

Coaching Without a Coach

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How can cash-strapped schools empower educators at all levels to engage in coaching?

It seems ironic. At a time when coaching has become widely accepted as a way to improve teacher practice and student achievement, school districts across the United States are experiencing major funding cuts and eliminating coaching positions.

For the last decade, federal and state departments of education in the United States have promoted coaching in schools. Reading coaches were a prominent feature of the Reading First program when it began in 2002. As Reading First funds rolled out, it seemed that coaching had arrived. Yet nine years later, although the U.S. Department of Education continues to support job-embedded professional development like coaching,¹ money to pay coaches is evaporating fast.

Although we believe that full-time, site-based coaching is the most desirable way to provide teacher support, we also recognize that effective coaching programs require large investments of money and time. Districts experiencing severe financial hardships may be forced to eliminate all positions that are not required under state law. So we asked ourselves, Is it possible to continue coaching without a coach? When funding cuts befall a district, how can that district continue to benefit from its considerable investments in coaching? And how can those fortunate districts that can still fund full-time coaches build on their hiring investment?

Keeping Coaching in the Picture

Both of us found ourselves asking these questions recently in our own professional capacity. Budget cuts in the low-performing school district in which Christina was a reading coordinator had led the district to eliminate all 20 of its instructional coaching positions. Elizabeth, a consultant who supported schools in developing literacy coaches, found that although schools were embracing the coaching approach, funding for coaching was disappearing. We began discussing the problem together. When we attended the International Literacy Coaching Summit and Widener University Reading Conference in spring 2011, we found that coaches and teachers from all over were struggling with this issue but were finding ways to keep coaching alive. We asked many people at this gathering how they coped.

The creative responses and strategies we share here come from our conversations at this summit and from our work with colleagues. These strategies vary in the intensity of time and resources they demand. They can be used across teaching roles and positions, but for simplicity's sake, we break them down here by roles within a school.

Former Coaches

Coaches whose positions are eliminated may experience a variety of emotions, ranging from excitement at the thought of returning to the classroom to sadness or resentment about losing the identity of coach. A change in job title doesn't mean former coaches must stop coaching, however.

The first question a coach returning to the classroom must ask is, "Do I want to continue providing coaching support to my colleagues?" If the answer is "Yes," the next question should be, "How much time can I commit?" The activities a reassigned coach engages in will take different forms. Consider these practices that can be combined relatively easily with the duties of a classroom teacher or specialist.

Provide professional development during faculty gatherings. Coaches can provide professional development to fellow teachers during release days or staff meetings, perhaps recruiting colleagues to work with them. School administrations might provide compensation for planning time if they realize that this arrangement can be less expensive and more targeted to school needs than hiring outside consultants.

Use release time to continue coaching on a limited basis. If the administration will make release time or compensation available, former coaches can find hours to give teachers some instructional help. They should meet with teachers to schedule the coaching activities that teachers would most like to continue—such as demonstration lessons, lesson observations and feedback, or data study team meetings.

Refer colleagues to experts. No former coach can respond to all requests. When teachers request assistance from one former technology coach we know, he refers them to other teachers in his network who have expertise in that area. This practice helps prevent the burnout that would result from striving to do two full-time jobs, and it builds collaborative expertise in a school.

Share data analysis. Bethany Sidella, a reading specialist and former coach from Melrose School in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, provides coaching support to colleagues by sharing data. As she enters the school's student literacy assessment data into an online system, she notices patterns of student growth and needs across all classrooms; Bethany points these patterns out to classroom teachers as she shares data.

Bethany also facilitates the process by which the school refers students for extra reading instruction. As her colleagues provide that additional instruction, she shares ideas and strategies. She helps examine data to determine whether specific interventions are improving students' reading skills.

Classroom Teachers

As author John Gabriel notes, teachers can be forces for effecting change in schools.² Here are two actions teachers can take to foster a climate of mutual learning.

Initiate coplanning. Teachers can invite colleagues to jointly plan units, lessons, or assessments. Such sessions are an opportunity for teachers to share specific expertise and divide their work.

Lesson study provides a structure for coplanning. When teachers engage in lesson study, they visit colleagues' classrooms to watch how they teach coplanned lessons, which gives all participating teachers natural opportunities to share their strengths.

Recruit colleagues to join a book study group. Share responsibility for planning and facilitating the meetings among group members. Book study is a powerful form of collaborative professional development. If your administration will grant participants continuing education hours or provide free books or even compensation, teachers will have more incentive to join.

Teacher Leaders

Teachers who assume formal leadership responsibilities—such as team leaders and curriculum chairs—in addition to their teaching roles can naturally incorporate informal coaching activities into these new roles.

Develop and share instructional resources. Teacher leaders should share, and encourage their colleagues to share, their successful units, lesson plans, and resources. It's important to initiate a conversation—"Here's what I did with this lesson; here's what worked beautifully and what I'd do differently next time"—in addition to sharing materials. Wikis can help leaders spread resources—and interactions—across grade levels and subject areas.

Spearhead collaborative analysis of student work. Leaders can guide teaching teams in analyzing student work or assessment results together, using analysis protocols. Colleagues can take turns facilitating. Regular perusal of student work makes a good entry point for teacher discussions of standards, assessments, and specific instructional practices.

Facilitate peer coaching groups. A grade-level team at Northwest Elementary School in Reading, Pennsylvania, volunteered to run its team meetings as a collaborative study group whose members would coach one another to improve literacy instruction. The team leader provided meeting agendas and resources. Teachers agreed to meet regularly, try new instructional techniques, and share their results. Although members initially resisted in-classroom coaching, they later asked to visit one another's classrooms to observe new instructional techniques.

