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ISSUE BRIEF

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INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING

On a chilly Friday morning, Loretta Hopper sits at the front of a first-grade classroom at Ephesus Road Elementary school in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Ms. Hopper is a reading specialist at Ephesus, and today she is introducing a reading workshop with Ms. Capps, the regular classroom teacher, by her side. The students are sitting in a group on the carpet with miniature whiteboards in their laps. "Write the word 'father' in the corner of your board," Ms. Hopper directs. Then she asks, "What other words can 'father' help you write?" The students are engaged, quickly writing as many words as they can on their boards that use similar "th" and "ah" sounds.

"Look at how many words use the 'th' sound," Ms. Capps observes as she scans the students' progress and writes examples on the board. Both teachers are sitting near the front of the room, and throughout the morning both are giving directions, asking questions, and praising students as they call out responses from their seats on the carpet. Though Ms. Hopper is primarily responsible for today's literacy instruction, Ms. Capps is equally active, and students shift their attention seamlessly between the two.

Later today, the two teachers will reflect together on the parts of the lesson that worked well and plan their focus for the next week. Ms. Hopper supports Ms. Capps and other teachers through modeling and team-teaching, as she is doing this morning, as well as through collaborative planning and constructive feedback. A few years ago, after more than 20 years of teaching, Ms. Hopper stepped out of her traditional teaching role to become a school-based literacy coach. In order to train for her new role, she attended a distance learning program on literacy coaching offered by Lesley College in Boston.

Ms. Hopper's work is an example of *instructional coaching,* in practice at Ephesus as it is in many other classrooms across the country. As they work to improve instructional practice and, ultimately, student learning, many school districts have adopted coaching as a model for teachers' professional development. Research makes clear that improving teachers' classroom practices has great potential to improve student learning,[1] and coaching is increasingly being used as a professional development strategy to improve instructional practices. In 2004–05, the Center on Education Policy found that 60 percent of districts had engaged "distinguished teachers" to assist struggling schools.[2] Coaching has been adopted as a central professional development strategy in Boston, Dallas, New York, and Philadelphia public schools.[3] Several school reform models, such as America's Choice, High Performing Learning Communities, and the Breaking Ranks framework, also rely on instructional coaching to support successful reforms.[4]

The increased use of coaches is due in part to the professional development requirements contained in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. NCLB requires districts to develop and implement a school improvement plan that includes professional development programs for teachers at schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) for two years or more. Specifically, NCLB requires that these professional development programs incorporate activities, like coaching, that are provided consistently over time.[5] In 2005–06, nearly 10 percent of all schools were

required to develop or implement a school improvement plan.[6] It is therefore not surprising to see a nationwide increase in the prevalence of coaching as a professional development strategy.

Schools and districts invest a great deal of time and money in professional development for teachers through instructional coaching. With this effort comes the responsibility to design coaching programs that have the greatest potential to improve classroom instruction and, in turn, increase student learning. What research is available to help district and school leaders use coaching effectively? What do we know about the qualities of a successful instructional coach? Do schools and districts have to provide training for coaches too? How should coaches be evaluated? District and school leaders must consider these types of questions, presented in Figure 1, before putting a coaching program into place. In this Issue Brief, we draw on the emerging research on instructional coaching to provide guidance for local leaders to effectively select, train, and evaluate coaches. A second Issue Brief in this series, *Principal as Instructional Leader: Designing a Coaching Program That Fits,* will offer guidance on how effective leaders can tailor the most promising coaching strategies to the needs of their schools.

What Is an Instructional Coach?

Despite the prevalence of coaching in schools and districts across the country, there is not a standard model or uniform definition of an instructional coach. School and district officials may decide to tap an existing school district employee—a teacher, content specialist, or district-level instructional leader, for example—to take on coaching responsibilities; or it may employ an external coach with particular expertise. School and district officials also have a variety of purposes: Some adopt a coaching strategy to improve instructional capacity across the district, while others focus their efforts only on low-performing schools. Officials also define coaches' goals differently depending on the local context and their reform and professional development goals. Coaches may be asked to train teachers to use a particular approach to teach a particular content area, or they may work to improve general instructional practices or to promote a more reflective, collaborative, and professional culture among the faculty, to give a few examples. Coaching programs across the country are extremely varied because they tend to be designed to meet local needs using available resources.

