

More than mentors: Principal coaching

This article appeared in the May/June 2003 edition of Leadership and is published with the permission of the Association of California School Administrators.

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Over the past few years, the attention of the education community has focused upon the principalship.

There is little doubt that an effective principal is prerequisite to school improvement. There is a shortage of candidates for the principalship, and an increasing trend for individuals with relatively limited experience to move into these positions.

There is a growing consensus that traditional pre-service programs have not adequately prepared candidates for the principalship. National principals' organizations and new legislation call for induction programs for novice principals that include mentoring. It is clear that experienced principals also need ongoing support and professional development, and that a coach or mentor can be a key element of this process (ERS, 2000).

The New Teacher Center at University of California Santa Cruz, in collaboration with the Association of California School Administrators, is taking steps to address these issues through our professional development program for leadership coaches: Coaching Leaders to Attain Student Success (CLASS).

CLASS was developed with support from the Stupski Family Foundation, and is grounded in the pioneering teacher induction work of the Santa Cruz New Teacher Project and the principal induction work of the NTC's New Administrator Program.

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CLASS prepares individuals to coach new and experienced school principals, and supports the establishment of programs for principal induction and ongoing professional development. In its first year, CLASS has trained hundreds of leadership coaches, established an ongoing coaches' network, and assisted in the development of principal induction programs in districts up and down the state.

Limitations of mentors

Principal mentoring is not a new idea. Most principals credit their survival on the job at least in part to a relationship with an informal mentor. California credential programs require a mentoring component, and many districts assign informal mentors or "buddies" to novice principals.

Unfortunately, the mentoring received by most principals is inconsistent and suffers from some severe limitations. Because the mentoring beginning administrators receive usually comes from colleagues in the same district, it may be difficult to share confidences.

Informal mentors are usually tied to their own demanding jobs, and though they may have the best of intentions, they are not fully available to their proteges. These relationships generally do not provide a coherent mentoring process that is focused upon instructional leadership. And although successful practitioners themselves, these informal mentors may not possess the tools or the skills that it takes to be most effective in providing individual support.

California has proven models in place for mentoring educators in its Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment Programs. Quality BTSA programs are organized around a well-articulated vision of

effective teaching and provide dedicated, trained and supported mentors who are detached from the supervision process.

The New Teacher Center brings similar resources and rigor to principal support. For the past five years, the NTC has provided coaching support to principals. Now, in collaboration with ACSA, the NTC is disseminating CLASS, a new model of leadership coaching.

A unique approach

While coaching is a “hot” topic, particularly in the private sector where executive coaching is an established profession, the literature on the coaching of school leaders is very limited. In designing CLASS, we have drawn from research and experience in the private and public sectors, and our own work and research in supporting school leaders. We have designed a unique approach to coaching that is built around the particular needs of school leaders.

We start by making a distinction between coaching and mentoring. Mentors are typically senior organizational insiders in job-alike positions. The most effective coaches are generally outsiders who, while professional experts, have leadership coaching as their primary work.

We suggest that novice principals should have a mentor as a source of advice and information regarding district matters. In addition, novice (and perhaps all) principals need an external coach as a source of confidential and expert support around the wide-ranging, problematic and often deeply personal issues that they must deal with from their first days on the job.

Basis of the coaching model

The CLASS coaching model is based upon the following precepts:

- The coach is a “different observer” of the coachee and her context. Bringing a different perspective to the relationship, the coach can see both circumstances and possibilities that the coachee can't.
- The coaching relationship is based upon trust and permission.
- The coach moves between instructional and facilitative coaching strategies based upon assessment of the coachee's needs and in pursuit of agreed-upon goals.
- The coach's fundamental commitment is to student success, and the coach will appropriately push the coachee to that end.
- Professional standards (ISLLC, CaPSELs) are a framework for goal-setting and ongoing formative assessment.

Coaching defined

It is important to understand that coaching is not training. Training conveys a particular curriculum, while coaching addresses the needs of the individual. While it is our goal that CLASS participants master the elements of the principalship outlined in the ISLLC standards and that they directly impact

student achievement through their leadership, it is the coachee who determines the focus of the coaching session.

We should also be careful not to confuse coaching with therapy. Coaching focuses upon goal accomplishment, while therapy deals with psychological function, personal history and the resolution of pathology.

This does not mean that coaching does not often deal with difficult personal issues such as communication style or stress management. CLASS coaches must be prepared to address these sorts of concerns, and to recognize when a coachee's needs fall out of the scope of leadership coaching, and even when referral for therapeutic support may be appropriate.

Blended coaching strategies

At the heart of the CLASS program is our reliance upon blended coaching strategies. This approach is represented by a mobius strip that conveys a fluid and flexible coaching model, supporting growth and change in both what we do and who we are.

We claim that effective coaches move between instructional coaching strategies, in which the coach serves as expert consultant, collaborator and teacher; and facilitative strategies, in which the coach adopts a mediational stance, with a primary focus upon building the coachee's capacity through metacognition and reflection.

