



School-Based Coaching

A revolution in professional development—or just the latest fad?

By Alexander Russo

"They call it coaching, but it is teaching. You do not just tell them it is so. You show them the reasons why it is so." —*Vince Lombardi*

After years of disappointing results from conventional professional development efforts and under ever-increasing accountability pressures, many districts are now hiring coaches to improve their schools. These coaches don't use locker-room pep talks to motivate their teams, but they do strive to improve morale and achievement—and raise scores—by showing teachers how and why certain strategies will make a difference for their students.

The professional development strategy known as school-based coaching generally involves experts in a particular subject area or set of teaching strategies working closely with small groups of teachers to improve classroom practice and, ultimately, student achievement. In some cases coaches work full-time at an individual school or district; in others they work with a variety of schools throughout the year. Most are former classroom teachers, and some keep part-time classroom duties while they coach.

In the United States, school-based coaching was pioneered primarily in large districts like Boston and New York City's [Community School District 2](#), and it has been spreading quickly around the nation, particularly in urban schools. Examples of these efforts include:

- New York City's public schools have recently embarked on a large-scale staff development effort to support reading, writing, and math programs, assigning experienced coaches to schools throughout the city. The coaches will not only work with small groups of teachers during planning time but also set up demonstration classrooms where teachers can watch sample lessons that they can later replicate with their own students.
- In Philadelphia, a group of schools was chosen to pilot a coaching program during the 2002–03 school year as part of a school restructuring effort. Each coach worked part-time at several schools, and first-year results were strong enough that, in August 2003, Philadelphia contracted with the [Princeton Review](#) to create and implement a professional development program for approximately 500 school-based instructional leaders and 130 coaching staff. The goal is to provide district educators with the skills and tools necessary to monitor student performance more closely and to help shape classroom instruction based on individual student performance data.
- In Dallas, former associate superintendent and "reading czar" [Robert B. Cooter, Jr.](#), now a professor of reading and urban literacy education at the University of Memphis, emphasized the need for literacy coaches as part of his districtwide Dallas Reading Plan to improve student performance. To attract the best staff developers to Dallas schools, Cooter persuaded a local foundation to provide a \$10,000 per year stipend to supplement each literacy coach's district salary. By 2001, five years after the program began, all of the schools involved had been removed from the state's low-performing list and student reading performance had improved dramatically. "We got the best of the best," Cooter told the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* last fall.
- [America's Choice](#), a school reform model being used in roughly 600 schools in 15 states, includes a strong school-based coaching component. Teachers work with math and literacy coaches one-on-one and in small groups to develop instructional strategies and to build model classrooms for innovative language arts and mathematics programs.

A Professional Development Alternative

One of the most compelling rationales for school-based coaching is that many of the more conventional forms of professional development—such as conferences, lectures, and mass teacher-institute days—are unpopular with educators because they are often led by outside experts who tell teachers what to do, then are never heard from again. To be effective, scores of researchers say, professional development must be ongoing, deeply embedded in teachers' classroom work with children, specific to grade levels or academic content, and focused on research-based approaches. It also must help to open classroom doors and create more collaboration and sense of community among teachers in a school.

When compared with many other approaches, school-based coaching seems to meet many of these criteria remarkably well. It also seems to meet many of the standards set forth by the [National Staff Development Council](#), the country's largest professional association dedicated to improving teacher professional development (see below). Coaching at its best is focused on authentic student work, is closely tied to a specific school or district's curriculum and to teachers' practice, takes place on a continuous basis, and relies heavily on research.

Coaching Meets Standards for Effective Staff Development

School-based coaching meets many of the standards set forth by the National Staff Development Council (NSDC), the nation's largest professional association dedicated to improving teacher professional development. Recommendations in the latest NSDC standards, adopted in 2001 (and summarized here), include:

- the organization of educators into "learning communities" that have clear goals consistent with school and district goals;
- effective leadership to support "continuous instructional improvement";
- the application of research to school and classroom strategies and decisionmaking;
- support for teacher collaboration;
- the development of educators' skills at increasing parent involvement.

View the [NSDC standards online](#).

"Instead of everyone going out and hearing an expert speak who is not familiar with Boston, coaches are now becoming the experts," says Gemina Gianino, a former classroom teacher who is now lead literacy coach at two elementary schools in the Boston Public Schools system. Gianino, who "coaches the coaches" at the city's Mary Lyon and Harvard-Kent schools, has attended her share of single-day professional development presentations and workshops and believes coaching is superior to these one-shot approaches because it helps provide something that's on every educator's mind these days: accountability.

"When you go to a workshop for a day, you come back and no one's holding you accountable. You might get credit for going out to that workshop, but no one was there with you to say, 'Now how do we make what you learned work in here?'" Gianino notes. "And so here we're saying, 'We're with you through this. We're not only helping you figure out what it is, but we're going to stay with you while you figure it out. We're not just going to give you advice and then leave.'" As Gianino points out, one of a coach's main goals is to make certain that the ideas a teacher gains in the professional development setting are translated into actions that have a chance to improve student learning.

Coaching Caveats

Despite the apparent promise and newfound popularity of school-based coaching, experts say school leaders should think carefully before hopping on the coaching bandwagon. First, there are tremendous variations in what people call "coaching"—educators should be clear about their goals and expectations before making an investment in any type of coaching initiative.

