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# Is Coaching the Best Use of Resources?

For some schools, other investments should come first

by Elizabeth A. City

I arrived for my first day of coaching at a Boston school with energy, ideas, and a batch of homemade blueberry muffins. A teacher on the Instructional Leadership Team looked at me, looked at the muffins, and said, "I hate you already." She said it with a smile, but she wasn't kidding. Later I would come to appreciate her honesty, but at that moment all I could think was, "But you don't even know me."

She knew enough. She knew that she had been teaching longer than I had been alive, she knew that I was supposed to help the school "change" and "improve," and she believed that she didn't need any changing or improving. I knew that I had learned some things as a teacher and a principal. I knew that most students in the school weren't performing at a proficient level on the state tests and I believed they were capable of doing better. And I knew my blueberry muffins were good. I offered her a muffin and plunged into the meeting.

In the six years since that experience, I've had the opportunity to observe and reflect on the use of coaching in schools as a researcher, consultant, and teacher of aspiring principals. During that time, coaching has continued to swell in popularity as a strategy for improving instruction and, consequently, learning.

The strengths of coaching as a professional development strategy are well known, as are some of the challenges of doing it right (see "School-Based Coaching," *HEL* July/August 2004). But even when schools are doing all the right things and coaches have the proper preparation and training, coaching can fall far short of its potential. Instead of trying to resolve all the challenges associated with coaching, schools may need to step back and ask themselves: Is this the best use of my school's people, time, and money?

## A Tale of Two High Schools

As part of my research, I studied two small urban high schools, Tech High and Health High, after their conversion from the same large comprehensive high school. (The names of schools and individuals in this article have been changed.) As part of the restructuring effort, the district gave each school five part-time coaches.

The principals of these two schools had very different

answers to the question of whether coaching was the best use of resources in their first year of trying to transform their schools. For principal Tony Hobbs at Tech High, the coaches helped him refine his vision and provided critical emotional and collegial support. For principal Paula Martin at Health High, the coaches were people she didn't choose, who didn't match her needs, and who made demands on her time.

Although Hobbs and Martin shared three of the five coaches, the same individuals who were seen as assets in one school were seen as liabilities in the other. This contrast, however, had more to do with what the principals perceived as *their* greatest needs than with their teachers' needs. By all accounts (principals, coaches, teachers, and students), coaching in both schools had little noticeable impact on instruction or learning. On balance, it was a tremendous waste of resources.

Even when schools are doing all the right things, coaching may fall short of its potential.

## Readiness ... and Hope

Why didn't coaching work? As in many schools I've visited, the fundamental problem wasn't the coaching model,

the quality of the coaches, or the leadership. The schools simply weren't ready to make good use of coaching. In cases like these, some of the issues may be structural or contractual. A school may not be organized to support coaching well, for instance, by having a schedule that allows enough time for teachers to meet. Faculty and staff may be overwhelmed with fundamental noninstructional issues, like discipline and curriculum (i.e., *what* are we teaching tomorrow vs. *how* are we teaching it). All this leads to a fragmented approach to professional development because there are multiple legitimate demands on the school leaders' and teachers' time, with no clear sense of priority.

"Readiness," however, is about more than schedules and contracts and systems. Readiness is also about factors like vision and hope. A shared vision has been shown to be essential to school improvement. Hope, while less well documented, is no less essential. Hope as a root of successful and improving schools has two elements: (1) the belief that success (attaining the vision) is possible and (2) that each person sees herself as a necessary part of that

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## Autism

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top students. He's also been building on his social skills and newfound acting talent by participating in the school drama club—the kind of resource that Henderson points out is generally unavailable in a segregated setting.

### “Best Practices” Guides

A few decades into the public education of children with ASD, many schools and districts have pioneered programs that are helping autistic children make progress as defined in their individualized education programs. To keep schools from having to reinvent the wheel, states like California, New York, New Jersey, and others are perfecting their own “best practices” guides aimed at helping schools use the most successful tools available.

At the University of Washington's Experimental Education Unit, Schwartz oversees a U.S. Department of Education initiative aimed at improving programs for children with autism nationwide on a case-by-case basis, drawing on the NRC recommendations. The program's goal is for every child with ASD to receive the best possible education at his or her local school. Schwartz and other autism experts sponsor weeklong training sessions for small teams of educators who come to Seattle from around the country. She and her colleagues also make site visits to school districts to help district staff members assess their needs and develop the best model for each school.

In her work with districts, Schwartz and her team consider factors like teacher-student ratios, whether trained teachers and therapists are available, and how the school can best support—and keep—specially trained staff. They also tackle challenges specific to the learning or behavioral needs of particular children in a given school.

“There can be a huge gap between what is state of the art and what is state of practice [in the education of students with ASD],” notes Schwartz. “We are trying to close that gap.” ■

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## Coaching

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success. It is not wishful thinking. It is not “hope” in the sense of “I hope you feel better” (a sentiment you may genuinely mean, but with the knowledge that you don't have any responsibility for the actual outcome).

A year and a half after Tech High opened, Hobbs observed that the main issue in his school was that most of his teachers didn't see the need for change. Even if they admitted the school was failing, they would say, “Yes, but it's the best we can do, given the circumstances.” Most of the adults at Tech High in the first year of the conversion had little hope.

In fact, the lack of hope among teachers in both schools

was perfectly rational. Most of the students had failed multiple classes and had reading, writing, and math skills far below high school-level work. Most of the teachers thought they were working hard and saw that students who did their work learned something, while those who didn't do their work didn't learn much. So why would teachers bother to work with coaches to change their instructional practice if there was little evidence that doing so would make a difference?

