

INSTRUCTIONAL  
COACHES MAKE

# Progress through partnership

Intensive support can improve teaching

"Quick fixes never last, and teachers resent them. They resent going to inservices where someone is going to tell them what to do but not help them follow up. Teachers want someone who's going to be there, who's going to help them for the duration, not a fly-by-night program that's here today, gone tomorrow."

— Lynne Barnes, *Pathways to Success* instructional coach

BY JIM KNIGHT

Over the past four years, researchers and professional developers from the Kansas University Center for Research on Learning (KU-CRL) have used an approach to staff development that provides teachers with intensive support designed to improve instruction.

The Pathways to Success project places full-time instructional coaches in the six middle and three high schools in Topeka, Kan., the district made famous by *Brown v. Board of*

Education. An instructional coach is an on-site professional developer working in one school offering, as instructional coach Irma Brasseur said, "on-the-spot, everyday professional development."

"You're right with the teachers and their students, you see what's happening, and you provide a real suggestion or solution for what's happening," Brasseur said.

"We give them something they can use, right with their kids, right in their content area," said instructional coach Lynn Barnes.

It is that practicality that has won widespread teacher support. In the four middle schools where the program began, 98 of 125 teachers are using the research-based strategies instructional coaches introduced. Similar results are occurring in the other middle and high schools as the project spreads across the district. And teachers have seen the effect on their students (see box on page 37).

#### WHAT A COACH DOES

Instructional coaches are university employees who are funded by a five-year federal GEAR UP program, along with other grants written through a district-university partnership. They work with school administrators to implement school improvement initiatives and plan and implement professional development.

An instructional coach's main task is to help teachers see how research-validated practices offer useful solutions to the problems teachers face. Instructional coaches teach teachers about strategies and routines validated

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through KU-CRL research (Deshler et al., 2001), along with other interventions, including Randy Sprick's CHAMPs classroom management techniques (Sprick, Garrison, & Howard, 1998) and Richard Stiggins' assessment for learning process (Stiggins, 2000).

But an instructional coach has to be more than an expert in instructional practices. She or he is part coach and part anthropologist, advising teachers on how to contend with the challenges and opportunities they face while recognizing each school's unique culture. Although coaches must be flexible and adapt their approaches, all usually follow similar procedures:

**1. Meet with departments or teams.** Instructional coaches begin the change process by meeting with each school department or team. The instructional coach explains that teachers have an opportunity to learn about new research-validated teaching practices designed to make classes more accessible or to help students become better learners. The instructional coach then asks teachers to indicate their interest on an evaluation form.

**2. Meet one-on-one with interested teachers.** The instructional coach schedules a series of one-on-one or small group meetings to identify what research teachers are interested in learning about and to discuss how that research can be translated into practice. School culture is often opposed to change initiatives, but every school has individuals interested in new ideas.

**3. Work on real content.** Teachers meet with instructional coaches anywhere from once or twice to every week for a semester, depending on the nature of the strategy being introduced. Each meeting focuses on real applications of the research-based

#### THE PARTNERSHIP MIND-SET

Instructional coaches learn to adopt a partnership approach with teachers. Partnership, at its core, is a deep belief that we are no more important than those with whom we work, and we should do everything we can to respect that equality. This approach is built around the core principles of choice, dialogue, and knowledge in action.

**CHOICE.** The best way to involve teachers in our project was to respect their ability to make decisions. Teachers were given the choice of working with instructional coaches. "Choice respects a person's professionalism," said instructional coach Irma Brasseur. "Teachers have a good idea of what they know and what they need, and if they aren't involved in the decision making, they aren't going to embrace the idea." While a few teachers were pressured to work with us, our experience showed the least successful way to involve teachers was to tell them they had to do it.

**DIALOGUE.** Instructional coaches and teachers spend

a great deal of their time talking about learning. As instructional coach LaVonne Holmgren said, "I'm not just there to give information. I help problem-solve, figure out how to get things to work, translate research into something less complex and more useful. There's a lot of give-and-take."

#### KNOWLEDGE IN

**ACTION.** Instructional coaches work from the assumption that knowledge is learned quickest when it is learned on the job. Instructional coaches share ideas with teachers during one-on-one meetings, mostly held during teachers' planning time, or by modeling instructional methods in the classroom. As instructional coach Lynn Barnes said, "I want teachers to see that I have concrete stuff that can empower students' learning."

