



How ‘tugboat coaching’ propels one district forward

BY JOELLEN KILLION, JEANNE SPILLER, AND BRENDA KAYLOR

The instructional coaches in Kildeer Countryside School District 96 (KCS D 96), outside Chicago, are like tugboats, a key part of a maritime navigation system.

Just as tugboats nudge and guide barges and ships that need steering

assistance to navigate tricky waters, the coaches nudge and guide educators to navigate toward school and student learning goals. Just as tugboats read and respond to currents, weather, and load, the coaches read and respond to students’ and schools’ needs and progress.

And as tugboats coordinate with other tugboats to reach the same destination, the coaches collaborate with one another within and across schools and with other parts of the guidance system (district and school improvement plans, student data systems, curriculum, human resources,

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professional learning, and leadership), to maintain a clear focus on their common destination of student success.

When two or more tugboats work together, it is essential that the tugboats collaborate to move toward the same identified destination. If any tugboat's directional heading is off the mark of the intended destination, it foils the entire team's efforts.

Although research (Kraft & Blazar, 2017; Kraft et al., 2018; Kraft & Hill, 2020) confirms the impact of high-quality coaching on student academic achievement, mustering the power of coaching to achieve maximum impact in the day-to-day reality of schools can be challenging.

Sometimes, it can feel like district waters have too many ships moving in different directions and at different speeds. Yet, the "tugboats" in KCSD 96 are overcoming those challenges and leveraging the power of coaching to ensure every student and educator is moving toward the same harbor — common goals for student success.

What's their secret? A deep commitment to data-based continuous improvement. Unlike many coaching

programs that go unchanged for years, leaders in KCSD 96 long ago decided that they would use data to adapt the coaching program to respond to shifting currents and evolving needs.

To resist complacently accepting the status quo, district coaching champions, the assistant superintendent, and directors who oversee the coaching program regularly analyze data to understand current strengths and opportunities for growth to ensure high levels of achievement for all students. The district team uses a combination of quantitative (student achievement and growth data) and qualitative data (coach interviews, coach, principal, and teacher surveys, case studies, and observations) to analyze areas for improvement.

Now in the district's 12th year with coaching, KCSD 96 leaders have identified three key factors to ensure that its coaching program and coaches nudge and guide all staff toward districtwide success:

- Coaching roles and responsibilities require continuous refinement and clarification;

- Job-embedded coaching aligns with the district's and schools' goals; and
- Coaching support extends beyond a subset of classroom teachers to include all educators who directly contribute to student learning.

SHIFTS IN ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Shifting coach roles and responsibilities based on current data is essential to keeping the coaching program — and the district — on track. One example of how KCSD 96 leaders have done that is in their approach to supporting English learners.

Student achievement data collected over several years showed that English learners were less likely to meet expectations on the Illinois Assessment of Readiness (IAR), the state assessment and accountability measure, than their peers. Additional data collected from classroom teachers, language development teachers, and administrators suggested that a contributing factor was the district's approach to supporting English

learners, through a co-teaching model that embedded a language development teacher for one hour a day in classrooms with high concentrations of English learners.

Student achievement data and input from principals, teachers, and language development teachers indicated that the available amount of support in classrooms was insufficient to meet teachers' growth or students' language development needs. The co-teaching model intended to build teacher capacity to integrate language learning practices throughout the day, yet both classroom and language development teachers communicated that they wanted more direct support for students. Implementation of the co-teaching model created a tug-of-war between direct support to English learner students and building teacher capacity.

Based on this discovery, the district shifted from a co-teaching model to a coaching model. In the coaching model, language development teachers function as coaches; they continue to work in classrooms with high concentrations of English learners, but their focus is on building teacher capacity to incorporate effective instruction to ensure that English learners access instructional content effectively throughout the day. Acting as tugboats, they nudge and guide the teachers' practices so that all students have access to effective instruction tailored to their learning needs throughout the day.

But in their ongoing data analysis and in the spirit of continuous improvement, the district, after three years of implementing this model, has discovered that this shift is still not producing the level of student growth desired. Student achievement data, teacher and language coach input, and principal observations indicate that both language development coaches and teachers they support have struggled to shift from a co-teaching model to a coaching model.

