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# Instructional Coaching: An Essential Element for Building and Maintaining Instructional Capacity

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INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING: AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT FOR BUILDING AND  
MAINTAINING INSTRUCTIONAL CAPACITY

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## Preface

Instructional coaching was a district-level initiative we were just beginning to get off the ground while I was transitioning from an assistant principal at a school where I implemented process writing to director of curriculum, instruction, and assessment for the district. District level leadership offers another layer of complexity that does not exist at the building level. For one, my role shifted to developing systems and structures: I would no longer manage initiatives at the building level; that was the role of the principals and assistant principals. My new role was to set up the culture and conditions that would support professional learning at the district level. This did offer me the opportunity to expand what I had started in my previous role, which I was excited about. I learned that the higher up the systems ladder you move, the more political it can get. At the district level, I realized I was dealing with a wider swath of issues and dynamics that were unique to each school's environment, and often reflective of the building's leadership.

Instead of working with teams of teachers within one building, I was now working with teams of instructional facilitators from all five buildings in the district. I was also now the instructional leader of the principals, who had previously been my colleagues. Given a new vantage point, I suddenly became privy to dynamics and issues that couldn't be seen from the building level. There was a lot happening.

Amidst all this, instructional coaching had emerged as the priority, and as such it needed a lot of attention. The relationship between principal and coach can be a delicate dance: helping the instructional facilitators grow into their new roles, along with developing principals' understanding of the importance of this role and relationship, was

not an easy endeavor. It's still not. My goal was to bring the change I had initiated at the building level, achieved there through creating professional learning communities centered on writing, to the district level, through the coaching initiative. While I was excited about the potential, I needed to build new relationships, garner trust, and gather feedback from a broader range of stakeholders.

It's one thing to try to affect change when you are in a single building day in and day out—when you see people every day and have time to stop into classrooms for a casual chat. At the district level I was now only meeting with teams twice a month, halfway across town, making the process significantly slower than at the building level.

While at the building level I was working to expand teachers' knowledge base in terms of instruction and best practices research. I would essentially be doing the same thing this time around, but with principals and instructional coaches. Aligning the understanding of why instructional coaching matters, and the significance of the principal/coach relationship, was a bigger challenge than I had anticipated.

I had not anticipated that we would wrestle with issues of confidentiality, that people would make agreements at the table and return to their buildings and violate every one of those agreements, or that I would now have to hold my principal colleagues accountable. Much like I saw changing our writing instruction as imperative, I also saw establishing instructional coaching as imperative in order to maintain our progress.

In some ways, managing change at the building and district level is not that different. The patterns of emotions are similar: individuals still have a range of needs that must be supported, and the need to build a knowledge base still exists. What was new for me, however, included managing conflicts across buildings, learning how to approach

people when their actions didn't match the agreements we made, and subsequently holding them accountable. The Common Core State Standards were looming, and it was in everyone's best interest to keep moving forward. Say what you will about the Common Core, but it has provided me with the leverage I needed to get writing and coaching up and running. Without it, I am not sure I would have been able to get it either initiative off the ground.

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## SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION

*“The real goal is for people at the school to learn how to learn together, and in doing so, learn how to become a school where professionalism involves recognizing, implementing, and improving upon high-impact teaching practices, rather than about individual teachers going their own way, oblivious to everyone else.”*

-Lucy Calkins, Mary Ehrenworth, and Chris Lehman  
*Pathways to the Common Core: Accelerating Achievement* (2012)

The focus of my program evaluation was to assess the depth of implementation of the Writer’s Workshop curriculum across grades five and six since its initiation during the 2008-2009 school year. The goals for the evaluation were to examine consistency in the delivery of instruction, maintain alignment across the grades, and determine professional development needs. I interviewed teachers in several categories affected by this change (pioneers, veterans, and newly hired), the literacy facilitator, and the assistant superintendent of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Because I was the instructional leader in the building, I did not seek input from our principal because she was in her first year and could not speak to the changes that had evolved over the last three to four years.

The results of the evaluation revealed that continued staff support and development is necessary to continue enhancing our collaborative culture and professional learning community. While we have come a long way in developing a common knowledge base, common language, and the development of common expectations for instructional delivery, there needs to be a continued focus on depth, alignment, and consistency. Because teachers have a range of both experience and depth of instructional understanding, it is important to design continued staff development that fits teachers’ needs and to articulate expected teacher proficiencies while we continue our work with capacity building. Much like teaching children, there is no one-size-fits-all



approach to adult learning: teachers are in need of coaching, individual feedback, and training in collaborative frameworks for looking at student work in order to enhance the current level of instructional discourse.

But as I recently discovered, principals and instructional coaches are also in need. While I had successfully managed to extinguish the ‘hamburger method’ for writing essays from my building, it was revealed to me that this was not occurring in other buildings across the district. After investing tens of thousands of dollars in staff development, consulting, training, and materials, process writing was not being utilized as deeply as it was intended to be in all of our classrooms. However, process writing is a district expectation—not a choice. So why, then, is there inconsistency in the understanding of the expectations and the definition of the word ‘fidelity’ as it relates to implementation of the process method? If there is inconsistency in writing, especially after such a big push, what does consistency in practice look like across all curricular areas? I find it hard to believe that this is an issue exclusive to writing instruction. Does a similar pattern exist in other content areas as well?

As I move from the role of assistant principal in our fifth & sixth grade building into the position of director of curriculum and instruction for the entire district, I am now responsible for macro-level curriculum oversight for five buildings and the work is more critical than ever. In expanding my lens from outside the single school I had been in since 2002, I can see that our individual school was a microcosm of the district in terms of the need to support a common knowledge base, shared language, and consistency in implementation of curricular initiatives. This takes a tremendous amount of vigilance and oversight, and it needs to come from more than one source. It needs to be the very fabric

of how we look at curriculum and instruction in our district. According to Calkins, Ehrenworth, and Lehman (2012), the authors of *Pathways to the Common Core*, “That is to say, any school reform must be deeply connected to the learning culture of the school, the collaboration of its teachers and school leaders, and also assessment—the true understanding of where our children are in their learning process and of what they need in order to progress” (p. 181).

In order for our culture to sustain any kind of change, it must be an extension of the mission and vision of the district, and live and breathe inherently our schools’ structure. From the central office balcony, I can collaboratively set district expectations with the administrative team, but it is up to the principals and coaches to affect change within their own buildings. My role is to support their professional learning, align our work to district goals, and provide them with the resources to support their work toward the established goals.

Lest someone think that a high-performing school district, i.e., one in which 90% of all students meet or exceed standards, is not in need of improvement, I often ask the question, “Do our students achieve because of us, or in spite of us?” And how do we know? This is an important issue to confront on the road to creating a culture of continuous improvement. Our students do perform quite well on standardized assessments, but are we also fostering in them the necessary skills that are not so easily measured, such as the ability to collaborate, to persist in the face of a difficult task, or to appropriately critique the others’ thinking? Many of our students operate on a level above and beyond the standards. Are we serving those students well? One leader of a high-performing high school shared a similar concern: “Not only do we need to work on the

15-20% of our students who are not yet proficient, but we clearly need to provide a higher level of challenge for those students for whom our state standards are a floor, not a ceiling” (Reeves, 2006, p. 8). School communities that value continuous growth and improvement seek to answer these vital questions.

Though not explicitly stated in the mission and vision statement for the district, we believe in the importance of lifelong learning, in the importance of the adult learning community modeling the qualities and habits of mind we expect to foment and observe in our students. This holds for all adults, and the need for new learning is arriving at a fast and furious pace with the advent of the Common Core State Standards for English language arts and math, as well as the Next Generation Science Standards.

But as a district, what have we done to facilitate learning for our leaders? How have we compelled them to reach an agreement about what good instruction looks like? How have we helped them prioritize a deeper understanding of instruction over other initiatives we might be piling on them over the course of the year—or years? The need to augment the instructional capacity of principals, in order for them to work more effectively with our instructional coaches, will be an essential piece of my work. Additionally essential is building the leadership capacity of teachers to take on more formal leadership roles in order to support and sustain the implementation of new initiatives.

What does building capacity entail? Is leadership the sole responsibility of the leader? According to *Building Leadership Capacity in Schools* (1998),

Leadership is about learning together, and constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively. It involves opportunities to surface and mediate perceptions, values, beliefs, and information, and assumptions through continuing conversations; to inquire about and generate ideas together; to seek to reflect upon and make sense of work in the light of shared beliefs and new information; and to create actions that grow out of these new understandings. (p. 6)

By this definition, leadership represents a dynamic, not an individual, a collective, not a solo entity. Leadership is to be shared if the organization is to thrive and continuous learning is to be valued. Leaders are in need of common expectations and understandings as much as teachers.

It is also essential that the continuous support of teachers be provided through a fellow member of the teaching staff: a teacher leader, or in this case, an instructional coach, in order to provide a safe working relationship that can be free of evaluative judgment. According to Reeves (2008),

These teacher leaders are not gossips but rather the people to whom everyone in the system—and many professionals outside the system—turn when they need a direct answer to a questions about teaching practice. When teachers have a question about special education, assessment, instruction, or classroom management, they do not ask the principal or the central office; they ask a colleague. (p. 20)

Teachers need space to ask questions, take risks, make mistakes and adjustments, and receive targeted, purposeful feedback to enhance their teaching practices without the worry that they are under the microscope.

The principal is charged with holding people accountable for meeting and carrying out district expectations for curriculum delivery. While that sounds heavy-handed, it doesn't have to be, in terms of how accountability is executed. The principal and instructional coach need to work together to make sure both purposes work in tandem

and serve one another. The principal is responsible for evaluation; the coach should never be placed in a position where s/he is perceived as evaluative, or teacher trust will evaporate immediately.

Ideally, the instructional coaches support district expectations for instruction and communicate the needs of the staff to the principal. Principals and coaches should collaborate to provide the targeted staff development teachers need. The work of consistency and alignment is never-ending. Principals cannot do this work on their own; they lack the time, and, quite often, the expertise required to raise the level of instruction. Therefore, the work of coaches and principals should go hand-in-hand, and their shared understanding of teacher proficiencies, goals for growth and improvement, and classroom curricular targets is essential.

In building upon my work, it will be key to examine the role of the principal in tandem with the role of the instructional coach. Their relationship includes crucial elements for building the capacity and sustainability of any curricular initiative, and it is important that the two leaders establish a mutual vision for the work. It will also be important to define what an instructional coach is, as well as what it is not. This definition will be important to share with principals so they are aware of the limitations placed on the position; they will not have the flexibility to use instructional coaches as they previously have: to plug holes in the schedule or fulfill staffing needs outside of their job description. In the past, instructional coaches have been used as a catchall position, infringing on their time and ability to work with the teachers they were hired to support.

Going forward, the purpose of the coaching role is to focus solely on supporting adults, as opposed to supporting students. Certainly, coaches will interact with students while they support teachers through co-teaching or demonstration lessons in the classroom, but the end goal is to provide teachers with support and feedback to help them gain greater insight and expertise into the workshop model of teaching, in order to provide students with formative feedback that enhances student learning.

The ultimate goal is to build capacity among the teaching staff in order to guide their own needs and their own learning. In my experience, however, teachers are busy teaching; they do not have the time to build agendas, coordinate professional development needs, or lead the group in focused way—often because they lack access to the bigger picture outside their room, grade level, or school. It is important to have someone at the helm who has access to both the classroom and macro-level views, and can also emphasize the inherent value of continuous adult learning.

Instructional coaching is now more critical than in the past; the instructional and intellectual standards our teachers are expected to uphold are much different from previous educational eras. In part, the newly adopted standards in various content areas have not only enhanced the rigor and expectations for student learning, but the sheer volume of, and shifts in, grade level content has required our school district to rewrite its curriculum for English language arts, math, and science. Along with enhanced content standards clearly articulated by grade level come the adoption of practice standards, which instill the habits of mind within an academic discipline that carry equal weight to the content itself.

The extensive new criteria, coupled with the need to adopt new instructional materials to support the revised Common Core-aligned curriculum, have thoroughly overwhelmed teachers. They need help. They need support. They need retraining. And they need it now. We are fortunate that the majority of our teachers agree with and support the new standards, but that doesn't make the task at hand any less daunting. What are the implications of Common Core teaching for principals, instructional coaches, and teachers? How can we come together as a school-wide learning team to support the need for change and establish a culture of continuous learning?

The creation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English language arts and math has provided clear learning progressions from grades K-12 based on what its creators believe will prepare students for college and careers. It is an attempt to take a swipe at the seemingly intractable era of skill-based education, delivered through curriculum that was a mile wide and an inch deep. It is a call for greater depth and analysis to be embedded in the K-12 student learning experience. It assumes that our students are capable of handling more sophisticated content at younger ages, and that it is necessary to do so to ensure greater long-term success. The standards are aligned in such a way that if students are not exposed to the standards via the curriculum laid out to support the CCSS, there will be a break in student learning. According to the authors of the CCSS,

High standards that are consistent across states provide teachers, parents, and students with a set of clear expectations to ensure that all students have the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college, career, and life upon graduation from high school. These standards are aligned to the expectations of colleges, workforce training programs, and employers. (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015b, p. 1)

The vision the authors present in the introduction articulates the intention of the newly developed standards: “To ensure all students are prepared for success after graduation, the Common Core establishes a set of clear, consistent guidelines for what students should know and be able to do at each grade level in math and English language arts” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015b, p. 4).

