Instructional Coaching For Personalized PD

EDITOR’S NOTE
Effective instructional coaching provides personalized guidance and support to help teachers continuously improve their instructional practices. This Spotlight will help you investigate evidence-based strategies for effective teacher PD; evaluate real examples of personalized coaching programs; discover the potential benefits of on-demand PD; analyze how instructional coaches can effectively deliver feedback; learn from a former administrator’s experience with delivering teacher PD; and more.

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What Works—and What Doesn’t—in Teacher PD

By Madeline Will

When done right, professional development can improve teacher practice and student experiences. But when done wrong, it can have little to no impact and end up frustrating teachers who don’t see any relevance to their work. And it’s all part of a costly, $18 billion market with little quality control.

A new paper, published by the Research Partnership for Professional Learning and written by researchers at Harvard Graduate School of Education and Brown University, examines the literature to understand what works in the field of professional development—and, just as importantly, what doesn’t.

“Teachers in different schools, in different subject areas, in different districts have very different experiences with their professional learning,” said John Papay, an associate professor of education and economics at Brown and a co-author of the paper. “Some of it, we know, can be effective, and some of it, we know, isn’t effective. The challenge is, how do we maintain this investment in and emphasis on professional learning and teacher development throughout the career while also working to make it more effective?”

The research review analyzed both individual studies and syntheses of teacher professional learning, relying mostly on studies that identified a causal impact of the PD on teaching and learning. However, the researchers noted that their review cannot say with certainty that the PD formats and contents are the sole factors behind any success with student outcomes.

It finds that the most effective forms of professional development focus on improving what teachers do in classrooms—their day-to-day practice. It also has an element of accountability involved, so teachers are motivated to change and improve.

Here are five takeaways from the report.

1. PD should focus on instructional practices rather than content knowledge

Over the past two decades, professional development has focused on building teachers’ content knowledge, said Heather Hill, a principal investigator and professor at Harvard Graduate School of Education and a co-author of the paper. The idea was that if teachers have a firm understanding of, say, how fractions work, they will be better at teaching fractions.

But the body of literature suggests that’s not necessarily the case, Hill said, adding that the realization was “personally a little earth-shattering.”

Instead, professional development that focused on changing teachers’ instructional practice—such as by identifying key teaching strategies and providing support for carrying out those changes in the classroom—was found to be more effective for improving student outcomes.

One study in the review directly compared elementary science PD that focused on deepening content knowledge to PD that was focused on analyzing videos of lessons. Teachers spent the same amount of time in both professional development experiences. Students of teachers who did the lesson-analysis PD outperformed students of teachers who did the content-deepening PD by 20 percentile points on a research-developed assessment.

The researchers hypothesized that content-focused professional development might not last long enough for teachers to learn enough about the subject to truly make a difference in their instruction. Also, those types of PD programs often don’t offer much support for the day-to-day practice, and teachers need to be able to connect their learning to their existing curriculum materials or lesson plans, the researchers said.

2. PD should prioritize concrete materials for practice over general principles

There are two approaches toward PD that can be at odds. The first is to give teachers materials like curricula, lessons, and assessment items that offer concrete ways to reach the goal, but may leave them without a strong understanding of the learning philosophy behind the new approach. The second is to emphasize more general principles to promote broader and more lasting changes in instruction, but leave it up to the teachers themselves to integrate those changes in their existing lessons, materials, and assessments.

For example, one approach to PD could focus on helping teachers learn how to use formative assessment items in their classroom and giving them some models; the other approach might emphasize design principles so teachers can create their own new formative assessment items.

The research review found that focusing PD on concrete materials is more effective than teaching general principles, which usually ends up requiring teachers to do additional work on their own time. PD that provides support for the day-to-day is more likely to...
Instructional Coaching for Personalized PD

increase uptake and improve the quality of the implementation.

“It needs to be job-relevant in a way that teachers can see how it improves their practice and is not asking them to do extra work,” Hill said.

3. Have follow-up meetings after PD or coaching

A low-cost way to boost the effectiveness of a PD program is to add a post-implementation follow-up meeting, the research review found. Teachers can share their experiences implementing the practices learned and receive feedback from colleagues and program facilitators. They can also ask questions and voice concerns about parts of the new program that are particularly challenging to implement.

These sessions are typically collaborative, so teachers can share ideas with one another and perhaps even improve the program by customizing it to meet the needs of their students and school.

Also, the paper notes, follow-up sessions offer some accountability—teachers are more likely to implement the practices if they know they will need to report on how it went to their colleagues and facilitators.

4. PD should help teachers build relationships with students

Past research has shown that strong teacher-student relationships can lead to higher student academic engagement, better attendance, better grades, fewer disruptive behaviors and suspensions, and lower school dropout rates. Those effects were strong even after controlling for differences in students’ individual, family, and school backgrounds.

