

## **Coaching PA: Coaching as a Vital Component of an Aligned, Standards-Based System**

### **Overview of Coaching as Providing Effective Professional Development**

The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* set the bar for student achievement at a very high level. All students will reach proficiency, as defined by each state, in reading and math by the year 2014. In Pennsylvania, our accountability system has been built on strong tenets to ensure our success in reaching the goal. The Pennsylvania Department of Education, under the leadership of Dr. Gerald Zahorchak, established a framework for school improvement planning (*Getting Results*) and a number of tools and support services to assist districts as they strive to raise the level of student achievement. Dr. Zahorchak identified the next critical need to be in the area of professional development. As he stated recently, "We have both high demands for student performance and an excellent set of tools focused on improving student performance. Now it's time to align our attention with our intention by maximizing professional development activities".

That alignment requires a data framework with a process for data analysis, decision-making, and effective use of PDE tools and resources to identify proven solutions that will enhance student achievement levels. The Department of Education has developed and is presenting this framework across the state. It guides educators through a step-by-step method to identify critical data through multiple sources and analyze the data through each of the six components of a standards-based system. These components are clear academic standards, aligned curriculum, effective instruction, fair assessments, appropriate resources and materials, and successful interventions. When all of these components are considered, data analysis reveals the needs that exist and discovery of solutions becomes possible. Professional development in the area of coaching will prepare coaches to utilize the data framework to effectively support teachers, thus, improving in student achievement and enhancing the instructional practices of teachers.

Coaching is one model of professional development that has shown potential to improve the knowledge, skill, and practice of teachers, thus, enhancing student achievement. In a 2004 study by the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning, instructional coaching was found to significantly increase the implementation rate of newly learned practices. This study indicated that without support and follow-up, teacher implementation of new instructional methods is about 10%, but with coaching the percentage increases to 85% (Knight, 2004). Coaching as a professional development activity involves a highly skilled professional (the coach) working with other professionals (the teachers) in a collegial manner to raise instructional practice to the highest level possible. Coaching promotes teacher growth and problem solving. It is on-going, classroom based, and personalized for each teacher. Coaching should provide consistent support to teachers as they work to improve practice based on collaboration, inquiry, and consultative feedback from the coach. It represents sound, job-embedded professional development that has the potential to improve instructional practice, and ultimately student achievement.

Coaching is a key component of many initiatives across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Supported through grant funding, these initiatives focus on reading, mathematics, and technology integration. Reading coaches are a required component for the implementation of the **Reading First** program in kindergarten through third grade. Reading First is federally funded through NCLB to ensure that all students are reading at grade level by grade three. Eligible schools receiving this grant must

provide a reading coach for every twenty-four teachers. All districts are eligible for the **State Accountability Block Grant**, Governor Rendell's 200 million dollar initiative focused on raising student achievement. Funds from this grant may be used by districts to hire math and/or literacy coaches to improve math and/or reading instruction and academic literacy. In an effort to provide consistent, high quality professional development that is job-embedded and easily accessible for all teachers, the Pennsylvania Department of Education has partnered with Learning Sciences International to develop online courses, referred to as **Online Professional Education Network (OPEN)** courses. These courses involve staff development for coaches who will facilitate online communities of learners as they participate in the online experiences. The **Getting to One** initiative supports the seamless integration of technology into classroom instructional practices for the purpose of assisting teachers in guiding each child to reach his or her potential. A component of this initiative is to provide teachers with coaches who can model and support technology integration for more effective implementation. At the secondary level, **Project 720** also supports the implementation of a coaching model as part of the overall high school reform project to improve student performance in reading and mathematics. Further supporting the efforts of Project 720, the **Pennsylvania High School Math and Literacy Coaching Initiative** provides qualified high schools with one math and one literacy coach for every 600 students. Funded through a 31 million dollar Annenberg Grant, this three-year initiative provides teachers, instructional coaches, and school leadership teams with staff development to improve academic literacy and enhance coaching skills. The intent is that high schools develop into collaborative learning communities whose culture promotes a collective responsibility to improving student achievement.

