ABSTRACT

            Increasingly, third parties are working with schools and
providing a coach (a skilled educator external to a school) who helps to
facilitate reform. This paper explores some of the complexities of coaching
by presenting a case study of a coach in her first year of facilitating math
and science reform in a pseudonymous middle school in a Boston suburb. The
school enrolled 900 students, predominantly white and middle class, and had
approximately 70 teachers, including 12 math and science teachers. The coach
came from the Center for Collaborative Education, a nonprofit organization
that works with schools and districts to improve student learning by
promoting and facilitating models of school reform. The center employs the
following four school-based practices: (1) building leadership capacity and a
professional collaborative culture; (2) improving learning, teaching, and
assessment; (3) creating structures to support high achievement; and (4)
fostering data-based inquiry and decision-making. The case study identified
some of the challenges coaches face and some of the strategies used by
coaches in their daily work. The paper also discusses some of the challenges
coaches face. (WFA)

The Coach in Context: Building School Capacity through External Facilitation.

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The Coach in Context:
Building School Capacity through External Facilitation

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Increasingly, third-party organizations are working hand-in-hand with schools, in which the position of a coach—a skilled educator external to a school—works with a school to facilitate reform. Many school reform designs, such as Turning Points in middle schools and the Coalition of Essential Schools, use this model in working with schools. Although more popular now, educational initiatives have used coaches, or school change facilitators" (Williams 1996), "outside reformers" (McDonald 1989), and "external consultants" (Fullan 1991), to effect change since the 1950s (Sulla, 1998).

Given this backdrop, it is surprising that little is known about just what coaches do and how they do it. We do know that coaches play multiple roles--they can advocate for the school with a district, provide professional development to teachers, work with principals, design curriculum, facilitate meetings, and more--but we know little empirically about how coaches manage their time, how they perceive the reform process, and how they facilitate their many roles and activities when working with a school. This paper will explore some of the complexity that makes coaching multifaceted by presenting a case study of a coach in her first year of work in facilitating math and science reform in a middle school. This case study identifies some of the challenges coaches face and some strategies used by coaches in their daily work. Further, this paper discusses some implications for the coaching model given these issues.

An organization that uses the coaching model
To best understand what a coach does, it is imperative to understand the context in which he or she works. This paper examines the work of a coach at the Center for Collaborative Education (CCE), a non-profit organization that works collaboratively with schools and districts to improve student learning by promoting and facilitating models of school reform. CCE has a detailed theory of change, based on the empirical work of many researchers and practitioners, most notably Newmann (1996), Sizer (1991), Levin (1991) and the Carnegie Corporation's report on young adolescent education (1989), which guides a coach's work in facilitating change.

The Center believes that sustainable school change is facilitated by collaborative work with schools in the following four school-based practices:

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(1) **Building Leadership Capacity and a Professional Collaborative Culture**: Schools require strong, shared leadership to promote a professional collaborative culture. Schools in which faculty interaction is collegial, and teacher talk and collaborative work is focused on curriculum, instruction, and assessment, have experienced strong improvements in student achievement.

(2) **Improving Learning, Teaching, and Assessment** Ultimately, student learning does not increase unless there is a continual focus on setting high expectations for each and every student, and providing ongoing support for teachers to improve their practice of teaching and assessing student learning.

(3) **Creating Structures to Support High Achievement** High performing schools create structures that promote the conditions for high quality learning and teaching.

(4) **Data-based Inquiry and Decision Making**: Ongoing analysis of data from multiple sources provides a comprehensive picture of a school's strengths and challenges. School-wide participation in this inquiry process results in thoughtful decisions for improvement.

The Coach in Context

The Turner Middle School[1] is located in a suburb 20 miles north of Boston. The school enrolls 900 students who are predominantly white and middle class. There are approximately 70 teachers at the school, including 12 math and science teachers. The school had been working with CCE for two years with a previous coach. The district's curriculum coordinator in math and science was the assigned contact for the coach.

Consistent with CCE's theory of change, the overarching goal of the coach's work was to build capacity for improving the teaching and learning of math and science. Specifically, the coach worked toward that end by building a culture of professional collaboration, trying to institutionalize structures that promote teacher collaboration around the sharing teaching practices. To accomplish these goals, the coach visited the school three times per month, working with school staff and administrators in multiple ways.

The school had the following collaborative processes in place, and these served as places where the coach could begin to work with faculty:

- Interdisciplinary Team meetings of four teachers (math, science, English, and history, and some teams also had an additional language teacher). While the teachers are accustomed to getting together, the majority of these meetings are to discuss students or administrative business, rather than student work or teaching practice. These meeting occur daily, for one period of about 42 minutes.