These relationships can be fostered and improved through targeted professional learning, the researchers found.

The University of Virginia’s school of education offers professional-development support focused on improving teacher-student interactions. The program, called MyTeachingPartner, has been associated with student gains in learning and the closing of the racial discipline gap in high school.

Hill said she has witnessed facilitators in those trainings share easy-to-implement strategies for teachers to better connect with students. For example, a facilitator urged teachers to stand at the door as students file in at the start of the class, greeting them individually and asking questions about their life outside of school (like how a basketball game went).

These are “on its face, very simple strategies that actually can be pretty powerful,” Hill said.

5. Coaching and teacher collaboration are key strategies

The research review emphasized the effectiveness of both peer collaboration and coaching. Evidence suggests that teachers can and do learn from each other, and that when schools promote collaboration, teacher practice and student outcomes improve. Coaching—which can include modeling instruction, co-planning lessons, direct feedback, and other consultations and support—has also been found to successfully improve classroom instructional quality and student outcomes.

However, the design of these practices matters. Collaboration should be focused on shared and specific goals for improvement rather than meeting to vaguely improve practice. And teachers should have dedicated and protected time to work and learn together.

Meanwhile, coaching is most effective when it’s more focused—when the coaches can focus on working with teachers instead of administrative duties, and when the coaches also receive some professional development and leadership support.

Yet the realities of school operations these days often don’t allow for these conditions, the researchers said. Many schools are struggling to staff classrooms, and coaches are often tapped to act as substitute teachers, pulling them away from the core functions of their jobs. And collaboration time can be put at risk when teachers have to cover other classrooms.

“There’s coaching as it is in the literature, and coaching that exists in schools,” Hill said.

Educators have a lot on their plates this school year, and teacher stress levels are still high, surveys show. Still, teachers are tasked with helping students recover unfinished learning as a result of the pandemic, making effective professional development more important than ever, the researchers said.

“Finding opportunities for teachers to engage in professional learning seems particularly critical now because that type of support, that type of ongoing development ... leads to teachers feeling more satisfied [in their jobs, which can] alleviate burnout,” Papay said.

“Cutting out professional learning or not prioritizing it will, in some ways, lead to larger challenges downstream.”
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– DIG Coaching Collaborative Participant, July 2023

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A District’s Coaching Program for Principals Takes A Holistic Approach to Address the Struggle With Stress

By Elizabeth Heubeck

There’s no doubt that the last few years have left teachers stressed, burned out and, in many cases, ready to call it quits. But principals are stressed out, too. They ultimately shoulder the brunt of responsibilities that befall schools, and statistics prove how dire the consequences can be.

A recent nationally representative survey found that 85 percent of principals are experiencing job-related stress, 48 percent are dealing with burnout, and 28 percent report symptoms of depression. Job dissatisfaction led nearly 40 percent of school leaders to report plans to leave their jobs within the next few years, according to consecutive surveys of principals by the National Association of Secondary School Principals released in 2021 and 2022.

The School District of Philadelphia has not been immune to these challenges. “There has been constant turnover in leadership roles over the last several years. School leaders experienced an enormous amount of stress during [recent] school years,” said Chuanika Sanders-Thomas, a leadership coach for the Philadelphia district, which onboarded more than 30 new principals during the 2021-22 school year and 2022.

The district in 2019 launched a unique leadership coaching program that pairs new and aspiring principals with one of approximately 10 district leadership coaches, each of whom previously served a successful stint as a principal in the district.

While instructional coaching programs for principals are relatively common, the Philadelphia district says that its type of leadership coaching, which focuses on leadership behaviors and dispositions, is less so.

Education Week recently caught up with principal-turned-leadership coach Sanders-Thomas to learn more about the program. She explained the core principles of the program, how it works, and what effect it’s having.

The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

How does this program differ from others designed to support leaders?

The program is built on establishing trust between the coach and the ‘coachee’ and is designed to be non-supervisory and non-evaluative. Coaches are in place to support leaders as they navigate the challenges of leading their complex school organizations. One of the beliefs of our program is “principals are the most influential leaders in our organization and city.” We believe that our leaders are talented, resourceful, and fully capable of leading their buildings.

What is the district’s leadership coaching program modeled on?

Our leadership coaching program operates on principles governed by the International Coaching Federation. The program was created and tailored to meet our needs by Kirsten Olson, founder of Old Sow Consulting and a professor in the coaching program at Georgetown University.

We define coaching as the “intentional relationship between two people focused on developing a coachee’s mindsets and behaviors to achieve the coachee’s goals.” In this model, the coach focuses intentionally and specifically on the person exhibiting the issue, not only the problem they are presenting.

The program claims to produce ‘well-rounded leaders’, not just instructional leaders. Could you elaborate on this?

