


A Primer on Instructional Coaches



BY JIM KNIGHT

PREVIEW

Instructional coaches collaborate with teachers to help them use proven practices.

Coaches model teaching in classrooms and help teachers identify when to implement interventions.

Principals work with instructional coaches to strengthen their own knowledge and identify teachers who will receive the greatest benefit from coaching.

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When I was a principal, I wanted so much to have an impact on how my teachers taught. As I was talking with teachers or observing them, I'd think how much I wished I had the time to give these teachers the kind of support they need. If I had had an instructional coach in my school, I could have done that...When I see a coach and principal work well together, the coach is really an extension of the principal—the coach makes it possible for the principal to truly be an instructional leader.

—Doris Williams, A Harford County (MD) Department of Education Hall of Fame Principal and director of the Passport to Success Program in Anne Arundel County, MD

The pressure to improve the quality of instruction in schools may be higher today than at any other time in the history of U.S. education. To respond to this urgent demand, schools across the nation are hiring instructional coaches (ICs) although there is little published research that shows what works and what does not work when it comes to instructional coaching. This lack of information about instructional coaching puts principals and districts at risk. If principals and other decisionmakers do not understand exemplary coaching practices, they risk spending precious dollars on instructional coaching programs that have little or no effect on student achievement.

Over the past six years, researchers from the Kansas Uni-



versity Center for Research on Learning (KU-CRL) have been studying ICs who work in two programs: Kansas University's Pathways to Success project and the Maryland Department of Special Education's Passport to Success project. Pathways to Success, which is funded by the U.S. Department of Education's GEAR UP program, has been implemented in nine middle level and high schools in Topeka, KS, and Passport to Success has been implemented in five middle level schools in Anne Arundel County, MD. In my capacity as the project director of Pathways to Success, I have identified seven common questions about instructional coaching and here is what the researchers have learned from studying these two instructional coaching programs.

What Is an Instructional Coach?

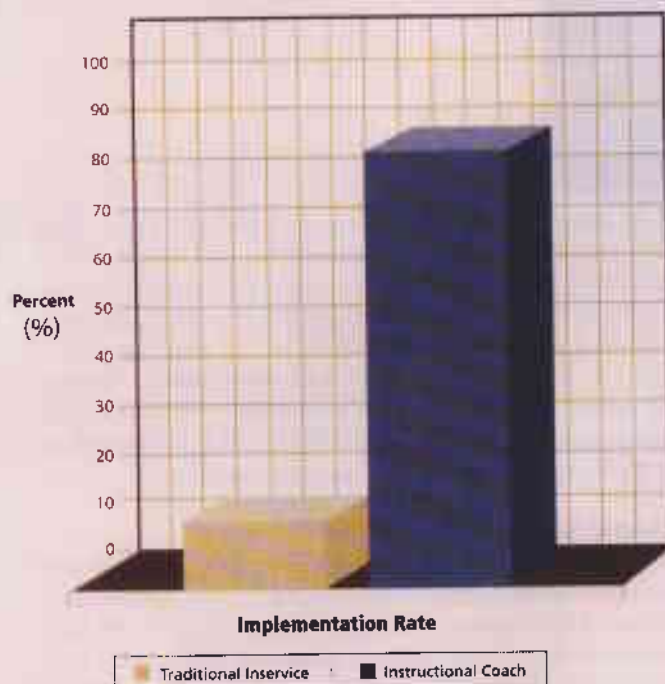
An IC is an on-site professional developer who teaches educators how to use proven teaching methods. ICs use a repertoire of effective instructional practices to collaborate with teachers, identify practices that will effectively address teachers' needs, and help teachers implement those practices. ICs use a variety of professional development procedures to encourage the widespread, high-quality implementation of effective teaching practices, including holding one-to-one or small-group meetings during which ICs can identify how to address their most pressing concerns; guiding teachers through instructional manuals, checklists, and other materials; collaboratively planning with teachers to identify when and how to implement effective instruction practices; preparing materials for teachers prior to instruction; modeling instructional practices in teachers' classrooms; observing teachers when they use interventions; and providing feedback to teachers (Knight, 2004).

Why Invest in Instructional Coaching?

Research from Pathways to Success and Passport to Success suggests that there are at least three important reasons why coaching can be a good option for school improvement efforts. First, coaching leads to implementation *when* the right conditions are in place. In both projects, well-constructed coaching programs have consistently generated implementation rates of at least 85%, with schools frequently getting every teacher to use several effective instructional practices.

Recent implementation rates after teachers had attended summer workshops reveal that within six weeks of the start of school, 85% of the Pathways to Success teachers (70 out of 82) were already implementing practices from at least one of the workshops. In contrast, Showers and Joyce (1996) suggest that traditional inservice with no follow-up is likely to have no better than a 10% implementation rate (see figure 1).

