

Designing Instructional Coaching: Suggestions for Supporting Teachers' Professional Learning for the 21st Century

Sarah L. Woulfin, PhD
Associate Professor
Educational Leadership and Policy
University of Texas at Austin
Austin, TX

Laura DeSimone, PhD
Professor
College of Education and Human Development
University of Delaware
Newark, DE

Amy Stornaiuolo, PhD
Associate Professor
Learning, Teaching, and Literacies Division
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, PA

Abstract

Coaching is a popular and high-leverage instrument for instructional reform. Coaching holds potential to accelerate teacher learning and school improvement. Linking results from current research, we portray how coaching benefits from robust infrastructure. This article offers three design recommendations that leaders can implement to optimize coaching: (1) identify infrastructural resources; (2) align coaching with instructional priorities and standards; and (3) ensure coaches have the knowledge they need, particularly in relation to the local context. We share insights on how educational reformers and leaders can re-set systems and optimize coaching to accelerate learning and change.

Key Words: coaching, district leadership, educational improvement

While instructional coaching is deemed a high-leverage educational reform instrument with a robust research base (e.g., Kraft, Blazar, & Hogan, 2018; Russell et al., 2020), the current educational landscape—with all of the attendant challenges of pandemic-related disruptions to student and teacher learning and unsettled state and district policies about ‘appropriate’ content and pedagogy—requires a revitalized and more comprehensive vision for how coaching might support teachers’ professional learning (PL).

From constant demands to adapt instruction and incorporate new learning tools, teachers need PL opportunities that can help them navigate these challenges and provide high quality, tailored instruction that meets students’ needs and is aligned to state standards.

Drawing on our extensive research studying different models of and approaches to PL (e.g., Desimone, 2009; Desimone & Garet, 2015; Garet et al., 2002; Hochberg & Desimone, 2010; Woulfin, 2018 & 2020), we argue coaching holds significant potential to rise to this challenge and play a role in accelerating learning (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012; Kraft et al., 2018; Pak, Desimone & Parsons, 2020).

With current plans by many districts to use Elementary and Secondary Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds for deploying additional coaches to support teachers in improving student outcomes, it is particularly pressing for districts to understand how to move beyond the technical steps of hiring more coaches and toward optimizing coaching (Woulfin, 2020).

This article offers concrete recommendations for educational leaders

interested in leveraging coaching to meet the challenging demands of our educational system and offer teachers more targeted opportunities for PL.

Given that district leaders play a critical role in designing key elements of both instructional reform and coaching (Desimone et al., 2001; Hopkins et al., 2013; Woulfin, 2020), we offer three specific design recommendations that leaders can implement to optimize coaching: (1) identify infrastructural resources to improve the coaching model; (2) align coaching with the district strategic plan, school improvement priorities, and instructional standards; and (3) ensure coaches have the knowledge and skills they need, particularly in relation to the local context.

In the remainder of the article, we explore each of these evidence-based conditions and activities holding the potential to assist with scaling up and optimizing coaching.

We draw on insights from several research studies we have conducted in recent years, including those from the IES Center on Standards, Alignment, Instruction, and Learning (C-SAIL), a seven-year project investigating the impact of college- and career-ready standards on K-12 instruction in five states (Ohio, California, Massachusetts, Texas, and Pennsylvania).

We also draw on results from Woulfin and colleagues on organizational conditions and leadership enabling instructional coaching. Thus, we link results from our research with ideas for how educational reformers and leaders can re-set systems to accelerate learning and change (Ladson-Billings, 2021), using coaching as a mechanism for supporting educators.

Background on Coaching

Over the past two decades, and across states, instructional coaching has become a popular lever for district reform and instructional improvement (Domina et al., 2015; Woulfin, 2020). Instructional coaches are primarily focused on teacher learning, often working with groups or individual teachers to observe classroom practices, provide supportive feedback, and model instructional strategies, as well as engage in administrative responsibilities, lead professional development workshops, and network with district and state stakeholders.

