

Instructional Coaches Get Specialized Training

Teacher leaders supported in working with adult learners

By **Madeline Will**

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Instructional coaches can be instrumental in helping teachers improve their practice. But who is coaching the coaches?



"It's amazing how many people are appointed as a coach and told, go forth and coach," with no professional development or support, said Lynn Kepp, the senior vice president for strategic partnerships at the New Teacher Center, **which works with school districts across the country** to increase the effectiveness of teachers.

The center is one of several organizations that have tapped into a specialized market: providing professional development for coaches. It takes a whole new skill set for coaches, who are typically former classroom teachers, to work with adult learners. And while research has shown that coaching has benefits for all teachers, not just new or struggling ones, coaches must learn how to pitch their services, which are often not mandated by districts, and how to develop trusting relationships with the educators they work with.

Kendra Hanzlik, an instructional coach at Prairie Hill Elementary in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, said that when she first started coaching, people were reluctant to work with her. Teachers feared being seen as deficient in their practice, she said.

Hanzlik's district, College Community schools, through its membership in the Grant Wood Area Education Agency, receives coaching support from the **New Teacher Center**. Four times a year, coaches from 38 districts come together for two days of center-provided professional development. The coaches also regularly meet with their district peers in professional learning communities.

During the PD sessions, Hanzlik and the other coaches have learned strategies for building relationships with teachers and then working with them to improve their practice. Part of that is learning how to transition from working with children to working with adults.

"When you're teaching students, it seems like you can see changes in behavior or you can see learning happen at a much more rapid pace. With adult learners, sometimes it just takes longer," Hanzlik said. "It's required me to be more patient and also just to be confident that what it is we're doing is working."

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Ideally, Kepp said, instructional coaches spend the majority of their time in the classroom, working directly with teachers. They have consistent, ongoing development and support. And they have access to data to track student outcomes to see if what they're doing is working.

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"With those things in place, instructional coaches as teacher leaders can have a tremendous impact on the entire system," Kepp said.

Collaborating Is Key

Coaching programs vary by school and by district, but often, there are only one or two coaches per building. The coaches don't always have that ready-made camaraderie seen among teachers, who team up based on their grade level or subject area.

To hold herself accountable, Barbara Leete, an instructional coach at Center Point-Urbana Primary in Center Point, Iowa, said she asks herself two questions at the end of every day: What did I do today that made a difference for a teacher and, therefore, the students? And what is something I can do better tomorrow?

"In a way, you are an island," she said. "Throughout the week, you're not on a team. It is somewhat of an isolated position, and I think if I didn't ask myself those questions, I could fall into a rut and I wouldn't be stretching myself."

Leete meets with the other instructional coaches in the district every Friday afternoon to conduct book studies, go over data, look at videotapes of their coaching in action, and give feedback to each other.

"It has helped me to have others [there] as I talk aloud about my experiences. ... Otherwise, I don't know who I'd get my feedback from," she said. "Yes, I get it from teachers, but they don't see me doing the whole big picture."

That kind of collaboration and support is crucial for coaches' success, said Jim Knight, the director of the [Kansas Coaching Project](#) and a senior research associate at the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning.

Knight has worked with districts across the country to bolster their coaching programs. Of course, that doesn't mean there's a one-size-fits-all model of success, Knight said.

"People always like to have things crystal clear and black and white," he said. "But I think when you try to come up with a recipe or set structure, it's inconsistent with what happens in the classroom. For coaching to work well, it has to be individualized to the teacher."

That means that there should be a district-level "coach of the coaches," Knight said, to help support coaches implement the strategies that he and his team teach. Knight and his team will check in periodically to see how their practice is going and offer tools to follow up on challenges encountered.

The coach of the coaches and all the coaches in the district should meet regularly as a team to evaluate their practice and stay abreast of new learning, he said.

"The power of the professional learning community is [that] coaches are unlike any other

position," Knight said. "I think coaching is the best support for the coach. ... There's always room for improvement; coaches can [learn to] ask better questions."

And when coaching is done well, it can transform learning, Knight said: A coach can help increase the time a teacher spends on instruction, rather than transitions or classroom management, by about 15 percent, just by looking at what's happening in the classroom. Research has also found that coaching **can improve student outcomes** and lessen teacher turnover.

Successful Strategies

Coaching has **seven success factors**, Knight said. Successful coaches understand the complexities of working with adults; use an effective coaching cycle; know effective teaching practices; gather data; have effective communication strategies; are effective leaders; and are supported by their schools and districts.

Effective coaches, Knight said, "have their act together, are reliable, are ambitious for change, [and are] deeply respectful of the teacher's needs."

He continued: "If the coach is unresponsive, doesn't have their act together, struggles to follow up, drops the ball—the coaching is not going to flourish."

Transparency and communication are vital for successful coaching, said Deanne Thiede, a program leader for the Teacher Leadership System at College Community schools.

"We learned that it's better to overcommunicate," she said, adding that coaches in her program admit when they've made a mistake or aren't sure about a certain issue. "Being willing to be vulnerable when you don't have the answers—I actually think that's a strength."

In December, Leete, the instructional coach in Center Point, surveyed the teachers in her school about their feelings toward coaching. Every teacher said instructional coaching is meeting his or her professional needs, and 82 percent said they felt like they had a strong relationship with Leete.

That was a victory, she said, especially considering that teachers were hesitant to embrace coaching when she started two years ago.

"I was very cognizant that I had to gain their trust and credibility and let them get to know me, and I had to be OK and patient with that," she said. "I tried to do whatever it took—teachers have their jobs, they're in the trenches. What can I do for you that you don't have time for?"

"I've tried to ask rather than tell, and see why you are thinking the way you're thinking. 'Do you think it would make a difference if we tried this?' " she said. "Letting them evolve, because otherwise, I think you would get pushback."

And being a coach, Leete said, has improved her own practice.

"It does make you better," she said. "I know I'm a better teacher by talking to teachers [regularly] and conversing with them about their practice."