



## GROWTH & CHANGE

Jennifer Abrams

**Schools should be places where everyone — not just students — learns, matures, and develops.**

# COACHES HELP US BECOME BETTER SELVES AND BETTER EDUCATORS

**W**hen I work with school leaders and their teams, I always share this belief: Growing into who we can become is a lifelong journey that never ends. Usually, there is pushback. Some will ask, “Shouldn’t education leaders be there already? That’s why we got the job, right?” Others will say, “I have so much on my plate as it is. How could I find time to grow?”

While I agree there is a fundamental level of competence and professionalism that should be expected of all school leaders, I also believe that our development as professionals is never complete. We should always aspire to be better selves and better educators.

We should model for those we teach and lead what it means to be a work in progress and stretch at our edges. Schools should be places where everyone — not just students — learns, matures, and develops. We should not solely be in the child development business. We should be in the human development business (Abrams, 2021).

In this ongoing process of growth, coaching is invaluable. Working with a coach can and should be considered for the following reasons.

### THE WORK WE DO IS TOO COMPLEX TO GO IT ALONE.

The work of teaching and leading is complex and nuanced. Sometimes we get lost in the day-to-day work, and we don’t see what we don’t see. Sometimes we get stuck in one perspective when we should take a bigger view, from the trees to the forest to the canopy.

Coaches can help us move from micro to macro and back again. In the midst of all the laws, mandates, strategies, protocols, and discussions we need to navigate, they can help us make time to pause, reflect, and redirect. Coaches can also help us understand our overwhelm, find some structure in our perceived chaos, and help us remember what our goals were to begin with.



### WE CAN AND SHOULD CONTINUE TO GROW, EVEN AS WE GROW MORE EXPERT IN OUR FIELD.

Often as we move into our fifth or 10th or maybe even our 20th year in a profession, many of us consider becoming a coach but often don’t think about finding a coach for ourselves. Coaching offers an opportunity to have a thought partner who holds a safe space for us one-on-one as we find our voice around a given topic, no matter if we are novice or veteran in our positions.

We all can grow cognitively, psychologically, and spiritually as we move past being able to grow physically. And we must, especially in education, where the challenges are always evolving. Working with a coach offers us a sounding board, someone who gives us space to find our voice and work through our challenges so we can learn to approach our work with others with more strength and understanding.

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**Jennifer Abrams (jennifer@jenniferabrams.com) is an independent communications consultant and leadership coach.**

### Share feedback from state or external walk-throughs with teachers.

Often, those who oversee the school's improvement initiatives conduct walk-throughs without teacher engagement. This can leave teachers wondering if the work they have put in is being noticed, and it deprives them of valuable information.

Even when teachers do see or hear the feedback, it can feel overwhelming or disconnected from their direct work. Connect the dots by reviewing the upper-level feedback with teachers and discussing action steps that fit into the coaching work you are already doing.

My experience also suggests something to avoid doing. When we are under pressure to get immediate results, coaches can be tempted to take over the instruction or decision-making by telling teachers what to do or doing

### LEARNING FORWARD'S COACHES ACADEMY

Learning Forward's researched-based Coaches Academy fosters the development of skills that allow coaches to address organizational needs while meeting teachers where they are by fostering relationships based in mutual respect and resulting in collaborative learning that improves outcomes for all students. For more information, visit [services.learningforward.org/services/coaches-academy/](https://services.learningforward.org/services/coaches-academy/)

the all-important reflection work for them. But this ultimately has a negative impact on a teacher's sense of efficacy. It also masks the problem so when the coach is deployed elsewhere, that problem could potentially re-emerge and get worse.

As you are working with educators in high-pressure situations, remember to stay true to the key principles of effective coaching. And remember that

Learning Forward is here to support you through our Coaches Academy and other resources and programs.

### REFERENCE

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### COACHES HELP US PROJECT THE SELVES WE WANT TO BE.

Educators do far more than deliver content; we model for students what it means to be fully human and to live out our values. Students are watching us and learning from how we respond and react to the situations and people around us. As one teacher with a popular Instagram account recently reminded all of us who have the privilege to be in classrooms, "Somebody is learning how to be a person by watching you. Let that sink in" (mrscowmansclassroom, 2020). To be the models we want to be, and to live our values out loud, we have to understand what those values are and how other people are — or are not — perceiving them based on our actions. Coaches can help us with both of those things.

Coaches can serve as sounding boards, so we can discuss our possible

choices for our actions and their implications. Then when we have settled on an authentic and solid next step, we often feel more assured of our values and decisions.

Equally important, they can help us determine if we are communicating those values and decisions. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1983) said that, instead of learning from textbooks, we should learn from "text people" — in other words, we learn most about the world and our place in it from reading each other.

Our words, gestures, and actions are constantly being read and interpreted by others. But are they being interpreted the way we intend them to be? Coaches can help us do the hard work of examining those questions and making necessary shifts to ensure that we are expressing outwardly the person we want to be so that we can help students become the people they want to be.

We all need to be the humane, growth-oriented person we want others to see. Working with a coach helps us look at our challenges with a broader perspective, find new strategies for handling them in growth-producing ways, and help us become the person we want to be.

### REFERENCES

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**Cowman, S. (@mrscowmansclassroom).** (2020, March 11). *Today during our read aloud, my tongue got tied up and I laughed at myself a little bit (they all [Photograph].* Instagram. [www.instagram.com/p/B9nHxZshHX0/](http://www.instagram.com/p/B9nHxZshHX0/)

**Heschel, A.J. (1983).** *I asked for wonder: A spiritual anthology.* Crossroad. ■