

Instructional Coaching Report

Executive Summary

Background of the Study

This report is a response to a Cambridge Public Schools (CPS) request for proposals issued in January 2014. Upon completion of the competitive bid process, Consensus Now! was selected to conduct the program review. We are an independent LLC focused on delivering external reviews, practice recommendations and training focused on instructional coaching and other levers for raising student achievement.

Purposes of the Study

The district is seeking a review in order to determine whether the coaching model, as designed and implemented is leading to desired improvements in teaching and learning.

Therefore, the purpose of the Instructional Coaching Review is to collect baseline data in order to provide:

- Exhibited strengths of the school coaching program over the past ten years
- Findings and recommendations for strengthening future instructional coach delivery through examination of school levers: structures, practices, consistency, and/or use of time
- Findings and recommendations for growing the level of coach capacity and level of agency to more effectively execute coach roles and facilitate PLC's at the school level.
- Findings and recommendations for improving instructional impact of coaching models at the school level, particularly for those in need of intervention.
- Parallel recommendations for effective district level support of coaching through staffing, reporting, job descriptions, staff development and benchmarks.

Study Methods

The report is based on several sources of ethnographic baseline data: interviews with relevant central administrators, district coaches, coordinators and school principals as well as a K-8 teacher survey and field observations of teachers and coaches in action in classrooms and while serving on their school PLC. We also examined school achievement data and coach schedules as artifacts to inform our interviews and observations.

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Our intent is to use the neutrality of ethnographic methods and protocols to reveal the strengths and needs of the current coaching implementation and to express them in a set of practical recommendations. By focusing on both school and district levels and enlisting the support of relevant research findings, we hope to gain insight into how to create a more systemic response that goes beyond individual program modifications and enhancements.

School Level Findings and Recommendations:

The major school level findings and themes that emerged from the data are coupled with explanatory evidence and parallel recommendations.

Authentic Teaching and Learning

Finding: CPS instructional staff maintained a steady preference for authentic teaching and learning throughout this era of increased accountability, but did not pursue strategies to take it to scale.

Evidence: Unlike other urban districts pressured by external mandates, CPS resisted narrowing the content and reducing student performance to metrics alone. They championed building authentic instructional capacity of teachers individually, but the implementation was not designed to build teams of teachers in a school or to take strong practices to scale across schools.

Recommendation: Continue the focus on building authentic instructional capacity, but now with attention to conditions of learning that scale: support school teams of teachers and share positive practices across schools.

Pedagogic Priority

Finding: CPS coaches and principals exhibited an emerging readiness to prioritize pedagogy over content.

Evidence: School level interviews and observations revealed a readiness for a shift in priorities from content coaching to pedagogic coaching. The creation of a rigorous content curriculum aligned to Common Core is due to be completed by 2016. This curricular resource decreases the pressure on coaches and teachers to design lessons based on original content since the district plans to provide easy access to online resources created by teachers and for teachers. It also allows coaches and teachers to focus on pedagogic methods that will increase differentiation and achievement across the diverse learners in CPS. Rather than two content coaches per school with highly dispersed schedules, one pedagogic coach with a schedule focused exclusively on instructional delivery is more likely to produce a more positive impact on student learning.

Recommendation: Assure the full adoption of and teacher access to the new curriculum; shift the role of the school coach from content to pedagogy and exchange the two content coaches for one pedagogic coach per school.

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Student Centric Purpose

Finding: The early purpose of coaching in CPS was teacher development through content-driven professional development; recent teacher priorities for coaching are emerging as more student centric, focused on differentiated data for student mastery.

Evidence: The early implementation of coaching in CPS was designed as a professional development response focused on teachers who felt inadequately trained in content by their university certification programs. Recent teacher priorities for coaching are in the process of switching to student-centered purposes, calling for a balance of data driven lessons creatively designed and delivered to differentiate to student needs and raise student achievement.

Recommendation: Support teachers and coaches in school-based pedagogical strategies to differentiate data-driven instruction.

Grade Level Teams

Finding: CPS student data calls for more student differentiation, yet the use of team coaching as a strategy is limited by school schedules with inadequate common planning time and is diminished by lack of staff understanding about its power to deliver differentiated lessons.

Evidence: The academic performance metrics of CPS students and their increasing diversity reveal that they would benefit from a more efficient differentiated teaching approach. Recent coaching research and practice studies reveal that grade level teams facilitated by a pedagogic coach during common planning time are uniquely positioned to accelerate student learning. Teams address the needs of all students by addressing common priorities through collaboratively designed differentiated lessons.

School coaches resort to cycle and rotational schedules for team meetings and most coaches spend the majority of their time working with individual teachers. The result is that teachers in most CPS schools count only a few customized contacts per year with their coach, often limiting the positive impact of coaching on students.

Recommendation: Institute common planning time and grade level teams in schools facilitated by a pedagogical coach. The majority of coach time should be spent on team facilitation and support.

One on Ones

Finding: One on ones between a single coach and teacher are the primary way coaches spend their time now. The coach/teacher contact ratios are low because it is an individualized and labor-intensive process; it is not an efficient way to routinely impact all the teachers or students in the building.

