

## LEARNING FROM DISTRICTS SERIES BRIEF 4

# Designing Instructional Coaching to Support Today's Teachers

## THREE RECOMMENDATIONS

Today's educational landscape—with its attendant challenges of pandemic-related disruptions and shifting state and district policies about “appropriate” content and pedagogy—requires a revitalized and more comprehensive vision for how coaching might support teachers' professional learning. Teachers today face constant demands to adapt instruction and incorporate new learning tools and modalities. They need professional learning opportunities that will equip them to provide high-quality, tailored instruction that meets students' needs and is aligned to state standards.

Our research on different approaches to professional learning indicates that coaching can help teachers meet these challenges and accelerate student learning. Indeed, **many districts are planning to use money from the federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund to deploy more instructional coaches. District leaders have much to gain from knowing how to optimize the coaching they assign.**

Instructional coaching is a powerful instrument for sharpening teachers' methods and skills in a way that leads to greater student learning—as demonstrated by a robust research base and in practice. District leaders can amplify the effects of coaching if they know how to optimize this beneficial process. Our research in the field sheds light on how leaders can achieve this.

Here we offer three specific design recommendations that leaders can implement to optimize coaching. We explore each of these evidence-based conditions and activities, drawing on research studies we have conducted in recent years, including those from the IES Center on Standards, Alignment, Instruction, and Learning (C-SAIL), a seven-year project investigating the impact of college- and career-ready standards on K–12 instruction in five states (Ohio, California, Massachusetts, Texas, and Pennsylvania). We also draw on results from Woulfin and colleagues’ research on the organizational conditions and leadership that support instructional coaching. We link results from this research with ideas for how educational reformers and leaders can reset systems to accelerate learning and change, using coaching as a catalyst. For a complete list of references, see end of the brief.

### **What Is Instructional Coaching?**

Over the past two decades, instructional coaching has become a popular lever for district reform and instructional improvement in many states. Instructional coaches are primarily focused on teacher learning, often working with groups or individual teachers to observe classroom practices, provide supportive feedback, and model instructional strategies, as well as engage in administrative responsibilities, lead professional development workshops, and liaise with district and state stakeholders. Coaching mediates the relationship between government policy (federal, state, and district) and classroom practice, because coaches often work directly with teachers to shift classroom practice, advance reform efforts, and improve student outcomes.

Districts approach coaching in different ways. Variables include:

- **Coaches’ roles.** Districts may deploy coaches as introducers (or even enforcers) of reform, with coaching functioning as a lever for compliance—or they may lean on coaches as collaborative thought partners or mentors.
- **Deployment.** Districts may offer embedded coaching, with coaches working at one school and in teachers’ classrooms—or they may have coaches work in multiple schools, especially when districts have only one special education or English Language coach who must divide time among schools.
- **Targeting.** In some instances, coaches target certain sets of educators (for example, first-year teachers).
- **Delivery.** Coaches may work in person or they may coach remotely or use digital technologies in ways that mediate the teaching/coaching relationship.
- **Approach.** Coaches may be directive (acting as experts) or more responsive (engaging in joint inquiry and reflection with teachers).

## Three Recommendations for Optimizing Coaching

There are many types of coaching—ranging from district- to school-based and embedded to virtual (see box). Our research tells us, however, that the type or model of coaching matters much less than **the right design features, which can enable coaches to carry out their core work. What matters most is how districts design, support, and define coaching as part of a broader professional learning strategy.**

Optimization of coaching requires close consideration of the **infrastructure for instructional improvement**, particularly in developing clear structures, systems, routines, and leadership activities around coaching. Optimization also entails developing stable resources for coaching, transparent guidelines on who coaches whom, aligned professional supports for coaches, and robust, shared understandings of the purpose of coaching. Drawing from the C-SAIL research project and our separate research on coaching initiatives in several districts, we offer three recommendations for developing and optimizing high-quality coaching opportunities:

- identify and strengthen district-level infrastructure for coaching;
- align coaching with other instructional-improvement pillars—district priorities, curriculum, and standards; and
- help coaches develop local knowledge and strong relationships.

### Recommendation 1: Strengthen district-level infrastructure for coaching.

To optimize coaching, we recommend that district leaders strengthen the infrastructure for instructional improvement and align it with coaching itself. The elements of this infrastructure are **curriculum, professional development, and leadership.**

The nature and quality of this infrastructure can enable adult learning and school reform. Infrastructure guides the process of coaching. As illustrated by Sarah Woulfin’s research, system leaders can take active steps to create and bolster the infrastructure for coaching, including allocating time and resources to develop coaches’ capacity related to priorities and reforms.

In the C-SAIL project, we likewise found that districts played a critical role in providing infrastructure for instructional improvement, which in turn shaped aspects of coaching. Each of the five districts we studied included some form of coaching, but

in some of the districts coaching represented a key part of the professional learning infrastructure and aligned smoothly with the district's curriculum and leadership efforts.

In Ohio, California, and Texas districts, coaches were directly involved with teachers' professional learning communities and participated (or led) monthly and quarterly district- and school-level professional development sessions. Coaches met regularly with teachers and had clearly defined roles in the district ecosystem. California provided teachers access to instructional coaches for English Language Arts, math, English language learners, and special education, and those **coaches not only coordinated with one another but often joined teachers' professional learning communities and provided leadership at district- and school-based professional development sessions.** In these districts, coaches mediated teachers' work with curriculum materials, particularly in helping educators understand and implement new curricula and follow the districts' scope-and-sequence documents; coaches thus served as important liaisons between educators and district leadership. In making coaches a key part of district infrastructure for educational improvement, districts can balance flexibility with specific guidance in ways that support educators in implementing state standards and district policies.

