

Evidence-Based Coaching

Key Drivers of Scalable Improvement District-Wide

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INTRODUCTION

Building from our nationally recognized teacher induction program and 20+ years of experience working in close consultative partnerships with hundreds of districts across the country, the New Teacher Center (NTC) has become a leader in teacher development. Today, our evidence-based mentoring and coaching program models support leadership to design sustainable school- and district-based systems of support for teachers at all stages of their careers—from beginners to teacher leaders.

To better understand how to implement effective instructional coaching programs at scale, in 2015, NTC received a five-year *Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED)* grant from the U.S. Department of Education. Working with SRI, the external evaluator for the grant, we are studying the complex process of implementing our rigorous, instructionally focused coaching model in two case study sites. Specifically, this work involves:

- Capturing data that uncovers the existing perceptions, practices, and contextual factors that impacted early implementation at the case study sites
- Using our formative assessment system in conjunction with specific recommended leadership practices to support effective implementation
- Documenting early indicators of positive change in teacher practice and student outcomes

This report presents a summary of findings thus far, including: 1) a brief description of the case for coaching as a driver of instructional improvement and outline of the NTC Program Theory of Action, 2) example data from case study sites that illustrate typical coaching contexts, 3) examples of implementation and course correction strategies with recommendations detailing leadership practices that have resulted in improved implementation in the case study sites, and 4) preliminary data that indicate resulting change in teacher instructional practice at the case study sites with potential impact on student learning anticipated in the longer term.

THE CASE FOR COACHING

Despite the enormous intellectual, scientific, and financial capital the education community has expended to try to fulfill the promise of public education for our systemically under-served students, we've still only seen modest improvements in outcomes over the last decade, with unacceptable achievement gaps persisting on a national scale. The percentage of African-American and Latino students achieving reading proficiency on the 2017 National Assessment of Educational Progress lagged significantly behind that of Caucasian students (20% and 23%, respectively, compared with 47%), with similar results in mathematics as well (19% and 26%, respectively, compared with 51%) (NCES, 2017a; NCES, 2017b).

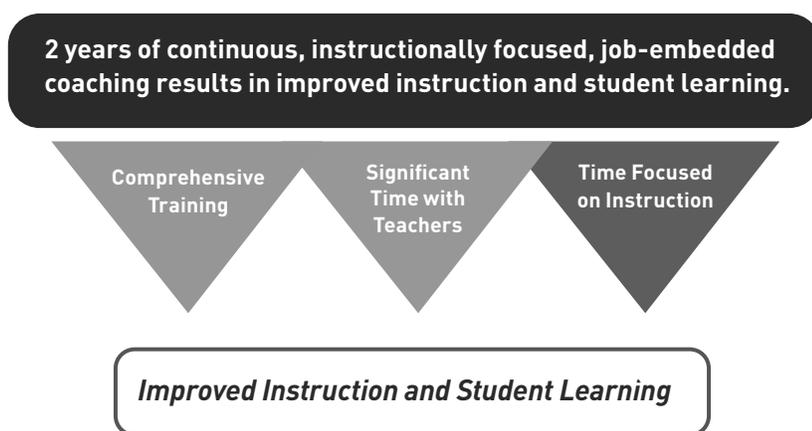
In the ongoing effort to better serve students, districts typically approach instructional improvement through professional development and other supports for teachers, making a wide range of investments including “time and money toward training, mentoring, evaluating and providing ongoing job-embedded experiences” (TNTP, 2015, p. 8). Nationally, we spend an estimated \$18 billion annually on teacher professional development (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2015). Districts typically spend 3 to 5 percent of their budget on professional development (Odden, Archibald, Fermanich, & Gallagher, 2002; Miles, Odden, Fermanich, Archibald, & Gallagher, 2004 as cited in Kraft, Blazar, & Hogan, 2018). The 50 largest districts spend about \$8 billion (TNTP, 2015), with less than 1% of the districts accounting for over 40% of the spending in this space.

Among these investments, instructionally based coaching stands out for having empirical evidence of effectiveness. An important meta-analysis by Kraft, Blazar, & Hogan (2018) shows that content-specific and general coaching programs have substantial effects on teacher instructional practice, although the 43 studies with instructional outcomes included in the meta-analysis reported a fairly wide range of effect sizes.¹ Other research confirms that instructional coaching is associated with improved student learning (Campbell & Malkus, 2011; Lockwood, McCombs, & Marsh, 2010; Kraft, Blazar, & Hogan, 2018; Neuman & Cunningham, 2009).²

NTC MODEL AND EVIDENCE BASE

NTC began developing a coaching model for new teacher induction in the 1990s. We work annually with over 5,000 mentors and 30,000 teachers across the gamut of district and school contexts. Our resulting programmatic theory of action (see Figure 1) is based on this close collaborative work with schools and districts, best-practice research, and empirical studies.

