



# Model classrooms can amplify coaching's impact

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**A** school is much more than a collection of individual classrooms. Although teachers have an undeniable impact on the students in their classrooms, school culture and structure can effectively support or dramatically limit teachers'

capacity to grow — and, therefore, their students' capacity to learn. But the influence of school culture and structure on teacher practice is too often overlooked as a lever for improvement (Johnson, 2019; Quintero, 2017).

Fostering a collaborative and learning-oriented culture can improve

teachers' and students' success. One promising model for doing so is a professional learning approach we witnessed in 2018-19 as part of a larger study of teacher leadership programs (Berg et al., 2019): coupling coaching with model classrooms.

In model classrooms, teachers

who have participated in professional learning open their classroom doors and agree to have others observe as they work to integrate the targeted new approaches. Model classrooms, therefore, don't guarantee a window into high-level practice. Instead, they provide models of how to learn the practice. Model classrooms simultaneously give teachers an opportunity to be lead learners among their colleagues and power up the potential impact of aligned professional learning and coaching.

## TRANSFORMING CULTURE

There's more going on than meets the eye in model classrooms. On the surface, individual teachers are simply observing as their colleagues model the process of learning to implement a targeted practice or approach. But model classrooms can also serve to influence organizational change and help transform the culture of schools for several reasons.

First, teacher-observers watch their model-teacher colleagues experimenting with new approaches in a way that demonstrates vulnerability on the part of the observed and compels reciprocity on the part of the observer. The experience strengthens trust and cultivates a learning stance among teachers so that teachers begin to feel willing to try something new and feel safe asking their colleagues for support.

Second, in school-based model classrooms, teachers learn in the presence of students who are just like their own. This can help strengthen teachers' sense of collective efficacy, as it demonstrates not only how this can be done, but it shows how the targeted instructional practice can be adopted or adapted *here* and meet the needs of *our* students (see Margolis et al., 2017).

Model classrooms also have

the potential to establish cultural expectations — for staff and students — that the school is a community of learners (Margolis & Doring, 2012). Not only do students see the host teacher demonstrating a willingness to try something new, but they see teachers striving to learn and to do so together. They're modeling the habits of lifelong learners.

At the same time, model classrooms empower teachers as professionals. In model classrooms, teachers demonstrate and grow their willingness to lead, share their expertise, and collaboratively build professional capital from the test kitchens of their own classrooms. Over time, this enhances their sense of teacher professionalism.

Despite their many potential benefits, model classrooms are rarely seen in U.S. schools. We were intrigued, therefore, by the use of model classrooms we observed in Bonaver School District (a pseudonym). Bonaver is a midsized suburban U.S. school district that grew concerned in 2015 about the quality of literacy instruction due to elementary reading scores. Leaders in the district wanted to amplify the impact of planned professional learning and coaching on literacy instruction and believed they could do so by tapping more teachers as leaders.

After convening a cross-stakeholder planning team and with guidance from the state's teacher leadership network, they resolved to add a model classroom component to their professional learning plan in 2016.

## BUILDING MODEL CLASSROOMS

Bonaver School District sought to maximize the benefits of model classrooms when building their new literacy initiative. District staff selected literacy leaders from among the

district's teachers through a rigorous interview and observation process.

These teacher leaders continued in their classroom roles full time but added three new responsibilities, for which they received a stipend: 1) attending the district's literacy professional learning sessions; 2) collaborating with instructional coaches to present the material from those sessions to their teacher colleagues at the building level, and 3) putting that learning into action in their own classrooms while inviting others to come and observe them. They also convened regularly to receive role-relevant support from the district.

At the same time, the district reconfigured the existing instructional coach role. In addition to leading coaching cycles, helping teachers analyze data, demonstrating instructional strategies, and providing resources, the coaches now joined teachers in observing lessons in the literacy leaders' classrooms, led debriefs of those observations, and helped teachers use these reflections to set goals for their own coaching cycles.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Education leaders in Bonaver integrated the model classroom as a powerful component of their instructional capacity-building plans by attending to three factors:

- Building structures that support cross-role relationships;
- Making the district commitment visible; and
- Taking creative approaches to time and funding.

### Cross-role relationships

Bonaver's model strategically engaged multiple instructional leaders and prioritized efforts to support strong relationships with clear communication across roles. By design, literacy leaders

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and instructional coaches often worked side by side — participating in the same professional learning, leading professional learning collaboratively, and debriefing observations together.

One instructional coach said the shift was both individual and organizational. “My work with our literacy leader has made my role as an instructional coach a hundred times better. ... It’s not just the literacy leader in this building teaching our teachers. They’re [all] coming together.”

By facilitating formal meetings and informal interactions among educators who have different roles in supporting teachers’ growth, both the quality of the teacher leaders’ work and the relationships needed to enact the work were strengthened.

The district also provided protected time for literacy leaders to collaborate across schools and with coaches. This networked approach reduced the anxiety some literacy leaders felt when facilitating professional learning with colleagues. For example, many literacy leaders said they were nervous about leading whole-staff presentations, and the networking approach allowed them to meet and plan these sessions together so that they could play to their individual strengths and “cut the workload of who’s standing up there the whole time,” as one leader put it.

Similarly, communication routines with district administrators strengthened relationships and bolstered the sustainability and success of the program. A district administrator helped literacy leaders troubleshoot the new role, which they said helped to create more of a sense that “we’re all in this together. I’m learning it; you’re learning it.” This also allowed them to establish a relationship of shared ownership of the role and its improvement.

School-based administrators similarly benefited from two-way communication with literacy leaders. One principal who worked closely with the literacy leaders said, “I feel like it just really helps strengthen literacy

in my building having those leaders that are every day in the classroom, practicing and putting out what we’re talking about.”

