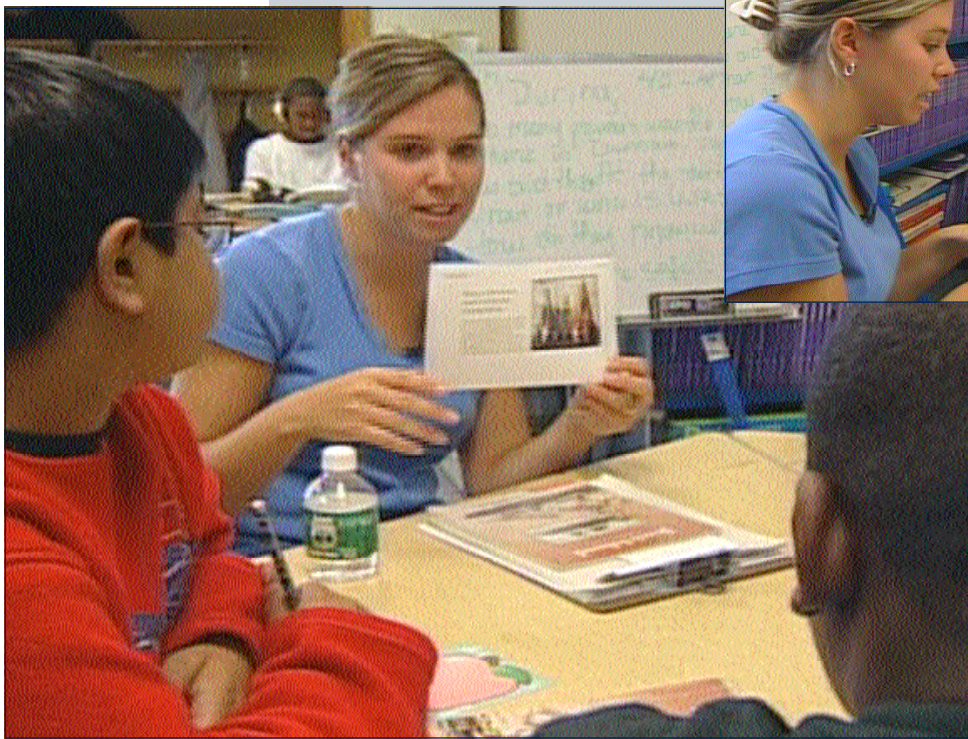


# *Instructional Coaching*



Annenberg  
Institute for  
School Reform

Professional Development Strategies  
That Improve Instruction



**The Annenberg Institute for School Reform** (AISR) at Brown University works with urban school systems across the country that are engaged in comprehensive school reform, especially in communities serving disadvantaged children. In our work, we support and encourage the use of instructional coaching, a promising new professional development practice in which teacher leaders serve as coaches to facilitate and guide content-focused professional learning for a school's teachers.

Coaching aligns with the Institute's interrelated focal areas for systemwide school improvement: district redesign, leadership, opportunity and accountability, and community-centered education reform. Indeed, effective coaching incorporates an array of interrelated approaches we advocate that promote coherence, focus, and alignment at multiple levels of a school system:

- **Investment in human capital.** Effective coaches and coaching structures build instructional and leadership capacity by applying what is known about adult learning and change theory.
- **Sustainability.** Coaching supports the systemic improvement efforts of school communities that push beyond individual teacher behavior or even the work of an individual school.
- **Equity and internal accountability.** Coaching holds the potential to address inequities in opportunities for teacher and student learning by providing differentiated, targeted supports. The structures and culture that well-implemented coaching models promote can increase collective responsibility throughout a school system for students and their learning.
- **Connecting school and district.** In cases where coaches are effective liaisons between school practice and district initiatives, emerging evidence shows that they can facilitate professional learning that supports systemwide initiatives more powerfully.

