

# How School Administrators Can Serve as Productive Partners in Teacher Coaching Programs

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## The Role of the School Administrator in Coaching

Research shows that when principals, coaches, and teachers define, understand, and engage in coaching as a partnership, instructional coaching programs can be more effective. Engaged principals are key to a successful coaching program (Knight, 2007). According to data from our three-year study of instructional coaching across 163 schools, when school administrators remain involved in the coaching program throughout the year, teachers feel less stressed about their challenges, feel better about their coaches' coaching skills, and show more improvement in their teaching practices (Bakhshaei et al., 2019).

School administrators play a critical role in the success of coaching programs in their building mainly **by supporting coach-teacher collaboration**. Additionally, school administrators can also support the success of coaching programs **by closely collaborating with their coach**. Based on our three-year research study, we outline below specific actions school-based administrators can take to serve as productive partners in teacher coaching programs (Bakhshaei et al., 2020).

### Support Coach-Teacher Collaboration

**1. Build teacher buy-in for coaching.** For a coaching program to be effective, school administrators should be involved in building a clear understanding around the role of coaches and how working with a coach is aligned with district, school, and teaching goals. This common vision promotes teacher willingness to work with coaches and helps activate the coaches as leaders in change management. Our research indicates that when teachers volunteer to participate in a coaching program with a positive perception and a clear understanding of what it involves, they are more likely to be invested in the process and benefit from the program. We've also found that when teachers understand the alignment between coaching and instructional and curricular priorities, they feel more motivated to participate in the program.

*"I think it's important to have the principal share the 'why' behind coaching to help with buy-in," one coach said. "I also think that if the principal believes in it, it will show in how he/she talks about it throughout the school year with staff."*

#### Strategies for success:

- At the beginning of the year, a kick-off event that introduces the alignment between coaching and school and district goals can energize teachers to participate. This helps them understand that the coach is there only to make teacher's lives easier rather than adding additional work to teachers' plates.
- Over the course of the year, early volunteers for coaching can also be leveraged to recruit their colleagues by sharing testimonials, both formally in larger faculty

meetings, and informally through word-of-mouth and social media. Administrators can promote voluntary participation among teachers by amplifying these coaching success stories.

## **2. Respect confidentiality in the coach-teacher relationship and promote a non-evaluative approach.**

Another key to a successful partnership between the school administrator, coach, and teachers is a safe environment where teachers do not feel evaluated by their coach or see the coach as a member of the administration team who observes their classrooms for the purpose of evaluation. In our research, coached teachers who reported non-judgmental coaching were more willing to participate and more likely to report progress in their practice. When teachers trusted that the collaboration with their coach was free from assessment, they worked with their coach in an open and transparent manner. This non-evaluative support provided a framework within which teachers felt free to experiment, take risks, and try new things. Interestingly, most coaches agreed that respecting the confidentiality of the coach-teacher relationship was the most valuable form of support that principals provided.

*“Teachers won't work with instructional coaches if they think that person is just a spy to come back to administration. It's no an effective, trusting relationship,” said a principal.*

### **Strategies for success:**

- Coaches and administrators should repeatedly emphasize the non-evaluative aspect of the coaching work and be open with teachers about the extent to which information that the coach collects during their collaboration with teachers will be kept confidential. This communication should not only occur when the program is launched, but it should also be reiterated throughout the year in staff meetings by the school administrator and by the coach.
- Moreover, coaches should not be given administrative roles that bias their coaching role. Caution should be taken when asking coaches to perform any administrative tasks that could be associated, even tangentially, with teacher evaluation. If coaches do need to perform tasks that are typically seen as administrative, take time to communicate the boundary of that role with teachers to prevent misunderstandings. Coaches should be positioned as thought partners who have valuable knowledge, skills, or a way of thinking that helps teachers innovate and grow.

**3. Ensure coaches have the time they need to provide classroom support.** One of the most basic ways to increase the effectiveness of any PD activity is to maximize the time that teachers learn and practice. Therefore, it is critical that the coach's role be protected to ensure that the majority of the coach's time is spent directly with teachers. While coaches may be responsible for a variety of tasks both within and outside the classroom, coaches should not be weighed down by administrative or teaching tasks that are not related to their main coaching responsibilities. In our research, coaches expressed concern about the quality of their support when they couldn't fully concentrate on coaching. In addition, our data suggests coaches are dissatisfied with their jobs when they feel their position is not fully recognized and they have to take care of the tasks that are not directly related to their role.

*“The most significant support my principal can provide is removing barriers to my schedule that will impact my time and ability to coach teachers,” one coach said.*

**Strategies for success:**

- Clear and consistent communication between coaches and administrators throughout the year will help them evaluate the coach's schedule and workload, and better define their boundaries of work.
- Additionally, sharing information with the rest of the staff concerning the coach's roles, responsibilities, and schedule will help staff understand how to respect the coach's time.

## Collaborate Closely with the Coach

**1. Consistently meet with the coach throughout the school year.** Strong collaboration between the coach and school administrator throughout the school year is another key to an effective coaching partnership. Coaches need frequent, dedicated time with their school administrator to share successes and challenges and to seek constructive feedback and support. These meetings also help coaches gain a better sense of school culture and keep their practice aligned with school and district goals. In our research, coaches reported one-on-one formal meetings with their principals were most valuable in helping them with their coaching roles.

*“I know principals have a lot on their plates, but please be involved as much as possible in the program,” a coach urged. “When you're meeting with your coach, you're meeting with your coach. Try your best to make sure that time is protected for the two of you.”*

### Strategies for success:

- Before the school year begins, school administrators and coaches can carve out structured time for relationship-building, collaborative goal-setting, and deciding how to adapt the coaching model they are using to work best in their specific school context. This time allows them to begin the year with a shared understanding of their roles and upcoming action items.
- Throughout the school year, administrators and coaches maintain this momentum by consistently meeting to discuss bright spots, challenges, and coaching trends.

## 2. Trust coaches to make decisions around coaching.

Although it is important that school administrators remain actively involved in coaching programs, this doesn't mean that they are the sole drivers. School administrators need to give coaches the freedom to implement a coaching program with creativity and innovation. Our research suggests that when coaches are trusted to make decisions around coaching, they feel more confident in their skills, can more easily build and develop necessary rapport with teachers, and are better able to personalize the type of support that they provide. Furthermore, providing the coach with the autonomy to make decisions enhances trust and respect in the coach-administrator relationship, an essential component of the partnership approach.

*“Without autonomy and authority, an instructional coach cannot do their job well,” said a coach. “I was given autonomy to get my job done [and] the authority to make decisions in the best interest of the school and students as needed.”*

### Strategies for success:

- Providing the coach with autonomy does not mean that they work in isolation. Indeed, regular meetings between the coach and the school administrator are an opportunity for the administrator to celebrate when a coach has taken ownership of a coaching decision and seen a positive impact as a result. It's important that coaches feel appreciated for taking on the accountability that goes hand-in-hand with ownership of coaching decisions. Alternatively, when a coach has not had success with a coaching decision, the school administrator can help the coach reframe mistakes as learning opportunities.

## References

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