



**Coaching as Professional Learning:
Guidance for Implementing Effective Coaching Systems**

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Introduction

To build collective capacity within organizations, schools and districts across the world have implemented coaching as an effective method for systemic reform. Vermont in particular has a wide variety of coaches, including instructional coaches and systems coaches, as well as a variety of interpretations of the coaching practice. Many schools invest a great deal of time and money in professional learning for instructional coaching, often funded with federal program funds. With these investments comes the responsibility to design systems and processes with the greatest potential to improve organizations, classroom instruction, and, ultimately, student achievement.

This document is a synthesis of research on coaching in educational settings. The contents include information and resources that support methods for implementing and sustaining effective coaching systems and practices in a variety of educational contexts, as well as [Guiding Questions for Building and Strengthening Effective Coaching Systems](#).

PART 1: Defining and Rationalizing Coaching

Definitions

Generally, in educational literature, coaching roles are defined in one of two ways: coaching as a component of professional learning, or, coaching to attempt whole school reform (Brown, Stroh, Fouts, and Baker, 2005). This document will focus primarily on coaching as a component of professional learning.

Coaching done well may be the most effective intervention designed for human performance.

Gawande, 2011

The purpose of an *instructional coaching model* is to help close the student achievement gap and accelerate learning for all students by building teacher capacity through implementation of effective instructional practices (Casey, 2006). As the use of high yield instructional strategies grows through instructional coaching, the social capital of schools increases. In contexts with high social capital, educator relationships are characterized by frequent interaction, collaboration, and trust, resulting in positive student outcomes (Leana, 2011).

The purpose of a *systems coaching model* is to build collective knowledge, effective systemic processes, and progress monitoring capacity across the organization. In Vermont, the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework is one area in which both instructional and systems coaches are employed to build capacity.

It is important to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of coaches, and how these differ from those of consultants, mentors, and teacher leaders. *Table 1* provides a starting point for these discussions. Roles and responsibilities of all positions, including coaches, should be clearly articulated through decisions made at the local level. The sample descriptions, models, frameworks, etc. in this document serve purely as examples.

Coaching is a process in which education professionals assist each other in negotiating the distance between acquiring new skills or teaching strategies and applying them skillfully and effectively.
Showers, 1985

Table 1: Roles and Responsibilities

Coaches empower people by facilitating self-directed learning, personal growth, and improved performance. (John Hattie, 2012)

Instructional Coach	The instructional coaches' primary role is to work with educators to implement research-based practices and encourage reflective practice (Knight, 2007). They provide ongoing, embedded, non-evaluative, professional learning.
Systems Coach	Systems coaches serve as a liaison within district school leadership teams, providing the ongoing coaching support and data-driven professional development necessary to implement the agreed upon common goals (Oregon Coaches Task Force, 2013). They frequently communicate the common goal to which everyone is accountable and ensure that policies, practices, and resources are aligned with the goal. In Vermont, the <i>Multi-Tiered System of Supports External Coach</i> provides dynamic support and facilitation to build the internal capacity of school and supervisory union/district leadership teams in implementation of the Vermont Multi-Tiered System of Supports (vtMTSS) to improve learning outcomes for all students and close the achievement gap for students with disabilities.
Consultant	Consultants are outside experts providing short-term advice, services, ideas, and solutions.
Mentor	Mentors are paired with educators who are either new to the profession or new to the school, in order to provide training, orientation, assistance, and support. Mentors demonstrate high-quality instructional practice and have training in mentoring (Vermont State Board of Education, 2014).
Teacher Leader	Teacher leaders are commonly classroom teachers with leadership roles and additional professional responsibilities. They may work closely with coaches to engage in or facilitate professional learning, but a majority of their time is spent teaching students.

Benefits: Coaching as High-Quality Professional Learning

High-quality professional learning that spans the continuum of an educator's career increases content and pedagogical knowledge and skills, and promotes positive attitudes and beliefs, helping the educator guide all students to learning at high levels. In an effort to promote high-quality professional learning, the Vermont Standards Board for Professional Educators (2012) adopted the [Vermont Standards for Professional Learning](#).

As Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, and Orphanos (2009) note, professional learning that is most effective in improving an educator's practice is:

- intensive;
- ongoing;
- connected to practice;
- focused on student learning; and
- aligned with school improvement practices.

