Forces that shape coaches' classroom access

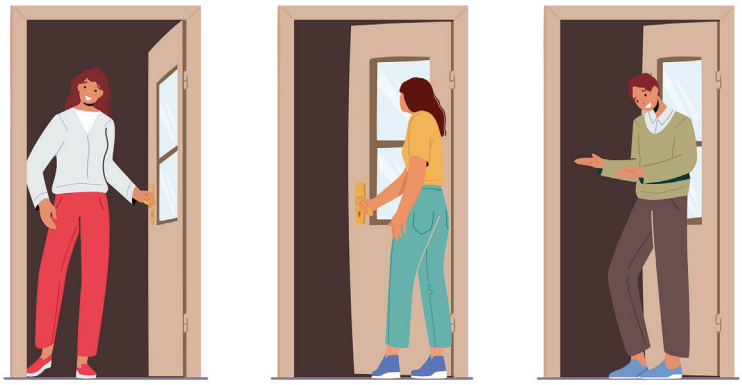
BY EVTHOKIA STEPHANIE SACLARIDES AND JEN MUNSON

For coaches, access to classrooms isn't straightforward and is far from guaranteed. Access is a prerequisite for coaching, yet there are many barriers beyond a coach's control, making their job difficult to impossible.

In our recent interview study with 28 content-focused coaches in one school district with an established coaching program, we asked coaches about their access to classrooms for coaching work (Munson & Saclarides, 2022, 2024; Saclarides & Munson, 2022).

They described both the barriers and the support, which we refer to as forces, that influenced their classroom access but were beyond their control. Of note, coaches pointed to administrators and school structures as formidable forces that played a meaningful role in either facilitating or impeding their classroom access (Munson & Saclarides, 2024).

For instance, Eliza, an English



language arts coach in the study, said that administrators who sent coaches into classrooms to covertly gather and report information on teachers could have a tangible impact on the coach's relationships with teachers and their trust for the coach, ultimately influencing whether those teachers granted the coach entry. "If I felt the pressure of administration to find information or go into rooms, that would really put me at a major disadvantage and really break my relationships (with teachers)," she said.

For Claire, an elementary mathematics coach, school schedules were a significant barrier to access because when math instruction and intervention were scheduled simultaneously, Claire's capacity to offer coaching was limited. Claire said, "I have (student intervention) groups many times when teachers are teaching math. So I can't get into the classrooms. … That is a real dilemma for me, and I think it's a real dilemma for a lot of us."

In this article, we detail how five administrative and structural forces shaped coaches' access to teachers' classrooms. We include recommendations for school and district leaders for how to best support coach access and, ultimately, the efficacy of coaching programs.

HOW SCHOOL LEADERS IMPACT COACHES' ACCESS TO CLASSROOMS

Coaches said district and school administrators shaped their classroom access for coaching work in three ways: their value for the coach's role, their direct actions to promote or protect coaching, and their efforts to foster a culture of professional learning.

Administrator value for coaches' role

From the coaches' perspectives, their school and district administrators' value (or lack thereof) for the coaching role was an important force that impacted their classroom access for coaching work.

Coaches had greater access when supportive school- and district-level administrators fostered an open door policy with the coach, promoted ongoing communication with the coach, and asked coaches about their needs.

Coaches felt supported when they shared a common vision with their administrator for the coaching role, one whose primary function was to support teacher learning and instructional improvement.

On the other hand, coaches said that when administrators didn't understand or value their role as coaches, classroom access could be constrained. For example, when administrators didn't perceive that the coach's primary role was to support teaching and learning through professional learning at schools, or when administrators tried to position their coaches as fellow administrators or evaluators of teachers, coaches' access was inhibited, and teachers didn't open their classroom doors for coaching work.

Direct administrator actions that promote or protect coaching

Coaches frequently pointed to the different ways in which direct actions from administrators could support or limit their classroom access for coaching work. Giving coaches autonomy about issues related to coaching, such as creating their own coaching schedules and deciding

which teachers to coach, enhanced coaches' access because they could make decisions that responded to new opportunities or teacher needs.

Administrators who provided coaches with materials, such as mathematics manipulatives or leveled readers, to use with teachers in the context of professional learning publicly positioned coaches as a form of professional support to all teachers.

Alternatively, coaches pointed to administrator actions that disrupted their classroom access. In particular, classroom access was strained when administrators assigned coaches additional duties that took them away from coaching or didn't provide sufficient direction.

Administrator fosters a culture of professional learning

Coaches said the culture of professional learning that an administrator fostered — or didn't foster — at their school sites actively shaped their classroom access. In our dataset, this force was only discussed in a supportive manner.

Coaches' access was enhanced when their administrator communicated a vision for high-quality instruction to the entire school community, which encompassed articulating an instructional improvement vision and promoting public practice among teachers to support ongoing professional learning.

Although coaches didn't talk about this force as inhibiting their classroom access, the converse is likely true: The lack of an administrator-articulated culture of professional learning could ultimately hurt coaches' access to teachers' classrooms. For example, if a school administrator doesn't create norms of an open door policy among teachers, then teachers may be more reluctant to make their teaching public and open their classroom to a coach.

HOW SCHOOL STRUCTURES IMPACT COACHES' ACCESS TO CLASSROOMS

Coaches also described two ways that school and district structures shaped their access to teachers' classrooms for coaching work: structures of time and workload and district policies toward coaching.