Instructional coaching is focused on giving the leader advice and feedback that is based on student data. This type of coaching normally involves observation of teaching and learning. While instructional coaching can help principals improve student data in the short term, it doesn’t always address underlying causes for poor performance which can impact long-term student achievement.

Leadership coaching focuses on the leader and his or her leadership behaviors. It’s about creating the space for leaders to pause and be reflective about their practice. It’s also about supporting the leader in developing awareness and allowing the leader to answer his or her own questions. Ultimately, our leadership program supports leaders in designing action steps to achieve their self-identified goals. These goals are often tied to instructional leadership, but they can also be connected to skills like relationship building.

In a nutshell, what are the specific goals of the coaching program?

To support school leaders in a non-supervisory and non-evaluative manner, to invest in our leaders by creating the space for them to be self-reflective and engage in the inner work that is required to enhance their leadership skills, and to use the leadership competencies as a guide to enhance well-rounded leadership.

Describe the role of leadership coaches and their relationship with ‘coachees.’

Each leadership coach has a caseload of 15 to 18 school leaders. Most of our time is spent in schools, where we meet with our leaders for at least an hour bi-weekly. It is common to see school leaders more often depending on their needs.

Each coaching session is unique in that coaches don’t come with an agenda. The (school leader) determines the goal and sets the desired outcome for each session.

Which school leaders does the coaching program support?

The First Year Principals Program includes all first- and second-year principals. The As-
piring Principals Academy works with select assistant principals who aspire to be principals. The Residency Program supports experienced assistant principals selected to serve a year-long principal residency under the guidance of an experienced principal.

Pathways to Leadership provides coaching support to teacher leaders and climate managers, who manage issues related to student behavior, interested in pursuing assistant principal and principal positions.

What’s been the reach and impact of the program so far?

The program has coached over 200 leaders, including 50 percent of all principals in the district, and dramatically reduced turnover. Only 5 percent of participating principals have resigned from their positions.

Among assistant principals, 50 leaders have been coached, 100 percent of principal residents have moved into principal seats, and 60 percent of assistant principals coached in the Aspiring Principals Academy are now principals.
Teacher burnout. Lack of coaches. Union contracts that place limits on when tech professional development can be scheduled. Competition from other PD priorities.

Like many districts, the 7,000-student Cambridge school system outside Boston has struggled for years with those and other roadblocks when it comes to finding time to offer tech professional development to teachers and ensuring it meets their needs.

Enter the pandemic. Over the summer of 2020, with no return to in-person learning in sight, Cambridge had to figure out a way to help its teachers deliver effective digital lessons, without being able to meet with them in person.

The solution the district came up with—on-demand modules on different tech tools chock full of videos that teachers could access when it worked for them—didn’t just help Cambridge get through the pandemic. It helped the district think much more creatively about how to offer tech PD long since schools returned to in-person operations, Cambridge tech leaders said in a presentation at the International Society for Technology in Education’s annual conference in Philadelphia last month.

Cambridge teachers must take at least 35 hours of professional development a year. While much of that time is directed by school and academic department leaders, 10 hours are left up to teacher choice.

To help teachers meet the requirement, the district’s ed-tech professional-development team built more than 30 modules, each of which take about two hours to complete. Topics range from tools like Book Creator and Peardeck to teacher practices like offering students feedback in a digital context.

The modules don’t assume a high-level of technical mastery, even when it comes to getting professional development online. Each module kicks off with instructions for things like watching an embedded video or working your way through a Google slides deck. There’s also a clear list of learning objectives and goals, and contact information to ask questions.

There are a host of videos embedded in each of the modules, including some that show Cambridge teachers using a particular tool or strategy in action. To be sure, similar, but more generic videos, for many of the tools Cambridge uses already exist on YouTube and other platforms. But those take “time and energy” to sift through and may not ultimately meet teachers’ needs, said Ingrid Gustafson, an instructional technology specialist for the district.

“I think it’s incredibly helpful when you have someone who knows what your role looks like, knows what it can feel like to be in front of 20 kindergarteners and trying to use [a tech product like] Seesaw in our context because every school district is different,” she said. “Every school within our district is different.”

At the end of each module, there’s a check for understanding. That might mean actually using the tool to create something that could be used in the classroom. For instance, the Google Slides module asks teachers to create a presentation.

### Giving PD credit for technologies teachers have already mastered

When the district first started using the approach, tech leaders asked themselves how they felt about a teacher who has already mastered a particular tool—say, Google slides—going through the module and getting professional development credit.

They decided they were fine with it “because they have already taken the time to learn [the tool], to put it into practice and they probably never got credit for that. So now they’re getting credit for the time that they put into that professional learning,” said Gina Roughton, the assistant director for educational technology for Cambridge.