Studies on the effectiveness of coaching are ongoing. Some studies indicate moderate effects on student achievement (e.g., Russo, 2004; Guiney, 2001). However, the majority of the literature cites the positive impact on teacher efficacy and effectiveness. For example, research indicates that educators who are observed more frequently by a coach implement instructional strategies more readily than non-coached peers (Matsumara, Sartorial, Bickel and Garnier, 2009). There is also evidence that effective coaching can help educators make informed instructional decisions and can contribute to increased instructional capacity through:

- continuous teacher learning that transfers to practice due to embedded coaching;
- targeted school-based professional development;
- a culture of reflective practice and collective responsibility for student learning; and
- quality principal leadership for instructional improvement (Neufeld and Roper, 2003).

Joyce and Showers (2002) identified five main findings related to the impact of coaching. They found that coached teachers and principals:

1. practiced new strategies more frequently and at a faster pace in context than their un-coached peers, even when they had participated in the same professional development;
2. learned the strategies embedded in real instructional objectives and could apply them in light of theories specific to models of teaching;
3. acquired long term retention of knowledge and skill;
4. were more likely to explain new models of teaching to their students, ensuring that the theories of use were understood by learners;
5. exhibited clear cognition with the recognition of purpose and use of new strategies, as indicated by interviews, lessons plans, and class performances.

With a complex endeavor such as teaching, it is extremely difficult to reach and then maintain the highest levels of performance without help. The most effective help commonly comes in the form of coaching.

Marzano, 2013

Coaching works hand-in-hand with a fluid and responsive [Multi-tiered System of Supports](#) framework (Vermont Reads Institute and Statewide Steering Committee on RTII, 2014). Instructional coaching enhances quality instruction delivered at the universal level. By effectively coaching at the universal level, schools can reduce the number of students needing more targeted interventions.

Consider the following factors when building or strengthening your coaching systems:

- leadership support
- instructional or systems focus
- [Adult Learning Theory \(AIR, 2011\)](#)
- structures that support coaching such as scheduling, time for embedded professional learning, professional learning for coaches, etc.
- clearly defined job descriptions: [Sample Job Description \(Springhill U.S.D, 2008\)](#)
- student outcomes
- regional capacity-building efforts, which can significantly increase the implementation of coaching roles (Mangin, 2014).

These considerations will be explored throughout this document.

PART 2: Effective Coaches and Effective Systems

Characteristics of Effective Coaches

Effective coaches have a solid understanding of research-based instructional practices and/or system dynamics. They are effective relationship builders and spend the majority of time with teachers, directly improving instruction. They are skilled communicators with a repertoire of excellent communication skills that enable them to empathize, listen, and build trusting relationships (Knight, 2008). Good coaches know how to break down a performance into critical individual components (Gawande, 2011). Coaches are leaders, but should never be placed in an evaluative position with respect to their colleagues.

Merriam-Webster defines art as “skill acquired by experience, study, or observation.” This is in fact the hallmark of a great coach. The science explains how adults learn, the way the brain reacts to new information, the number of times one must practice something before becoming fluent, why people resist change, and what chemicals the brain produces when it feels safe or when it feels threatened, but the art of coaching develops with experience, deep reflection and observing master coaches in action. Coaches who have mastered the art are skillfully able to create conditions in which teachers feel safe enough, cared for enough, inspired enough, joyful enough and knowledgeable enough to take a risk to change an instructional practice, even when they know they might at first fail.

Carol Chanter, 2015

Strong coaches typically demonstrate:

- belief in the potential, value, and resourcefulness of the person being coached
- skillful building of trusting relationships
- effective communication strategies
- a non-evaluative stance
- content and pedagogical knowledge
- leadership, facilitation and collaboration skills
- avid research skills
- accomplished problem-solving and time management skills
- evidence-based decision making
- skillful use of continuum of professional learning formats to support differentiated coaching (e.g. professional learning communities, book study, demonstration lessons, lesson study, and co-teaching).

The coaching position is complex and requires an experienced educator who has the skill and finesse to work effectively with adult learners.

Features of Effective Coaching Systems

Effective Coaching Cycles

Coaching is a form of highly targeted professional learning (International Literacy Association, 2006). Effective models vary, but include reflective and non-evaluative methods for:

- continuous support, communication, and collaboration;
- ongoing quality professional development embedded in daily practice;
- data analysis, interpretation, and action;
- collaborative, reflective practice;
- collective problem solving;
- relationship building; and
- collegial conversations about instructional practices and systemic change.

