

# Insights Brief

## Building a System of Supports for Instructional Coaching Insights from the New Teacher Center

*Instructional coaching has gained increased attention as a growing body of evidence supports its effectiveness. In contrast to traditional professional development workshops, coaching provides individualized support for teachers and learning teams that is adapted to their needs and grounded in their classroom contexts. Despite the promise of coaching, implementing a districtwide coaching program can be challenging. Without clear expectations and support from district leaders, coaches might not devote sufficient time to the full range of coaching activities needed to improve teachers' instruction. This brief offers insights from the New Teacher Center on how districts can better implement instructional coaching by tracking coaching activities, providing clear guidance to coaches, and engaging district leaders as they implement a coaching program.*

### BACKGROUND

The New Teacher Center partners with school districts to build their capacity to provide instructional coaching to teachers. The organization partners with districts to develop coaches who can support new teachers as part of an induction program, teachers who struggle to meet expectations, or all teachers as part of their ongoing professional learning.

A key goal of the New Teacher Center's approach is building the capacity of districts to implement coaching with sufficient intensity and with a consistent focus on supporting teachers' instruction. Coaches conduct ongoing coaching cycles with teachers in which coaches support teachers in planning a lesson, observe the lesson and debrief on it afterward, and then review evidence of student learning from the lesson. These frequent, instructionally focused interactions aim to elevate teachers' practice and develop a growth mindset in which teachers believe their students can learn at high levels.

The partner districts adopt the New Teacher Center's structures and strategies to support coaches and ensure they implement the coaching as intended. The New Teacher Center's Instructional Coaching Program and Practice Standards defines these structures and strategies and guides its partnerships with districts. The organization works with each district to identify a program lead to oversee and coordinate implementation.

### About this series

The U.S. Department of Education's Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) grants fund evidence-based programs that prepare and develop effective educators. As SEED grantees implement, adapt, and grow their programs, they gain valuable insights that can inform the work of districts, states, and organizations working to improve educator effectiveness. This series of briefs is designed to share these insights with the broader field. Each brief describes a grantee's perspective on the lessons learned from its implementation experiences. The briefs are part of a broader project for the U.S. Department of Education to disseminate lessons learned from SEED grants. Mathematica Policy Research is leading the project in partnership with AEM and Knowledge Design Partners. This brief was prepared based on input from the New Teacher Center.

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## INSIGHTS ON IMPLEMENTING INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING

The New Teacher Center designed its coaching cycle to instill within teachers and learning teams the habit of closely analyzing and improving the effectiveness of their own instruction. The cycle includes three steps:

- 1. Lesson planning.** The coach and teacher discuss the learning activities that can move all students in a classroom toward mastery of specific academic and social-emotional competencies.
- 2. Observing instruction.** The coach takes detailed notes on the teacher's delivery of the lesson and the extent to which all students were engaged and demonstrated sufficient understanding.
- 3. Analyzing learning.** The coach and teacher debrief on the lesson and together examine examples of student work to assess mastery and determine next steps for the teacher's instruction.

Each step of the coaching cycle examines the connection between instructional objectives, teaching activities, and evidence of student learning for the same lesson. The organization recommends that each teacher participate in 180 minutes of coaching each month, and at least 85% of this time should be spent in instructionally-focused coaching cycles. To ensure that coaches give ample attention to each teacher they support, the New Teacher Center advises a caseload of no more than 15 teachers per full-time coach.

Although many districts aspire to provide this type of coaching, implementing a coaching program effectively presents a number of difficulties. Coaches might not have enough time to provide teachers adequate support, or the coaching might not focus on teachers' critical instructional needs. Another challenge is that coaches might not follow through on completing the full coaching cycle. For example, coaches could co-plan lessons with teachers but not observe those lessons, making it difficult to discuss the effectiveness of the teacher's efforts to implement specific strategies. Lessons learned from the New Teacher Center on how to address these challenges follow.

