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NOVEMBER 2010

EXPLORING SCHOOL-BASED LEARNING COACHES IN ALBERTA

FOR DISCUSSION

Learning coaches are educators who are knowledgeable about inclusion and are skilled at facilitating teacher collaboration and sharing of promising practices. School-based learning coaches should be part of the school's leadership team, facilitating job-embedded and ongoing professional development for school staff. A learning coach advocates for, facilitates, and supports improved instructional practices with teachers, but *never performs supervision or evaluation*. Through ongoing communication about student learning needs with school administrators, a learning coach is a change agent and culture builder, and contributes to an individualized school growth plan that supports achievement of school, district, and provincial goals. A learning coach makes an ongoing commitment to continue to learn about pedagogical research and trends, technologies and new instructional theories.

Conceptions of school-based coaching and inclusive education from various research sources help to identify attributes that focus on collaboration, professional relationship building and research-based support for the development and improvement of teaching practice in inclusive classrooms and schools.

School-based coaching is “a collegial practice where experienced educators work with teachers in order for teachers to improve classroom instruction.”

DAVIS, 2008

WHAT IS A LEARNING COACH?

"Student-centered coaching puts student work at the center of the coaching conversation. Coaching is not a reflection of what the teacher did or didn't do, but rather, the coach and teacher work together to plan how they can more effectively meet the needs of the students."

SWEENEY (2009)

A LEARNING COACH...

- Is a certificated teacher with indepth knowledge of curriculum as well as an understanding of the diverse learning needs of students
- Demonstrates strong relationship building and collaborative skills with staff
- Applies understanding of change processes
- Draws on shared leadership approaches to build on others' strengths, and respect and motivate others
- Supports learning in a variety of environments
- Demonstrates ability to identify, model and share promising practices related to inclusive education
- Focuses on common and mutually agreed upon goals
- Demonstrates ability to make instructional decisions based on assessment data and information
- Understands the professional development and specific needs of the school community
- Draws upon and models diverse tools and strategies, including differentiated instruction
- Demonstrates understanding and ability to apply positive intervention strategies and supports

A LEARNING COACH SHOULD NOT...

- Focus only on logistical aspects of inclusive classrooms or schools, such as: meeting coordination, materials preparation or developing/monitoring Individual Program Plans (IPPs)
- Act as an expert imparting knowledge or mandating practice
- Evaluate teachers
- Divide teaching responsibilities between teachers and the coach
- Insist that his or her approach to teaching is the only valid one
- Only mentor beginning teachers
- Take responsibility for all assessment in the school
- Focus only on the needs of students with disabilities or diverse needs
- Act as a tutor for students

ROLES AND KEY COMPETENCIES



Learning coaches should have clearly articulated roles within the school environment. Overall, the job of the learning coach is to work *collaboratively* to build the capacity of the school and its teachers for creating and sustaining inclusive learning environments that meet the diverse learning needs of all students. To be most effective, the learning coach is highly skilled at interacting with classroom teachers to build relationships and foster change. Learning coaches will typically spend the majority of their time working collaboratively with teachers in solution-focused, individual one-on-one or small group learning contexts (e.g., identifying instructional needs, promoting reflection, joint problem-solving, modeling, observing, co-planning, or demonstrating instructional strategies through co-teaching). The learning coach also plays a major role in the development and implementation of a school-wide plan to collect, analyze, and use different forms of student achievement data to inform and enhance instructional planning and decision-making.

Effective implementation of school-based coaching roles can be explicitly connected to key competencies that are necessary for effective implementation of a school-based learning coach. Research (Knight, 2004; Killion and Harrison, 2006) emphasizes a number of competencies that qualify coaches to model and improve promising practices.