FIGURE 1: NTC PROGRAM THEORY OF ACTION



Our model has been shown to have demonstrable impact on student learning through randomized control trials conducted by external evaluators in districts with over 80 percent of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch.³

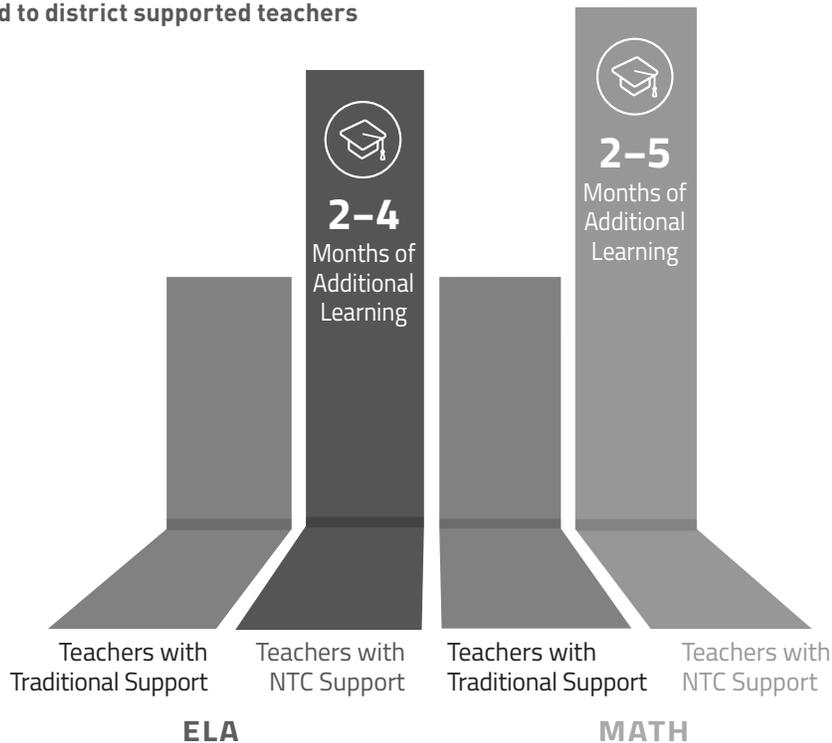
¹ Across the 43 studies included, Kraft et al. (2018) estimated a pooled effect size of 0.49 standard deviations on instructional practice outcomes (e.g., measures using validated classroom observation rubrics).

² Kraft et al. (2018) found that professional learning programs with an instructional coaching component had an effect of 0.18 SDs on student achievement across the 31 studies examining student outcomes and a more moderate effect of 0.12 SDs (not statistically different from the overall 0.18 SDs) on standardized test scores in the 10 studies using those outcomes.

³ Winning two successive federal *Investing in Innovation* (i3) grants, (1) a validation level grant (2013–17) for implementation in two urban districts and one consortium of rural districts; and (2) a scale-up grant (2016–20) for another five urban districts has allowed for evaluation and independent study of our model and implementation supports by national third-party evaluators. The evaluation of our mentoring model with the i3 validation grant found high implementation fidelity and corresponding positive and significant impact on reading and mathematics achievement in grades 3 through 8 (Young, Schmidt, Wang, Cassidy, & Laguarda, 2017). Preliminary results from SRI’s ongoing evaluation of the scale-up effort also show effects on both teacher practice and student achievement (Schmidt, Laguarda, & Wang, 2019.)

FIGURE 2: ADDITIONAL MONTHS OF STUDENT LEARNING

Additional Months of Student Learning in ELA and Math compared to district supported teachers



Source: SRI International Evaluation, 2016

As we've extended our learning to support districts to develop coherent systems of educator development that support all educators at a site as they progress in their careers through instructional coaching, NTC's program theory of action has continued to guide the evolution of our models.

The overarching takeaway across this work is that the existing context for coaching at school and district sites matters, and changing perspectives and behaviors in significant ways is required at multiple levels of the system to support effective program implementation. This means coordinating explicit district and school leadership support for the effort, cultivating broad buy-in and shared understanding, and sustaining implementation fidelity with patience while waiting for evidence of change in teacher practice and then in student outcomes. This comes as no surprise, nor is it necessarily unique to instructional coaching as a reform.

Because the setting for coaching can influence (either directly or indirectly) the philosophical approach and buy-in to the program as well as the myriad of cascading decisions that impact how the coaching program operates, it is important to pay attention and address existing contextual factors. A better understanding of these conditions can support leadership to then make the kinds of necessary adaptive changes required by the specific circumstances of the site. Recognizing this, the design of our program model includes iterative consultation and data analysis to help districts pivot from the existing status quo to more intentional leadership practices that promote and develop an aligned and coherent instructional vision supported through coaching.