For instructional coach Susan Clafin, the partnership approach is important to an instructional coach's success. "When we work with a teacher, there can be a little friction because we represent change," she said. "The partnership approach relieves that friction. It's not me against the teachers, it's us working together making a change for the better. Rather than being a confrontation, it really becomes fun."

interventions, and theoretical discussion is kept to a minimum, at least initially. For example, a coach and teacher discussing how to organize a unit might develop a graphic organizer that the teacher can use right away.

**4. Model lessons in each teacher's classroom.** A major part of an instructional coach's work is modeling initiatives so teachers can see how an approach works in their classrooms. Instructional coaches often model the first lesson in a sequence so teachers can better understand how to make the approach work. "Teachers need to see it," said Barnes. "They need to see you modeling, and that gives them insight into other things that might need to be done — keeping kids on task, redirecting inappropriate behavior, giving feedback, recognizing kids when they're doing great, keeping the room positive and energized. ... There's an art to teaching, and a lot of that art is hard to learn from reading teachers manuals."

**5. Pay for teachers' time.** For teachers to enthusiastically commit extra time to any change effort, they should be paid. Paying teachers demonstrates respect, yet teachers in the project frequently turn down the honorarium. They simply appreciate the recognition that their time is being taken.

**6. Make it as easy as possible.** If an intervention works and is easy to implement, our experience suggests teachers will use it. Instructional coaches provide all the materials teachers need to implement a strategy or routine, to help teachers transfer research into practice. For example, instructional coaches give teachers a cardboard box called "strategy in a box" filled with everything the teacher needs to implement an intervention — overheads, learning sheets, readings, teaching behavior checklists, and instructional manuals. Coaches also might write lesson plans, help with student evaluations, create over-

heads, or co-teach to give teachers additional time. "Part of our goal is to release teachers from burdensome, mundane things so they can spend time thinking about being a learner, to make changes to bring out critical teaching behaviors," Brasseur said. "(Teachers) need to get to the point of thinking about teaching."

**7. Respond quickly to teacher requests.** Since teachers are pressed to organize classes, evaluate students, and keep on top of their content, they require material quickly. Instructional coaches must reply immediately when teachers request new materials. Even a few days' delay may kill the opportunity for implementation. "I take care of as much as I can right within the hour," said Barnes. "Too many times, people put you on hold. When we get right back to our teachers, we show them we care about them."

#### WHAT DOES THE PROJECT LOOK LIKE?

Instructional coaches have been able to gain support because the coaches respond to teachers' individual needs. One 7th-grade team, for example, was part of a summer CHAMP's workshop offered by an instructional coach. The teachers then collaborated with their school's instructional coach to create materials that specifically addressed problem behaviors they had seen the previous year.

The teachers identified a top 10 list of problem behaviors, then worked together with the instructional coach to write up very specific expectations for how they wanted students to act when they walked in the hall, entered the class, listened to teacher instruction, worked in cooperative groups, used their planners, worked with a substitute teacher, and so forth.

The teachers "figured out a plan together, and then everyone went

over it with their classes and reinforced it in the same way,” instructional coach Shelly Kampschroeder said. The result was that “the teachers had their act together from the get-go. A lot of the headache behaviors decreased, and you could see a visible change in behavior. The kids got it. ... Teacher teams definitely make my job easier — some ideas spread like wild-fire.”

### HOW DO IDEAS SPREAD?

Malcolm Gladwell’s (2001) observation that “ideas and products and messages and behaviors spread just like viruses do” is borne out by the experiences of instructional coaches working on Pathways to Success.

Shelly Bolejack’s experiences as an instructional coach at Highland Park High School are typical. At first, she doubted whether she’d have a meaningful effect on the school. “I had a lot of time,” she said, “and I sat and stared at the wall, thinking, ‘What have I done? They don’t know me and don’t want to work with me.’ ... People were unclear about what I was doing. I felt I had to keep clarifying what was going on. Teachers were reticent and apprehensive, so I kept sharing that I was there to help them.”

Bolejack said she kept contacting teachers through conversation, e-mails, and the school newsletter. She made herself available to talk with teachers at any time. She gathered materials, explained the project, answered questions, modeled it, and listened to teachers’ issues. Eventually, interest grew.