Reading Specialists

Reading specialists are in a prime position to take on responsibilities related to professional development.

Spur joint data analysis. While working as a reading specialist at the Riverside School in Reading, Pennsylvania, Linda Bell created a collaborative data-analysis opportunity by inviting teachers to stay after school to score common assessments together, with snacks provided. The informal conversations about student responses and their relationship to assessment criteria yielded powerful professional learning. They helped teachers see the need to differentiate instruction and to measure student progress with more frequent and varied reading assessments.

Demonstrate lessons and coteach. When reading specialists have enough access to provide intervention within the regular education setting, they can model cutting-edge practices for classroom teachers. It's best to plan demonstration lessons with the teacher in advance, but impromptu experiences and conversations can also influence a peer's practice or beliefs. Another nonthreatening way to demonstrate effective core reading practices is to teach lessons *with* the classroom teacher.

Evolve. Some districts have transformed the role of their reading specialists from directly working with kids to coaching colleagues full- or part-time. For instance, over two years, the job duties of Aimée Ashley, a reading specialist in New Jersey's Greenwich Township School District, evolved from working half the time with students and half the time with teachers to working only with teachers. She recommends using data—such as statistics on students' reading levels, the number of kids who need reading interventions, and the impossibility of one reading specialist serving all struggling readers—to make a case for a reading specialist working with teachers.

Principals

Principals need to design systems and structures that create and sustain opportunities for coaching without a coach.

Schedule common planning time. To improve their teaching skill and understanding, teachers must have common planning time during the work day. To provide teachers with time to meet in professional learning communities, Haley Butler, an assistant principal in Radnor School District in Pennsylvania, created a schedule that frees up time during the school day once a month. Butler collaborates with her reading specialist/coach, Alexis Swinehart, to plan learning communities focused on four areas from which teachers can choose: data-driven discussion, collaborative analysis of student learning, motivating student learning and engagement, and teacher development and social views.

Create sustainable practices. Michael Reed, principal of Williamsport Area High School in Pennsylvania, has set up professional learning opportunities that will be sustainable even if his school loses funds for coaches. When he led Sci-Tech High in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Reed instituted teacher learning walks. Teachers had the opportunity to visit colleagues' classrooms to "browse, borrow, and build." Reed has replicated this nonevaluative practice throughout his new school and district.

When he arrived at Williamsport Area High, it had no coaches, but the school secured a grant to fund six coaching positions starting in the 2011–12 school year, with the stipulation that the positions would only last one to three years. Coaches are currently guiding teachers on learning walks so that after the coaches leave, teachers can facilitate their own learning walks. Reed has also invited central office administrators in the district along on some of the walks so they can share this practice with other schools in the district.

Get creative with release time. Providing release time during the work day poses challenges, including compensating substitute teachers. Thus, principals must get creative. Sarah Bilotti, an

elementary principal in Greenwich Township School District in New Jersey, circumvented these challenges by scheduling herself to substitute in teachers' classes in one-hour blocks. During this release time, teachers meet with the school's reading specialist to engage in professional learning opportunities. Not only does this model demonstrate Bilotti's commitment to professional learning, but it also provides her with a deep understanding of the needs of her classrooms.

District Leadership

District administrators can take big-picture actions to ensure that schools have the structures and resources they need to offer teacher learning opportunities.

Reallocate funds. Severe cutbacks in education funding provide an opportunity to rethink how money is spent. Program funds can be spent in new ways, such as reallocating for professional development money usually spent on renewing equipment and materials that districts could wait a bit longer to replace with no harm done to instruction. For example, use Title I funds to provide professional development, including coaching support, to all the teachers of Title I students.

Partner with universities. District leaders can establish partnerships with local universities that benefit both the district and the university. For example, the Pennsylvania State University School of Education has partnered with the State College Area School District to develop professional development schools, in which prospective and beginning teachers work with expert practitioners in area schools. The veteran teachers who guide the new teachers are providing coaching, but they also enrich their own professional learning by trying new roles as mentors, teacher leaders, or university adjuncts.

Recruit retired teachers. Joyce Atwood, assistant superintendent of Chillicothe City Schools in Ohio, recruited retired reading specialists and teachers to be coaches in her literacy coaching program. She used funds designated for professional development in reading to buy professional books for these coaches that enhanced their work with teachers, and she occasionally offered small stipends. Retired teachers greatly appreciated the opportunity to stay involved with schools and to offer their invaluable expertise.

Advocate. District leaders must continue to advocate for full-time, job-embedded professional development opportunities for all teachers. This includes seeking funding to sustain coaching initiatives and continuing to search for alternative means to provide full-time coaching support.

Coach Is a Verb

Ann Black, a former Classrooms for the Future coach, told us, "One of the best things about becoming a coach has been the community I was able to join." As funding cuts bring an end to some coaching programs, each school's goal should be to sustain this community. We strongly encourage former coaches to maintain the coaching communities they formed with their former colleagues, and—just as important—to make time to nurture internal coaching communities within their schools.

The word *coach* as a noun is very sensitive to external factors such as funding and leadership decisions. However, *coach*, as a verb, is something all educators can do together. Educators in every role can work collaboratively, rethink roles, and support one another to keep coaching alive as they work with—or, sadly, without—a coach.

Endnotes

¹ U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). *Race to the Top fund: Purpose*. Retrieved from www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/index.html

² Gabriel, J. G. (2005). *How to thrive as a teacher leader*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

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