The online delivery was especially popular during the pandemic, although participation has dropped since students and teachers returned to in-person instruction. This past school year, 62 participants completed 269 modules. The district has about 750 teachers. One big plus: Easy updating. If a tech tool gets a new twist or feature, it’s simple to add in a slide or two explaining it. What’s more, teachers can refer to the module if they have trouble remembering how to use a particular tool.

It’s also been helpful for teachers new to the district to have a one-stop-shop to get familiar with all of Cambridge’s ed-tech tools. And when the district brings on a new piece of tech—this past year, it was a parent communication tool—it can add a module, allowing teachers to get the training they need in a familiar format.

Educators attending the presentation pointed to one challenge in recreating Cambridge’s model: It’s labor intensive. “That is incredible work, but man I’m sure it was exhausting,” one educator said during a question and answer period at the end of the session.

Roughton agreed that it hadn’t been an easy lift, even though the district had about 15 educators working on the modules initially.

Cambridge is a well-resourced district, “with a relatively large tech team, when you think about our size, and so we are fortunate that we have a lot of professionals across the district whose expertise we can leverage,” Roughton said.

In her view, the effort ultimately paid off. “I think it’s worthy of our time to try and create resources that are really customized to what our educators are looking for and need,” she said.
It’s Not Complicated. Instructional Coaches Should Give Clear Feedback

To do anything less is borderline negligent

By Rick Hess

If you care about school leadership or culture and don’t know Michael Sonbert, you really should. He’s been a teacher and a novelist, cut his teeth as a coach working in the nation’s largest turnaround school network, and then founded Skyrocket Education in 2016 and Rebel Culture in 2022. Today, he works on leadership development with schools, Google, Northwell Health Systems, and many more. I find him a terrific source of straight talk on school leadership. That’s why, when he sent me a recent note on instructional coaching, I asked if he’d mind expanding it for you all. He agreed. Here’s what he had to say.

—Rick

Jim Knight, founding senior partner at the Instructional Coaching Group, author of multiple books on instructional coaching, and architect of a widely adopted approach to instructional coaching, recently penned the piece, “Should Coaches Give Feedback? It’s Complicated,” for ASCD, the education publisher, technical-assistance provider, and all-around K-12 juggernaut.

The essay, by a hugely influential coach for a hugely influential outlet, argues that “top down” coaching (as he refers to it) for teachers from coaches is often ineffective. Knight says, “The coach shouldn’t tell the teacher what data means, but ask questions and listen, trying to think with the teacher.” He continues, “Top-down feedback, I began to realize, was very helpful when there was a clear right and wrong way to do a task, such as when my dad taught me exactly how to skate backwards . . . [but not] when I tried it to discuss the complex environment of teachers’ classrooms.”

I respect Jim Knight’s substantial contributions to education, but here he’s wildly off. Knight’s assertion supposes a false binary, whereby coaching is either “top-down” or more of an exploratory conversation between teacher and coach.

You see, there’s a third option that Knight is missing. Schools need to have an agreed-upon vision for instructional excellence. Once that vision is clear (by the way, teachers can absolutely contribute to that vision), coaches don’t need to play guessing games with teachers but can instead compare what’s happening in the teacher’s classroom against the exemplar and then tell (yes, tell) the teacher, with compassion and kindness, precisely what needs to get better and what the teacher should do to get there.

The coach should then model the skill the teacher needs to improve upon and have them practice that skill multiple times, giving feedback throughout, until they begin to build automaticity.

Knight’s approach assumes that getting a teacher to a place of being highly effective is like trying to answer a confusing, ambiguous riddle. But it’s not. I’ve worked in hundreds of schools in the past 15 years. The trends in classrooms across the U.S. are staggeringly similar, and what to do about them is surprisingly straightforward.

Now, that doesn’t mean execution is easy. Getting into great physical shape is straightforward: eat well, exercise, and burn more calories than you consume. But executing on it, for most people, is pretty difficult. Similarly, getting a school or individual educator to a place of being highly effective is straightforward: You start with systems, move to culture, and then go all in on instruction. But, as any educator can attest, executing this can often be challenging and fraught with obstacles.

What’s the point of using all the rubrics and frameworks that schools “use” if, when we enter a teacher’s classroom, we act as if we have no idea what success looks like? What’s the point of all the trainings and conversations about instruction if, when we observe teachers, we behave like great teaching is an unsolvable mystery?

A basketball coach, even at the professional level, wouldn’t ever ask the team to look at the score at halftime and have them analyze why they’re losing by 20 points. Instead, the coach would have meticulous notes on the places where the team can do better and then share those things with the team. Because the path to success is so clear, the coach can give feedback on how effectively the team is rebounding, playing defense, moving the ball, and—of course—shooting.

It’s the same thing in schools. More nuanced, yes, and with far more variables. Still, despite so many school leaders and teachers thinking their challenges are unique to them, they’re not.