Principals and central office staff noted that many teachers and coaches gravitated back toward the familiar co-

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teaching model in which one student group worked with the classroom teacher while English learners worked with the language development coach. As a result, a refined model to support English learners is emerging for the 2022-23 school year.

Another example of updating coach roles and responsibilities as a result of data collection and analysis involved content-focused coaching. The district coaches served as literacy, math, science, and language development coaches. Data — including coach logs, coach case studies, coach journals, time analysis, one-on-one meetings between coaches and coach champions, and coach and teacher input — indicated that content-focused coaches in literacy, math, and science focused more on developing teachers' discipline-specific knowledge and less on instructional practices.

This led district coach champions to create positions for six innovation coaches (iCoaches) whose role is to focus on highly effective instructional practices and who work side-by-side with other coaches and teachers to weave together content knowledge and pedagogical practices.

District leaders chose to have iCoaches emphasize two elements of highly effective teaching practice: engagement and differentiation. A team involving iCoaches, teachers, principals, and district leaders developed a district instructional playbook focused on these two areas and based on the research of experts including Robert Marzano and Deborah Pickering (2011), John Hattie (2008), and Spencer Kagan and Miguel Kagan (2015).

The iCoach team introduced the instructional playbook to teacher teams, then teachers individually identified an initial area for coaching support.

iCoaches then guided teachers to clarify and focus their cycle goals with data, including student achievement data and observations from classroom visits.

The initial plan was for all general education teachers to engage in a coaching cycle with an iCoach focused on the playbook. Then COVID-19 struck. The iCoach team, out of necessity, shifted its focus to ensuring that district teachers were prepared to continue rigorous instruction in a remote setting.

The creation of the iCoach role and the success of the instructionally focused cycles led to further thinking about shifting all coaching roles to focus more directly on instructional practice. Despite all coaches' and teachers' hard work, student proficiency and growth lagged behind expectations.

There were several contributing factors. Content-focused coaches worked primarily with teachers who volunteered, and they focused on what teachers perceived they needed to improve. As a result, the district leadership team recognized after reviewing data from coach cycle records, school improvement plans, and student fall, winter, and spring MAP proficiency and growth data that the tugboats were not all heading toward a common destination.

To affect teacher practice and ultimately student achievement, the district's coaches needed much greater clarity about how to leverage their efforts to achieve the intended goals. District coach champions began working to determine a clear destination and support for their powerhouse tugboats and other parts of the guidance system to pilot the ship toward that destination in a coordinated manner.

CONSISTENCY AND COHERENCE

With the recognition of the need for a common destination, district and school leaders began to focus on creating consistency and coherence. They started by having coaches gather observational data from every classroom

to determine which highly effective instructional practices were most and least prevalent. Along with that data, research (e.g. Dyer, 2015; Marzano & Pickering, 2011) helped district and school leaders narrow their focus to fostering student engagement.

With a clear focus on engagement, it was now possible for coaches and the teachers they support to achieve consistency and coherence. To fulfill that possibility, coach champions, principals, and coaches worked to re-envision school improvement planning.

Previously, district leaders acknowledged that school improvement planning was a significant pathway to student success, but school leadership teams often considered school improvement efforts as distinct and separate from other efforts, especially coaching. With guidance from district leaders, the school leadership teams, coaches, and principals discovered that coaching could exponentially power up schoolwide efforts to achieve school improvement goals — if, and only if, coaches and teachers aligned the focus of their coaching interactions with the school's improvement goals and the needs of educators and students.

School administrators quickly recognized the importance of intentional alignment and made it a priority to move all parts of the school-based system, including general education, related services, special education, coaching, and administration, in the same direction as the district system.

To do so, each school incorporated a school improvement goal for student engagement into the 2021-22 school year plan. District leaders and coaches worked collaboratively to develop tools to build coherence, consistency, and clarity, including Innovation Configuration (IC) maps on engagement and coaching.

The IC map on engagement specifies the district's definition of student engagement, what it looks like in practice, and the numerous decision points for teachers about how to foster

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engagement. It also guides educators to self-assess their practice and use that assessment as the basis for a coaching cycle goal.

