



When we invest in coaching, we invest in teachers

BY KIM COFINO

After several years of operating in crisis mode, many teachers are feeling exhausted and burned out. More than ever, they need to feel appreciated, valued, and respected to be resilient in the face of ongoing stress. One of the best ways to show appreciation for

teachers is to value their professional growth and provide support to address their needs and achieve their goals. Instructional coaches provide exactly that kind of support.

Coaches listen, see the possibility in every teacher, and provide customized professional learning based on teachers' needs and goals. Instructional coaching,

when implemented successfully, can be the key driver of both teacher retention and continued, long-term, sustainable professional growth in schools. When we invest in coaching, we invest in teachers.

To illustrate the many ways coaching can support teacher retention, this article will unpack some statements

When schools create a culture of coaching and commit to the structures, policies, and leadership vision that need to be in place to make coaching a success, they are creating a sustainable environment for professional growth, where teachers feel valued and championed as the experts they are.

from expert educators from around the world who have appeared on my weekly podcast, #coachbetter, which features interviews with teachers, coaches, and leaders from international schools. The quotes incorporated here were selected from a range of podcast conversations from the years 2019-22 about instructional coaching and its impact on high-quality professional learning, sustainable school growth, teacher satisfaction, and teacher retention.

The podcast and educator insights shared in this article are grounded in a clear definition of what effective instructional coaching is — and isn't. Coaching should be an invitational process that is nonevaluative and not tied to appraisal. Coaching should start with a teacher's own professional and instructional goals, involve a thoughtfully designed coaching cycle or similar system that incorporates teacher self-reflection, and operate close to the classroom, with observation, co-teaching, or modeling as a central part of the experience. If any of these components are not in place — especially the element of being nonevaluative — coaching can end up feeling like an imposition on teachers rather than the positive support and guidance that it is designed to be.

Coaches show an investment in teachers and empower them to grow.

We know that when schools and leaders invest in teachers, they are investing in students. When teachers feel valued, they bring that feeling of support and joy into their classrooms. When schools create a culture of coaching, when they commit to the structures, policies, and leadership vision that need to be in place to make coaching a success, they are creating a sustainable environment for professional growth, where teachers feel valued and championed as the experts they are.

As education leader and author Brad Johnson says, "To the people who say it's all about the kids, just remember the kids are learning in an environment created by the teacher. A teacher who is supported, encouraged, and appreciated will create a more positive and dynamic learning environment than a teacher who is not supported that way" (Johnson, 2022).

At a learning-focused school, learning is for everyone, not just students. When schools make an investment in the professional learning of all educators, the value placed on learning is explicitly clear. Carrie Zimmer, classroom teacher at Dunecrest Dubai, notes that "the school needs to have established a

community where learning is for everyone. If a school believes in that, they should believe in the coach as a facilitator of that learning."

Coaches work with teachers to identify their professional goals and support teachers in making the changes needed to achieve their goals. In doing so, they are creating an environment that promotes success. Niki Dinsdale, counselor at United World College Southeast Asia in Singapore, says that "coaching highlights my own self-worth. I'm worth stopping and thinking about my professional growth."

In this way, coaching can help teachers feel that their learning is valued, that they are a valuable member of the school community, and that their professional growth is an important part of being a teacher — all of which directly impacts overall teacher happiness and thereby teacher retention.

Coaches personalize teacher learning in a nonevaluative way.

When coaches are able to facilitate professional learning within the classroom context, with actual students, in the exact situation that teachers are managing on a daily basis, the process is clear and achievable and the impact is visible immediately. As

James MacDonald, head of school at International School Brussels, notes, “The more we can individualize [professional development], the more we can move forward as a school.” You can’t get any closer to personalized, authentic learning opportunities than having coaches in the school working with teachers in their classrooms every day.

