



**Coaches are first and foremost learners, and they require the support and investment that every educator in the system deserves.**

**Tracy Crow is chief strategy officer at Learning Forward.**

## CALL TO ACTION

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# COACHING IS EMBEDDED IN STANDARDS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

**A**s Learning Forward releases the revised Standards for Professional Learning this spring, coaches may be wondering, “Where are coaches in the standards, and how do standards impact us?” Coaching is embedded throughout all 11 standards, and coaches play a key role in implementing each of them.

To begin an exploration of the revised standards, here are two where coaching and coaches take center stage.

## THE IMPLEMENTATION STANDARD

**The standard:** *Professional learning results in equitable and excellent outcomes for all students when educators understand and apply research on change management, engage in feedback processes, and implement and sustain professional learning.*

**Why it matters for coaches:** Coaches are often a school or system’s chief implementation leaders for professional learning, with the collaboration of principals and central office leaders. They are responsible for supporting their colleagues in making sense of new knowledge and skills and moving new information into practice. The Implementation standard encapsulates the way that effective coaches understand and apply the principles of change and growth.

Coaches who embody the Implementation standard recognize that educators approach new learning and initiatives from different perspectives and with differing levels of readiness. They support each educator according to his or her individual needs, offering multiple avenues to practice and apply new strategies and skills, leading to meaningful and sustained implementation.

## TO LEARN MORE:

Learning Forward is releasing Action Guides for educators in a range of roles, including coaches, to specify their responsibilities and the actions they’ll take to bring standards to life in schools and systems. Learn more about each standard at **standards.learningforward.org**.

## THE LEARNING DESIGNS STANDARD

**The standard:** *Professional learning results in equitable and excellent outcomes for all students when educators set relevant and contextualized learning goals, ground their work in research and theories about learning, and implement evidence-based learning designs.*

**Why it matters for coaches:** To provide on-the-ground support for educators’ learning and growth, coaches must continually develop and share knowledge about evidence-based practices, emerging research, and how to use local data to inform improvement efforts. For example, effective coaches help educators understand the student data they’ve collected and use it to identify an area of focus for learning and improvement.

Using both the data and an understanding of learning theories, they help educators see how they might achieve their desired learning outcomes and help create a learning plan. When

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of school leadership. The assistant principal should be as well-rounded a leader as possible, in part because the assistant principalship is often a steppingstone to the principalship.

Coaching is one important way for assistant principals to prepare for the principalship. Assistant principals should be additional instructional leaders in their schools, and I remind assistant principals that if they supervise and evaluate teachers, it is nonnegotiable for them to be effective “assistant coaches.” Taking on this role helps their current school and the school they will one day lead as principal.

It therefore must be a priority of the principal to coach assistant principals and, in turn, help them develop their own coaching skills. As convenient as it is to relegate assistant principals to full-time disciplinarians or cafeteria monitors, that model will not result in optimal performance of children in classrooms. The roles of principal and assistant principal as coaches can never be minimized. You show me a school where principal and assistant principal coaching are either minimal or nonexistent, and I will show you an underperforming school.

### **THE INSTRUCTIONAL COACH IS VITAL, TOO**

School leaders are not the only ones who can provide modeling, support, and guidance. Instructional coaches have that responsibility as well. Instructional coaches are valuable resources for teachers and leaders.

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They have the training, skills, and time (when coaching is implemented well) to support professional growth and improvement in their schools. But for them to achieve their potential, principals and assistant principals must work in close concert with them, with a common vision and mutual respect.

From my observations, this is often not the case. When I speak about instructional leadership, administrators frequently talk with me publicly and openly about whatever questions, concerns, and challenges they are facing. But instructional coaches approach me privately because many of them don’t feel comfortable expressing their concerns with their administrators present. It suggests that they don’t feel fully supported by their principals, and that’s a problem for everyone in the school. Of the concerns and challenges coaches express to me, two of them are particularly salient and relevant to school leaders.

First, because coaches are not administrators, some teachers don’t respect coaches’ expertise or feel they

need to participate in coaching. In situations like this, school leaders have to set clear expectations for teachers’ engagement in coaching, and, to do so, they must understand why teachers might not see the value instructional coaches bring. For example, some teachers are reluctant to work with someone in the same bargaining unit, whom they see as a peer. This is why it is vital for principals to reinforce coaches’ credibility.

Second, instructional coaches often feel they are working in isolation from the administrative team, in part because school administrators are so overwhelmed that they have little time to collaborate with them. For this reason, I tell administrators that there must be an ongoing collaboration between instructional coaches and administration. Not only does this help coaches do their jobs, but it provides administrators with vital information about what goes on in classrooms.

### **WORKING AS A TEAM**

For instructional coaching to work optimally, it must be an intentional and integral component of the school culture. No one person can do that alone. Just as an athletic team is more likely to win when it has a head coach, several assistant coaches, and position coaches who work with specific athletes on targeted skills, a school is more likely to succeed when it has a principal, assistant principal, and instructional coaches working together toward the same goals. ■

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they embody the Learning Designs standard, coaches are well-positioned to serve as facilitators of various learning designs and support their colleagues in developing essential knowledge and skills.

### **STANDARDS HELP COACHES GROW**

In approaching their engagement with Standards for Professional Learning, among coaches’ most important responsibilities is prioritizing their own growth. To fulfill the roles

described above, coaches are first and foremost learners, and they require the support and investment that every educator in the system deserves. An excellent first step is in-depth study of the revised Standards for Professional Learning. ■