

INSTRUCTIONAL COACHES

Lessons
From the Field

Enlisting the assistance of instructional coaches can be an effective capacity-building strategy for principals who follow a few simple steps.

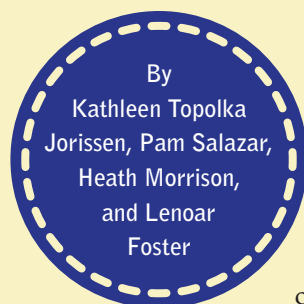
“I worked 14-hour days and couldn’t get it done.”

As members of the NASSP Task Force on Principal Preparation, we recently completed a study of the changing role of the secondary principal (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2007). One striking finding was that multiple roles and responsibilities leave today’s principal feeling chronically harried and overworked. Such comments as the following summed up the consensus on the greatest challenge to most principals: “I am recently retired. However, the number one issue confronting me at my retirement was *time*. The increasing role of instructional leader and change manager did not negate the need to ‘manage’ a physical plant and program for 1,200 students.”

For principals in small or rural schools, the problem is compounded by a lack of support personnel. As one principal said, “I am the only principal for K–12 students in our district. I find myself having to shift gears at least 30 times a day to accommodate all of the different people, students, parents, etc., who need my services. The only two administrators in the district are the superintendent and me. People need to realize that rural administrators do not have any assistants to help them with personnel, discipline, facilities, transportation, public relations, etc. It is just us.”

It is clear that increasing demands are being placed on a role that has historically been complex.

To keep the focus on instruction while juggling multiple roles, many principals are developing teacher leaders among their staff members. Those teacher leaders can serve in many areas, including curriculum committees, school improvement teams, professional learning communities, and departments. In schools across the country, teachers are taking on the role of “instructional coach” by working part-time or full-time as facilitators of professional learning. Whether the decision to tap teacher leaders for



coaching roles is initiated at the school or the district level, principals have found this additional source of instructional support to be valuable in building school capacity. By using the following effective strategies in their work with instructional coaches, principals can ensure that professional learning becomes a school norm.

Clarify and Communicate

Instructional coaches serve in a variety of roles, depending on district and school initiatives. In Montgomery County, MD, for example, many schools have created data management coaches or teams to track each student’s progress toward proficiency. The school teams analyze data and student work to plan instructional improvement as well as to help individual teachers address their own teaching needs as members of a professional learning community.

In other districts, a broader set of responsibilities may be assigned to instructional coaches. They help identify appropriate interventions, model teaching strategies, gather data in classrooms, and engage teachers in reflective dialogue to improve professional skills. Instructional coaches offer support, feedback, and intensive individualized professional learning. As Terry Gribble, an instructional coach at Andrews (NC) Middle School, said, “In a typical week, I am a jack-of-all-trades. Daily, I work with new teachers, modeling effective practices, conferencing, modifying, and offering suggestions. I work with veteran teachers in any capacity they see fit: designing lesson plans, pre-conferencing, modeling, observing, and post-conferencing.”

Coaches and principals agree that for coaches to be successful, the principal must establish and communicate the school focus. According to one coach, “It is not the coach’s job to set school expectations.” But the coach can be a part of the process. “Together we look at our school needs and

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how best to address those needs," said one coach. Another added, "Principals need to talk to the faculty and help them understand that a coach is not a spy, but a resource." East Henderson (NC) High School Principal Matt Gruebmeier reinforced this by saying, "It's really important that the coach not be seen as an evaluator. Teachers won't trust coaches if they see them as lackeys for the principal."

Use Data

Strategic data monitoring in teams or with coaches not only helps schools meet their targets but also allows for more proactive use of all available resources. In Montgomery County Public Schools, the largest school district in Maryland, principals are trained to use data as part of their professional growth. Principals and school teams take Instructional Leadership Through Data-Driven Decision-Making, a course that gives them a process for analyzing data to determine the root causes for student performance so that interventions can be applied to address student needs.

