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the education blog

Supporting teachers with
instructional coaching

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Professional development opportunities provide a valuable way for teachers to stay informed on changes and research in their field, not to mention an invaluable way to supplement what they already know from experience. With this compilation of posts from our blog, [*Teach. Learn. Grow.*](#), we invite you to learn more about instructional coaching and how it can transform teaching and learning in your school or district.



How to make coaching cycles the center of instructional coaching work

Kenny McKee

Coaching research, evidence-based data, and teacher surveys show that coaching cycles are the key coaching action that improves student learning. However, if you're an instructional coach, you know all too well that we are often tasked with so many other responsibilities. These run the gamut from developing and leading traditional professional development sessions to collaborating with school teams, facilitating and organizing school-wide assessments, organizing learning walks and other forms of public teaching, and analyzing student achievement data.

Each of these activities can contribute to positive change in schools. The constant work that supporting these large-scale activities requires, though, oftentimes means that the one-on-one coaching cycle—the primary vehicle of instructional coaching—can all but disappear.

I'd like to make the case for why prioritizing coaching cycles over some other efforts will make a significant impact on student learning in your schools. I will explain how you can advocate for prioritizing coaching cycles to school leaders. I will also discuss a flexible structure for coaching cycles that makes them possible, despite the widely varying instructional coaching assignments and workloads each instructional coach may carry.

What is a coaching cycle?

There are many different models of coaching cycles used in education, but most can be boiled down to this simple definition: A coaching cycle is the process in which a teacher and instructional coach work collaboratively to set an instructional or student learning goal, make a plan for supporting the goal, monitor progress toward the goal, and then reflect on how well the plan supported the goal. Each cycle usually includes three phases:

1. A goal-setting and planning pre-conference
2. Coaching actions for implementing and monitoring the plan
3. A reflection post-conference to assess impact

Coaching actions in the middle phase can vary based upon the goal. They can include co-teaching, modeling, observation, co-planning, and the potential for other actions. The reflection post-conference is usually rooted in evidence to assess impact: student work, assessment data, video, student surveys, and/or an observation tool.

Why do coaching cycles matter?

Coaching cycles are an effective antidote to the [knowing-doing gap](#). When teachers engage in traditional professional learning, many of them still struggle with implementing new learning in their classrooms, despite their best intentions.

