

Developing an Effective Instructional Coaching Program



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Developing an Effective Instructional Coaching Program

Mark Wiernusz and Amram Migdal

Introduction

Instructional coaching is among the most powerful means of helping to develop excellent teachers—and research shows that such teachers are the most important school-based factor for student learning.¹ Nationally, school districts spend \$18 billion per year on professional development (PD) for their teachers, yet most PD is not consistently effective at raising teacher performance.² Instructional coaching is a significant exception, as successful coaching, when aligned with district teaching and learning priorities as a component of a comprehensive teacher training strategy, creates significant positive impacts on both teacher practice and student achievement.³

Even though instructional coaching has the potential to be a powerful development tool, most districts have not seen consistent, concrete gains in instruction and academic achievement from coaching. One reason is that districts do not structure their coaching programs to purposefully match coaches with the specific needs of individual teachers. Increasing teacher participation can also be a challenge, in part because districts must overcome the perception among some teachers that coaching will be used for evaluation rather than for professional development.

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

At District Management Group, we advise school district leaders who want to develop an effective instructional coaching program that they must (1) ensure alignment in the **Structures** of the coaching program (e.g., which approaches to coaching the district should use, who the district’s coaches should be, which teachers should receive coaching); (2) provide support for coaches to carry out effective **Strategies** inside and outside of the classroom; and (3) define roles and reporting structures to encourage teacher buy-in and participation, and measure success to adapt, improve, and **Scale** the coaching program to reach more teachers.

Coaching Is a Powerful Yet Underused Professional Development Tool

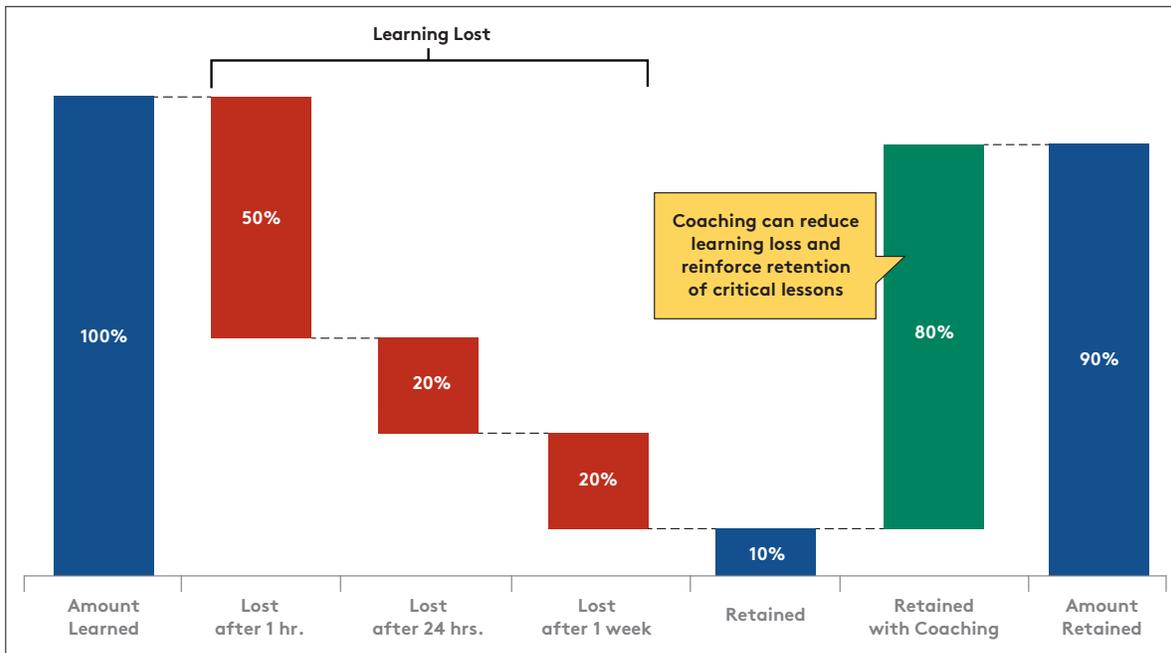
Despite school districts’ tremendous investments in teacher development, most methods of PD are not consistently effective, especially training in the form of the one-size-fits-all, “sit-and-get” mandatory workshops that 72% of districts require.⁴ In fact, research shows that participants tend to lose 50% of the knowledge

covered in such settings within one hour, and 90% of the learning is lost after one week.⁵

