



COACHES AS

SYSTEM LEADERS

Next to the principal, coaches are the most crucial change agent in a school.

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There's been a growing realization that we need education reform on a larger scale—at the level of the district, state, or country.

This raises an interesting question about the role of coaches. It's futile to develop their role unless we treat it as part of an overall strategy to change systems.

For example, the work of coaches is squandered if school principals are not instructional leaders. At the same time,

the work of schools will go nowhere unless school districts organize themselves to focus relentlessly on instructional improvement. Without coaching, many comprehensive reform efforts will fall short of real improvement.

Good coaching gets results—and it gets them fairly quickly. However, “good coaching” is not the reality for many coaches who operate in systems that are not organized to create,

develop, and sustain the conditions for instructional improvement.

In the United States, for example, whole-system education reform focuses on the wrong drivers (Fullan, 2011a)—accountability, individual teacher development, technology, and piecemeal reform components. Such reform drivers as capacity building, teamwork, pedagogy, and systemic reform are much more compatible with the strategies of good coaches.

Coaching Your Way to Success

All schools in a district must be treated as part of a single system. Changing one school at a time is no longer an option for countries that want to compete internationally.

Take York Region District School Board, a large multicultural district in the greater Toronto area in Ontario, Canada. It has 130,000 students; 8,800 teachers; and 192 schools. The district has had major success in literacy, numeracy, and high school graduation rates over the last decade (Sharratt & Fullan, 2009).

We discovered the crucial role that literacy coaches played 10 years ago when one of us, in conjunction with the superintendent of curriculum and instruction, worked with 17 low-performing schools in this district (Sharratt & Fullan, 2009). In the schools that improved significantly, literacy coaches worked closely with principals to implement 14 key parameters (see “Fourteen Parameters for Success,” p. 52). The coaches typically spent their day planning lessons with classroom teachers, modeling lessons, observing instruction, facilitating meetings, reviewing student data, and leading the collaborative marking of student work. We eventually brought all the schools in the district into the change process. The system improved dramatically—by more than 20 percent on most measures. School leaders saw themselves as part of a systemwide effort.

Take Crosby Heights, a K–8 school with 662 students. When a new principal was appointed in 2004, the school was one of the worst in the district. The culture was toxic, characterized by deep conflict between the union and management; the building was dilapidated; and morale was low.

In addition to setting a new direction for Crosby, the principal and literacy coach started working with teachers to improve instruction. For example, a 5th grade teacher and the literacy coach worked on a lesson to strengthen

students’ word choice in their writing. They planned the flow of the lesson, the posters they would create to describe success criteria in student-friendly language, the student groupings they would use, and the strategies they would implement. Together with the principal, the coach and 5th grade teachers also collaboratively examined and graded student work. Rich conversations emerged about best practices teachers could use with struggling students.

Teachers’ new positive teaching experiences began to change the culture of the school. Four years later, the school had raised its proficiency rates in literacy and numeracy from an average

for these coaches. They’re equally comfortable on the dance floor and the balcony.

How to Squander Your Coaching Efforts

Staff members at the Kansas Coaching Project at the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning have visited more than 100 schools around the world in the past three years. They’ve found that coaches are often placed in impossible situations. Too often, they collaborate poorly with administrators. In many schools no one—including the coach and the principal—understands school improvement plans. Other schools exhibit a kind of organizational

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of 43 percent to 83 percent. The turnaround was the result of successfully integrating the 14 parameters. The literacy coach was a key member of the school team that led this effort.

Teachers and school leaders experienced the success as a system phenomenon. In one school survey, a majority of teachers responded that the literacy focus had “raised the expertise of teachers within their schools,” “raised literacy expectations for all students,” “produced more consistency and continuity in literacy across subjects,” and “facilitated sharing of expertise with teachers from other schools.”

The role of school leadership—of principals and coaches—must be played out on a systems level to get widespread and sustainable improvement. Successful coaches combine instructional expertise with knowledge about schoolwide and districtwide strategies. The small and the big picture merge

attention deficit disorder, jumping from one intervention to another before achieving meaningful change. As the following examples show, in far too many settings, coaches are unable to do their work.

Give Coaches the Wrong Work

In a state-sponsored coaching workshop, the 50 coaches in attendance were asked how they used their time in school. More than 75 percent reported that they had spent less than 25 percent of their time on coaching in the previous week; more than 40 percent reported spending 10 percent or less of



their time on coaching. Indeed, some coaches had spent *no* time on coaching in the previous week.

Many coaches explained that because their roles and responsibilities were poorly defined—and because their principals weren't clear how best to employ them—they ended up doing quasi-administrative or clerical work rather than improving instruction. Instead of helping teachers reach out to more students, they photocopied papers, filed documents, or ordered supplies.