In contrast, **other districts struggled with how to support and develop their instructional coaches.** The Pennsylvania urban district had too few coaches, so they were stretched thin—only first-year teachers received a coach, and even then, only for a few sessions. The Massachusetts rural district left it up to individual schools to determine how to support coaches. The district provided little training or opportunity to connect with other coaches or district leadership. In Texas, while the coaches' role was well defined, the infrastructure for training coaches was lacking, with one coach noting: “There's not a whole lot of coaching for people who are coaches.”

In a study of an urban public school district's approach to professional development for coaches, Woulfin found that the training fostered a professional community for the district's school-based coaches, but that it focused mainly on current district reforms, with less attention to how coaches should engage in coaching routines.

## Recommendation 2: Align coaching with your district's priorities, curriculum, and standards.

Coaches are more likely to contribute to deeper levels of change when they advance and reinforce ideas that are coupled with standards-aligned curricula, rather than offering diffuse or loosely coupled messages to teachers. That means that coaches can—and should—promote curriculum when they work with teachers and other educators. Our research found that **coaches advanced instructional reform when they reinforced messages on district-adopted reading curricula, playing a role in coupling the curricular messages with teachers' classroom practice.** What's more, district leaders play an important part in shaping how coaches support alignment with district priorities and curricula.

In the C-SAIL project, we found that the coaches' alignment with the district curriculum materials, strategic plan, school improvement priorities, and federal, state, and district instructional standards shaped teachers' pedagogical practices and standards implementation. We conducted an intervention study that provided virtual coaches to classroom teachers, with a central goal of supporting teachers in aligning their instruction to college- and career-readiness standards. Survey responses following the coaching indicated that teachers did significantly improve the alignment of their instruction. The teachers we interviewed reported that the **coaching bettered their understanding of state standards, focused their attention on the alignment of their instruction to state standards, and ultimately helped them improve their instruction to support students in learning the content of the standards.** One teacher said that the individualized nature of the coaching was particularly helpful in accomplishing these goals, in contrast to the typical, more broadly targeted professional development in her district. As this intervention study illustrates, **helping to enhance teachers' knowledge and skills related to state standards and standards-based instruction is one form of alignment that coaches can facilitate.**

## Recommendation 3: Help coaches develop local knowledge and relationships.

To maximize the potential of instructional coaching, system leaders need to **set the stage for coaches to learn about the local school context so coaches can develop positive professional relationships with teachers and tailor their messaging and coaching routines to specific needs.** In the C-SAIL project, both teachers and coaches underscored the importance of developing this understanding. Coaches who were embedded in a single school had opportunities to do so, learning about specific teacher needs as well as the many variables teachers navigated on a daily basis. The coaches we interviewed also stressed the importance of building trust. As one Ohio coach said, “I think the relationship has to come first before anything will be productive.”

By contrast, coaches who went into a classroom only once or who spent limited time with teachers often lacked this understanding. For example, we found that virtual C-SAIL coaches, who were not embedded within specific school buildings, often had less awareness of contextual factors. While the online coaching did benefit many teachers during the intervention study, allowing them the opportunity to reflect with the coach and observe students more objectively, the coaches were limited in the assistance and support they could provide. **Teachers noticed that coaches’ feedback was more robust when coaches understood the school and classroom context, including what transpired before and after the observed lesson.** Coaches need to develop nuanced understandings not only of state and district policy, demographics, and culture but also of school- and classroom-specific factors that shape teaching and learning on a moment-to-moment basis. Coaches who demonstrate wide knowledge of these multiple factors often have more buy-in from local teachers.

### Putting the Recommendations into Practice

Refining several facets of coaching could help coaches do their most supportive work in the service of addressing pandemic-related challenges in K–12 schools. School and district leaders play a key role in raising the potential of coaching to drive change. They can do so in these concrete ways:

- District and school leaders are responsible for **actively promoting coaching.** In particular, district leaders can engage in clear, consistent, and persuasive framing on the rationale for coaching and why coaching is a priority.

- Principals can **create positive working conditions for coaches** by improving collaboration systems, including improving the schedule for individual and team meetings with teachers. Principals can also collaborate with coaches to **ensure shared understandings of the focus and nature of coaching**. Principals can also **elevate coaches and their coaching** by introducing the coach to teachers, explaining their expertise, and making it clear that they value educators' productive engagement with coaches.
- Central-office leaders should **provide funding and other resources to design and continuously improve their coaching model**. This would entail collecting data on coaching processes and outcomes to precisely understand coaches' use of time, teachers' perceptions of the usefulness of coaching routines, and changes in teachers' classroom practice. Leaders would then draw on this data and other forms of evidence to design and target coaching so it aligns to strategic-plan and school-improvement priorities. Central-office leaders should refine the hiring and supporting of coaches to **ensure they have appropriate knowledge and skills related to leadership, content and curriculum, and data analysis**. Notably, it will be vital to develop coaches' skills on facilitating effective professional learning to accelerate adult learning.
- District leaders should encourage principals to **create school-level conditions that support both coaching and collaboration**. This may involve creatively adjusting the calendar and schedules or using technology such as Zoom for virtual touchpoints with coaches. Finally, central-office leaders should work collaboratively to **draft clear district-level definitions of and guidelines for coaching, setting clear expectations on what coaches focus on and who is coached**. This lays the groundwork for strong, positive norms around engaging with coaches.

This brief is based on the following articles:

Atchison, D., Garet, M., Smith, T., & Song, M. (2022). The validity of measures of instructional alignment with state standards based on Surveys of Enacted Curriculum. *AERA Open*, 8(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584221098761>

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