The CCSS also clearly state that standards are not curriculum: the standards clearly outline the ‘what’ but not the ‘how’, recognizing that teachers must assume ownership of the standards in order to create clear, coherent curriculum for their students. Wiggins and McTighe (2007) refer to standards as blueprints that direct the architect, or in this case, those who write curriculum. They assert,

A complex education, like a complex building, cannot be well built without a blueprint. Any blueprint fulfills two vital functions: it permits us to envision, in greater detail than just a verbal or visual model provided, what the desired results will look like in their interconnection; and it enables us to derive from it a logical and effective work plan. Architects develop blueprints to enable the contractor and all subcontractors and workers to logically plan for and successfully accomplish the construction of the building. The goal is to ensure that all discrete work adds up to a coherent realization of the big picture. (p. 38)

The Common Core is the curriculum blueprint for school systems. It is up to school districts to interpret the blueprints, utilizing a common vision of what the final product will look like: in this case, a student ready for college and a career. The analogy is an apt one, given the number of ‘subcontractors’ a student will be guided by during the construction of their educational framework. If one of the subcontractors is not familiar with the building code, the student’s educational house is vulnerable to structural failure: the heavier the materials become, and the greater the stress imposed on the student’s existing framework. The next contractor on the job will be charged with doing any repair



work the previous contractor left unfinished, substandard, or ignored. In most districts, including ours, this is a very real concern because not everyone understands how to read a blueprint—without explicit training, they can easily be poorly read or misinterpreted.

Wiggins and McTighe (2007) are not the only educational visionaries to apply the building metaphor to school reform. Doug Reeves (2006) believes that “leaders are the architects of individual and organizational improvement” (p. 27). What the architect designs, and how she orchestrates its transformation from a drawing on paper to a durable structure, is vitally important to long-term viability and integrity. The key elements of purpose, scale, logistics, form, and function are essential considerations to keep at the forefront when creating a structure to support the educational improvement load. While the architect articulates the vision, she needs a team to realize it. Comprehensive school improvement requires a concentrated team effort comprised of administrators, facilitators, and lead teachers to support instructional initiatives and inspire the faculty. Each person should have a clear understanding of his or her role in the construction process.

In our district, we began our investigation into the CCSS in 2010, when we realized adoption was imminent: What are the CCSS? What are they asking students and teachers to know, understand, and do? What will change? And perhaps, more importantly, what will not? In order to appropriately prepare staff it was essential to affirm their efficacy prior to asking them to change and to find new inroads—especially among a staff whose battle cry is, “You’re taking away our autonomy!” and “You want us to all teach exactly the same way at the same time!” Contrary to some beliefs, neither represents our intention as a district.

However, we are asking teachers to follow consistent learning progressions and an established scope and sequence for student learning, which is a major shift in a culture that had previously based curriculum on teacher passions and personal expertise. Though we have managed to move away from this practice, there are elements that persist, especially with the veteran teachers. The Common Core is the leverage that clearly states the ‘what’, but consensus on best practices to support student learning has yet to be defined and agreed upon. This is where the heavy lifting begins. In theory, our teachers agree with the standards and see them as an opportunity. However, the true test is in coming to a collective agreement on how it will be executed and implemented. Wiggins and McTighe (2007) highlight the difficulties in such an endeavor:

Unfortunately, in most schools, staff have not reached professional consensus about what goals demand of teaching for what constitutes ‘best practices’ for learning—nor have they ever been expected to. And so, many timeless and unexamined bad teaching habits persist, generation after generation... Indeed, schooling and reform have been hindered by the view that it is most ‘professional’ if individual teachers decide for themselves how to teach. The result is merely not an inconsistent array of unexamined approaches to instruction... a more harmful effect is that any critique of teaching inevitably is seen as an attack on teachers. (p. 111)

In the current climate of education, it is not unusual for teachers to feel attacked on many fronts from political pressures, economic realities, and school board expectations. In fact, the local pressure is perhaps the most anxiety provoking. Externally, there is a sense that the school board does not trust teachers’ abilities to support high achievers. Internally, teachers feel they are being told how to teach, what to teach, and when to teach it. The importance of creating a unified learning community with the inherent support system it has to offer can counteract negative feelings and facilitate a newfound sense of control over student outcomes.

It is not unusual for there to be a disconnect between how teachers are expected to teach today versus how they were taught during their own education, or even in their teacher education programs. Does the current curriculum support the depth of the new standards? Do the instructional practices? Is there agreement on what effective instructional practice looks like? Frankly speaking, if we are teaching our students in the same manner we were taught, traditionally and rote-based, we are doing it wrong—contemporary education must look different. As Daniel Pink said to our staff during his keynote at our Summer Institute, and in his book *A Whole New Mind* (2006), we must prepare our students for their future, not our past. In our district, we expect teachers to arrive with a depth of instructional knowledge that most generalists do not possess. It is one of the greatest challenges we face and requires a tremendous amount of adult learning within a coherent structure for continuous professional development.

We have come to the realization as a district that we need to train teachers to deliver the caliber of instruction we expect, and that principals need to establish cultures of continuous learning and improvement. For some teachers, the instructional strategies they have utilized for years are no longer robust enough to support the new standards, and their knowledge base is not sufficient enough to allow them to navigate the new standards without tension, doubt, or fear. This leads to decision making based on emotion as opposed to student evidence, another critical shift we need to address as a district:

Professional development is the last frontier in our shift to emphasizing student outcomes over educator intentions. By thinking first about a goal for students and then designing the support for teachers, we can redefine professional development to ensure that it meets the needs of our students and teachers. (Sweeney, 2011, p. 127)

If teachers have not kept up with current research or evolved as practitioners, they will feel particularly overwhelmed by the requirements of the CCSS. Instructional habits are deeply ingrained, and some of these habits need to be broken. It is a shift that will require careful coordination and targeted professional development:

...the real work of the Common Core is not about curricular compliance; it is about accelerating student achievement. And for this to happen, schools need to build the ongoing systems of continuous improvement that make learning- on the part of the students and teachers alike – part of the culture and infrastructure of the school. (Calkins, Ehrenworth, Lehman, 2012, p. 182)

In order to change our habits we are in dire need for new learning, not only in terms of what the standards are asking students to know, understand, and do, but also in terms of the educational practices that will serve as the vehicle for student learning:

By focusing the lens on students, we can diffuse the existing pressures we feel related to “resistant” teachers since the focus isn’t on improving them, but instead on improving the achievement of their students. Furthermore, these structures help us to build a community of teachers who are skilled at analyzing student work to make decisions that best support student learning. (Sweeney, 2011, p.15)

The CCSS-ELA (English language arts) place an emphasis on close reading, the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) require a deep understanding of science and engineering practices, the CCSS-M (math) emphasize eight mathematical practices, and all place a focus on developing student expertise. This expertise ultimately reflects the professional behaviors and practices of people who work within the disciplines of math and the importance of writing in both.

To illustrate what one of those shifts may look like for a teacher, in an article entitled “Why the Common Core Changes Math Instruction,” Faulkner (2013) shares,

At the heart of the Common Core Standards is a move to create classroom discussions that clearly develop students' number sense by habitually making important connections across the mathematics. Unfortunately, many of the habits students have learned and developed don't support these important mathematical connections. (p. 22)

In short, there are also adjustments that students will have to make as learners. In math, the ability to think flexibly and utilize more than one strategy to solve problems with fluidity goes far beyond vertically lining up numbers and doing the calculations. Faulkner goes on to illustrate her point through the creation of a chart that pinpoints habits teachers need to eliminate, new habits they need to adopt, and why. For example,

Eliminate the old habit	Adopt this new habit	Why?
<p>“Subtraction makes things get smaller.”</p>	<p>Subtraction is about difference.</p> <p>You might say this:            “We use subtraction when we’re finding a missing part of a total or when we compare two numbers to find the difference between the two.”</p>	<p>Subtraction does not make things get smaller. This is a false construction based on a limited set of numbers that are introduced in elementary school.</p> <p>For instance, <math>5 - (-3) = 8</math>.</p> <p>Consider in your own life the situation where a debt is taken away from you. “Don’t worry about that \$3 you owe me.”</p> <p>Also consider the comparative model. If I compare what I have, let’s say my net worth is \$10,000, to what you have, let’s say your net worth is a negative \$5,000. When I compare those two numbers, the difference between our net worth is \$15,000. This is actually the greatest of those three numbers!</p>

(Faulkner, 2013, p. 22)

When teaching conceptually based mathematics, the content shifts from skills to ideas and an understanding of how to break numbers apart. Often, in an effort to make concepts more clear and concrete for students, we actually create misconceptions. Use of imprecise language due to a lack of deep instructional knowledge, or through the intention of making something easier to understand, serves to undercut the conceptual learning (Faulkner, 2013). Additionally, this causes the absence of the foundation that needs to be set in the earlier grades for future work, leading to roadblocks in mathematical understanding in the upper grades. With the CCSS, everyone is contributing to the big picture.

In our district we are not big-picture thinkers, and teachers have had a hard time moving from the 'me' of curriculum delivery to the 'we'. It will be one of our biggest challenges, and there are many challenges we face. One-day workshops will not support the collaborative learning we need to engage in as a district. According to *Teaching the Teachers: Effective professional development in an era of high stakes accountability* (2013), a study produced by The Center for Public Education, traditional one-day workshops have little-to-no impact on student achievement or professional growth for teachers:

Not only did these workshop programs fail to increase student learning, they didn't even change teaching practices. An earlier study of the various models of professional development found if the training merely described a skill to a teacher, as traditional workshops do, only 10 percent of teachers could transfer the skill to practice. (p. 13)

As it turns out, the learning of new information isn't the biggest issue; rather, it is the implementation of the new learning that has proven to be most challenging for teachers. Gulamhussein (2013) advocates paying more attention to the implementation stage of new

teacher learning, stating that 20 is “the number, on average, of separate instances of practice it takes a teacher to master a skill, and this number may increase if a skill is exceptionally complex” (p. 13). Implementing a new instructional strategy is time-intensive and, at times, discouraging. Without ongoing support and encouragement, it is easy for teachers to declare that a new practice is ineffective or too difficult, and consequently revert to their old ways of doing business.

But teacher commitment is not enough. In order to truly implement change in teaching practices, there must be system-wide commitment to change on the part of district leadership, principals, teachers, and coaches. Accountability is an important component to district and school-wide change, and the role of the principal as the instructional leader is critical: “If school districts want teachers to change instruction, the implementation stage must be included and supported more explicitly in professional development offerings, as this is the critical stage where teachers begin to commit to an instructional approach” (Gulamhussein, 2013, p. 15). While the principals must support the change, the district must commit to providing the necessary resources to support ongoing professional learning.

It is likely teachers will not initially recognize the need to closely examine their instructional effectiveness against the new standards; a statement frequently heard in our district is, “I already do that.” Without student evidence to prove this claim, it is also likely there is a disconnect between teacher perception and student achievement in reality. Therefore, it is up to curriculum directors, principals, and coaches to create a vision for ongoing professional development through the establishment of cultures of continuous learning. What is required in order to establish an adult learning culture?

Telling people what they should do may be more efficient during the initial stages than sharing the responsibility for change across the school, but building capacity requires exactly that: collaboration. In addition to being a strong communicator, it is equally important, if not more so, for the leader to be a listener and keen observer:

The leadership skills required for collaborative work involve the ability to develop shared sense of purpose with colleagues, facilitate group processes, communicate well, understand transition and effects on people, mediate conflict, and hold a keen understanding of adult learning from a constructivist perspective. Such perspectives enable us to create mutual trust, hear each other, pose questions and look for answers together, and make sense of our common work. (Lambert, 1998, p. 18)

In other words, school leaders need to foster communication, support collaborative culture building-wide, possess the ability to articulate a vision, and understand the change process, particularly how it manifests in individuals. It is not enough to run a highly effective crisis drill; they must be instructional leaders. How many of our principals are truly prepared to facilitate the culture this requires?

All teachers, regardless of level of experience or proficiency, will need support to shift their instruction. According to the Gulamhussein (2013), “Learning about writing isn’t as difficult as actually writing, learning about bicycling isn’t as difficult as actually riding a bike, and learning about a teaching method isn’t as difficult as actually implementing it” (p. 11). Battling current perceptions of what works and what doesn’t, without evidence to support our thinking, does not allow for clear understanding of student learning or progress. Our professional learning must focus on teacher behaviors, student outcomes, and analysis of student data. According to Calkins et al. (2012),

When assessments are sound, we want them to matter; assessments need to inform and fuel not only teaching, but our school reforms. Assessment, at best, will give us crucial information, information we need about what exactly is working—and not working—for our students’ education. (p. 181)



It will be essential for us to monitor student progress toward the learning goals based on the CCSS. However, the CCSS has acknowledged that it is an ambitious document, stating,

Coming to a consensus on the standards guarantees that, from the viewpoint of any given state, topics will move up or down in a consistent grade level sequence. What is important to keep in mind is that the progression in the Common Core is mathematically coherent and leads to college and career readiness at an internationally competitive level. (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015a, p. 7)

There is a difference between theoretical intention and practical application, and the only way to determine the difference is to try it. 43 states have taken on this challenge; Illinois is one of them.

Given the uncertainty of how the standards will unfold in practice versus theory, teachers may encounter issues with curriculum delivery and assessment of student progress. Processes that allow teachers to collaboratively broach these issues; problem solving in teams allows teachers to work smarter, not harder: “Help teachers realize that one of the most important things they can do is to see problems, to name them, and then to gather with their colleagues to invent responses to those problems” (Calkins & Pessah, 2010, p. 192).

The CCSS also requires teachers to create common expectations and monitor student achievement to ensure they are making progress toward the goals. What constitutes a level of mastery? What evidence should we be looking for in student behaviors or student work? If not carefully attended to, these standards have the potential to back up against one another, resulting in a backlog of learning. They require teaching to be intentional, vigilant, responsive, and above all, collaborative. Meeting the expectations of the CCSS obliges teachers and leaders to work as a system, not as

independent contractors. Without routine articulation and review of student work, there will be instructional drift, causing disconnection of standards across the grades and subsequent widespread frustration among teachers and students.