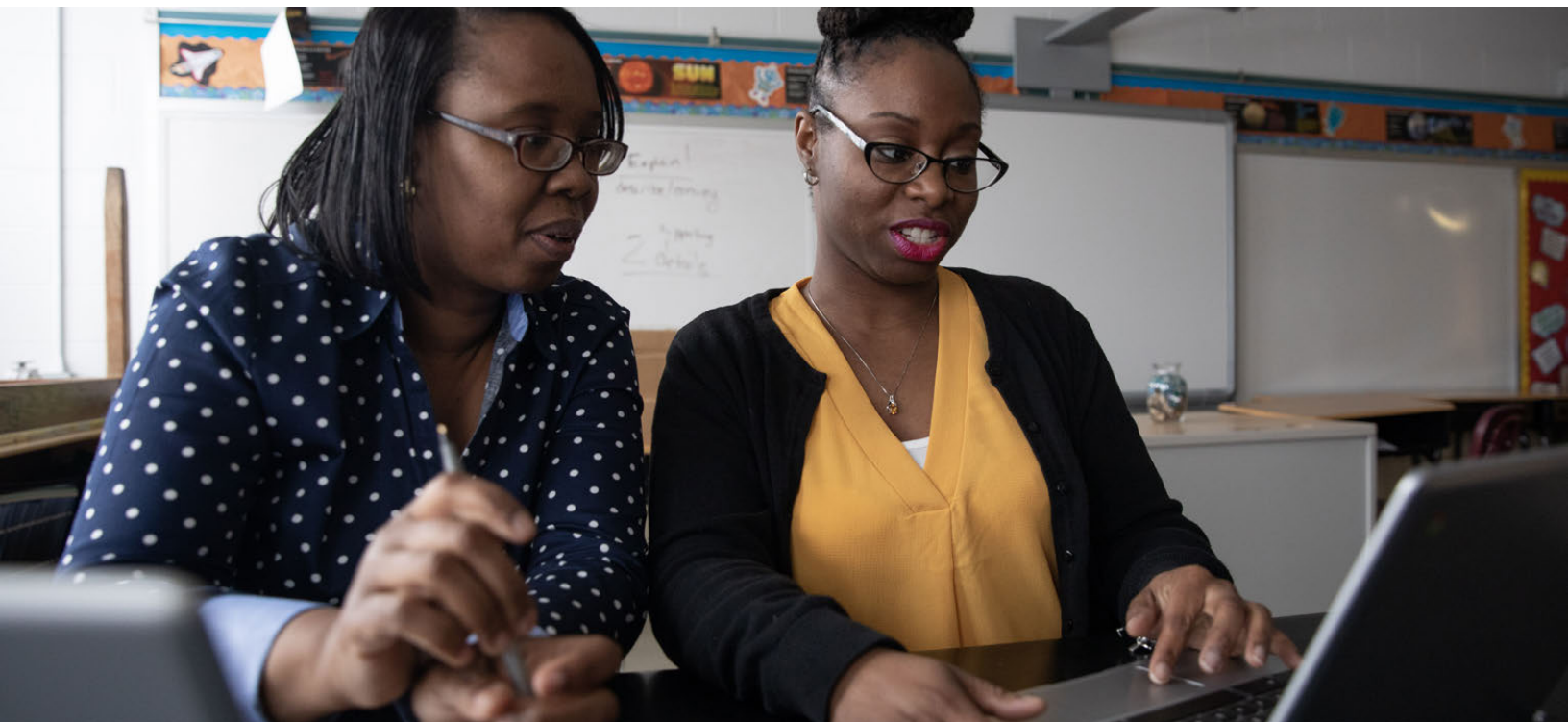
Simply holding workshops, sharing information, or engaging in role plays is not enough to transfer skills, but coaching is highly efficacious in transferring skills to the classroom, where teachers can impact students most. In 2002, [Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers presented research](#) that showed that almost no learning based in theory and discussion, demonstration by a trainer, or role playing with feedback transferred to classroom practice. However, coaching in the classroom resulted in 95% of learning transferring to classroom practice.

Instructional coaching is effective! The process of coaching is contextualized, and personalized professional learning is co-designed specifically to support the needs of teachers and their students. Teachers need ongoing collaboration and support while they implement what they have learned from professional development, and this is why following up professional learning with in-person coaching is recommended.

What is the evidence?

Many studies continue to support the efficacy of instructional coaching for supporting, improving, and elevating classroom instruction. Here are just a few samples:

- [Linda Shidler's research](#) shows that well-defined coaching cycles, especially when aligned to school-wide goals, yield increased achievement on different measures of assessment compared to looser, more ambiguous instructional coaching activities. The “type and quality of the interactions,” she explains, matter more than the amount of time one is engaged in coaching.
- Teachers have remarked that engaging in coaching cycles has improved student engagement in their classrooms. They have also said that they implemented more new literacy strategies with the support of coaches, according to a [study by Kelly Feighan and Elizabeth Heeren](#).
- In [Diane Sweeney's research](#) on the student-centered coaching cycle model, student proficiency on learning targets improved from an average of 5% in the coaching pre-conference to an average of 73% in the coaching post-conference.
- My own coaching feedback surveys with teachers revealed that teachers who engage in individual coaching cycles are more likely to say that coaching improved learning for their students and that they could sustain using new teaching practices in the classroom in the long term.




What should I do now?

If you're an instructional coach, here are three ways you can prioritize coaching cycles:

- 1. Consider creating a coaching menu.** The menu can focus on supporting a few school-wide goals. Use it to engage individual teachers in individual coaching cycles. I used a simple Google form that allowed teachers to share their goals for students and coaching actions they believed would help us collaborate well. If you want to learn more about creating your own coaching menu, check out [“The Digital Coaching Menu: Four Reasons Why You Need One.”](#) a post I wrote on the topic.
- 2. Audit your time.** Record all your activities for a week and make a chart to see where you are spending your time. Strive to dedicate at least 50% of your time to coaching cycle work. Ask your supervisor for help if you need it.
- 3. Advocate for time to coach.** Share this eBook with your administrator, direct supervisor, or team. Discuss how support for students and teachers in your school would be strengthened if your work were firmly centered in coaching cycles.

