


Winter 2016

# Instructional Coaching Implementation: Considerations for K-12 Administrators

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## Recommended Citation

Johnson, Kelly Gomez, "Instructional Coaching Implementation: Considerations for K-12 Administrators" (2016). *Teacher Education Faculty Publications*. 93.

<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/tedfacpub/93>

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# Instructional Coaching Implementation: Considerations for K-12 Administrators

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As school leaders, 21<sup>st</sup> century school administrators are in the spotlight for their role in promoting an environment of academic achievement. Along with organizing and planning for the fundamental workings of their staff, students, activities, and building, administrators are expected to encompass numerous roles. In fact, two primary, yet conflicting activities expected from school administrators are leading and managing (Hall & Simeral, 2008). At the intersection of these primary activities is the evaluation and development of teachers as a means to improve student learning. While the management of formal teacher evaluations and observations is important for ensuring teacher accountability and quality, administrators are also needed to use evaluation data along with student achievement data to improve teacher practice.

Administrators create the environment where best practices are supported, encouraged, acknowledged, and expected. However, teachers matter more to student achievement than any other aspect of schooling, and there is much research indicating a strong relationship between student achievement and teacher quality (Archer, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Darling-Hammond, Berry, & Thoreson, 2001; Goldhaber, 2002; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2004; Haycock & Huang, 2001; Kaplan & Owings, 2003; Sanders & Rivers, 1996). With a focus on student learning and growth, schools are continuously looking for professional development opportunities for teachers and administrators to positively impact student achievement. One trending form of professional development is instructional coaching. Schools are embracing the concept of coaching as an on-site instructional support for teachers and administrators versus the traditional one- or two-day workshop style formats in which the “experts” are brought from outside of the school organization. While instructional coaching, on paper, seems to meet the instructional leadership support needs of both teachers and administrators, there are many considerations to be made at the building level to ensure suc-

cessful implementation. With the growing popularity of instructional coaching, school administrators must critically evaluate the purpose and background of coaching as professional development, their role in the successful implementation of coaching, and the qualities and experiences they should look for when hiring instructional coaches in their district and school buildings (Heineke, 2013).

## Professional Development

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 entrusted states to ensure that professional development for all teachers was “high quality;” however, it did not define “high quality” or explain how it was to be measured. While the law emphasized that activities were not to be isolated workshops or short-term conferences, there was little evidence that these recommendations were followed. With the passing of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), NCLB’s replacement, there have been many changes, including the elimination of the “high quality” terminology. Professional development expectations have been updated to “ensure personalized, ongoing, job-embedded activities” that are “available to all staff (including paraprofessionals), a part of broader school improvement plans, collaborative and data-driven, developed with educator input, and regularly evaluated” (Civic Impulse, 2016, n.p.). Along with providing a more descriptive definition of professional development (now United States policy), ESSA also transformed the professional development language from scientifically-based to evidence-based (Civic Impulse, 2016). Evidence-based professional development practices will push for greater emphasis on increasing student outcomes through teacher quality. But regardless of the federal legislation, effective professional development is vital to school improvement when administered appropriately (Guskey, 2002). For school administrators to effectively implement and hire instructional coaches, they must first have a deep understanding of instructional coaching, their partner-

ship in the role, and the hiring of instructional leaders to support and share their vision for success.

### Why Coaching?

Joyce and Showers (1980) were the first to propose peer coaching as a form of internal professional development. Instructional coaches are on-site professional developers who work to empower teachers through collaborative partnerships to incorporate research-based instructional methods into classrooms (Knight, 2007). Their purpose is to accelerate learning and close achievement gaps for all students by building the instructional capacity of teachers (Casey, 2006). Instructional capacity refers to teachers' ability to gather resources to support instruction and, most importantly, to use those resources effectively to enhance and engage student learning. One way that principals can increase the instructional capacity in their schools is to provide sufficient opportunities for collaborative work (Jaquith, 2013). Coaching, while not a new phenomenon, is designed to be an "authentic learning opportunity" based on teachers' daily experiences. Coaches facilitate learning over continuous interactions, and reflection, dialogue, and analysis are the foundation of problem solving through the teaching craft (Lieberman, 1995).

One of the guiding concepts that support this type of teacher learning and professional development is Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Vygotsky (1978) defined the ZPD as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). This concept suggests that teachers have the potential to achieve a greater degree of success (i.e., student learning) when supported by other knowledgeable professional educators. With the adoption of the Common Core State Standards and more inquiry-based learning across the country, teachers are required to implement pedagogical practices that are frequently different from their own experiences as students. Coaches can guide these teachers through a reflective process of evaluating current beliefs and practices in conjunction with new knowledge and skills to shift thinking and instruction (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). With coaching as a facilitated professional development model, teachers are better equipped with the dispositions, skills, and knowledge necessary to implement new research-based classroom practices (Dziczkowski, 2013). Showers and Joyce (2002) found that fewer than 5% of teachers understand or implement new

strategies or skills presented to them during professional development sessions, even when given the opportunity to practice the skill. Effective coaching and descriptive feedback dramatically increases this implementation rate to dramatically to 95% (Knight, 2007).

