

Instructional Coaching for Elementary Schools in the State College Area School District: A Rationale and Plan for Implementation

Instructional Coaches are teachers released from classroom responsibility so that they may provide job-embedded professional development that builds capacity in teachers to make informed instructional decisions. The chief clients for instructional coaches are teachers.

Why do we wish to have Instructional Coaches?

Coaching makes professional development job-embedded. District level initiatives and district-wide improvement can occur daily as coaches work with teachers. Just as an athletic coach knows the strengths and needs of the athlete, an instructional coach develops relationships with teachers learning their unique strengths and needs. Just as the athlete improves through work on the specific endeavor, teachers too will improve through dialogue, reflection, and coaching that can occur before, during and after the teaching act.

One size fits all workshops are not effective for the development of teachers. Again, just like athletes, teachers enter their classrooms with different levels of expertise. A known “expert” in the education field can provide a workshop that may be meaningful to some of the attendees. An instructional coach can be embedded in the school and provide support for all teachers to improve, from the first year novice to the twenty year veteran. The instructional coach is also the scaffold that ensures that workshop and in-service learning is applied in the classroom.

As teachers we model, provide guided support and then ask students to practice a new skill independently under our watchful eye. The same holds true for teachers trying something new that will improve student learning. The coach is the individual who can model, support, and then watch as the initiative takes bloom in the practice of the teacher.

“The work of schools will go nowhere unless school districts organize themselves to focus relentlessly on instructional improvement. Without coaching, many comprehensive reform efforts will fall short of real improvement” (Fullan and Knight, 2011, pg. 50). It is not sufficient for us to try to improve our instructional capacity and student achievement one class or one building at a time. We must look at ourselves as a single entity and strive for systemic improvement. With coaches providing focus and “glue” this can be possible.

What does an Instructional Coaching position look like?

Instructional coaches have unique roles. They must be committed to the district level mission and district level initiatives. At the same time they must understand the unique qualities of the leaders and teachers in each building.

Instructional coaches are an extension of the instructional leader in the building, the principal. The coach and the principal must meet regularly to ensure that their work is complementary. These key individuals work in partnership to provide focus on instructional improvement. The means to this end will come in many forms. It will include modeling of lessons in classrooms, co-teaching of lessons, one-to-one work with teachers, and small groups of teachers. It will include designing and implementing professional development at the building and district level. An instructional coach will be an integral part of the collaborative team planning process as well as grade level and building based data analysis.

The coach will lead building based literacy and math leadership teams that will ensure fidelity to district initiatives, but allow for creativity at the building level to enact creative and motivating means to enhance student learning.

What traits would we look for in the identification of Instructional Coaches?

An effective instructional coach is an educator who understands that teachers have different strengths and needs. The coach is an individual who has inherent skills at building relationships. Through the relationship trust is established. With trust the coach is able to start with the strengths and build on the needs. This description implies the need for a combination of content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge along with the ability to transmit that knowledge in a manner in which it is accepted. "People skills" and coaching expertise are necessary.

What does the research say about Instructional Coaches?

In the Unified School District 501 in Topeka Kansas a study by Knight (2006) found that 85% of teachers who were working with coaches were implementing a new initiative within a week of its presentation. Contrast this with the typical 10% implementation rate without the job embedded coaching.

In a second study in Topeka, Knight (2006) cites that teachers surveyed found that watching a coach model a lesson made it easier for them to implement a new teaching practice, increased fidelity to the model, increased confidence, and provided the means for learning additional teaching techniques.

Sharratt and Fullan (2009) cite a study on schools in the area of Toronto, Canada. With determined focus on some key parameters instructional coaches and building leaders provided the impetus for improvement in 17 low performing schools. The school district observed improvement of 20% in most measures of achievement.

Another example cited by Fullan and Knight (2011) show a K- 8 school making 40% – 80% improvement over a four year period in literacy and numeracy. Again, this growth is attributed to the concentrated work of instructional coaching.

Sailors and Shanklin (2010) reference several studies that indicate the effect that coaching had on student learning. These studies are small and scope, but coupled with the enormous body of anecdotal information, there appears to be a clear link among effective coaching, improved instructional practice, and increased student performance.

Recommendation

Four Instructional Coaches are being recommended at this time for the 2012-2013 school year. The coaching team will be identified based on criteria/traits denoted above. Expertise as a teacher as well as relational abilities will be prime criteria. Consideration will be given to developing a strong coaching team in which several members may have more strength in literacy and several with greater strength in numeracy.

The cost to the district will be approximately the equivalent of adding 4 new teachers.

Interview team will consist of Supervisor of Elementary and Middle Level Education, K-8 Director of Curriculum, Elementary Principal representatives, Classroom Teacher representatives

Each instructional coach will be assigned to work in two elementary schools with focus on literacy and math instruction. This will allow for close cooperation with building principals as instructional leaders and the time allowance to fulfill the demands of the position, which includes relationship building and participation on several building level teams.

Timeline

March – Post for 4 anticipated Instructional Coaches

April – District level team reviews applications and conducts interviews

May – Four Instructional Coaches recommended to the Board of School Directors

References

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