Coaching cycles are the bridge over the knowing-doing gap for many teachers. Instructional coaches are in a unique position to impact student learning based on their capacity to offer contextualized, ongoing professional learning for those they serve. Bringing coaching cycles to the focus of coaching work will have lasting benefits for students, educators, and the communities we serve. **TLG**



Beyond the bowl of chocolates: How to build trust in instructional coaching relationships

Kelly Cardenas, Jenna Talos, and Trina Barton

In the realm of instructional coaching, trust is the linchpin that holds together the transformative journey a coach and teacher go on together. While having a bowl of chocolates at your desk to share with the teachers you work with may be charming (and certainly has its place), the essence of building trust has to go far beyond mere gestures.

Building trust—real trust—in an instructional coaching relationship requires embodying qualities that resonate deeply with teachers so that you can create a foundation of partnership, reliability, consistency, and confidentiality. These are the true “chocolates” that invite teachers into a space of growth and learning. As our colleague Lindsay Deacon and Angela Scotto Harkness say in their book, [*The EduCoach Survival Guide*](#), “without trust, there could be no coaching.”

Equally vital are the intangible elements that serve as a metaphorical bowl, cradling and supporting your trust-building endeavor. Warmth, character, and stewardship provide the vessel in which these essential

qualities are held, nurturing a climate of trust that fosters genuine collaboration and development.

Let's look at all of those elements—partnership, reliability, consistency, confidentiality, warmth, character, and stewardship—as you consider your role as an instructional coach.

Partnership: Co-creating the journey

It is important that coaches and teachers approach their interactions as partnerships, not hierarchical relationships.

Involving the teachers you work with in decision-making, seeking their input, and valuing their expertise during joint planning sessions taps into a teacher's agency and helps them begin to trust you: their coach.

Partnerships also encourage active participation from teachers. As Lindsay and Angela explain, “If coaches don't really get to know the teachers in their school and learn what's important to them, the impact of coaching will be less effective.” The more often coaches can tailor their approach to meet each teacher's unique needs, preferences, and goals, the more impactful the relationship will be. Showing that you understand and care about a teacher's circumstances demonstrates compassion and improves the partnership.

Reliability: A pillar of dependability

In strong partnerships, both members are responsible for reliability. Without reliability, it's difficult to build trust, in any kind of relationship. If a car is unreliable, for example, it still runs, but perhaps not always when it's needed most. The owner might find other methods of transportation when they absolutely must be somewhere at a certain time—methods that might be costly, inefficient, or exhausting. Similarly, teachers will look elsewhere for advice or support if their coach does not remain committed to the coaching relationship. While these other places might serve a teacher's short-term goals by providing quick solutions, long-term change to their teaching practice is less likely to occur.

Coaching is most impactful when teachers and coaches work together throughout a [coaching cycle](#). This cycle begins with coaches and teachers setting expectations for themselves and for the relationship. Establishing clear guidelines for what the coaching sessions will look like, where they'll take place, and what the responsibilities of each person will be needs to occur within the first few sessions. Then, both parties need to stick to their guidelines if they want to build reliability.

The use of [protocols](#) and checklists for meetings helps ensure teachers and coaches come to meetings prepared and ready to focus on the day's tasks. When teachers can predict what coaching sessions will look and feel like, they know they can rely on the sessions to be productive and useful. Teachers want to know that the time spent in instructional coaching sessions will be valuable and won't add to their already lengthy to-do list.

Consistency: The backbone of trust

Many of the behaviors that demonstrate reliability lead to consistency. Coaches and teachers must intentionally practice reliability for consistency to occur.

Choosing to use the same meeting protocols and sticking to the agenda during coaching sessions removes confusion and inefficiency. When coaches provide resources, feedback, and further assistance, and when they then follow through in the agreed-upon timeframe repeatedly, they demonstrate their commitment to the shared goal of the coaching relationship. The consistency of engaging in coaching sessions week after week, without interruptions or cancellations, shows that both coach and teacher have prioritized coaching and the benefits it provides for teachers and their students.

Confidentiality: Building safe spaces

Perhaps the greatest quality of a successful coaching relationship is confidentiality. Teachers who enter a coaching agreement must be able to share their struggles as well as their successes. (To learn from your mistakes, you must be able to admit those mistakes in the first place, right?) It's difficult for teachers to express disappointment or frustration in their teaching practice if they're worried the information might be shared with the administration or other teachers in the building.

