Defining Instructional Coaching: It Matters

As I read a recent newspaper report, I was tugged to examine again how school leaders, school board members, teachers, and instructional coaches themselves define the role of coaches. The reporter was exploring, “What are instructional coaches and how do they help teachers?” This examination of instructional coaching was occurring because the school board was considering dropping instructional coaches to use the positions to decrease class size.

The first tug comes from the framing of the reporter’s question, “How do they help teachers?”. The critical question needs to be,”How do coaches positively impact student learning?”. To exchange coaching positions for lower class size one would need to believe that the lower-class size would have a greater impact on student learning than does the impact of instructional coaching.

Joellen Killion (2008) in Are You Coaching Heavy or Light, described beliefs that can interfere with coaches coaching

heavy. Here is one:

"The work of coaches is to support teachers"

Why?

"Saying that a coach's role is to support teachers misleads teachers. A coach's primary responsibility is to improve student learning."

The newspaper report stated that an instructional coach could be in classrooms taking notes, co-teaching or modeling a lesson, or researching the best teaching methods. One coach also was the testing coordinator for the school, worked with some students gearing up for testing, and was creating a book room with resources for easy access for teachers.

"When coaches allocate time to services with the greatest potential for deep change in teaching and learning within their schools, students, teachers, and principals benefit. Every student succeeds as a result of high-quality teaching. "
– Joellen Killion

Kane and Rosenquist (Making the Most of Instructional Coaches, *Kappan*, April, 2018) share that while the promise of coaching is high, the evidence of effectiveness has been inconsistent. Coaches' job descriptions may be one of the problems. They often contain a wide array of duties that can erode time to work directly with teachers. Studies have identified some coaches working only a fourth or a third of their time with teachers to improve instruction. The authors suggest that pressure on principals to improve test scores may lead to decisions about the coach's time being more short-term focused

than the longer-term improvement of instruction. (Podcast interview with Kane.)

"To achieve their potential, coaching initiatives must be designed to maximize the time coaches spend working with teachers to improve instruction."
– Kane and Rosenquist

One teacher interviewed by the reporter had a comment about working with a coach that illustrates the power of coaching. She said that in order to grow a teacher needs to be uncomfortable and that the coach assisted her in working through the discomfort to improve her teaching. That is an investment in positively impacting student learning.

I'm wondering how a school board will assess reducing class size as a way to increase student learning. I was intrigued when reading Malcolm Gladwell's **David and Goliath** where class size was used as an example to explain an Inverted-U curve impact: an initial change (decreasing class size) has a positive effect. Then further reduction has no effective and

at some point, further reduction has a negative effect.

Gladwell shares examples of large classes in Israel as high as 38 being reduced to classes of 20 showing a positive impact on student learning outcomes. Moving class sizes from 25 to 18 tends not to generate a change in student outcomes. He suggests the reason is that there isn't a change in teacher practice at this step. Therefore, not a change in what students are doing and learning. Lots of questions exists about the impact of class size. This post raises some.

The common ground for deciding about investing in instructional coaching really should be the degree to which one believes that changing teacher learning, beliefs and skill development will produce increased student learning outcomes.To assess the value of instructional coaching, its critical to know "how coaches' time is spent." Principal/coach partnerships need to match coaches' time usage to desired outcomes.