



Use Coaches, Not Mentors

A growing number of districts now understand that a critical component of a successful comprehensive induction program is a coach. Read why in the **Going Beyond** folder for Chapter 23 or scan the QR Code in the book.

Coaches Are More Effective than Mentors

The research is very specific: Well-trained, proficient, and effective teachers produce student learning. But our schools do a poor job of training teachers to be proficient and effective.

Can you imagine a team that gives one of its players a mentor and they have “reflective conversations” that are totally separate from the head coach or team manager? Teams give their players a coach and the coach coaches according to the team culture and strategy as set by the team manager.

Yet, instead of training teachers, we give new teachers a mentor—and some schools do not even do that—and no one monitors or assesses the relationship. The mentor is given no goals or direction and the principal has no idea what transpires. After a year of sporadic help from the mentor, the new teacher retires to a classroom to work in isolation.

And the cycle repeats itself, decade after decade, and no one stops to reflect on the fact that new teacher attrition remains the same and student achievement does not improve. Why?

We have been giving new teachers a mentor for over thirty years and there is absolutely no research to support this strategy for improving teacher effectiveness.

**One-on-one mentoring does not improve student learning.
Coaching will improve learning.**

Leslie Huling at Texas State University says, “Simply assigning a mentor teacher does little to remedy the situation of teachers becoming discouraged and leaving the profession. Induction and mentoring (note that induction and mentoring are not the same) must go hand-in-hand. You cannot do one without the other.”

Susan Wynn and her colleagues at Duke University found that there is no consensus on what mentors should do, what they actually do, and what novices learn as a result of mentoring. Their results did not find a relationship between mentoring and teacher retention—much less improved student achievement.

Mike Schmoker, author of the best-selling book, ***Results: The Key to Continuous School Improvement***, says of mentoring:

“So-called ‘mentors’ are everywhere these days, but they aren’t often given release time or a clear, compelling charge. Research has not been found that supports the systematic formation of effective teachers solely through the use of mentors, especially mentors who show up after school begins and may not have been trained, compensated, or given direction or goals to attain.”

Ted Britton, Senior Researcher for WestEd (www.wested.org), a nonprofit research, development, and service agency, reports this about mentors:

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“Mentors are more typically assigned to respond to a new teacher’s day-to-day crises and provide survival teaching tips. Mentors are simply a safety net for the new teachers. Mentoring, in and of itself, has no purpose, goal, or agenda for student achievement, and, thusly, one-on-one mentoring has failed to provide evidence of the connection between well-executed professional learning communities and student learning.”

The North Carolina Teaching Fellows Commission¹ says, “Giving a teacher a mentor only is a convenient and unconsciously foolish way for an administrator to divorce himself or herself from the leadership required to bring a beginning teacher up to professional maturity level.”

The same commission also found that principals and new teachers rated mentors the least effective way to help new teachers. One out of four new teachers claimed that they received either “poor” or “no support” from their mentors. Simply assigning a mentor teacher does little to remedy the situation of teachers becoming discouraged and leaving the profession.

The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future² reports, “Unless we move beyond the traditional one-to-one mentoring model, we will continue to reinforce the industrial-era practice of stand-alone teaching in isolated classrooms.”

John Rockoff, in a working paper for the National Bureau of Economic Research, writes that well over one million new teachers have received mentoring, but we know little about its effects on teacher and student outcomes.

In Every Aspect of Life Except Education

Today the most innovative districts coach, not mentor, their new teachers and place them in learning teams (PLCs—Professional Learning Communities) to develop their teachers to state specified standards.

Common sense would tell you that in every aspect of life, people are given a full complement of activities and people to train and support them from the day they come on the job until the day they leave.

Comprehensive training programs are the norm for most jobs. Ask the fire chief, the store manager, or hospital executive what they do with new employees. Ask the baseball manager, construction foreman, or senior partner in a law firm what they do. Ask the workforce at a pizza or fast food restaurant. They will all tell you that every employee is trained. And in most cases, the training continues until the employee leaves the company.