COACHING CONTEXTS AND IMPLEMENTATION TRENDS

Districts across the country have been investing in coaching over the last decade in some form or another as a strategy to support teachers to improve instruction, but specific variables can vary widely, such as:

- **Coaching coordination and focus:** Coaches may be supervised from multiple district departments with different specified goals. Literacy instruction is a common target for coaching, but coaches can also specialize in other content areas such as math or science. Coaches may also cut across subject areas to focus on general pedagogy, data analysis skills, differentiation, and equity mindset. Teachers may even receive support from multiple coaches at once. Teacher expectations about coaching can thus be shaped by perceptions and prior experiences related to content focus, expertise, and coaching strategies, as well as support from multiple sources.
- **Targetted teachers:** Some districts deploy coaches to serve specific groups of teachers, such as novices, those new to a grade level, teachers in specific content areas, or those deemed in need of improvement. This can dramatically impact teacher buy-in and perspectives about who needs support. More commonly, districts may not have criteria for determining who receives coaching support, or the decision may be left to individual school leaders.
- **Roles and responsibilities:** While coaches are often considered full-time coaches from an HR perspective, it is common for coaches to assume additional responsibilities because they often do not have students full time. For example, a school-based coach may be expected to double as a testing coordinator, cover other school routines such as cafeteria or recess duty, step in as a substitute if a teacher is absent unexpectedly, or fulfill administrative responsibilities such as submitting district and state data.
- **Role of PLCs:** Districts often include PLCs as a best practice for teacher collaboration. However, actual PLC time often falls short, and PLCs are commonly used as administrative or coordinating meetings and lack structure or a consistent instructional focus.

The following common characteristics and illustrative data from case study sites further demonstrate typical coaching contexts and implementation trends.

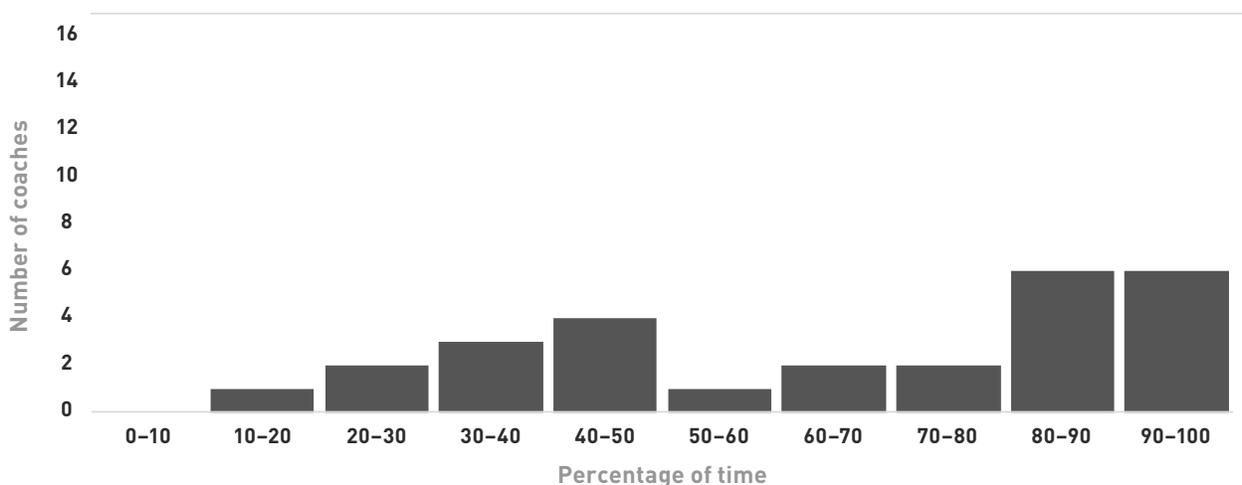
Existing programs/program components and prior experiences and perceptions impact effectiveness

Many districts that already have basic structures to support coaching programs on paper—identified coach positions in HR, PLCs and collaborative planning on the master calendar—do not always implement the program in ways that lead to success. In addition, leadership and staff may be operating from unclear or unspoken assumptions about what coaching is, who it is for, and coach roles. Not understanding, accounting for, and restructuring the existing context for the program can impact buy-in and implementation in significant ways.

Coaches spend little time actually coaching, and time spent coaching is not instructionally focused

The most common practice inhibiting effectiveness is frequently and consistently tasking coaches with non-coaching duties (testing, lunch or recess duty, etc.). Then, what little time they do spend coaching is too often not instructionally focused. Similarly, PLCs, teams, or collaborative planning groups either don't meet consistently or spend their time on coordination or administrative tasks. Especially in sites where a coaching program has previously existed, we find that the actual time coaches report spending on coaching is surprisingly low. For example, in one of our case study sites, around 80% of coaches reported spending about half their time on activities other than coaching (see Figure 3).