The Institute believes that – when employed and supported effectively – instructional coaching enhances district professional development systems by providing school and central office personnel with sustained, targeted supports to build knowledge, improve practice, and promote student achievement.

## School-Based, Job-Embedded Professional Development

Instructional coaching is grounded in current research and clinical knowledge on leadership and schools as “professional communities of practice.” Recent research on professional development suggests that it is most effective when it includes components that are based in the school and embedded in the job and when it increases teachers' theoretical understandings of their work (Miller 1995). Supports for improved teaching and learning are also more effective when they are tai-

lored to needs identified by teachers and when their approach to learning is collaborative and inquiry-based (Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin 1995).

Coaching provides such supports through an array of activities (see sidebar) designed to build collective leadership and continuously improve teacher instructional capacity and student learning. These activities, ideally, coalesce in ways that create internal accountability due to the embedded nature of the work and people engaged in it (Barr, Simmons, and Zarrow 2003; WestEd 2000). A well-designed and -supported coaching program weaves core elements of effective professional development with the essential goals of professional learning communities in ways that advance both school and systemic improvement.

## Effective Coaching

### Lessons from Research

The principles of instructional coaching are grounded in research on effective professional development and professional learning communities. Coaching appears to be a promising approach because it strives to blend what is known about effective professional development with school-based and school-specific needs regarding both content and school climate.

Evidence of increased student learning as a direct result of coaching is not yet well documented (Poglinco et al. 2003). But, as coaching is increasingly used and its impact measured, researchers expect more and more links to be established between coaching and student achievement. A growing body of research suggests that coaching is a promising element of effective professional development in some of the following ways.

❖ **Effective coaching encourages collaborative, reflective practice.**

Coaching shifts professional learning from direct instruction outside the context of practice (such as workshops and conferences) to more varied opportunities to improve discipline-specific practice. Most studies show that coaching leads to improvements in instructional capacity. For instance, teachers apply their learning more deeply, frequently, and consistently than teachers working alone; teachers improve their capacity to reflect; and teachers apply their learning not only to their work with students, but also to their work with each other (Neufeld and Roper 2003; Poglinco et al. 2003).

❖ **Effective embedded professional learning promotes positive cultural change.**

The impact of coaching often goes beyond improving content instruction. The conditions, behaviors, and practices required by an effective coaching program can affect the culture of a school or system, thus embedding instructional change within broader efforts to improve school-based culture and conditions (Neufeld and Roper 2003).

## What Does Coaching Look Like?

Instructional coaching is fundamentally about teachers, teacher leaders, school administrators, and central office leaders examining practice in reflective ways, with a strong focus on student learning and results as the ultimate barometer of improvement. In instructional coaching (sometimes referred to as content-based coaching), teacher leaders, or coaches, facilitate and guide a school-based professional learning program for groups of teachers in specific content areas. These groups focus on the intersection of school and student needs and district reform initiatives with the goal of building a professional learning community that supports collective leadership, continuous improvement of teaching practice, and, ultimately, improved student learning.

A well-designed coaching system exhibits three key components:

1. **Structural conditions** that support effective coaching, which include but are not necessarily limited to
  - clearly articulated district initiatives and goals that are directly linked to expected coaching outcomes;
  - a content focus (such as literacy);
  - structural guidelines (coaching is for groups rather than individuals);
  - systematic measurement of work and impact (data and evidence documentation);

- a generally accepted set of principles for adult learning, including collaborative, ongoing, job-embedded work that is actively constructed and refined by participants;
- dedicated time for teacher groups to meet, learn together, analyze their work, observe each other, collect evidence of their work and its impact, and refine their practice.

2. **A guided, content-based focus on adult learning** in a school-based professional learning environment that enables coaches to

- focus on data- and evidence-informed learning;
- promote adult learning in a way that models classroom practice;
- construct and apply knowledge and skills in the classrooms of participating teachers;
- develop school and teacher learning plans that focus on content and leadership;
- make connections and ensure alignment with the larger system;
- continuously measure, document, reflect upon, and adjust professional learning opportunities.