Even the best educated of new employees need on-the-job training. Despite completing college and medical school, doctors spend years working as hospital residents before entering private practice. Newly elected judges, armed with law degrees and years of experience, attend judicial college before assuming the bench. Pilots receive initial training and recurrent training every time they change positions, such as from co-pilot to pilot, and when they fly a different type of plane, such as from a Boeing 737/777 to an Airbus 320.

Coaching Is Job-Embedded

Every baseball season begins with spring training. At training camp, the camp is crawling with coaches. They have coaches for pitching, hitting, catching, base running, outfield play, infield play, sliding, base stealing, taking signals, and warming up drills, just to name a few. They do not give each player a mentor who then go off and “reflect.”

Each coach has responsibility for bringing out the best in every player under the coach’s tutelage. In turn, the coaches meet with the manager on a regular basis to assess the progress of each player. **Baseball, like a school, is a team function, and everyone needs to know the culture of the team to ensure it operates in harmony and unison.**

The most effective schools have coaches. In many schools we find literacy coaches, math coaches, science coaches, technology coaches, instructional coaches and even coaches (not mentors) for principals.

The coaches meet with the principal on a regular basis to assess the progress of every teacher and student. **In an effective school, everyone functions as a team and there is a laser focus on student achievement.**

Coaches are in the classrooms with the teachers and students. The work is job-embedded, which is how teachers learn best to become skilled and effective.

The reason coaches succeed in improving student learning is because coaches have a defined responsibility. Just as a sports coach or an executive coach have responsibilities, educational coaches have similar responsibilities for producing proficiency and effectiveness.

Coaches Have Responsibilities

Mentors have an important role in providing emotional support and answering basic questions for survival. Coaches, however, have responsibilities.

Mentors have **roles**.

Coaches have **responsibilities**.

A coach’s major responsibility is to help maximize personal and professional potential, while concomitantly upgrading their own professional proficiency. Mentors are under no obligation to upgrade their role as a mentor.

Coaching is customized and focused to provide specific instruction on what needs to be accomplished. Coaches tailor support, assess each teacher’s progress with observations, use interviews and surveys, and have follow-up visits. Teachers feel more motivated and responsible to act on new skills learned because coaching is personalized, customized, and ongoing.

Just as a tennis coach, a fitness coach, or an executive coach has the responsibility of achieving results, educational coaches have similar responsibilities to produce proficiency and effectiveness. Coaches have a “big-picture plan” for student achievement. To accomplish this they suggest or show teachers what to do and assess for progress.

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Tom Guskey, an expert in evaluation design, analysis, and educational reform, found that coaches focus on student learning goals, identify small measurable steps to tailor goal accomplishment, and plan professional development that is differentiated for each teacher based on their needs. **The emphasis is on student learning and coaches coach to achieve results in teaching and learning.**

| Differences Between Mentors and Coaches | |
|---|--|
| Mentors | Coaches |
| Are available for survival and support | Help teachers improve student learning |
| Provide emotional support; answer singular procedural questions | Coach to improve instructional skills on a sustained basis |
| React to whatever arises | Focus on student learning goals |
| Treat mentoring as an isolated activity | Are part of job-embedded induction and staff development process |
| Are just “buddies” | Have a leadership responsibility |

In many districts, mentors have taken on some coaching responsibility for teacher proficiency. Proficiency is essential if there is to be a consequent improvement in student learning because the research results are very specific. It is the teacher—the trained, effective teacher—who achieves results.

The more proficient the teacher, the more students will learn.

In districts where mentors are working to improve instruction skills for improved student learning, they should, by definition, be called “coaches.”

What’s Your Game Plan?

If you are a pre-service teacher looking to be hired this fall, you know the support you’re looking for in a school district. **Coaches!**

If you are an administrator dealing with low test scores and fleeing teachers, you know the kind of support you need to establish in your school district. **Coaches!**

If you are a teacher in a non-supportive school district and want to move, you know what to look for in a caring school district. **Coaches!**

We’ve shared with you the structure for success with coaches. It’s time for you to execute a winning game plan.

¹*A Profession in Jeopardy: Why Teachers Leave and What We Can Do About It and Keeping Talented Teachers* (Raleigh, NC: Public School Forum of North Carolina, December 1996).

²Fulton, K., Yoon, I., and Lee, C. “Induction into Learning Communities,” *National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future* (August 2005) Available at www.nctaf.org.