Although generally similar in theory, coaching cycles vary slightly in design. They may be long-term or short-term, depending on the data and the goals. The sample coaching cycle, illustrated in *Table 2*, represents one model used to gain results in student achievement (Knight, Elford, Hock, Dunekack, Bradley, Deshler, and Knight, 2015). Similarly, a collaborative inquiry and reflection model for instructional coaching includes the cycle phases illustrated in *Figure 1*.

Table 2: Sample Coaching Cycle

Sample Coaching Cycle	
Identify	The coach and teacher collaborate to examine data, set a goal, and identify a strategy to meet the goal.
Learn	The teacher learns how to implement the strategy; the coach assists with research, explanation, modeling, video samples, co-planning, co-teaching, and/or peer observations.
Improve	The coach monitors the teacher's implementation and they collaboratively examine data (e.g. from observations, assessments, or student work) to assess whether or not the goal was met.

Figure 1: Collaborative Inquiry and Reflection Model for Instructional Coaching



For more detailed information about coaching models and cycles, please refer to the following documents:

[New Brunswick Coaching Model \(2013\)](#)

[Instructional Performance Coach Plan, Friendship Charter School, TNTP \(2010\)](#)

[Instructional Coaching Model, Shaker Heights School \(2014\)](#)

[Ithaca City School District Instructional Coaching Program \(2013\)](#)

Clearly Defined Roles, Responsibilities, and Relationships

In effective coaching systems, roles, responsibilities, and goals are clearly defined and articulated. Effective coaches are educators who serve in a leadership role (not an evaluative role) primarily facilitating school reform and improving teacher quality (Killion, J. and Roy, P. 2009). They help develop capacity for educators to instruct and implement initiatives. As stated by the International Literacy Association (2006), this work may include providing leadership in school-based initiatives, and designing and implementing professional development by:

- facilitating inquiry-based collaboration in professional learning communities;
- collaboratively observing and examining instructional practice;
- promoting instructional reform, providing current research, and supporting methods for implementation;
- improving data literacy and data-based decision making;
- supporting teachers through demonstrations, co-teaching, observations, debriefs, and follow-ups; and
- being embedded in instructional practice contexts.

Coaches are system leaders. They need development as change agents at both the instructional level and the level of organizational and system change.

Knight and Fullan, 2011

Coaches in Vermont can actively partner with educators, professional learning communities, data teams, and other student support teams to:

- help implement proficiency-based learning, curriculum, instruction, and assessment, based on [Vermont Education Quality Standards](#) (2014), [VT Framework of Standards](#), and [Continuous Improvement Plans](#), through job-embedded professional learning within a coaching cycle;
- foster collaborative reflection on practice;
- facilitate collaborative inquiry for all relevant data sources and data-based decision making;
- support teachers through demonstrations, co-teaching, observations, debriefs, and follow-ups in development of universal instruction within a multi-tiered system of supports framework.