### The Writing Contest

The only coaching that was effective at Tech High occurred when the writing coach organized an essay contest for seniors. She worked with students to write and revise multiple drafts, and the whole school gathered for the awards ceremony, where the mayor and superintendent gave awards and the winners read their essays. After the assembly, an English teacher said to Hobbs, “I didn't think my kids could write like that, but if her kids can do it, mine can, too. I want to start working with that writing coach.”

This teacher had had the opportunity to work with the writing coach all year but had opted not to. Now she saw evidence that something different was possible. She had hope, and this meant that the people, time, and money that would be invested in helping her develop new skills would have a much better chance of paying off in improved instruction and learning.

The writing contest was a minor investment compared to the school's coaching budget for the whole year (see “People, Time, and Money,” p. 7). But it made possible a kind of change that all the hours and money spent on the rest of the coaching effort did not achieve.

### Shifting the School's Investment

When there is little belief that teaching matters for learning or that students are capable of great things, all the coaches in the world may not be able to convince teachers to examine and improve their practice. Instead, a school's resources are better invested in shifting this belief, especially by *providing evidence that students are capable of success and that teachers are capable of contributing to that success*. These initial investments often focus on three areas: students, big wins, and examining data.

*Students.* Rather than investing in teachers, schools may find it easier to build momentum for change by investing in projects designed to shift students' vision of what is possible for themselves. At Health High, for example, Martin focused on college applications. She was determined that all students would have the option to attend at least one college, preferably a four-year college. Her guidance counselor did not support this vision and, in fact, Martin wrote all the students' recommendations because she did not trust the counselor to pitch them well.

Martin cajoled and supported students in applying one at a time and enlisted the help of an outside organization to provide individual support to students. Eventually, every senior but one (who had already signed up for hairdressing

## People, Time, and Money

Each of the initiatives undertaken at Tech High and Health High (see main article) entailed different tradeoffs in the use of people, time, and money. A look at the rough numbers gives a sense of the relative costs of each approach:

**Coaching.** Each small high school invested about \$125,000 on coaches in the first year (mostly money provided by the district). This amounted to 2–3 percent of their budget, or \$4,000–\$6,000 per teacher. Spending on coaching represented about half the school's professional development spending, with the rest going to common planning time, meeting time, stipends, and consultants.

**Writing contest.** The contest involved about a quarter of the writing coach's time (\$5,000), half of which was paid for by the school and half by an outside organization; \$300 in cash prizes for students; one hour for the schoolwide assembly; class time devoted to writing and revising; and time from the mayor and superintendent.

**College applications.** Principal Paula Martin devoted vast amounts of time to helping students with college applications, not to mention the \$88,000 spent on paying the guidance counselor for a job that Martin was mostly doing. Other investments included \$8,000 for a college program volunteer coordinator, application fees for some students, and the time of several outside volunteers.

**Robotics contest.** The total investment in this project was \$1,500 for the robot kit, plus teachers' and students' time after school. For the next school year, the school planned to buy two robot kits so the students could build and test a prototype, and to sponsor a robotics class, since so many students were interested in robotics after the team's success.

school) applied to college, and all were accepted to at least one college. Martin hoped that by convincing teachers that all students had the opportunity to go to college, she could encourage them to seek the support they needed to ensure that students were prepared for college-level work.

**Big wins.** Another approach is to invest in "big wins": highly visible endeavors that focus on student performance and offer public recognition of success. The writing competition at Tech High is an example of a "big win." Another was a robotics competition at Health High. Martin and her teachers recruited several students to build a robot after school. Although the team was inexperienced and could not afford to build multiple prototypes, their robot placed 19th out of 44 schools, higher than any high school in the district, including the elite exam school, and the team won a special newcomer award. As soon as the competition was over, Martin received a cell phone call from students screaming, "Miss, we won! We won!" Martin described the victory as a "defining" moment: "There's not a culture here yet of valuing academic achievement. Being on the robotics team helped build kids' confidence, and

beating other schools showed them that they can compete with kids they don't even usually encounter."

Hobbs and Martin both spoke of building a critical mass of students and teachers who shared their vision to tip the scales away from the status quo. Highly visible "big wins" helped build that critical mass.

**Looking at data.** A third route is to look directly at evidence about what students and teachers are doing in the classroom. Both Health High and Tech High tried this approach to create a sense of urgency, but it didn't work very well because, for example, the teachers at Health High weren't nearly as appalled as Martin about the number of students who received failing grades.

So Martin took a different tack. She changed the grading policy so that students could not get a grade below C– at the end of a quarter. Any student whose average was below that received an "incomplete" and was required to make up the work. Teachers were surprised to see that most students actually completed the work they needed to move from an incomplete to at least a C–.

In a situation where there is little belief that something different is possible, data may work better to show something different *after* it happens than to show that something *needs* to happen.

In short, school leaders should work on generating demand for professional development before investing heavily in instructional improvement. Small investments can catalyze shifts in hope that ripple through schools, helping students and teachers see not only that something different is possible, but that it is possible *for them* and *because of them*. This is a process that can take quite a bit of time—especially in tumultuous circumstances like those faced by Tech High and Health High in the first year after conversion. Coaches can sometimes be instrumental in shifting hope—as happened in the Tech High writing contest—but it may make sense to think about cultivating the conditions for coaching first before deploying this potentially rich resource.

And that teacher I met at the Boston school on my first day of coaching? By the end of that year we agreed on the need for change and she was taking a leading role in that change, though she trusted her colleagues more than coaches to help her with her own practice. Lots of listening got me farther with her than did my blueberry muffins. But as with all improvement, it's a combination of factors that lead to success, and the muffins didn't hurt ... ■

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## For Further Information



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