ROLES

KEY COMPETENCIES

Mentor:

Building and maintaining confidential relationships with teachers so a high level of trust is created and maintained between the teacher and the learning coach

- Strong teaching skills and ability to model
- Ability to build a collaborative team that creates a school culture which encourages open communication and creative problem solving among all members of the learning team
- Ability to provide mentorship to adults in a supportive, collaborative manner that enables them to learn from and provide constructive feedback

Learning Supporter:

Identifying school needs in order to implement a high quality professional learning plan which will enhance teachers' abilities to address the diverse strengths and needs of learners

- Knowledge of promising practices involved in educating diverse learners (e.g., differentiated instruction, assistive technology for learning, etc.)
- Ability to design, develop and support high quality professional learning opportunities for teachers and other school staff

Change Agent:

Promotes exploration and change in instructional practices (e.g., introducing innovative ideas, questioning practices, making observations, exploring new technology)

- Ability to motivate others to implement innovative instructional practices that respond to the needs of 21st century learners
- Knowledge of implementation of sound classroom management, higher-order thinking skills, engagement strategies and differentiated instruction

Instructional Specialist:

Facilitating the use of research-based teaching strategies and promising practices (e.g., differentiated instruction, positive behavior supports, response to intervention) to ensure that all students have access to meaningful and effective learning opportunities

- Understanding of outcome-based planning, including how to plan instruction to achieve outcomes
- A deep understanding of the research on effective instructional strategies and how to align instruction with content

Resource Supplier:

Provides relevant, meaningful, research-based, and "learning appropriate" information and resources upon teacher request

- Knowledge of why and when strategies are effective
- Deep understanding of the Alberta Program of Studies and how programs connect to one another across subject areas and across grade levels
- An instructional leader with in-depth knowledge of local resources, specialists and support systems

Classroom Advocate:

Builds teacher capacity to explore innovative instructional practices through systematic modeling, co-teaching and feedback

- Understanding of how students learn and how teachers make instructional decisions
- Established knowledge and ability to model a rich array of instructional approaches, resources, and technologies across subject areas and grade levels

School Leader:

Works closely with school leadership team to promote and support school improvement that aligns with district vision

- Ability to focus teachers on the big picture first
- Demonstrated understanding of cultural awareness and willingness to adapt practices to align with the diverse needs of students, staff, families and communities

Lifelong Learner:

Models, experiences and promotes continuous learning experiences (e.g., asking questions, researching possibilities, seeking a variety of options)

- Questioning skills
- Ability to share insights and questions from own learning

Assessment Guide:

Helps teachers to select, understand and use data to improve instruction and enhance student learning

- Demonstrated skills in collecting, analyzing and using data for instructional planning

(Killion and Harrison, 2006)

IMPLEMENTATION

"Coaching must effectively deal with complex equity issues such as language diversity and special needs."

THE ANNENBERG INSTITUTE (N.D.)

Implementation of a school-based coaching model can be approached with a variety of strategies, but many effective implementation models share the following key elements:

- School-based coaches are essentially “site-based,” whether they are located in an individual school or have responsibilities for multiple school sites.
- School-based coaching models must provide dedicated time for coaches to work directly with classroom teachers. This should be external to time that some coaches may spend on other roles for which they have responsibility, such as curriculum specialist.
- School-based coaches must be provided with opportunities to have sustained and ongoing interactions with teachers.
- Coaching must be explicitly linked to other professional development and systemic improvement initiatives. In some models, coaches are identified as a primary strategy for delivering professional development while in others, they are part of a multi-faceted professional learning strategy.
- School-based coaches must be qualified, viewed as such by other school staff, and be able to demonstrate and model key competencies. Training coaches and committing to ongoing professional development is a critical success factor.

Many jurisdictions and schools that have successfully implemented school-based coaching effectively are doing so with full-time coaches who have clearly defined roles and expectations and a jointly negotiated schedule. Other approaches may involve the establishments of coaching cycles, which involve in-depth work with teachers over a six to nine-week period of time. For example, a school district may develop a coaching model in which a coach visits a group of between four and 10 teachers at a school twice a week, working alongside them in classrooms as the teams demonstrate, observe, and reflect upon effective instructional practices.

One of the most significant factors of success relates to the degree of leadership and support for school-based coaches from school and jurisdiction leadership and administration. This support should be clearly delineated and established as an integral aspect of the coaching initiative.

Research findings that have implications for the relevance of school-based coaching indicate that "direct coach-teacher interactions were more likely to lead to changes in instructional practice than coaching in small group settings. They also found, however, that coaches were sometimes tasked with extraneous duties, such as paperwork and clerical assignments, and this took significant time away from direct coach-teacher activities. Conversely, coaching that was ongoing and directly related to classroom instruction provided greater evidence of potential and actual improvement than did irregular interactions or activities directed at larger group meetings."

