

Still in the Game:

How coaching keeps leaders in schools and making progress

POLICY BRIEF



Coaches make us better versions of ourselves. They provide perspective, help us see aspects of ourselves we might not be aware of or want to see, and motivate and support us to do our work more effectively. In any profession, a coach is a critical thought partner for addressing challenges head on.

Consider the work of a principal. This role has become increasingly complex in recent years as school leaders are expected to do more with less. Principals must be building managers, instructional leaders, visionaries, and problem solvers. They are tasked with improving learning for each student while the demographics and needs of their students are shifting. At the same time, workplace demands for which schools must prepare young people are evolving. To make sure each student gets the support and resources she needs to reach her potential, school leaders must be able to adapt to these shifts and lead their staff in adapting to changes.

Leaders are better able to make and sustain change when they have the support of a coach. Principals who do not receive adequate support report feeling isolated and stressed on the job. It's no surprise then that the average principal leaves a school after just three or four years, and even sooner in low-performing and high-poverty schools.¹ Frequent principal turnover can create real problems for schools: Student achievement often drops, teacher turnover rises, and effective programs and practices can falter.² Trusting, professional relationships among staff also break down, making it harder for educators to collaborate on school improvement, which is so important for a school's success.³

Principals need coaches. Why, then, aren't coaches revered, sought after, and held onto in education as they are in sports? Why aren't they seen as a critical part of every school, district, and state education budget, woven into per-pupil expenses? According to a 2012 national school staffing survey, only half of school leaders receive coaching.⁴ And when they do, it's usually short-term, early in their careers, or for remediation.⁵ This despite evidence that veteran principals benefit from coaching, too.⁶ And, perhaps more importantly, so do their schools.

In a recent study of the impact coaching has had on New York City principals who have been working with a leadership coach for at least five years, the NYC Leadership Academy found that these principals:

- **Remained in their schools more than twice as long the national average principal tenure in a school.** In New York City, four out of ten new principals leave their first school within five years; in our study, all of the principals stayed in their first school for more than five years.
- **Improved their ability to supervise staff, distribute leadership, communicate, and lead with resilience.**
- **Avoided complacency.** After their schools made some initial progress, the principals in this study did not just coast. They worked with their coach to continue to make improvements at their schools.
- **Benefited from coaching thanks to the trusting relationships they were able to develop over time with their coaches.**

When school leaders improve their leadership practices and stay in their jobs longer, student learning improves.⁷

With high principal turnover, and a shortage of strong leaders to fill those open jobs,⁸ there is a greater need than ever for districts and states to ensure that all principals get the ongoing support they need to keep them in their jobs and improving their schools. Consider the expectations and values of the upcoming generation of school leaders: Millennials tend to look for jobs that offer professional development, coaching, and mentoring opportunities.⁹ This generation values detailed, regular feedback, a hallmark of good coaching.¹⁰ And whether they are mid-career educators or considering a career change into education, members of Generation X also value opportunities for intellectual development and professional learning.¹¹

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Recommendations

The good news is that states are increasingly prioritizing coaching and mentoring as a way to develop school leaders. A recent survey of state education officials found that their top priority around school leadership development is to provide principals with support and professional development, most importantly through coaching and mentoring. Still, many states that included coaching in their ESSA plans specify coaching is for novice principals or principals in need of remediation.¹²

Given the benefits of ongoing professional learning, particularly coaching, found in our research and prior studies, we urge local and state policymakers to consider the following recommendations:

1. Make coaching a part of new principal induction.

Research shows that professional development helps principals stay in their role longer, yet many states still focus professional development on teachers, rather than principals.¹³ As of 2016, only 20 states required some type of professional support to new school administrators.¹⁴ The professional development opportunities typically available to school principals vary greatly from district to district and are often not directly connected to a principal's work in their school.¹⁵ Leadership coaching, however, has been associated with improved student performance and a reduction in principal and teacher turnover. We encourage states to adopt and faithfully implement formal policies requiring that all new principals receive leadership coaching during the first two years on the job (Missouri offers a strong example),¹⁶ and to guide and support school districts to implement high-quality coaching programs.¹⁷

2. Offer coaching beyond the first two years of the principalship.

While leadership coaching is primarily offered to new principals, research shows that experienced principals also need ongoing professional development support to sustain them throughout their career.¹⁸ School leaders show the most growth when they receive ongoing, job-embedded support.¹⁹ Therefore, we encourage districts to offer coaching to principals beyond the first two years.

3. Budget coaching into per-pupil expenditures.

Investing in leadership coaching is not nearly as costly as replacing a principal. Research has found it can cost as little as \$4/student per year (depending on the number of principals and cost per coach)²⁰ while the cost of replacing one principal is estimated to be about \$75,000.²¹ We urge districts and states to calculate what it would cost per student, and to build that into their per pupil expenditures.

4. Take advantage of the flexibility offered by the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) offers states and districts greater control over how they can use federal funding for initiatives to support leadership development and learning, particularly Titles I and II.²² Title I, Part A focuses on school improvement and provides a broad range of allowable uses of funds, including the ability to support leadership.²³ We urge states to allocate the funding permitted under Title II, Part A, to leader development and, as ESSA allows, to reserve up to 3% of funds to support principals through activities such as coaching or mentoring.²⁴

5. Provide principals with an ongoing, non-evaluative thought partner.

An effective coach offers confidential, professional guidance, helping leaders reflect on practice in order to move the school where it needs to go. One of the most important features of the coaching relationship for principals in our study was that it was confidential and did not impact their formal evaluation, allowing principals to be more candid than they would be with their supervisor or staff. For systems that are relying on supervisors to provide leadership coaching, decisionmakers should consider the limitations of someone who is also responsible for evaluating the leader to provide an intensive leadership coaching experience.²⁵

6. Re-envision the principal supervisor role as supportive, not just evaluative.

If providing a non-evaluative leadership coach is not immediately feasible, principal supervisors can also provide effective coaching. Many school systems are now rethinking the principal supervisor role to make it less about compliance and more about support.²⁶ In such instances, principal supervisors have the opportunity to provide ongoing, job-embedded professional support. Recent research shows there is value in principal supervisors focusing on leading such professional learning of principals.²⁷ As the central office was originally set up to carry out regulatory and administrative functions, principal supervisors will need professional learning and training aimed at building their capacity to coach and support principals.²⁸

7. Consider cost-effective ways to supplement and enhance one-on-one coaching.

States and districts can consider other cost-effective ways to enhance or supplement one-on-one coaching such as group or peer coaching. Principals tend to work in isolation, which has been negatively correlated to work performance.²⁹ Establishing a network of school leaders can help create a more collaborative, supportive professional community where leaders learn from one another, share resources, and hold each other accountable for applying new knowledge and skills.

8. Develop coach skills and monitor progress to ensure success.

Simply passing legislation does not guarantee access to quality coaching. Most state or district coaching programs do not have required training for coaches, nor do they gather meaningful data to assess program effectiveness.³⁰ States and districts should consider implementing a rigorous coach selection process while providing foundational and ongoing training for anyone engaged in leadership coaching, whether a traditional coach, principal supervisor, or peer coach. For example, New Jersey's state-approved mentoring and induction program selects mentors based on their records as accomplished school leaders and years in the principalship. The program provides mentors with training, focusing on "developing a supporting mentoring relationship that effectively addresses the needs of new school leaders."³¹ States and district coaching programs should also develop accountability structures that go beyond compliance, measuring program outcomes related to the coaching's impact on leadership behaviors associated with improving student and school success.³²

Endnotes

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