Coaching mediates the relationship between federal, state, and district policy and classroom practice (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012), since coaches often work directly with teachers to support educator learning and shift classroom practice, advance reform efforts, and improve student outcomes (Kraft et al., 2018; Russell et al., 2020). There exists a constellation of coaches working at the district and school levels, engaging in multiple forms of coaching, and advancing multiple reform efforts (Domina et al., 2015; Galey-Horn & Woulfin, 2021; Hashim, 2020; Woulfin, 2020).

Researchers and practitioners have documented considerable variation in how districts approach coaching. Some districts count on coaches as introducers (or even enforcers) of reform, with coaching functioning as a lever for compliance (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012; Desimone et al., 2014; Galey & Woulfin, 2021). Other districts lean upon coaches as collaborative thought partners or mentors (Sailors & Price, 2015).

Some offer embedded coaching, with coaches working at one school and in teachers' classrooms, while others have coaches travel across district schools, especially when districts

only have one special education or English Language coach who must divide time across schools. In other instances, coaches target certain sets of educators (e.g., first-year teachers), or they may be virtual or use digital technologies in ways that mediate the teaching/coaching relationship (Rock et al., 2011).

Further, coaches vary in their approaches depending upon the nature of the coaching situation, moving from more directive (acting as expert) to more responsive (engaging in joint inquiry and reflection with teachers) depending on a variety of factors (Deussen et al., 2007). This variability in the structures and core practices of coaching raises questions about designing and implementing coaching so that coaches can do their best work to promote educator learning and shifts in classroom practice.

Such variability signals the need for system leaders to optimize coaching rather than just continuing with existing models. Optimizing coaching involves close consideration of the infrastructure for instructional improvement (Hopkins et al., 2013), particularly in developing clear structures, systems, routines, and leadership activities around coaching (Woulfin & Jones, 2017; Woulfin & Rigby, 2017).

The optimization of coaching entails developing stable resources for coaching, transparent guidelines on who coaches whom, aligned professional supports for coaches, and robust, shared understandings of the purpose of coaching. Drawing on our recent work in developing and studying coaching initiatives, we explain how district leaders and policymakers can take concrete actions to design coaching programs that can meet the challenges of our dynamic ever-evolving educational system.

Three Recommendations for Optimizing Coaching

Though there are many types of coaching—ranging from district to school-based and embedded to virtual—we argue that the type or model of coaching matters much less than the design features enabling coaches to carry out their core work. In other words, what matters greatly is how districts design, support, and define coaching as part of a broader professional learning strategy. Drawing on research from the C-SAIL project (e.g., Pak, Desimone, & Parsons, 2020) and coaching across several districts (e.g., Woulfin, 2020), we identified three recommendations for developing and optimizing high quality coaching opportunities that we outline below: establishing district-level infrastructure for coaching, aligning coaching with other instructional improvement pillars, and developing coaches' knowledge and skills.

1. Identify key district infrastructural resources

To optimize coaching, it is vital to strengthen and align the infrastructure for instructional improvement with coaching itself. Researchers and practitioners concur that the nature and quality of the instructional improvement infrastructure can enable adult learning and school reform (Hopkins et al., 2013; Penuel, 2019; Woulfin & Gabriel, 2020). Comprised of curriculum, professional development, and leadership (Woulfin & Gabriel, 2020), this infrastructure guides conceptualizations, regulations, and norms on coaching. Importantly, as illustrated by Woulfin (2020), system leaders can take active steps to create and bolster the infrastructure for coaching, including allocating time and resources to develop coaches' capacity regarding priorities and reforms.

In the C-SAIL project, we found that districts played a critical role in providing

infrastructure for instructional improvement, which in turn shaped aspects of coaching. Each of the five districts we studied included some form of coaching, but in some of the districts coaching represented a key part of the professional learning (PL) infrastructure that aligned with the district's curriculum and leadership efforts in an integrated fashion.