“Once somebody tries it,” she said, “the next teacher tries it, and another teacher talks to another. ... Teachers have to see that it works. And because the strategies are research-based, since they do work, they sell themselves. Even teachers who felt they haven’t been successful can be successful since the strategies are so complete. When they see that

### PATHWAYS DATA

- Pathways to Success ([www.ku-crl.org/pathways](http://www.ku-crl.org/pathways)) is a districtwide school improvement partnership between the Kansas University Center for Research on Learning and the Topeka, Kan., public school district, USD 501.

- Pathways is funded through the U.S. Department of Education’s GEAR UP program (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs). GEAR UP’s mission is to increase the number of low-income students prepared to enter and succeed in post-secondary education.

- Pathways to Success is based on the idea that teachers must use proven instructional methods to help at-risk students succeed. All the instructional methods used in this project have been shown to be effective with at-risk student populations in experimental studies using quantitative methods. They have either been developed by KU-CRL, its associates, or other researchers.

success, it makes them want to continue.

“Now, less than a year after I started, every single person on the freshman team is doing something with our project. There are times when I’m really busy, but I feel incredible seeing this happen for other teachers.”

### HOW ARE INSTRUCTIONAL COACHES SELECTED?

Hiring the right instructional coach is important to successful implementation. In addition to being disciplined, organized, and professional, instructional coaches also must be flexible, likable, good listeners with great people skills, and committed to learning. Most importantly, instructional coaches have to be outstanding teachers. A good instructional coach must be able to go into any classroom and provide a model lesson that responds to an individual teacher’s needs.

During interviews, project staff included unconventional questions to learn more about candidates’ flexibility and people skills in addition to the potential instructional coach’s teaching philosophy, relationship-building skills, and ability to think on his or her feet. After the first round of interviews, remaining candidates demonstrated their teaching skills. Each was given a manual for a Pathways to Success intervention, such as Jan Bulgren’s *Concept Mastery Routine* (1993), and then had 24 hours to prepare a 20-minute lesson on the content. Project staff could see which candidates were able to learn content quickly, think on their feet, prioritize, and, of course, teach. Instructional coaches have primarily been hired from within the district, although some are external candidates. They are assigned to schools in close consultation between project staff and the district administrative team, who meet weekly to discuss the project.

Since they are university employees who report to the Pathways to Success Project director, instructional coaches are protected from being drawn into the numerous school-based bureaucratic tasks that can consume so much of any school employ-

**Hiring the right instructional coach is important to successful implementation.**

ee's time. They are free to spend the vast majority of their time providing intensive professional development. Coaches make it clear they are not administrators, and their job is to provide support, validation, and professional growth for teachers, not to evaluate. At the same time, as full-time workers in a school, they are able to collaborate with the school principal and other staff to create plans for schoolwide or teacher-specific professional development.

### HOW DO INSTRUCTIONAL COACHES LEARN THEIR JOBS?

For Devona Dunekack, learning to be an instructional coach was like learning a new language. Dunekack honed her skills and continues to learn in a variety of ways, through formal and informal professional development, by watching other experienced instructional coaches, and by collaborating with other instructional coaches during formal and informal meetings.

"You can't learn to be an instructional coach in a week," she said. "I remember at first I was totally confused because it was a lot to internalize. Understanding all the vocabulary was flipping me out, and I told my friend, 'I will never be smart enough to do this.' But as time has passed, I've learned how to put things together. I'm still learning every day, and my

The instructional coach's goal is "to work with teachers where they are, to listen to their point of view, to respond to each teacher as a human being, and to give them something that helps them reach more kids right away," said instructional coach Susan Claflin. "A successful instructional coach will do anything that needs to be done to help teachers implement something that will help kids."

### Topeka Public Schools Unified School District No. 501 Topeka, Kan.

**Number of schools:** 21 elementary, six middle schools, three high schools

**Enrollment:** 14,508

**Staff:** 1,319 (including full- and part-time teachers)

**Racial/ethnic mix:**

<b>White:</b>	49%
<b>Black:</b>	22%
<b>Hispanic:</b>	15%
<b>Asian/Pacific Islander:</b>	1%
<b>Native American:</b>	2%
<b>Other:</b>	11%

**Limited English proficient:** 2.8%

**Languages spoken:** English, Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Arabic, Bicol, Swahili, Dinka

**Free/reduced lunch:** 58.8%

**Special education:** 20.1%

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understanding keeps coming by little bits, but now I'm confident that I know what I'm doing."