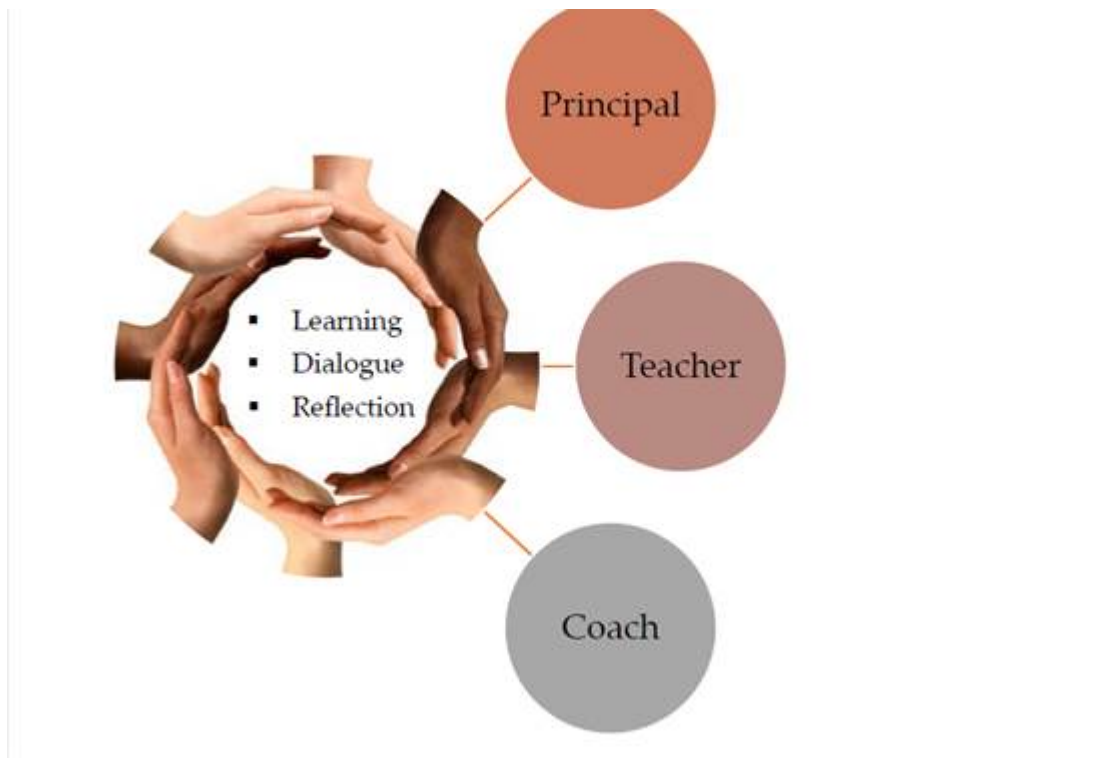
Huguet, Marsh, and Farrell (2014) found that key coaching practices help build educator capacity; these practices include dialogue, questioning, modeling, observation, and feedback. [Lesson study, instructional rounds \(City, Elmore, Fiarman, and Teitel \(2010\)\)](#) and [collaborative inquiry](#) (Ontario Schools, 2014), with student data and instructional data are just a few high-leverage methods coaches may apply, with educators, to improve teaching and learning (see additional resources in appendix). Throughout the partnership learning process and reflective conversations, coaches maintain confidentiality. Educator choice and voice are essential components of the coaching cycle and are honored throughout the partnership (Killion, Harrison, Bryan, and Clifton, 2012).

In effective coaching systems, the coach's role does *not* include:

- evaluation;
- mandating;
- substitute teaching; or
- administrative work unrelated to the instructional core or systems change initiatives.

Coaches are part of the overall plan for systemic reform. They work closely with principals on instructional leadership, reform, and school culture, as it relates to instructional practice (Knight, 2007; Knight and Fullan, 2011). Coaches develop relationships and emphasize that they are **teachers** willing to help (Toll, 2014). Teachers should perceive coaches as peers. This relationship is depicted in *Figure 2* and the roles are subsequently explained in *Table 4*.

Figure 2: The Teacher-Coach-Principal Partnership



Coaching is most effective when it operates in a context that provides for the support of coaches and coaching (Martin, Kragle, Quatroche & Bauserman, 2014). One of the most influential features of effective coaching is the level of support the coach receives from the principal (Walpole, McKenna, Uribe-Zarain, & Lamintina, 2010). As Jim Knight (2008) details, coaches and principals should meet frequently and have a shared understanding of coaches' roles and responsibilities, as well as the professional learning content delivered to teachers.

Table 4: The Teacher-Coach-Principal Partnership

Role of Teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Co-design the coaching relationship by identifying “what”, “how”, and “when” in relation to giving and receiving feedback.✓ Prepare for co-planning, instructional delivery and coaching sessions.✓ Be honest with the coach about challenges and engage in probing conversations.✓ In collaboration with the coach, develop goals and actions to strengthen instructional practice.
Role of Coach	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Approach the coaching relationship from a core belief in the value of the teacher and the coaching relationship.✓ Build trust with teachers by asking clarifying questions, actively listening, establishing confidentiality, validating teachers' assets, and asking permission to coach (Aguilar, 2013).✓ Support teachers' questions and learning by collecting and sharing appropriate research and information; ask questions that foster reflection on practice (Duncan, 2006).✓ Actively seek <i>and</i> provide honest feedback, input, modeling, and debriefing.✓ Use inquiry and probing conversations to support teacher reflection.✓ In collaboration with the teacher, develop goals and actions to strengthen instructional practice. <p>For additional role competencies: International Coaching Federation Core Competencies (n.d.)</p>
Role of Principal	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Engage in relevant professional learning to understand and support coaches and teachers in improving instructional practice.✓ Support both teachers and coaches with the time and structures needed for the embedded professional learning✓ Endorse the coach to the teachers—publicly state support (Matsumara, Satoris, Bickel, and Garnier, 2009).✓ Observe coaches in action to better understand and support their role✓ Respect the coach’s professional judgment (Knight, 2008; Matsumara, Sartoris, Bickel and Garnier, 2009).✓ Honor the confidential, non-evaluative nature of the teacher-coach relationship✓ Ensure that the coaching system is evaluated, celebrate the successes and address the challenges.
<p>The Shaker Heights Coaching Model (Kulich, 2014) elaborates on the relationships by describing the various roles of the coach, the teacher and the principal.</p>	