For example, at Newport Mill Middle School, former Principal Nelson McLeod infused the use of data into the instructional practice of the school. McLeod stated, "We used a systemic process for data monitoring that focused our attention on individual students. The process allowed us to remediate, enrich, and accelerate our students for rigorous learning opportunities." McLeod emphasized that strategic data monitoring with a team maximized the time he could give instructional support to his staff members and students and allowed him to be proactive rather than reactive in addressing needs.

Instructional coaches may prepare data displays to use with teams of teachers or examine data with the school improvement team or the principal. Many use data when helping teachers with action research. To maximize effectiveness and provide progress measures, principals and coaches need to be skilled in developing and using data in school improvement efforts.

Include the Coach

Developing the big picture of school issues and initiatives is essential for coaches to be effective. Gruebmeier includes

the coach on the school improvement team and in department meetings, because the coach brings a valuable perspective in generating ideas. Meeting regularly with the coach is also important for maintaining the instructional improvement focus. Gribble said that she meets with her principal at least biweekly. Teresa Caron, a coach in Swain County (NC) Schools, meets informally with her principal regularly. "We discuss which direction to take and how to help teachers. This summer, we will have some formal meetings to establish a plan of action," she said. Another principal said that she puts her coach on the agenda for each faculty meeting to maintain the momentum of instructional initiatives. Karen Sumner, a coach who serves several schools in Henderson County, NC, said that she meets regularly with each principal. "They talk with me about where they see their schools going," she said, "and then I help carry out the plan to go there."

Focus on Instruction

A group of instructional coaches who met recently to begin networking spent some of their meeting time comparing job descriptions. One shared that in her district, principals were discouraged from assigning coaches any responsibilities that were not directly related to improving instruction, including assigning coaches as emergency substitute teachers.

A coach knows many ways to help teachers strengthen their practice: designing lesson plans, modeling, coaching, developing classroom management strategies, integrating technology, using data, coplanning, engaging in action research, and facilitating collaborative learning. To succeed in leading improvements in classroom practice, however, coaches must be given the time and support they need to work in classrooms with teachers.

Communicate Expectations

Forging collaborative relationships for working and learning is not an easy task, particularly in the initial stages. Although teacher leaders tend to hold credibility with their peers, some teachers resist accepting assistance even from another teacher. "I think it's important to guard against the dismissive attitude some teachers have about new initiatives," said Gruebmeier. Caron agreed: "Principals can help

by letting teachers know that these changes are a priority and are not to be brushed aside." Principals can communicate expectations by observing classes and reinforcing the work of the coach. One of the most important expectations is that teachers will work and learn together. "We have to work hard to overcome the inclination to work alone," Gruebmeier said. "It is the collaboration that is one of the most powerful aspects of the model."

Support Professional Development

The selection and development of coaches differs from district to district and school to school, depending on available resources. Some coaches receive extensive training that is sponsored by their state or district. Others may be selected for their expertise in an area of need. Most, however, have had little experience working with adults and need guidance and support as they develop effective facilitation skills. Caron said that she grows "primarily through reflection and analysis of my relationship to the teachers and of the changes that are taking place in our school system." In regular informal conversations with instructional coaches, the principal can facilitate reflection with open-ended questions and active listening.

Build Leadership Capacity

Addressing the multiple tasks of instructional leadership efficiently and effectively requires a shift in thinking about leadership as solely the province of the principal and the assistant principal. As Lambert (2003) said, leadership capacity means that many people participate in the work of leadership:

If the principal, a vast majority of the teaches, and large numbers of parents and students are all involved in the work of leadership, then the school will most likely have a high leadership capacity that achieves high student performance. (p. 4)

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The savvy leader who stretches leadership across the school, enlisting the expertise of everyone in the pursuit of excellence, will succeed in building leadership capacity. That, according to Fullan (2007), is perhaps the most important legacy of a good leader:

The main mark of an effective leader at the end of his or her tenure is not so much the impact on the bottom line (of profits or student achievement), but rather how many good leaders he or she leaves behind who can go even further. (p. 98)

By distributing leadership, many principals find it possible to address the priorities of a complex job. **PL**

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