In addition to the strong emphasis on instructional practices inherent to the disciplines we are teaching, there is also an expectation of shared responsibility for students' literacy development. According to the CCSS website, "This division [of the standards] reflects the unique, time-honored place of ELA teachers in developing students' literacy skills while at the same time recognizing that teachers in other areas must have a role in the development as well" (2015a, para. 7). The very notion of this is enough to instill panic in the science, social studies, and math teachers who firmly believe that literacy is not their problem. Who is going to talk them off the ledge? Who will cheerlead and champion their efforts as they wrestle with their own vulnerability? Who creates a feeling of safety for the adult learner as s/he wades into unfamiliar territory?

As we move forward, it will be essential to develop the habit of asking, "What adjustments do I need to make in my teaching in order to support student learning?" instead of defaulting to, "This isn't developmentally appropriate!"—which, in my view, is overused and sometimes an educational copout. Yes, sometimes the stated expectations are not developmentally appropriate, but just as often I see teacher expectations based on perception, not evidence. Teachers can just as easily underestimate what students are able to do just as standards can overestimate student capability.

Building this reflective capacity is crucial for staying in touch with each child's progress while simultaneously allowing for deep investigation into student learning—

which also incorporates adult learning. Continuous learning is essential to maintaining relevant instructional skill sets; in a culture of continuous learning and improvement, the goal is to maintain relevance throughout one's career. According to Hirsh (2013), "In high performing systems, the process is part of a collaborative continuous improvement cycle, where teams with shared concerns set goals together, learn together, and periodically review progress together" (p. 12). Everyone bears the responsibility for monitoring both student and adult learning and growth. We must shift to an evidence-based culture in order to inform instruction through formative and summative classroom-based assessments that are authentic measures of learning.

The ability to reflect appropriately and collectively on our instructional practices will, to some degree, depersonalize curriculum and instruction, requiring a shift in our thinking. According to Wiggins and McTighe's book *Schooling by Design: Mission, Action, and Achievement* (2007),

Without long-term results and shared analysis of goals to study together or shared standards of best practice to which we refer, teachers have little choice but to (over) emphasize personal beliefs, habits, and style. Naturally, then, any criticism of our teaching makes most of us defensive and resistant to the message. (p. 11)

Just as there are learning standards for students, there are standards for adult learning communities. It seems there are standards for everything these days, and though they can seem over prescriptive to some, they offer direction and translate into high-quality learning targets systems can grow into. The organization Learning Forward has established Standards for Professional Learning (Roy, 2013), which encompass practices inherent in highly effective cultures of continuous learning:

- The duration of professional development must be significant and ongoing to allow time to grapple with implementation.
- There must be support of teachers during the implementation stage that addresses the specific challenges of changing classroom practice.
- Teachers' initial exposure to the new practice should engage teachers through active participation.
- Modeling is highly effective in helping teachers understand a new practice.
- Content presented to teachers should be specific to the discipline.

As a young, 26-year-old educational radical, I scoffed at standards. To me they represented everything wrong with NCLB, including an emphasis on back-to-basics, low-level skills that dumbed down the profession and grossly underestimated what students were capable of achieving. Today I believe the CCSS, which foster the creation of relevant, compelling curriculum, serve as the building code that keeps our schoolhouse from falling down.

Though coaches are advocates for systemic and individual improvement, it is difficult to isolate and identify the impact these improvements have on increased teacher and student learning. What does knowing look like, and what are the behaviors associated with the implementation of new skills? Student work is the voice and experience of the student, jumping off the page. The qualitative nature of it tells the learning story of each child and his or her unfolding educational journey. Learning to interpret their efforts is key in making responsible instructional decisions.

As a result of the CCSS, we have rewritten our math and language arts curriculum to align with the new student learning progressions. For the first time in district history, we have clearly articulated learning goals from grades K-8 that are aligned by content and educational practices. This is something to be celebrated, but it is only the first necessary step in establishing a culture of continuous improvement and professional learning communities. We have established the ‘what’ for students, and are now charged with supporting the ‘how’ for teachers. Therein lies the complexity of capacity and sustainability of systemic implementation: the ‘what’ is the easy part; it involves the clinical arranging of standards into coherent units outside of a classroom context. In fact, the curriculum committee is worthy of collective back-patting for its newly minted content knowledge and commitment to the required change. The ‘how’, though, is the heavy lifting, involving human emotion and buy-in on the part of teachers who were not involved in the curriculum committee’s ‘kum-ba-ya’ moment. The ‘how’ is too heavy for individuals, but collaboratively that ‘how’ is a far easier load to bear. What stands between the established ‘what’ and the potential ‘how’ is the careful and strategic navigation of the intractable human reaction to change.

In approaching any kind of change, Doug Reeves (2009) discusses the importance of first establishing what will not change, which can establish stable ground for people to stand on in a landscape riddled with sinkholes. There is risk involved for everyone, but by pooling the risk, the costs of change are much lower—and the cost of not changing is much higher. Educational insurance, if you will.

Being aware of what high-impact professional development looks like is one of the key factors in facilitating change. According to Gulamhussein (2013),

In the coming years, schools will be hit with a trio of potent reforms: teacher evaluations that will include test scores, widespread adoption of higher academic standards, and the development of high-stakes standardized tests aligned with these new standards. Each of these reforms challenges the status quo, demanding that schools systematically and continuously improve student performance, marking and measuring their progress each and every step along the way. (p. 1)

The demand for instructional change on the part of teachers is guaranteed to be fatiguing. This fatigue reminds me of the sticky octopus prize found in the cereal boxes of my youth. The octopus is supposed to be thrown against a wall, and kids are amazed when it sticks so effortlessly. *It's novel! It's inspiring! It's robust!* Satisfied with its sticking power, you might walk away, assuming the octopus will remain stuck to the wall without its grip weakening. But if you remain vigilant and continue to watch the octopus closely, you will see that after its initial firm attachment to the wall, the octopus begins to slowly, imperceptibly, almost painfully peel off the wall and plunk to the floor. The higher the octopus is thrown on the wall, the more dramatic the plunk. Eventually, the stickiness of the octopus erodes, and instead of sticking, the octopus gets smacked against the wall and immediately thuds to the floor. It is important for leaders to not throw teachers too hard against or too high up the learning wall without providing the adhesive ingredient that stimulates staying power—we don't want our teachers to suffer the same fate as the falling octopus. Coaches are charged with carefully monitoring their adult learners in order to prevent them from peeling off the learning wall; principals provide the time and resources for teacher support—essential adhesive ingredients:

Sustainable change requires a reorientation of priorities and values so that the comfort and convenience of the individuals is no longer the measure by which the legitimacy of change is considered. Rather, we respond to a vision of change so compelling and whose benefits for others are so overwhelming that we see students and colleagues not as cogs in the machine but as stars in a galaxy that outshines our fears and dwarfs our apprehensions. (Reeves, 2009, p. 5)

This is the direction we must go. The Common Core demands it.

How can instructional coaches and principals work together to build instructional capacity across the organization? What macro-level framework needs to be created to structure and support this work? What types of shared understandings about core content and instructional competencies need to be established to allow us to proceed with clear purpose and mission? Which feedback loops must be put into place to ensure that implementation is even and responsive to the range of needs across all five of our schools?

These questions undergird a major adjustment in the way we view instructional coaches and the relationships they have with building principals. Coaches have now been asked to take on the degree of responsibility required to support instructional sustainability. In the advent of the CCSS and the instructional changes these standards demand, the instructional coach has gone from a gopher for supplies or substitute teacher to a leader and teacher of teachers, who supports their growth toward established building or district goals. This is a major shift in their role and responsibilities.

Explicitly stated, the goals for my work are as follows:

- Provide a compelling rationale for why instructional coaches are necessary for continuous growth and sustainable change
- Clearly define the roles and responsibilities for instructional coaches

- Articulate the mission and vision for the coaching work
- Select a coaching model or framework as a foundation for their work
- Provide training around that framework
- Define the relationship between the principal and the instructional coach
- Establish shared agreements between coaches and principals on instructional expectations.
- Develop walk-through targets to facilitate conversations and diagnose teacher staff development needs
- Create a reflection process to help support the further development and needs of the coaches as they move through this transition
- Support the learning of coaches and principals

So where does that leave us at present? What is our ‘as-is’ as a district before we dive into this work? In examining our competencies, conditions, culture, and context, through the lens Tony Wagner et al. provide in the *Change Leadership: A Practical Guide To Transforming Our Schools* (2006), I have determined the following:

### **Competencies**

“Competencies are the repertoires of skills and knowledge that influence student learning” (Wagner et al., 2006, p. 99) Our teaching staff takes pride in their knowledge of their field or content area. There is clear evidence that highly effective professional learning communities collaborate around curriculum construction, revision, and examination of student work to inform their practices in some areas across the district. Often, the level of sophistication is driven by the existence of an instructional facilitator who can create agendas, procure the necessary resources, and offer job-embedded



feedback to teachers. However, this is inconsistent across the district. In some cases this is a function of how comfortable the coach is in the role of giving feedback instead of being a gopher for supplies. This is also often a function of the instructional vision of the principal and the degree to which s/he emphasizes teacher learning and growth. In some buildings instructional coaches are used to plug holes; in other buildings instructional coaches have pulled students out of classrooms in small groups for math enrichment, a clear violation of the differentiation framework our district adopted four years ago. If not nurtured and consistently monitored, the drift of our collective understanding of content is a very real concern.

Prior to this year, it has not been made clear exactly what the roles and responsibilities of the instructional facilitators were. Those who had vision and drive fulfilled the role to the degree I can only hope was intended upon its initiation. The relationship between the principal and the coach has also not been clearly defined nor placed into a context with a larger purpose. Some principal/coach relationships are visionary and innovative, while others are disengaged and lack shared understanding of the needs of teachers and the curricular goals.

The good news is that we have the luxury of establishing the instructional coach position in the first place; we also have the resources to provide coaches with training in order to help them understand their shifting role and its accompanying expectations. It will be important to maximize their capabilities in order to not only support teacher and student growth, but to simply justify their presence in the buildings should we experience school board skepticism or a financial downturn that could leave them vulnerable to staffing reductions.

## **Conditions**

Conditions are the external architecture that surrounds student learning, the tangible arrangements of time, space, and resources (Wagner et al., 2006, p. 101). We have recently developed a document entitled “Roles and Responsibilities” for the instructional coaches, which they had a hand in drafting, creating, and approving. These guidelines are universal no matter what content area they support, and have been approved by the school board and the principals. While the principals have confessed that this shift will impact how they are currently utilizing some of the instructional coaches, they ultimately lent their consent, acknowledging that the shift is necessary and important.

We are fortunate to possess the resources that make it able to have the coaches in the first place. The literacy facilitators have received a grant that will allow for an external consultant from Columbia University Teachers College in New York to come in and support them with job-embedded staff development. Teachers are also willing to support this work by opening their classrooms as demonstration sites for facilitator training. The math facilitators have a nationally recognized consultant who will work closely with the math team as well.

One clear limitation is the fact that these positions are only part time, and the needs of the job definitely exceed the time frame we have in which to tackle them. Another issue is that the coaches need their own staff development time for training and collaboration. Since they are only at the school part time, though, meeting all of their learning needs while maximizing their time with teachers will be a challenge. Issues such as how they will engage teachers, find entry points, and avoid the perception that the

coach only assists substandard teachers need to be considered further. Equity in how coaches engage staff and supporting the notion that coaches work with everyone, regardless of proficiency, will be important to emphasize.

### **Culture**

“Culture refers to the shared beliefs, assumptions, expectations, behaviors related to students and learning, teachers and teaching, instructional leadership, and the quality of relationships within and beyond the school” (Wagner et al., 2006, p. 102). Our district has always emphasized teacher autonomy, in some cases to a fault. However, teachers who are successfully engaged in productive, collaborative teams come to see that working together actually enhances their autonomy. However, there is still a faction of teachers who think consistency equals conformity, and blame this shift on the new role of the coaches—a role that emphasizes collaboration. The coaches became the scapegoats, though undeservedly, since this shift was motivated by the requirements of the CCSS, not by any personal or even district-related reasons. Nevertheless, all the buildings value and appreciate the coaches as they are in their current capacity. The relationships with teachers are good, and most of the coaches have been in this role for many years. As with any shift, there will be tension while some coaches get past the awkwardness of giving teachers direct feedback if they have not done so before. How we coach the coaches into this new skill will be important; placing the focus on student evidence instead of the teacher will be an essential cultural shift.

Looking globally at instruction, teachers and coaches are aligned in their thinking about teaching and learning. While we pride ourselves on being a progressive district, how individuals define ‘progressive’ within the district is inconsistent. Shared

expectations will be quite important, as this inconsistency is bound to be an issue with principals as well as teachers. Problems will arise when coaches insist that math instruction is not optional and that teachers in the elementary schools provide it for an hour every day. It may take some time for teachers to take coaches seriously in terms of following through with what is expected of them—instead of nodding their heads in concurrence but then doing whatever they want when the coach isn't around. What accountability measures need to be in place to move the work forward? Without commitment to change and support of that change, we will remain stagnant.

### **Context**

“Context encompasses skill demands, concerns of families, and the community the school district serves” (Wagner et al., 2006, p. 104). We serve a community that supports—and demands—excellence. This community is also very vocal about supporting whom we refer to as ‘high-readiness learners’, and the community refers to as ‘gifted’. The community and the families we serve insist on rigor, consistency in instructional delivery, and strong principal oversight of staff. The community is generous with resources, as long as they see the results of their giving through their child’s enhanced educational experience. There is the assumption that the students of our district will be future leaders, and thus our mission is to educate their children to become reflective, thoughtful problem solvers who will thrive in competitive conditions. For the most part, the staff shares the same mission, though prefers to address it in a way that reduces the pressure this type of community often places on their children.

There is tension with staffing levels as it relates to our student population. Our enrollment has declined considerably over the past decade, but staffing levels have not.