A more effective approach to teacher development is to include coaching as a core element of PD, which has been shown to reduce learning loss and reinforce retention of critical lessons (*Exhibit 1*).⁶ Coaching helps teachers substantially improve their instructional practice — enough to drive significant improvements in student academic achievement. In fact, teachers who receive coaching see improvements in the quality of their instruction that are “larger than differences in measures of instructional quality between novice and veteran teachers.”⁷

Coaching is uniquely positioned to help teachers retain lessons presented in formal training and to support implementation of district priorities. It bridges the gap between training and in-classroom practice by providing on-the-job feedback and guided learning to teachers. Coaches help teachers reinforce key technical skills, analytical frameworks, and best practices via classroom observation, out-of-class analysis and planning, and collaboration.

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>.

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45%

Only 45% of all U.S. school districts have mandatory, as opposed to opt-in, instructional coaching programs.

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Yet, coaching remains an underused source of professional growth for teachers. Even though the overwhelming majority of students attend school in a district that provides at least some form of coaching for teachers, these efforts are often ad hoc and uncoordinated, having limited impact on teacher development districtwide. Only 45% of all U.S. school districts have mandatory, as opposed to opt-in, instructional coaching programs.

Key Features of an Effective Instructional Coaching Program: Structures, Strategies, and Scaling

To establish and expand high-impact instructional coaching programs, districts must address the following features:

Structures: Coaching programs will be more successful if their operational structures tightly align the choice of a specific approach or approaches to coaching — e.g., data-driven, teacher-practice-driven, or teacher-goal-driven — the identification of coaches, and the selection of teachers to receive coaching.

Strategies: Districts must support dedicated coaches by giving them the time and resources required to execute effective coaching strategies



Issue

Instructional coaching is a powerful method of professional development (PD) for teachers. Yet, in many cases, coaching does not produce the sustained, widespread benefits to instruction or achievement that school districts expect, and lack of teacher buy-in and participation is common.

Cause

Coaching programs often are not structured to tightly align the selection of the appropriate coaches, the teachers to be coached, and the approach to coaching used — e.g., data-driven, teacher-practice-driven, or teacher-goal-driven. Coaches are too often assigned to support teachers with development needs that fall outside the coaches' areas of specialization, which limits coaching's impact and undermines teachers' faith in the program's value. Lack of teacher buy-in is further exacerbated by the belief among some teachers that coaches are evaluating their performance rather than supporting their professional growth and development.

Solution

School districts must ensure that each coaching program is structured to reliably match teachers with coaches whose skills are suited to address each teacher's particular development needs. It is vital for districts to monitor and measure coaching and make adjustments both in order to raise the quality of coaching and bring coaching to more teachers. Districts must also avoid blurry reporting structures by clearly delineating the roles of coach, teacher evaluator (such as principals), and coaching supervisor. Teachers are more likely to participate in coaching if they are assured and trust that coaches are not evaluating them nor reporting to the teachers' evaluators. Designing a coaching program in this way can position a district to begin to successfully scale the program and increase its impact and reach.



both inside and outside of the classroom. In addition to observation, modeling, and other activities within the classroom, coaches analyze teacher and student data, plan coaching sessions, give feedback, and work with teachers outside of the classroom in order to be responsive to teachers' needs.

Scale: Finally, and most importantly, school and district leaders must strengthen and expand their coaching programs by building trust to encourage teacher participation. To do so, districts must clearly delineate coaching as a non-evaluative activity focused on development and define the roles of coaches, principals and other evaluators, and coaching supervisors (who should not be principals). Consistent and thorough progress monitoring then allows districts to identify gaps and adapt to improve their coaching programs while maintaining their impact.

Structures: Promoting Alignment Across Coaching Program Components

One of the biggest challenges facing districts when they are developing or strengthening an instructional coaching program is to ensure alignment across the program's operational components, or structure. Districts must ask themselves:

- Which approach to coaching best suits our district and objectives?
- Who should be our coaches?
- Which teachers should we select to receive coaching?
- What group size should we set?

Which Approach to Coaching Should Districts Use?