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[1] All names used are pseudonyms.

- Math and science teachers also attend a monthly after-school curriculum meeting for one hour. Teachers meet with the curriculum director for math and science and discuss curriculum issues (such as a new science curriculum). Sometimes they meet in grade and subject levels to work on issues related to their specific subject.

Building capacity

This section details the coach's work in four domains of activity to build school capacity to implement and sustain reform. These domains are: working with teachers, working with administrators, building structures that promote collaboration, and inquiry-based teaching and learning. Each section details the coach's goals in that domain, the strategies used by the coach to reach those goals, and the coach's reasoning behind those strategies.

Working with teachers

Not surprisingly, the coach described the need to develop positive relationships with teachers as an essential first step in facilitating the reform process. The coach wanted and needed to create the trust necessary for an honest sharing of teacher practices, questions, and issues. The goal in her work with teachers was to provide professional development in inquiry-based teaching and learning, helping to deepen teachers' understanding of how and what children learn through inquiry as well as pedagogical practices to use this approach in the classroom. The coach did this in four ways.

One-on-one meetings with teachers

One, when the coach was initially introduced into the school, the curriculum director organized one-on-one meetings between the faculty and the coach. In these meetings, the coach introduced herself and described her role in the school, and the coach, echoing the introduction by the curriculum director, told the teachers that this was an opportunity for them to get to know each other and to figure out how they could best use the coach's skills. Further, the coach asked each teacher what instructional materials they used and if she could drop by their classroom. The coach told them that she wanted to observe students to see what their understanding was as well as the directions, questions, and comments made by the teacher.

Informally observing classroom lessons

Two, the coach informally observed lessons, casually wandering in and out of classes, to get to know teachers and to get to know in general the kind of instruction occurring in the school. In addition, the coach followed up on initial conversations with teachers, more formally observing their lessons and giving feedback on issues they had previously discussed. In her observations, the coach spent a lot of time looking at student's understanding of the lesson, looking at

their work on paper and their conversations with one another, and also asking individual students questions as they were working ("What are you doing and why?"). In her debrief sessions with the teachers, the coach talked about pedagogy and her observations of student comments and understandings of the lesson. The coach suggested to the teacher ways that students could be more engaged in the lesson, emphasizing the relationship between student engagement and deeper understanding.

Facilitating a workshop

Three, the coach conducted an inquiry-based investigation for the teachers in their monthly after-school curriculum meeting. The coach modeled an inquiry lesson for the teachers, in which the teachers worked as adult learners, with teachers learning about electricity through inquiry and reflecting upon themselves as learners and on the coach as a teacher. Teachers learned on two levels, the process by which they learned experientially as students and, meta-cognitively, what they learned as teachers in watching the coach's instructional practices. The coach cited two reasons for this session. First, it helped to build rapport, making the coach vulnerable to feedback and criticism. Observing teachers in their classrooms is not yet a common occurrence in most schools, so by allowing her own teaching to be critiqued, the coach was building a more trusting relationship with the teachers. Second, by modeling a specific kind of instructional practice that the coach and curriculum director wanted to see happen in the school, the coach built a foundation, a shared experience, for helping teachers build their understanding for how people learn content through inquiry. She had heard, both in this school as well as others she had worked with, that the teacher perception of inquiry approaches was that "messing around is fine, but then the kids have to learn something." Teachers had trouble seeing how and what students learned through inquiry and conversations with each other.

In-depth work with teachers

Four, the coach worked to build the capacity of teachers by working more frequently with certain teachers, both veteran and novice. The curriculum director had targeted specific teachers that she believed would benefit from in-depth work with the coach. These teachers were both new and veteran teachers. In one instance, the coach worked with a veteran teacher, who was new to the school and the state, to provide a colleague, a sounding board, of someone with similar experiences, and attitudes about teaching. The coach helped the teacher to become familiar with the state standards and they talked about ways in which the teacher could bring an inquiry approach into her 42-minute classes, as she was used to longer periods at her most recent school. In working with two less experienced (first and second year) teachers, the coach drew on different areas of her expertise. She needed to provide a different level of scaffolding, helping to

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broaden their repertoire of resources and activities while also providing reassurance in the skills they had.

Working with an administrator
A second important capacity building activity was working with the administrators in the school. In this school, the coach spent a great deal of her time with the district curriculum director for math and science, meeting with her for long periods each week she visited. The curriculum director was valuable to the coach in helping her integrate into the school. As stated previously, the director organized individual meetings between the coach and the teachers and helped to shape the content of those meetings, and consequently the work of the coach, by suggesting to the teachers that they set up times for the coach to observe their teaching.