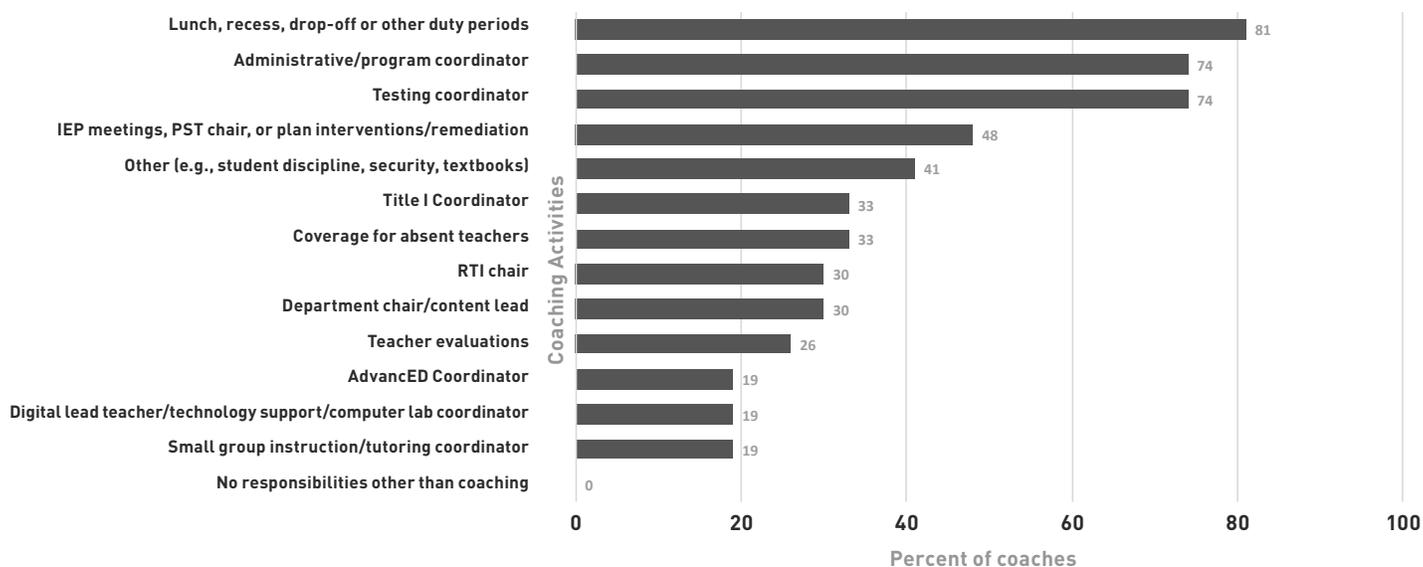
FIGURE 3: DISTRIBUTION OF COACHES BY PERCENTAGE OF TIME SPENT ON NON-COACHING DUTIES



Source: SRI Education, Coach Survey 2018

When asked how they spend their time, these coaches reported many competing demands and priorities such as coordinating testing, covering duties such as recess, lunch time, and school dismissal, and other administrative tasks (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 4: NON-COACHING DUTIES REPORTED BY COACHES