3. **Instructional leadership** by coaches who typically

- observe instruction and provide feedback to teachers;
- construct opportunities for groups of teachers to observe each other;

- structure time for teachers to discuss their learning from classroom observations, modeled lessons, etc.;
- model particular instructional strategies for individuals or groups of teachers;
- employ multiple strategies to gather and analyze student evidence with teachers;
- facilitate teacher meetings during professional development time, common planning time, etc.;
- support teachers in group, and, if necessary, individual settings;
- engage in their own learning with other coaches and content specialists to improve their work.

Coaches must be knowledgeable about not only their content area, but also district reform goals, achievement standards, and adult learning. Meeting such a range of goals requires that coaches possess strong communication and interpersonal skills, consistently follow through with support for teachers, and demonstrate a willingness to listen and learn (Neufeld and Roper 2003). The degree to which coaches possess these skills impacts the success of standards-based instruction in the classroom and the quality of links to district supports and broader school reform efforts; emerging evidence shows that teachers' success at changing practice mirrors the work of the coaches (Neufeld and Roper 2003; Poglinco et al. 2003).

### ❖ **A focus on content encourages the use of data analysis to inform practice.**

Effective coaching programs respond to particular needs suggested by data, allowing improvement efforts to target issues such as closing achievement gaps, supporting teachers across career stages, and advocating for equity (e.g., through differentiated instruction). A coaching program guided by data helps both to create coherence within a school and to bridge different levels of the system (Barr, Simmons, and Zarrow 2003) by focusing on strategic areas of need that are suggested by evidence, rather than by individual and sometimes conflicting

opinions. Coaches can then be chosen who have the content expertise and organizational development capacity to lead their “cadres” toward more effective practice in these areas of need at various levels of the educational system.

❖ **Coaching promotes the implementation of learning and reciprocal accountability.**

Coaching is an embedded, visible support – usually funded by the district – that attempts to respond to student and teacher needs in ongoing, consistent, dedicated ways. The likelihood of using new learning and sharing responsibility rises when colleagues, guided by a coach, work together and hold each other accountable for improved teaching and learning (Barr, Simmons, and Zarrow 2003; Coggins, Stoddard, and Cutler 2003; WestEd 2000). And because instructional coaching takes place in a natural setting – the classroom rather than a hotel ballroom – observation, learning, and experimentation can occur in real situations (Neufeld and Roper 2003).

❖ **Coaching supports collective, interconnected leadership across a school system.**

An essential feature of coaching is that it uses the relationships between coaches, principals, and teachers to create the conversation that leads to behavioral, pedagogical, and content knowledge change. Effective coaching distributes leadership, supporting the goals of effective principals through the coaches by keeping the focus on teaching and learning. This focus promotes the development of leadership skills, professional learning, and support for teachers that target ways to improve student outcomes (Lyons and Pinnell 2001).

Research findings indicate that effective coaching structures promote a collaborative culture where large numbers of school personnel feel ownership and responsibility for leading improvement efforts in teaching and learning. Coaching attends to the “social infrastructure” issues of schools and systems (Payne 1998) that often impede the deep and lasting change that school reform requires. These issues include school climate, teacher isolation, insufficient support, and limited instructional and leadership capacity. The attempt to address these critical elements of school quality by incorporating new understandings of effective professional development is a primary reason that coaching holds significant promise toward improving teaching and learning in urban schools (Neufeld and Roper 2003).

## Lessons and Implications from the Institute’s Work

As coaching has emerged as an increasingly common component of systemic reform, the Annenberg Institute has had the opportunity to work with, learn from, and observe in districts that are considering or engaged in instructional coaching as part of their professional development systems. Over time and in varied settings, we have observed some noteworthy challenges to effective coaching.

