Coaching

THE KEY TO TRANSLATING RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE LIES IN CONTINUOUS, JOB-EMBEDDED LEARNING WITH ONGOING SUPPORT

BY JIM KNIGHT

In the past decade, interest in the form of professional learning loosely described as coaching has exploded. This growing interest in coaching is likely fueled by educators' recognition that traditional one-shot approaches to professional development — where teachers hear about practices but do not receive follow-up support — are ineffective at improving teaching practices. Much more support is needed to help teachers translate research into practice, and for many districts, that support is coaching.

DEFINITION

What is coaching? Researchers and practitioners have described several distinct approaches with unique goals and methods. Peer coaching (Showers, 1984), classroom management coaching (Sprick, Knight, Reinke, & McKale, 2006), content-focused coaching (West & Staub, 2003), and blended coaching (Bloom, Castagna, Moir, & Warren, 2005) are just a few approaches. Three approaches are especially common in today's schools: literacy coaching (Moran, 2007 & Toll, 2005), cognitive coaching (Costa & Garmston, 2002), and instructional coaching (Knight, 2007).

Cognitive coaches engage in dialogical conversations with teachers and others, observe them while working, and then use powerful questions, rapport building, and communication skills to empower those they coach to reflect deeply on their practices. The term literacy coach is used widely to refer to educators who use a variety of tools and approaches to improve teachers' practices and student learning related to literacy. Instructional coaches partner with teachers to help them incorporate research-based instructional practices into their teaching so that students will learn more effectively.

Despite the unique goals and methods of each of these approaches, there are several commonalities:

- **Focus on professional practice.** The purpose of most forms of coaching is to improve the ability of a school to educate students by improving the way teachers teach in the classroom.
- **Job-embedded.** The professional learning experiences facilitated by coaches are usually directly applicable to teachers' classrooms. Teachers who collaborate with coaches make plans, explore content, reflect, and implement new practices that they will use immediately in their lessons.
- **Intensive and ongoing.** Coaching is not a one-shot workshop, but rather differentiated professional support, meeting each teacher's unique needs over time. Coaching often occurs one-to-one and may involve several interactions lasting

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days, weeks, and, in some cases, months.

• **Grounded in partnership.** Coaches see themselves as equal partners or collaborators with teachers. Thus, teachers have choice and control over how coaching proceeds.

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• **Dialogical.** Coaches strive to enable dialogue when they coach teachers. Coaching is not about telling teachers what to do but rather about engaging in reflective conversations where coach and teacher think together.

• **Nonevaluative.** Although coaches frequently observe teachers teaching, and, indeed, teachers may observe coaches teaching, coaches do not set themselves up as evaluators of teachers. Rather, they discuss teaching with teachers in a nonjudgmental way.

• **Confidential.** Most approaches to coaching describe the relationship as confidential. Coaching will likely be more successful when teachers are comfortable speaking openly about their strengths and concerns.

• **Facilitated through respectful communication.** Coaches need to be excellent communicators who articulate their messages clearly, listen respectfully, ask thought-provoking, open-ended questions, and whose observations are energizing, encouraging, practical, and honest.

CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

Between 2005 and 2008, researchers and consultants associated with the Kansas Coaching Project at the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning have worked with coaches and other educators in schools, districts, and state agencies in more than 35 states. During these workshops and consultations, certain factors repeatedly surface that appear to be critical for coaching success.

Focus and continuity. Districts that attempt to implement too many practices simultaneously overwhelm teachers with the changes they are expected to implement and decrease their enthusiasm for any change. Similarly, when districts frequently adopt and abandon programs and initiatives, teachers often take a wait-and-see approach to professional learning. Coaches will find a better setting for professional learning if districts have a sustained focus on a few high-leverage strategies.

A learning-friendly culture. Teachers are more likely to experiment and learn when they feel respected and free to take risks. Conversely, when teachers feel they are punished more than praised and constantly under scrutiny without sufficient encouragement, their desire to learn may decrease dramatically. Teachers who work in learning-friendly schools will be more much likely to collaborate with coaches.

Principal support. Principals need to support their coaches by attending coaching workshops, observing coaches while they conduct model lessons, speaking frequently about the importance of professional learning and coaching, learning what the coach shares with teachers, and meeting frequently with coaches to ensure that their coaches share their vision for professional learning.

Clear roles. If teachers perceive their coach as an administrator rather than a peer, they may hesitate to open up about their needs or take risks. Therefore, principals and coaches should ensure that coaches work as peers providing support and service to their colleagues, and principals and other administrators should perform important administrative tasks such as teacher evaluations and walk-throughs. Principals respectfully hold teachers accountable, and coaches provide sufficient support for teacher professional learning.

Protect the coaching relationship. Coaching works best when teachers are collaborating with a coach because they want to, not because they are forced to. If a principal tells a teacher they have to work with their coach, the coach may be perceived as a punishment. If a principal strongly encourages a teacher to change, but offers the coach as one of several growth options (others might include books, articles, web sites, and video programs), the coach can be perceived as a lifeline rather than a punishment.

