WHAT IS MATH COACHING? WHAT IS NOT MATH COACHING?

By: Multiple Contributors

All Learners Network (ALN) facilitators Erin Oliver and Tara Trudo pull from their experiences as classroom teachers, interventionists, math specialists, and coaches to collaborate on this basic coaching primer.

Coaches play an important role in schools. They provide the middle leadership that is crucial to maintaining a productive learning environment. They are often a trusted instructional leader in a building or district. Coaches have the opportunity to connect with teachers and students to move learning forward for all parties.

Job descriptions for this important role vary greatly between districts. The tasks coaches are asked to take on in their systems also vary greatly. Given the diversity of what is expected of a coach, All Learners Network (ALN) decided to brainstorm what we think are the critical aspects of coaching.

First and foremost, math coaches need to focus the majority of their cognitive energy on supporting the following three things in their system:

1. Helping teachers interpret data
2. Improving pedagogy (responsive decision making)
3. Supporting intervention

At ALN, we believe in supporting systems to develop a coaching model for supporting teacher's instructional decisions. Today we are going to uncover what we believe coaching should be and also what it should not be.

WHAT IS NOT COACHING?

Coaching is not treating teachers as a category. It does not mean talking about teachers as one entity. We don't have low teachers and high teachers. Teachers are not the problem.

Coaching is not being permissive with harmful teaching practices. It is not forgetting to tackle the mindsets behind the practices. It is not disregarding when an instructional decision has a negative impact.

Coaching is not problem-solving through telling, especially with canned responses or lots of jargon. The job of a coach is not to show them how it's done.

Coaching is not looking at data in a telling way. It is not drawing conclusions and telling teachers about their standardized testing data. It is not just looking at percentages.

Coaching is not sharing a long list of resources. Coaching is not telling examples from your own teaching experiences. Coaching is not doing the planning for teachers.

Coaching is not doing all the teaching. It does not mean taking over all of a balanced math block.

WHAT IS COACHING?

Coaching is relationship building. It is understanding the strengths and needs of the teachers you are working with. It is believing in a teacher's capacity to improve their practice and make changes. It requires honoring a teacher's experience and expertise. The relationship needs to get to the point where both parties are comfortable being both honest and curious.

Coaching is problem-solving. It is working together to identify problems and using a rapid cycle of inquiry to solve problems of practice. It is asking questions that help teachers examine their practice. It is reflecting back the positive things you are seeing while always demonstrating a growth mindset. It is acknowledging the complexity of the teacher's craft while modeling an unwavering belief that every student can be a capable, confident problem solver in their math classrooms.

Coaching is looking at data as part of a team. It is teaching others to view data as a useful form of feedback. It is using formative assessment in an ongoing process. It means sitting with teachers and sorting student work. It is noticing the positive things kids are showing and working together to identify the next steps.

Coaching is co-planning. It means taking what you discovered from looking at classroom data and student work and planning side by side with the teachers. It means figuring out together how we can honor what kids know and help them go deeper with purposeful planning of launches, main lessons, and menu options. It honors inquiry instruction by pre-planning important questions that will help center students as the thinkers and doers of the math throughout the balanced math block.

Coaching is co-teaching. It can mean taking on part of a balanced math block to model a specific skill or strategy. It can look like taking turns with teachers and being another set of eyes and ears to make sure strategies are being listened to and not listened for. It means showing up when math instruction is happening to help model asking, not telling.

We hope you use this list as a reminder about what good coaching is and what coaching isn't. It can be easy to forget about the most important parts of being a coach, especially without a clear job description. On the days that we are tired or frustrated, it is easy to stray from best practices. Good coaching is hard work.

Remember that as a coach, you travel beside teachers, not in front of them.