Within the community, and at the district level, there is a shared interest in aligning staffing to our current student population, which translates into staff reductions. There was a concern that coaches would be viewed as non-essential, so part of my job will be to champion their presence and showcase them as essential to our progressive mission of teaching and learning. However, capturing evidence to measure the impact of instructional coaches will be a challenge.

Where would I like ‘to-be’ as a result of our focused efforts to build our framework and execute our mission around instructional coaching? The change will need to be systemic, which involves many moving parts that must work together in order to be effective. The human dimension of change will be important to keep at the forefront, not only in terms of how it impacts the principals’ leadership, but also how to make the change manageable for teachers.

In order for our ‘to-be’ to have staying power, it will require the collective to take a deep, honest look at our present competencies, conditions, culture, and context, and attempt to anticipate and remove any obstacles that stand in the way of this change (Wagner et al., 2006). Though the vision will need to be realized and validated by the leadership team, what follows is rooted in research and best practices for change leadership—in essence, the model for the change I envision.

### **To-Be Competencies**

In order for true change to occur, Doug Reeves (2009) discusses the importance of advocating for change through the articulation of a clear and compelling vision. However, prior to rolling out the change, Reeves also discusses the importance of highlighting what will *not* change; change is often associated with a profound sense of

loss or perceived as a personal attack: *What is wrong with what we are doing?* It's human nature to become defensive and feel that something is being taken away, such as power or autonomy. Affirming what will remain, while simultaneously creating the need for agency, can reduce anxiety, which is frequently the element that sabotages change efforts (Reeves, 2009).

The CCSS have provided the change leverage we needed in order to enhance the capacity of our instructional facilitators. There is recognition on the part of the faculty that implementing new curricula and working with new materials to strengthen instruction requires a range of supports. It is unclear if the faculty understands the extent of the instructional shifts required by the CCSS, but they do know they need support during the change. Nevertheless, this does not ensure that they still won't occasionally resist the change altogether.

Establishing a clear vision shared and understood by everyone across the district, from the central office to teaching assistants to parents, will be an important goal. Why do we have instructional coaches? How does coaching support a culture of continuous learning? What is a professional learning community, and how does that enhance teacher and student growth? In the end, everyone should know the answers to those questions. With a clearly articulated vision, coaches can feel supported in their mission and establish clear goals for themselves as well as the teachers they support.

Once a vision and mission have been established, supporting coaches with their roles and responsibilities across the schools, along with enhancing their visibility with the staff, is key. In addition to articulating the overarching vision and mission of the district for cultures of continuous learning, coaches need to be skilled at articulating what that

means in the context of their position. The instructional coaches collaboratively drafted their roles and responsibilities (see Appendix), but putting them into practice is intimidating for both teachers and the coaches themselves. Many of the responsibilities they are charged with require the support of the principal if they are to have a chance at being effective in engaging teachers.

Building the principal/coach relationship is vital to the success of any coaching model. The existence of a strong relationship between the principal and the coach, an understanding of the boundary between supporting and evaluating, and the distinct responsibilities of each position all need to be clearly established and agreed upon between principal and coach. Together, principals and coaches should define the building priorities in order to determine professional learning needs, develop an action plan that establishes goals, and create a communication plan they will follow with one another.

Just as it is important to share what a coach does within the school, is it equally important to emphasize what they do *not* do: namely, evaluate teachers, serve as a spy for the principal, or exist solely as a support for struggling teachers. Instead, it should be emphasized that coaching will be student-centered, and that there will be a shared understanding between coach and principal of what good instruction looks like and how it should be supported.

Leaders need their own leadership practice communities (LPCs) for several reasons. First, few principals or district personnel have received training in how to be instructional leaders, or even how to provide effective supervision. LPCs offer principals opportunities to present and discuss problems of practice related to

supervising teachers (Wagner et al., 2006). Important goals to consider include the following:

- Coaches and principals will meet on a regular basis to review instructional practices
- Professional learning communities will be established across the district
- Shared leadership among teachers will increase, as well as ownership of continuous learning

### **Conditions**

- Through the principal's support, the coach will be involved with all teachers
- Principals and coaches will meet weekly
- Coaches will have the time to meet with instructional teams, individual teachers, as well as support teachers in their classrooms
- Coaches will design and deliver targeted professional development based on observed need or relevant teacher request
- Targeted professional development is designed for both principals and coaches to enhance their collaborative vision and relationship

### **Culture**

- Shared value and vision of the coaching model
- Enhanced capacity for shared leadership
- Enhanced instructional capacity on the part of coaches, teachers, and principals
- Professional learning communities become the norm across the district
- Continuous learning is valued and practiced by all professionals across the district
-



## Context

- Increased teacher capacity and curricular alignment
- Increased principal capacity
- Culture of continuous learning
- Increased student facility with 21<sup>st</sup> century skill sets
- Increased shared leadership

This is a tall order that will require a multi-year framework and realistic benchmarks. If I have learned anything in my years as an instructional leader, it is that you cannot push people beyond their understanding. The conditions must be ripe for risk-taking, reflection, and processing of new information. To what degree are the coaches ready to engage in this work? Based on the reaction to the “Roles and Responsibilities” document, which, ironically, was written by the coaches, there are feelings of excitement, ambivalence, and reluctance within the coach group. Part of the apprehension may be due to the fact that the roles and responsibilities were developed and shared without an accompanying structure to execute them. Nevertheless, I have witnessed through my previous experience that action is what changes attitude; waiting for buy-in, an ineffective strategy at best, is a luxury we simply do not have.

At the moment we have defined the ‘what’ and now we must look deeply and carefully at the ‘how’. I know who the ambitious coaches are, but I am unclear as to where the others stand in the acceptance of their new role. On one hand, I have been encouraged by the willingness of the group to jump into the role. On the other hand, I have witnessed beliefs and behaviors that highlight a greater need to develop a more united vision.

One experience I found highly encouraging and revealing of our ‘to-be’ potential was in the spring. Our reading and writing consultant from the Columbia University Teachers College Reading and Writing Project spent two days with our literacy coaches. Together they discussed the purpose and philosophy of coaching within the reading and writing workshop. They went through the structure of a demonstration lesson and then applied it in two language arts classrooms of teachers immersed in teaching the workshop model. It was low-risk in the sense that the students were familiar with the workshop structure, and their classroom had already been used as demonstration class many times throughout the year.

Our consultant, Emily, did a fine job of throwing the coaches into the fire but making sure they were wearing fire suits to protect them. Each coach had a specific task during the demonstration lesson, so the risk was shared among the group. At the conclusion of the lesson, the group debriefed the experience and gathered their questions for their future session together.

On their second day together, five teachers agreed to allow the group to conduct ‘walk-throughs’ in their classrooms. Emily modeled a walk-through using a specific tool that allowed coaches to gather qualitative data. She then modeled how to use the data to set goals, look for patterns, and determine professional development needs or potential topics for school-wide inquiry. At the end of the two days, the coaches were quite inspired. It left me believing, naïvely, that this might not be as hard as I thought. But I realized at a later point that it appeared so because we had an expert guiding us through the work.

That later point arrived in late May, when the district language arts committee gathered to discuss third grade's participation in the district writing assessment. The questions on the table for the committee were as follows: Is it developmentally appropriate for the third grade to participate in an on-demand writing assessment? Can the prompt for the third grade be adjusted to align with the writing units they will be teaching? Is the rubric appropriate? I was clear at the beginning of the meeting that the answers to the questions being posed needed to be defensible: we would need to provide a strong rationale for any decision we made at the end of the meeting that we were going to share with teachers, principals, and in my presentation, to the school board.

One of the literacy facilitators was strongly against giving the third grade the district writing assessment, believing that it was not developmentally appropriate. She felt that since it was the first time students were doing this kind of writing, it would be difficult for them and therefore it wasn't fair to assess them. The committee examined the data from the previous year and determined that the third grade students had actually exceeded the expectations set by the rubric and had met the established benchmarks, rendering the developmentally inappropriate argument indefensible. This upset her a great deal, as she was insistent that we were asking too much of teachers and students.

We turned our attention to the CCSS-ELA, which clearly expected not only third grade students to engage in this type of writing, but second grade students as well. In the end, the committee determined that the assessment would stand, but the prompt would be changed to match their unit on opinion writing. The rubric would not have to be altered, as it was already aligned to both the CCSS-ELA and the curriculum. The literacy facilitator shook her head and said, "The third grade teachers are going to be very upset."

She made it clear that she disagreed with the committee's decision. The committee, comprised entirely of teachers and myself, the sole administrator, had no response. The data were the data, and the CCSS-ELA were what they were. To proceed in any other manner would not have been justifiable

Why do I share this example? It illustrates several things: for one, without the buy-in on the part of the coaches, the effort to build capacity is futile. Much like there are teachers who will resist change, some of the coaches may resist as well. What kind of steps will we take if this is an enduring problem? Declare a mismatch between the person and the role and look for someone else? The mission and vision of the district aren't going to change, so being on board is critical.

Second, it reveals that this facilitator's professional knowledge is not up-to-date. I would fully expect this person to be familiar with the CCSS-ELA, but it seems that she either was not, or did not agree with what the CCSS-ELA asks of students. Regardless of which one could be attributed to her, both are a problem. Just as there are pockets of excellence among the teaching staff, there appear to be pockets of excellence among the coaches as well.

Third, what will this person say to her teachers when she delivers the news that they will still be expected to participate in the assessment? How she shares it is more important than what she shares. She will model attitudes the staff has the potential to adopt—for better or for worse. Coaches need to stand shoulder-to-shoulder, not undercut the mission and vision. We can debate and disagree privately, but publicly, we need to present a united front.

While the concept of and rationale for coaching is compelling, human nature will be the ultimate driving force of its success or failure. Coaching requires active nurturing, vigilance, and monitoring of expectations and progress toward our goals. In the absence of our consultants, Emily and Nanci, to regularly inspire and appropriately push and challenge our coaches, it will be important to provide our coaches with ongoing internal support and guidance—not only for the five days a year we can afford to have Emily and Nanci spend time with us.

Being grounded in our mission and beliefs is essential. There will be times when the teachers claim something is ‘developmentally inappropriate’ and it will be imperative for the literacy coaches to stand their ground and be clear about the purpose and rationale for their work together. How would this literacy facilitator help the teachers receive what she perceived as bad news? Does she have strategies for sharing her dissenting opinion while abiding by the committee’s decision?

There are overt patterns of group behavior that will be important to identify ahead of time, in order provide coaches with strategies for responding to misconceptions (e.g., in the case of the third grade writing assessment), protests, challenges, or blatant resistance. The behaviors, attitudes, and issues I have witnessed over the years include the following:

- “Where is this coming from?” “Who made this decision?”
- “What do you mean by ‘fidelity’?” “Do I *have* to use these materials?”
- “I’ve been teaching for \_\_\_ years; I already do this.” (They don’t.)
- “The research is wrong.” (A lack of familiarity and disregard for research.)

- The group will forget the decisions they made the week before and will undo the decision
- The group will attempt to reinvent the wheel even though the work is already complete
- The group will over-process and over-think, which wastes a lot of time
- People think they understand, but their actions show that they don't
- People can clearly articulate the philosophy and objective of workshop teaching, but show absolutely no evidence of executing it in their classrooms, making it appear as if they are strong when they are not
- People resisting loudly and boldly
- People resisting silently and subtly
- The group will accuse you of not being progressive (a harsh insult and the strongest challenge to leadership in a progressive environment)

The group also tends to confound having their voices heard with getting their way. If a decision runs counter to their own desire for maintaining the status quo or protecting what is seen as the sole domain of classroom teachers, you are accused of not listening to teachers. The ultimate irony of this accusation is that teachers lead the curriculum committees and make the hard decisions for their colleagues.

There will be mistakes. In my mind, an absence of mistakes means an absence of growth (Tomlinson, Brimijoin, & Narvaez, 2008). Therefore, positive relationships will be essential so that forgiveness can be forthcoming when one 'steps in it', which is inevitable; the only thing in question is how deep.

The ability to address these questions, redirect the group, and keep work on track is highly dependent on how adeptly the coach handles these moments, which can derail productivity and undermine morale if the group gets stuck too often. A good coach will know how to preface the work to prevent these situations from occurring in the first place. However, there is a learning curve involved, and coaches need to be practiced and prepared to respond.

Perhaps one of the hardest aspects of moving into a coaching role is that coaches are neither teacher nor administrator. Coaches live a quasi-existence that can feel very isolating, so they will need their own community to reduce this isolation. Their success is also contingent on the support of the principal. It's clear, therefore, that relationships are the cornerstone of this work. It's likely that year one will focus solely on building relationships, making our mission and beliefs live and breathe, and looking for entry points where the roles and responsibilities can be translated into action.

Knowing that the traditional approach to professional development does not produce changes in teachers' instructional practices leading to long-term results, what instructional coaching models should schools consider when making the shift to job-embedded professional development and cultures of continuous learning?

Jim Knight of the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning and author of *Instructional Coaching: A Partnership Approach to Improving Instruction* (2007), advocates for collaborative partnerships between instructional coaches and teachers:

ICs [instructional coaches] adopt a partnership approach with teachers. Partnership, at its core, is a deep belief that we are no more important than those with whom we work, and that we should do everything we can to respect that equality. This approach is to build around core principals of equality, choice, voice, dialogue, reflection, praxis, and reciprocity. (p. 24)

What does that entail exactly? According to Knight (2007), the core principles are defined as follows:

- **Equality:** The individuals who enter into a coaching relationship are seen as equals. Neither person holds power over the other. They work together to examine and improve instruction, with no one person's input more valuable than the other's.
- **Choice:** The teacher maintains the ability to have as much choice as possible in terms of what the learning will be and what the approach to professional learning will look like.
- **Voice:** There is a mutual responsibility for each person to share his or her views on learning and instruction. All opinions are important and have the potential to enhance learning and raise the quality of the dialogue between coach and teacher.
- **Dialogue:** Conversation and careful listening are at the heart of this relationship. The coach does not tell the teacher what to do. Instead, there is an exchange of ideas with genuine interest in understanding.
- **Reflection:** To build the capacity to be reflective, teachers must be given the latitude to synthesize ideas and ultimately determine which steps they should take to be most effective.