[Figure 1]
Percentage of teachers supported by coaches implementing interventions within six weeks of workshops compared to the implementation rate for traditional inservice.



Second, ICs can also increase teachers' fidelity to scientifically proven instructional practices. Pathways to Success recently studied the importance of fidelity by comparing the results of middle level students ($n=1,302$) in what is referred to as "hi-fi" classrooms (where teachers used practices that were close to those outlined in instructional manuals) with

middle level students ($n=562$) in "low-fi" classrooms (where teachers left out major components of the teaching practices outlined in instructional manuals). The results showed that students in hi-fi classrooms improved the number of complete sentences by 13% (from 74% to 87%) and students in low-fi classrooms improved by 4% (from 76% to 80%) (see figure 2).

To better understand how ICs help teachers, researchers recently conducted a survey of teachers who had watched an IC from KU-CRL provide a model lesson in Pathways to Success schools. As figure 3 illustrates, teachers stated that watching an IC made it easier for them to implement a given teaching practice, increased their fidelity to the instructional model, increased their confidence, and enabled them to learn other teaching techniques. From the teachers' perspective, watching a coach in the classroom was an important part of professional learning.

A third benefit of instructional coaching is that it promotes positive conversations in schools. By providing support to teachers and changing the type of conversations that take place in schools, ICs make an important contribution to school reform. As Perkins (2003) has observed, encouraging positive, or what he refers to as "progressive," conversations in schools is difficult but very important:

"In times of stress, while cognitive load is high, behavior tends to regress toward simpler earlier-learned behaviors. And it's hard to be progressive when the other guy is being regressive. Both progressive and regressive practices stimulate their own kind." (p. 247)

Through healthy, empathetic conversation, ICs help teachers move away from regressive interactions in which personal responsibility is reflected mostly through blaming external factors such as parents or administrators (Fisher & Frey, 2003) to progressive interactions that involve "effective knowledge processing...[and] the kind of symbolic conduct that builds cohesiveness, trust, and commitment" (Perkins, 2003, p. 29).

What Should ICs Teach?

The intense pressure to foster significant improvements in student achievement can lead some leaders to promote many school improvement efforts within a single year. However, promoting too many interventions can actually be counterproductive. According to Conner (1992), most people embrace some change in their life, but as the number of changes multiplies and as the time demands increase, people approach a dysfunction threshold, a point where they lose the capacity to implement changes. For this reason, principals and coaches must carefully choose what changes they initiate and focus on high-leverage interventions that are likely to have a significant positive effect on students' and teachers' lives. In the Pathways to Success program, teachers' needs are viewed as a hierarchy that is similar to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. As a result, the

professional development is organized around teachers' and students' most-pressing needs.

ICs start by helping teachers address classroom management issues. For learning to take place, teachers must first be able to keep the classroom a safe and productive learning community for all students. After the classroom has become well managed, ICs focus on content. ICs help ensure that teachers are teaching the right content and that they have a deep, correct understanding of the content standards. ICs then proceed to collaborate with teachers to develop a rich repertoire of teaching tactics to ensure that students master the content. These tactics include such practices as advance organizers, effective modeling, constructive feedback, effective questioning, and scaffolding instruction.

ICs also work with teachers to develop assessment literacy. Teachers obviously benefit from knowing whether or not their students are learning content. In addition, students become motivated when they know how well they are doing, when they receive frequent constructive feedback on their progress, and when they are involved in assessing their own learning.

Once teachers have their classrooms under control, are clear on their content and content standards, use instructional basics fluently, and are assessment literate, they then can continue to collaborate with ICs to enhance instructional proficiency.

What About Skills?

ICs need a deep understanding of the interventions they are sharing with teachers. In *Pathways to Success*, ICs receive ongoing and extensive professional development in the interventions they are sharing with teachers. In addition, personal qualities are very important: *How* a coach goes about working is just as important as *what* a coach knows.

