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LEARNING LEADERS

Baruti K. Kafele

COACHING PLAYS AN ESSENTIAL ROLE IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

As a former athlete, I understand firsthand the importance of good coaching. Coaches are leaders. Their leadership improves individual players and the team as a unit. Imagine if an athletic team didn't have a head coach. The team would lack direction, guidance, structure, systems, and a central source of motivation and inspiration.

A school principal is like the head coach of the school, and the principal's leadership is every bit as important to the instructional team as an athletic coach's is to a sports team. A principal has endless responsibilities, but some of the most important ones are to teach, inform, and inspire staff members so that they are continually and consistently growing, developing, and improving. There's a tremendous amount of coaching inherent in the principal's leadership.

Like athletic coaches, though, principals can't do that work alone. They must be supported by a cadre of leaders, including assistant principals and instructional coaches, who nurture the growth of teachers and other staff. Effective coaching must be embedded in their roles, too, and in the culture of the school as a whole.

THE PRINCIPAL AS HEAD COACH

School administrators have so many responsibilities that we often lose sight of the coaching role. Early in my school leadership career, I would find myself in reactive mode because I thought that responding to crises and new stimuli was my role — it's what principals do. I had to grow into the coaching role, into empowering others and reimagining the culture of the school.

During my administrative internship, my mentor said to me, "The purpose of your supervision of your teachers will be their continued improvement in instruction."

That message didn't resonate with me at the time, but it did when I received my first student assessment results as a principal, which were not good. Slowly but surely, I became a coach of my staff. Over time, that work shifted the culture, and that shift freed me up to become the principal that I not only needed to be, but also wanted to be: an instructional leader.

Coaching must be a priority that can never be violated. Students cannot learn optimally if their teachers are not performing optimally, and teachers cannot perform optimally without direction and support. Although teachers can benefit from other forms of professional learning, direct coaching in the context of a solid, collegial relationship with a leader is one of the best ways to learn. An athlete can read books, attend camps, and view videos, but none of this will equate to effective direct coaching. The same is true for educators.

THE ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL AS ASSISTANT COACH

The assistant principalship is the most misunderstood and underused position in all of education. There is no universal understanding or agreement about what an assistant principal does. It is my unwavering contention that the assistant principal should be involved in all aspects



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. ■

CALL TO ACTION / Tracy Crow

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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. ■