- **Praxis:** “Meaning arises when people reflect on ideas and then put those ideas into practice...each individual is free to reconstruct and use the content the way he or she considers it most useful” (p. 25).
- **Reciprocity:** Both members of the partnership have the ability to learn from the other. The collaborative basis for the relationship is highly valued.

Respecting a teacher’s professionalism and meaningful collaboration is at the heart of this coaching model. Forming a positive, productive relationship takes the highest precedence. A lack of trust and safety undermines the growth potential for all involved, and an honest analysis of practice and authentic dialogue between teacher and coach simply will not be possible. Knight says it best when he highlights an effective relationship between coach and teacher:

Collaboration is also critical because it is in collaboration that the partnership relationship comes alive. Collaboration, at its best, is a give and take dialogue where ideas ping pong back and forth between parties so freely that it’s hard to determine who thought what. Collaboration, then, is not one person telling another what to do; collaboration is people working together as partners, reflecting and co-creating together. (p. 28)

This model, though described as a one-to-one model, can also develop collegiality skills that can be expanded across different learning configurations, such as small group analysis of student data or whole group content area learning.

Diane Sweeney author of *Student-Centered Coaching: A Guide for K-8 Coaches and Principals* (2011), discusses in her book the need to shift the focus away from the teacher and onto the student:

Student-centered coaching is about (1) setting specific targets for students that are rooted in the standards and curriculum and (2) working collaboratively to ensure that the targets are met. Rather than focusing on how teachers feel or the acquisition of a few simple skills, we measure our impact on student learning. (p. 7)

Making this shift from teacher to student also necessitates a shift in assessing the depth of student understanding, elevating the importance of classroom-based formative assessment, which can serve multiple purposes simultaneously. First, it enables teachers to target specific student learning outcomes, leading to reflection on teaching practices and necessary instructional adjustments if students do not meet the established target. Second, it allows teachers to harness relevant, targeted, and purposeful information. Third, it provides teacher with concrete evidence of the range of student understanding, which drives differentiated instruction (an initiative we have struggled to implement as thoroughly as we would like).

By focusing on student understanding, this model could provide us with an opportunity to integrate several initiatives that currently compete with one another due to the way we have structured our professional development into discrete components. Instead of looking at Response to Intervention (RtI), differentiation, assessment, and the implementation of new standards and curriculum as separate entities, shifting to a ‘student understanding’ lens integrates these instructional initiatives into a single overarching purpose, promoting a unified approach to teaching and learning:

Student work (or data) is at the heart of student-centered coaching. Without student work, coaching quickly slips toward being more about teaching practice and less about student learning. Student work keeps coaching conversation grounded and specific, and propels student learning. (Sweeney, 2011, pp. 12-13)

The goal is also to enhance pedagogical knowledge and strategies that have been proven effective. And by shifting the focus to students, the work is depersonalized, which reduces feelings of defensiveness and hopefully enhances trust.

The student-centered model for coaching not only includes one-on-one teacher support through goal setting and reviewing student data, but also through modeling lessons and observing and offering specific feedback within a given coaching cycle. The instructional coach is also responsible for facilitating whole group meetings, small group meetings, and professional development sessions, as well as the procurement of resources and data management.

Pete Hall and Alisa Simeral propose a coaching model in *Building Teachers' Capacity for Success: A Collaborative Approach for Coaches and School Leaders* (2008) called 'strength-based school improvement'. Rather than focusing on a deficit model for improvement, they suggest leaders assess school-wide strengths and build upon existing assets within the community. The authors also suggest building the capacity of teachers to self-reflect:

Whether the teacher is a leading expert on best practices or a new educator who knows very little about how to run a classroom, what matters most is the teacher's personal level of self-reflection... a teacher's ability to self-reflect is directly linked to his or her classroom effectiveness. Self-reflection, therefore, is a fundamental component for building a teachers' capacity for success. (Hall & Simeral, 2008, pp. 37-38)

This model emphasizes building the metacognitive capacities of teachers, which assists in enhancing self-awareness, facilitating the ability to recognize strengths and pinpoint areas for growth, making instructional decisions that are sensitive to student needs, and facilitating a higher degree of intentionality. Unlike other models, this model also provides instructional coaches with a 'continuum of

self-reflection', comprised of "levels of self-awareness, and phases of self-reflection" (p. 40). It reflects skills but also examines the stages of the mindset of a teacher, ranging from the 'unaware' to 'conscious' to 'action' and finally to the 'refined'. The stages are defined as follows:

- **Unaware stage:** Teacher has limited, if any, knowledge of educational research or best practice pedagogies related to their content area. They do not tend to view instruction as something that is based on or designed around evidence of learning. Their students tend to yield the smallest gains.
- **Conscious stage:** In this stage teachers tend to display a 'knowing-doing' gap. Teacher may be aware of the most recent research or best practices, but there is little-to-no evidence of this in his or her classroom. Teachers in this stage tend to know what they should do, but are unsure of how to do it. Teachers in this stage need support with consistent implementation.
- **Action stage:** Teachers in this stage are "motivated to change and begin to consistently integrate their knowledge with classroom instruction" (p. 43). They seek resources and are invested in becoming highly effective. This stage is where teachers increase the number of effective instructional strategies in their teaching toolbox. They also have the ability to be open and flexible, recognizing that there is no single correct approach to high-quality instruction.
- **Refinement stage:** Teachers recognize their thinking about instructional practices will continue to evolve over time based on evidence and reflective practice. Assessment drives instruction, and teachers in this stage are able

to engage their creativity and innovate. Coaches support teachers in this stage by guiding teachers' "self-reflection and analysis of instructional strategies" (p. 45). Teacher relies on evidence to support his or her thinking and decision making.

The continuum is intended to support coaches in identifying where teachers are situated along the continuum of self-reflection, and provides possible coaching points that support moving teachers from one stage of the continuum to the next. While I reviewed the continuum criteria for each stage, specific teachers came to mind. The continuum is structured to highlight certain elements that Hall and Simeral refer to as 'teachers' reflective tendencies', 'related classroom characteristics', the 'role of the coach', and 'strategies that foster reflective growth'. It provides instructional coaches with targets and suggestions for how to engage the teacher in each stage.

In many ways, this model meshes well with the progressive philosophy reflected in our school culture. The ability to articulate what we do—and why we do it—should always be at the forefront of our instruction. The compelling vision for instructional choices should be based on evidence showing we have met the ranges of needs within each classroom. You cannot meet these needs by marching through a set of lesson plans without taking the time to look at the impact your lessons are having, or in some cases, are not having.

Jim Knight's partnership approach (2007), Diane Sweeney's student-centered coaching (2011), and Pete Hall and Alisa Simeral's continuum of self-reflection (2008) all share the same essential elements: the need for strong relationships between instructional coach and teacher and instructional coach and principal, as well as the need

for coaching to be goal driven, collaborative, and reflective. “The days of ‘cardiac assessment’—“I feel in my heart that the adjustments I made helped these children”—are over. We need proof that our intentions yield dividends. It has been said that what gets measured gets done” (Hall & Simeral, 2008, p. 122). We have long been a district that has relied on ‘cardiac assessment’, and it is time for us to move away from this practice. I truly believe that it has done teaching and learning more harm than good.

Effective coaching hinges on principal support and the explicit understanding that coaching is non-evaluative. The roles of principal and coach must be clearly defined for teachers. The way a principal and coach each engage in their own roles and responsibilities enhances the trust and understanding among the staff. These authors also acknowledge that teachers learn from each other every day, and thus are far more likely to accept guidance from one another than from a principal or central office administrator. Building capacity by empowering instructional coaches and fostering teacher leaders within schools and across the organization leads to cultures of continuous professional learning.

Knight (2007) sums it up by saying,

Three variables, in my experience, are the most important predictors of the success of a coaching program. One is that coaches have received appropriate professional development in what and how to coach. A second is that coaches have the discipline, skill, and personality required to be effective coaches. The third is that coaches are working in schools with principals who are effective instructional leaders. (p. 32)

Independent of the model we ultimately select, there are other factors that must be taken into consideration when attempting to effectively implement instructional coaching: building relationships to engender trust and the safety to take risks, developing a learning culture within the school, and promoting the role of the principal as the

instructional leader, who must provide instructional leadership across the building in order to support and nurture a learning culture. The principal must be the visionary who clearly articulates the vision for a professional learning culture and the accompanying expectations. Sweeney (2011) emphasizes the importance of school culture:

Should a school focus on developing the culture first and then engage teachers in coaching and professional development? Or does the act of engaging teachers in coaching and professional development create the school culture? The answer is quite simple: both are essential...without working on the culture we will fail to get the results we are hoping for...but without any structures in place for teacher learning, we won't get anywhere either. (p. 51)

As for the role of the principal, Sweeney shares,

It is not the coach's job to hold teachers accountable for implementing a specific curriculum or set of practices. This is the role of the school leader. Principals who support student-centered coaching put pressure on teachers and hold them accountable for practices that are based on the standards and curriculum. They view the coach as the source of support to help teachers get there. (p. 71)

Coaches maintain the ability to be responsive to teacher needs and offer frequent support in ways that principals cannot. This is largely due to coaches possessing the relevant instructional expertise, but also due to the broader responsibilities the principal has across the school.

There are aspects of these three coaching models that would suit our purposes very well. Are there elements of all three that we should incorporate into our work? Would a hybrid approach be appropriate? Determining a starting point based on the articulated needs of the instructional coaches will be a critical consideration.

### **Background and Methodology**

We are a public school located in an affluent, primarily residential village 16 miles north of Chicago, located directly on Lake Michigan. The school is comprised of

grades five and six, and it is the only school middle school in the community. The district has long enjoyed a reputation for its progressive, child-centered educational philosophy.

Learning is centered on problem solving, self-reflection, and experiential methodologies.

According to the district mission statement:

We are a dynamic community of learners committed to respecting childhood, challenging the intellect, nurturing creativity, fostering reflection, encouraging action and exploring possibilities for the future. We believe that a developmental, child-centered approach to education is the most effective way to meet the needs of our students and the high level of expectations we set for them. We are guided by a set of beliefs embedded in a culture that honors tradition, reflects on transitions and makes choices about transformations. (Winnetka: A Community of Learners Task Force, 2009)

Our district is small, with 1782 students comprising grades K-8. We maintain three K-4 elementary schools, one 5-6 middle school, and one 7-8 junior high school. The village the district resides in is one of five villages located within the larger township. Our district is also one of five districts that feed into the single high school serving the entire township, from which 96% of students continue on to college. According to the 2012 Illinois School Report Card, our student population is 91.9% white, 0.2% African-American, 2.2% Hispanic, 3.2% Asian, 2.4% of two or more races, 1.2% are Limited English Proficiency (LEP), and 16.4% of the students are on Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs). The average class size is 22. 97.6% of the students meet or exceed the Illinois Learning Standards as measured on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) (Illinois State Board of Education, 2015).

Instructional coaches have taken on a role of increased significance in the last year in our district. Coaches are in need of a common vision, comprehensive training, and a clear understanding of how to build and support a culture of continuous learning. The goal is for the director of curriculum, instruction, and assessment (my role), the



principals, and the coaches to collaborate to fulfill these needs. Certainly, input from the coaches in terms of their current beliefs, or ‘as-is’, and their ‘to-be’ goals, is a significant element of this vision. My intent was to determine, through the use of surveys and one-on-one interviews, what each coach felt they needed individually and collectively.

There are currently five literacy facilitators and seven math facilitators in the district. There is one literacy facilitator for each building, and all of them are part-time positions, or .5 full-time equivalent (FTE). The math facilitators range in FTE and number per building. The junior high has one .5 facilitator who also teaches half the day. There are two facilitators at the middle school; each are .5, one for fifth grade and one for sixth grade. The sixth grade facilitator is also the .5 district math facilitator, who oversees the entire group. The elementary schools have one full-time math facilitator per building but one elementary school has two people currently splitting the position—one works with kindergarten, first, and second grade teachers, and the other with third and fourth grade teachers.

Both groups of facilitators, math and literacy, meet twice a month as a leadership team to discuss implementation of math and literacy initiatives across the district, as well as share professional development needs and ideas. Agendas are created collaboratively and are facilitated by our district literacy and math leaders. I also attend the meetings to help coach the coaches, offer my input and support, and provide the macro-level perspective of our goals and initiatives to ensure our missions are aligned.

In order to gather input from the facilitators, I constructed a survey using SurveyMonkey and provided all math and literacy facilitators with the custom link. I created my own private SurveyMonkey account instead of utilizing the district’s account,

so no other administrators could access or review the responses. Of the 12 facilitators in the district, 10 completed the survey. The surveys were intended to assess their current understanding and beliefs about the role of a coach, the essential elements and conditions necessary to support coaching and a culture of continuous learning, and the current culture and conditions within their buildings. Participants were also invited to share their successes and challenges this year, and were given the opportunity to share or comment on anything the survey did not address but that they felt was important to express. The only way participants were identified in the survey was whether they were a math or a literacy facilitator. Four out of the five literacy facilitators and six out of the seven math facilitators participated in the survey. All survey items were derived from the coaching research of Knight (2007) and Sweeney (2011).

I also conducted interviews with three math facilitators, and I was purposeful in my selection. The junior high facilitator is in his first year of the role and also continues to teach part time. The sixth grade middle school facilitator/district facilitator is in her 20<sup>th</sup> year with the district. She is at ease in her role and operates at a very high level. Her leadership has engaged the district with math experts in the field, supported high levels of learning, and has engendered strong relationships with people across the district. The elementary facilitator has been in the district for 20 years as well, but she has struggled to embrace the new structure and expectations for coaching. Some days she fights the change, and some days she appears to accept it. My goal was to capture the range of professional development needs among the coaches, gain an enhanced understanding of their vision, and assess the learning cultures in each building in order to set goals for future growth.