In Ohio, California, and Texas districts, coaches were directly involved with teacher professional learning communities (PLCs) and participated (or led) monthly and quarterly district- and school-level professional development sessions. Coaches met regularly with teachers (e.g., weekly, bimonthly) and had clearly defined roles in the district ecosystem. In the suburban district in Ohio, for example, a principal described that coaches were a key part of “the opportunities that infrastructure allows people to have”; in her previous district, “they had coaches but you weren't quite sure of the access - we didn't know where to go for questions necessarily. So the one thing I've been extremely impressed with when I came to [district] is that infrastructure.”

Similarly, California provided teachers access to instructional coaches for ELA, math, ELs, and special education, and those coaches not only coordinated with one another but often joined teachers' PLCs and provided leadership at district- and school-based PD sessions. In these districts, coaches mediated teachers' work with curriculum materials, particularly in helping educators understand and implement new curricula and follow the districts' scope and sequence documents, functioning as important liaisons between educators and district leadership. In providing coaches as a key part of district infrastructure for educational improvement, districts can balance flexibility with specific guidance in ways that support educators in implementing state standards and district policies.

In comparison, other districts struggled with how to support and develop their instructional coaches, indicating flaws in infrastructural pillars. The Massachusetts rural district left individual schools to determine what was needed to support coaches, providing little training or opportunity to connect with other coaches or district leadership and constraining their ability to engage in high-leverage coaching activities, such as walkthroughs matching district priorities or PD facilitation on adopted instructional materials.

In Texas, while the coaches' role was well-defined, the infrastructure for training coaches was lacking. These results match earlier qualitative findings from Woulfin (2018) on the format and content of an urban public school district's approach to coach PD. On the one hand, this PD fostered a professional community for the district's school-based coaches. The PD, however, devoted little attention to how coaches should engage in coaching routines.

2. Align coaching with priorities, curriculum, and standards

A second way to optimize coaching is to strengthen the alignment of coaching with system-level instructional priorities, including adopted curricula and standards. There is mounting evidence showing that the connections between coaches' work and adopted curricula matter for the potential of coaching to support changes in classroom practice (Coburn & Woulfin, 2012; Matsumura et al., 2010). That is, instructional coaches are more likely to contribute to more substantive instructional change when they concentrate on, advance, and reinforce ideas coupled with standard-aligned curricula, rather than offering diffuse or loosely coupled messages.

Here, we point to how districts/district leaders play roles not only in selecting

curriculum, but in articulating how coaches can—and should—promote curriculum while engaging with educators (Woulfin, 2020). This reinforces insights from Coburn and Woulfin (2012) and Woulfin (2015) regarding how coaches advanced reform by reinforcing messages on district-adopted reading curricula, playing a role in coupling the curricular messages to teachers' classroom practice. Like Woulfin (2020), we found that district leaders in the five C-SAIL case study districts played a strong role in shaping how coaches could support alignment with district priorities and curricula.

In the C-SAIL project, we found that coaches' alignment with the district curriculum materials and strategic plan, school improvement priorities, and federal, state, and district instructional standards was an important factor shaping teachers' pedagogical practices and standards implementation. In an intervention study that provided virtual coaches to classroom teachers, one of the central goals was to support teachers in aligning their instruction to college and career ready standards.

Survey responses indicated teachers did significantly improve the alignment of their instruction, and the teachers we interviewed reported that the coaching was useful in helping them increase their understanding of state standards, improve their instruction to support students in reaching the state standards, and focus their attention on the alignment of their instruction to state standards.

One teacher identified the individualized nature of the coaching as particularly helpful in accomplishing these goals, in contrast to the typical district PD that was broadly targeted. She noted how the coaching helped her understand that some standards “require a higher level of cognition

than others. And just being mindful that we need to teach all of them.” This coaching intervention helped raise teachers’ knowledge and skills regarding state standards and the implementation of standards-based instruction.

3. Developing local knowledge and relationships

To maximize the potential of instructional coaching, it is beneficial for district leaders to ensure coaches are well-positioned to gain understandings of their context, which, in turn, permits coaches to tailor messaging and coaching routines to the local needs of schools and educators and develop positive professional relationships with teachers. Thus, leaders should be attuned to the degree to which coaches are familiar with particular school sites and their opportunities for gaining ideas and information about the nature of those spaces.

