

# INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING

Keys to Raising Instructional Quality and Academic Performance



# Key Insights

## **How great of an impact does instructional coaching have?**

Evidence shows that coaching has a significant impact on helping teachers improve their practice and boosting students' academic achievement. Coaching is especially powerful when paired with other forms of professional development (PD), and when the coach's skills and instructional resources are tailored to specific content, such as coaching for literacy or math instruction.

## **What is the role of coaching in achieving teacher development priorities and other district goals?**

Instructional coaching can play a variety of roles in a school or district. Coaching frequently has a cognitive role, supporting direct development of teachers' skills and knowledge. It can also play a role in promoting collaboration and knowledge-sharing, where coaches share instructional knowledge while facilitating collaboration among teachers to collectively improve instruction. Coaching also commonly takes on a support role in the implementation of new policies and practices.

## **What are the characteristics of effective instructional coaches and coaching?**

The coaches who help teachers improve the most are experienced, with a track record of demonstrated results as both a teacher of students and a coach of teachers. Coaches must be knowledgeable, adaptable, and engaged to influence teachers to change their practice. Effective coaches employ tactics such as data analysis support, modeling, structured goal-setting, gathering student feedback, supporting alliance building, video-recording and analyzing lessons, and more.

## **What are the keys to effectively scaling a successful coaching program without losing its impact?**

Bringing coaching to scale requires taking a strategic approach to designing and administering the program, including clearly defining the objectives and measuring results, setting appropriate criteria for the selection and assignment of coaches as well as the teachers to receive coaching, carefully designing the organizational and reporting structure, and integrating coaching into broader professional development efforts.

This DMCouncil Member Research Brief explores published findings on key questions that district leaders may have about instructional coaching and how to best manage their own coaching programs. For an analysis focused on how to operationalize these research-based insights, see our accompanying brief, "Developing an Effective Instructional Coaching Program."



# Coaching to Raise Instructional Quality and Academic Performance

*Mark Wiernusz and Amram Migdal*

Coaching has been described by leading researchers as “an essential feature of professional development training that facilitates teachers’ ability to translate knowledge and skills into actual classroom practice.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, coaching has been shown to help teachers substantially improve their practice in ways that drive significant gains in academic performance.<sup>2</sup> School districts have steadily increased the use of coaching as a professional development (PD) tool, doubling the number of coaches per student nationally over the 15 school years from 1997 to 2013 — amounting to roughly two coaches for every 100 teachers across the country.<sup>3</sup> Today, 93% of students attend districts where at least one coach or instructional specialist supports teachers to help them improve their practice.<sup>4</sup>

Despite this increase, coaching has thus far not delivered the type of widespread impact on teacher practice and academic performance that many school and district leaders had envisioned based on the research on coaching’s potential. Only 45% of school districts have coaching programs that are mandatory, as opposed to opt-in, compared to 72% of school districts that have mandatory traditional PD, typically in the form of group trainings and workshops.<sup>5</sup>

At times, the impact of coaching is diminished because districts fail to prioritize the content-specific coaching that has the greatest effect on instruction, such as coaching specifically for literacy- or math-instruction skills.<sup>6</sup>

This article represents the thinking and approach of District Management Group.

In addition, coaches have less success influencing teacher practice when coaching is used in isolation instead of being paired with complementary training and instructional resources. Of course, coaching is also less effective when coaches are assigned to support teachers with development needs in areas that fall outside the coaches' areas of specialization.<sup>7</sup>

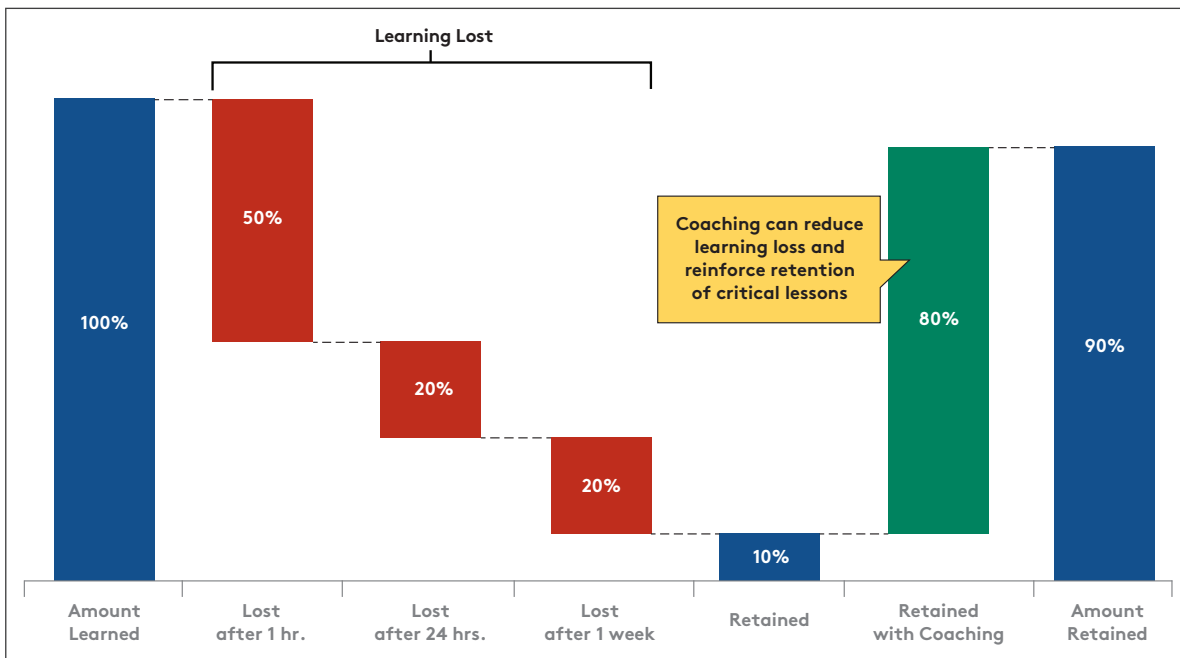
To maximize coaching's potential to raise instructional quality and academic performance, districts must deepen their understanding of how coaching, used as a method of PD, can powerfully advance teacher-development and district priorities. This DM Council Member Research Brief explores a variety of published research on the characteristics and tactics of effective coaches. For further perspectives on how to put the materials covered in this Research Brief into use as a comprehensive coaching system in your district, see our accompanying District Strategy Series Brief, "Developing an Effective Instructional Coaching Program."