The meetings that Knight describes, instead of radically building teacher skill, are just conversations. I know this because I’ve observed dozens of them. In these meetings, the teacher and the coach talk. And while some learning may occur—and they may even agree on some next steps—without actual skill-based coaching,
very little changes. Which is why so many school leaders across the country are having the same conversations with teachers in May that they were having in September.

If we adopt Knight’s approach, we are wasting valuable time: the coach’s time, the teacher’s time, but most importantly, the students’ time. Maybe Knight is trying to solve a different problem than my team and I are trying to solve. But in the schools where we coach, things are extremely urgent. Students don’t have weeks or months for adults to figure things out. They need excellent teaching right away. In some cases, their lives literally depend on it. And in a profession dominated by terms like “equity” and “fairness,” isn’t it more equitable and far more fair to make change for students as quickly as possible?

There may be places for an approach like Knight’s. But they’re few and far between. When teachers are expert planners and have incredible classroom culture, collaboration about deep student engagement makes sense. When teachers can’t get students to sit down, are teaching without measurable objectives, and not assessing student outcomes, the approach just doesn’t make sense.

Knight’s approach, and others like it, at best assume that teachers have the ability and bandwidth to analyze their own classrooms and decide upon the next steps that would change student outcomes. I haven’t seen evidence that this is the case for the overwhelming majority of teachers. The approach, at worst, assumes that teachers are fragile, overly sensitive, and unable to receive straight feedback. Again, not random feedback grounded in what the coach thinks or is feeling in the moment but precise feedback aligned to the school’s instructional vision.

Moreover, these approaches also let coaches off the hook for being experts who can analyze classrooms, collect the most pertinent data, and model agreed-upon best practices for teachers and coach them to improve. Why do schools have coaches if they don’t coach but instead pass the buck to overworked, under-supported teachers to essentially coach themselves?

The rationale I’ve received from people who use Knight’s model and others like it is that they’re great for building relationships with teachers. I haven’t seen evidence that this is the case. So many of the teachers I’ve spoken to, on the subject of this kind of coaching, express frustration about long, meandering meetings and feeling like they’re trying to guess the answers to the coach’s questions when the coach could simply tell them instead.

Imagine you were lucky enough to receive tennis lessons from Serena Williams. It would be exhausting to spend a good chunk of time playing Q&A about proper form, foot positioning, and ball placement. But it would be invigorating to be taught by an expert. It’d be thrilling to know that in a very short time, you’d be better because of her coaching.

This is where great relationships come from. When a coach’s feedback is spot-on and a teacher knows that implementing that feedback will improve their teaching, students (and their teachers) will be better off. Strong relationships and trust come from providing value for someone (quickly), not spending a teacher’s entire prep pretending that questions about good teaching are unanswerable.

To the question about whether or not coaches should give feedback, it’s not complicated like Knight asserts. They should. To do anything less is borderline negligent.

Rick Hess is a resident senior fellow and director of Education Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute.

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As Dr. Atul Gawande once said, “Coaching done well may be the most effective intervention designed for human performance.”

Grounded in trust, collaboration, and reflection, instructional coaching “done well” enables educators to grow, explore their challenges, and take risks without fear of negative consequences.

Amidst this growing excitement around instructional coaching, however, many school and district leaders find themselves making large investments in coaching programs without first having a clear idea of the specific practices that are the most effective for supporting educators. With every coaching program comes the promise of improved teacher retention and student outcomes, but without the research to support these claims, ed leaders are made to make decisions based on instinct rather than data.

Enter, the science of coaching.

The Research Behind the Science of Coaching

Built upon 10 years of validated, peer-reviewed research from esteemed professors at Rutgers and Arizona State Universities on the most effective instructional coaching strategies for public school educators, the science of coaching comprises 3 coaching skills and 6 essential coaching actions that are proven to consistently increase teacher retention and improve student outcomes.

We'll come back to those coaching skills in a bit.

In addition to conducting their own research, Dr. Linda Reddy from Rutgers University and her colleague Dr. Alexander Kurtz from Arizona State University synthesized decades of existing research on the best instructional coaching practices with the
goal of providing a clear coaching framework that leads to meaningful outcomes for leaders, teachers, coaches, school support staff, and students.

For example, Dr. Reddy and Dr. Kurtz’s research includes studies on behavioral support coaching for paraprofessionals, coaching on positive reinforcement strategies in high-poverty school classrooms, and coaching on behavior management strategies in special education classrooms in high-poverty schools. Across the board, the findings overwhelmingly support the impact of the 3 coaching skills and 6 essential coaching actions on educator effectiveness and student behavior, engagement, and achievement.

The research is significant, not only because it finally gives coaches and teachers a clear, structured, and proven system for growth, but also because it empowers school and district leaders to make data-informed decisions about the kind of instructional coaching they should be investing in.