Instructional coaches can communicate their dedication to confidentiality by providing a safe space for coaching sessions. This might mean holding meetings in private spaces within the building, playing background music or white noise to account for thin walls, or using a "do not disturb" sign to let others know a coaching session is taking place.

As an instructional coach, you can also let the teachers you work with know that all coaching conversations will remain private and that it is up to the teacher if they want to share the successes (or struggles) of both their teaching practice and the coaching cycle with others. The coaching relationship is similar to that of doctors and their patients, or attorneys and their clients: confidentiality must always be at the forefront.

Warmth, character, and stewardship: The crucible of trust

While partnership, reliability, consistency, and confidentiality serve as the inviting “chocolates” of instructional coaching, it is your warmth, character, and stewardship that hold it all together. “Right now, teachers need people who care about them more than ever,” Lindsay and Angela explain in [their book](#).


Instructional coaches with warmth create a welcoming environment where teachers feel valued and respected. A coach’s character speaks to the integrity and authenticity that underpins every interaction they have with others. Stewardship embodies your dedication to a teacher’s success and acts as a guiding force throughout your journey.

Chocolate is just the start

Beyond the allure of a bowl of chocolates lies the true heart of instructional coaching: the art of building trust. Through the consistent application of partnership, reliability, consistency, confidentiality, warmth, character, and stewardship, you can pave the way for transformative growth in the teachers you work with. It’s in these intentional actions and genuine connections that trust takes root, creating a fertile ground for teachers to flourish in their professional endeavors.

Instructional coaches can—and should—commit to going beyond the surface, cultivating trust that stands the test of time. **TLG**





4 instructional coaching principles to follow when helping teachers use data

Tara Hardman

It's spring 2021 and everything feels like a mess following COVID-19 school closures. I'm leading a professional learning session at a K-8 school in Colorado where I'm an instructional coach. All staff are huddled in a circle in the library. We are discussing culture and climate data, and it is... uncomfortable. Everyone in the room has their own definition of "data" and their own thoughts on what should be done about the data we have to work with. Just saying the word sparks five different thought-provoking conversations.

I hear a teacher say, "I use data to help me understand my life. If the coffee is hot, I wait to drink it." That comment still stands out to me all this time later because while it did not take away the discomfort, it told me what I needed to know to coach that group of educators effectively: Teachers have a vast knowledge about data and its collection. They have many data points (maybe too many) to analyze in their classroom. The role of an instructional coach is to help make data analysis streamlined, repeatable, and worth the teacher's time. An instructional coach partners with teachers so that when they are looking at data, it's clear what they need to do next.

Here are four principles instructional coaches should follow for effective partnerships with teachers around using data in the classroom.

1. Clarify what data is—and isn't—able to show

The word “data” has become synonymous with numbers and is often used punitively with teachers and students. I think (and I know I’m not alone) that it’s important to move away from using data in that way. It’s simply not as effective as starting on a more positive, productive note.

I encourage you to begin by asking, “How do you currently use data in your classroom?” The process of answering this question is usually surprising to a teacher. They often realize they use data all the time and just need support with collection and analysis.

Listing all the data a teacher collects opens up the conversation and can help you begin to pinpoint the purpose behind everything that’s being gathered. This is where having a clear concept of qualitative versus quantitative data is important. In [chapter 5](#) of the book *Action Research*, J. Spencer Clark, Suzanne Porath, Julie Thiele, and Morgan Jobe break down both types of data and give great ideas on what types to collect in a classroom. Consider sharing it with your teachers.

While partnering with a team of teachers during that 2021 workshop I mentioned, we decided to start off with a quantitative question: We looked at the number of responses to a four-part question on fractions. Later, we tackled a qualitative question: What were the most common responses to that four-part question? Purposely identifying and focusing on both qualitative and quantitative data allowed us to have an in-depth



understanding of where the students were, and it also gave agency to the team to take natural next steps with the data.

During instructional coaching data discussions, aim to clarify what data is and is not with teachers, and to do that in the shortest—yet most impactful—amount of time. Data should be empowering and used with the sole purpose of supporting students in their learning process.