## Coaching Is a High-Impact Form of Professional Development for Teachers

Instructional coaching can have a much more significant impact on teacher practice and student achievement than that of more traditional PD. One-size-fits-all, "sit-and-get," mandatory PD workshops tend not to be effective, especially when presented alone, without the reinforcement provided by coaching. Often, participants lose 50% of the knowledge covered within an hour of PD, and 90% of the learning is lost after a week.<sup>8</sup>

With coaching, 90% of the critical lessons may be retained (*Exhibit 1*).<sup>9</sup> Coaching is especially effective when paired with complementary teacher development efforts and instructional resources, such as curricula, lesson plans, and guide books. In fact, when teachers work with instructional coaches, they are more likely

*Exhibit 1* LEARNING AND RETENTION RATES: THE IMPACT OF COACHING



Source: Shane Lueck, "Hijack Learning Retention Rates by Teaching Learners to Fish," Dashe & Thomson Learning and Development blog, June 27, 2017, <https://www.dashe.com/blog/hijack-learning-retention-rates-by-teaching-learners-to-fish>.

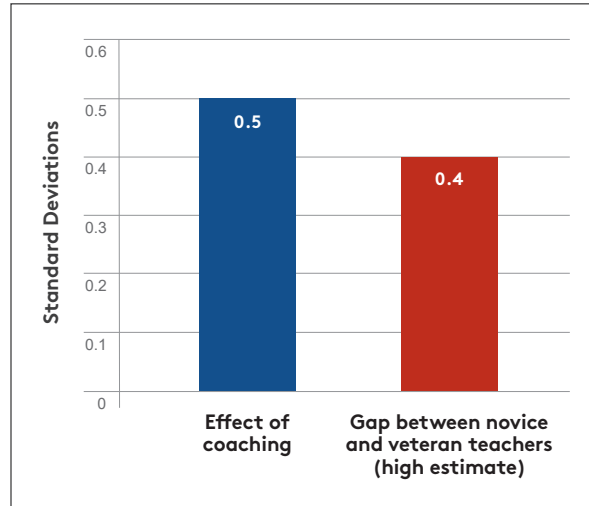
to adopt critical lessons and practices introduced via workshops and group trainings.<sup>10</sup> The positive impact of instructional coaching is clear in analyses of measures of both teacher practice and student academic achievement.

## Impact of Coaching on Teacher Practice

Instructional coaching has been proven to have a significant impact on how teachers practice their craft. In a 2018 meta-analysis, Matthew Kraft, David Blazar, and Dylan Hogan looked at 60 studies on coaching programs and concluded that coaching raised instructional quality across measures based on classroom observation of pedagogical practices, teacher-student interactions, student engagement with classroom content, and classroom climate, among others.<sup>11</sup> They found that coaching's effect size<sup>a</sup> on teacher practice is 0.5 standard deviations greater than the effect of a teacher growing from a novice into a veteran educator over the first 5 to 10 years of her career (*Exhibit 2*).<sup>12</sup> The bottom line is that, as a form of PD, coaching is remarkably effective at getting teachers to actually change and improve their practices in a manner that substantially raises instructional quality.

One rigorous study looked at the use of instructional coaching to support implementation of Visible Learning<sup>b</sup> strategies. The study showed that, after attending a development workshop, 87% of teachers who received coaching were likely to implement the new pedagogy, compared with 33% of those who did not receive coaching.<sup>13</sup> Observations showed that teachers who received coaching taught with closer fidelity to the original model, and that they were more than four times more likely to continue to use the new teaching routine.<sup>14</sup>

*Exhibit 2* COACHING IMPACT ON INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICE



Source: Matthew A. Kraft and David Blazar, "Taking Teacher Coaching to Scale," *Education Next*, vol. 18, no. 4 (Fall 2018), <https://www.educationnext.org/taking-teacher-coaching-to-scale-can-personalized-training-become-standard-practice/>.