Dunekack, along with other instructional coaches, helped write the Pathways to Success mission and values statement. "The partnership training and writing the mission helped us embrace the same vision and purpose," she said. "We're a strong team because we're all on the same page."

Instructional coaches take part in formal professional development activities, including five day-long sessions per year conducted by the project director on the interventions, and the philosophy and approach of coaching. They are trained in the partnership approach to professional development (see "The Partnership Mind-Set" on page 33). The coaches also attend two conferences a year.

And all instructional coaches spend at least an hour or two every

two weeks watching other instructional coaches in action. "For me, it's huge that we get to go to another school and see someone else do it," Dunekack said. "We learn a lot when we see each other model."

They read and review the research supporting Pathways to Success interventions. Dunekack said reading articles was a task that didn't seem useful at first, but ultimately it paid dividends. "Now I can speak with confidence about the research," she said, "and thanks to my reading, if my understanding was muddy, the articles cleared it up."

### WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

Project staff are committed to learning from teachers and adapting as the program proceeds. We continually rethink the shape of interventions and how to work with teachers. Over the last four years, we've learned several important lessons.

**Go slow to go fast.** Those who expect the most from improvement efforts often underestimate the complexity of change. Pushing for rapid change can alienate staff and sabotage the effort. Instructional coaches found the most efficient way to create change is to spend time creating meaningful relationships that generate successes. Once a few teachers have had positive experiences, word travels.

**Focus on relationships.** Instructional coaches work to build healthy relationships with everyone in a school. They work hard to see matters from the viewpoint of the teachers in their school. An effective instructional coach recognizes when teachers need support and also when they are too overloaded to take on anything new. Their goal is to pass ownership of ideas to teachers; the art of being an instructional coach is to know when to do so.

**Have a partnership mind-set.** Instructional coaches must genuinely see themselves in equal relationships

with teachers and expect to get as much as they give whenever they collaborate. Professional developers who see themselves as experts, more gifted than the teachers with whom they're working, are doomed to fail before they begin.

**Offer teachers choices.** The heart of professionalism is individual discretion (Skrtic, 1991). When we respect teachers' ability to make their own decisions about how a teaching practice might fit into their classrooms, teachers are much more interested in adopting the practice and teaching it with fidelity. Teachers participate in the Pathways project voluntarily, and we believe this has led to deeper and broader implementation.

### CONCLUSION

Our research suggests (Knight, 2000) that teachers resist change programs that offer too little support. In four years, the coaches in the Pathways to Success project have had a significant impact on the schools in Topeka. By offering teachers choices, providing support, respecting teachers' time, establishing partnerships, and modeling instructional practices, instructional coaches have enabled schoolwide improvements in instruction. More importantly, the coaches have created dozens of meaningful relationships and friendships, giving teachers an opportunity to talk about and reflect on the art and practice of teaching.

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### RESULTS FROM THE PAST TWO YEARS

Pathways to Success staff have engaged in ongoing formative and summative assessment through all stages of the project. Teachers and project staff use curriculum-based pretest and posttest measures (along with other measures) to assess the effectiveness of each intervention used. Here are a few examples of results from the past two years:

- Jardine Middle School's 7th-grade team learned a classroom management strategy through coaching that reduced the number of disciplinary referrals from 203 in first semester 2002 to 78 in the same term 2003.
- A traditional experimental design was used to study the effectiveness of the self-questioning strategy when taught in general education 7th-grade science classes at Chase Middle School. One teacher taught the reading strategy along with his science content in three of his classes, and used his traditional methods of teaching in his remaining three classes. To study the strategy's effectiveness, we gave each student a pretest and posttest on the content covered in the unit. Students who learned the strategy improved their posttest scores by 60%; students who didn't learn the strategy improved their posttest scores by 40%.
- One study of middle school students who learned a sentence writing strategy (n = 1,302) in classes where the intervention was taught with fidelity showed significant improvement in the number of complete sentences in their writing (according to curriculum-based measures of their writing samples), writing 73% complete sentences on pretests and 87% complete sentences on posttests. In classes where the strategy was taught with less fidelity, students (n = 564) showed much less impressive improvement, writing 76% complete sentences on pretests and 80% complete sentences on posttests.

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