Characteristics of Systems that Support Effective Coaching

Time and Structures:

Time for coaches to coach is essential. In order for coaching to be effective, time is structured strategically -- coaching isn't an "add on" (Steiner and Kowal, 2007). As Moran (2007) states, coaching is part of differentiated professional learning. It is not a one-size-fits-all process that can be delivered at a school faculty meeting or in a one-day workshop. Coaching is embedded within the context of instruction and/or systems work in order to increase instructional and leadership capacity. The [New Brunswick Coaching Model](#) and the [Friendship Public Charter School Model](#) offer suggestions regarding the time allotments for the various coaching responsibilities.

Data Analysis:

Data analysis is an essential process for improving instruction and learning. Therefore, the use of data is an integral part of the coaching process (Barr, Simmons, and Zarrow, 2003). Coaches must be data literate and know how to facilitate [collaborative inquiry](#) (Ontario Schools, 2014) with multiple sources of student data and instructional data, in order to help educators reflect on practice, set individual and group teaching and learning goals, and determine foci for coaching observations and model lessons. This can be done with individual teachers and with entire professional learning communities. Data—and reflection about that data—should drive the entire coaching cycle. For further information, please explore the article, [How Instructional Coaches Support Data-Driven Decision-Making](#) (Marsh, McCombs, and Martorell, 2010).

Culture:

Coaching may be a significant culture shift for all involved. Adult learning theorist Malcolm Knowles, et al. (2005) posited that adult learners need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction and are most interested in subjects that have immediate relevance and impact to their job. Part of a coach's job is to actively involve educators and leaders in the professional learning process—including the selection of priorities—through reflective conversations, co-planning, and facilitation. In coaching partnerships, both parties collaborate to plan, learn, observe, share ideas, examine data, and to work toward goals (Knight, 2007).

The culture of coaching should be allowed to grow naturally to reach a critical mass. As Toll (2014) notes, one strategy is to begin with "ready to go" teachers. Effective coaches allow the reluctant teachers the opportunity to see the organic flow of ideas and their impact. Most importantly, coaches listen well and build relationships first, and frequently remind educators that they are collaborative partners in improving teaching, learning, and systems.

PART 3: Evaluating the Effectiveness of the System

The effectiveness of a coaching system is based on instructional practice, student achievement data, teacher efficacy, and coaches' development. To measure the impact of coaching, a coaching evaluation system must be designed prior to implementation and may include the following methods:

- Interviews: select a sample of school sites (principal, teachers, and coach)
- Observations using a coaching “look fors” document; attached to this could be a check-list or rating scale
- [Reflective Working Notebook](#) and system-wide [surveys](#) (Kansas Coaching Project, 2008) involving all professional learning teams that have a coach on staff
- Action Research (Example: Two teachers want to improve questioning techniques. One teacher has access to a coach, the other doesn't. Measure pre and post comprehension and application)
- In- class observations and interviews with student
- Additional guidance is offered in the following documents: [Eight Steps for Measuring Impact \(Killion, 2003\)](#); [Evaluating Coaching Impact \(APQC, 2011\)](#); [Self-Assessment for Instructional Coaches Pennsylvania Institute for Instructional Coaching](#)

Good evaluations on professional development do not have to be costly, however, nor do they require sophisticated technical skills. What they do require is the ability to ask good questions and a basic understanding about how to find valid answers. Good evaluations provide information that is appropriate, sound, and sufficiently reliable to use in making thoughtful and responsible decisions about professional development processes and effects.

Guskey, 2000

The use of coaching tools, such as conference documentation, professional learning impact forms, coaching impact forms, is one suggestion for embedding measures for progress monitoring of teaching practices, teacher efficacy, and coaches' impact. Additionally, an [Evaluating Effectiveness](#) form (Killion, J., Harrison, C., Bryan, C., and Clifton, H., 2012) may be useful in assessing coaching systems.