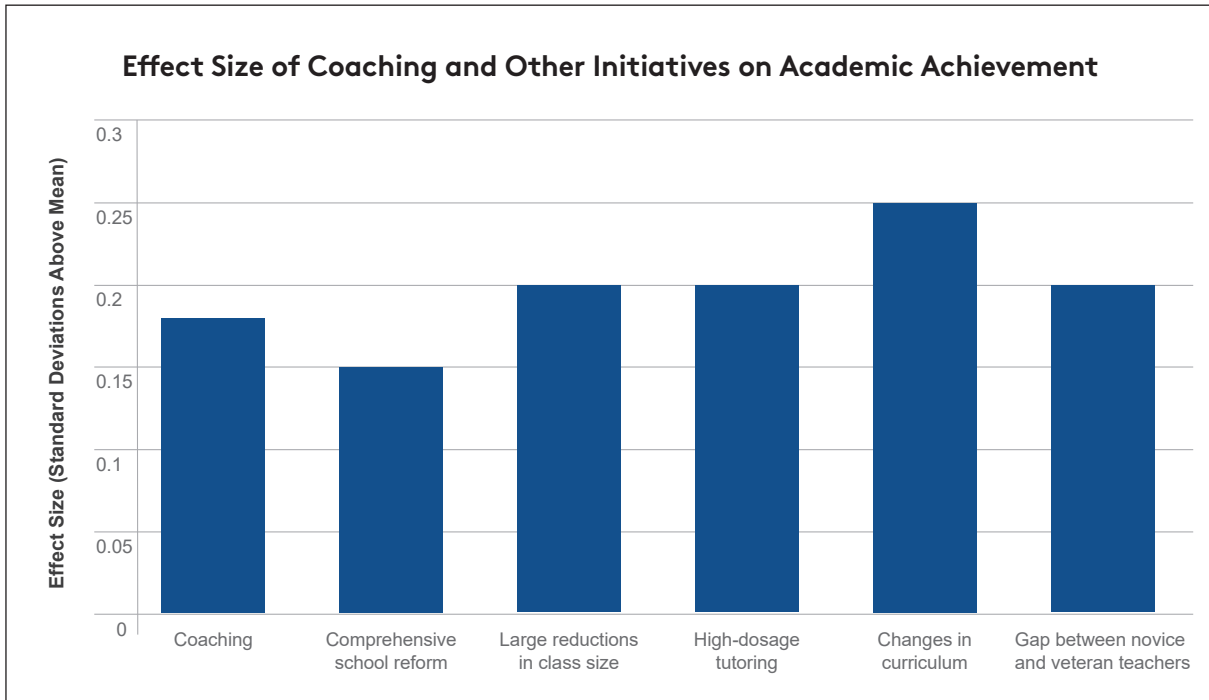
*The impact of coaching on student achievement is also comparable to the improvement teachers might be expected to exhibit over the first 5 to 10 years of their careers.*



<sup>a</sup> "Effect size" is a statistical term that captures the magnitude of the impact of a given intervention. In this case, the effect size summarizes the magnitude of coaching's impact on a variety of aggregated teacher-practice and academic-performance measures used in the various studies.

<sup>b</sup> *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement* (New York: Routledge, 2009) is a massive meta-study, spearheaded by John Hattie, on what works best for learning and the factors that influence student achievement. First published in 2009 and updated since, *Visible Learning* bases its findings on analysis of 1,400 meta-studies of more than 95,000 underlying individual studies on learning conducted over the past three decades.

### Exhibit 3 COACHING'S IMPACT ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT



Source: DMGroup, based on Matthew A. Kraft and David Blazar, "Taking Teacher Coaching to Scale," *Education Next*, vol. 18, no. 4 (Fall 2018), <https://www.educationnext.org/taking-teacher-coaching-to-scale-can-personalized-training-become-standard-practice/>.

## Impact of Coaching on Academic Achievement

Coaching's effect on teacher practice is significant enough to raise student academic achievement. Its effect size of 0.2 on academic achievement is smaller than that of teacher practice yet still significant. With this effect size, the impact of coaching can reasonably be compared to the impact of "comprehensive school reform (effect size of ~0.15, depending on the school reform model), large reductions in class size (~0.2), high-dosage tutoring (~0.2), and changes in curriculum (~0.2, depending on grade and curriculum)."<sup>15</sup> The impact of coaching on student achievement is also comparable to the improvement teachers might be expected to exhibit over the first 5 to 10 years of their careers (*Exhibit 3*).<sup>16</sup>

Few other interventions or teacher development tools are able to affect instruction in such a meaningful way, with effects that carry through to student learning and performance. In fact, the effect size of coaching on academic achievement is larger

than the effects of "student incentives, teacher pre-service training, merit-based pay, general PD, data-driven instruction, and extended learning time," write Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan.<sup>17</sup> Because coaching can be so powerful, it is vital that school districts have a thorough understanding of the roles it can play in helping to achieve their teacher-development and instructional priorities.

## Roles Coaching Plays in Teacher Development

Coaching is "inherently multifaceted and ambiguous," as Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan describe it, and thus it can take on different roles in different contexts. Below, we lay out three roles coaching can play in school and district development and instructional efforts: the **cognitive role**, the **collaboration and knowledge-sharing role**, and the **reform role** (*Exhibit 4*).<sup>18</sup> This list, identified in the research of Sarah Galey, is not definitive but provides a useful schema for how coaching can be utilized.



## Cognitive Role

The **cognitive role** of coaching is the role that likely comes to mind immediately for educators. In this role, coaching is a direct development tool aimed at improving instruction and imparting skills and knowledge to individual teachers — what Galey calls “professional capital” that targets development to fill gaps in teachers’ practice.<sup>19</sup>

Coaches help teachers understand how and why certain classroom strategies work, collaborate with teachers to identify gaps, and then develop plans and interventions to support improvements in practice. Within the cognitive coaching role, content-specific coaching, such as coaching for literacy instruction or math instruction, has a greater impact than coaching for general instructional skills.

