

Scenario

Benson School District is preparing to launch a coaching program. As a part of the development process, Julia Jackson, the district's assistant superintendent and coach champion, wants to be sure that the coaching program and the first "class" of coaches are as successful as possible. The district plans a three-year phase-in for hiring coaches for each school, so she carefully considers which schools are ready for coaches. She believes that their early success would build success for future coaches.

She devises a list of criteria with input from principals, colleagues in central office, and coaches in other districts. A school staff's commitment to continuous improvement and collective responsibility are high on the list of criteria. These factors will make a difference in how quickly coaches are able to begin their work to strengthen teaching and learning. She also learns that principal readiness and understanding of the role of a coach and his or her relationship with the staff also matter in the coach's and coaching program's success.

With her criteria in mind, she visits with leadership teams in each of the district's 21 schools and principals separately to assess their readiness. She formulates a set of questions to guide her meetings and invites teams and principals to be candid in their responses. She stresses that every school will get a coach within the three-year phase-in period, some sooner than others. She explains that the purpose of her meetings is to determine how to phase in placement of coaches, an essential step to start the program.

Her criteria include staff collaboration, staff commitment to student success, staff sense of efficacy and agency, and current student results. She watches also for the dynamics of the leadership teams' interactions with each other and administrators.

During her meeting, a few schools self-select out of consideration for first-year placement. They acknowledge that they want more time to prepare for coaching as a routine part of their school improvement efforts. After finishing her interviews, she reviews her notes and prioritizes the list of schools in two ways — one based on student achievement data and one based on her assessment of the schools using her criteria.

The lists do not match. She finds that several of the high-needs schools demonstrate less commitment to student success. Their leadership teams complain about parents, students' readiness for their current grades or courses they are in, or student behavioral challenges they face. Principals indicate that it is difficult to be an instructional leader in their schools because they have so many staff, student, and family challenges.

Using the criteria, Jackson makes a list of recommended schools in which to place the first cohort of coaches, approximately one third of the schools. She shares it with the superintendent, principals' council, and teachers' association along with her rationale. Sparks fly. Only two of the four lowest-performing schools are on the list to get coaches during the first year of implementation. Jackson explains that it is not possible for coaches or the program to be successful in such challenging school environments.

She asks the leadership of those schools to work with her on creating and implementing a readiness plan for coaching during the next year, and if they demonstrate progress on the criteria, they will be assigned a coach the next year. She also asks principals in those schools to work with a leadership coach as another support to increase the schools' readiness for coaching.