Alan Richard, a state policy writer for [Education Week](#), authored a recent report on school-based staff development for the [Edna McConnell Clark Foundation](#). After conducting interviews and observations at local schools and reviewing coaching literature, Richard describes the practice of coaching as a "promising but often poorly focused school improvement tactic." He also notes that school leaders who expect coaching alone to solve a host of problems, from low test scores to poor student-teacher relationships, are setting themselves up for disappointment.

"I saw too many examples where the coaching wasn't enough," Richard says. "Most of what I saw showed that coaches could help a school improve, but not alone, and not without attention to other pressing issues such as broader efforts in professional development, learning environment, leadership, resources, use of technologies, community involvement in the school, well-developed and thoughtful curricula, etc."

Another report by the [Consortium for Policy Research in Education](#) (CPRE) says school-based coaching fills "a particular and promising niche" in the larger scope of school districts' improvement efforts. "Coaching is increasingly relied upon by schools and districts across the nation to train teachers on a particular set of instructional techniques and practices," the CPRE authors write. They also concede, however, that the evidence of coaching's success is largely anecdotal and that the research base in support of coaching is woefully small: "Few, if any, studies provide evidence that coaching strategies, in whatever form, lead to greater student learning."

There are also numerous logistical challenges associated with implementing school-based coaching on a large scale, these experts say. These challenges include finding enough good coaches without draining schools of their most successful teachers, training and supporting coaches so that they have a clear notion of what they are supposed to be doing, and dedicating enough time in the school day so that coaching can be effective.

The first challenge—finding enough coaches—can be a major obstacle in some districts. Barbara Neufeld, former lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and current president of the education research agency [Education Matters](#), points out that in Boston and San Diego "neither district can find as many coaches as they need, and [the task is] much more difficult in math than in literacy."

Training and support for coaches is yet another challenge, since site-based professional developers need their own professional development. In Boston, for example, lead literacy coaches like Gianino work in a small number of schools to train the coaches within those buildings.

Securing teacher release time and buy-in to participate in the coaching enterprise—whether coaching or being coached—is another issue. In at least some cases, officials are "underestimating what it takes to do the work, the implications of removing these people from schools, and what it would take to train them," says Neufeld, who has studied coaching efforts in Boston, San Diego, and Louisville.

There is also the issue of cost. Boston had spent almost \$6 million on its coaching program, which included 75 coaches in 97 schools, as of Neufeld's 2003 report. So far, in nearly all cases, outside funds have been critical to getting coaching programs up and running. Places like Chicago and Boston have conducted "audits" of their professional development spending to figure out how best to monitor and coordinate their efforts.

Finally, there are a number of cultural challenges created by coaching. In many situations, the coach's role in a school is almost entirely new and different—he or she is neither administrator nor district overseer nor classroom peer. Schools and school systems are simply not used to these positions. Perhaps more important, teachers are not usually accustomed to talking about their work in the way one does when working with a coach.

For these reasons and others, schools and districts need to make an institutional commitment to coaching in order for it to have any hope of succeeding, says Ellen Guiney, director of the [Boston Plan for Excellence](#), a local education fund that partnered with the [Boston Public Schools](#) to develop the city's [Collaborative Coaching and Learning](#) (CCL) model. Guiney says the program has evolved since its 1996 inception, as coaches and district

leaders have learned the drawbacks of not having a coherent and systematic plan. "We initially started out [only] having coaches work with teacher volunteers, and we wasted a lot of time. If the school's leadership doesn't support [coaches] and the staff doesn't see them being supported, then the coaches are wasted," Guiney says. "Teachers have a lot to do. Time has to be set aside, they need support, and they need to see the work as worthwhile."

In response to these kinds of concerns, Boston's initial one-day-a-week, one-teacher-at-a-time coaching model has now been replaced by revolving six- to eight-week "cycles" that school leaders and teachers both have a say in scheduling. During a cycle, a coach visits a group of between four and ten teachers at a school twice a week, working alongside them in their own classrooms as the teams demonstrate, observe, and reflect upon effective instructional practices.

What Next?

Most immediately, better school-based coaching research is needed. Teacher surveys and evaluation studies have thus far lagged far behind the interest in and implementation of coaching programs. Without adequate research, says Neufeld, "there isn't any way of knowing in fact whether [coaching] is worth the money."

At the same time, districts need to be sure that they are implementing quality programs that they can support. In some cases, says Richard, "leaders have not invested the time, thought, and resources necessary to launch and sustain a coherent program and to address other serious problems within schools or districts that create barriers for in-school staff developers."

Still, both the spotty track record of traditional professional development and the success stories that have emerged from coaching so far suggest that this new strategy may have a great deal of untapped potential. At least in theory, school-based coaching helps educators envision a world where professional development means showing and not telling; where teachers can learn and improve their practice in a reflective, supportive setting, and where coaches serve as liaisons between research and practice, bringing the latest findings to where they are most needed—the classroom.

"[Coaching] offers long-term follow-up, long-term consistency, and a sense of trust so that you can go in and be a supportive agent for the classroom teacher," says Pat Butler, lead coach at Boston's Perry and Marshall elementary schools. "If [teachers'] skills are sharpened, then they are going to transfer this information into their classroom, and both their practice and their students will benefit."

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For Further Information

[Boston Plan for Excellence in the Public Schools](#), 6 Beacon St., Suite 615, Boston, MA 02108; 617-227-8055.

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