There is no clear best approach to coaching; different coaching models have been shown to be effective in different circumstances. Districts should select the approach or approaches that best suit the development needs of their teachers and that best align with district priorities.

Data-driven approach to coaching

In a **data-driven** approach to coaching, the coach's role is to partner with teachers to design instruction based on specific evidence of student learning. Coaches and teachers use student data to extract precise and meaningful insights that help the teachers to alter their practice over the course of a coaching cycle. This approach is effective in districts and schools with strong data-management practices. It is not ideal for teachers who have fewer than two years of experience because they lack historical student data to identify trends or issues.

Teacher-practice-driven approach to coaching

A **teacher-practice-driven** approach uses coaches to move teachers toward implementing a program, policy, or particular instructional practice. The coach observes and identifies what the teacher is or is not doing in the classroom and helps the teacher address issues. The goal is to improve teachers' fidelity to the intended practice and thereby maximize its impact on student learning. This approach to coaching relies on the coach's expertise to drive changes in teacher practice and is therefore most effective when coaches are content experts in the area in question.

Teacher-goal-driven approach to coaching

Teacher-goal-driven coaching relies on teachers to direct the objectives of their coaching and on coaches to tailor their support to match teachers' self-identified needs. This approach can be effective in high-performing districts with experienced and skilled staff, who have the self-awareness to identify their own performance gaps and inform coaches of areas they need to address.



Not every individual with the title “coach” is qualified or suited to support every teacher’s development needs in every circumstance.



Public school districts are not limited to using one approach to coaching or another. It is often beneficial to combine or simultaneously employ a combination of these approaches, as appropriate. For example, districts can take a teacher-practice-driven approach that is informed by student data that coaches and teachers can analyze together to establish specific goals to improve practice and, ultimately, student performance.

Who Should Be the District's Coaches?

When selecting coaches, districts must take a few key considerations into account. Coaches must possess key strengths and attributes in relationship building, problem solving, and teaching both students and adults. Coaches must be able to identify the problem — “What does this teacher need?” — and know how to address that problem — “How should I as the coach craft and provide feedback to this teacher?” Effective coaches typically possess some set of the following qualities:

Experienced, with demonstrated results

Effective coaches usually have a proven track record of student results, and in fact, a coach should have been a skillful teacher. Demonstrated experience with students makes it clear to teachers that the coach is not an unsuccessful teacher who is trying to coach as an alternative career option.

Knowledgeable

Coaches should have specific content knowledge as well as knowledge of different approaches to

coaching in order to offer differentiated coaching strategies to address individual teachers’ various needs.

Adaptable

The ability to teach adults as well as young people is critical for instructional coaches, and requires a distinct skillset. Coaches must also be flexible and adjust their efforts as appropriate to meet the needs of individual teachers.

Engaged

Effective coaches are highly engaged and motivated. Coaching is not something to take on as an unwanted obligation or additional task. To be effective, coaches must be passionately committed to being successful *as a coach*. District leaders must ensure that teachers have a voice in decisions to become coaches and avoid imposing sudden shifts in title and responsibilities.

Districts must take care not only to have a roster of experienced, knowledgeable, adaptable, and engaged coaches, but also to utilize coaches appropriately. Coaches should be assigned to support teachers whose development objectives align with the coach’s skills. The term *coach*, like the term *teacher*, refers to an individual who specializes in a variety of different areas, and not every individual with the title “coach” is qualified or suited to support every teacher’s development needs in every circumstance.

For example, a coach who specializes in data analysis should not be assigned to work with a teacher who needs help with reading instruction. A skilled literacy coach would be a more appropriate individual to assign to work with the teacher — yet, this type of misaligned assignment occurs with surprising frequency. To achieve the greatest effect on teacher practice, districts should choose coaches to provide support to teachers based on the coach’s domain of expertise.