Coaching in the cognitive role can be *responsive*, helping teachers reflect on and improve their practice, or *directive*, using observation and offering direct feedback on instructional practice.<sup>20</sup> Responsive coaching focuses on the teacher, and is developmental and psychological in nature. Coaches may ask teachers how they can best support their practice and aim to help teachers develop practices that “work for them.” In contrast, directive coaching tends to focus on instruction and program implementation, usually asking teachers to make more significant and specific

changes in their practice. Neither responsive nor directive coaching is the “superior” approach — balancing both is necessary for cognitive coaching, as well as for the other roles of coaching.<sup>21</sup>

## Collaboration and Knowledge-Sharing Role

Coaching can play a role beyond the development of teachers’ skills; it can also be used to strengthen the entire school’s or district’s ability to continue to develop and improve instruction. In this **collaboration and knowledge-sharing role**, coaches collect, organize, and share instructional knowledge and best practices while helping teachers collaborate to collectively improve instruction. Galey refers to this as the “organizational” role of coaching, which focuses on capacity building and “organizational structures that support the development and use of instructional resources rather than individual teacher learning—processes rather than practice.”<sup>22</sup> Coaches in the collaboration and knowledge-sharing role support “a sense of collective responsibility for learning and increased commitment to organizational goals.”<sup>23</sup>

Coaches play a collaboration and knowledge-sharing role when they organize, oversee, and provide support for teacher collaboration via professional learning communities (PLCs) and other peer groups. In these settings, coaching imparts effective methods to reflect

on practice to help teachers make sense of academic standards, align curricular plans to assessments, use student data to improve instruction, etc. Coaches also enable and facilitate teachers’ learning from one another by setting up peer observation and feedback, and they can coordinate to help multiple teachers address shared skill gaps and development priorities, as well as share resources created by other teachers.

## Reform Role

Galey defines the **reform role** of coaching as supporting coherent and effective policy implementation. When coaches play this role, she notes, they are typically positioned as part of a larger effort to implement change in a school or district, such as providing support for the adoption of new curricula, pedagogies, textbooks, or technology.<sup>24</sup> Coaches are tasked with helping teachers interpret the new concepts and put policies into practice in their classroom with fidelity, given the local context. Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan similarly write of coaching’s role as “a form of implementation support to ensure that new teaching practices — often taught in an initial training session — are executed with fidelity.”<sup>25</sup> The reform role has been a key driver of the proliferation of instructional coaching because coaching is able to “more tightly couple teacher practice with ongoing curricular and

instructional reforms by building important capacities for implementation.”<sup>26</sup>

Districts can, of course, employ coaching in more than one role to support their broader efforts to achieve instructional priorities and develop teachers. In District Management Group’s work with districts, we have noted that the cognitive role of coaching is distinctive in its focus on improving teachers’ self-efficacy and the quality of their practice, while the collaboration and knowledge-sharing role and reform role tend to encourage specific organizationally supported practices — roles perhaps better conceived as lying outside the context of PD.

## High-Quality Coaches Are Specialists

“Coaches are the intervention,” Kraft and Blazar remind us.<sup>27</sup> To be successful, coaching, regardless of its role or situation, depends on “capable coaches whose expertise is well matched to the diverse needs of teachers in a school or district.”<sup>28</sup> Quality coaches are specialists who are “skilled as classroom teachers and have a vast repertoire of scientifically proven practices to share” with teachers in order to influence their practice.<sup>29</sup> Along with the capacity to build strong

*Exhibit 4* COACHING PLAYS DIFFERENT ROLES IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

	Cognitive Role	Collaboration and Knowledge-Sharing Role	Reform Role
Area of Focus	Teacher development	Organizational learning and capacity building	Coherent and effective policy implementation
Main Activity	Work with individual teacher or groups of teachers to improve instruction	Knowledge management and building structures for teacher collaboration and PD (e.g., PLCs)	Adapt and modify new policy information to the local context as part of larger reform efforts
Drivers of Coaching	Formal instruction of teachers, informal influence, structured and semi-structured interactions	Formal organizational influence, institutional knowledge, structured and semi-structured interactions	Formal and informal political influence, interactions driven by accountability for fidelity to reform

Source: Sarah Galey, “The Evolving Role of Instructional Coaches in U.S. Policy Contexts,” *The William & Mary Educational Review*, vol. 4, no. 2, article 11 (May 1, 2016), <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1044&context=wmer>.



relationships, identify the strengths of others, and engage in constructive self-reflection, high-quality coaches typically possess some or all of the following characteristics.

## Experienced, with Demonstrated Results

Coaches with a proven track record as teachers are most successful. When coaches can draw on their past experience in the classroom and familiarity with a repertoire of instructional strategies from real practice, they are “more likely to earn teachers’ trust.”<sup>30</sup> It is vital that coaches grasp how children learn so they can formulate instructional strategies to help teachers manage the classroom, and can help teachers navigate their schools’ and systems’ resources to drive student achievement.<sup>31</sup> Many districts thus employ principals or master teachers as coaches exactly because of their experience and demonstrated results, rather than hiring dedicated full-time coaches. However, to be effective, such arrangements require teachers’ confidence that coaching is oriented toward professional development and not used for evaluation.

## Knowledgeable and the Right Fit

In addition to having past experience and success as a teacher, coaches inspire trust by displaying mastery of the practices and skills relevant to their current work *as coaches* of teachers. To be effective, coaches must have knowledge that fits the specific development needs of individual teachers to help them improve practical skills and practices that are directly applicable in the classroom. Coaches who specialize in skills related to particular subjects or instructional domains — such as social-emotional learning, special education, or data analysis, among others — are better able to deliver high-quality coaching that is individualized, context-specific, focused, and non-evaluative.

As specialists, effective coaches are up-to-date with teachers’ specific contexts, including relevant curricula, and are familiar with teachers’ capabilities and skills gaps, and the particular needs of the teachers’ students.<sup>32</sup> Research finds this familiarity is especially critical for coaches of math or literacy instruction and for coaches at the middle or high school levels, who must have a thorough knowledge of the

complexities of the content in later grades.<sup>33</sup> This level of specialization and expertise needed to excel at coaching stand in contrast to the qualifications for mentorship and other forms of individualized professional support, which depend on imparting knowledge based on the advisor’s own circumstances.