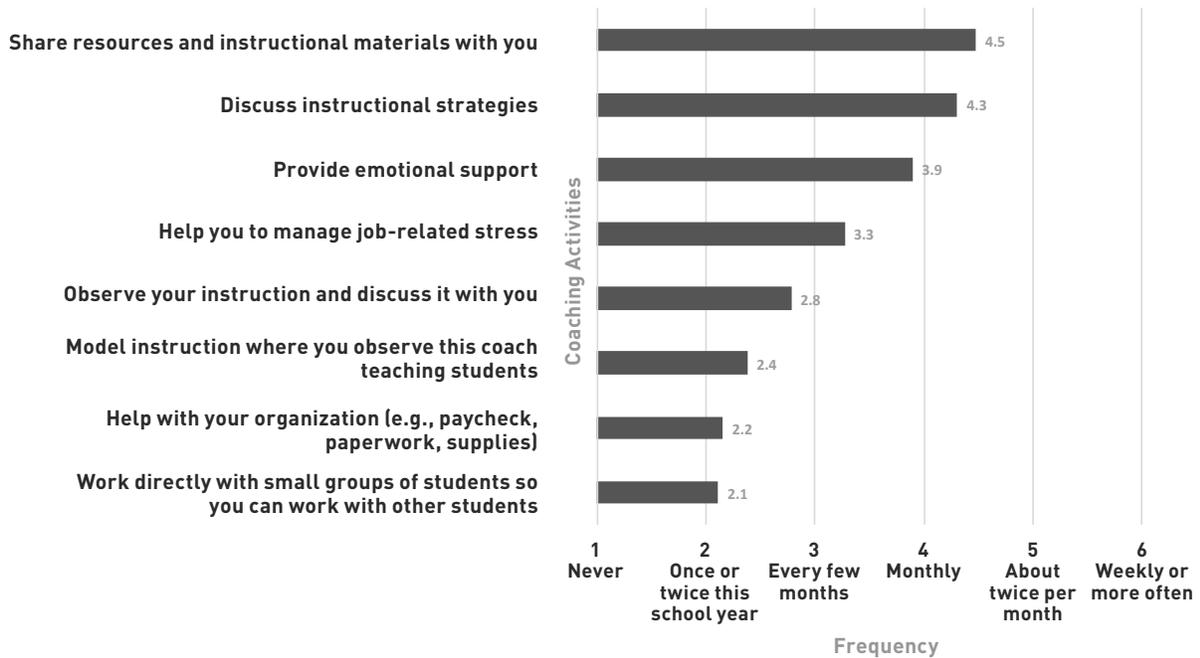


Source: SRI Education, Coach Survey, 2018

At the heart of any successful instructional coaching model is a laser-like focus on instruction, which can be a significant departure from the way school leaders, coaches, and teachers have experienced coaching in the past. We found that when coaches in the case study sites did spend time with teachers, that time often was not focused on instruction or the high-leverage coaching practices. As Figure 5

illustrates, three of the top four activities teachers reported spending time on with their coaches were not focused on instructional improvement. Rather, coaches most often supported teachers by sharing resources, providing emotional support, and helping manage stress.

FIGURE 5: TEACHER REPORTS OF COACHING SUPPORTS RECEIVED

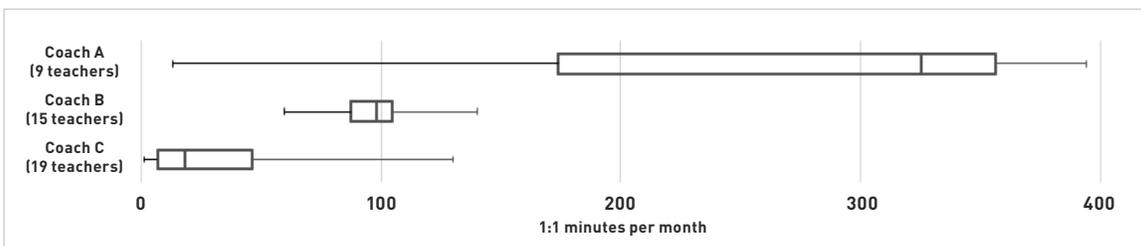


Source: SRI Education, Coach Survey 2018

We’ve also seen that the amount and type of instructional support provided can vary dramatically within a district and from coach to coach. Figure 6 below illustrates the variation among just three coaches in one of the case study districts. Coach A had the lowest number of teachers to support and the highest average 1:1 time per month with her teachers but also the widest variation in time spent with individual teachers. Some of her teachers received far more minutes in 1:1 time with her than others, including at least one teacher who received less than 25 minutes per month on average. Coach C averaged approximately 20 minutes per month per teacher in 1:1 time, with her highest number of minutes being less than half the average of Coach A.

FIGURE 6: HOW COACHES SPEND THEIR TIME WITH TEACHERS

Coaches Logging the Highest, Median, and Lowest 1:1 Minutes per Month



Source: SRI Education, Coach Log Data, 2018

As these data illustrate, coaches' time can be fragmented and inconsistently allocated to coaching tasks or across teachers, and the small amount of time that is spent coaching may not be focused on the practices that will improve instruction.

Mindsets about coaching limit buy-in and impact

Some teachers, especially veterans, are reluctant to receive coaching, especially when the criteria for being assigned a coach and the type of support provided is not explicit. In traditional school settings, teachers expect autonomy and even privacy as leaders of their own classrooms.

The norms in many schools reflect the belief that veteran teachers should need minimal outside guidance beyond coordinating and sharing administrative tasks and collaborating on lesson plans or assessments. Only novices and underperformers are viewed as needing a coach.

New teachers are widely acknowledged as needing support, suffer no stigma from receiving help, and are generally appreciative of any assistance they receive during those daunting first years in the classroom. Veteran teachers, on the other hand, can be resistant. This may be caused by fear of being viewed as underperforming, perceptions that a coach with fewer years of teaching experience won't have valuable strategies, or a belief that they simply don't need help even if changing teaching assignments or implementing new strategies, curriculum, and other mandates required at both the district and/or school level.

In addition, coach assumptions and perspectives need to be shifted, too. In our sample sites, for example, existing coaches were used to responding to many types of requests—from administrative and resource needs (e.g., finding suitable classroom materials and activities) to typical classroom management (e.g., organizing a room to improve flow between student centers) to more content-focused and instructionally rich questions (e.g., how to assess an objective). Because these contacts with teachers were essentially fielding questions or requests, coaches had a more willing and eager audience. Typical interactions were usually brief and not necessarily designed to build a teacher's skills and competencies through a series of planned coaching sessions.

This kind of relationship-based, on-demand coaching that prevailed in most schools in the case study districts in the past differed from the intentional and intensive focus on advanced standards-based knowledge and skills that is at the heart of the NTC model and that is essential for the continuous, career-long professional learning and support that every teacher requires and deserves.