In addition, because they’re in a nonevaluative position, coaches can help teachers keep a growth mindset in a nonthreatening way when helping bring about this kind of personalized learning. Increased teacher retention is just one of the many positive outgrowths of a situation where teachers feel they are receiving personal support as professionals and individuals within a safe learning environment.

This kind of support can have a domino effect leading to a broader acceptance of coaching as a positive feature of a school community, rather than something imposed on teachers from above. Jen Ricks, director of teaching and learning at the American School of Abu Dhabi, reminds us that “the common view in education is that you must be ‘bad’ if you need a coach, but when we think about elite athletes and high-level executives (for example), they have coaches, that’s the norm, and we expect that. We should expect the same as educators.”

Coaches have the time and focus to become experts in what teachers are doing, and know what works by connecting teachers to each other and sharing and celebrating success (without evaluation pressure). Jim Laney, former head of the American Embassy School of New Delhi, acknowledged that “education is typically very flat — you may have 50 teachers supervised by one leader. It’s not a real supportive environment for growing and learning. Coaching helps fill that gap and creates a step for those strong teachers to take the next step.”

Coaches have a whole-school perspective.

Coaches may be among the only

Ensuring that there is continuity in our professional learning has a profound impact. Coaches are the bridge between schoolwide goals and individual needs — avoiding perceived mismatches between the school’s direction and where teachers are, and thus promoting greater teacher retention.

nonadministrative faculty members who have a whole-school perspective. They have the opportunity to see what’s happening in a variety of grade levels and subject areas. They have the availability to cross divisions and engage in deep conversations with teachers and leaders. This means instructional coaches can take the big-picture messaging of whole-school professional learning and customize it for teams or individuals based on need.

Beth Dressler, deputy head of school at Dresden International School in Germany, notes that “coaches come in with a bird’s-eye view of the school and have a relationship with the teacher, so they can sometimes see things the teachers can’t see.” Coaches can take whole-school goals and connect and translate them to an individual level, so that they’re customized based on what exactly is happening in that teacher’s classroom.

Anne Marie Chow, former middle school vice principal at United World College Southeast Asia in Singapore, notes, “With whole-school [professional development], you’re going to get 60%-75% relevancy for teachers, but when you have a coach working with an individual or a team that has identified this desire to get better at their practice, you’re going to get 100% relevancy. Everything the coach puts in is going to go back and impact student learning.”

Because schools are dynamic learning spaces, and we’re always

assessing, reflecting, adapting, and changing our goals, ensuring that there is continuity in our professional learning has a profound impact. Coaches are the bridge between schoolwide goals and individual needs — avoiding perceived mismatches between the school’s direction and where teachers are, and thus promoting greater teacher retention. As John D’Arcy, former deputy head of school at Western Academy of Beijing, pointed out, “Effective coaches are experts at finding the sweet spot between understanding the school’s strategic goals and teachers’ enthusiasm and energy.”

Coaching programs encourage long-term teacher development, not quick fixes.

School leaders invest extensive time, money, and energy in hiring just the right educators and bringing them into their school community. Those high-quality teachers are likely people who are engaged in their own professional growth and thus they expect to be supported by the school. To address this, many schools offer annual professional learning funds for teachers, but without school-based structures for support, is that really the most effective investment? Without professional growth support inherent in the school structure, like an instructional coaching program, those teachers may be more likely to make the decision to move on.

When we create a coaching environment with consistency over time, that’s when we will see the biggest impact. According to author and education consultant Steve Barkley, “Today’s teaching goals are so complex that you can’t approach them in an isolated single-year scenario” — and that was before the pandemic. Our challenges grow more complex each day. Without a long-term view on individual and team professional growth, we’ll continue to be stuck applying disposable bandages to life-threatening wounds.