In other words, with the science of coaching, the era of go-with-your-gut coaching is officially over. This transformative approach thrives on personalized support and measurable educator growth in role-specific competencies, ultimately fostering a sustainable culture of ongoing adult and student learning.

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The evidence-centered, action-outcome framework provides a systematic approach to measure and drive continuous improvement for coaching talent and schools.

Assessing the Effectiveness and Interactions of Instructional Coaches
Linda A. Reddy, PhD; Todd Glover, PhD; Alexander Kurz, PhD; Stephen N. Elliott, PhD

The 3 Coaching Skills

Thanks to this research, effective coaching isn’t a mystery. It’s science! Especially when paired with an all-in-one instructional coaching and talent development platform like e2L’s GroweLab, the 3 coaching skills are proven to drive meaningful educator growth, increase teacher retention, and accelerate student outcomes. The 3 skills are as follows:

01 Collaborative Goal Setting

According to the latest research, ensuring positive and meaningful professional learning outcomes hinges on effective collaboration between each teacher and their coach.

Here, coaches work individually with educators to help them identify their strengths, areas for improvement, growth goals on role-specific competencies and instructional best practices, and ways to measure and assess goal attainment along the way.

02 Implementation Design & Support

The latest research also points to observational data as a critical tool for generating positive, constructive feedback and assessing the effectiveness of coaching efforts and classroom implementation.

Here, coaches collaborate with teachers to develop an implementation plan, create goal-specific options and next steps, consider resources and potential barriers, share and model real examples, and create opportunities for feedback on evidence of on-the-job practice.

03 Data-Informed Feedback

The research also shows that clear, frequent, and positive feedback improves coaching, teaching, and student outcomes. Additionally, the evidence reveals that many teachers consider instructional coaching paired with data-informed feedback to be a positive source of professional development, thereby removing potential barriers to ongoing professional learning and growth.

Here, coaches regularly monitor and interpret educator growth data to provide educators with timely praise, offer constructive feedback, assess progress and skill acquisition, and measure the overall effectiveness of their own coaching efforts.
The Real-World Impact of the Science of Coaching

When the researchers began interpreting and publishing their findings, they sought to discover if there was an organization that aligned to the actions and skills that make up the science of coaching. Rutgers’ Dr. Reddy put it this way: “engage2learn (e2L) was the only coaching organization we found that was already aligned to our research. We know the experts at e2L will be able to scale the impact of our validated assessment data insights and provide measurable results for schools.” Not only does the independent research prove the efficacy of e2L coaching, their extensive coaching experience has produced over a decade of evidence of on-the-ground, transformative impact in its partner districts every single day.


The Results: Job-embedded coaching from e2L has a statistically significant impact on NWEA MAP Growth in reading and math for K-5 students, improving the state ratings for multiple district schools, including getting Bonham Elementary School from an ‘F’ to a ‘C’ rating in just one year!

Tips for Integrating the Science of Coaching Into Your Coaching Methodology

No principal or superintendent wants to waste critical funding on an expensive, ineffective instructional coaching program. By integrating the science of coaching into your coaching framework, you can sleep well at night knowing that your investments in educator support are leading to measurable outcomes.

Assess Current Coaching Practices

Collaborate with leaders, coaches, and teachers to evaluate your existing coaching practices, identify areas that align with the science of coaching, and adjust or strategically abandon those that do not.

The Challenge: Improve WIDA ACCESS scores for English language learners (ELLs) across the Providence Public School District in Rhode Island.

The Results: Targeted teacher coaching from e2L has a statistically significant impact on WIDA ACCESS scores for ELL students.

Utilize Advanced Data Analytics

Use a coaching documentation and data analytics platform like GroweLab to streamline data collection, conduct regular analyses, simplify reporting, and correlate educator growth to student outcomes data.

Promote Feedback and Reflection

Develop a culture of positive feedback and self-reflection to keep both coaches and teachers engaged in their ongoing growth.

Scale for Impact

As you start to see your teachers grow and students succeed, explore opportunities to scale up the science of coaching across your school or district.

Get Certified in the Science of Coaching

Participate in e2L’s Data-Informed Growth Collaborative, a 12-week program designed to help coaches and school leaders become highly proficient at implementing the science of coaching. Instructional coaching will continue to be a powerful strategy for enhancing teacher growth and student outcomes in K-12 schools. To harness its full potential, it’s critical to incorporate the research-backed science of coaching into your coaching methodology. By doing so, you’re setting your school or district on a path toward a culture of continuous improvement that benefits educators, students, and the community at large, ushering in a brighter future for public education.