Coaching is not aligned with other instructional priorities

Coaching is typically brought into a mix of competing programs without a vision for alignment with other school and district initiatives. Too often coaching adds another layer of activity and expectations with resulting confusion, redundancy, and continuing gaps in professional learning for teachers.

An example from one of our case study sites illustrates the complex landscape into which coaching programs are often introduced. At the same time one district was shifting from an existing coaching approach to the NTC instructional coaching model, it was also in the middle of developing new curriculum frameworks in response to new state content standards, employing curriculum specialists to help schools shift instruction. During the initial transition to the NTC coaching model, instructional coaches were not only grappling with new approaches to working with teacher rosters and PLCs, coaches and teachers alike were learning about the new curriculum frameworks, with curriculum specialists working directly but separately from coaches. While coaches and curriculum specialists were tasked with supporting teachers instructionally, these efforts were coming from multiple offices creating confusion in the schools about what kinds of support were supposed to be provided by whom.

RECOMMENDATIONS: DISTRICT LEADERSHIP FOR A NEW COACHING MODEL

Given the range of contextual issues that can impact effectiveness, the following recommendations illustrate example strategies and leadership practices that support implementation of quality coaching.

Approach implementation with a change management orientation based on initial and ongoing analysis of contextual and program data

Because our grantee districts had invested in coaching in the past, we found a wide range of existing practices related to coaching, many of which were not effective, already in place. While structural changes such as creating new coaching positions or setting up PLCs require significant effort in sites without active programs, changing the nature and focus of existing coaching program components and related perceptions can be an even more challenging task.

To make the changes required for effective implementation of the NTC coaching model, we worked with our case study districts to build shared understandings and norms at each level of the system. Decision makers needed the same core information, including teacher and coach survey results and implementation data on coaching activities, to help illuminate and size the gap between the status quo and the changes they hoped to see with the new coaching program.

This allowed key leaders to align messaging with common assumptions, concerns, and perspectives to support buy-in. This also helped district and school leaders, coaches, and teachers to identify existing perceptions, behaviors, and activities to modify or stop and to define and adopt a new vision of the goals and strategies of the instructional coaching program.

In our case study sites, district leaders discussed coaching roles, activities, and concrete strategies at principal meetings. We also worked closely with chief academic officers who garnered superintendent-level support to generate buy-in from those who could influence others to pivot. By having strong central office support, NTC was also able to advocate for convening the critical stakeholders to engage in dialogue about course corrections throughout the work. School leaders also met informally or formally in their own PLCs to learn from each other about leadership practices to guide instructional coaching. Finally, the district leveraged early adopters and bright-spot schools to share best practices and lessons learned with colleagues. All along the way, this process was based on data sharing.

- **Dedicate significant time to building awareness and providing clarity about a new vision for coaching**
- **Collect and share teacher and coach survey data to explicitly address assumptions and perspectives in messaging about the program**
- **Share data with key district leaders to craft a new vision and concrete goals related to coaching activities to develop district capacity, create a baseline for progress monitoring, and support sustainability for the work from the start**
- **Identify influential leaders to help shift from the status quo**
- **Convene and regularly share program data with key stakeholders to contextualize goals and priorities, inform decision-making, and identify gaps and needs for modification**
- **Share and celebrate lessons learned, successes, and best practices**

Protect coaches' time and prioritize instructional focus

Data from our grantee sites indicated that, historically, each school in the case study districts independently directed its own instructional coaching program. Thus, school leaders and coaches held varying assumptions and expectations related to coach roles, including how coaches should spend their time and with which teachers.

To fully implement an effective instructional coaching model, school leaders needed to think differently about staffing resources and develop a common understanding about coaching roles and responsibilities. In our case study sites, school leaders who were able to maximize their coaching resources publicly expressed a commitment to protecting coaches' time, communicated to the whole staff expectations for all teachers to work with a coach through PLCs and 1:1 time, and supported coaches in accessing all teachers on their rosters. In addition, principals removed non-coaching duties from the coaches' plates and refrained as much as possible from tapping the coach for ad hoc administrative responsibilities.

NTC also supported district lead coaches to frequently and consistently clarify and reiterate expectations with coaches and school leaders and collaboratively developed a coach expectations document that detailed the role and responsibilities to ensure all identified teachers received sufficient levels of support. These expectations focused on the frequency and duration of coaching interactions as well as their content, emphasizing instruction over other types of contacts given the limited time coaches have with teachers. This reinforcement helped establish the purpose, responsibilities, and performance expectations for coaches, principals, lead coaches, and district leaders. In particular, it underscored the expectation that coaches should dedicate their time to supporting teachers and PLCs and discouraged the tendency to pull coaches away to pitch in on other school or district operations.

From a district perspective, this allowed more seamless movement across schools as principals and coaches inevitably transferred to other buildings. District program managers also identified specific school leaders who might need more individual support in prioritizing coaches' and PLC time.