❖ **Too great a focus on the classroom isolates coaching from systemic goals.**

One of the strengths of instructional coaching is that it is grounded at the school

and classroom level, allowing coaches to work as responsive, constructivist models for professional learning. This same strength, however, can create an array of divergent approaches to teacher learning and to building content knowledge, particularly in large or decentralized systems.

We have found the greatest coherence where coaching is guided by districtwide goals and standards that are grounded in research and experience, thereby avoiding disparate approaches at the school level and ineffective, diluted supports from the central office. To position coaching as a districtwide effort, a school and district need to develop decision-making systems that show commitment to a coaching program as a part of a shared practice. They need to identify strategies for communicating the coaching approach to a wide audience, designate the personnel required to do so, jointly invest in and create professional development *for coaches*, and clearly define criteria for hiring and evaluating coaches.

Clarity about the districtwide nature of a coaching program also takes the focus off individual classrooms and teachers. Clarifying that the coaches' role is supportive rather than supervisory avoids potential problems with the teachers' union and contract issues.

❖ **Coaching is one element of a professional development system, not the only answer.**

Coaching is no silver bullet. It can sustain professional learning and act as a bridge between school practice and broader district goals. However, for coaching to accomplish those ends, it must be explicitly linked to other professional development opportunities and broader components of systemic improvement such as small learning communities or districtwide frameworks. If coaching is the only form of professional learning, it runs the risk of creating isolated pockets of effective teaching and learning in individual schools, rather than supporting improvement both schoolwide and districtwide.

❖ **Coaching models are often not adapted well.**

Instructional coaching emerged in and is more commonly found in elementary schools. While certain elements of good practice hold true across the K–12 spectrum, trying to apply what worked in elementary schools will often undermine the work in secondary schools. Effective coaching recognizes and adapts to the structural, cultural, and instructional differences of different school levels. Key differences such as size, departmentalization, student load, and planning time affect the ways in which a coaching model can be implemented, supported, and assessed.

❖ **Whether voluntary or mandated, coaching can fail to reach resistant teachers.**

Instructional coaching goes beyond building awareness and knowledge to help sustain changes in practice. But in cases where participation in coached “cadres”

is voluntary, resistant teachers are able to opt out of the process. And in cases where participation is mandated, resistant teachers often feel resentment and develop no real ownership of the work. In both examples, the real benefit resides only with those teachers who most likely would have engaged in reflective, ongoing improvement efforts regardless of the structure within which it takes place.

❖ **School and central office supports are often underused or inaccessible.**

Central office supports for instruction and school-level efforts to improve instruction are often not consistently aligned and coordinated. While coaches can serve as liaisons between school and administration, clear routes of access to supports and communication of needs between central offices and schools remain ongoing challenges, particularly in large or decentralized districts.

❖ **Coaching programs often lack assessment indicators and systematic documentation of impact.**

As coaching is a relatively new approach to instructional capacity building, there is increasing demand for evidence that it improves teaching practice and increases student learning. Effective coaching structures use indicators to measure the changes in their practice and assess the effectiveness of their work. However, the time, knowledge, and investment required to systematically gather a range of evidence continue to be a challenge. The lack of documented examples of coaching allows districts to construct their own process and content, but these new models must then be tracked in order to share the lessons learned.

❖ **A focus on process limits the rigorous analysis of data and content.**

Just as rigorous instruction and high expectations are the goals for student experiences, the same holds true for the professional learning of coaches and the teaching teams with whom they work. “Process” activities such as collegial exchange and developing group processes and facilitation skills are highly valued and essential in coaching. But to be effective, the processes need to be grounded in content- and instruction-focused learning geared toward individual and organizational improvement through the use of evidence, research, and keen observation of practice.

❖ **Coaching often focuses on broad strategies to the exclusion of differentiation and equity.**

Coaching must move beyond a “universal best practices” approach to instruction in order to effectively deal with complex equity issues such as language diversity and special needs. For example, a literacy coach cannot simply help his or her teaching team learn a menu of “reading strategies,” but must also attend to the unique learning needs of English-language learners. These considerations hold true at the school, coaching, and district levels.