In the C-SAIL project, teachers and coaches declared the importance of understanding teachers’ local contexts, whether at the district, school, or classroom level. Coaches who were embedded in a school had in-depth knowledge not just of teacher needs but of the many variables the teachers navigated on a daily basis. In one Ohio district, for example, the elementary coaches were embedded in the schools, which one elementary literacy coach said was critical because “there’s different needs in each of our buildings, and different relationships, and situations.” In turn, coaches drew on their knowledge about specific teachers and contexts to tailor their coaching techniques and get to know teachers as individuals.

As one Texas coach asserted, “We have to build our relationship with these people so they trust us, so that we can make them grow;” this sentiment was mirrored by all of the coaches we interviewed, including an Ohio coach who said, “I think the relationship has to

come first before anything will be productive.” This provides a reminder of coaches’ efforts to build relationships as well as how coaches shift directions based on what individuals need.

Other teachers cautioned that coaches that just came into their classroom once or who offered advice without knowing the particular challenges of a class were less effective at knowing what the teachers needed. For example, we found that virtual C-SAIL coaches, who were not embedded within specific school buildings, often held less detailed awareness of contextual factors.

While the online modality was a positive benefit for many of the teachers in the coaching intervention, allowing them the opportunity to reflect together with the coach and notice, as one teacher said, “some of the good things kids were doing, [which] I didn’t notice until we watched it,” the coaches were limited in the assistance and support they could provide as outsiders unfamiliar with the local context. As one participating teacher commented: “Everything is sort of in a nutshell too because [the coach] is only getting a snapchat of one lesson, six lessons per year. She doesn’t always have the context of what went on prior- or post-lesson.”

Teachers noticed that coaches’ feedback was more robust when coaches held understandings of the school and classroom context, including what transpired before and after the observed lesson. As such, coaches should develop nuanced understandings not only of factors like state and district policy, demographics, and culture but also school and classroom specific factors that shape teaching on a moment-to-moment basis.

As the elementary literacy coach in Ohio sensed, “We’ve had some instructional coaches that have come from outside the

district, or they haven't been in the classroom for a long time. It just doesn't seem like the trust is there as much ... if somebody had experience in the classroom recently in the district, I think it's going to be a better situation just because the buy-in from teachers seems to be better.”

Moving Forward with Coaching: Putting the Recommendations into Practice

Refining several facets of coaching could enable coaches to do their most supportive work in the service of addressing pandemic-related challenges across the U.S. education system (Ladson-Billings, 2021). This would entail educational leaders strengthening the infrastructure for coaching as well as considering issues of coherence (Gabriel & Woulfin, 2020; Woulfin, 2020).

As depicted by CSAIL results and other research on coaching, district and school leaders should pay close attention to the nature and strength of the infrastructure for PL, alignment of coaching with instructional priorities, curriculum, and standards and coaches' knowledge of local conditions. The thoughtful consideration of these design features is likely to result in coaching that will better support educator learning and encourage change in classroom practice.

Grounded in research on coaching across states and systems, we remind reformers and educators that leaders play a key role in raising the potential of coaching to drive change. Leaders make a difference through their daily work activities tied to instructional reform, curriculum, professional learning, and coaching. First, district and school leaders are responsible for actively promoting coaching (Elfers & Stritikus, 2014; Mangin & Dunsmore, 2015; Woulfin, 2020).

In particular, district leaders can engage in clear, consistent, and persuasive framing on the rationale for coaching and why coaching is a priority.

Second, inside schools, principals can create positive working conditions for coaches by improving collaboration systems, including improving the schedule for individual and team meetings with teachers. Principals can also collaborate with coaches to ensure shared understandings of the focus and nature of coaching. Principals can also elevate coaches and their coaching; this involves introducing the coach to teachers, explaining their expertise, and making it clear that they value educators' productive engagement with coaches.

Finally, we offer several recommendations for district leaders aiming to institute coaching to accelerate teacher and student learning. Central office leaders should provide funding and other resources to design and continuously improve their coaching model (Yurkofsky et al., 2020). This would entail data collection on processes and outcomes of coaching to precisely understand coaches' use of time, teachers' perceptions of the usefulness of coaching routines, and changes in teachers' classroom practice.