In addition to possessing specialized knowledge, coaches must be thoughtfully assigned so that their expertise aligns with the development objectives of teachers and the district. Assigning low-quality coaches or coaches who lack mastery in the areas they are helping teachers to improve will lose teachers’ trust and risk undermining confidence in the district’s broader coaching program.<sup>34</sup> When coaches have specific content knowledge and understand the context, they are able to offer differentiated coaching strategies to meet individual teachers’ development needs.



---

*Coaches with a proven track record as teachers are most successful.*



## Adaptable and Engaged

Skillful coaches are adaptable and engaged, adjusting their efforts flexibly and appropriately to meet the needs of individual teachers. In addition to having proven success in teaching students, coaches must also possess the different set of skills required to teach adults. As with mastery of content and pedagogical knowledge, interpersonal capabilities are crucial to effective coaching. Although knowledge and interpersonal skills are not mutually exclusive, instructional coaches themselves actually rank interpersonal skills as more important to their craft because people skills are more difficult to acquire through training or experience.<sup>35</sup> These “people skills” include sustaining relationships, establishing trust and credibility, and framing support to best serve educators given their

individual needs. Researchers report that coaches with an “infectious personality” are better at encouraging and inspiring educators to develop their instruction and serve students.<sup>36</sup>

## Effective Coaching — Tactics to Support Teachers

In addition to requiring quality coaches who are appropriately assigned, successful coaching utilizes a variety of tactics that may be employed across different coaching specializations to influence teachers’ instruction. The sampling of research-backed tactics listed below focuses on helping teachers analyze their current instructional performance and gain insight into student learning levels, motivations, feelings, and interest in learning.<sup>37</sup> Districts must identify the tactics that are appropriate for teachers’ development goals in order to effectively administer a successful coaching program. Tactics may include:

### Data analysis support

Working together, teachers and coaches can analyze student work and performance data, as well as other objective data collected in the classroom.<sup>38</sup> Data analysis, especially in collaboration with a knowledgeable coach, helps teachers “identify specific student learning needs and address those needs with the appropriate instructional tools.”<sup>39</sup>

### Modeling

Research shows that “teachers are more likely to modify their own instructional practices when coaches model instructional techniques in their classrooms.”<sup>40</sup> Coaches can demonstrate strategies with or without students present, and teachers can also see strategies modeled by observing other teachers or by watching recorded lessons.<sup>41</sup> Modeling supports improvements in teachers’ academic practices, students’ academic outcomes, and students’ behavior outcomes.<sup>42</sup>

### Goal setting

There are a variety of goal-setting formats and procedures that can help teachers and coaches identify the right development objectives. One such model, developed by Jim Knight, is

representative in its structured approach: identify goals that make a socially significant difference in students’ lives, that teachers really want to reach, that are easy to describe in substance, that are reachable, and that are focused on student achievement and engagement.<sup>43</sup>

At DMGroup, we often work with coaches and teachers to apply a SMART goal approach — goals that are Specific, Measurable, Aggressive yet Attainable, Relevant, and Time-bound. These goals should directly touch on teachers’ daily work and have enough of an impact to contribute to the accomplishment of districtwide goals. SMART goals must be laser-focused, highlighting the current state of the teacher’s performance and the desired outcome.

### Interviews or surveys

Coaches conduct interviews or survey students to gauge engagement, then share the results with teachers.

### Alliance building

Coaches can employ alliance-building strategies, including their interpersonal skills and empathetic listening, to build rapport and gain teacher buy-in.<sup>44</sup>

### Video-recording lessons

An increasingly important coaching tactic is the video recording of teachers’ lessons. Coaches and teachers can then analyze the lesson together to understand elements of instruction like the level of student engagement, the amount of monologue vs. dialogue, the effectiveness of questions the teachers asked, and the proportion of class time spent on learning versus non-instructional activities. Recording lessons can also extend coaches’ capacity by allowing them to remotely observe lessons they were not able to attend in person.

While this sampling of instructional coaching tactics is far from comprehensive, these approaches are representative. Just as districts must match coaches’ specialties to the needs of teachers, coaches must use tactics that fit development objectives and district

priorities. Once specific tactics are identified for adoption, district leaders must support coaches with the appropriate resources — for example, access to data, use of space and equipment, and efficient integration into teachers’ schedules — and track how these approaches are used and whether they are effective.

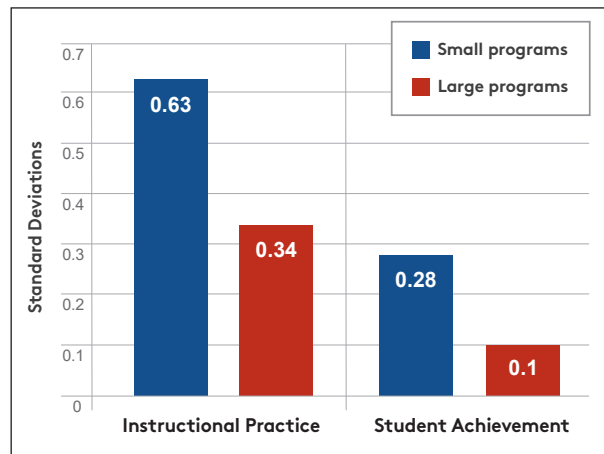
## Scaling Coaching Programs Requires Strong Systems and Trust

Scaling coaching programs to reach a greater number of teachers remains a challenge. Although the effectiveness of coaching is clear, instructional coaching is time- and resource-intensive, costing between \$3,260 to \$5,220 per teacher — “6 to 12 times more expensive than traditional approaches to PD.”<sup>45</sup> In addition, studies find “a clear negative relationship between program size and program effects, consistent with a theory of diminishing effects as programs are taken to scale.”<sup>46</sup> Coaching initiatives that target fewer than 100 teachers have approximately twice the effect size on instruction and three times the effect size on achievement compared with the effect size of larger programs (*Exhibit 5*).<sup>47</sup> In short, bringing coaching to more teachers is difficult to accomplish without compromising impact and running up costs.

