Podcast: Planning for Instructional Coaching Success

How are the expectations of an instructional coaching program shared with staff? This is an important question when implementing an instructional coaching program and an important element to address as new staff join a faculty each year. It also needs to be revisited when principal or coach positions change. Listen to a high school and elementary school coach and principal share their first three years of experiences as partners.

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PODCAST TRANSCRIPTSteve: 00:00 Hello and welcome to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast. Instructional coaches and leaders create the environment that supports teachers to continually imagine, grow and achieve. They model an excitement for learning that teachers in turn model for

students. This podcast is dedicated to promoting the important aspects of instructional leadership. Thanks for listening.
Steve: 00:28 Planning for instructional coaching success. I'm currently supporting a district that is implementing instructional coaching for the first time. I decided to go back into my podcast interviews for voices of principals and instructional coaches whose experiences might be helpful as these leaders and coaches are beginning. In each of the interviews that follows, the coach and principal are discussing their experiences three years into their partnerships. First, we'll hear from high school principal, Larissa McCoy and coach Robin Sullivan from the Leto High School in Tampa, Florida. I began by asking them how they communicated expectations for teachers around working with coaches.

Larissa: 01:31 So I'm glad you asked that question cause I think that changes from place to place. But at our school now, when we first came in, we really had to come in as transformational leaders which is extremely challenging because I'm sure that as you know, that takes a lot of figuring out ways to build trust with people to make sure that they were willing and able to access the health that we know that they needed. So one of the things that when we first came in is, before we even the year even started, I actually did a retreat with our coaches to help them just kind of sit them down and to say, listen, you know, this is what this is going to look like, this might be what we're going to be up against.

Larissa: 02:08 And so let's talk through ways right now that we can really make sure that we make people feel comfortable when we have conversations with them that might make them feel uncomfortable. So in training the coaches, we really talked a lot about student-centric coaching. So making sure that we're not just blaming the teacher for things but instead talking about what students are doing or not doing or what those outcomes look like. So that's kind of how we started

everything. Teachers knew right away, because I am a very clear communicator, what I mean by that is, is I don't mince words and I pretty much am a very straight shooter. So I was very, very passionate about the fact that we needed to change instructional practices at our school to best serve the students that were coming here. And I explained to them that we were going to offer different opportunities for that.

Larissa: 02:54 We created an instructional leadership team to build capacity among teachers who were here that were already doing great things with kids who then could maybe help us do great things with other teachers so they could help kids. I talked to teachers a lot about taking risks. There was a culture of fear here when we got here. And so that culture of fear, unfortunately made teachers afraid to take a risk and to try things that were new because they feared that their evaluation would somehow be negatively impacted if they did something and it failed. And so I spent a lot of the first two years here really communicating with teachers that I wanted them to use our coaches to learn how to take those risks and I wanted them to utilize those coaches for support. And well, I told them I would never impose a coach upon them because I think that nothing gets done when I'm making you do it.

Larissa: 04:23 So my staff knew that the coaches were here in a support role, that they were available anytime that they needed something, but that we weren't psychic and so they needed to really talk to us and ask us for that support. That said, if I went into a teacher's classroom and I realized that that teacher needed support, then I would have a coaching conversation with them and at the end of that, really to continue that cycle, I would suggest that they work with a coach and to be really honest with you, every single teacher that had that conversation with by that point was willing and able to work with the coaches. At this point, now we're in our third year, the coaches don't have a single day where they can do things because they're in teacher's classrooms, which is

exactly what it’s supposed to be.

Larissa: 05:07 So my expectation in the beginning really was coaches, I want you to build trust. Teachers, I want you to take risks and together, you guys can do that. And so I want you to partner together so that we can try new things to make sure that we’re serving our students because it is unacceptable that 71% of our students are not proficient when it comes to reading and literacy.

Robin: 05:25 In the beginning, we spent a lot of time trying to build safe spaces that looked more like PD. Like we would do a learning walk and we would do many a lunch and learn type PD sessions where we could just kind of facilitate a learning environment that people had a choice to sign up for or come to. It gave them an opportunity to get to know us as coaches and get to kind of match our strengths maybe with what they needed or our personality types with what they needed because we’re all very different.

Robin: 05:57 And based on that we were able to build relationships with teachers and then they saw the usefulness and that we weren’t there to tell on them or to rat them out that we were really just helped there to help them facilitate their classrooms and to facilitate their own professional learning.

Robin: 06:15 And then based on those relationships, a lot of this job has word of mouth. So we started getting more people coming to us saying, this teacher said you did this with them and it was awesome and they love that strategy. Or, you were able to come in and just tweet one little thing in the classroom and it’s made all the difference with our kids. So we were able to sell ourselves a little bit that way in a non-threatening like non-evaluative situation, which I think has been really helpful.

Steve: 06:43 I think the process that Larissa and Robin shared

is close to a suggestion that I've been making for starting instructional coaching programs. And that is, moving from invitational to expectational. In other words, over time, administrators' actions and words, from hiring interviews, to problem solving conversations with individuals or teams, begins to illustrate that coaching is a way that we do business here. New teachers join the staff, where does coaching fit in? Curriculum changes occur, where does coaching fit in? Data identifies some students making insufficient progress, where does coaching fit in? A school-wide instructional model, such as PBL is adopted, where does coaching fit in? The next voices also come from Hillsborough County, Florida. Elementary principal, Glenda Vinueza and literacy coach, Heather Moncrief, share experiences from their first three years as coach and principal at Tampa Bay Boulevard School. Glenda initially encouraged Heather, who had been a resource teacher, to complete training in the district's literacy coach program.