Importantly, principals joined professional learning sessions led by literacy leaders as full participants alongside teachers. This allowed them to experience the educator learning process alongside their staff, which fostered shared language and instructional expectations across all grade levels.

## Demonstrated commitment

Knowing that teachers’ buy-in is often affected by the frequency with which school initiatives seem to come and go, school and district administrators made several moves that gave educators confidence that this professional learning model is a priority — and teachers noticed.

Several teachers noted that teacher leaders were never pulled out of their teacher development work to be emergency subs in the building or for other noninstructional leader activities, as had happened in the past. They also witnessed district leaders responding with a problem-solving orientation to challenges they identified in the role.

Over time, the more school and district leaders’ commitments to the program continued to be visible in small ways such as these, the more people believed in it. One literacy leader described this phenomenon: “When we began, I can still remember teachers looking at me and being like, ‘Great, something else, something new that is going to last for a little bit.’ ... [But] as we’ve moved through the years, I’ve started to see teachers that were hesitant and closed off to this starting to open up and to try these things. ... I think it’s the balance and continuation and just sticking with it.”

Over time, the presence of the model classroom began to shift not only how teachers learned, but also how the larger organizational culture evolved, and administrators embraced and applauded the changes. One district

administrator described this shift in culture as creating an environment where communication and collaboration is “just expected ... it’s how professional learning is approached in the district.”

The culture shift around teacher learning enabled greater shifts in practice, as the commitment to model classrooms became stronger and stronger over time. Another administrator said that the organizational culture created for and by the model classroom was now directly impacting students with “better instruction ... because they’re all working together to create those lessons and prepare.” Sticking with and continuously tinkering with the model classroom was beginning to have a positive ripple effect throughout the district.

## Sustaining resources

Of course, it was also essential that Bonaver provided the resources to support this new form of professional learning. First, administrators had to think creatively about scheduling so that all teachers would be able to observe in the model classrooms and debrief the observation with their coach. Rather than solely relying on substitute teachers, Bonaver brought other educators into class coverage rotations — including purposeful visits by school counselors.

In another case, the district stepped in to provide a full-time sub. One literacy leader who noted some variation across the district said that the principal was key in making this happen: “They have to believe in the program enough that they’re willing to get coverage for those teachers to be able to do it.”

Bonaver also had to think differently about budgeting. The districted shifted monies that historically had been directed elsewhere, including Title I and university partnership funding, to support this program by some leaders. One district administrator described it as a case

of budgetary will: “So there are CTE funds, there are IDEA, there are our general funds, and there are federal dollars, Title I, Title II, that for various things are utilized.” Another principal described the district’s decision as one of redirecting funds from buying external “frivolous programs” to investing in the school’s people.

### CAUTIONS TO DISTRICTS

This case points to the great potential in a model classroom approach to instructional capacity-building and illustrates factors that can help school districts seeking to couple the model classroom approach with coaching and professional learning. However, we can learn as much from what didn’t go quite as well as what did.

We know, for example, that school-level preparation and intentionality for the model classroom visits was important. It’s not surprising, then, that when instructional coaches were not deliberate about making connections to coaching during and after the observation of the literacy leader, observing teachers were less engaged, had fewer look-fors, and were less focused. One literacy leader also reported hearing “horror stories from other people in the county about how people wouldn’t pay attention, or they were goofing off” during professional learning led by literacy leaders and instructional coaches.

This indicates that additional school-level efforts would have been helpful to secure teachers’ buy-in and assist all educators in understanding the compelling purpose and calculated coherence across professional learning, model classrooms, and coaching support.

Further, while Bonaver leaders sought to resource the program purposefully and creatively, in many cases it was not enough. Literacy leaders received \$2,000 per year and no guaranteed release time. Innovative efforts to provide additional funds or sub coverage were inconsistent.

While for some literacy leaders it wasn’t about the money and more about impacting change, for others the work became unsustainable. This left some schools with no applicants for the literacy leader positions available at crucial grade levels. In those cases, a literacy leader would often provide support to teachers beyond their own grade level.

The budgetary limitation that led to inadequate compensation relative to the work was a districtwide concern beyond the teacher leader program, with one administrator describing the situation as “trying to get blood from a turnip.” Thus, while the district had made progress in resourcing the teacher leader program and piloting ideas to provide requisite release time, there was still work to be done in institutionalizing this support to ensure sustainability of a quality program.

An additional related challenge was that teachers often wanted more time with the literacy leaders (who were still teaching) than the instructional coaches (who were no longer teaching). Teachers found interactions with literacy leaders more authentic because they were doing the same work as teachers, yet there was no formally designated time for these potentially high-impact conversations. So, while creative use of resources and scheduling helped to bring the model classroom to life, at the time of this study, Bonaver was still working to further evolve the program for greater impact and sustainability.

### SEEING THE POTENTIAL

While Bonaver’s model classroom implementation was not easy or perfect, the case expands our sense of what instructional capacity-building can look like and the potential role model classrooms can play. District commitment to working through inevitable implementation challenges was key, as well as a willingness to engage in continual program refinement based on feedback loops about what was and was not working in practice.

Bonaver is not alone in its concern for the quality of instruction and its willingness to own the problem with systems-level solutions. To be sure, shifts in individual teachers’ practice are required, but school and district leaders play a key role in whether schools have the organizational structures and culture needed to support those shifts.

At this point, model classrooms are an overlooked potential component of district plans for instructional capacity-building. It is an approach that not only has potential to shift what teachers do, but also to transform how they think about their schools as a place to learn how to improve their practice together.

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