Evidence: One on ones in CPS schools are meetings between a school coach and individual teacher, usually focused on planning, delivering and/or debriefing a customized lesson to a specific student audience. One on ones offer effective ways of modeling new instructional strategies, but they are limited to impacting a single teacher at a time and they are laborious for coaches to design, deliver and debrief.

Recommendation: Reduce the number of one on ones, but use each one as a way to illustrate a team designed lesson. This modeling becomes more powerful when it is offered as feedback about how a commonly designed lesson was delivered in one classroom.

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Intervention

Finding: The use of school coaches to deliver classes to students in need of intervention has not been effective; coaches lack diagnosis training for special populations and the time expenditure diminishes coach leverage in high impact activities such as team and one on one coaching.

Evidence: Our interviews and observations on current intervention practices of school coaches revealed that they are using 10%-40% of their coach time to deliver direct group or individual instruction to students, with the highest percentages of time spent at the Upper School level because of larger numbers of intervention students. We also learned that many coaches, teachers and administrators do not perceive themselves as having the specialized diagnostic training to customize instruction to meet these student needs.

The addition of an interventionist to the grade level/content teams would assure that expert diagnosis occurs as part of the differentiated lesson planning. Interventionists participating in the teamwork can deliver pullout or push-in instruction so that each pedagogic coach could focus 100% of their time on facilitating teams, coaching one-on-ones and observing commonly designed lessons and constructing opportunities for feedback to the grade level team of designers.

Recommendation: Redeploy school based interventionists as participating grade level team members; they lead the diagnosis and delivery plan for each intervention student on the grade level team. In some cases they can deliver the instruction to small groups, in other cases the intervention student is included in the common lesson taught by the regular teacher, but with a differentiated activity.

Principal Leadership

Finding: Principal interviews revealed a desire to fully supervise the coach residing in their building, while coach interviews simultaneously reinforced their need to work with an involved and accountable instructional leader. Some principals were open to leading a school-based Professional Learning Community (PLC) as opposed to the current Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) structure.

Evidence: Recent PLC research reveals that leading an active school PLC causes principals to facilitate more high impact coach strategies: they supervise and schedule coaches with adequate common planning time, they deliver school goals by working in concert the coach and they involve teachers in meaningful collaborations and professional development aligned to Common Core. PLC studies reveal that as head of the PLC, the principal often negotiates resources from central district sources to accomplish school goals.

Recommendation: Assign school coaches wholly to principals for supervision. Offer research-based training to principals and coaches about how to implement a successful Professional Learning Community structure.

District Level Findings and Implications

Nature of District Support

Finding: A school-centric preference in the nature of district support emerged from central staff, principal and coach interviews.

Evidence: The district is already proactively moving in this direction, as evidenced by comments of central staff members who are seeking ways to provide just-in-time online resources rather than instigating an array

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of live, time bound central trainings. District leaders and principals also expressed the need to coordinate diverse PD efforts into one menu, driven by aligned district and school goals and funding capacity.

Recommendation: Continue the development of central support services customized to school needs. Sources of new district digital resources useful to coaching might include: curriculum lessons and units, customized student data for use of grade level teams, videos of teachers delivering team designed lessons and intervention supports.

Central Role Shifts

Findings: The interviews with coaches, principals and central administrators converged on the need to redesign coordinator positions as the key link between the school and central resources. These same interviews suggested that the district coach positions were redundant and no longer deemed essential as.

Implications: The roles of the district coaches and coordinators will need to be redefined in light of coach and principal role changes at the school level. A fair exchange should be instituted between schools and central office: More school autonomy is earned by schools through an exchange for student achievement; schools and their leaders are gradually released from central requirements as student outcomes are achieved.

Recommendations: As the new curriculum becomes more accessible to all, redesign coordinator positions as a key link to customized resources such as curricular content, school data, and instructional videos. Redeploy district coach roles but institute a benchmarked system to assure gradual release of schools from district dependencies.

Conclusion

Although the early implementation of coaching in CPS established a clear rationale and purpose for coaching, the implementation over time was neither systemic nor aligned with measurable district outcomes. Today's CPS coaching program is an accumulation of many smart, well-intentioned purposes lacking an implementation that reinforces the connections between them. Hence, the district's significant effort, talent and resources are not producing the desired results, particularly for the lower third of the students in Language Arts disciplines. The coach staffing, reporting and communication structure is not currently maximized to produce positive student achievement gains, primarily because it was constructed over time, and layered with individual rather than systemic intentions, unconnected to a shared vision of achievement expectations for coaching. The recommendations of this report address what is needed to convert these findings into a coherent and efficient system that produces high impact learning for all students.

The report is full of descriptive supporting evidence and recommendations, derived from interviews, observations or the teacher survey. Research is cited whenever relevant as a reinforcing source. The

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documented patterns of interaction emerge as a series of valuable micro-insights and guidance that increase the chances of a more connected systemic coaching implementation.

Specific actionable recommendations that respond to multiple findings are detailed in the last chapter as a resource for administrators. A benchmarked framework of expectations is suggested as a way to scaffold schools into the new system. If the recommendations and framework are put in place together and if the school-based PLC's become the primary school based coordination meeting for all instructional decisions and best practice, the new system will emerge as strong and sustainable with the desired district achievement gains.