The interviews were audio recorded on an iPad and later transcribed for analysis to determine common themes, capture teacher attitudes regarding the instructional shift, and assess the collective needs and ideas of staff regarding the successes, missteps, and vision for next steps in the district. I promised the entire group I would not share the results of the surveys with anyone else without their permission, and that we would review them to discuss the trends in order to determine our next steps together.

## **Results and Analysis**

### **Survey Results**

Analysis of the first question (“Please check the appropriate box to indicate your support for the following ideas: It is important to...”), intended to capture beliefs held by the respondents regarding the essential elements of coaching, revealed that 80-90% of the respondents ‘strongly agreed’ while the remaining respondents ‘agreed’ with the following statements (percentages below):

It is important to...

- Understand how to apply a variety of methods, techniques, and strategies to formally assess students throughout learning. (90%)
- Have a well-developed knowledge of the standards and curriculum. (90%)
- Support teachers to draw from a deep well of instructional strategies and practice to promote student learning. (80%)
- Support teachers to be knowledgeable about current educational research in their subject areas. (80%)

What was notable (and a pleasant surprise) was that all survey respondents either strongly agreed or agreed with all statements centered on the elements of effective coaching, and none strongly disagreed or disagreed. The four aforementioned criteria that rose to the top reflect the focus of conversations we have had this year. The CCSS have

been at the forefront of our curriculum development work at the district committee level, which is work that involves all of our instructional facilitators. An extension of being knowledgeable about the CCSS is having an understanding of the instructional practices required to support student learning across the standards. Supporting teachers has been the priority this year as we implemented new curricula and materials for both math and language arts.

The instructional facilitators also appear to understand the importance of relationship building with teachers and engaging them as partners. However, the collaborative element to coaching, which involves helping teachers “set specific goals for students with teachers that are rooted in the standards and curriculum,” was evenly split, with 50% strongly agreeing and 50% agreeing. While it is encouraging that no respondents disagreed with this element of coaching, it does indicate an area of growth for two reasons: First, this reflects the practice of student-centered coaching, which we have not yet officially established as our model. Instructional facilitators agree in theory, but we do not currently have a structure or dedicated protocols for this approach. Second, there is the perception of ‘goal overload’ on the part of teachers and some facilitators. One facilitator recently advocated for not setting goals with teachers because teachers have too many to respond to already. Part of this is a mindset issue, but part of this reaction is legitimate in that we need to streamline our processes. Goals are overused and spread across too many areas to ultimately be effective. According to Jim Knight, a presenter at the December 2013 Learning Forward Conference in Dallas, Texas,

You need to set a goal for the coaching to have an impact. Can coaching have an impact if teachers don’t set a goal? The answer is no. If there is no goal, there is no impact. There needs to be a measurable student goal not a teacher goal.

Our coaches have been focused on teachers, curriculum, and materials this year, but going forward, we will need to train coaches to be student-centered as they approach their work with teachers. This will be a major goal area during the 2014-2015 school year.

The response to the statement “It is important to utilize formative assessments to drive decision-making” was split; 60% of the respondents strongly agreed and only 40% agreed. I am not surprised that not all respondents strongly agreed with this statement, given that assessment is something we have been grappling with as a district. Until very recently, assessment was a dirty word: it represented standardization, as opposed to a classroom-based means of assessing student progress toward established curricular goals. Though the outright rejection of this practice is softening, and some teachers are even starting to utilize classroom data to make instructional decisions, we still need to make the explicit connection for teachers: reviewing formative assessment data and setting goals based on what the data show is responsive and responsible instruction that leads to student growth. This will also need to be addressed as we select a coaching model that supports the shift to student-centered coaching.

The second section of the survey required the respondents to prioritize their needs for professional learning through a forced ranking. Respondents were given eight items to prioritize. The results of the survey reveal that the top four collective learning priorities for respondents were as follows:

- Creating an effective coaching cycle to work with teachers across the school (6.90)
- Strategies for working with reluctant teachers (5.40)
- Review student work to support continued growth (4.90)

- Current educational research in my content area (4.70)

There is a collective recognition that we need to adopt a coaching model instructional facilitators will engage in universally. They are aware of the need for consistency and alignment in order to use shared language and to collaborate around common goals. They have also expressed in our meetings the need for strategies to build relationships with reluctant teachers. They know not to take it personally, but that can be hard when their colleagues are not very polite or are even openly hostile toward them. I believe one reason teachers are openly resistant in some schools is that they truly do not understand the role of the coach and what is expected within that role.

According to Diane Sweeney (2011), it is up to the principal to articulate the compelling vision for coaching, and up to the coaches to articulate the continuum of services or opportunities for teacher/coach collaboration. Sharing this at the very beginning of the school year is critical, but often overlooked. She states,

Defining how you see yourself as a coach is an important first step. More often than not, coaches take this process lightly, assuming that once they started, their role will define itself. Or coaches forget to calibrate what they perceive to be their role with the principal, which creates a confusing environment of mixed messages for teachers. (p. 27)

The buildings that have been effectively utilizing instructional coaches for several years experienced no ill effects regarding the unveiling of their roles and responsibilities. However, the schools that were engaging in this work for the first time had not anticipated this as a need. Resistance is to be expected; however, I do believe that some of the resistance can be attributed to an absence of understanding the purpose and

rationale of a culture of continuous growth. This will also need to be a priority during the 2014-2015 school year.

Most recently, our conversations have involved the need to shift toward reviewing student work one-on-one with teachers, as well as in grade-level team meetings. This seed appears to be taking root with facilitators, but it also hinges on the adoption of a coaching model. There is also recognition that in order to be an instructional coach who supports continuous learning, s/he needs to be a continuous learner as well. Staying current with the latest research in the field is an important element of the job. According to Knight (2007), “Our research suggests that teachers who implement new interventions will see much greater improvements in student achievement when their teaching practices are close to those specified in the research” (p. 26). In a continuous learning culture with an eye on growth, this elevates the importance of keeping pace with professional learning. For teachers who have not updated their professional knowledge over the years, the new instructional demands of the CCSS will be a stressor. Having an instructional coach to work with can relieve some of the pressure teachers may feel due to the changing conditions and circumstances of the profession.

The remaining areas of professional growth rated as lower priorities likely reflect an extension of the top four priorities:

- Looking at protocols for reviewing student work to develop collective inquiry (4.10)
- Building a partnership with the principal I work with (3.60)
- Effective strategies for facilitating meetings (3.40)
- Coordinating vertical articulation (2.00)

Once we establish our coaching model, the need for protocols will emerge. Protocols allow for the work to be focused and productive, and they also set parameters for classroom application, which allow facilitators to work with teachers in their classrooms on specific goals. The concept of looking at student work becomes much easier to accomplish in reality when there is a process to follow, at least in the early stages of collaboration. Not only will teachers need support in learning how to review and interpret information from student data, so will the coaches and principals.

In most instances, the facilitators maintain strong relationships with their principals, communicating well and frequently. The math and literacy facilitators at one school, however, struggle to communicate with their principal; they are concerned about her ability to be an instructional leader as well as her understanding of the coaching role as a non-evaluative one. The facilitators meet with her very infrequently, and do not feel they are in agreement regarding priorities for the building. The principal has not developed positive relationships with the facilitators or with the staff as a whole. Shared leadership is an essential element of instructional coaching, so these issues will need to be resolved if this building is going to progress with our coaching initiative. Without the support and understanding of the principal, coaching efforts will fail.

The CCSS necessitate vertical articulation in some form given that the work for each year stands on the shoulders of the year's work before it (Calkins et al., 2012). Vertical articulation, though, has never been a strong suit in our district, particularly because we existed in the past without clearly articulated goals. The lack of common language and expectations rendered the articulation useless, and we thus typically resorted instead to an educational show-and-tell, with no meaningful insights. Given past



experience, this has left most people reluctant to engage in vertical articulation. However, now that we have common curricula, language, and standards to work from, vertical articulation opens up a new set of possibilities. Once we get our grade level processes and protocols off the ground, vertical articulation will be an important layer to add to our learning community repertoire.

The third section of the survey was an assessment of the professional learning culture in each of the buildings. The respondents were to indicate the degree to which the components of collaborative culture were practiced: often, sometimes, rarely, or never. This section of the survey provides a baseline for our ‘as-is’ across the district. The desirable ‘to-be’ vision would encompass all the critical elements of coaching, occurring across a school to the highest degree possible given our current structure. The results revealed the coaches believed the majority of the elements existed sometimes. The specific elements seven to ten coaches felt existed often or sometimes are as follows:

- Learning focus is determined by faculty to ensure ownership.
- Focused and rigorous collaboration takes place on a consistent basis.
- Members of the school community support and encourage one another publicly and privately.
- Certain teachers aren’t favored over others. Rather, the success of all teachers is shared.
- Members of the school community pursue external professional development opportunities.

Two survey respondents indicated some elements never occurred within his or her building, including each of the following:

- Learning focus is determined by faculty to ensure shared ownership.

- Focused and rigorous collaboration takes place on a consistent basis.
- Members of the school community are provided time and resources to engage in learning.
- Certain teachers aren't favored over others. Rather, the success of all teachers is shared.
- Members of the school community observe one another with the purpose of sharing practices and considering dilemmas.

This section of the survey was designed to examine school culture, and to some degree, the extent to which the instructional facilitators are empowered and entrenched within each school. This also is a reflection of the current instructional leadership capacity of the principal in each building. The ability for each school to engage in purposeful collaboration reflects many factors, including the school leader's ability to articulate a clear vision, streamlining goals to support that vision, and structures and schedules that support collaborative culture. For example, in the middle school, math and language arts teachers meet weekly for 50 minutes. The block schedule was deliberately created to allow for common meeting time in the content areas, since the leadership values collaboration and prioritizes professional learning. For that reason, the culture of that building has evolved to rely on their collaborative time, and sees the inherent value of working together in content area teams to design assessments, review student work, and discuss differentiation of lessons.

The junior high offers a stark contrast. Their schedule has been built around a team structure that places value on cross-disciplinary teams (i.e., who work with the same students) that meet quite infrequently. The only common planning time for content area teachers is during a 35-minute lunch period, which is hardly enough time to dig into

purposeful work. In addition, the teacher contract specifically states that teachers may not be required to meet during a lunch period unless they elect to do so on their own accord. The only other time the junior high content area teams are able to meet are on Monday afternoon, the district early release day, from 2:45-4:00pm.

On those Mondays, the content area teachers are competing for time with full faculty meetings facilitated by the principal. Instructional facilitators have to rely on one-on-one interaction with teachers and grab collaborative time when they can get it. Unfortunately, the way the school schedule is currently structured reinforces working in isolation, without engaging in shared conversations or practice. This is highly problematic given the challenges we face with the CCSS implementation and our quest to establish cultures of continuous learning. The importance of the principal establishing himself or herself as an instructional leader in partnership with the instructional facilitator cannot be underestimated. Without the principal's clear vision and mission for professional learning, the instructional facilitator is left trying to guide a boat without the use of a rudder—not very effective, or safe, for that matter.

There appear to be mixed responses from the instructional facilitators regarding building relationships. Some express concerns over resistant teachers, but they also report feeling proud of the relationships they have with staff. These two conditions can certainly exist simultaneously. While the teachers appear to have congenial relationship at present, to what extent are they collegial? Roland Barth (1990) discusses the difference between congeniality and collegiality within schools. According to Barth, “Congeniality suggests people get along with one another. Friendly, cordial associations. People enjoy each other's company and getting along” (p. 30). Collegiality, on the other hand, is “the

presence of four specific behaviors, as follows: Adults in schools *talk about practice, observe each other, work on curriculum, and finally, teach each other what they know*” (p. 31).

Congeniality is a good place to start. After all, it is far more desirable than a staff that is toxic, at each other’s throats, or competitive with one another. While our committees do a fabulous job of facilitating their work, it is essential that we broaden the level of engagement beyond the few who routinely volunteer for committee work.

The recurring theme of relationships in the literature, the surveys, and the interviews with facilitators continues to highlight their importance as well as the need for intensive focus in this area. James Flaherty (1999) agrees:

Relationships remain the beginning point of coaching and its foundation. I keep bringing it up because it is the stage that more than any other is neglected, ignored, or considered to be unnecessary. Given that it’s the foundation, it can cause the most problems when it is taken for granted. The basic ingredients for the relationship are mutual trust, respect, and freedom of expression. (p. 39)

The comments section of the survey revealed trends regarding the challenges the coaches currently face: time, building relationships, reluctant teachers, and juggling too many priorities at once. Two facilitators, most likely from the same building, are struggling with their principal (as aforementioned) and indicated that it makes their ability to be effective challenging. With the arrival of the new principal, that particular building culture seems to be straining under the effects of top-down leadership and a culture of fear. The teachers are fighting to preserve their democratic professional learning culture, but they are starting to fatigue under the strain. It will be critically important to set expectations with the principal and support the instructional facilitators in this building.

Responses to successes indicated that the facilitators felt successful with the increasing curriculum alignment and implementation. Increased collaboration was also indicated as a success, as well as the relationships many of them have been able to establish with teachers in spite of their concerns about reluctant teachers.

Finally, in the open comment section, the facilitators expressed apprehension about teachers' true understanding of what the facilitator's role is within the school, finding a better balance between supporting small groups of teachers and individual needs, and establishing strong professional learning communities.

### **Interview Results**

The three individual interviews I conducted yielded similar patterns to the survey and offered some unique concerns and misperceptions. The three interviewees universally cited the importance of teachers understanding instructional facilitators' purpose, building trusting relationships with teachers, collaboration with principals, and strengthening the facilitators' capacity to work as a team.