Guskey (2000) is one of the expert voices in the field who has repeatedly made the case that evaluation is an essential, yet sadly neglected aspect of professional learning. Morel and Cushman (2013) are very clear that evaluation should be built into the professional learning design prior to implementation. *Table 5* presents a protocol that you may want to explore as a potential framework to guide your evaluation efforts. As noted in the embedded quote above, it is important to first identify what questions you will want to answer as a result of your evaluation effort.

Table 5: Evaluation of Impact – A Sample Framework

Level 1: Participants’ Reactions
Level 2: Participants’ Learning
Level 3: Organization Support and Change
Level 4: Participants’ Use of New Knowledge and Skills
Level 5: Student Learning Outcomes

Guskey, T.R. (2000). *Evaluating Professional Development*. Thousand Oaks, CA. Corwin Press.

Conclusion

The research findings on high-quality professional learning and effective coaching are clear. Putting research into practice will not only require a committed, collaborative effort between educators, coaches, principals, and leadership teams, it may also require a significant shift in school culture. The ultimate goal is to improve the quality of teaching and learning in Vermont schools; no single person can accomplish this effort alone. By implementing coaching as a practice for embedded, ongoing professional learning, schools and districts can take action to ensure high-quality support for both educators and students.

Appendix: Additional Resources for Building and Strengthening Coaching Systems

Instructional Coaching

[Research Brief: The Multiple Roles of School-Based Specialized Literacy Professionals](#)

[Roles and Responsibilities of Literacy Coaches](#)

[Suggestions for Building Teacher-Coach-Principal Relationships](#)

[Principals Boosting Coaching's Impact](#)

[Kansas Coaching Project](#)

[Pennsylvania Institute for Instructional Coaching](#)

[Coaching For Change: Amount of Instructional Coaching Support to Transfer Science Inquiry Skills from Professional Development to Classroom Practice](#) – 2015

James A. Houston University of Nebraska-Lincoln

[A Case Study of Coaching in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math Professional Development](#) - April, 2012. Sue Ellen DeChenne, Gwen Nugent, Gina Kunz, Linlin Luo, Brandi Berry, Katherine Craven, and April Riggs

[The Role of Coaching by Teaching Artists for Arts-Infused Social Studies: What Project CREATES Has to Offer](#) - 2010

R. Wilcox, S. Bridges, & D. Montgomery

Poudre School District Instructional Coaching Field Guide (n.d.)

[Sample Field Guide](#)

Booker T. Washington Senior High School – Coaching Cycle and Coaching Continuum (2013)

[Sample Coaching Cycle/Continuum](#)

PowerPoint Slides and Video Vignettes for Professional Learning

[Vermont Professional Learning Network \(PLN\) Lesson Study Project](#)

Western Dubuque Community School District - Instructional Coaching Handbook (2014-2017)

[Dubuque Coaching Handbook](#)

[The Role of Elementary Mathematics Specialists in the Teaching and Learning of Mathematics](#)

[It's Time: Themes and Imperatives for Mathematics Education](#), Chapter 5, p. 54

[The Elementary Mathematics Specialist's Handbook](#), Campbell, et. al (2013), Appendix B

[The Math Coach Field Guide: Charting Your Course](#), Felux and Snowdy (2006)

Systems Coaching

[State Personnel Development Network \(SPDG\)](#)

[Illinois SPDG](#)

[System's Coaching: A Model for Building Capacity](#) (2013)

[Learning To Change: School Coaching for Systemic Reform](#) (2005)

Additional Coaching Resources including Organizations, Standards, and Competencies

[International Society for Technology in Education \(ISTE\) Coaching Standards](#)

[Standards for Middle and High School Literacy Coaches](#)

Myers, A. (2015). [Coaching as professional development: A powerful change accelerator](#).
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Videos

[Vermont Professional Learning Network \(PLN\) Lesson Study Project](#)

[Effective Coaching Systems](#)

[What do Instructional Coaches Do?](#)

[Principal-Coach Collaborative Conversation](#)

[Setting-up Coaching Cycles and Sample Conversations at Elementary and Secondary Level](#)

[Pennsylvania Coaching Institute: Excerpts from Coaching and Class Sessions](#)

[The Teaching Channel: Coaching Videos Collection](#)

[Edvantia Coaching Standards](#)

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Pam Chomsky-Higgins (Vermont Reads Institute)

David Cohn (Curriculum Director)

Casey Murrow (Vermont Professional Learning Network)

Theresa Young (District Coach)