For the purposes of this discussion, an *instructional coach* is defined as someone whose primary professional responsibility is to bring practices that have been studied using a variety of research methods into classrooms by working with adults rather than students. Instructional coaches, as described here, may spend some time working with groups of teachers and may have other administrative responsibilities, but they set aside a significant portion of their time to offer classroom modeling, supportive feedback, and specific observations of individual teaching practices.

Selection: What Should A District Look For?

Across the country, there is little consistency in the qualifications that states and districts require instructional coaches to possess, in part

Figure 1. Elements of an Instructional Coaching Program: Selecting, Preparing, and Evaluating Coaches for Effectiveness

* The blue sections are explored in this Issue Brief.

Figure 2. Toward a Common Definition: Coaching Standards

As part of its statewide school improvement strategy, the Ohio Department of Education assigns "technical assistance providers" to work with schools that are identified as low- performing. In an effort to regulate this process, Ohio has created its own standards for instructional coaches. Ohio's standards are designed to help ensure that districts and schools have the capacity to raise student performance in reading and mathematics, and include guidance for instruction, reflection, and collaboration.

The International Reading Association (IRA), together with professional organizations of secondary school teachers across several disciplines, also has developed standards for middle and high school literacy coaches. The IRA standards specify what coaches must know and be able to do to help content-area faculty address reading comprehension, writing, and communication skills. For example:

> *IRA Standard 3.* Content area literacy coaches are skilled evaluators of literacy needs within various subject areas and are able to collaborate with secondary school leadership teams and teachers to interpret and use assessment data to inform instruction.

The IRA literacy coach standards are based on the extant research literature on literacy coaching and also rely heavily on empirical evidence gathered by IRA's association partners. Public comment from reading experts, linguistic experts, and content-area teachers, and feedback from a panel of practicing literacy coaches also have played an important role in the shaping of the IRA standards.

Sources: International Reading Association (with National Council of Teachers of English, National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, National Science Teachers Association, & National Council for the Social Studies). (2006). *Standards for middle and high school literacy coaches.* Newark, DE: Author. Retrieved August 27, 2007, from http://www.reading.org/downloads/resources/597coaching_standards.pdf

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because there are few agreed-upon definitions of their roles. The Ohio Department of Education, for example, has created its own standards for instructional coaches, termed "technical assistance providers," who are assigned to all of the state's lowest performing schools. This is just one example of a state effort to define the capabilities and skills that coaches should possess (see the sidebar "Toward a Common Definition: Coaching Standards"). It is important for all school and district leaders to actively seek out potential coaches with a level of competence and experience that prepares them to work effectively with other teachers.

What do we know about the backgrounds, talents, and skills of successful coaches? What qualities should a school district look for when hiring? Descriptive and quasi-experimental studies of existing coaching programs are the primary source of guidance for schools and districts in answering these questions.

Characteristics of Successful Coaches: What does the Research Say?

Though specific to state needs and specific content-area coaches, standards such as the one listed in the sidebar echo many of the same qualities that are supported in the literature about the characteristics of successful coaches. The majority of the literature on this topic consists of case studies of individual coaching programs and surveys of teachers and coaches. Only additional experience with coaching programs and more rigorous research will ultimately provide a better understanding of what makes an effective coach. Nonetheless, the current work points to three broad categories of skills that an effective coach should possess: pedagogical knowledge, content expertise, and interpersonal skills.

- **PEDAGOGICAL KNOWLEDGE.** The literature is nearly unanimous that coaches should be experienced teachers who have demonstrated success in the classroom. Effective coaches have a thorough understanding of how children learn and are skilled in developing and implementing instructional strategies—from questioning strategies to classroom management—to improve student learning.[7] These accomplished teachers not only have a larger toolbox of instructional strategies to draw upon; according to teacher surveys, they also are more likely to earn teachers' trust.[8]

- **CONTENT EXPERTISE.** Effective instructional coaches, no matter their subject area, have a thorough understanding of the subject they are coaching as well as familiarity with the curriculum that teachers are currently using.[9] This is particularly important for coaches who focus on a subject area such as literacy or mathematics or who work at the middle or high school level, because of the demand for in-depth understanding of the complexities of the content area at higher grade levels.[10] Process-oriented coaches whose task is to improve classroom strategies such as data analysis or differentiated instruction must also have experience in and a deep understanding of these critical instructional strategies and methods.