Given the potential of coaching as a powerful tool for professional development and the widespread application into all content areas across the Commonwealth, this position paper suggests that there is a need for common understanding of coaching as a practice and consistency in its implementation. The paper suggests qualifications for coaches, summarizes appropriate activities of coaches, explains activities that are not appropriate and why, and lists state-level certification as related to coaching. It is understood that each initiative that uses a coaching model may have different objectives, grade level audience, or content area focus. However, this paper supports the concept that there are consistent criteria across initiatives for coaching as a model of professional development. These criteria are important for determining the quality of coaching and its ability to improve instruction and improve student achievement.

The Pennsylvania Department of Education, through the Act 48 Professional Development Guidelines document, has identified ten criteria of effective professional education experiences.

Each professional education experience:

1. Is related to attainment of the Pennsylvania academic standards and high quality instruction.
2. Is planned in response to a need of the school entity and its professional employees, that have been identified for a target audience.
3. Has clear and concise, written content and skill based competencies.
4. Includes content and instructional methods that are appropriate for the intended competencies to be mastered.
5. Is planned and conducted by personnel who have an academic degree or other education and experience appropriate to the subject matter being taught.
6. Is research-based, data-driven and contributes to measurable increases in student achievement.

7. Provides sufficient support and resources over time to enable individuals to master new skills.
8. Contributes to building learning communities and continuous improvement.
9. Requires that participants demonstrate attainment of the competencies.
10. Is evaluated by the participants.

All initiatives, such as coaching, must first meet the standard as established within this document if it is to be identified as a best practice of professional development.

## **Qualifications of Coaches**

The International Reading Association issued a position statement entitled *The Role and Qualifications of the Reading Coach in the United States* in May, 2004. It identified five essential requirements of what a coach must know and be able to do. Although the focus was on reading coaches, it is applicable as well to coaching in general. The five requirements are:

- coach has a highly successful teaching experience with positive student outcomes in the same general grade levels (elementary, middle, secondary) and subject area of the teachers to be coached,
- coach has in-depth and specific knowledge in content, curriculum, instruction, and assessment,
- coach has experience working with teachers to improve their practice,
- coach has good presentation skills and can provide facilitation of learning groups,
- coach has skills to observe instruction, model instruction, and provide feedback through a trusting relationship with the teacher.

This position paper suggests four additional and very critical requirements. They are:

- coach has skills in the analysis of all available data to inform and direct instruction,
- coach has ability to develop interpersonal relationship with teachers, school personnel, parents, external agencies, and community to benefit teacher and student resources,
- coach participates in on-going professional development to enhance coaching skills,
- coach must be knowledgeable about district reform goals, achievement standards, and adult learning.

## **Roles / Responsibilities of Coaches**

The roles and responsibilities of coaches should be clearly defined. The Reading First Project, funded by NCLB, requires the implementation of a coaching model for the instruction of reading. *An Introductory Guide for Reading First Coaches* was produced by the Central Regional Reading First Technical Assistance Center under a U.S. Department of Education Contract. This document outlined the work of Reading First Coaches in such a way as to be applicable to coaching in any content area. It identified the role of the coach to be in three primary areas: instructional leadership, assessment, and professional development. JoEllen Killian from the National Staff Development Council also identified similar areas and included the additional area of district/school-based leadership. Identified below are activities that a coach might assume for each of these areas. The areas are a synthesis of the roles as described by Central Regional Reading First Technical Assistance Center and the National Staff Development Council. Some modifications have been made to make the list applicable to the specifics

of Pennsylvania and across all content areas. The activities under each area include but are not limited to the following:

#### School/District Based Leadership

- Assist and serve on leadership teams within the school/district
- Bridge the gap between and among school programs
- Facilitate alignment of individual goals and school goals
- Build school capacity by encouraging and supporting teacher leadership