Blended coaching strategies draw upon a number of coaching disciplines, including cognitive

coaching (Costa and Garmston, 2002) and transformational coaching (Hargrove, 1995). It is a demanding model that requires a coach to be able to decide when it is appropriate to take an instructional approach (for example, when a new principal asks for help interpreting test scores) or a facilitative approach (as that same principal determines how to work with faculty in improving those scores).

It is a model that assumes that coaches are willing and able to help leaders deal with the toughest issues of emotional intelligence (as that same principal struggles with personal insecurity in bringing concerns about student achievement to individual teachers). In applying blended coaching strategies, the coach is a fully-present listener who moves skillfully between instructional and facilitative strategies.

Directly addressing principals' needs

Many educators already have some experience with cognitive coaching and/or with other models of peer support. These programs teach valuable interactive coaching skills, but do not directly address the issues facing of school leaders. CLASS is not a generic program; it is designed around the challenges that principals face and upon the needs they bring to the coaching relationship.

For example, we know that all principals, particularly novices, grapple with issues of emotional intelligence. We know that novice principals struggle with practical matters such as time management, delegation and supervision, and with more complex and personal matters such as

cultural proficiency. CLASS participants practice coaching around these issues via the exploration of case studies, videos of principals describing the challenges they face and videos of coaching sessions (see sidebar for examples of typical coaching scenarios).

The right tools

Because CLASS is directed at impacting student achievement and is aligned with leadership standards, coaches need to be equipped with tools to offer to their coachees. Some of the tools are designed to support the coaching process through self-assessment, problem analysis and goal setting. Surveys known as 360° instruments serve as a source of perceptual data from peers, supervisors, community and subordinates and provide significant “grist for the mill” in the coaching and professional growth process.

Coaches may also offer tools for day-to-day challenges such as teacher supervision, meeting facilitation, decision making, school program planning and budget management.

Networks break isolation

Leadership coaching isn't learned in one workshop and shouldn't be practiced in isolation. In order to build a community of practice, the NTC, in collaboration with ACSA, maintains the California Network of Leadership Coaches. Participants in this network include individuals who are coaching full- or part-time as district, county or CSLA staff, as well as consultants, retirees, administrators on

loan to universities and college faculty.

The Network provides these coaches with opportunities to further hone their knowledge and skills, to share tools and resources, and to participate in the construction of a new profession.

Does coaching make a difference?

How do we know that coaching school leaders actually results in schools that make a positive difference for students? To answer this question, the NTC is conducting research into the impact of our coaching programs upon novice principals. Our research design includes comparative case studies of both supported and unsupported principals.

Preliminary findings suggest that leadership coaching is a worthwhile investment. It is not surprising that principals who receive coaching say they appreciate the support and that it has made a positive difference for them. Supported principals not only report that they are more engaged in instructional leadership, they actually are spending more time on instructional issues and are addressing them with more skill than unsupported principals.

Over time, we will accumulate data regarding the impact of these programs upon student achievement and principal retention.

Leading the nation

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California can lead the nation in providing coaching support to novice and experienced principals.

We must begin by providing these programs with adequate resources, similar to those the state puts behind its first- and second-year teachers through its BTSA program. Coaches must be carefully selected, must have sanctioned time for coaching, must receive training, and must be part of an ongoing community of practice.

As we continue to deal with the evolving principalship and principal preparation programs, demand for skilled leadership coaching is going to increase. Coaching Leaders to Attain Student Success is proving to be an important resource as we work to meet these needs.

Sidebar: Typical coaching scenarios

- Paul is always prepared with a list of problems he wants to speak with you about. Coaching sessions have consisted of rambling discussions of unrelated issues. Paul doesn't make connections between the problems he discusses, and he doesn't listen too well to you. You are frustrated by the lack of progress in these sessions, the sense that Paul is not taking advantage of coaching, and his tendency to want to unload without reflection or analysis.

- It is one month into the school year, and Susan is puzzled as to how to go about spending money. The prior principal left a budget, but the categories were no more specific than "instructional materials." Teachers are asking for materials, supplies, and to schedule field trips and conferences. Susan is blaming this on the level of support she is receiving from the central office. She is having

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a hard time getting timely budget information, and is often asked for reports with very short notice. Susan knows that the central office is under a great deal of stress due to vacant positions, but she is waiting for the district to provide printouts before she works on her budget.

- You do a series of classroom visits with Jack. He is the principal of an elementary school. Jack's prior experience was as a middle school assistant principal. In the course of conducting the classroom observations, Jack's comments relate to the physical environment in the classrooms; bulletin boards, neatness and so forth. He makes very few comments directly related to teaching and learning, yet you know that Jack's school is in the second year of a significant literacy initiative.

- A rift is developing between Anna and many members of her staff. She uses language like "these teachers ... they are always ... this school ... I can't seem to make them ..." You know that Anna is frustrated because standardized test scores didn't rise at the school over the past year.

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