To learn more about the science of coaching and how to implement a successful coaching program, visit engage2learn.org

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The science of coaching is a structured approach that is not intended for a specific model, nor does it conflict with other coaching models or frameworks. Rather, it’s designed and proven to enhance any coaching model by integrating the effective coaching actions and empowering coaches to utilize data to inform growth-focused instructional support.
What This Former Administrator Wishes She Had Known About Teacher PD

The wrong kind of professional development can hold teachers back

By Renee Gugel

Just five short years ago, I was an administrator in charge of professional development for my high school. But now, after teaching teacher leadership full time at the university level, my wish is that I could travel back in time and have a very important conversation with myself. The reason? I have now worked with and learned from hundreds of teachers who are more than willing to tell it like it is.

Think back to your first year of leadership and what you might tell yourself if given the opportunity; that’s what teaching graduate-level education has done for me. Boy, what I would have done differently with my professional development plans in 2018 if I knew then what I know now.

I regularly teach a course called Leading Teacher Development and Student Learning, and in this course, we discuss all things PD. Graduate students are honest. Brutally honest.

When I left my 20-year service in the public school system, I was afraid that I would somehow feel disconnected from the “real world” of education. Exactly the opposite has happened. Instead of having a perspective informed by the three districts I personally worked in, I now see PD in action in hundreds of schools. I have in-depth conversations with teachers about their experiences and, yes, how well they feel their administrators are doing their jobs.

This can be cringeworthy for me when they vent about the very things I was doing as I planned professional development for my building. I’d like to use this opportunity to share with you what they have shared with me.

Teachers want to grow. Most of them want to collaborate. And oftentimes, what we are doing (inadvertently) as we plan professional development is holding them back—exactly the opposite of what we’re intending to do.

In my class, we start the term with a deep reflection on the PD process in each teacher’s school. We share the processes with one another and we talk about what is working and what needs improvement in our buildings. Then, each teacher puts together a survey to gather information from teachers at their schools to better understand the big picture of how teachers feel about PD.

When we come back together as a group to analyze their survey results, we find that regardless of size, location, economics, or any other demographics, the results are strikingly similar. As instructional-coaching researcher Jim Knight articulated more than a decade ago in Unmistakable Impact: A Partnership Approach for Dramatically Improving Instruction (ASCD, 2011), teachers feel that PD is something that is done to them, not with them. It really is that simple.

In every class I teach, most of the teachers surveyed say that the majority of their professional development comes from the top down, and they have little or no involvement in the process. They understand, of course, that sometimes PD needs to be universal and involves information that all teachers need to learn as a large group. But when every single PD session falls into that category, they feel as if they don’t matter as individuals, that their unique abilities are not being respected. In short, they want their voices to be heard as PD is developed. They want to be a part of the process.

Next, teachers want PD that is customized to their content and their needs. In our surveys, teachers overwhelmingly share that they are “forced” to sit through PD that doesn’t apply to them.

In every class, there is always at least one teacher who works at a school with amazing professional development. It is eye-opening to hear their classmates ooh and ahh over their experiences. Teachers are longing for PD that is meaningful to them, and they are jealous when they hear about teachers who are getting those experiences. (Yes, “jealous.” Their word.)

To summarize, teachers want voice and choice—exactly the same things we make sure our students in our classrooms are receiving. Yet, somehow, we often fail to give those same options to our teachers. What’s interesting, too, is that many leaders I speak with know their PD may not be as meaningful for teachers as it could be. But when institute days and PD opportunities sort of sneak up on us along with the millions of other things we’re responsible for, it’s easy to see why PD ends up being something we do to teachers instead of with them.

So what’s a school leader to do? Here’s what the teacher-leaders I have taught recommend:

1. **Ask them.** Every school year, send teachers a survey asking them what their PD needs are and, as difficult as it may be to hear, what has and has not worked for them in the current system.
2. **Be transparent.** Share the results of the survey with your staff. This may take some vulnerability on your part as some of the results and comments may be negative, but transparency is key.

3. **Form a professional development team.** Give teachers the opportunity to be a part of the team that builds and designs PD. Plan your PD calendar for the upcoming school year with your team, using the survey results as a guide.

4. **Think in percentages.** The majority of PD should be customized for teachers and allow for choice in learning opportunities. If this is new, aim for 51 percent and grow from there.

As you share with teachers their survey results and the collaborative plan for the upcoming year based on those results, the culture in your building will begin to shift immediately. They will recognize their own words in the results and will see a plan that has taken their ideas and their unique needs into consideration. And most importantly, they will see you being vulnerable as you listen to their suggestions and make real and meaningful changes from past practices.

As leaders, we must make the planning of meaningful, high-quality PD a top priority. Your teachers are longing for it; just ask them.