Structures of time and workload

Most coaches pointed to the influence of time and workload structures on their classroom access. In particular, coaches' access was supported when they had structured professional learning time with teachers (e.g., grade-level team meetings, whole-school professional learning) built into the school schedule.

These professional learning structures enabled coaches to come into regular contact with teachers, gather information about their professional learning interests and needs, and use access-granting strategies to spark coaching work.

Coaches also said structured professional learning time to meet with other coaches in their district enabled them, as a coaching community, to discuss their shared problems of practice — such as gaining classroom access for coaching work — and problem-solve.

Conversely, coaches pointed to several time and workload structures that impeded classroom access. For example, access was negatively impacted when the school schedule didn't provide them with sufficient time to meet with teachers or they were responsible for coaching too many teachers to make any tangible impact.

District policies toward coaching

Last, coaches noted how particular district policies shaped their access to teachers' classrooms. Similar to the administrative force of fostering a culture of professional learning, coaches only described how district policies seemed to enhance their classroom access.

Coaches said a clear and focused job description for the coach's role sent the message to teachers that the coach's job was to support teacher learning. Coaches also said the implementation of new policies at the district level, such as new formative assessment and technology tools, supported their access by creating new learning needs for teachers, who, in turn, sought out coaching.

Last, coaches said teacher growth plans supported their classroom access as teachers often sought coaches' help to meet their professional learning goals. One can easily imagine how district policies could have the opposite effect and negatively impact coaches' access to teachers' classrooms. For example, a school district could lack a job description for the coach's role completely, or have one that is unfocused or unclear, which could ultimately obscure the coach's role or position the coach as an evaluator, hindering access to teachers' classrooms.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

If you have coaches in your school district or building, you likely want them to gain access to classrooms so they can support teacher learning and instructional improvement. So what is your role?

Our research shows that administrators and school structures play a powerful role in shaping coaches' access. To use the authority you have to support coaches' access, and ultimately your coaching program, we have developed the following tips.

Understand the coach's role and how that role can support teacher learning, district goals, and school leaders' vision. View the coach as an integral part of a healthy and growing professional community. Cultivate a culture of professional learning that all engage in — through professional learning, coaching, and collaboration — toward a shared vision of teaching and learning.

Have a focused and clear job description for coaches that articulates that the coach's job is to support teacher learning. Stick to the job description and resist the urge to assign coaches other duties that are significantly time-consuming, such as testing coordinator, interventionist, or substitute teacher. Protecting time for coaching sends the message to all that engaging in coaching is valued and supported.

Position coaches as support for all teachers to access, not only new or struggling teachers. Make participation in coaching normative and valued in your school. Promote participating in coaching as a way teachers can engage deeply with their practice and the questions that inevitably arise when they strive to meet the needs of all learners.

Set aside time for coaches to meet with teachers for professional learning (e.g., co-planning, co-teaching, lesson study, etc.), and make it normative for coaches to be involved in this work with teachers. Think about how these times can be distributed across the school schedule so that coaches can take part in the maximum number of opportunities to collaborate with teachers.

For content-focused coaches who coach teachers in just one academic discipline, consider spreading out the teaching of a given discipline across the day so coaches have increased access. This is particularly true for elementary schools, where school schedules sometimes concentrate the teaching of disciplines like English language arts and math in the morning, making it challenging for coaches to access all classrooms.

Be mindful of your coaches' workload. How many teachers is it reasonable and possible for one coach to support in a school year? If too much is demanded, coaching will either be absent in many classrooms or so diluted it may not have a meaningful impact.

Carefully consider the role coaches can and should play in new district-level initiatives or policies. When these initiatives involve teacher learning, they may allow coaches access to classrooms that are currently off-limits. However, resist using coaches to enforce or police policies, which can damage coach-teacher relationships and compromise access.

Coaches need community. For districts or schools with multiple coaches, create ways for coaches to connect to develop strategies for gaining access and support one another's professional learning.

While much attention has understandably focused on what coaches do to support teaching and learning — the activities, structures, and tools of effective professional learning — we can't take for granted that coaches will be invited into classrooms and teachers' practice to do this work.

School leaders and school structures can play a pivotal role in supporting or constraining classroom access and, ultimately, the entire coaching endeavor. Given the substantial resources that establishing a coaching program requires (Knight, 2012), it is incumbent on districts and administrators to leverage their authority to position coaches for effectiveness.

REFERENCES

Knight, D.S. (2012). Assessing the cost of instructional coaching. *Journal of Education Finance, 38*(1), 52-80.

Munson, J. & Saclarides, E.S. (2022). Getting a foot in the door: Examining content-focused coaches' strategies for gaining access to classrooms. *Elementary School Journal, 123*(1).

Munson, J. & Saclarides, E.S. (2024). Conflict and cooperation: Micropolitical forces impacting coaches' access. *Elementary School Journal, 124*(3).

Saclarides, E.S. & Munson, J. (2022). An exploration of coaches' coordination of strategies to gain access to teachers' classrooms. *Elementary School Journal, 123*(2).

•

Evthokia Stephanie Saclarides (saclares@ucmail.uc.edu) is an assistant professor in the University of Cincinnati School of Education. Jen Munson (jmunson@northwestern.edu) is an assistant professor in the Northwestern University School of Education and Social Policy.