#### Instructional Leadership

- Provide support, mentoring and assistance to classroom teachers
- Serve as a resource for identification of instructional strategies, materials, and interventions to address diverse learning needs
- Conduct demonstration lessons
- Assist teachers in designing, delivering, and assessing instruction
- Collaborate with teacher teams to set goals to improve instruction and to solve problems that limit student achievement
- Observe instruction and provide feedback as support for teachers

#### Assessment

- Assist teachers and grade-level teams in the analysis and use of assessment data to inform instruction (4Sight, PSSA, PVAAS, eMetrics) through application of the data framework
- Meet regularly with teams and/or principal to review student assessment data and assess progress toward grade-level goals
- Guide teachers in the use of assessment data to adjust instructional practice
- Guide teachers in the use of assessment data to plan professional development

#### Professional Development

- Provide on-site staff development to ensure teacher knowledge of academic standards, content, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and intervention strategies
- Collaborate with teachers, administrators and other personnel to identify professional development needs
- Provide facilitation and critical feedback for course progress monitoring of Pennsylvania on-line professional development courses
- Stay current in the areas of content, curriculum design and research-based instructional practices through professional development opportunities

The role of a coach is separate and apart from the evaluative role of the principal or supervisor of the teacher. The coach advocates for, facilitates, and supports the work of the teacher, but never performs supervisory evaluations. Supervisory evaluations, for example, include completing the teacher evaluation forms PDE-426, PDE-427, and PDE-428. The coach should not confuse providing teachers with consultative feedback requiring professional judgment with supervisory evaluation. The conversations and interactions that coaches have with teachers must always remain confidential so that a high level of trust is created and maintained between teachers and coaches. Exceptions to this include imminent physical or psychological danger to the students. The role of evaluator is the sole responsibility of the principal or supervisor.

## **Critical Supports**

For coaching to be successful, two factors are important and necessary. One is administrative support, and the second is that coaches be highly skilled. According to Jim Knight (2004) from the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning, when either one or both of these conditions are missing, the effectiveness of coaching efforts is minimized. The district and principal's roles in supporting the coaches as well as the teachers include, but are not limited to: providing resources; leading school improvement teams to implement the strategies shared by coaches; evaluating teachers based on learned practices; aligning coaching efforts with district and school goals; and celebrating teachers' successes (Knight, 2004).

Effective coaching requires a sophisticated set of skills. The processes a coach uses when working with teachers is just as important as the knowledge a coach brings to the learning experiences. These attributes include, but are not limited to: excellent communication and interpersonal skills; a passion for teaching and learning; empowerment of others; flexibility; respectfulness of all individuals with whom they are working; and strong organizational abilities (Characteristics of Effective Coaches).

## **Summary**

Coaching has been identified as an effective means of providing job-embedded, professional development with a strong potential to improve both instructional practice of teachers and academic achievement of students. The practice of coaching has been primarily applied to the content areas of reading (literacy) and math, with the Federal Reading First Program leading the way with a requirement for coaching in each of the Reading First schools. Several other initiatives across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania also focus on coaching as a vehicle to improve instruction, raise student achievement, and encourage high school reform. As a result, the need to clarify the role of a coach is critical to the consistent and successful implementation of coaching across the state.

This position paper provides common understanding of coaching as a means of professional development. It also suggests that if coaches are to be effective in their role, they must be highly qualified as teachers, knowledgeable in content, and skilled in the sophisticated practices of coaching. Their roles and responsibilities must be clearly defined and strongly focused on the improvement of instruction and student achievement. Their role must remain supportive and never be confused with the supervisory or evaluative role of the principal. Administrative support is a critical element to the success of coaching efforts. As effective facilitators of adult learning, coaches lead teachers in reflective and inquiry-based professional development that advances collective leadership, continuous improvement of instructional practices, and improved student achievement.

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