*Renee Gugel is the program chair of teacher leadership and an assistant professor of leadership studies at National Louis University in Chicago. She formerly worked as a department chair, dean of students, and associate principal at districts in northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin.*
Want to Strengthen Leadership Coaching? Try Collaborative Inquiry

Everyone stands to benefit

By Peter DeWitt

Leadership coaching has the potential to be a valuable reciprocal learning experience for both the person being coached and the person doing the coaching. Coaching is never just about what the coach learns from others while they’re at the table. It’s something I have written about before in this blog “If you’re coaching and not learning, you’re not coaching.” Instructional Coaching researcher Jim Knight has been talking about the reciprocal benefits of coaching for many years, and to truly experience it deepens the relationship between the person doing the coaching and the person being coached.

Over the last few years, I have found my worlds of facilitating multiple-day workshops and that of hybrid coaching—where I’m in the schools every other month and remotely the other months—come crashing into each other. It’s not that I didn’t notice it before, because what I learned while I coached was often useful in workshops and vice versa. However, what I have grown to learn more and more each year is how to be more intentional in coaching and facilitating.

About six months ago, I wrote this blog focusing on the fact that educators attend professional learning sessions, and some don’t even know why they’re there, which is something that comes up in coaching a lot, meaning that the person being coached tells me they are attending a workshop but are not sure why they are going. That’s where coaching can be different … more intentional.

If we, as coaches, can provide job-embedded coaching focusing on the needs of school leaders, perhaps when they do go to workshops, they will look for the topics that will most help them or they may not even have to go to a workshop because coaching can help meet their needs in ways that workshops never will.

That’s where collaborative inquiry enters the equation.

What is Collaborative Inquiry?

Collaborative inquiry is a cyclical process that begins with a problem of practice or an inquiry question focusing on an issue educators want to solve. What I have found is that leaders often want teachers to engage in the process, but leaders don’t engage in the process often enough. Leaders need to engage in actions that will help them grow as much as teachers do, and collaborative inquiry is a way to meet that need.

Casey (2014) writes, “Questions are the root of inquiry; they initiate, sustain and invigorate each aspect of the process. Questions direct investigation, drive creativity, stimulate discussion, and are the bedrock of reflection” (p. 510).

One document that leaders should always use to help guide them as they consider the inquiry process is that of their school’s academic plan, which is also sometimes called a strategic plan. Too often, the academic plans that leaders create are done in isolation, so their teachers do not know what the plan includes.

Sadly, there are leaders who have told me they created their academic plan, but it goes on the proverbial shelf or in the cloud never to be looked at again, which is also something that I wrote about recently.

Academic plans that have been created using data and the input of teachers can help bring a more effective and coherent focus to a school, which is common sense, but due to the rush of day-to-day pressures, academic plans are often completed out of compliance and not seen as the valuable tool that they could be.

Bernhardt (2018) suggests that teachers and leaders work together by exploring four types of data to get a sense of who they are as a school and where they can go next in their focus for those academic plans. Those four types of data are:

- **Demographic data**—Describes the system.
- **Perceptions data**—How do they do business? It involves surveys about climate and culture.
- **Student learning data**—How are the students doing?
- **School processes data**—What are their processes, such as PLCs, RTI, and other actions they take.

A Simple Google Doc

In leadership coaching, we can take those academic plans based on those four types of data and drill down to the three main priorities of the leaders and their staff. Often, it’s a focus...
on literacy, math, or attendance. Using a Google doc, I have leaders fill out their three main priorities, and then, in coaching sessions, we focus on what success would look like if they successfully met those three priorities, which also needs to go in that same Google doc. Defining success criteria for each priority is key, because if we can’t define what success looks like, then how can we move forward with an effective plan?

The next step, which is also completed within the same inquiry Google doc, is that of defining a theory of action, which is a process that has been around for a very long time. Theories of actions are simple statements that are referred to as If/Then. “If” we take this action, “Then” what are we hoping will happen? This is often a place where leaders and coaches can define outcomes.

As leaders go through the inquiry process, the information within those Google docs become vitally important to me as a coach. Based on the focus of the three priorities, I can offer resources and professional learning based on the needs of the school leaders and their teams, which means the professional learning is job-embedded and much more valuable to them than if they just attend random one-day workshops. In fact, due to their learning needs, leaders and their teams will be much more likely to attend one-day workshops that can help supplement the learning that happens during coaching, and that, too, will be more valuable.

The last step is reflection, which is not just about remembering it the way we thought the whole process happened. Reflection is about what we all learned during the cycle and what we changed about our practices when some actions worked and other actions did not. Reflection is also about, as collective teacher-efficacy researcher Jenni Donohoo says, celebrating the successes that the team experienced.

In the End

John Hattie has often said that educators, including leaders, have two main areas of focus. One is to look at how and what we do impacts student learning in positive ways. The other is to consistently evaluate our own impact on student learning. Engaging in cycles of inquiry during coaching can help meet both those needs, and when the process involves a leadership team, it can also help foster collective leader efficacy.

Peter DeWitt is a former K-5 public school principal turned author, presenter, and leadership coach.