### Administrator-Coach Partnership

In preparing to implement instructional coaching, administrators must have a clear vision of the role and responsibilities of the instructional coach in the school and then communicate that vision. While coaches are instructional leaders that facilitate, model, and execute the professional development, school administrators still play a major role in the process. The line between the role of a coach and an administrator is often blurred, and the key to improving teacher capacity and effectiveness is creating a partnership. As supervisors, administrators are responsible for collaborating with coaches to identify and develop a plan of action for their professional development and also for coordinating logistics and evaluating progress with coach feedback (Hall & Simeral, 2008). Successful instructional coaching relies on a critical understanding: Coaches are not evaluating teachers or providing information for the evaluation of teachers. Instead, administrators must support conditions in their schools that enable teachers to learn from others in a non-threatening environment (Jaquith, 2013). Jim Knight (2006) stated that coaching requires trust and time, and without the establishment of a trusting relationship over a sustained amount of time, the impact of the coaching model is severely damaged. Eliminating appraisal of performance allows both the instructional coach and teacher to have open dialogue and reflection regarding instructional practices.

Along with a shared understanding of roles, stakeholders in an organization must also develop shared goals and actions for future success (Senge, 2000). While coaches partner with teachers to improve student achievement, coaches must partner with administrators to fully understand their vision for school improvement as the instructional leader (Bean & DeFord, 2012). Not only does the administrator inform the coach of the most pressing concerns and goals for the school, but the coach also frequently informs the administrator of interventions, practices, and goals of the staff (Knight, 2006). Overall, administrators need to know how to build, lead, and support instructional experts, like coaches, who can help conduct research-based teaching experiments, learn collaboratively, and continuously improve both teacher and student learning (Jaquith, 2013).

### Hiring Effective Coaches

Hiring effective instructional coaches may be the most challenging, yet vital role for administrators. Having a strong program and vision in place is irrelevant without the right people. In order to successfully fill this unique educational leadership role, coaches must be equipped with certain professional qualities and characteristics in addition to strong interpersonal skills.

The hiring of professionals who are professionally credible in the eyes of both the teachers and administrators is an important aspect of a rigorous, selection process. Much attention is necessary to ensure that the process of hiring is clear and fair to ensure that the coaches are credible and knowledgeable in the eyes of all stakeholders (Neufeld & Roper, 2003). Professionally, coaches are expected to model lessons and aide teachers in various instructional and management processes. For this reason, first and foremost, coaches must be excellent teachers (Knight, 2006). A thorough understanding of both current and past content-specific pedagogical knowledge is a professional characteristic that will create teacher buy-in and confidence in their instructional partners. Many coaches are coming out of the classroom with little to no experience coaching or working with adult learners. Having relevant research to support “best practices” demonstrates a professional responsibility to life-long learning and growth (Kinkead, 2007). Coaches must also be deeply respectful of classroom teachers, their professionalism, and their ability to make decisions that are best for their students (Knight, 2006). The ability to recognize and appreciate teacher differences and uniqueness informs the teacher that the teacher-coach relationship is truly a non-threatening partnership, free of judgment and focused on student learning. Along with avoiding judgment, coaches are required to maintain confidentiality when talking to other teachers and their administration. Coaches viewed by teachers as “classroom spies” have a difficult task of being perceived as partners in supporting instruction and learning (Bean & DeFord, 2012). Administrators must recognize that the nourishment of this trusting relationship may come at the expense of knowing everything about the teacher-coach relationship.

Administrators must also find great leaders who are ambitious for the greater cause and mission of student achievement, not for themselves (Knight, 2006). Additionally, coaches must express their confidence and belief in the teachers they work with, internalizing the message “I believe in you, I’m investing in

you, and I expect your best efforts” (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002, p.62). Due to their interest in the development of others, instructional coaches are often referred to as *servant leaders*. Robert Greenleaf (1977) described servant leaders as people whose ultimate goal is not to control or manipulate, but to establish an environment and relationship of shared power and autonomy. While coaches must be driven to support the instructional progress of teachers to impact student learning, they must also foster a relationship with teachers that honors their professionalism. Administrators will need to focus on hiring coaches who have the ability to balance this type of situational leadership (Hershey & Blanchard, 1988). Hiring the most effective coaches will mean that these individuals can be flexible to the needs of individual teachers and also be able to drive the building or district level goals set by school leaders.

### Implications

Instructional coaching is a reality in many schools today, yet administrators often lack experience or background on how to utilize this professional development model effectively. Instructional coaching can help administrators balance the managerial and instructional leadership responsibilities required of their role. As districts adopt the practice as a part of their professional development model, administrators require a clear understanding of the opportunities and factors associated with coaching. Instructional coaching has the potential to positively impact the way teachers teach and students learn in our schools, and when effectively implemented, it can also positively affect the way administrators lead. While not a quick fix, administrators have the opportunity to use instructional coaching to improve their school’s success one teacher and one student at a time and hence their overall success as a school leader.

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