

Funding Coaching is Not Enough: The Role of the District Administrator in Instructional Coaching

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Districts are increasingly investing in coaching programs to improve teacher practice and student outcomes (Galey, 2016). However, merely providing schools with the funding for a coaching position is not enough (Delinger Kane & Rosenquist, 2018). To maximize the return on their coaching investment, [our three-year study of instructional coaching across 32 districts](#) shows that district leaders need to ensure that they are taking an active role in eliminating barriers to effective coaching and fostering a culture that encourages teachers to innovate their practice (Bakhshaei et al., 2019) . [Based on our three-year research study](#), we outline below specific actions district administrators can take to remove roadblocks and support coaching throughout the school year (Bakhshaei et al., 2020).

1. Adopt a research-backed coaching model and align it with district goals. District leaders should adopt a coaching model that explicitly includes the vision and targeted outcomes of coaching, as well as the roles and responsibilities of coaches, school leaders, and teachers. Without such a model, coaches may not know where to focus their efforts, and teachers may misunderstand the coaches' role. The framework not only provides coaches with clarity around their role and responsibilities, but it also supports positive teacher-coach relationships and helps school and district leaders plan strategically for the success of the program (e.g., coach workload, tools and resources that coaches need to ensure successful implementation, etc.).

As one coach explained, adopting an explicit coaching model “has allowed everyone on the team to be on the same page. We now have a common language and set of expectations.”

Strategies for success:

- Include stakeholders in the decision-making process when considering new coaching models. This may include the district curriculum team, district technology team, building administrators, coaches, and teachers.
- Explicitly communicate with district staff the ways in which a new coaching program aligns with district goals and existing initiatives.
- Carve out dedicated time for establishing a shared understanding and goals around a new coaching model with coaches and school leaders.
- Within the framework, provide campuses with autonomy to implement the coaching model in ways that fit their needs.

2. Plan for ongoing professional development for both coaches and administrators. Our research shows that ongoing PD is critical to coaches' growth and confidence in their coaching skills. In addition to coaching resources and training, coaches benefit from access to ongoing mentorship. Said one district leader: "Everyone needs a coach." Often, when expert teachers transition from the classroom into a coaching position, they become isolated in their role. Coaches' mentors can serve as indispensable thought partners who build capacity for strategic problem-solving. In addition to mentorship, our research indicates that coaches benefit from active participation in professional learning networks inside and outside their districts. Participating in and developing a professional learning network helps coaches become inspired and learn from a wealth of sources, develop familiarity with new tools and resources, and collaborate with people on common challenges. Likewise, many administrators do not have experience leading or collaborating on a coaching program (either as an administrator or as a coach) or even being coached as a teacher. Appropriate PD around coaching for administrators helps them become engaged in the coaching program by understanding their critical role in its success in their school or district.

"Having a mentor is like having a lifeline. She is there to guide me, to listen, to make suggestions. She supports me and celebrates the successes along the way," one coach said. "Everyone needs a coach, but every coach needs a mentor."

Strategies for success:

- When decision-makers select a research-backed coaching model, they should identify what resources exist for onboarding new coaches and administrators. Are there books, curricular materials, and/or in-person training opportunities that can guide the leadership team in implementing the model successfully?
- Build coach and administrator capacity by allocating resources for mentorship and PD (e.g., participating in professional conferences and trainings).
- Create opportunities for coaches within the district to learn from one another. Such collaboration might mean organizing days when novice coaches can shadow more experienced coaches, setting up a recurring meeting for coaches to convene to share challenges and success stories, or developing channels for informal coach communication and updates.

3. Protect coaches', principals', and teachers' time for coaching. Our research shows that the amount of time spent between teachers and coaches is one of the most important factors in a successful coaching program. However, coaches' time for coaching is often threatened by other responsibilities. In [a Digital Promise survey](#) conducted among education practitioners and

As one district administrator explained, "Our principals wear so many hats, which often results in coaches being left

leaders to learn about the coaching landscape in the United States, we found that many coaches throughout the country serve in multiple roles both within and outside the classroom (Van Ostrand et al., 2020). Moreover, in order to expand the coach's reach, they are often asked to support large caseloads of teachers in multiple schools. In practice, these strategies often end up diminishing the impact of coaching while also decreasing the coach's job satisfaction. It's important that the district protects the time coaches and teachers spend together so they can consistently meet to plan, implement new strategies in the classroom, and reflect on the process and their learning. Additionally, coaches and principals need adequate time for consistent collaboration. Despite the benefits of coach-principal alignment for fostering a culture of innovation and collaboration and supporting teacher buy-in, finding time for coach-principal meetings can be challenging.

to their own devices. As a district, we need to provide time for principals to collaborate on their coaching successes, challenges, and data so that they can regroup and refocus their attention on coaching goals."

Strategies for success:

- Before assigning a coach tasks that are unrelated to their coaching responsibilities, verify that they will still have adequate time to meet with teachers and visit classrooms.
- Assure teachers that time spent with their coach will be protected.
- Encourage principals and coaches to set a recurring standing meeting.

4. Foster a culture of coaching. Our research shows that when district administration encourages a culture of coaching, teachers feel more comfortable participating in coaching and taking ownership of the change process. A coaching culture simply means that teachers have had the chance to understand and accept that there are regular reflection, practice, and feedback opportunities in their workforce that are designed only to support them in their individual learning and growth without any evaluative purpose. In other words, coaching culture is about the principle of partnership. The beauty of this coaching partnership lies in developing an environment where teachers feel supported in their growth by one another and by their coach and administrators. In such a setting, there is a focus on continuous learning through inquiry and transparency, rather than performance, judgment, and self-protection. Regular feedback—up, down, and across the school/district—is grounded in a shared commitment to helping each other improve and the shared goal

Said a coach: "I think things are contagious, especially from the top down. So, if you have district leaders who are really excited and really in tune [to] what [coaching] is about and the changes that it could make, I think that trickles down to each campus administration level, and then ultimately [to] the teachers. And

of boosting students' achievement. Such an environment, fueled first by leaders willing to model vulnerability and take personal responsibility for their shortcomings and missteps, makes teachers feel safe to try new things. Results matter in this setting, but failures and shortcomings are treated as critical opportunities for learning and improving.

of course, our students benefit.”

Strategies for success:

- Consistently communicate to teachers that the purpose of coaching is continuous improvement, not evaluation.
- Recognize teachers who are participating in coaching. For example, one district hosted monthly breakfasts on each campus where all teachers who had been coached sometime during the school year came together and shared ideas and strategies with one another. This recognition not only promoted and celebrated coaching, but also amplified impact by fostering a culture of collaboration. By recognizing that coaching was a support that all teachers deserved and could benefit from, it also served to remove misconceptions that coaching was punitive or only helpful for novice teachers.
- Celebrate bright spots and share teacher testimonials. This might take the form of highlighting success stories in newsletters, encouraging teachers and coaches to share their progress on social media, or having teachers share testimonials at school board meetings.

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