

Celebrate the Power of Coaching

Support school leaders' growth through
job-embedded coaching and inquiry.

By Donna Anderson-Davis and Diane Smith

After 11 years as a school administrator, principal Rebekah Kim thought she had a solid approach to providing feedback. Despite limited time and many teachers to observe, she scheduled formal classroom observations and provided teachers with feedback designed to improve their practice.

Like educators across the country, Kim and the teachers of Midway Elementary School have faced increasingly complex demands for improving teaching and learning. Her school district, Highline Public Schools in Burien, Washington, had recently implemented shifts in its instructional models, as well as shifts to Common Core State Standards and a new instructional framework. Amid this backdrop, the school district implemented new collaborative structures that placed an emphasis on identifying each teacher's professional goals. How to maintain the sacredness of her time with teachers, while providing meaningful, personalized feedback to grow teaching practice loomed large for Kim.

With assistance from a long-term partner, the University of Washington Center for Educational Leadership (CEL), the school district has been using job-embedded coaching and an inquiry cycle process among its school leaders, principal supervisors, and instructional coaches to identify the most pressing improvement needs and to provide structures for support.

Kim chose to use one of the inquiry cycles with her supervisor, instructional leadership executive director Kimberly Kinzer. The resulting growth in her feedback practice was nothing short of celebratory.

Coaching from a Strengths-based Stance

In the Highline Public Schools district, all school leaders benefit from ongoing support and job-embedded learning that addresses specific needs and goals. Coaching—as a collaborative process that engages leaders in reflection and self-assessment—can be a powerful tool to support this leadership development.



At CEL, we view coaching as teaching, and take a strengths-based approach using reflection, modeling, and teaching to build instructional leadership capacity. A strengths-based approach focuses on what the leader can do—meaning purposeful and effective implementation of leadership practices.

This method examines leadership practices that are within the leader’s zone of proximal development. What are they on the verge of being able to do? These are practices that the leader may have an understanding of and some experience with, but may need specific feedback to implement more effectively. This strengths-based stance values the potential of the knowledge, skills, and capacity of the individual.

Creating Structure With an Inquiry Cycle

Combining strengths-based coaching with a process that supports identified areas for change increases the likelihood of implementing successful change. An inquiry cycle process provides a structure for reflection and self-assessment; identification and analysis of data; the development of a learning plan; and cycles of reflection and analysis of impact. In collaboration with a principal supervisor or coach, a school leader uses an inquiry cycle to help identify what practice needs to change to help improve instruction and student achievement.

The CEL Inquiry Cycle is a four-phase process for analyzing the current state of achievement in a school, developing a plan for improvement, implementing the plan, and evaluating the outcomes. It encompasses all aspects of teaching and learning from student achievement to teacher practice, and equally important, the impact of the leader’s practice. As part of the process, the principal develops a theory of action from which an action plan is developed, including identifying evidence of success. This problem-solving process can be used for school improvement, instructional improvement, and principal growth and development.

In Phase 1, the principal and principal supervisor/coach gather and analyze evidence to identify both student learning problems and problems of teaching practice, as well as strengths to leverage. The principal collects evidence to self-assess for the purpose of identifying strengths and challenges in his or her practice.

During Phase 2, the principal and coach analyze the evidence to identify an instructional leadership area of focus. They decide what the principal should specifically focus on to improve his or her own practice that will lead to the desired changes in teaching practices. Once the principal has collaboratively identified the student problem of learning to be addressed, the teacher problem of practice contributing to the student problem of learning, and the instructional leadership area of focus, a theory of action is created. The theory of action explains the specific changes the principal intends to make to improve teaching and learning in the school.

The theory of action is stated as:

- If the principal ...
- Then teachers will be able to ...
- So that students will be able to ...

Here is an example to illustrate a theory of action:

If the principal engages in learning the elements of effective mathematical discourse, and creates specific look-fors for teachers and students in fifth grade, and if he works alongside staff to learn and support implementation of these strategies,



then teachers will be able to engage all students in mathematical discourse that includes the use of mathematical academic vocabulary to justify their responses,



so that all fifth-grade students, will be able to justify their solution when solving math problems, including the use of mathematical academic vocabulary.

This theory of action is narrowly focused, which makes it achievable. Once the theory of action is co-developed, the principal determines evidence of success for principal practice, teacher practice, and student learning, along with a date to formally analyze the impact of this inquiry cycle.



DO THIS

Want to implement the inquiry cycle described in this article? Follow these steps.

1. Analyze Evidence
2. Determine a Focus
3. Implement & Support
4. Analyze Impact

During Phase 3, the principal and coach engage in a series of learning sessions centered on the principal's area of focus. Critical questions in this phase include "What are the possible actions for a series of learning sessions?" and "How will this learning improve principal performance?" The focus is on the principal engaging in learning or refining skills in the identified areas to support teachers' learning so that they can more effectively meet student needs.

Finally in Phase 4, the principal and coach analyze the results of the instructional leadership inquiry cycle. Critical questions in this phase include "What was learned about leadership practice and its impact on teacher practice and student learning?" and "What are the implications for the next inquiry cycle?"

The Inquiry Cycle in Action

Back at Midway Elementary School, Kim engaged in an inquiry cycle with the support of her supervisor. Initially, they met weekly to develop the plan during phases 1 and 2. During these sessions, they met in person to set professional learning goals and determine data as evidence of success. Kim and her supervisor observed classrooms with a specific focus based on the teachers' identified learning needs to monitor progress. Together they looked at student learning problems and problems of teaching practice to identify where Kim's "on-the-verge-of" strengths could have the most impact if further developed.


Kim noticed that some of her school's teachers required additional support outside of formal evaluations to address classroom environment issues affecting student learning. As such, she chose to focus on giving informal feedback with a more collaborative coaching stance. Kim used CEL's feedback tool, which includes a variety of sentence stems to support teachers' thinking. Kim focused her informal feedback with teachers by using the basic stem: "I saw you ... , and as a result, students" Kim selected the stem from the feedback tool to help her teachers understand how their actions impact students' learning behavior.

As part of Kim's learning plan, she and her supervisor engaged in a series of classroom visits that gave Kim the opportunity to practice using the informal methods of providing feedback. In one case, Kim invited a new teacher to participate in a learning walk with her and her supervisor.

They visited another same-grade-level classroom that had an exemplary classroom environment, sat side-by-side, and talked about what they noticed and how this might be able to be implemented in the teacher's classroom. When Kim went back to the teacher's room to provide informal feedback, she noticed significant changes in her classroom environment such as routines and structures that were not evident prior to their work together. Kim was able to rapidly impact the teacher's learning because of her specific focus on the evidence she was collecting based on the teacher's learning need.

Reflecting on the approach, Kim said, "While these changes may seem subtle, it felt celebratory because the approach was different than what I have taken in my last 11 years as an administrator who evaluates teachers. I took on more of a coaching role." Kim added that she will continue to use this approach in between formal evaluations. "The stem that I used seemed simple, but the feedback teachers gave back to me was positive and they appreciated hearing how their teaching moves impacted how students were responding."

For Kim, coaching support and the inquiry cycle have proved invaluable. At the conclusion of the inquiry cycle, Kim's supervisor lauded her "ability to see teachers with a growth mindset—finding what they are doing well and building on that strength to help them make improvements."

School leaders can benefit greatly from coaching support to continually improve their leadership practice. Engaging in a cycle of inquiry is one way to provide a structure and a process for school leaders and principal supervisors/coaches to work together to support teachers to improve instruction for all students. 

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