2. Keep things simple

A scientist in a lab tries to control as many variables as they can so they can get accurate data. They know that the more complex an experiment is, the harder it is to analyze and use that data to make any conclusions. A classroom is rife with uncontrollable variables. That's why it's important to keep things simple and choose *one* thing to collect data on. You can add other variables later.

I once coached a teacher who was curious about the potential impact of Margarita Calderón's [seven-step vocabulary method](#), so we did a little experiment. Students took an open answer pre-quiz on a few vocabulary words. The class then did the seven-step vocab process and took the quiz again. Students did this a few times a week and used the vocab in a culminating project. This data we gathered was simple, but it opened up many conversations about the role vocabulary plays in teaching content. It also gave us qualitative data, because we looked for patterns in the responses, and it gave us some quantitative data, because we could see the big picture of “right” and “wrong” patterns.

One of the primary benefits of instructional coaching is providing teachers with an ally who can help create repeatable structures that have easy organization and a clear purpose. Keeping data use simple will aid you in doing just that.

3. Use a data protocol

It is tempting when working with teachers to skip using data protocols. They can feel too bulky or restrictive. As a coach, I like to look at protocols as a means to keeping us focused on the work that needs to be done.

A data protocol will help you look at student data as objectively as possible, and it will also honor the teacher's time. Provide a data protocol unless the teacher you're working with already has one they use. I honed my data analysis skill set by using the data protocols in [Driven by Data: A Practical Guide to Improve Instruction](#). The book includes protocols

for before and after data collection as well as for action planning. I often adapt the book's protocols depending on what stage of the data process a teacher is in.

At NWEA®, we also use Nancy Love's [data driven dialogue protocol](#) from her book [*Using Data/Getting Results: A Practical Guide for School Improvement in Mathematics and Science*](#). This protocol provides a clear structure while also using open-ended questions that keep you in each phase of data processing.

The more you use a data protocol, the more it will flow for you and the teachers you support. I encourage you to choose a protocol and play with it.

4. Repeat

Data partnerships should not be one and done. There is always more data, and there are always more questions to ask. That is not to say that using data should become a heavy burden for teachers. But when it's done right, teachers will realize that data use is ongoing. Having the right support will help them follow a consistent process and will uplift them and their work in the classroom.

In conclusion

With instructional coaching, a coach's role in data partnerships is to guide a teacher through clear and simple processes that help the data come to life and be useful. The teacher's role is to engage with data processes that can help create more insight into their classroom and their students. Whether you're an instructional coach or a teacher, remember: If the coffee is hot, wait. **TLG**



5 crucial instructional coaching insights for principals

Kelly Cardenas

As education landscapes continue to evolve following COVID-19 school closures, the role of instructional coaches has emerged as a pivotal force in fostering teacher development and enhancing student outcomes. Principals, as the leaders of their schools, play a crucial role in understanding and supporting instructional coaching initiatives.

In the pages that follow, I'll delve into five essential insights every principal should grasp about the instructional coaching role to ensure its effectiveness in their school community.

1. Clear communication is powerful—and non-negotiable

Communication forms the bedrock of successful educational endeavors, and the instructional coaching role is no exception. Prioritize clear and transparent communication to articulate the purpose and goals of instructional coaching in your school. By providing a comprehensive understanding of how coaching aligns with your school's broader vision and mission for student success, you set the stage for a unified and purpose-driven approach to teaching and learning.

Clear communication is not just about disseminating information; it's about fostering a shared understanding among all stakeholders. It is

imperative that you clearly emphasize how your coaches contribute to a culture of continuous improvement and professional growth. When everyone is on the same page, the coaching process becomes more effective, and the entire school community can rally behind the shared goal of student achievement.

Here are a few specific things you could use to support clear communication around instructional coaching:

- **Coaching handbook or guide.** Provide a comprehensive coaching handbook to all stakeholders. It should include testimonials and success stories and outline coaching principles, roles and responsibilities, expectations, and benefits.
- **Visual roadmaps and infographics.** Enhance visibility and understanding by creating visually appealing roadmaps and infographics that represent the coaching journey, objectives, and milestones.
- **Interactive workshops and training sessions.** Engage teachers and staff through hands-on workshops, using real examples to illustrate how instructional coaching aligns with your school's vision and contributes to professional growth.
- **Regular feedback surveys and reflection sessions.** Continuously improve coaching communication by implementing regular feedback surveys and hosting reflection sessions to gather insights and suggestions from teachers.

