

Coaches are on the side of helping teachers implement effective instructional practices in non-evaluative ways. They help teachers become more reflective practitioners through a job-embedded, elbow-to-elbow support system. They offer a high impact outcome in a risk-free environment that promotes a consistency in language and practice. The goal is for all students to be in classrooms with highly effective teachers who are supported by highly effective instructional coaches.

Finding time, however, for this kind of “boots on the ground” commitment is “one of the most frequently cited challenges with implementing change in education” as cited by Joellen Killian in the June 2016 JSD, Learning Forward). Coaches and their teaching colleagues must make time, not find time, to collaborate regularly with each other. This is where ongoing learning takes place. *“... no matter what states and districts do to bolster the education workforce, they will need to do more and better with the talent they have. This will require a more effective and systematic approach to supporting, developing, and mobilizing the more than three million educators who will teach in and lead our schools”* (Professional Learning in the Learning Profession: A Status Report on Teacher Development in the United States and Abroad, February 2009, NSDC).

Instructional coaching is a systematic approach to improve teaching and learning.

Coaches are critical friends and engage in collective problem-solving with their teaching colleagues. They communicate regularly and offer ample opportunities for practitioners to practice with each other. They create and promote a school wide culture that understands the “why” of instructional coaching and the “how” to achieve a shared vision and common goals. They help teachers plan together, apply newly learned strategies, and then talk about what worked in classrooms. It’s not about the standards or eligible content; it’s not about a plethora of strategies to implement or a variety of digital tools to accomplish their intended outcomes. Rather, it is about the conversation before, during, and after that makes a difference in teaching and learning.

Providing workshops and “drive by” professional development to teachers does not extend any learning. It is a “spray and pray” or a “feast or famine” situation at the very least and quite frustrating at the very best. Either teachers are given multiple strategies to implement every day or told to implement a variety of initiatives that the school has decided to adopt, all without the ongoing support of a trusted, experienced colleague, a.k.a., an instructional coach.

Teachers in the United States spend more time with their students but less time planning and learning with their colleagues. On one hand, it is great that our teachers interact and engage with their students more than in other countries. On the other hand, if teachers do not have the time or flexibility to talk with their teaching colleagues about how their students learn, there is a missed opportunity for teacher growth. And, that is what is needed to influence student growth.

Coaches need to reinforce collaborative learning time; they need to focus on ways to bring colleagues together to plan effective instruction, visit classrooms to see the instruction, debrief and give feedback about the instruction, and then revise the thinking to make the instruction more effective. These kinds of conversations are not in the hallways or between classes. These kinds of conversations are deliberate and yield “high impact” suggestions designed to stimulate learning for both students and their teachers.

Make the time spent with teachers **SMART** time. Ensure that specific content is shared, manageable, achievable, relevant, and transferable so that teachers are more likely to try new instructional strategies and techniques. Make the limited time they can spend collaborating valuable, risk-free, and meaningful to their practice. Help your colleagues understand the power of collaborative learning and communal conversations.