#### **Understanding the Role of Instructional Facilitator**

Understanding the role of the facilitator, it turns out, needed to be articulated in several forms. The facilitators drafted the roles and responsibilities, which were then shared with the principals. After the principals reviewed them and accepted the revised expectations, they were then shared with all of the teachers across the district. The teachers' concern revolved solely around the role of evaluation: they wanted to make it crystal clear that the facilitator would not play a role in teacher evaluation. We validated that concern and strongly emphasized that was a shared agreement across the district at all levels. Nevertheless, an acceptance of a two-dimensional description of instructional

coaching responsibilities did not guarantee a three-dimensional understanding when it was time for implementation, on the part of the teachers or even coaches who wrote them. Seth, an instructional coach, describes some of the confusion:

There's my understanding of what *I am* supposed to do, but then there are the people I am supposed to be working with—*their* understanding of what I am supposed to do. And so, there is a gigantic culture shift, not only for people like me taking the job, but there is a culture shift for those who [I am working with]. The degree that I get to do what I think I am supposed to do seems dependent on some of the readiness of acceptance of what this role means.

Seth is certainly correct about the culture shift given that he is the inaugural instructional coach in his building. He has big dreams for what he would like to accomplish, but he is savvy enough to recognize that he will have to move incrementally. He also acknowledges that he needs to have a greater understanding of what coaching could and should optimally resemble.

While Seth has embraced his role, even in the face of his learning curve, the shift has been more of a struggle for Cheryl, who, prior to the shifting expectations, has been in this role comfortably for 12 years. In previous years, Cheryl had been able to work with small groups of accelerated math learners, which brings its own status within the community. This is no longer allowed under our model of differentiated instruction, and she, perhaps rightfully, feels like something has been taken away from her. Consequently, she has viewed this change as a devastating loss, one that initially seemed to have blinded her to the job's newfound possibilities, which she is in the process of resolving:

Okay, here is the struggle. I am being forced to be in the classroom with teachers and it is allowing me to talk with the teachers where we say, 'Did you see so-and-so? Go check that out.' And then I am teaching and the teacher is looking at the kids saying, 'Oh, my god. Look at Sophia!' It brings something good in return and at the end you need to reflect what is the balance. But I appreciate the change. It was a hard change, but I see the good in it.

Cheryl was struggling with the misconception that because she wasn't allowed to work with the small group of gifted students, she wasn't allowed to work with students at all. Given that perception, I certainly understand her sense of loss: the beginning of something new tends to signify the end of something else, and Cheryl was clearly in mourning. Now that Cheryl is beginning to establish herself and work with teachers and students collaboratively, she is understanding and appreciating her new role more than she was able to initially.

Erin, who has been in this role the longest, is a highly adept and widely respected instructional facilitator. She describes the shift that people are experiencing in reconciling the old with the new responsibilities:

It really should be the support of the teachers—in their instruction. Not doing things for them. That is the biggest shift. Typically, it's been—okay, I'll teach it for you. I'll take the high kids for you. I think that is the biggest shift: planning with a teacher, talking about the big understandings, talking about how to differentiate, talking about the students in the class, and then going into the class with the teacher and possibly working with groups within the classroom or doing a model lesson—with that comes assessments, collaboration, and so on and so forth.

This does require new skill sets for some of the facilitators who lack experience facilitating meetings and partnering with teachers. It is a very different experience to pull a small group of students from a teacher's classroom than to engage in a collaborative

unit sharing feedback and reviewing student data. For some, this is outside of their comfort zone.

The support of the principal goes a long way in establishing expectations so the coach is not put in a position where s/he has to justify or defend him or herself. The principals must set the standards for collaboration and accountability, taking the pressure off of the coach in order for him or her to focus on their roles and responsibilities. As Seth says,

I think that the principals at the administrative level need to really be clear on what a coach is to do and their purpose. Because it is awkward to explain to people why you are here and what your role is when they don't know you are coming.

Laying the foundation for the work is something that frequently gets overlooked at our frenzied pace. Going forward, it will important for us to act more intentionally in our framing of coaching.

### **Building Relationships with Teachers**

The importance of building strong relationships with colleagues cannot be emphasized enough. It is the foundation for any coaching relationship, as Knight (2007), Sweeney (2011), and Hall and Simeral (2007) have all highlighted in their coaching models. The instructional coaches need to build individual relationships while also facilitating healthy working dynamics in both small and large group meetings. Seth, Ellen, and Cheryl, math facilitators in the junior high, middle school, and elementary school respectively, spoke to the range of needs and challenges they have in their roles. They wear many hats: mentor, role model, and confidant, in addition to instructional leader. But they are well aware that they cannot operate in any of those capacities without first having equitable, trusting relationships with their colleagues.



Our district firmly believes in, and highly values, relationships. The social and emotional well-being of adults as well as students is a frequent conversation and emphasis. However, with all of the initiatives and associated deadlines, sometimes we do not address it sufficiently. The need for safety in the relationship assures the teacher that s/he can engage with the coach without judgment or fear of having evaluative information communicated to the principal. Seth shares his observations as he enters into this new territory:

I think it's just the desire to shy away from people in your room. I think there is a balance of, 'Is someone going to discover something bad about me? Is it safe? Am I really doing what I am supposed to be doing? Am I doing it well? I think I am. According to myself I am. According to the feedback I get from others it is.' But, it's never necessarily with other people who know your subject area who are saying, 'Yes, you are.' It's never validated by other math teachers or other mathematicians.

In Seth's case, he shifted from being the chair of the math department, where his primary duty was to order necessary supplies and confirm dates with his colleagues, to the math instructional facilitator: this shifted the lens from business items to instructional items, essentially eliminating the department chair position. Instructional collaboration had not been the expectation or the norm at his school, prior to the change in roles and responsibilities this year. He reflected,

I think teachers are just used to going it alone, frankly. And I think that is the biggest cultural shift. They are not used to collaboration. It is different than getting together and having a meeting. That everything we talk to each other about isn't collaboration. I think there's got to be some clear distinction that we all get to the point of what is collaborating really going to look like? And not every teacher is good at it. It's hard to collaborate. We've been doing this for 25 years in a certain way. They weren't asking for a coach.

Seth recognizes that they are starting at the very beginning in building a collaborative culture within the junior high; the majority of the math teachers have been

solo artists for the majority of their careers. The CCSS provides the leverage for this shift, but the vision and mission around the work need to be more firmly rooted in order for a professional learning culture to become the expected norm.

Ellen, on the other hand, works within a collaborative culture and has firmly established relationships with her colleagues. They have honest dialogue and are not afraid to share their opinions or ideas. Ellen discusses the importance of understanding the adult learners as individuals and navigating the different needs of the group, which she finds to be the most challenging aspect of being an instructional coach:

I've come to value that in [our district], relationships are the most important thing, and I totally get that. I understand it because if you don't have a good relationship with the person, she is not going to make any progress. When you said, 'What is the hardest thing?'—that is dealing with people that are reluctant or not really on board. Or who tend to dominate and want it all their way...dealing with adult learner is a big challenge for me. Not the math. The math is great. The people I work with are very into the math.

Over the years, Ellen has learned to think strategically about ways she can engage individuals equitably so that everyone feels valued and heard. She understands that sometimes a stated reason for not wanting to go in an instructional direction isn't always the actual reason behind the hesitation. Ellen recognizes the importance of being persistent while also taking the time to listen to teachers and understand them as individuals:

Being strategic with people and never giving up. Having the right conversation. I don't send out blanket e-mails very often. I do when I need to communicate something [so everyone hears it at once], but it's really through [personal] conversations. If there is something that needs evidence that it's working, or structuring conversations that are going to go in a certain way. It's usually more one-to-one talking to the person, and having expectations, but also listening to what the concerns are. Sometimes you get an inch and that is all you're going to get, and it's a huge accomplishment. Your expectations have to be high, but also realistic, and they are different for different people. You never quite know what to expect with adults, really. You've got to keep at it and thinking about ways, Hmm, how am I going to try to get to where I am going with the person?

Cheryl shares that trust is essential if teachers are going to be able to display vulnerability, such as asking for or admitting they need help:

[When] somebody asks [for help] they are putting their vulnerable side out there. I remember when I was a new teacher. I had two boys—I didn't know how to take care of them. They had learning issues, attention issues. I don't want to go to Sandy [the principal] and tell her I can't handle them. I remember going to Ann Baylor [a colleague] and saying, 'Help me!' And that is risking a lot. Of course, you aren't going to your boss to say, 'Help me—I can't!' [Teachers] need help without risking showing their boss they are incompetent.

Creating professional learning communities and establishing a collaborative culture requires a change in mindset from needing to generate all the answers on your own to coming together as a learning community to solve common instructional questions or concerns. People often don't understand the change you are asking them to make until they experience success under the new model. Seth is aware that not only is he a support for teachers, he is also a role model and change agent:

If I wasn't really in-depth learning about it [CCSS], and spending my time trying to understand it, I don't know if I would buy into it. I think by me showing support, it helps some of my colleagues buy in, because usually they would look at me and say, either he's the most opposed and we can feel good about that or he's the most for it and we can go behind that as well. That's what I feel like I have to do—be for it so everyone can also be for it and not be conflicted. You might not 100% believe in everything, but you have to do it anyway because that's your leadership role for your district, and for the teachers, and for the students.

Relationship building is a frequent topic for discussion at our bimonthly coaching meetings. We have not yet taken the time to discuss a collective strategy for how coaches will introduce their range of services to teachers, equitably engage all teachers, or establish the expectation that everyone (not just new or struggling teachers) should work with a coach over the course of a school year. Much of this work needs to be defined and carried out through a partnership with the principal.

### **Collaboration with Principals**

Ellen discussed the evolution of the learning culture in her school, which was not always smooth. She and the principals she worked with (I among them) had to set very clear expectations in the early years of building a collaborative culture for weekly content area meetings as well as the need for common assessments across grade levels. The principal understands the political minefields within the school and community that the coach is not usually privy to. It is up to the principals to stress potential issues and support the coach in navigating them before they develop into actual issues. One way to do that is to set firm boundaries and parameters for staff, but to also coach the coach. Ellen reflects on the principal/coach relationship:

It did help me to have an administrator that would give guidance as to things that needed to be tackled and did make decisions that I had to carry out, but—for example, meeting every week. That was a strategic decision that was going to lead to collaboration. That's going to lead to assessments that are developed together. So that was the administrator making that decision, but helping me to figure out from there how to work with different personalities and everything else. I have totally been mentored like that.

Ellen also highlights the partnership aspect of the relationship, recognizing that the principal may not have content-area knowledge. Therefore, it is up to the coach to share content area needs with the principal so that they can problem solve and construct a shared vision for the work that needs to be accomplished and craft professional development that supports continued teacher learning. She notes,

We have become more collaborative over the course of years. More shared leadership. I look at the principal or the building administrator as someone to problem solve with me, and my role is to also educate him or her on what is happening in the subject area, because that is going to be the person that is going to deal with potential political issues. They need to know what is going on and the teachers need the support of the principal. The principal can't always be there with the teachers talking about math, but that time with me can go a long way in helping further that understanding. BUT I also gain from having that relationship where we can problem solve about issues that come up.

Not only is Ellen a part-time instructional facilitator for the middle school, she is also a part-time district math facilitator. In her role as a district math facilitator, Ellen partners with me, the director of curriculum and instruction (me), to help design, plan, and facilitate the bimonthly coaching meetings for the math facilitators across the district in order to build common agendas that are aligned. These aligned agendas allow for a more consistent implementation of the district math goals, which are also tied to individual school improvement plans. Ellen is simultaneously on the dance floor and the balcony (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009). From the district balcony she sees the need to involve the principals more intentionally than we have been up to this point. Building a

common understanding with principals not just within individual buildings but across the district as well is an issue that has risen to the top of the priority list. She notes,

What are the strategies in math that work without it being evaluative? Because that is when people start to get uncomfortable in their role. The relationship with the principals is so important—are you talking about teachers by name or not? That is a huge piece where I’ve heard mixed messages and that is something that is very important to have clarified. Is it inappropriate when a principal asks you about a teacher or is that a natural thing for a principal to do? And there are all sorts of levels of trust there. That’s a big gray area that needs to be dealt with.

This should not be a gray area. Instructional coaches are in no way involved with evaluation, and the perception on the part of the teachers that they are puts the coach/teacher relationship at risk. There was an instance of a principal using the words ‘coaching’ and ‘evaluation’ interchangeably, which caused a lot of damage in the middle school. As a result, Ellen’s and the literacy facilitator’s relationship with their principal is tenuous at best. What this indicates is that not only do coaches and principals need to have a shared understanding, but it is up to me to be a coach of the coaches as well. It is also essential for me to lead joint professional development sessions with both coaches and principals to ensure there is a common understanding, message, and strategy for how we will all move forward together. I need to clearly communicate the district vision so that our principals understand what the expectations are for the instructional coaches and how principals are expected to structure and support the learning cultures in their buildings.

If that wasn’t enough to keep us busy, it has also become apparent we need to spend time building the math facilitator team into a collaborative unit. The implementation of our new math curriculum and new math materials has exposed some

competitive elements across the elementary schools that we need to acknowledge and resolve in order to establish new norms.

### **Strengthening the Leadership Teams**

We often say in our district that we are attempting to build a plane while flying it. It is an apt comparison, given the number of initiatives we have running simultaneously. The challenge is to shift from a reactive stance of fighting fires to a stance that is proactive and forward-thinking. This is something that Ellen highlights as a challenge, because she recognizes that we need to engage in team building. The shift in the coaching roles and responsibilities arrived before we had a plan to support it—most certainly an example of what not to do when initiating major change. Balancing the need for teambuilding and the need to hit our implementation targets has left everyone exhausted and overwhelmed. Ellen reflected,

It seems like we have so many issues every time [we meet] that we have to take care of, that we have to attend to. This is an age-old problem that we don't get to do pre-planning ahead of time for what would be effective. I do think learning the traits of good coaching in a thoughtful way would be a good idea. It's better when you have a task or when you are working on something, or when you are gathering input from everyone equally. Or you ask somebody, 'What do you think is best for us?' I think it is good to be able to come together and talk and support each other, but every session shouldn't be a therapy session either.