2. Collaborative relationships go a long way

One of the key ingredients for successful instructional coaching is collaborative and trusting relationships. Principals should actively encourage an environment where instructional coaches and teachers work together as partners in the pursuit of educational excellence. This collaborative approach fosters a positive school culture that values continuous improvement and professional growth. Conversely, coaching should not be utilized—or viewed—as a punishment, or the result of inadequate teacher performance. Doing so can create distrust or animosity toward the coach and instructional coaching in general.

To achieve a supportive and positive culture that helps teachers and their coaches build strong relationships, there's a lot you can do. Some of the things I've found to be most useful are facilitating team-building activities, establishing regular communication channels, and encouraging an open dialogue between coaches and teachers.

When teachers feel supported and valued, they are more likely to engage in the coaching process with enthusiasm, leading to a more impactful and meaningful professional development experience. For more on this topic, read [“Beyond the bowl of chocolates: How to build trust in instructional coaching relationships”](#) and [“5 grounding tenets for successful instructional coaching relationships.”](#)

3. Teacher support should be tailored, with differentiation in mind

Teachers are a diverse group with unique strengths, needs, and teaching styles. Instructional coaches must recognize and respond to this diversity by providing differentiated support. As a principal, you can work with your coaches to ensure that professional development opportunities are tailored to the varied needs of your teaching staff.

By conducting needs assessments or surveys, you can gather valuable insights into the specific areas where your teachers seek support and improvement. This information can guide the instructional coaching process, ensuring that it addresses the individual goals and challenges of each teacher. Differentiation in support not only enhances its relevance but also contributes to a more personalized and impactful professional development experience.



4. Data-informed decision-making must be emphasized

Data is a powerful tool in education, and instructional coaches are well-positioned to leverage it for informed decision-making. Instructional coaches play a vital role in analyzing student achievement data, collaborating with teachers to identify trends, and implementing data-driven instructional strategies. In your role as principal, you can stress the importance of using data to guide instructional strategies and professional development initiatives.

By incorporating data into the coaching process, you'll ensure decisions are grounded in evidence, leading to more effective teaching practices and improved student outcomes. Additionally, try to encourage a culture where assessment data is viewed not only as a measure of student performance but also as a valuable resource for shaping instructional approaches and fostering continuous improvement.

For more on data and how it can be used to support teachers in their practice, see [“4 instructional coaching principles to follow when helping teachers use data”](#) and [“7 steps to empowered data coaching.”](#) If your school tests with [MAP® Growth™](#) or [MAP Reading Fluency™](#), I invite you to also learn about our [professional learning workshops on using assessment data](#) in the classroom.

5. Resource allocation and professional development can't be overlooked

For instructional coaching to thrive, principals must allocate resources effectively. This includes providing coaches with sufficient time, training, and materials to carry out their roles successfully. Do your best to recognize the importance of investing in professional development opportunities for instructional coaches, keeping them abreast of the latest educational research and innovations.

Collaborative discussions between principals and coaches can also identify any barriers or challenges that may hinder the effectiveness of coaching initiatives. Adequate resource allocation demonstrates a commitment to the value of instructional coaching and underscores its significance in your broader educational mission.

Learn more

Instructional coaching is a dynamic and transformative force in education, and as a principal, you play a pivotal role in ensuring its success. By embracing clear communication, fostering collaborative relationships, supporting differentiation, emphasizing data-informed decision-making, and allocating resources effectively, you can unlock the full potential of instructional coaching in your school and champion a culture of continuous improvement, which will benefit both teachers and students alike.

To learn more about instructional coaching services offered through NWEA, visit [our website](#). I also encourage you to read the following *Teach. Learn. Grow.* blog posts for additional ideas on how to support effective instructional coaching in your school:

- [“3 ways quality instructional coaching impacts teacher efficacy”](#)
- [“3 key questions to measure instructional coaching effectiveness”](#)
- [“4 key conditions for making the most of instructional coaching cycles”](#)
- [“4 conditions for maintaining instructional coaching success at the end of the school year”](#)
- [“4 ways teachers can learn from one another”](#) **TLG**

About the authors



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