A final caution is to keep in mind that coaching is a job — a challenging job — in its own right. Coaching is distinct from mentorship, and the two should not be conflated. In mentoring relationships, mentors pass down wisdom from their own experiences, finding

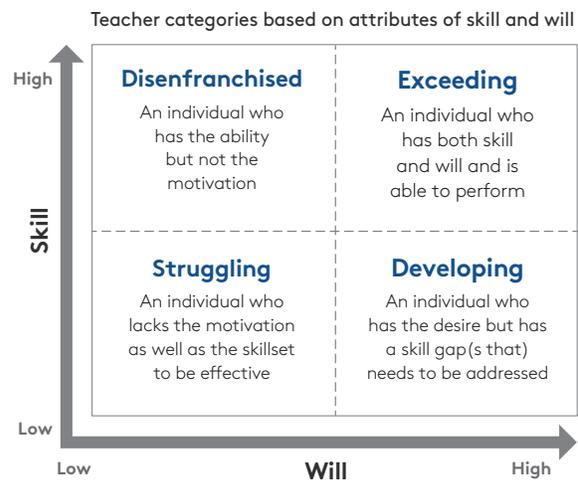
lessons from past situations that are similar to those their mentees are facing — “Here’s what I did in a similar situation ...” or “Here’s how I might handle that ...” In contrast, coaches identify teachers’ skill gaps, analyze their root causes, and help teachers address those gaps by creating and carrying out development plans.

Which Teachers Should Receive Coaching?

When school district leaders and principals think about which teachers should receive coaching, it is often the teachers whose practice is most in need of improvement that first to come to mind. However, coaching — when targeted to each teacher’s specific development needs — is a powerful tool to improve the practice of many teachers across the district, not just those who are struggling.

In determining which teachers should receive which types of coaching, focus should be placed on two key attributes: teacher skill and teacher will. Teacher **skill** refers to the teacher’s capabilities based on experience with the task, training, and knowledge. Teacher **will** refers to the desire to complete a task based on attitude, incentives, confidence, and personal feelings. Using these attributes along two dimensions yields four categories of teachers; these categories can be helpful in considering which teachers should receive coaching, and then determining the specific coaching they receive (*Exhibit 2*).

Exhibit 2 WHICH TEACHERS SHOULD RECEIVE COACHING?



Struggling teachers possess neither the skill nor the will to do their jobs effectively, and many districts' default impulse is to focus coaching efforts on this group. However, moving teachers forward on dimensions of both skill and will in a timely manner is extremely challenging.

Developing teachers have the will to grow and develop, but they lack certain skillsets. Coaching for Developing teachers focuses on technical development. Coaches must recognize that a distinct style of coaching is required, and must alter their approach and lesson planning accordingly.

Disenfranchised teachers possess the skills, knowledge, and experience to be excellent teachers but lack motivation. This could be due to burnout, a bad year with their class, or other factors. Coaching Disenfranchised individuals focuses on increasing motivation, which can be more challenging than developing technical skills because it requires the coach and teacher to examine assumptions and attitudes to break down the causes of frustration.

Exceeding teachers outperform expectations. As a result, even high-performing districts sometimes overlook or de-prioritize coaching for these teachers. Districts of course want all teachers to exceed, and so naturally they focus on providing development resources to teachers not yet in that category. But teachers can migrate out of the Exceeding category. To prevent teachers from dropping from Exceeding to Developing, districts can deploy coaching for high performers when, for example, introducing a new piece of instructional technology or new pedagogy. To prevent Exceeding teachers from becoming Disenfranchised, districts may employ motivational coaching to counter the possibility of burnout.

How to Set Group Size to Maximize Impact

Group size is an important consideration that can increase or decrease the impact of coaching efforts. Many districts default to using a one-to-one support model, in part because it is easier to coordinate. However, in some situations, small groups work as well or better, and districts should set clear guidelines regarding when to use a small-group approach to coaching.





One-on-one coaching is effective when teachers are working on significant skill gaps, motivational challenges, or other unique needs. When coaches provide one-on-one support, teachers are more open to learning and development, as the coaching focuses on improving individual skills and behaviors, and allows the teacher to develop self-awareness. However, in a one-on-one setting, a teacher's development is highly dependent on the relationship with the coach — a poor relationship between teacher and coach all too often leads to wasted time, effort, and energy that does not benefit either party. A one-to-one coaching support model also requires more resources (people, time, and money), which limits opportunities for scaling.

In a small-group configuration, coaches identify groups of three to five teachers who have similar needs and goals. Often this approach is suitable for more technical or skills-focused coaching, and it is also effective for reinforcing new material, methods, and practices. Working in small groups fosters team-building and can be more cost-effective than the one-to-one approach. Yet, with its focus on the team rather than the individual, small-group coaching can sometimes fail to address an individual's specific skill gaps. It also takes a skillful coach to navigate the potential for conflict or awkwardness among team members as they discuss skill gaps and how to address them.

