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Research Brief IV

Gaining traction through professional coaching

Center for Educational Leadership and Highline School District

A qualitative analysis of instructional improvement initiatives

CENTER FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP
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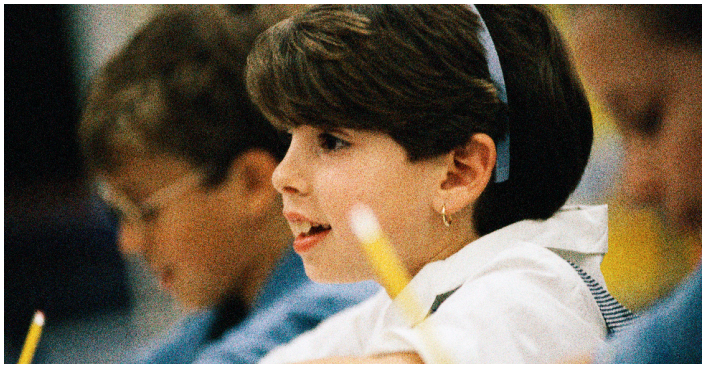
An examination of the theory of action of the Center for Educational Leadership (CEL) and research regarding its work in partnership with school districts is being conducted by the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy at the University of Washington College of Education. This publication, the fourth in a series to summarize the research, presents findings from a qualitative analysis by Chrysan Gallucci and Beth Boatright.

Coaching is now widely understood to enhance performance beyond the athletic field, court, or track. Coaches in the business office, the boardroom, and the classroom change behavior by observing behavior. They ask questions that prompt people to analyze their own purposes and actions, offer suggestions for improvements, and after allowing time for them to act on new insights and learning, return to ask follow-up questions: What did you do? What did you learn?

Coaching as a strategy to improve classroom instruction has been embraced by Highline School District through its partnership with the Center for Educational Leadership (CEL). Teachers at elementary schools and high schools[1] have been reflecting on what happens in their classrooms either by teaching side-by side with a coach, or by observing a coach in action with another teacher and collecting insights to take back to their classrooms. Researchers at the University of Washington, Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, have been observing the interaction that occurs and asking their own set of questions: What does coaching look like? What is the role of the building principal and central office in supporting coaching? What are the impacts of coaching?

Based on interviews, observations, and document reviews, the researchers concluded that Highline "is gaining traction in terms of system-wide instructional improvement in schools and classrooms." The partnership's early emphasis on developing instructional leadership for both central office and school leaders has also proved beneficial. Data collected from five research sites between September 2005 and December 2006 reveal that school leaders have played an important role in guiding and supporting growth for teachers and coaches.

[1] Research activities were concentrated at elementary and high schools. Highline has also invested in instructional improvement at middle schools.



This publication summarizes the findings from qualitative research, including:

- the evolving partnership between the district and CEL,
- embedded coaching at elementary schools, high schools, and summer school,
- support for coaching from school principals and central office leaders,
- impacts of coaching on student achievement and professional learning, and
- challenges of bringing instructional improvement to scale.

The evolving partnership between Highline School District and CEL

Highline School District and CEL have worked together since 2003 to improve student performance and close the achievement gap, employing a theory of action that targets efforts at the whole system (See Fig. 1, CEL Theory of Action). Through seminars, leadership meetings, and coaching, central office leaders and school building principals have learned how to recognize powerful instruction and how to support teachers in improving

their practice. Teachers have worked with CEL consultants and coaches to develop their content knowledge of reading and math along with their instructional skills. While continuing to support these strategies, Highline intensified the level of attention to classroom instruction in 2005 by contracting with CEL for "embedded" coaching in schools. Highline Assistant Superintendent Carla Jackson believes this form of professional development delivers more results for the district compared to other structures: "I don't think we can go back. Our principals are starting to say, 'That experience just doesn't measure up.'"

Embedded coaching at elementary schools, high schools, and summer school

CEL coaching takes different forms depending on where it is delivered: elementary school, high school or summer school.

The elementary delivery model is called the Elementary Studio/ Residency Project and distinguishes between the "studio" teacher whose class becomes a studio where others observe the interaction between the teacher, the students, and the consultant in a demonstration lesson, and the "residency" teacher who participates in a pre-conference and debrief of the lesson and then tries on the work back in his/her own classroom. The studio teacher, residency teacher, principal, and literacy coaches are all part of the studio school team; they are paired with a team from a residency school composed of residency teachers, literacy coaches and the principal. Observation of demonstration lessons and debriefing of those lessons occur in half-day sessions where members of both teams are joined by a central office leader and a central office literacy coach (See Table 1 and Table 2).

