHING RESULTS**

With these four principles at

the center, leadership coaching by professionals like Natividad Rozsa can be transformational. The data from LAUSD’s program attest to the power of this work: 98% of survey respondents indicated that their coach provided effective support on their problem of practice research project.

For example, one principal working with Rozsa discovered that English learners were significantly underperforming in comparison to their peers. Guided by the competencies cycle and rubric, he identified with observation and collection of lesson artifacts that teachers were not applying English Language Development Standards in their lesson planning.

With probing and reflection facilitated by Rozsa, he hypothesized that, by engaging teachers in focused professional learning and intentional planning time to align English Language Development Standards with the Common Core and daily practice, English learner students’ performance would improve. After one year of implementing this strategy, it did: English learner students’ Smarter Balanced assessment scores improved by 10%.

Rozsa also extended the inquiry about English learner students to students across the entire school feeder pattern. She created a community of practice for principals on this issue — in the process, building her own knowledge about that practice while building principals’ knowledge.

Coaching and capacity building must permeate the system for their full potential to be realized. After all, organizations are composed of people working in tandem toward a common goal.

The coaching cycle reveals a road map toward these common goals and does so with humanity and respect for professionals and the learning process. As a result, this approach can succeed where compliance, accountability, and condemnation fail. Systemic transformation occurs one coaching conversation at a time.

## REFERENCES

**Commission on Teacher Credentialing.** (2018, July). *Administrative Services Credential Program Standards*. <https://www.ctc.ca.gov/docs/default-source/educator-prep/standards/asc-admin-handbook.pdf?sfvrsn=48>

**Fullan, M. & Quinn, J.** (2015). *Coherence: The right drivers in action for schools, districts, and systems*. Corwin Press.

**Los Angeles Unified School District.** (2015). *Coaching cycle and competencies rubric*. <https://achieve.lausd.net/cms/lib08/CA01000043/Centricity/Domain/434/Coaching%20>

*Competencies%20Rubric%20v8.pdf*

**Los Angeles Unified School District.** (2019). *School Leadership Framework*. <https://achieve.lausd.net/cms/lib08/CA01000043/Centricity/Domain/434/LAUSD%20School%20Leadership%20Framework.pdf>

**Sinek, S.** (2009). *Start with why: How great leaders inspire everyone to take action*. Penguin.

**Vella, J.** (2016). The power of dialogue in adult learning. *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry*, 36, 95-101.

•

**All authors are employed by the Los Angeles Unified School District.**

**Marco A. Nava** ([mnava@lausd.net](mailto:mnava@lausd.net)) is administrator of professional learning and leadership development. **Ileana M. Dávalos** ([idavalos@lausd.net](mailto:idavalos@lausd.net)) is deputy chief human resources officer. **Maura Crossin** ([maura.crossin@lausd.net](mailto:maura.crossin@lausd.net)), **Ana Escobedo** ([aescob4@lausd.net](mailto:aescob4@lausd.net)), **Delia Estrada** ([delia.estrada@lausd.net](mailto:delia.estrada@lausd.net)), **Heather Lower Lowe** ([hlowe@lausd.net](mailto:hlowe@lausd.net)), **April Ramos-Olona** ([april.ramos@lausd.net](mailto:april.ramos@lausd.net)), **Jose Rodriguez** ([jmr7481@lausd.net](mailto:jmr7481@lausd.net)), and **Maria Sotomayor** ([msotomay@lausd.net](mailto:msotomay@lausd.net)) are administrative coordinators. ■

The principal's role has changed. Is professional learning keeping up?

*Continued from p. 42*

We must commit to systems of continuous support and growth if principals are to become leaders of learning and for learning in their schools. We know that the traditional sit-and-get model of learning is not enough for students or teachers; it certainly is not enough for principals.

## REFERENCES

**Boyatzis, R.E. & Kolb, D.A.** (1999). Performance, learning, and development as modes of growth and adaptation throughout our lives and careers. In M. Peiperl, M.B. Arthur, R. Coffee, & T. Morris (Eds.), *Career frontiers: New conceptions of working lives* (pp. 76-98). Oxford University Press.

**Curry, M. & Killion, J.** (2009). Slicing the layers of learning. *JSD*, 30(1), 56-62.

**DiPaola, M. & Hoy, W.K.** (2013). *Principals improving instruction: Supervision, evaluation, and professional development*. Pearson/Allyn and Bacon.

**Fusarelli, L.D. & Fusarelli, B.C.** (2018). Instructional supervision in an era of high-stakes accountability. In S.J. Zepeda & J.A. Ponticell (Eds.) *The Wiley handbook of educational supervision* (pp. 131-156). Wiley & Sons.

**Goldring, E., Grissom, J., Rubin, M., Rogers, L., Neel, M., & Clark, M.** (2018). A new role emerges for principal supervisors: Evidence from six districts in the *Principal Supervisor Initiative*. The Wallace Foundation.

**Grissom, J.A., Loeb, S., & Master, B.** (2013). Effective instructional time use for school leaders: Longitudinal evidence from observations of principals. *Educational Researcher*, 42(8), 433-444.

**Honig, M.I.** (2012). District central office leadership as teaching: How central office administrators support principals' development as instructional leaders. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 48(4), 733-774.

**Knowles, M.S.** (1996). Adult learning. In R.L. Craig (Ed.), *ASTD training & development handbook: A guide to human resource development* (4th ed., pp. 254-265). McGraw Hill.

**Learning Forward.** (2011). *Standards for Professional Learning*. Learning Forward.

**Leithwood, K.** (2018). *Leadership development on a large scale: Lessons for long-term success*. Corwin.

**Manning, T.** (2017). How do we clarify coaches' roles and responsibilities? *The Learning*

*Professional*, 38(4), 14.

**Thessin, R.A.** (2019). Establishing productive principal/principal supervisor partnerships for instructional leadership. *Journal of Educational Administration* 57(5), 463-483.

**Thessin, R.A. & Louis, K.S.** (2019). The role of districts and other agencies in supporting school leaders' instructional leadership. *Journal of Educational Administration* 57(5), 434-444.

**U.S. Department of Education.** (2016). *Non-regulatory guidance for Title II, Part A: Building systems of support for excellent teaching and learning*. <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/essatitleiipartaguidance.pdf>

**Zepeda, S.J.** (2013). *Professional development: What works*. Routledge.

•

**Rebecca A. Thessin** ([rthessin@gwu.edu](mailto:rthessin@gwu.edu)) is assistant professor of educational administration at The George Washington University in Washington, D.C. **Karen Seashore Louis** ([klouis@umn.edu](mailto:klouis@umn.edu)) is Regents Professor of Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development and the Robert H. Beck Chair of Ideas in Education at the University of Minnesota. ■