Glenda: 08:16 From the moment that Heather started – Heather, first of all, she's got very strong work ethics. Let me start with that. And to be in any sort of resource or coaching position, you have to start with – you've got to have a strong sense of work ethics and for this, some leadership skills, which she had both. I felt that as a reading resource teacher, I thought she could do more. So I pushed her along the way and told her, why don't you enter the cadre and see where it takes you? And four years later, you know, I will tell you, Heather is a strong advocate for kids. Among everything else, she's a strong advocate for kids and to do what's right for kids. She plays a huge role as the coach. First and foremost, she's a cheerleader for students as well as for the teachers.

Glenda: 09:09 She builds a strong relationship with the teachers based on trust, which is probably the most important piece of coaching. You've got to have that trust not only with your administrators obviously, because they have to know that

what you're doing is the right thing, but also building that relationship with teachers that teachers feel comfortable to work with her. So our main goal is to work is to build strong teams and Heather has been, especially for the past two years, she's been like that main leader to move our school forward as far as helping us build those collaborative teams during our lesson planning.

Steve: 09:50 Glenda, when you raise the the trust word, I know that that's a biggie. And part of a coach's trust with teachers is confidentiality regarding some of their work. Yet at the same time it, it's critical for the coach and the principal to have a strong communication system between the two of them. Heather, I'm wondering if if you'd start with responding to how you handle that tug between confidentiality and a strong member of the school team. And then Glenda, please chime in and add to that.

Glenda: 10:30 Yeah. I think that I was able to build that trust with the teachers because I was already here as a resource teacher, so it was easy to kind of get into that role with them. When Glenda and I talked before I became the coach, the start of the school year, because we had planned over the summer, that was one thing we had talked about was what are we going to do when I'm working with teachers. And basically, she was very clear about not – she didn't need to know who was doing what specifically unless it was something that was detrimental to kids. So she understood that I would be working with teachers and helping teachers, but I did not need to come report to her and tell her every single thing that was happening and going on with individual teachers. Unless it was something that it was like, okay, we need to come up with a plan to help so and so. And usually I would get the teacher on board with that to have that open communication to say, are you okay if I talked to Ms. Vinueza about this? And for the most part, I feel like most of our teachers are very much onboard with that and understanding that administrators are

similar to coaches in a different way because they do observe, but they do do that evaluation part, but they help support them as an educator in their classroom.

Steve: 11:58 Heather, am I hearing in that statement that you made that the teacher's sense in that scenario where you would, would go to Glenda,
the teacher's sense is that you were doing that because it was important for the teacher and the kids?

Heather: 12:14 Yeah. That's usually how I would try to word it. I would say, well, you know, we've tried this, we see that this, you know, like, especially like we had a lot of issues with scheduling, like scheduling is always a nightmare. So like if I'm working with a teacher during the literacy block, and then we have issues with the kids that go to speech, and let's say, they're getting pulled out for speech during the shared reading and that, like, it's just juggling all of these things and I'm trying to help support the teacher and the students and the teachers really frustrated. And then I would, that's a question that I would say, you know, we've tried to work it out on our own, are you okay with me going to administration to talk about, to further, you know, come up with a solution for this?

Glenda: 13:04 You know, Heather used the word detrimental. And I think that's probably the best word that she could have used to describe when I want her to come to me. If it's detrimental to student learning that I know something, that's when, not just Heather, but anyone who is also part of our coaching or our resource staff, they know that's when I really need to know. I don't want to know about the everyday conversations or the coaching cycle. There has to be that open communication between the coaches and the teachers in order for them to really move forward and to have that continuous dialogue so that they can grow and within within that growth there's growing pains and I don't need to be part of that conversation. I just want to know is it detrimental to

students so that I can help support that teacher because then I'll find other ways or other tools.

Heather: 13:59 Steve, I would like to add that coaching is very accepted at our school site. Like, in the beginning, it wasn't as much. We've shifted to where I'm not just coaching teachers that have problems. You know, right when I started coaching, I started coaching the – we had a teacher leader on campus and that was my first client if you will.

Steve: 14:22 Great start.

Heather: 14:23 Yeah, it was an expert. So then when people start seeing that I'm not just coaching teachers that are having low test scores or behavior problems in their class or brand new teachers, it's a good mix of everybody. So having that atmosphere of knowing that you're going to be coached. Whether it's in planning or it's in the classroom specifically for literacy or for – we have a math coach as well or math, it's just one of those things that everybody knows is going to happen.

Steve: 15:01 I hope that what you have heard from these administrators and coaches is reinforcing for your practices and future planning as well. You might want to review their conversations with principal coach and perhaps some teacher leaders. Examine what is coaching's current status in your school, and what progress might you want to seek. Hope you well on gaining that progress. Best wishes. Keep me posted. Thanks for listening.

Steve: 15:39 Thank you for listening. You can subscribe to Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud on iTunes and Podbean. And please remember to rate and review us on iTunes. I also want to hear what you're pondering. You can find me on Twitter @stevebarkley, or send me your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com