❖ **Teachers are typically the “learners,” but learning must occur at all levels.**

Instructional coaching is often focused – understandably so – at the school level and considered an issue between school administrators and school staffs. However, insufficient support or commitment not only from the school-level leadership, but also from district leadership, can derail even the best-laid plans. It is important to engage not only the school-level personnel who do the work, but also central office personnel to support and align the work across the district as well as community-based or other organizations knowledgeable about particular content-based issues.

## The Institute’s Current Approach to Coaching

The Annenberg Institute typically works with communities of schools or entire districts to help them consider or support coaching in the belief that systemic change will yield both broader and more lasting improvements. Our observations have led us to think carefully about opportunities for refinement, unanswered questions, and ways to garner evidence to inform our work and learning as well as that of the districts with whom we work. We have developed some strategic approaches and a series of framing questions and themes that attempt to address the challenges and observations described above.

## Strategies for Supporting Effective Coaching

❖ **Embed instructional coaching within professional development.**

Instruction is most visible at the school level, in interactions between teachers and students. But coaching, to be broadly effective, must permeate all levels of the district. Embedding instructional coaching in the district’s larger professional development system allows stakeholders at various levels of the system to engage in learning and allocate resources in coherent ways. Ideally, coaches are members of a districtwide team that seeks to improve the practice of all teachers and secure the central office supports required to sustain that practice.

For example, instructional coaches typically work with teams of teachers in one or two schools at a time. They serve as liaisons between teachers and administrators and between school and district, as well as serving as process facilitators and content experts, typically in math or literacy. They are ideally viewed as colleagues and allies rather than evaluators or administrators.

The varied demands of a coaching model illustrate the need for differentiated supports. Coaches themselves need professional learning opportunities to refine their practice, understand district initiatives and goals more deeply, and design their plans for their specific contexts. Teacher cadres also need professional development outside the scope of the coach to build broader group capacity and knowledge and focus on disciplinary areas within which the coaching model is

enacted. Finally, central office personnel need learning opportunities that help them understand the realities of current classroom practice, navigate the policy contexts within which they must guide school practitioners, and identify and align supports that are responsive to school needs and support district goals. And the system writ large needs clear pathways to document and disseminate the examples of excellent practice that teachers, coaches, or central office personnel find.

❖ **Assess existing practices and match needs with appropriate supports.**

We encourage districts considering or engaged in coaching to map existing learning networks, professional development opportunities, and central office policies and structures to determine whether coaching is an appropriate strategy to accomplish improvement goals and, if so, to identify coherent ways to support it.

For example, one large urban district determined that content-based coaching was an appropriate strategy because a large number of trained facilitators in the district provided an existing pool of personnel already competent in a core function of coaching. Another indicator of existing assets that could be used for coaching might be instances of collaborative practice – within schools and the district, or across roles (such as principals).

Mapping also helps identify possible misalignment between school practice and district policy or infrastructure, helping to target supports and align school and district communication more effectively.

❖ **Keep the focus on rigorous content-based experiences for teachers, coaches, and students.**

Since coaching is a relatively new practice, much attention has been given to creating the conditions necessary to implement coaching at the district and school levels. As coaching becomes more widespread, attention needs to shift to making sure coaching has a significant impact on teaching practice, and, ultimately, on student learning.

Structural and procedural elements such as release time, common planning time, materials and resources, and group processes are necessary but not sufficient conditions for the success of coaching. For coaching to make an impact, it must be wedded to specific, articulated gaps in content outcomes. We try to push school systems to move beyond collegial group processes and include content learning, data analysis, and approaches to documenting ongoing work in ways that will create greater capacity and internal accountability.