Using video technology to enable virtual or remote coaching may be an interesting option for accommodating group size and extending the reach of coaching. Some research indicates that coaching delivered remotely has the same positive impact on teacher practice and student achievement as coaching delivered in person.⁸ Virtual and remote coaching have the potential to improve the quality and reach of coaching programs by increasing access to skilled coaches whose specialties precisely match teacher needs but who may not work in the district's local area.

Strategies: Supporting Coaching Inside and Outside of the Classroom

Coaching strategies are the coaches' actions and specific approaches targeting the individual needs of teachers to further their development. More successful coaching strategies involve efforts both inside and outside of the classroom (*Exhibit 3*).

Inside the classroom, coaches should do more than just observe teacher practice. For example, coaches can utilize a gradual-release strategy, where, at first, the coach can demonstrate a particular practice or instructional approach by teaching a class while the teacher observes. Over time, the teacher assumes more control



Districts must explore ways to make coaching a constructive and comfortable space, where teachers' learning and professional development are prioritized over performance evaluation.



while the coach steps back to observe and assess how well the lesson or strategy has been adopted.

Outside of the classroom, coaches should debrief with teachers to provide feedback, shape the next coaching lesson plans, and provide real-time support in other ways, such as helping teachers analyze and understand data to identify skill gaps and track student performance.

Creating time for coaches to provide support across the full coaching cycle, both inside and outside of the classroom, enhances the effectiveness of a coaching program. When districts reduce the amount of time available for coaches to support teachers, particularly time spent outside of the classroom, the coach's ability to prepare for the next coaching lesson is limited. This commonly occurs when district and school leaders assign coaches to teach their own classrooms part-time in addition to coaching; such decisions and associated tradeoffs should be carefully considered when establishing guidelines for how coaches are utilized and spend their time.

Scaling: Expanding Instructional Coaching

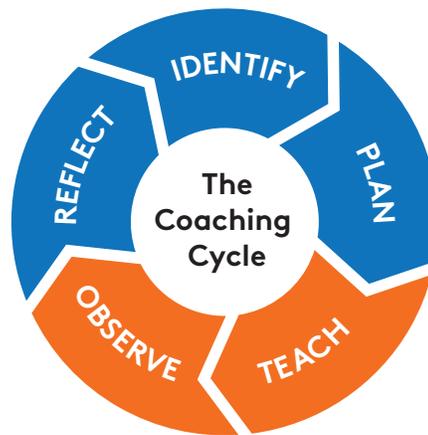
Knowing that coaching has the power to substantially improve instruction and learning, districts will naturally seek ways to expand coaching. To effectively scale up, district leaders must design instructional coaching programs that are capable of adapting, evolving, and growing. Two important steps for school districts to take in order to scale effectively and maintain impact are: (1) define clear roles and reporting structure, and (2) establish systems and processes for monitoring progress and measuring impact.

Defining Roles and Reporting Structure

Teachers sometimes wonder: Is coaching professional development or is it a form of teacher evaluation? This question arises because districts frequently fail to explicitly communicate the different roles and responsibilities of the teachers' evaluators (principals, assistant principals, department head,) and instructional coaches. Many teachers hesitate to participate in coaching under the assumption that if they discuss with their coach any skill gaps or performance areas they need to develop, their performance evaluations will be negatively affected.

To effectively gain teacher buy-in and increase the scale of coaching, districts must explore ways to make coaching a constructive and comfortable space, where teachers'

Exhibit 3 **SAMPLE REPRESENTATIVE COACHING CYCLE OF ACTIVITIES INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OF THE CLASSROOM**



■ Outside the classroom ■ Inside the classroom

Source: DMGroup.



Teachers must be assured and have confidence that coaching feedback identifying skill gaps in their practice is oriented toward professional development and will not be used for evaluation.



learning and professional development are prioritized over performance evaluation. Districts sometimes attempt to do this by making coaching an opt-in service, but that approach often leads to lower teacher participation — and frequently the teachers who do sign up are the top performers, who already excel.

A better approach to encourage trust is for districts to clearly define the role of coach, distinguishing it from the role of evaluator, and ensure that coaches report to a supervisor other than the principal. Explicitly communicating this reporting structure to teachers will dispel any perception that coaches might share information about teacher performance with principals for the purpose of evaluation.