So how do you scale? Coaching presents “very few economies of scale” because “the primary intervention is one-to-one interaction,” and researchers are still looking for ways to maintain impact across a greater number of teachers.<sup>48</sup> When districts cut costs by asking coaches to meet less frequently with each teacher or to coach teachers in groups, coaching’s value as a PD tool can be negatively affected.

Yet, research does point toward important aspects of coaching that may help districts scale instructional coaching to bring it to more teachers. First, districts must focus on strengthening systems and program administration to effectively manage resources and ensure that coaching maximizes the benefit to teachers. Second, districts must encourage broader participation by ensuring that teachers trust that the purpose of coaching is to further their development and help them improve their practice.<sup>49</sup>

**Exhibit 5 LARGER PROGRAMS, LESS EFFECTIVE**



Source: Matthew A. Kraft and David Blazar, “Taking Teacher Coaching to Scale,” *Education Next*, vol. 18, no. 4 (Fall 2018), <https://www.educationnext.org/taking-teacher-coaching-to-scale-can-personalized-training-become-standard-practice/>.

## Structures, Strategies, and Scaling for Coaching

Growing coaching from an ad hoc tactic requires establishing “more formal sets of systems and structures to ensure program fidelity. Scaling up from a small corps of coaches (key program staff or even program developers) to a large staff requires new systems for recruiting, selecting, and training coaches.”<sup>50</sup> Our District Strategy Series Brief, “Developing an Effective Instructional Coaching Program,” discusses three keys to establishing and strengthening such systems in a formalized coaching program:

1. Structures that ensure alignment of the following elements: the approach to coaching that best suits district and development objectives — e.g., data-driven, teacher-practice-driven, or teacher-goal-driven coaching; who the district’s coaches are; and which teachers are selected to receive coaching.
2. Strategies that coaches use both in and outside of the classroom, and for which districts must provide support.
3. Scaling can take place after first defining roles and reporting structures in order to encourage teacher buy-in and participation. Then measure success to adapt, improve, and increase the reach of coaching in the school and district.



*A growing body of research also suggests that video technology can facilitate the efficient sharing of information between coaches and teachers.*



### Virtual Coaching and Video

One promising approach to standardize and extend the reach of coaching is the use of video technology to enable remote or virtual coaching. Some research has found that there is no significant difference in effect sizes for coaching delivered in person versus virtually.<sup>51</sup> In some cases, video technology may provide access to remote, high-quality coaches for districts that lack local expertise. A growing body of research also suggests that video technology can facilitate the efficient sharing of information between coaches and teachers. For example, video may allow a coach to remotely model a particular practice or observe a teacher's lesson as the basis for later in-person or remote feedback.<sup>52</sup>

Video-based coaching might offer the additional benefit of alleviating the common concern among teachers that issues addressed during coaching may be used in their performance evaluations. Teachers may be reassured if they are working with virtual coaches who are geographically removed and otherwise unaffiliated with the school or district. Likewise, ensuring a clear separation between coaches and evaluators, and establishing a reporting structure where coaches report to a dedicated coaching supervisor rather than to principals, helps build trust among teachers.

### Teacher Trust in Coaching Enables Success

Building trust among teachers may be the most important factor necessary to increase the reach and

impact of instructional coaching on a broad scale. Without teachers' trust, districts may struggle to successfully increase teacher participation, while coaches may struggle to influence the practice and behavior of teachers who do participate. Trust enables successful relationships between teachers and coaches as well as effective coaching programs that promote greater levels of teacher engagement. Jim Knight, a leading instructional coaching researcher and practitioner, writes that coaching is characterized by a "non-evaluative, learning relationship between [the coach and teacher]."<sup>53</sup> The explicit purpose is for the teacher to learn, improve instruction, and thereby boost student achievement.

### Coaching Methods to Influence Teachers

In the absence of trust, coaches must still find ways of influencing teachers to develop and improve their practice. Galey finds that coaches influence teachers in such circumstances by means of pressuring, persuading, or buffering. Pressuring is when a coach uses explicit means and formal power to influence teacher practice, for example, "by invoking specific sources of authority, like the principal or grant funding."<sup>54</sup> "Persuading" refers to filtering new ideas and policies so they appear to align with teachers' existing practice — for example, presenting a new, district-endorsed pedagogy as being essentially similar to teachers' current methods. Buffering, in contrast, protects teachers from compliance pressure coming from external stakeholders, such as administrators.

"Persuading was the most successful strategy for getting teachers to change their practice, while pressuring yielded more inconsistent results," Galey finds; she adds that both pressuring and persuading are more effective coming from coaches than from other colleagues and administrators, suggesting that coaches "are uniquely placed to access, append, and diffuse policy information vertically and horizontally within and between schools."<sup>55</sup> Of course, the characteristics of effective coaching can vary depending on the role coaching is playing in a particular situation. For example, pressuring may be more effective for the reform role of coaching, while the cognitive role may or may not require pressuring, persuading, or buffering, depending on teacher buy-in.