Additionally, leaders would draw on multiple forms of evidence, including this process and outcome data, to design and target coaching so it aligns to strategic plan and school improvement priorities. Another structural step for central office leaders is to refine the hiring and supporting of coaches to ensure they have appropriate knowledge and skills related to leadership, content and curriculum, and data analysis.

Notably, it will be vital to develop coaches' skills on facilitating effective PL to

accelerate adult learning and conducting coaching cycles to encourage the adoption of accelerated/extended learning opportunities across schools and within classrooms.

It will also be vital for district leaders to encourage principals to create school-level conditions for both coaching and collaboration; this may involve creatively adjusting the calendar and schedules or using technology for virtual touchpoints with coaches.

Finally, central office leaders should work collaboratively to draft clear district-level definitions on and guidelines for coaching, setting clear expectations on what coaches focus on and who is coached. This lays the groundwork for strong, positive norms associated with engaging with coaches.

Conclusion

Coaching holds much potential for advancing

change as districts and schools re-set from the multiple years of pandemic-related disruptions.

However, for coaching to rise to this challenge, district leaders must attend to system-level conditions and factors enabling coaches to carry out coherent, curriculum-aligned coaching. This includes district leaders designing infrastructure for instructional reform and mediating coaching (Coburn & Russell, 2008; Hopkins et al., 2013; Penuel, 2019).

We portrayed the landscape of coaching and summarized the role of infrastructure and leadership in aiding coaching to function as a lever for systemic change.

We underscore coaches can work in caring, instructionally-focused ways to accelerate teacher learning and support tailored instructional change meeting the needs of teachers, leaders, schools, and communities.

Author Biographies

Sarah Woulfin, an associate professor at the University of Texas at Austin, studies the role of district and school leaders in instructional policy implementation. She served as a reading coach and has conducted research on coaching across states and systems. E-mail: sarah.woulfin@austin.utexas.edu

Laura DeSimone, Professor at the University of Delaware, applies multiple methodological techniques to study how state, district, and school-level policy can better promote changes in teaching that lead to improved student achievement and to closing the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students. E-mail: lauramd@udel.edu

Amy Stornaiuolo, an associate professor at the University of Pennsylvania, conducts scholarship regarding how to create equitable and accessible learning opportunities for young people by examining how they draw on diverse cultural and linguistic repertoires. Her research aims to enact meaningful change for educational justice. E-mail: amystor@upenn.edu

References

- Coburn, C. E., & Russell, J. L. (2008). District policy and teachers' social networks. *Educational evaluation and policy analysis*, 30(3), 203-235.
- Coburn, C. E., & Woulfin, S. L. (2012). Reading coaches and the relationship between policy and practice. *Reading research quarterly*, 47(1), 5-30.
- Desimone, L., Garet, M., Birman, B., Porter, A., & Yoon, K. (2001). How do district management and implementation strategies relate to the quality of the professional development that districts provide to teachers? *Teachers College Record*, 104(7), 1265-1312.
- Desimone, L. (2009). Improving impact studies of teachers' professional development: Toward better conceptualizations and measures. *Educational Researcher*, 38(3), 181-199.
- Desimone, L., Hochberg, E., Polikoff, M., Porter, A., Schwartz, R., & Johnson, L. (2014). Formal and informal mentoring: Compensatory, complementary, or consistent? *Journal of Teacher Education*, 65(2), 88-110. (This article won the Distinguished Research in Teacher Education Award from the Association of Teacher Educators)
- Desimone, L.M., & Garet, M.S. (2015). Best practices in teacher's professional development in the United States. *Psychology, Society, & Education*. 7(3), 252-263.
- Deussen, T., Coskie, T., Robinson, L., & Autio, E. (2007). "Coach" can mean many things: Five categories of literacy coaches in Reading First (Issues & Answers Report, REL 2007-No. 005). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest. Available at http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/northwest/pdf/REL_2007005.pdf.
- Domina, T., Lewis, R., Agarwal, P., & Hanselman, P. (2015). Professional sense-makers: Instructional specialists in contemporary schooling. *Educational Researcher*, 44(6), 359-364.
- Elfers, A. M., & Stritikus, T. (2014). How school and district leaders support classroom teachers' work with English language learners. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 50(2), 305-344.
- Galey-Horn, S., & Woulfin, S. L. (2021). Muddy Waters: The Micropolitics of Instructional Coaches' Work in Evaluation. *American Journal of Education*, 127(3), 441-470.
- Garet, M., Porter, A., Desimone, L., Birman, B., & Yoon, K. (2001). What makes professional development effective? Analysis of a national sample of teachers. *American Education Research Journal*, 38(3), 915-945.
- Hashim, A. K. (2020). Coaching and districtwide improvement: Exploring the systemic leadership practices of instructional coaches. *Teachers College Record*, 122(10), 1-44.