In addition, we support continuous professional learning for coaches that integrates district reform strategies, content knowledge, and approaches to effective adult learning. We also believe that a coherent system of professional development includes all stakeholders and is backed by a districtwide commitment of policy, supports, and people.

❖ **Think broadly about adding value and knowledge to coaching.**

We encourage districts to build collaborative, strategic relationships with diverse stakeholders to increase coaching capacity. Districts can establish both internal partnerships, by making support for coaching a systemwide endeavor, and external partnerships, by engaging organizations outside the system, to improve content knowledge or facilitation skills. The partnerships should exist vertically (school-district) and horizontally (across central office departments), as well as with universities, community organizations, and other civic institutions that might strengthen, broaden, and deepen the capacity of coaches and coaching structures to improve instruction and be more responsive to students.

Another important way to increase knowledge is to carefully observe the interplay between district-level conditions for coaching (a clearly articulated need and rationale, supports, and policies) and the school-level conditions of time, opportunity, and support. These observations can help generate the evidence required to refine coaching practices, make coaching more effective, and dramatically influence the culture of a school system to focus on results through shared ownership.

❖ **Document processes, content, and evidence of improvement.**

Documentation presents an ongoing challenge, particularly for teachers, whose time is already scarce. Documenting the work itself is daunting, let alone the impact, learning outcomes, changes in practice, and evidence of student learning. The volume of work that coaches and teachers must accomplish often leaves little time for capturing “homegrown” coaching models, adapting other coaching programs, and documenting lessons learned to inform future practice within and across systems. When given low priority, documentation can easily become a mass of disconnected reports, student work, and test scores that emphasizes quantity over quality.

We encourage districts to consider an array of ways to gather evidence and also to rethink how they allocate human resources to support documentation. Central office personnel can provide essential support to schools by generating data to inform teachers, schools, coaches, and the central office itself of key turning points or changes in practice.

❖ **Refine the coaching model in response to experience.**

Coaching holds promise for building instructional capacity, but there are still few concrete links to improved student outcomes (Poglinco et al. 2003). Until such evidence accumulates, existing practice and policy, as well as documentation of the local work and its impact, can be used as learning opportunities to refine the work in ways that address specific issues of a system or school. Understanding the policy climate and conditions for change of a system must inform the central offices, coaches, and school-level staff for coaching to be implemented reflectively.

For example, in many districts coaching first took hold at the elementary level, and the approach is being “scaled up” to high schools. However, we cannot assume that a first model will yield optimal results; it will require experimentation and adjustment. This is not to say that coaching should not be attempted in high schools because their cultures, needs, and supports are different from elementary schools. But a coaching model originating in elementary school and used in a high school setting must come with questions for reflection, refinement, and adjustment – and the commitment to make the necessary modifications required of a “first try.”

❖ **Seek locally appropriate approaches to issues of equity, opportunity, and differentiated instruction.**

To maintain an unwavering focus on improving student learning and achievement through building teacher capacity, we support districts’ efforts to construct an evidence-based coaching model that best serves local needs. Even within districts, the needs of a given community of teachers or a given school vary greatly; we recognize the importance of addressing those needs differently.

We encourage districts to consider their disaggregated data, the language and learning needs of their students, and the professional cultures of their schools when they examine instructional practices. In this way, school systems can develop differentiated learning and instructional strategies that more effectively support teachers and students than attempting to apply a “universal” set of best practices. For example, a school with a large number of English language learners (ELLs) likely calls for instructional strategies that specifically address language acquisition. A “universal best practices” approach would be insufficient to help teachers improve their practice to teach ELLs well and equitably.

## Key Themes and Framing Questions

How might districts think about coaching as an element of improved teaching and learning? Who leads the work and how does it get done? Based on research, experience, and observation in a variety of urban districts, we believe that the best way to build a coaching system is by doing it – but doing it as a collective enterprise embedded in the larger district context, rather than as an isolated project.