Clarifying the Roles of Principals and Coaches

Districts that wish to further scale the impact of coaching and ensure broader consistency of results ought to consolidate the management of their coaching programs and supervision of coaches under an individual coaching supervisor. A dedicated coaching supervisor can oversee, evaluate, and develop the coaching staff and programs districtwide and thereby ensure coherence and uniformity across the system. The coaching supervisor can also help ensure that coaches have the high-level coaching skills needed to drive development; for example, the supervisor may organize PD for

coaches to keep them aware of best practices and modern techniques in coaching.

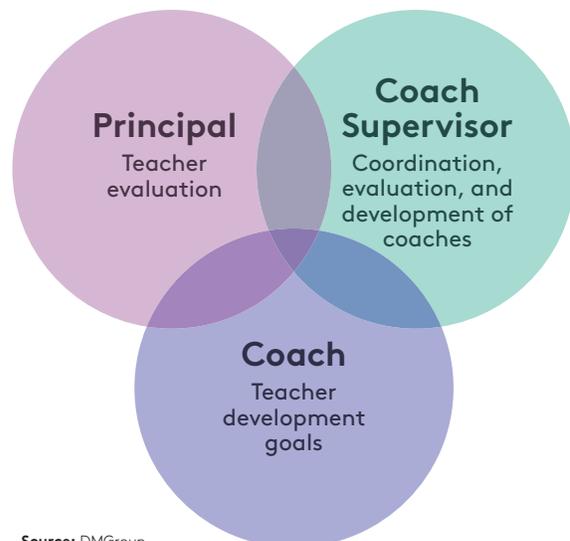
Coaching supervisors can make it easier for districts to implement coaching at scale by coordinating coach and teacher schedules across buildings and enabling the sharing of staff across the district. By creating a single point of supervision, districts clarify the go-to resource for teacher development issues. In addition, by having coaches report to someone other than the same individual that is evaluating teachers (e.g., the principal or department head), the districts further build teachers' trust in the program and the fact that coaching is a development activity, not another input for performance evaluations.

Establishing a clear reporting structure that distinguishes coaches from evaluators and includes a dedicated coaching supervisor who is not a principal helps to accomplish the goal of gaining teacher buy-in (*Exhibit 4*).

Monitoring Progress and Measuring Success

As with any significant program or initiative, it is imperative for school districts to define, measure, and

Exhibit 4 **THREE ROLES OF A COACHING PROGRAM REPORTING STRUCTURE**



Source: DMGroup.

evaluate the success of their coaching programs and to make adjustments as needed, especially as the program grows. A district must build in the capability to monitor the program’s effectiveness from the beginning in order to *first* be sure that the coaching program is working, and *then* expand its reach. An effective progress monitoring system analyzes and tracks success criteria including input metrics, output metrics, and outcome metrics (*Exhibit 5*).

Input metrics refer to measurement of the activities coaches spend their time on: working with teachers, classroom observations, reporting, attending meetings, etc. These activities are easy to measure and attribute to the coach, and help determine whether the coaching model is being implemented with fidelity. However, achieving input targets (e.g., determining that coaches are adhering to guidelines and expectations) alone is not enough to guarantee success in changing teacher practice or student outcomes. More is needed.

