

HOW ARE COACHES PREPARED?

By Barbara Neufeld and Dana Roper

Districts must commit themselves to providing coaches with the kind of responsive participatory professional development that coaching affords to teachers and principals and they must constantly reevaluate that professional development to ensure that it continues to provide the depth and breadth of knowledge coaches need for this work.

Coaching, like teaching, is not a routine activity. It must be focused on instructional goals and planned, but it must also be responsive to the needs of the learners and the exigencies of specific classroom situations. Coaches not only develop principals' and teachers' knowledge and skill; if they are successful, they also help develop schools' professional cultures as learning organizations.

To accomplish such work, coaches require professional development of their own so that they can improve their knowledge and skill to tailor their coaching to the needs of the teachers and schools with which they work. They need to understand organizational development and instruction, and they need considerable facility in working with adult learners in a coaching relationship.

Although some educators are sufficiently skillful in these areas and available to take on coaching roles, most districts have found that they need to "grow their own" coaches and sustain them with relevant, ongoing professional development.

Districts, as a result, need to formulate professional development programs for their coaches. And these programs, like learning opportunities for students and teachers, need to follow recognized guidelines for professional development.

Elements of professional development for coaches

District-developed programs that are currently under way suggest that professional development for coaches should:

Ensure that principals and coaches understand the "big picture" of the reform in which they are engaged and the reasons that undergird the changes.

Such understanding is not always easy because, at the outset, district administrators themselves may not be sure of the "big picture."

They may be aware only that they want teachers to implement a set of new instructional activities. They may not have articulated for themselves how these instructional activities are related to each other nor the accumulated demands they make on teachers. They may not be aware of the implications of these demands on schools as organizations.

Districts may fail to help principals and coaches understand as well as implement the organizational changes that must accompany implementation of such an approach to instruction or even acknowledge the challenges that they will face.

Develop a strong, focused, coherent orientation program for new content and change coaches.

This program should begin several weeks before the start of the school year so coaches can start their work with a clear understanding of the district's reform agenda (the big picture), the schools in which they will work, their roles, and the specific knowledge and skills they will need to bring to those settings.

In addition, coaches must be aware of how to get help if they are struggling with implementing their work. In subsequent years, the district might consider repeating such a program for new coaches as well as providing them with "coach mentors."

Develop differentiated professional development for experienced coaches.

It is difficult to implement effective coach professional development that mixes coaches across levels all of the time; therefore, their professional development should focus on the particular school

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level--elementary, middle, or high school--with which coaches will work. In addition, coaches need professional development that responds to their extant knowledge and skill and to the demands of their schools.

For example, coaches often request professional development that addresses their expertise with coaching as well as with content. They may want to learn how to work more effectively with resistant teachers and/or with teachers whose content knowledge or facility with classroom management is weak. Knowing that their role is not to tell teachers how to teach but to guide them in improving their practice, coaches often want professional development to help them improve their skill as guides of teachers' learning, and both change and content coaches often want professional development to help them help principals take on the instructional component of their leadership role.

Some of this coach knowledge can be provided during formal, whole-group professional development sessions; but, ideally, coaches should themselves be coached as they work with teachers and principals. The human and financial demands of providing such opportunities can be daunting, but they are essential both to ensure that coaches learn what they need to learn and to model effective coaching techniques.

Ensure that coaches are knowledgeable about the learning needs of special populations of students.

Without direct attention to the learning needs of special student populations, it is likely that many coaches will not be able to provide skillful coaching to those who teach special populations. Districts can provide such coaching by actively recruiting individuals with appropriate backgrounds and by ensuring that coach professional development includes attention to what coaches need to know about these issues.

Ensure that the coaches hear the same messages teachers do.

Outside experts who provide professional development often hold conflicting views on instructional reforms. Reforms are usually open to some interpretation and can be modified in light of local needs. However, in the early phases of changing instructional practices, teachers, coaches, and principals may be so concerned with implementing practices "perfectly" that they become confused and frustrated by variations in what they are learning and being asked to implement. Districts can alleviate this problem by sending a common message to coaches and teachers or else by acknowledging explicitly that there are some valid differences of opinion.

Enable some coaches to become "coach leaders."

Creating a community of learners is one way in which districts can address the evolving learning needs of coaches while using their experience and expertise to build on the district's coaching capacity. Some districts have, in fact, created "lead coach" positions to enhance their capacity to support both content and change coaches.

Challenges in Creating Effective Coach Professional Development

Since few people have the knowledge and skills necessary to lead high-quality professional development programs for coaches, districts face considerable challenges in creating and staffing programs that provide their coaches with the depth and breadth of knowledge they need.

In addition, the task of providing coach professional development can become more difficult over time as teachers and principals increase their knowledge and skill. Put simply, as coaches succeed in increasing teachers' and principals' instructional capacity, they must increase their own instructional capacity as well. Coaches need to be more than just "one step ahead" of the people they are coaching.

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