*Principals and district leaders must clearly present coaching as a non-evaluative development activity, and communicate that purpose to teachers throughout the district.*



### Opt-in vs. Mandatory Coaching

Although coaches may rely on pressuring, persuading, or buffering when necessary, districts must encourage trust through the structure and design of coaching programs. When districts offer coaching on a voluntary basis, not enough teachers tend to participate, often because they fear that coaching could be used for performance evaluation. Kraft and Blazar write:

Teachers may be hesitant or resistant given an expanded emphasis on linking scores from classroom observation rubrics to high-stakes job decisions. However, coaching is unlikely to be successful without teachers' openness to feedback and willingness to adapt their practice. Here, school leaders have a key role to play in creating a culture of trust and respect among administrators and staff in order to ease teachers' concerns and increase their willingness to actively engage.<sup>56</sup>

On the other hand, some proportion of teachers — often a significant contingent — “may not be interested in actively participating in coaching.”<sup>57</sup> One alternative, then, is to make coaching mandatory, but that approach comes with its own drawbacks. For example, a 2010 study of a statewide Florida program through which teachers across content areas received coaching from 2,300 reading coaches to develop literacy-instruction skills produced little effect over four years.<sup>58</sup> Researchers could not determine whether the

program's failure stemmed from the fact that coaching was mandatory, the challenge of staffing enough coaches, or other factors.

Districts must therefore create a structure that makes teachers feel it is safe to expose their skills gaps in order to learn and develop, without fear of being evaluated. Principals and district leaders must clearly present coaching as a non-evaluative development activity, and communicate that purpose to teachers throughout the district. As one study aptly summarizes, “Trust is ... a critical aspect of instructional coaching. Building a trusting relationship with teachers is a necessary stepping stone for more advanced collaborations around instruction.”<sup>59</sup>

## Realizing the Potential Power of Instructional Coaching

Instructional coaching can be a powerful tool for teacher development that has meaningful impact on the way teachers practice — sufficient to drive improvements in student academic performance. Yet, attaining the benefits of coaching requires a thorough understanding of the role coaching can play in a district's broader PD and instructional efforts as well as what effective coaches and coaching look like. In this DMCouncil Member Research Brief, we have seen that content-specific coaching, such as that by coaches who specialize in literacy or math instruction, is most effective, and that coaching works better when it is paired with complementary training and instructional resources.

DMGroup's experience working with districts aligns with research suggesting that districts must be clear about the role of coaching “instead of launching general coaching initiatives” that lack specific, measurable objectives.<sup>60</sup> When districts take a strategic approach to key elements of instructional coaching programs, such as the criteria for selecting and matching coaches with teachers, their coaching programs thrive — as do teacher practice and student learning.<sup>61</sup> For further insights on how to operationalize a coaching system in your district, see our accompanying Brief, “Developing an Effective Instructional Coaching Program.” ♦