Expecting that sending teachers to

conferences and other one-off learning experiences will have a long-term impact on professional growth is often unrealistic — especially if the growth is expected to spread beyond the individual teacher who attended the event. Without any long-term, contextual support within the school setting, inspiration from external events often ends shortly thereafter. When teachers walk away from events with long lists of things to try but don't have the support to make that happen in their classrooms, the lists stay "wishes" — and teachers grow frustrated at not being able to translate their professional learning into reality, which can negatively affect teacher retention. Coaches help teachers turn inspiration into action on a regular basis — with their students, in their school community.

The long-term investment in a coach will make a lasting impact on a much-larger group of educators than any one-off conference or consultant visit. Long-term personalized learning within the context of the school — held physically in the classroom spaces at the school, and with someone who knows the teachers, the school, the context, and can work with them over a long period of time — will make a bigger impact over time.

LEADING THE CHANGE

Keeping all this in mind, it's clear that creating an effective coaching program that fosters teacher retention is a long-term project that requires lasting changes to be implemented over time. As school leaders consider whether to invest in coaching, it's important to remember that it is not realistic to expect to see this kind of professional growth in the first year (or the first iteration) of a coaching program. As James Dalziel, head of school at NIST International School Thailand, points out, "When building a coaching culture, leaders need to understand and recognize how long change takes in a school. It will take time to embed a coaching culture within the norms of the school."

LINKS TO PODCASTS QUOTED IN THIS ARTICLE

- **Steve Barkley:** "Personalize Coaching for Every Teacher," coachbetter.tv/episode-55/
- **Anne Marie Chow:** "Building a Coaching Culture With Both Cognitive Coaching & Instructional Coaching," coachbetter.tv/episode-140/
- **James Dalziel:** "Building a Coaching Culture," coachbetter.tv/episode-72/
- **John D'Arcy:** "Creating an Empowered Community of Learners," coachbetter.tv/episode-37/
- **Niki Dinsdale:** "Instructional Coaching as an Intellectual Spa," coachbetter.tv/episode-39/
- **Beth Dressler:** "Coaches as Learning Partners," coachbetter.tv/episode-43/
- **Jim Laney:** "How Instructional Coaching Supports Professional Growth at All Levels of the School," coachbetter.tv/episode-86/
- **James MacDonald:** "Essential Coaching Skills That Can Make You a Better Leader," coachbetter.tv/episode-79/
- **Jen Ricks:** "Building a Coaching Program," coachbetter.tv/episode-172
- **Carrie Zimmer:** "Teacher Spotlight," coachbetter.tv/episode-50/

When working to establish a coaching culture, leaders can model leading the change by demonstrating their own personal commitment to coaching, perhaps even by being coached themselves. When leaders visibly invest in coaching themselves, they set the stage for coaching to be valued by all staff members. Jen Ricks says, "The time to sit down and think about what you're doing, to have those reflective conversations, is so important. It needs to be normalized in schools."

Although creating a coaching culture will not happen overnight, it is possible to start with just one dedicated coach. If you're in a school right now, and you are a coach, or you want to be a coach, or your coaching program is struggling, it's important to talk with your school leaders to help them understand why coaching is so valuable, especially during this period of widespread teacher attrition and turnover, and why they should start and stay the course.

DEVELOP A COACHING CULTURE

Whether your school already

has an established coaching culture, or is just considering implementing an instructional coaching program, investing in and building a coaching culture can have a lasting impact on teacher retention and professional growth. Educators, like all employees, choose to stay when they feel safe, fulfilled, respected, and valued in their work. Instructional coaching allows schools to develop exactly this kind of culture. When we build communities of growth-minded educators and leaders, we are creating schools where teachers and students are happy and engaged in their learning, and that's precisely the sort of environment where teachers want to stay, and grow, over the long term.

REFERENCE

Johnson, B. [@drbradjohnson]. (2022, September 8). [Photograph]. Instagram. www.instagram.com/p/CiOaGdDs5py/?igshid=MDE2OWE1N2Q%3D

•
Kim Cofino (kim@edurolearning.com) is founder and CEO of Eduro Learning. ■