To support this effort to first generate a shared understanding of expectations and then to frequently monitor what was happening in individual programs, case study sites used NTC's online data and reporting system to support data capture and analysis of how coaches spent their time, including frequency of interactions, time spent, and coaching focus, with emphasis on high-leverage coaching tools aligned with a teaching and coaching cycle of planning, observation, and analysis of student learning.

- **Create and socialize an explicit statement about coach duties to foster common understanding among district leaders, school leaders, coaches, and teachers**
- Provide deliberate district guidance and support for principals to protect coaches' time
- Regularly collect, review, and share program data about coaching activities
- **Develop a process for understanding how coaches spend time with teachers to ensure high levels of instructionally focused support**

Shift perceptions about coaching from “stigma” to “norm” for professional growth

The district and school are critical in promoting a cultural shift around coaching. The school leader in particular can message a “coaching for all” mindset and building-wide expectations that coaching involves intentional, sustained instructional support as the norm for professional growth.

In grantee sites, a concerted effort was made to shift toward a growth mindset and assets-based coaching stance and to remove a deficit orientation. Districts first established clear criteria for school leaders to use in identifying specific teachers as coaching priorities—such as those who were novices, new to a grade or subject assignment, or new to the district—so that selected teachers did not feel singled out based on performance issues.

The schools most successful in accessing teachers had principals who made a clear and public commitment to coaching and PLCs and followed up with coaches and teachers about whether they met consistently and productively. To push the cultural shift, one school leader messaged that “Every teacher deserves a coach” to promote the importance of coaching and the need for each teacher to commit to their own learning and improvement and to combat assumptions that only certain teachers required coaching.

NTC’s instructional coaching model employs a specific roster of teachers identified for intensive individual and sustained coaching. Rostering is designed to focus coach attention on interactions with a manageable number of specific teachers that are sustained through the school semester or year to allow enough time to deepen instruction and see meaningful growth.

Despite the messaging from leadership, not all teachers on rosters in the case study sites agreed that they needed coaching, and coaches reported requiring additional strategies and non-stigmatizing entry points to address resistance. Coaches able to win over reluctant teachers used multiple avenues to gain access, including leveraging questions teachers raised during PLCs to follow up, offering to model a specific lesson for each grade-level team member, making walkthroughs in every classroom a standard practice, and encouraging teachers to raise particular concerns they wanted the coach’s input on.

- Explain to staff the rationale for rostering, a focused list of teachers who meet clear, non-stigmatizing criteria to receive coaching
- Take strategic steps to change mindsets about who gets a coach and promote coaching as a norm for professional growth for all educators
- Provide coaches with strategies to access reluctant teachers and use ongoing coach meetings to workshop different approaches to challenging situations
- Identify specific needs of veteran teachers and ensure that the coaching cadre has the capacity to address them

Organize for coherence and integration with district instructional improvement efforts

As the example of our case study site implementing coaching in the middle of a curriculum initiative illustrated, intentional effort to align and coordinate coaching as part of a coherent instructional improvement plan is required. After the district clarified respective roles in the context of clear messages about high-quality instruction and expected instructional changes, teachers had a better understanding of what was being asked of them, and coaching support was aligned to the instructional shifts the district had prioritized.

In addition, the district clarified the highest priority instructional strategies and put together teams of district leaders, school leaders, and coaches to observe for those strategies using a common classroom walkthrough protocol. Coaches and curriculum specialists were clearer about their respective roles in supporting teachers. In the most instructionally aligned schools, school leaders stated school improvement goals that dovetailed with the district's instructional priorities. This increased coherence and allowed the district to leverage instructional coaches' roles. Instructional coaches could carry district messages about key instructional changes and provide concrete examples of what they looked like in the classroom to support the shifts the district wanted to see.

Again, we used our online data system to support this coordination. By tracking coaching activities, districts were able to monitor the frequency and duration of coaching interactions, the tools that were used, and the content focus for individual and PLC meetings. NTC and district lead coaches used these timely data to design supports for the coaches. The data indicated, for example, whether coaches needed help in accessing their rostered teachers more frequently, meeting with teachers for longer periods to be able to engage more deeply, or using high-leverage tools that focus on key skills to support shifts in instruction, such as building stronger student agency in learning. The data also served as a reflection tool for district leaders, highlighting important implementation issues related to use of coaching time and number, type, and quality of interactions with teachers.