The IC map on coaching guides coaches to focus and assess their practice and increase the frequency of direct classroom support. It also shapes the focus for coaches' ongoing professional learning, which occurs several times a month in large and small groups. Both IC maps are also used to inform coaching team conversations, principal and coach conversations, and district leader and principal conversations.

Coaches leaned on the newly developed IC maps and found that the common focus on engagement created synergy among schools and built increased opportunities for lateral learning across teams and classrooms. Teachers reported value in instructional cycles. "I am learning so much from you and loving everything," said teacher Abby Heuer. "This has been so beneficial for my kids. ... I would love to find a time to meet consistently and plan for these kinds of things."

COACHING FOR ALL

Today, all staff members who work directly with students are immersed in coaching cycles focused on the district's highly effective practices goal, even those who do not traditionally have access to coaching, such as occupational therapists, social workers, speech and language pathologists, psychologists, and general education teachers in areas such as music, art, and physical education.

Every staff member now understands what coaching is and how it supports

educator growth and development, and staff across departments and roles are benefiting from expert coaching that guides them to implement engagement practices appropriate to their environment. Perhaps most importantly, all staff are now recognized as contributors to school and district goals and student success.

An essential element of this universal approach to coaching is ongoing professional learning for coaches and those who supervise and support them. Each new coach participates in a two-year preparation program, and all coaches engage in monthly whole- and small-group professional learning designed to extend and refine coaching practices and meet emerging needs.

Coaches and principals within each school meet regularly to align their efforts and monitor progress. Principals and district leaders also participate in the coach preparation program and rotate into the two-year program every three years. This keeps central office and principals connected to the coaching program and the coaches.

Coaches gain a sense of confidence when they know principals understand their work, speak the same language about coaching, and have opportunities to engage in purposeful dialogue about coaching. Some principals have participated in the coach-preparation two-year program as many as three times and find that they gain skills they can apply in their supervision and coaching of staff and new insights about coaching and how to leverage it to support student learning and the school's improvement plan. Central office and principal engagement in the coaching preparation program keeps coaches and administrators navigating toward the identified goals.

VISIBLE RESULTS

Early indications from informal data collected from classroom walk-throughs and teacher, coach, and principal input suggest that classroom

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Learning Forward Coaches Academy, participants and facilitators agree, is nurturing coaches' ongoing growth and development.

"As continuous learners, professional learning for coaches allows the growth process to continue and informs schoolwide change," Dantzler says. "It helps us improve professional learning for our colleagues and meet our goals for students."

North Dakota's Marijke Leibel says the Coaches Academy empowers coaches and, as a result, "we've seen a lot of leaders emerge."

That investment in continuous learning is a key mindset for coaches

and all professional learning leaders. As Rome says, "Everyone needs a coach. Coaches, coaches of coaches, principals — everyone." And when she reflects on the opportunity the Learning Forward Coaches Academy has provided for that, she says that the impact is evident in the growth of skills and expertise she has seen among coaches.

North Dakota's Erin Jacobson agrees and sees this as a crucial moment for coaching. "Teaching has only increased in complexity, so it makes sense that we need to increase our support for teachers," she says. "Coaching is a positive way to do that. And when you have a good structure

and capacity, it can make a very big impact, not just for teachers, but for students."

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implementation of student engagement strategies is increasing, as is the sophistication and depth of engagement strategies in student-educator interactions.

Coaching cycles focused on student engagement began in October, and teachers want more opportunities to repeat those cycles, especially now that they have had their first ones. Conversations among teachers and between teachers and coaches about student engagement are specific, data-driven, and guided by the IC map. Teachers are using the IC map to expand their understanding about engagement strategies and self-assess their practice.

Related services staff, now viewed as valuable contributors to school improvement goals, are experiencing coaching for the first time. Principals are engaging in classroom walk-throughs to identify and monitor student engagement strategies. Each school's leadership team uses its school's improvement plan and the IC maps for engagement and coaching to develop short-term commitments, actions that teams and individuals will take, to lead toward the broader school

improvement goals. Leadership teams use interim student achievement data to assess if their actions are affecting student success and use the data to adapt their actions.

The ship is making steady progress under expert guidance from leaders and navigational assistance from tugboat coaches. All hands are on deck, contributing to a coordinated effort to use the essential tools, expertise, and determination to reach the destination of student success.

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