- **INTERPERSONAL CAPABILITIES.** The existing research on effective coaches makes clear that along with content and pedagogical expertise, coaches must possess strong interpersonal skills and competencies.[11] In a 2003 survey of 31 professional development coaches, the most frequently mentioned characteristic of an effective coach was "people skills," including the ability to build relationships, establish trust and credibility, and tailor assistance to individual educators' needs.[12] Researchers at the Center for Research on Learning at the University of Kansas have similarly found that successful coaches possess not only strong content knowledge but also an "infectious personality" that helps them encourage and inspire teachers to improve their practices.[13] Coaches themselves ranked interpersonal capabilities higher in importance than content and pedagogical knowledge; they believed they could improve their content expertise through training but people skills would be more difficult to acquire.[14]

Schools and districts would benefit from more rigorous research in this area, particularly with regard to the specific interpersonal capabilities that leaders might look for in a potential coach. Although existing research and experience suggests that these interpersonal skills are a coach's most important attributes, very little is known about the specific techniques and competencies that contribute to more effective coaching. Additional research could contribute greatly to the understanding of these capabilities by comparing effective and less effective coaches using reliable instruments that measure psychological variables such as intelligence, aptitude, and personality traits.[15]

Preparation: Coaches Need Training Too

While many teachers with the above-listed qualities adapt quickly to the demands of coaching, experience suggests that coaches generally require ongoing training. Districts with longstanding coaching programs have found that coaches require professional development of their own to improve their knowledge and skills and to keep up with the needs of their teachers and schools. In Boston, where the use of coaches has been a crucial school improvement strategy since 2001, coaches' professional development was built into the program from the start. Each week, coaches attend a training session that typically begins with a whole-group conversation about recent successes and challenges followed by small-group opportunities to share experiences and discuss topics that have arisen in their work.[16]

A small number of researchers have evaluated coach training programs,[17] but there has been very little research about the effectiveness of particular programs or the necessary elements of a successful program. Most of what is known about training coaches comes from quasi-experimental and descriptive studies. With these important caveats, one can identify a few key features of promising professional development

programs for coaches regarding both the substance of the training and its form.

- **CONTENT.** The existing research suggests that coaches need ongoing training in three general content areas: their particular subject area, such as literacy or mathematics; pedagogical techniques particular to the population their teachers are working with; and general coaching strategies, such as conducting post-session meetings.[18] Former and current coaches as well as the International Reading Association (2006) specifically recommend that coaches receive training in working with students with disabilities and English language learners, as well as coaching strategies such as questioning, coteaching, and fostering reflection.[19] In their evaluation of a development program for coaches in the Netherlands, Veenman and Denessen found that coaches who participated in training that encouraged them to reflect on their own practice as coaches performed better than untrained coaches.[20]

- **METHOD.** Taken as a whole, the research suggests that training programs for coaches, like any learning opportunities for teachers, should adhere to the common guidelines for effective professional development.[21] For example, coaches' training should be ongoing and provide opportunities for collaboration with other coaches.[22] In surveys, coaches express a strong preference for collaborative forms of professional development, such as the training provided in Boston, over lecture-style training provided by outside experts.[23] In the past several years, the two training strategies in online seminars that have generated the most interest among coaches are those that foster collaborative learning communities, such as questioning seminars and demonstration lessons.[24]

Evaluating a Coaching Program: Methods and Objectives to Consider

Despite the pressure on districts to draw links between coaching, teacher practices, and student achievement to justify the expense of coaching over other, sometimes less expensive professional development programs, there seem to be no research studies that suggest how to best evaluate a coaching program. Fortunately, though, studies that have evaluated the success of specific coaching programs use a variety of methods that could be emulated by district officials who want to analyze their own programs. These evaluation methods include teacher surveys, classroom observations, interviews, and analysis of student achievement data. Whatever data-gathering methods are used, an ideal evaluation of a coaching program would randomly assign teachers to receive coaching or otherwise construct a viable comparison group of noncoached teachers.