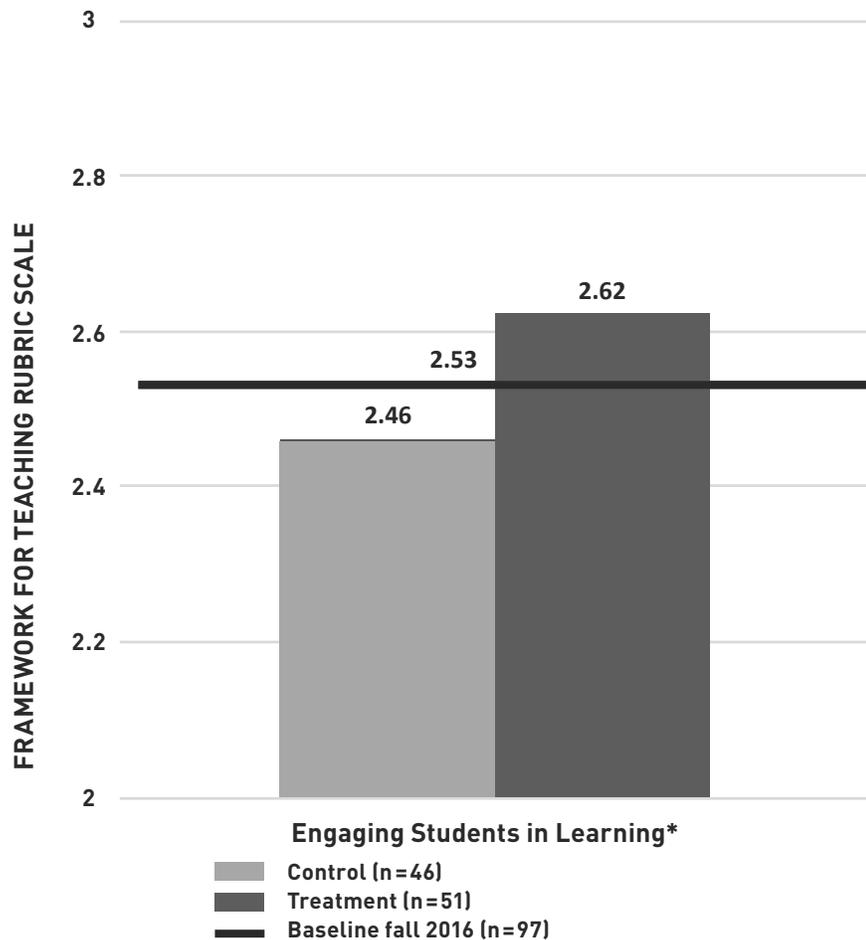
- **Ensure the district defines and shares a common vision for high-quality instruction**
- **Align district policy, resources, and supports so that coaching is consistent with and reinforces the district's overall instructional improvement approach**
- **Collect relevant data related to implementation to improve instructional coaching efforts**

PROMISING RESULTS: PRELIMINARY IMPROVEMENTS IN INSTRUCTION

Despite variation in coaching activities across schools, the intentional strategies for refocusing implementation of instructional coaching described in the examples and recommendations above resulted in preliminary improvements in instruction and teaching practice at the case study sites.

For example, based on observations using the Framework for Teaching (Danielson, 2013) conducted by SRI in early implementation of the NTC instructional coaching model and then two years later, teachers receiving coaching from NTC-supported coaches had statistically significantly higher scores on engaging students in learning compared with coaches receiving the districts' status quo supports. Additionally, the NTC supported group improved from baseline while the status quo group declined from baseline, based on blind observations.

FIGURE 7: MEAN OBSERVATION SCORES FOR ENGAGING STUDENTS IN LEARNING



Note: *The Framework for Teaching* (Danielson, 2013) uses a 4-point rubric where 1=Unsatisfactory, 2=Basic, 3=Proficient, 4=Distinguished; $p < .05$.

Source: Laguarda, et al, 2019. Laguarda, K.G., Wang, H., Cassidy, L., Goetz, R. (2019). *Evaluation of New Teacher Center's Instructional Coaching for Academic Success SEED Grant*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International. Unpublished data.

While we have seen positive shifts in how coaches spend their time and how they support teachers, our data still show wide variation in the amount of support teachers receive that is focused on instruction. This range in implementation quality implies that the focus of coaching may not be consistent enough yet to impact overall student learning.

However, consistent with other research on coaching, student achievement impacts often may lag implementation. For example, Allen, Pianta, Gregory, Milkami, & Lun (2011) found effects on mathematics achievement the year after the coaching intervention, Harris and Sass (2009) found that student achievement effects accrued in the 3 years following teacher participation in professional development, and Lockwood et al. (2010) found higher student achievement among the teacher cohort receiving coaching for the longest period of time (4 years).

Therefore, the initial improvements we are seeing in teacher practice suggest the impact of instructional coaching is tracking in the right direction, and improvements in student achievement may emerge subsequently as effective coaching practices take hold with more consistency across coaches and school contexts.

Our findings thus far from the SEED grant indicate that early implementation efforts that take into account critical existing contextual factors to make site-relevant course corrections can mean the difference between a coaching program that is just another initiative with negligible impact and a program that has the potential to drive instructional improvement, build collective efficacy, and transform school culture. The recommendations provided in this report align with our consultation support for district leadership implementing mentoring and coaching programs as part of broader teacher development initiatives.

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