As much as we tried to include the coaches in the change, this is something that has largely been done *to* them, even though they were the authors of the revised roles and responsibilities. The instructional facilitators are in need of a heavy dose of empowerment in order to develop a modicum of control over their own fate and exercise their voices. Ellen states,

I think the leadership needs to be developed in these people because, and this is a unique situation, these roles were not leadership roles. We made them into leadership roles with the same people in them. Now we have all these expectations for you, and it's not really their fault that their job changed. They are trying to figure it out. To develop that leadership is hard and particularly at the elementaries where there are [teachers] that don't have the greatest fondness for math.

The coaches have been operating without a framework or a plan. They have expressed interest in training and learning strategies to lead. Some of the curriculum implementation has supported them this year with clear objectives and goals, but it is not enough and will not sustain them indefinitely. While they can point to success in their work with teachers, some of them do not feel their interactions with each other are fulfilling their collegial needs.

Historically, all five schools in the district operated as their own individual kingdoms. There were strong individual school identities, but not a cohesive district identity. We have spent the last five years trying to pull the individual schools together as a collective, and have seen incremental progress over the years. Bringing the elementary grade levels together to develop an identity as district grade-level teams has been a hard habit to break: teachers are very wrapped up in their building identity, and so are many of the facilitators for that matter. Changing the mindset of the facilitators will hopefully model changing the mindset for the teachers. Since we only have one middle school and one junior high, the issues don't exist in grades 5-8. Cheryl has expressed extensive frustration with her new role, but also with the other math facilitators at the other two elementary schools:



I'm always counting on teachers with experience in teaching [*Investigations*] in the other two buildings. And ever since in the spring I have been asking and asking for resources for differentiation. What's interesting is that there isn't a lot of outreach. I was really frustrated. If you were to ask me, what did you do for differentiation in *Everyday Math* I would have binders. But there isn't any of that, but I guess that's the dynamics of the buildings and that's why we are different. I want to learn with my colleagues [in the other buildings]. I want to know what they are thinking and their culture in their own buildings. I think it's great that the four of us coming together. I feel there is a sense of mistrust. Mistrust and competitiveness.

Some of this is a function of the need to build the team, but I can't help but wonder if some of it is old district baggage associated with competition among the elementary schools. Cheryl's school, even in the face of new ISAT cut scores, had 98% of their students meet or exceed standards in math. The other elementary schools were at 89% and 90%, respectively. Cheryl's school used *Everyday Mathematics*, and the other two schools used *Investigations*. Our curriculum review process required all elementary schools to adopt common materials, and due to CCSS alignment issues, *Everyday Mathematics* was out and *Investigations* was in for everyone, as determined by the district math committee. Cheryl's school has not adapted well to the change and there is some resentment being harbored by teachers—and Cheryl. They are no longer unique in the district, and may not enjoy their high test score status going forward.

Bringing everyone together as a team has the potential to reveal attitudes and resentment that can undermine the team building. It appears people have expectations of one another that have not been communicated; thus, it will be important to harness those expectations and build group norms. While we have never been a particularly political district, there seem to be political elements we will need to put to rest.

We certainly have a lot of work ahead of us, and no shortage of issues to tackle. This work is not going to be easy. Given all of the input and information, I think we are now in a position to strategize about our work and collaboratively construct a plan of action for the next several years. It is clear to me that we need to spend the second half of the 2013-2014 school year creating our implementation plans utilizing a multi-year lens. It is also essential that this work involve all stakeholders: the director of curriculum and instruction, principals, assistant principals, and instructional facilitators. I firmly believe that all stakeholders recognize the power and potential of instructional coaching, but we need a well-defined strategic plan of action to fully realize both.

### **Conclusions**

*“Faculty collaboration is the foundation of fairness. Learning communities are the essence of respect.”*

-Doug Reeves

*The Learning Leader: How to Focus School Improvement for Better Results (2006)*

Given the survey of the literature and the results from interviews and surveys, what are the next steps for implementing an instructional coaching model across the district? I think it will need to have a series of phases that are prioritized by level of importance, based on known effective practices. This may be stating the obvious, but we have already proven that the obvious has not dictated our decision making thus far. In order to reach the ‘to-be’ articulated earlier in this paper, I propose the following three phases for development and implementation:

#### **Phase One: January 2014-June 2014**

Phase one will establish the vision, relationships, and framework for re-launching the instructional coaching initiative. In the administrative world, planning for the

following school year begins as soon as we return in January. This is true for the principals as well. I currently meet with the principals bimonthly for our curriculum and instruction meetings (C&I) to discuss necessary resources, professional learning as a team, and progress toward our established goals for the year. The district literacy and math teams also meet bimonthly, but have had separate meetings thus far. Phase one will cover the work that should have been done prior to this 2013-2014 school year (but due to the train already being out of the station, it was not able to happen).

I would like to spend January through June bringing the principals and coaches together in order to build our collective vision of priorities by working on the following:

- Sharing hopes and dreams for instructional coaching
- Sharing best practices research and correcting misconceptions
- Establishing a single unified focus for 2014-2015 (“Teaching for understanding” is currently being considered for the theme)
- Establishing a plan for how they will communicate with one another
- Setting clear boundaries in terms of what the coach is responsible for (e.g., facilitating meetings, coordinate staff development) and what the principal is responsible for (e.g., creating a structure that supports coaching and setting expectations for staff around a learning culture)
- Creating a common message around the coach being non-evaluative
- Articulating a vision that they co-create, but that the principal will share with staff the first day of school
- Coaches creating an outline of services or opportunities to partner with teachers they will share the first day of school

- Adopting a coaching model that is student-centered and data-driven
- Streamlining goal setting for teachers to be specific, targeted, and purposeful
- Selecting a ‘touchstone’ book that we will all read together to support our shared learning and common language building

Prior to bringing the two groups together, I want to prep them for the work. At the next literacy and math meeting, we will review the survey data together and draft our priorities, recognizing that the principals will want to do the same, and that the end result will represent a collaborative set of goals for our work as principal/coach teams across the district. Our math and literacy consultants are returning in the spring to work with the instructional facilitators. It will be essential that we design a session to include the principals. I am interested in having the consultants discuss their observations of both strengths and growth areas, best practices priorities in each content area, and collaborative goals for the content areas with the principals. The learning should not be fractured—we need to come together.

### **Phase Two: June 2014- January 2015**

The instructional coaches shared their need for training and professional development loudly and clearly. It is crucial to establish specific training needs and provide professional development to support those needs. Because the coaches have all possess a varying degree of experience and comfort with their role, the training will have to meet the range of needs as to opposed to following a one-size-fits all template. I have set aside the necessary funding for the following:

- **Summer 2014:** Attend the Teachers College Summer Reading Institute. I have asked principals who have not attended the weeklong institute for reading or writing to attend this weeklong conference with me. There is a portion dedicated to assisting school leaders in building their understanding of CCSS for literacy and the practices necessary to meet those standards.
- **Summer 2014:** Provide all principals and instructional facilitators with annotated bibliographies of instructional coaching resources if they would like to read more about coaching independently. This will not be required, but I will make some recommendations based on their articulated needs. For example, “If you are interested in learning more about \_\_\_\_\_, try this book.”
- **August 2014:** Bring in our differentiation specialist to deconstruct the CCSS ELA standards and learning progressions, since I am not convinced the principals have a true understanding of the standards. As evaluators of teachers, they need to have a firm understanding not only of the standards, but what they look like in action.
- **Fall 2014:** Send all five literacy coaches to Columbia University’s Teachers College Coaching Institute. The Coaching Institute is a weeklong experience where coaches not only learn about best practices, they push into New York City public school classrooms and practice these skills under the guidance of staff developers who offer timely and targeted feedback for the instructional coaches.

- **Fall 2014 and Spring 2015:** Contract with our Teachers College consultant to return for the 2014-2014 school year to continue not only her work with the literacy facilitators, but also her work with building principal instructional capacity around reading and writing workshops. One focus will be a continuation of using student data to drive instructional decisions.
- **Fall 2014 and Spring 2015:** Contract with our math consultant to focus solely on student-centered coaching. This training should be job-embedded and involve facilitating group training in using protocols for looking at student work.
- **Fall 2014 – Spring 2015:** Develop a framework for peer observations. This work will need to be developed with the teachers so they do not feel like it is something being done to them. The seeds that have been planted are starting to grow, so it will be important to capitalize on the interest before it wanes.
- **January 2015 – June 2015:** Review our collective learning and determine further needs. Begin to set goals for the following year, this time planning staff development progressions for teachers. What learning experiences, based on principal and coach observations, do we feel are most important to provide our teachers? Teachers and coaches develop a collaborative vision and framework for staff development for the 2015-2016 school year.

### **Phase Three: 2015-2016 School Year**

This will be the time to implement a teacher/staff development plan. Experiences could include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Ensure staff development is job-embedded. Instead of pulling people out of classrooms, push people into classrooms. For example, lesson study, regular review of student data to determine differentiation, RtI, and resource needs.
- Have an established calendar shared with teachers ahead of time so they know what is expected of them over the course of the school year; they do not like surprises once the school year begins.
- Further build teacher leadership capacity at the building level through collaborative agenda setting or co-facilitation

A final essential element that will also need to be tackled is measuring the impact of instructional coaching. How will we know it's working? This is not an easy metric to isolate given how many adults have a hand in student growth of the course of a day, a week, a month, and a year. This will require deeper investigation and framing. I know we do not want the teachers evaluating the coaches, given that the coaches do not evaluate them. It will also require a strategic approach that must provide a metric to convince the school board of the added value instructional coaching brings to our teachers and students.

All of this, however, is subject to adjustment given instructional facilitator and principal input. But the core needs, given the data, are indisputable. Apart from unforeseen challenges, we already face glaring challenges that have the potential to

impede the progress of our implementation, such as the ability for the current people in the coaching position to be successful in their new role, the instructional leadership capacity of the principals, and acquiring school board support.

Putting together a three-year plan is one challenge, but putting together an effective team is another. According to Knight (2007), not everyone possesses the skills and personality to be an effective instructional coach. Applying this to the future, one of my concerns is that we have changed the nature of the role while the people who currently hold the position have been operating under different expectations. They were not consulted about the change, and the role was adjusted based on the needs of providing a 21<sup>st</sup> century education, not on whether they wanted to assume these new responsibilities.

I cannot help but think about Jim Collins's 'hedgehog principal', discussed in his book, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...And Others Don't* (2001). I am a firm believer in the concept of getting the "right people on the bus" and "in the right seats" (p. 41). I am not convinced we have the right people on the instructional coaching bus. However, those who are a mismatch would do quite well on a different district bus, were the right seat available. This will be a reality we will likely have to confront sooner rather than later. Looming retirement for one or two will help us make adjustments, but there are still two others I am concerned about. These will be difficult conversations to have, and I will need to begin with the principals to establish clear expectations.

I also have concerns about the instructional capacity of two of our principals. One does not show any interest in—or understanding of—instructional leadership. Relationships with her staff are highly strained, and she seems to experience frequent



misunderstanding of instructional expectations. She is a top-down manager who does not collaborate well with either staff or her assistant principal. Additionally, she appears to be pushing back against the district alignment philosophy, preferring to operate on her own.

The other principal is a wonderful relational leader and articulates our needs competently, but falls very short when it comes to execution. It may very well be that difficult leadership conversations will be necessary as we move through this change; it is possible we do not have the right people in these positions.

My hope is that a change plan with clearly defined action steps, coupled with the appropriate resources and support, will afford optimal growth and success for everyone within the district. The current educational environment is more hostile than it is supportive of teachers. The pressure resulting from new standards, the upcoming PARCC assessment in Illinois, and student achievement data tied to teacher evaluation beginning in 2016 is overwhelming teachers with stress and anxiety. They need the support of their colleagues and a coach as a confidant. This initiative inherently values the intellectual and emotional well-being of our teachers and is in alignment with our district values. The work is intense, requiring time, energy, and resources that must be appropriately supported through systems, structure, and professional support. This initiative involves change at the district, building, and classroom level, and this change is pervasive and all encompassing. It is too important to fail.



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## Appendix

### Facilitator Roles and Responsibilities

#### INSTRUCTION

##### Delivery of Service

- Coach teachers, collaboratively and strategically
  - Support teachers in reaching professional goals
  - Support consistency and alignment of instructional practices
  - Reflect with teachers to refine future lessons and instruction
  - Support teachers by identifying areas of accomplishment and growth
  - Plan instructional scope and sequence
  - Co-teach and model in classrooms
- Facilitate support for differentiated instruction within a classroom

#### CURRICULUM/ASSESSMENT

##### Planning and Preparation

- Reflect with teachers to evaluate student learning
- Demonstrate expertise of content knowledge and instructional practices, current research, and professional development.
- Research, evaluate, and create supplemental materials, resources (including technology), and assessments for implementing District curricula at the building level.

#### Professional Responsibilities

- Assume a leadership role in:
  - Grade level/Department meetings
  - Instructional Leadership Team
  - Curriculum review team
  - Professional development for teachers
  - Parent education
- Coordinate and manage instructional materials
- Model professionalism, including integrity and confidentiality
- Serve as liaison between colleagues, Principal, and District
- Analyze data related to student performance to support instructional planning and the School Improvement process

## ENVIRONMENT

- Initiate and build relationships that are highly respectful and trusting, collaborative, and supportive
- Promote an environment that values reflection and continuous improvement within a culture of professional inquiry
- Support change in a respectful environment
- Establish a framework for collaborating with tea