Depending on the goals of the coaching program, an evaluation using a combination of these methods can be designed to assess the impact of the program at three levels: teacher perception, instructional practice, and improved student learning.

- **DO TEACHERS VALUE THEIR COACHES?** A common method for evaluating coaching programs is to ask the teachers themselves. What do teachers think of their coaches? What characteristics or coaching strategies have they found most helpful? What are the contextual impediments to getting the most out of coaching? While teacher surveys have some limitations because they rely on self-reporting, districts can learn a great deal by examining teachers' perceptions of the program.

- **ARE TEACHERS CHANGING THEIR PRACTICES?** Perhaps more relevant than teachers' opinions of their coaches are the teachers' practices and strategies in the classroom. Do the teachers who work with instructional coaches use new methods of instruction? Are coaches improving teachers' abilities to use appropriate techniques? A school or district could use observations of teachers and coaches, as well as interviews, to measure coaches' impact on teaching practice.

- **IS STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT INCREASING?** While teachers' perceptions and their day-to-day practices are important, the ultimate aim of any professional development program is to improve student learning. As noted earlier, however, evaluations that gauge

coaches' success by their impact upon student achievement, whether measured by standardized tests or other measures, are very rare.[25] Linking coaching to student outcomes is complex, in part because there are dozens of factors other than coaching that are likely to impact student achievement during a given time.[26] Limitations on teacher- and student-level data also may make it difficult to track the impact of an individual teacher or coach. Nonetheless, to the extent that they can isolate the effect of instructional coaching upon student performance, schools and districts should consider evaluations of this sort to provide the most relevant evidence of effective and ineffective coaching.

The information that school and district leaders gather using any one of these methods can, in turn, provide valuable insight as schools develop and refine their coaching strategies. Student achievement data could reveal, for example, that individual coaches are more or less effective, which would allow school and district leaders to make informed coaching assignments for future years. The data also could suggest that certain approaches to coaching are more successful, or that particular teachers benefit more from individualized coaching. All of this information could be used to help allocate coaching resources and inform how future coaches are trained.

Experience suggests that with all of these methods, as with evaluations of any kind, schools will be best served by clearly communicating their evaluation criteria up-front and engaging in ongoing discussions about the goals that coaches are expected to achieve.[27]

Conclusion

Ephesus Road Elementary School is not alone in adopting instructional coaching as a model for its teachers' professional development. The emerging body of empirical research on coaching indicates that instructional coaching has great potential to influence teacher practice and, ultimately, student performance. As more schools and districts implement coaching programs, it will be important to pay close attention to the selection and training of coaches and the evaluation evidence on programs. More research will be necessary to pinpoint successful strategies in each of these areas, including:

- The particular skills and competencies that instructional coaches should possess in order to successfully meet particular reform goals.
- The kinds of training and inservice professional development that are most useful for coaches.
- The most promising methods for evaluating coaches' performance.

In the meantime, existing research and experience suggest that district and school leaders should carefully select coaches who demonstrate strong pedagogical knowledge, content expertise, and interpersonal capabilities. These coaches will benefit from ongoing training to help them further develop their pedagogical techniques, specific areas of expertise, and general coaching strategies. Finally, education leaders and coaches themselves will be more able to put a coaching program to good use if they know what is working and what is not, through targeted and reliable evaluation of coach and teacher practice, and of student learning. These elements, together with thoughtful alignment with school needs, are the foundation of a successful instructional coaching program.

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This is one of two in a series of issue briefs to be written for The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement. These commentaries are meant to help readers think beyond simple compliance with federal law or basic implementation of programs: What unacknowledged challenges must educators and leaders confront to help schools operate more effectively and to sustain improvement over the long run? In what ways does the conventional wisdom about teaching, learning, and school improvement run counter to current research and get in the way of making good decisions? What are the emerging next-generation issues that educators will face next year and five years from now? Readers can visit **www.centerforcsri.org** to obtain other papers in this series and to access additional information on school reform and improvement.

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