- Hochberg, E., & Desimone, L. (2010). Professional development in the accountability context: Building capacity to achieve standards, *Educational Psychologist*, 45: 2, 89—106.
- Hopkins, M., Spillane, J. P., Jakopovic, P., & Heaton, R. M. (2013). Infrastructure redesign and instructional reform in mathematics: Formal structure and teacher leadership. *The elementary school journal*, 114(2), 200-224.
- Kraft, M. A., Blazar, D., & Hogan, D. (2018). The effect of teacher coaching on instruction and achievement: A meta-analysis of the causal evidence. *Review of Educational Research*, 88(4), 547–588. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654318759268>
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2021). I'm here for the hard re-set: Post pandemic pedagogy to preserve our culture. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 54(1), 68-78.
- Mangin, M. M., & Dunsmore, K. (2015). How the framing of instructional coaching as a lever for systemic or individual reform influences the enactment of coaching. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 51(2), 179-213.
- Matsumura, L. C., Garnier, H. E., Correnti, R., Junker, B., & DiPrima Bickel, D. (2010). Investigating the effectiveness of a comprehensive literacy coaching program in schools with high teacher mobility. *The Elementary School Journal*, 111(1), 35-62.
- Pak, K., Desimone, L. M., & Parsons, A. (2020). An integrative approach to professional development to support college- and career- readiness standards. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 28(111). <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.28.4970>
- Penuel, W. R. (2019). Infrastructuring as a practice of design-based research for supporting and studying equitable implementation and sustainability of innovations. *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 28(4-5), 659-677.
- Rock, M.L., Zigmond, M.P., Gregg, M., & Gable, R.A. (2015). The power of virtual coaching. *Educational Leadership* Volume 69, Number 2, October 2011 ISSN 0013-1784.
- Russell, J. L., Correnti, R., Stein, M. K., Thomas, A., Bill, V., & Speranzo, L. (2020). Mathematics coaching for conceptual understanding: Promising evidence regarding the Tennessee math coaching model. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 42(3), 439-466.
- Sailors, M., & Price, L. (2015). Support for the Improvement of Practices through Intensive Coaching (SIPIIC): A model of coaching for improving reading instruction and reading achievement. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 45, 115–127. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2014.09.008>
- Woulfin, S. L. (2020). Crystallizing coaching: An examination of the institutionalization of instructional coaching in three educational systems. *Teachers College Record*, 122(10), 1-32.

- Woulfin, S., & Gabriel, R. E. (2020). Interconnected infrastructure for improving reading instruction. *Reading Research Quarterly, 55*, S109-S117.
- Woulfin, S. L., & Jones, B. (2021). Special development: The nature, content, and structure of special education teachers' professional learning opportunities. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 100*, 103277.
- Woulfin, S. L., & Rigby, J. G. (2017). Coaching for coherence: How instructional coaches lead change in the evaluation era. *Educational Researcher, 46*(6), 323-328.
- Yurkofsky, M. M., Peterson, A. J., Mehta, J. D., Horwitz-Willis, R., & Frumin, K. M. (2020). Research on continuous improvement: Exploring the complexities of managing educational change. *Review of Research in Education, 44*(1), 403-433.