Keep Goals Unclear

A school district was awarded a grant to hire coaches in all its secondary schools. The district hired the coaches but never articulated what their professional development goals should be. Were the coaches supposed to support classroom management, differentiated instruction, curriculum development, Response to Intervention, content knowledge in all disciplines—or all of these?

In addition, the district provided no professional learning for principals, so they were unable to provide the coaches with either clarity or support. In some schools, the principals directed their coaches to take a top-down, assertive approach to their work that left little room for the professional discretion of individual teachers. Not surprisingly, the coaches' efforts prompted resistance, with little change occurring in classrooms.

Don't Train Your Coaches

An inner-city district received a large federal grant in August to provide coaching to teachers. Because school was starting in just a few weeks, the district immediately hired the coaches from a small pool of teachers who were interested in taking on this new work.

The coaches received no training, except for a one-day workshop that didn't take place until mid-October. Not knowing what to share and how to coach, and in some cases lacking the pedagogic, communication, and

leadership skills necessary for their work, the coaches were disheartened by mid-October; many had already decided to return to the classroom the following year. In some schools, the coaches shared their frustration with teachers, which negatively affected culture and morale. What could have been a promising step forward for the district became a wasteful step backward. The coaching program was abandoned after two years.

It Can Be Done

Developing effective instructional strategies systemwide is a new goal for many school leaders, including coaches,

Fourteen Parameters for Success

The York Region District School Board has found that these strategies improve students' literacy achievement:

1. Shared beliefs and vision
2. Embedded literacy coaches
3. Timetabled literacy blocks
4. Principal leadership
5. Early and ongoing intervention
6. Case management approach
7. Literacy professional development
8. In-school grade and subject meetings
9. Book rooms with leveled books and resources
10. Allocation of resources to literacy learning
11. Action research focused on literacy
12. Parental involvement
13. Cross-curricular literacy connections
14. Shared responsibility and accountability

except in those few countries that have accomplished systemwide success, such as Singapore, Finland, and Canada.

This is not abstract work. For the past 8 years, we've taken a large, stagnant system of 2 million students in 4,000 elementary and 900 secondary schools in 72 school districts in Ontario and achieved substantial improvements in student achievement. Literacy and numeracy are up 14 percent across the 4,000 elementary schools, and the high school graduation rate has climbed from 68 to 81 percent. At the heart of the strategy is instructional capacity building, with coaches at the school, district, and province levels working with instructionally focused administrators—principals, superintendents, and province officials. Literacy coaches are integral to our success at the elementary level. At the high school level, the system has funded “student success teachers.” These coaches serve as change agents; working as part of the school leadership team, they focus on struggling students.

Whole-system reform also requires new capacities at the state level. In 2004, we established a unit within the ministry of education called the Literacy Numeracy Secretariat. It houses some 100 “student achievement officers”—in effect, literacy and student success coaches—to support school and district change leaders.

The new system identifies, spreads, and supports high-yield pedagogical practices, such as the *critical learning pathway*, a six-week cycle during which teachers look at student work to improve instruction. Coaches from the province, district, and school levels participate. Peers also learn from peers. One veteran 4th grade teacher who'd been sent to the workshop by her principal but who didn't want to be there was shocked at the high quality of the student writing that other teachers brought. She didn't think her own students were capable of such work. But as the workshop cycle progressed,

her students' writing "soared." She's now eager to do more. She explained, "I now realize that for 25 years I've set my goals too low. How many more of my students could have reached so much higher if only I had known I could take them there?" (Fullan, 2011b, p. 20). Coaches, then, help teachers realize moral purpose.

A recent report (Mourshed, Chinezi, & Barber, 2010) that looked at how school systems improve found that schools that had gone from poor to fair in developing countries focused their interventions equally on accountability and professional learning. However, countries that had gone from great to excellent focused 78 percent of their interventions on professional learning and only 22 percent on accountability. The researchers concluded that once the capacity of teachers reaches a certain level, peer culture becomes the source of innovation and energy. Thus, peers become change agents. This is good news for coaches because developing peer cultures—and linking them to the bigger system—is the work they should do.

States, provinces, and nations need to recognize that a combination of change agents is essential for success. If teachers are the most significant factor in student success, and principals are second, then coaches are third. All three, working in coordinated teams, will be required to bring about deep change. The work of coaches is crucial because they *change the culture of the school* as it relates to instructional practice.

A New Role for Coaches

When a system is heavily laden with accountability-driven reforms, it's difficult for an effective education system to evolve. Schools need less blatant accountability and testing and more capacity building, team learning, learning across schools, and transparency of results and pedagogical practice—the very things that coaches are good at. They also need more pedagogically

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driven technology and deep learning around the higher-order skills of advanced literacy, collaboration, and citizenship.

School improvement will fail if the work of coaches remains at the one-to-one level. Coaches are system leaders. They need development as change agents at both the instructional level and the level of organizational and system change. It's time to recast their role as integral to whole-system reform. 

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