## Works Cited

- 1 Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers (2002), cited in Matthew A. Kraft, David Blazar, and Dylan Hogan, "The Effect of Teacher Coaching on Instruction and Achievement: A Meta-Analysis of the Causal Evidence," *Review of Educational Research*, vol. 88, no. 4 (August 2018).
- 2 Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan, "The Effect of Teacher Coaching."
- 3 Thurston Domina, Ryan Lewis, Priyanka Agarwal, and Paul Hanselman, "Professional Sense-Makers: Instructional Specialists in Contemporary Schooling," *Educational Researcher*, vol. 44, no. 6 (2015): 359–64, available at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED577949.pdf>.
- 4 Sarah Galey, "The Evolving Role of Instructional Coaches in U.S. Policy Contexts," *The William & Mary Educational Review*, vol. 4, no. 2, article 11 (May 1, 2016), <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1044&context=wmer>.
- 5 Annette Konoske-Graf, Lisette Partelow, and Meg Benner, "To Attract Great Teachers, School Districts Must Improve Their Human Capital Systems," Center for American Progress, December 2016, <https://amp.rgs/2U5lrnf>; TNTP, "The Mirage: Confronting the Hard Truth About Our Quest for Teacher Development," 2015, [https://tntp.org/assets/documents/TNTP-Mirage\\_2015.pdf](https://tntp.org/assets/documents/TNTP-Mirage_2015.pdf).
- 6 Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan, "The Effect of Teacher Coaching."
- 7 Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan, "The Effect of Teacher Coaching."
- 8 Shane Lueck, "Hijack Learning Retention Rates by Teaching Learners to Fish," *Learning and Development Blog*, Dashe & Thomson, June 27, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2WzRWHX>.
- 9 Lueck, "Hijack Learning Retention Rates."
- 10 Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan, "The Effect of Teacher Coaching."
- 11 Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan, "The Effect of Teacher Coaching."
- 12 Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan, "The Effect of Teacher Coaching."
- 13 Jim Knight, "Instructional Coaching for Implementing Visible Learning: A Model for Translating Research into Practice," *Education Sciences*, vol. 9, no. 101 (May 10, 2019), available at <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/9/2/101/pdf>.
- 14 Knight, "Instructional Coaching for Implementing Visible Learning."
- 15 Lightly edited from Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan, "The Effect of Teacher Coaching."
- 16 Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan, "The Effect of Teacher Coaching."
- 17 Lightly edited from Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan, "The Effect of Teacher Coaching."
- 18 Galey, "The Evolving Role of Instructional Coaches."
- 19 Galey, "The Evolving Role of Instructional Coaches."
- 20 Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan, "The Effect of Teacher Coaching."
- 21 Jacy Ippolito, "How and Why Do Literacy Coaches Balance Responsive/Directive Relationships with Teachers?," Harvard Graduate School of Education presentation, National Literacy Coaching Summit, Corpus Christi, TX, April 2009, <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.598.4348&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.
- 22 Galey, "The Evolving Role of Instructional Coaches."
- 23 Galey, "The Evolving Role of Instructional Coaches."
- 24 Galey, "The Evolving Role of Instructional Coaches."
- 25 Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan, "The Effect of Teacher Coaching."
- 26 Galey, "The Evolving Role of Instructional Coaches."
- 27 Matthew A. Kraft and David Blazar, "Taking Teacher Coaching to Scale," *Education Next*, vol. 18, no. 4 (Fall 2018), <https://www.educationnext.org/taking-teacher-coaching-to-scale-can-personalized-training-become-standard-practice/>.
- 28 Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan, "The Effect of Teacher Coaching."
- 29 Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), "Characteristics of Effective Coaches," module 1, reading 2 of "Building Teachers' Capacity for Success: Instructional Coaching Essentials," 2015, available at [https://pdo.ascd.org/LMSCourses/PD15OC005M/media/BTCFS-Coaching\\_M1\\_Reading2.pdf](https://pdo.ascd.org/LMSCourses/PD15OC005M/media/BTCFS-Coaching_M1_Reading2.pdf).
- 30 Julie Kowal and Lucy Steiner, "Instructional Coaching," Issue Brief, The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement and Learning Point Associates, September 2007, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED499253.pdf>.
- 31 Galey, "The Evolving Role of Instructional Coaches."
- 32 Knight, "Instructional Coaching for Implementing Visible Learning."
- 33 Kowal and Steiner, "Instructional Coaching."
- 34 Amy Lancaster, "Factors That May Lead Instructional Coaches to Leave That Role: A Mixed-Method Case Study," dissertation, University of Houston-Clear Lake, May 2016, available at <https://uhcl-ir.tdl.org/handle/10657.1/630>.
- 35 Kowal and Steiner, "Instructional Coaching."
- 36 Kowal and Steiner, "Instructional Coaching."
- 37 Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan, "The Effect of Teacher Coaching."
- 38 Knight, "Instructional Coaching for Implementing Visible Learning."
- 39 Galey, "The Evolving Role of Instructional Coaches."
- 40 Galey, "The Evolving Role of Instructional Coaches."
- 41 Knight, "Instructional Coaching for Implementing Visible Learning."
- 42 Jennifer D. Pierce, "Effective Coaching: Improving Teacher Practice and Outcomes for All Learners," National Center for Systemic Improvement, November 2014, [https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/NCSI\\_Effective-Coaching-Brief-508.pdf](https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/NCSI_Effective-Coaching-Brief-508.pdf).
- 43 Knight, "Instructional Coaching for Implementing Visible Learning."
- 44 Galey, "The Evolving Role of Instructional Coaches."
- 45 David S. Knight, "Assessing the Cost of Instructional Coaching," *Journal of Education Finance*, vol. 38, no. 1 (Summer 2012): 52–80, available at <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ979245>.
- 46 Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan, "The Effect of Teacher Coaching."
- 47 Kraft and Blazar, "Taking Teacher Coaching to Scale."
- 48 Kraft and Blazar, "Taking Teacher Coaching to Scale."
- 49 Kraft and Blazar, "Taking Teacher Coaching to Scale."
- 50 Lightly edited from Kraft and Blazar, "Taking Teacher Coaching to Scale."
- 51 Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan, "The Effect of Teacher Coaching."
- 52 Knight, "Instructional Coaching for Implementing Visible Learning."
- 53 Knight, "Instructional Coaching for Implementing Visible Learning."
- 54 Galey, "The Evolving Role of Instructional Coaches."
- 55 Galey, "The Evolving Role of Instructional Coaches."
- 56 Kraft and Blazar, "Taking Teacher Coaching to Scale."
- 57 Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan, "The Effect of Teacher Coaching."
- 58 Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan, "The Effect of Teacher Coaching."
- 59 Galey, "The Evolving Role of Instructional Coaches."
- 60 Kirk Walters, "Instructional Coaching Strategies to Support Student Success in Algebra I Research Brief," U.S. Department of Education Contract No. ED-ESE-12-O-0081 with the American Institutes for Research, September 2014, <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/dropout/instructionalcoaching092414.pdf>.
- 61 Galey, "The Evolving Role of Instructional Coaches."

# Improve Social, Emotional & Behavioral Supports

DMGroup can help strengthen social-emotional learning and expand the reach and impact of behavioral supports for students.



## Talk to an expert

 877-362-3500

 [www.dmgrouppk12.com](http://www.dmgrouppk12.com)

 [info@dmgrouppk12.com](mailto:info@dmgrouppk12.com)



**District  
Management  
Group**

Helping Schools and  
Students Thrive



DMGroup's 17th Annual  
Superintendents' Strategy Summit

# High-Impact Leadership in Increasingly Complex Times

New York, NY | January 15–17, 2020

Managing for Change Given the Future  
of Education

Themes will include:

- Leading 21st-century school districts
- Strengthening adaptive leadership skills and strategic problem solving
- Tackling specific problems of practice including strategic budgeting and overlooked strategies to improve instruction

Guest Speaker

**Michael Horn**

Author of *Blended*

Disruptions in Higher Ed:  
Implications for K-12

Join us

 877-362-3500

 [www.dmgrouppk12.com/summit2020](http://www.dmgrouppk12.com/summit2020)

 [info@dmgrouppk12.com](mailto:info@dmgrouppk12.com)



**District Management Group**

Helping Schools and Students Thrive