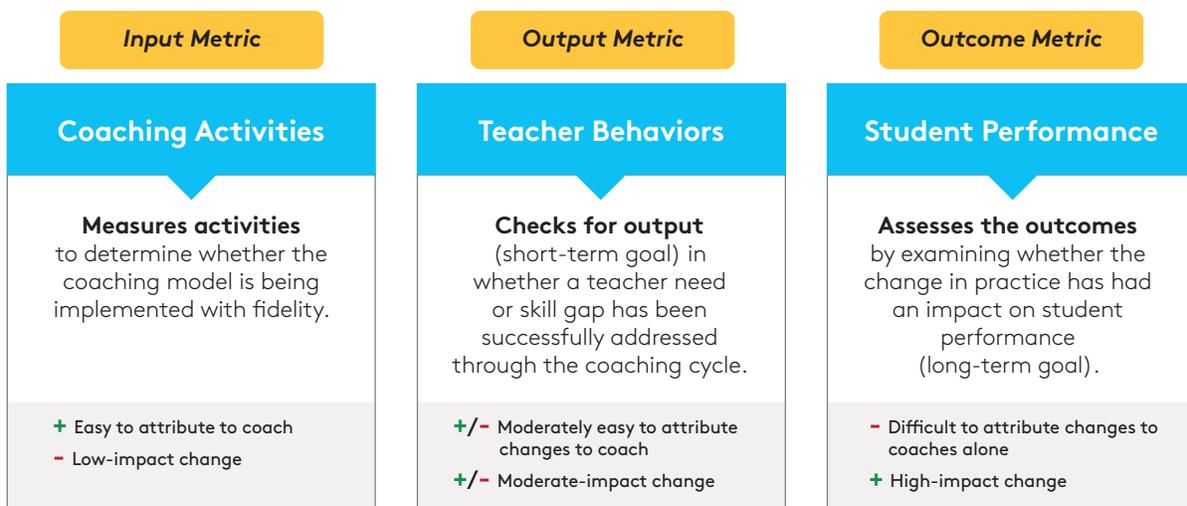
Output metrics capture teachers’ behaviors to answer the question: Is the coach’s activity leading to changes in teacher practice? These measures check for output (a short-term goal) in whether

teachers’ needs and skill gaps are being successfully addressed through the coaching cycle. Output metrics can be attributed to the coaching activity; however, in some cases coaches may be working hard and yet some other factor prevents a change in teacher practice from manifesting.

Outcome metrics refer to the ultimate purpose (long-term goal) of all teacher development efforts, which is to improve student learning and academic performance. Coaching must do more than simply affect teacher practice; it must affect practice in a way that results in increased student achievement. Although it is difficult to directly attribute gains in student achievement to the activities undertaken during the coaching cycle, districts must continue to monitor student performance measures to evaluate whether coaching is achieving the long-term goal.

The key to effective progress monitoring is to avoid defining success by inputs, outputs, or outcomes individually. For example, simply relying on inputs could lead a district to believe that its program is going well simply because coaches are holding meetings with teachers and reporting on their activities, despite a lack of movement in output or outcome metrics.

Exhibit 5 **PROGRESS MONITORING – DEFINING SUCCESS**



Source: DMGroup.

Likewise, improvements in student performance that are in fact due to some other factor could be misattributed to the coaching program if districts do not pay attention to the alignment and correlations between all three sets of metrics. Incorporating all three — input, output, and outcome measures — will help districts better pinpoint where the coaching program is succeeding and where it needs to be adjusted or reinforced.

Building an Effective Coaching Program to Maximize the Impact of Instructional Coaching

To maximize the impact of instructional coaching and realize the full potential of this powerful teacher development tool, public school district leaders must take a systematic approach to designing and scaling their coaching programs. Districts must ensure alignment across the structures of their coaching programs: appropriately identifying and assigning coaches, selecting teachers to receive coaching and identifying their specific needs, and implementing the right approaches to coaching. In addition, it is critical to clearly define roles and responsibilities for the coach, the teacher's evaluator, and the coaches' supervisor in order to promote teacher trust and participation. Finally, careful monitoring and measuring of inputs, outputs, and outcomes allow districts to pinpoint what is working and what needs to be adjusted as the coaching program scales.

Every district leader understands how critical it is to have excellent teachers in order to have a significant, positive impact on students over the long term. Instructional coaching offers a means of helping teachers improve their practice by bolstering and reinforcing critical teacher development lessons and offering targeted support. The challenge is to maintain the efficacy of this high-impact development tool while extending coaching support to more and more teachers. By paying careful attention to coaching structures and strategies, districts can more effectively scale their programs and broaden the benefits of coaching to more teachers, which ultimately benefits students. ♦

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- ⁸ Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan, "The Effect of Teacher Coaching."



District Management Group

Helping Schools and Students Thrive

District Management Group was founded in 2004 on the belief that management techniques combined with education best practices are key to addressing the challenges facing American public schools. Our focus is on partnering with school districts to achieve measurable and sustainable improvement in student outcomes, operational efficiency, and resource allocation to help schools and students thrive.

Ways we help school and district leaders include:

- Consulting services to help district leaders succeed in addressing complex challenges such as strategic planning, resource allocation, and program and initiative assessments
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