

Getting the Most Out of Instructional Coaches

In this *Kappan* article, author/consultant Jon Saphier and math expert Lucy West applaud the deployment of instructional coaches to support instruction but warn that if they're not used wisely, nothing will change. The mission of the school-based coach, they say, is to raise the quality of teaching and learning in every classroom by building a culture in which:

- Educators watch each other teach and share rigorous feedback aimed at improving student learning;
- Planning for instruction is thorough and collaborative and digs deeply into the content;
- Interim and on-the-spot assessments of student learning are the focus of nondefensive conversations and questions among staff. We taught it, but did they learn it?

“The culture, in turn, is the soil in which seeds are planted in order to improve teaching and learning for both adults and students,” say Saphier and West. And instructional coaches are ideally situated to build this culture because they have access to every classroom, are seen as helpers who work side-by-side with teachers, and don't carry the baggage of being formal evaluators. Here are some ideas for coaches:

- *Lead from strength.* Saphier and West recommend that coaches focus initially on the strongest teachers in their schools, using their classrooms as sites for peer observation and joint inquiry into effective practices. Strong teachers can provide a multiplier effect for coaches' work, spreading the word to colleagues and preparing, perhaps, to be coaches themselves some day. Focusing primarily on the weakest teachers is a mistake, say Saphier and West. This doesn't build capacity and perpetuates the idea that coaches are there mainly in a remedial role and that a visit from one of them means there's a problem.

- *Foster public teaching.* Coaches should recruit teachers who are open to having their classrooms observed and can serve as models, not necessarily of the best teaching but of nondefensive self-examination. “Once a few people begin to take a risk and find it valuable,” say Saphier and West, “then teachers who are hesitant about all this ‘professional culture stuff’ will be more likely to participate in a productive planning and debriefing cycle hosted in the room of a lead teacher.”

- *Use planning conferences.* Working individually with teachers planning lessons is one of the best entry points for coaches, say Saphier and West, and they believe it's a higher priority than lesson observation and feedback. “Especially during the early days of building a coaching relationship, planning conferences offer more potential for improving instruction,” they say. “Many teaching problems begin when teachers don't anticipate student confusions, can't figure out how to scaffold needed prior knowledge, and don't carefully think out experiences that would allow students to access new knowledge.”

Good planning conferences can help teachers use the required curriculum more mindfully and have more success with students.

- *Lead teacher meetings.* Facilitating teams is another highly productive activity for coaches as teachers plan and debate lesson designs and instructional strategies. This, of course, requires that the principal has scheduled common planning time and made it clear that this kind of meeting is valuable.

- *Facilitate peer observation.* Saphier and West are strong advocates of public teaching – teachers opening their classrooms to observation by peers. It may take several years to get a whole staff comfortable with this idea, they say, but it’s an important goal. One way to start is lesson study, with a team designing a common lesson, the coach teaching it while the team watches (a good way to break the ice and gain credibility), and then revising the lesson and having others teach it.

- *Work closely with the principal.* This partnership is key, say Saphier and West. Coaches should build a close working relationship, plan where to begin and with which teachers, set up a weekly meeting to share insights and improvement strategies, and frequently attend teacher meetings where instructional substance is discussed. Coaches should observe lessons with their principal, building a common image of what good teaching looks like and sharing it with the whole staff, and also educating the principal in the finer points of pedagogical content knowledge in the coach’s subject area.

- *Be part of a districtwide plan.* Saphier and West recommend that coaches report to a district curriculum director, not the principal, so they are members of a cadre aimed at bringing about systemic change. “Coaching is a strategy to improve schools across the district, not just to develop a few model classrooms or a lighthouse school,” they say. “... Systems often get stuck at this plateau of improvement.” This requires that district leaders have a clear vision and organize training and support so that coaches and principals work in harmony toward the goal, and coaches in different schools have weekly meeting time to share, plan, and collaborate. Another reason for having coaches report to someone above the principal is to prevent their time being hijacked by short-term, non-instructional duties within the school, or working on unproductive agendas like shoring up the least effective teachers.

“For a corps of coaches in a school district to significantly influence student achievement,” conclude Saphier and West, “the role of the coach must be construed as a change agent and culture builder for professional learning of all adults in the building... The coach needs to focus on improved instruction and evidence of student learning of important ideas and rigorous content – the instructional core. Focusing just on pedagogy without content or just on content with pedagogy is insufficient.”

“How Coaches Can Maximize Student Learning” by Jon Saphier and Lucy West in *Phi Delta Kappan*, December 2009/January 2010 (Vol. 91, #4, p. 46-50); this article can be purchased at <http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/index.htm>

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