Working with an administrator was an important activity for the coach to be able to build capacity in the school. The curriculum director needed someone to help her shape her long-term vision of math and science in the school as well as the district. The coach needed to work hand-in-hand with leaders in the school to create a long-term vision and strategic plan to build the capacity that a school needs to sustain the reform. Almost all of these meetings focused heavily on strategic planning for the use of the coach's time as well as for the direction of the school.

Another example of the mutually supportive and close working relationship between the coach and curriculum director was that they co-facilitated the monthly after school curriculum meetings.

Building structures that promote collaboration
The coach described building structures to institutionalize reform changes as essential to building capacity in a school. Building capacity in an individual does not necessarily translate into capacity for the school. The individual teacher or administrator could leave, ending much of the work of reform that had occurred.

As a first step in building structures to support the capacity building efforts of the coach's work with individuals, the coach, curriculum director, and school principal reinstated subject area meetings. These meetings occur once a week and have taken the place of one of the daily teacher team meetings. In these meetings, teachers talk about their practice; they talk about what topics they cover and how they cover them. For example, a new teacher who is trying to learn how to teach ratios is working with a veteran teacher around how to do so. Further, the after school curriculum meetings, described in the beginning of the

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paper, are now being used to focus on issues central to the reform goals. The coach's hope is that the meetings evolve into times when teachers examine student work; but one step at a time is needed, and so getting the conversations started around classroom practice is a first step. Building structures cannot support reform if teachers are not willing to use the time afforded by those structured meeting times to talk and share with each other. Creating structures provides the opportunity for teachers to take advantage of their increasing professional collaborative culture that is currently being supported by the coach and curriculum director.

The coach also introduced two other collaborative practices that she hoped to institutionalize, data-based inquiry and decision making and peer observations. The previous coach at the school had actually begun the process of data-based inquiry and decision making with the math and science faculty. This process, which will be described in more detail in the next section, provides a way for teachers to build collaborative practice as well as providing teachers with a different lens by which to examine the efficacy of their practices. The coach hopes to implement the process as a regular feature of the school's work. Finally, the coach hopes to create a structure that will support teachers' peer observations of each other. While she has been conducting observations and debriefings with teachers, the coach recognizes that this process must occur among faculty. The coach is modeling the process and showing how effective it can be.

Inquiry-based teaching and learning
The goal of focusing on inquiry-based teaching and learning grew out of three mutual needs: (1) the curriculum director wanted teachers to develop their skills in this pedagogy, (2) many teachers had an interest in teaching in this way, although very few had experience doing so, and many had questions about its efficacy, and (3) the coach believes strongly in this practice, and has considerable experience in working with teachers to develop skill in this practice.

The coach introduced this topic in two ways. First, the previous coach had begun a process of data-based inquiry and decision making with the staff. In this process, staff divided into teams; each team was responsible for looking at data the school had collected. One team looked at MCAS[2] results for the school; another looked at course outlines and state curricula frameworks, and the third group looked at action plans from previous work with the coach, internal student evaluations, and student placement in math and science. Teams generated strengths and challenges areas in looking at the data. Each group then picked what they saw as the most significant challenges, or barriers, to increasing student learning. Teacher teams shared what they saw as the most significant

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[2] The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System.

barriers with each other. Teachers then chose what challenge they saw as the most significant barrier.

Teachers chose three challenges as most important, and teachers then divided into teams to focus on each challenge. The challenges chosen by teachers as most significant were: (1) student's difficulty in providing responses to open-ended questions, (2) providing real-life applications in the curricula, and (3) having students show their work and not just write a final answer in order that teachers can see their thought processes. The remaining after-school curriculum meetings were to be used by teachers to conduct action research around these identified areas. After the next two meetings, the teams had not progressed very far and teachers were not doing groundwork during the time between meetings. The new coach and curriculum director felt that teachers were having a difficult time pushing deeper into the process, partially because teachers felt unsure about where the process was leading them. The coach and curriculum director discussed their observations and brainstormed ways that they could help teachers dig deeper into their generated challenges. They saw all three categories as integral to the process of inquiry-based teaching and proposed using inquiry as a way to frame this work for the teachers. For example, they saw student's difficulty in open-ended responses as analogous to questioning, real-life applications of the curricula to having the curriculum be meaningful to and generated by students, and recast having students show their work as having teachers examine student work as a tool for teachers to learn about their students' understanding of the lesson.