BORMAN & FEGER (2006): P. 5

ROLE OF PRINCIPAL:

- Principal and coach calibrate their view of coaching and the coach's roles and responsibilities ■
- Principal and coach define student-centered coaching for teachers and invite their participation ■
- Principal and coach commit to weekly or biweekly planning meetings ■
- Principal works with teachers to develop school-wide goals for teacher learning that is data-based
- Principal spends time in classrooms on a regular basis
- Principal sets the expectation for teachers to participate in large group, small group, and one-on-one professional development
- Principal develops a schedule that makes time for job-embedded professional development in the large group, small groups, and one-on-one
- Principal manages through issues around climate and culture and sets a tone that all teachers are expected to engage as learners

ROLE OF COACH:

- Coach sets the coaching focus with teachers who are ready to go with one-on-one coaching
- Coach and teachers create a set of agreements for working together in one-on-one coaching and small groups
- Coach monitors and develops relationships with all teachers
- Coach builds a schedule that makes an impact with students and teachers through one-on-one coaching cycles and small group coaching cycles
- Coach and teachers measure impact at the end of one-on-one and small group coaching cycles

"Instructional coaches are team members, who help pull together and lead the right combination of school staff to reach common goals."

JIM KNIGHT (2007)



AN ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE: DAY IN THE LIFE

"One of the strengths of instructional coaching is that it is grounded at the school and classroom level, allowing coaches to work as responsive, constructivist models for professional learning."

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Although there is no such thing as a typical day, the following example provides a sense of some of the responsibilities and tasks a school-based learning coach might experience.

8:00 a.m. Start the day with a consultation with the school principal. Most of the coach's time will be scheduled in the classroom with the teachers. The principal has consulted the coach's online agenda, and has some questions about the strategies the coach will be working on with teachers.

8:45 a.m. The first classroom meeting is in a grade 6 social studies classroom. The grade 6 teacher has been working on the development of research skills and infusing multiple perspectives. He has a lot of questions that he records during his week with the students. The coach and teacher discuss these questions for the 15 minutes before class begins. The coach then models a learning process involving the development of inquiry questions and reminds the grade 6 teacher that their professional learning community group will be meeting to discuss inquiry-focused learning at early dismissal.

10:30 a.m. The coach is then off to a grade 8 classroom, where the teacher also has been focusing on developing research skills. She and the coach look over samples of student work while the students are collecting materials and forming their groups. They then work together with a small group of students who are having difficulty with organizational skills. The coach has brought in a number of different graphic organizers and shares them with the teacher and students. The students choose one to work with and the teacher works with them to organize research data while the coach looks over some other student samples.

The teacher has a preparation period, so coach and teacher work together to select student samples that illustrate writing generalizations and conclusions. They type up samples so that the work is anonymous and discuss how the teacher can use these samples to encourage her students to analyze and improve their writing.

12:30 p.m. After a lunch break, the coach meets with another grade 6 teacher. Their focus is on instructional strategies that they have identified together as supporting an inquiry-based learning approach. The teacher wants to integrate these into both science and social studies, and the coach has brought copies of the Programs of Study so that they can discuss how these strategies can work in the context of specific learning outcomes. They then go together to the classroom so that the coach can observe the implementation of a strategy that they have worked on developing together. The coach will provide some feedback and they agree to continue the discussion via email.

2:30 p.m. Early dismissal, and the inquiry-focused learning group meets in the library. Teachers share and discuss instructional planning, effective strategies and the research related to inquiry-based learning. The coach facilitates the meeting, and provides the teachers with some links to online resources that are research-based and provide some engaging approaches to inquiry-based learning. They do a quick check-in to share their goals for the next time they will work together.

3:30 p.m. The learning coach catches up with some email check-ins with coaches at another school. He provides a brief summary on what teachers have been working on and they discuss options for having the inquiry-focused learning group sharing some insights with other staff members. The coach then plans for tomorrow's grade level meeting with another group of teachers to help them focus on differentiated classroom assessment strategies.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

There are a number of useful references that provide thinking and talking points to inform school-based coaching initiatives. References to start with may include the following:

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