



Coaching is a technique for turning teaching talent into student achievement.

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The Case for **Coaching**

by Mike Rutherford

Skillful instruction drives student achievement. Simply stated, a teacher's pedagogy (skill in the art and science of teaching) clearly and directly affects the rate and degree of student learning. Since pedagogy is a skill-set, not merely a knowledge base, it is best developed through practice with feedback. Like all skills...serving a tennis ball, riding a bike, painting a landscape...improvement is realized through repeated practice with skillful feedback. The act of providing this skill-developing feedback is what we call coaching.

Coaching, in essence, is a technique for turning teaching talent into student achievement by developing the teacher's skill-set for instruction. It drives skillful instruction, which drives student achievement. That's the case for coaching.

Coaching by school administrators

It sounds logical, convincing, even simple, doesn't it? However, in the day-to-day reality of school leadership, the case for coaching is not so simple. Here's why...

School administrators are busy. They get up early, stay late, and juggle long to-do lists. Hundreds of interactions, many interruptions and multiple sightings of Murphy's Law occur in a typical day. This overwhelming work environment produces a predictable survival response. To make it, school administrators quickly become ruthless time managers. They learn to practice "educational triage," optimizing their attention, energy, and resources to produce the most good for the most people in the least amount of time, being careful not to waste valuable time on questionable endeavors.

From an "educational triage" perspective, the case for coaching is not strong... some reasons:

1. Becoming a skillful coach requires a good deal of up-front learning and practice, which takes a good bit of time while providing little initial benefit.
2. In early trials as a novice coach the process is awkward and may not be at all rewarding.
3. In practice, coaching an entire faculty requires a large and regular investment of time, again with delayed results.

So school administrators find themselves in a dilemma. What they know to be important in the reality of the long-term does not seem sufficiently urgent in the reality of the short-term. When these two realities send conflicting messages it is the short-term reality that commands more attention.



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A lesson from aviation...Pilots, when under stress and disoriented, must fight the natural tendency to believe their senses and instead, fly according to their instruments. To believe the short-term reality reported by their senses can be a fatal mistake. Believing in the reality of their instruments, is a lifesaving decision.

Here are some truths about the long-term reality of coaching. When current reality seems to suggest otherwise, remember these long-term benefits. They can provide an "instrument check" to confirm one's direction and encouragement to choose the important over the urgent.

The case for coaching...

1. Coaching develops the innate and latent talents of teachers. The process is positive and rewarding to both teacher and coach.
2. When coaching topics are well-chosen, a teacher's growth can be fast and significant, resulting in immediate gains in student achievement.
3. Great teachers seek out schools where a professional, coaching culture exists. Poor teachers seek to leave such a school.
4. Schools where coaching is skillfully employed tend to keep their excellent teachers longer and lose fewer to transfers.
5. Coaching develops capacity at the school's technical core, pedagogy. Future programs and initiatives will be more successful with improved pedagogical skills.
6. Coaching increases the ability to recognize good instruction, enhancing interviewing and hiring skills.
7. Coaching affirms a teacher's sense of worth.
8. The ability to skillfully develop another person's skills is tremendously satisfying and rewarding to the coach.
9. Administrators with good coaching skills are seen as less adversarial and more collaborative.
10. As administrators advance in their careers...coaching skills look great on a resume and are compelling in an interview.