Time. The single most powerful way to increase the effectiveness of coaches is to ensure that they have sufficient time for coaching. In conducting research on coaching at many sites around the nation, my colleagues and I ask coaches to map out how they use time in their roles. Overwhelmingly, their maps indicate that less than 25% of their time is spent in coaching tasks. Principals

and other district leaders need to ensure that they do not ask coaches to do so many noncoaching tasks that they rarely have the opportunity for sustained coaching.

Continuous learning. Coaches and administrators should "walk the talk" when it comes to professional learning by continuously improving their own professional practice. Coaches need to have a deep understanding of the practices or content knowledge they share with teachers as well as the coaching practices and communication skills that are necessary for effective coaching. Principals need to understand what coaches do, and how they can contribute to conditions that support coaching. Additionally, both coaches and principals need to be coached so that they are constantly learning how to improve the way they lead instructional improvements in schools.

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WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

For a recent book chapter, Jake Cornett and I reviewed more than 200 articles, presentations, reports, articles, and books that contain some form of research on coaching (Cornett & Knight, 2008). The bulk of this research was conducted on peer coaching, cognitive coaching, and instructional coaching. In one landmark study, Bush (1984) conducted a five-year study of staff development in California. Bush's research team studied the impact various approaches to professional development had on whether or not teachers used new teaching practices. They found that when teachers were given only a description of new instructional skills, 10% used the skill in the classroom. When modeling, practice, and feedback were added to the training, teachers' implementation of the teaching practices increased by 2% to 3% each time. When coaching was added to the staff development, however, approximately 95% of the teachers implemented the new skills in their classrooms. (See chart above.)

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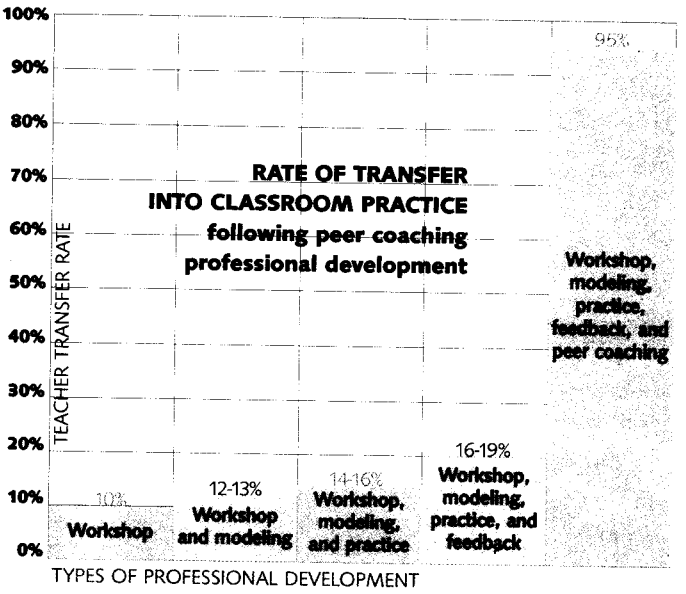

Source: "Effective staff development," by Robert N. Bush. In Far West Laboratory (Ed.), *Making Our Schools More Effective: Proceedings of Three State Conferences.* San Francisco: Author, 1984.

In her book *Cognitive Coaching: A Synthesis of the Research* (2001, p. 1), Jenny Edwards identified nine anticipated outcomes:

1. Increase in student test scores and "other benefits to students";
2. Growth in teacher efficacy;
3. Increase in reflective and complex thinking among teachers;
4. Increase in teacher satisfaction with career and position;
5. Increase in professional climate at schools;
6. Increase in teacher collaboration;
7. Increase in professional assistance to teachers;
8. Increase in personal benefits to teachers; and
9. Benefit to people in fields other than teaching.

In a recent study of instructional coaching (Knight & Cornett, 2008), 51 teachers attended an after-school workshop on unit planning and teaching routine, based on *The Unit Organizer* (Lenz, Bulgren, Schumaker, Deshler, & Boudah,1994). Teachers were randomly assigned into two groups, one that received coaching and one that did not. Research assistants observed the classes taught by teachers in both groups, watching for evidence of use of the newly learned teaching practice. In classes taught by teachers who were coached, observers saw evidence of use of the unit organizer during 90% of their visits. However, in classes taught by teachers who were not coached, observers saw evidence of use of the unit organizer in only 30% of the classes.

It is important to note that research on cognitive coaching doesn't necessarily apply to instructional coaching, and vice versa. Nonetheless, a few generalizations seem to be fairly unavoidable. First, in most of the studies we reviewed, the best implementation rate one could hope for

following a one-shot workshop was 15%. Second, coaching that focuses on helping teachers implement new practices leads to implementation. Finally, the research on cognitive coaching suggests that this approach has a positive impact on teachers' beliefs about their efficacy as teachers.

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