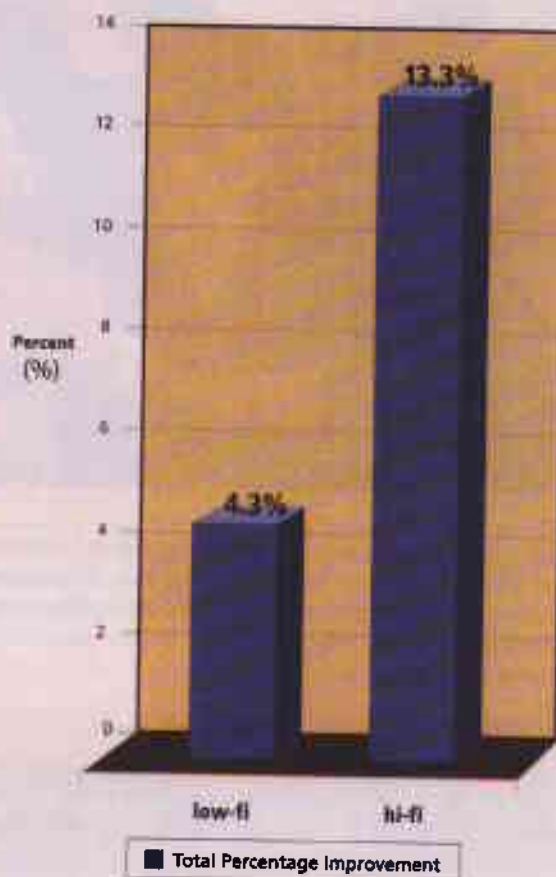
Experience has shown that effective ICs must be master teachers who are comfortable going into any classroom and love having the chance to work with other teachers. Simply put, no matter how much ICs know, they won't win over teachers unless they can be successful in the classroom. An IC needs to have energy and a positive outlook, and he or she must be the kind of person that others enjoy being around. As one IC commented, coaches need to be "respectfully pushy." Most important, at their core, ICs must continually communicate their deep, honest belief in teachers—even when they are talking about specific ways that teachers need to improve their teaching practices.

How Do Principals and ICs Work Together?

ICs have the greatest impact in schools where the principal and the IC work together in partnership. This partnership is manifested in several activities. First, ICs and principals must be in agreement about the nature, potential, and effectiveness of the interventions a coach brings to a school. In some

[Figure 2]

Percentage Improvement in number of complete sentences written by students in hi-fi and low-fi classes.



cases, the principal already has a deep understanding of the interventions and what they should look like in the classroom; the principal might even be the primary mover behind the initiative being implemented by the IC. In other cases, the principal is one of the first people the IC educates.

Pathways to Success has developed tools that help principals quickly learn about the numerous interventions that are available. Because most principals do not have time to sit through extensive, detailed explanations, *Pathways* ICs have prepared *Strategies at a Glance*, which are one-page summaries of the various interventions, to make it easier to learn about the interventions. ICs often start to explain the various routines and strategies by sharing these materials with principals. In addition, ICs can share checklists that summarize the important teaching behaviors in the teaching routines and the learning strategies that teachers might be using.

Principals and ICs should also work together to identify the teachers who can most benefit from the IC's services. From their vantage point as administrators, principals can



identify teachers' true instructional needs and can respectfully encourage teachers to work with their ICs. At the same time, from their vantage point as professionals collaborating with teachers, ICs can offer principals another perspective on what is happening in the school.

How Can Resistance Be Overcome?

In some cases, teachers don't resist change as much as they resist poorly designed change programs. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1993), the history of technological change shows that the changes people embrace generally share two qualities: They are more powerful than older technologies and they're easier to use. Csikszentmihalyi states that the ideas, values, and technologies "that do the job with the least demand on psychic energy will survive" (p. 178). In other words, an appliance that does more work with less effort is preferred. If something is easier, if it does more, people embrace it. ICs believe that the same notion holds true for educational interventions and share interventions that are proven to work and that address the real challenges a teacher faces. The fact that these interventions help teachers help students increases the likelihood that teachers will adopt them.

However, even a powerful program is not likely to be adopted if it is difficult to implement. Interventions catch on and spread when they are powerful *and* easy to implement. This is where ICs become very important. The IC's job, in large part, is to make it as easy as possible for teachers to implement a given intervention. As IC Devona Dunekack from Eisenhower Middle School in Topeka, KS, observed, "As a coach, I do whatever I can to provide support. I make copies. I get them transparencies if they need them. I model

in their classrooms. I give them feedback. Sometimes support is just showing that things are happening even when the teachers are too close to the class to see it."

What Is the Theory?

The unfortunate reality is that ICs and principals can employ all of the tactics and methods outlined in this article and still fail if their change initiative is not based on sound principles. As the founding vice president of the Covey Leadership Center says "The principles you live by create the world you live in; if you change the principles you live by, you will change your world" (Lee, 1997, p. 7)

ICs in the Pathways to Success and Passport to Success projects receive extensive and ongoing professional devel-

opment in what is referred to as the *partnership approach* (Knight, 2002), which gives conversations a central role in professional learning and embodies seven key principles:

- Equality: Teachers and ICs are understood to be equal partners.
- Choice: Participant choice is implicit in every communication about content and in the process used to learn the content.
- Dialogue: ICs collaborate with teachers in conversations that allow the teacher and the IC to think and learn together.
- Praxis: Teachers and ICs creatively adapt, shape, and plan how to use interventions.

[Figure 3] Teachers' perceptions of the value of observing coaches providing demonstration lessons.

Questions	Mean score on a scale from 1.00 to 7.00
Does watching coaches demonstrate lessons make it easier to implement the interventions?	6.51
Do teachers think watching a coach model practices increased their fidelity to instructional practices?	6.4
Do teachers think watching a coach model practices made them more confident about implementing?	6.13