The coach and curriculum director proposed to the teachers a new way to examine these issues: They suggested that teachers work in grade level subject teams to develop inquiry-based units. The curriculum director asked teachers to think about how the three questions from the data-based decision-making process can help the teachers create a in-depth inquiry based unit. For example, the teams are thinking about how to build a unit that has real-life applications for students. These units thus served as a product to focus and guide their current work with the coach.

Some teachers are already using their lessons in their classes. The goal of the coach and the curriculum director is that, when the lesson is taught, teachers will look at student work to discuss the three questions and how their understanding of them can improve their teaching. This is not yet happening, but the coach and curriculum director plan to provide more scaffolding for teachers to share practices, and to provide more training and use the after school meeting structure to provide teachers with the time to do so. In addition, both the coach and the curriculum director plan to reintroduce teachers to the data-based inquiry process; they believe that having teachers create lessons based on a

preliminary use of data will help to provide a context from which teachers can see the role of data-based inquiry in their work.

Implications for building school capacity to sustain reform

This case study provides insight into how one coach thinks about her work in schools and the decisions she makes to help a school change. The coach must work both top-down and bottom-up; she must help administrators shape a vision and help teachers buy into that vision; she must provide administrators with training to develop their strengths; and she must train teachers in both classroom practice strategies as well as helping them to develop a whole school vision. Coach's work is done with an eye toward building the capacity of school personnel to sustain changes. Given the wide variety of activities in which coaches do engage, the role of a coach requires a delicate balance of how best to spend time. This section will discuss two of the main challenges for a coach's work. The two challenges are: (1) How a coach balances working with groups or individual teachers and (2) How a content coach can affect whole school reform.

Working with groups or individual teachers
In order to build capacity within a school the coach needs to work with teachers both in groups and individually. While the coach believes that deep conversations about teaching and learning are at the heart of building a professional, collaborative culture, she wondered where and how deep conversations could best be created and sustained. Working in groups helps to shape a professional, collaborative culture; working with individuals helps to build skills, raise questions, and increase buy-in for teachers to bring back to the group. However, if a coach is at the school only one day per week, it is impossible for her to work with each teacher each week, or even every other week, given other needs. Further, building the capacity of individuals in necessary, but it does not always affect whole school change. Individuals may leave the school or be unable to share their new knowledge and ideas with others.

To effectively build capacity, a balance must be maintained, but that balance must be weighed to working with groups of teachers. The need is for the coach to help create structures that can provide support for individual teachers, using the personnel resources available at the school. The coach can provide support for teachers to make best use of these structures. For example, by creating a structure for teachers to conduct peer observations and provide feedback, the coach has institutionalized a process whereby teachers can support one another. However, structures alone are insufficient for reform. Creating a structure does not entail that school staff know how best to use it; it is still necessary for the coach to work with faculty to shape the content to their needs. The coach must

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continue to work with teachers around issues of classroom pedagogy, providing models for teachers to implement in their classrooms. Further, the coach must work with teachers on how to most effectively use the new structure, in this case, how to effectively observe and provide feedback to one another.

How can a content coach effect whole school change
Conversely, the coach also asks whether she can effect change in the math and science staff without effecting whole school change. Will any changes made be sustainable if there are not whole school structures in place to support them? And can the coach develop enough support across the whole school for those changes?

In some ways, the coach has created changes in the whole school. As stated previously, the coach helped to give math and science teachers one of the daily team meetings to talk specifically about math and science. This also allows the English and Social Studies teachers to have a chance to meet in subject area groups. We have seen the effort put in by the coach and curriculum director to help math and science teachers make the best use of these meetings; can other teachers also make good use of these meetings by sharing and talking about important aspects of practice, without coaching support?

This challenge has two implications for a coach's work. First, content coaches will be mor elikely to effect whole school change if they are working in a school that has embraced a unifying whole school reform model. The coach is trying to create a philosophic and pedagogical shift in the ways that teachers' work and students' learn. Schools need new structures to sustain reform; it is likely that these structures will affect teachers from other content areas, and so the degree that these structures can be implemented is dependent on teachers with whom the coach does not work. Without reaching a critical mass of teachers, and without creating the structures to support it, any reform effort will fail.

Second, school administrators play a very important role in expanding the influence of the content coach. Obviously, the coach and the administrator must work together and share similar visions, or the efforts of the coach will not take hold in the school. Further, although the coach must work with the school administrator to help create those conditions just outlined in the school for the school to make best use of the coach. The school administrator can create a whole school vision and conversation around reform. The coach must work to help the administrator increase their capacity to develop, sustain, and implement that vision.

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