## What mechanisms support coaches in implementing a coaching cycle as intended?

The New Teacher Center works with partner districts to provide guidance, training, and accountability for coaches using the following methods:

- ❖ **Coaching tools.** The New Teacher Center has a set of protocols with questions to guide coaches and teachers for each of the three steps of the coaching cycle. For example, the protocol for lesson planning includes the prompt, "What strategies will support and encourage students to use reasoning and evidence to justify their ideas?" Coaches and teachers discuss these prompts and how to address them in a series of one-on-one conversations throughout the coaching cycle.
- ❖ **Professional learning for coaches.** Coaches in New Teacher Center's partner districts receive initial and ongoing job-embedded training on how to use the coaching tools, best practices for adult learning, and standards-based instruction specific to the content areas taught by the teachers they mentor. The training includes facilitated communities of practice (forums) that convene coaches to discuss their progress in implementing the coaching cycles and specific challenges they have to address with teachers. The districts' program leads also coach the coaches by observing them as they work with teachers and providing feedback on the interactions.
- ❖ **Implementation data.** The New Center Teacher collects extensive data on how coaches in their partner districts use their time. For each interaction with a teacher, a coach completes an online log that indicates the amount time spent with the teacher, the focus of the conversation, the teaching standard discussed, and the coaching tools used. The coaching cycle tools are also completed online for information on progress. For more qualitative data, the organization collects collaborative assessment logs that coaches fill out as they work through the coaching cycle to document a teacher's successes and challenges, along with next steps for both the teacher and coach. Program leads review these data to identify areas for improvement for individual coaches and for the coaching program as a whole.

## What strategies can build sustained support among district leaders for effective coaching?

According to the New Teacher Center, it can take three to five years for a district to build the capacity to provide effective coaching districtwide. As coaches become more proficient, they spend much more time engaged in instructionally focused coaching with the teachers they mentor. To sustain a coaching program for the long term, the New Teacher Center works with partner districts to engage district leaders in the program's implementation on an ongoing basis.

Several insights from the organization on how to build sustained support among district leaders follow:

- ❖ **Develop a shared vision of effective coaching among district leaders.** It is critical that district leaders understand the essential components of effective coaching, and how effective coaching improves instruction. From early in a program's implementation, program leads explain to district leaders what each step in the coaching cycle looks like in practice, and how the steps work together to hone teachers' abilities to analyze and improve their own instruction. Doing so helps to recalibrate the expectations of districts leaders, whose preconceptions of coaching could entail less frequency and less focus on the specifics of a teacher's instructional practice.
- ❖ **Align coaching with other district strategies to improve instruction.** Sustained support for effective coaching is unlikely if the district views coaching as unrelated to other priorities. The New Teacher Center works with program leads to integrate a coaching program with other initiatives to improve instruction, such as implementing curriculum and evaluating teachers. For example, the coach training in a district will emphasize how to use the coaching cycle to help teachers implement their district's curriculum. The program lead also works with a district's curriculum, professional learning, and educator effectiveness departments to help them understand how coaching advances their objectives. For example, the program lead will highlight the alignment between the coaching criteria and the district's evaluation framework. This clarifies that the coaching, although formative, is ultimately designed to support teachers'

performance on their evaluations. The coaching also supports the evaluation cycle by providing teachers with more frequent feedback on their practice than they typically receive.

- ❖ **Review implementation data with district leaders on an ongoing basis.** Program leads share the same implementation data used to provide feedback to coaches with district leaders on a regular basis. This enables program leads to demonstrate improvements in how coaches use their time and enables them to engage district leaders in addressing barriers to effectively implementing the coaching. For example, data might reveal that coaches at a particular school cannot devote sufficient attention to coaching because the schools' leaders assign them many additional duties, such as coordinating tests or supervising the lunch room. In this example, district leaders can emphasize to school leaders the importance of protecting coaches' time and look for other ways to cover additional duties.

### About this brief

Jeff Archer and Jeffrey Max developed this brief based on input from three leaders with the New Teacher Center: Laura Baker, vice president for strategy and implementation; and program consultants Michelle Robellard and Clarissa Williams.

A recording of a webinar featuring the work of the New Teacher Center, "Designing Instructional Coaching Programs," is available at <https://www.mathematica-mpr.com/our-focus-areas/education/additionaltopics/insights-briefs>.

Tools, videos, case studies, and other resources for implementing New Teacher Center's coaching approach are available on the organization's website: <https://newteachercenter.org/resources/>

Questions on the New Teacher Center's strategies can be emailed to [lbaker@newteachercenter.org](mailto:lbaker@newteachercenter.org)

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