

Principal Support for Literacy Coaching

Cathleen Cronin Kral
Instructional Leader for Literacy,
Director of Literacy Coaching,
Boston Public Schools

Educators agree that leadership by a principal profoundly affects what is accomplished at a school. This effect of leadership is particularly true when schools and districts are engaged in reform. When the reform effort impinges on school culture, the principal plays the main role in leading and supporting this change.

Principals support change

An often unwritten expectation for literacy coaches in schools is that they function as change agents. In many districts, coaching results are measured relative to the degree of change evidenced in the teaching staff. Principals can play an essential role in literacy coaches being effective as change agents if they consider this advice from Michael Fullan (2001):

Remember that a culture of change consists of great rapidity and nonlinearity on the one hand and equally great potential for creative breakthroughs on the other. The paradox is that transformation would not be possible without accompanying messiness.
(p. 1)

Principals actively participate

A principal who understands the messiness of change, supports the risks it involves, and allows it to happen over time is more likely to realize positive results than

one who simply tries to mandate change and uses the coach as the “tool” to get it done. Teachers need to know that the principal is learning along with them, or is at least very involved in their learning. Teachers watch for principal reaction to and involvement in the work of the coach at their school. A distant relationship between the principal and the coach sends a message of low priority, which results in teachers’ opting out of the intended reform. Schmoker (1997) states that, “Unless the administrator expresses pride and interest in the success of the project, unless the teacher leader[s are] carefully selected and given supports and encouragement, the effort will probably die” (p. 128).

This is especially true when the project encompasses changing the culture of a school and teachers’ beliefs about learning.

What and how can principals demonstrate real involvement? Consider the following:

- Creating school schedules that provide time for teachers to work with the coach;
- Participating in group sessions and professional development sessions facilitated by the coach;
- Encouraging teachers to try new strategies;
- Talking and listening to teachers;
- Continuing to learn themselves;
- Partnering with coaches;
- Making time for everyone to learn and keeping it sacred;

- Starting with a core group, then planning how to scale up.

We never thought we had a right to say, “I don’t really understand, I’m not sure...” We always had to pretend for some reason that we knew what we were doing... [Now we ask] how are we going to teach this? What do we need to do all this? The latest research has really changed my teaching.
—*Education Matters*, p. 41-42

Principals prime the pump

Principals can relieve teachers’ anxiety about coaching by giving them good information about the purpose of coaching, what they will get out of it, what it will ask of them, and how coaching sessions will be organized. Principals should also encourage teachers to talk about their concerns about working with a coach.

In her article, “Reflections on Reform,” teacher researcher Elizabeth Hinde notes that, “when upsetting feelings associated with change are managed and given credibility, then change is more likely to proceed” (p. 5). It is hard to lead what you do not know. Principals and administrative teams need to deepen their knowledge, know what teachers are learning and what support they will need as they implement what they have learned in their classrooms.

Principals model collaboration

By participating in professional development and coaching sessions with their staff, principals help teachers learn more. They show that everyone needs to keep learning, and they dispel the notion that a single workshop or PD session is enough to learn deeply a new approach to instruction.

Collegial relationships deepen when teachers learn together, and whatever energy a principal expends in this area is well spent in terms of building a cohesive approach to instruction. Principals and teachers should first set norms for collegial conversations and then begin honest, risk-free discussions about the implications of coaching and instruction at their school. Conversations can happen in grade-level meetings, leadership team meetings, study groups, or one-on-one dialogue. The key is for the principal to lay out expectations, listen to teachers’ questions, and then proceed respectfully. Producing and nurturing a collaborative culture presents a profound shift from the traditional organization of schools as reflected in this Boston teacher’s comments:

When I first began [teaching], for years and years you never came out of your classroom. You never talked about teaching. You never talked about strategies or lessons or any philosophy you had...

Principals build relational trust

Principals need to help teachers build trust in interacting around their work. As instructional leaders, administrators should be seen doing the work they expect others to do. By modeling continuous learning, by walking the talk and by spreading enthusiasm, principals can re-energize their schools. Principals can also be extremely effective when they ask coaches to help them hone their lenses on instruction. This is especially helpful when the principal’s background is not in the field of literacy.

Casey (2006) explains that coaches can inform principals about the coaching work they are doing with teachers and explain what the principal should expect to see in classrooms. It is also true that coaches should expect to have their work analyzed and evaluated because they are hired to improve teacher practice in order to improve student learning. An effective principal mutually supports the coach and the teachers as they collaboratively work to improve instructional practices and develop professional learning communities that take on the ownership of improved student achievement.

A positive relationship between principal and coach is not a lofty ideal — it is a key factor that determines the efficacy of the coaching. Smart principals also do everything in their power to help the coach forge positive, trusting relationships with the teachers on their staff. A principal with an extremely effective coaching program in a highly successful school tells it all:

Every day the coach is in the school she meets with me. I share with her my observations from my learning walks in the school — things she might not have seen. We collaborate together around teacher learning. I don’t say, we’ve got to do something about that teacher. That’s not the tone at all. The whole conversation between coach and principal is about support, and it has to be that way. Otherwise, you get a fear-laced, evaluative climate and that’s not conducive to

optimal learning. — *Mary Russo, Principal,
Murphy Elementary School, Boston, MA*

Principal leadership is the key to results-driven coaching. Whether it is one school with one coach, or a district coaching program that serves multiple schools, there has to be a structure built that supports the coaching work. In the context of a single school, this means an agreed upon job description with clear parameters, protected time set aside for teachers to work with the coach, and regular meetings with the principal and a core group of teachers with whom to begin. Usually, thoughtful and inquisitive teachers comprise the first group.

If it is a district that is initiating coaching, an infrastructure should be in place to support the implementation, accountability and professional development of the coaches. District support begins with the expectations and support of the superintendent, who should lay out the rationale behind the coaching initiative and set clear district goals around instructional practice. Ideally then, district literacy leaders can choose a model for coaching, set goals and benchmarks for student improvement, and articulate the roles of principals, teachers and coaches in the coaching initiative.

Principals make it happen

All too often, a coach arrives in a school where no groundwork for coaching has been laid and no purpose or goals have been articulated around expected results. Sometimes even the principal does not know why the coach is there or what the coach should do.

Principals should do all they can to prevent this occurrence. They need to push back and offer to help district leaders develop a coaching plan that delineates the “what,” “why,” and “how” of coaching in their district. The plan should include an accountability system that documents the coaching work and a support system that provides continuous learning for the coaching staff.

Even if a district is initiating coaching in a single school, it is imperative that the principal, together with teachers, develop a viable plan that supports and accounts for the coaching work at the school.

If coaching is really going to succeed in a school, it is the principal who is going to make it happen.

The Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse website at www.literacycoachingonline.org can provide principals with much additional information that will help to make their school coaching programs a success. The website includes standards for coaches, briefs on coaching, descriptions of coaching programs, research findings, forums, events, and other helpful resources.

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