To that end, we have developed some key themes to frame instructional coaching as an element of capacity building. We also include specific framing questions a district can ask as it considers or implements coaching. We encourage districts to add other relevant framing questions of their own.

❖ **Knowledge and ownership**

It is our belief that making the case for coaching is a critical element to its viability. Building knowledge in ways that include diverse stakeholders – all those who will feel the impact of the work – enhances the opportunity for real ownership of the work. School and central office staff will be more engaged if they have a

stake and a say in the reasons for the work, what it will look like in practice, and the kinds of results the system hopes it will yield.

Framing questions:

- What is your rationale for considering coaching?
- What questions or needs are you trying to address through coaching?
- What evidence have you gathered that these questions or needs are the right ones to address?
- What are the content areas (subjects or roles) for which you are considering coaching?
- Who are the key players in your system who will need to understand and “own” the concept of coaching? How will you go about “making the case” for them?
- What are your ideas for sharing responsibility, leadership, development, and credit?
- How do you imagine coaching might address issues of collaboration, culture, and collective capacity in your district?

#### ❖ **Commitment and support**

A new initiative is only as good as the levels of commitment and support it receives over time. The commitment must be both in word and in practice, at multiple levels of the system. An important way to embed coaching throughout a system is to ensure that the superintendent, central office, and school leaders articulate similar messages about the purposes and expected outcomes of coaching. Systems must consider how they will provide specific human and fiscal resources, supports for learning and action, and time to engage in coaching effectively.

Framing questions:

- What, specifically, is the central office role in support of coaching?
- How will the central office demonstrate the system’s support of coaching?
- What is the district’s message about how coaching fits into the spectrum of reform efforts?
- How will you ensure an equitable allocation of resources, time, and staff?
- How will you help schools determine their needs and areas of focus? How will coaching address those areas?
- What kinds of professional learning opportunities will coaches, teachers, and district personnel be offered or lead to support coaching?
- How can the central office support coaching through technology and data systems?
- What practices are already in place at the central office to support instructional capacity building?

### ❖ **Personnel selection and support**

Coaching is made real by the leaders who enact it at the school level – the coaches. Districts that put careful thought into defining the role of coaches, selecting them, and ensuring their learning are helping their coaches to achieve the greatest success.

Because coaching is a relatively new approach to capacity building, many systems fall into traditional traps based on titles. For example, a given system’s reading specialists are often assumed to be the best pool for literacy coaches when, in fact, skills beyond a reading specialist credential may be essential. Thinking broadly about the content and adult learning needs of a district will widen the pool of potential coaches and create a more diverse range of expertise to guide the systemic work of coaching.

Framing questions:

- Where might your district look to find the most appropriate coaches?
- Where might your district look to find the staff to support coaching?
- What characteristics must coaches in your particular context have?
- What kinds of content knowledge or professional learning knowledge must coaches in your context have?
- What kinds of people are best positioned to have an impact on your system through coaching?
- How will you support the learning needs of the coaches?
- How will the selection process articulate and align with your system’s stated needs?

### ❖ **Planning action and measuring results**

The themes articulated above set the stage for coaching, but the actual work of enacting it throughout a school system requires a great deal of support, follow-through, and adjustment. It is not enough to define what coaching is. A system must tackle the questions of how coaches do their work, how central offices support coaching, how evidence from coaching is gathered and analyzed, and what ongoing refinements must be made to the practice.

Framing questions:

- What are the expected outcomes of coaching at the central office and school level for the first year of implementation? What about after two years?
- In what ways will the central office take responsibility for the work of coaching?
- How will coaches be evaluated and by whom?
- How will the central office support the documentation of the network of coaches and disseminate that information throughout the system?

- What will be the indicators of success for year one, year two, and so on?
- What examples of evidence-based documentation will help limit wide variance of coaching practice across the schools?
- What kinds of specific timelines and benchmarks throughout the school year will help guide the coaches' work, as well as the central office's support work?

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