Figure 1. CEL Theory of Action

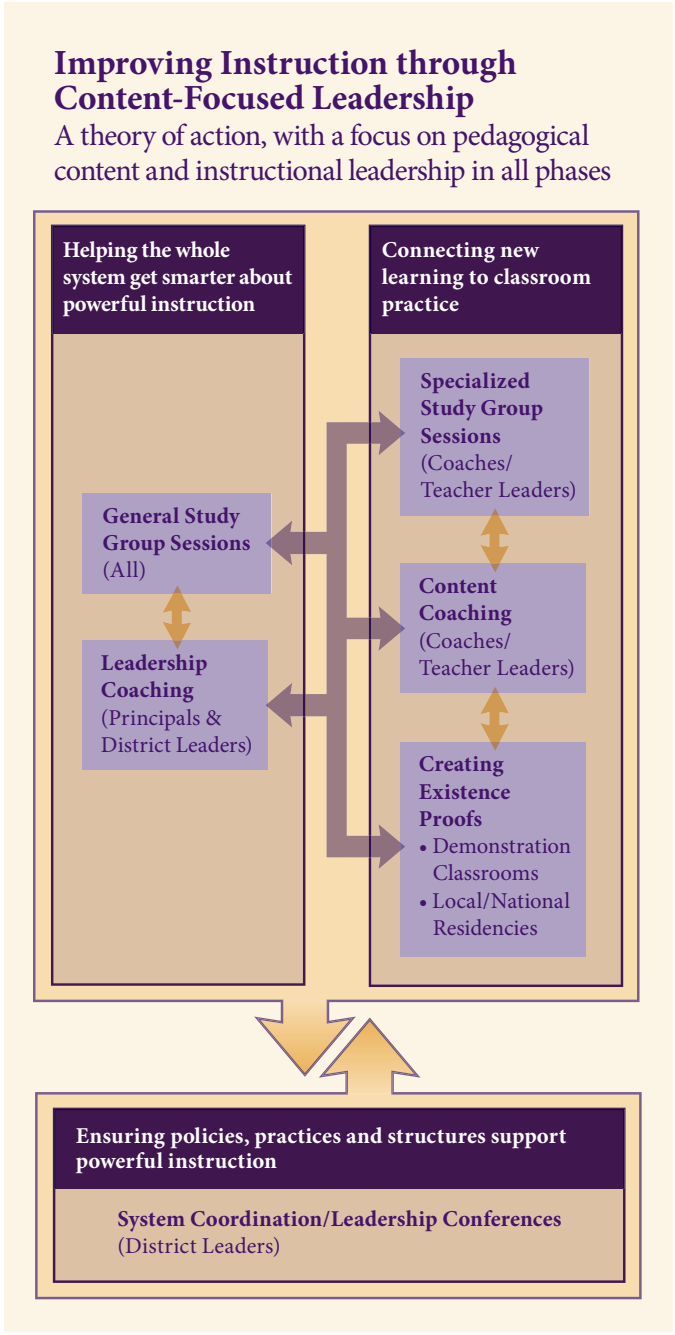


Table 1. Design of the Elementary Studio/Residency Project

Studio School	Responsibilities
Studio focus teacher and his/her students	• Select content for coaching sessions • Plan and model lessons with students alongside CEL consultant • Debrief lessons
Residency teacher	• Observe and debrief studio lesson • Put lessons learned into practice in his/her classroom • Debrief efforts with CEL consultant
Literacy coach (1-2)	• Select content for coaching sessions with studio teacher • Observe model lessons; participate as literacy coach in model lessons
Principal	• Select studio focus teacher and other participants • Participate in planning content for coaching sessions • Observe model lessons • Debrief with CEL consultant and others • Plan next steps with teachers and coach that will build capacity throughout the school

Residency School	Responsibilities
Residency teachers (1-2)	• Observe and debrief studio lesson • Put lessons learned into practice in his/her classroom • Debrief efforts with CEL consultant and others in the large group
Literacy coaches (1-2)	• Observe and debrief studio lesson
Principal	• Observe and debrief studio lesson while considering their own school setting • Plan next steps with teachers and coach that will build capacity throughout the school
Central Office	**Responsibilities**
Central office leader	• Observe and debrief studio lesson • Record key events and summarize sessions
Central office literacy coach	• Observe and debrief studio lesson • Develop next steps to support the building coach

Table 2. Highline/CEL Capacity-Building Structures for Learning

Learning Environment	Participants	Content	Frequency	Typical Activities
District Leadership Seminars	Central office leaders Principals Literacy coaches CEL consultant CEL project director	Leadership for powerful instruction, powerful instructional content and pedagogy in reading, mathematics, writing	One day per month	Large group presentation by CEL consultant, small group discussions, demonstration lessons with Highline students, standards-based lesson planning
Building Coaches Seminars	Elementary directors District literacy coaches Building literacy coaches CEL consultant	Powerful instructional content and pedagogy, instructional coaching models	One day per month	Whole group work with CEL consultant, demonstration lessons, small group discussions
Summer School	Selected literacy coaches Principals Teachers CEL consultants	Instructional coaching practice, powerful instructional practice (literacy and math), "workshop" models for literacy	4-5 weeks with various numbers of days of CEL support	Job-embedded coaching for teachers and coaches Lesson planning, classroom coaching, and demonstration lessons
Elementary Studio/ Residency Project	Classroom teachers Building coaches Principals District literacy coach Elementary director CEL consultant	Instructional leadership, powerful literacy instruction, instructional coaching	2005-2006: 6 half days per building 2006-2007: 6-10 half days per building (literacy)	Pre-conference, lesson analysis with demonstration lessons, post-conference
Secondary Embedded Coaching	Teachers Lead teachers and part-time coaches Principals (as possible) CEL consultants	Best practices for secondary literacy instruction, creating authentic learning experiences for high school students	Range from 7-30 days per year by school	Coaching cycles with joint planning sessions

The researchers offered an in-depth example of the coaching process, including exchanges that occurred between the studio teacher and the CEL consultant, reflections of the studio teacher about her own learning, insights of the studio teacher's literacy coach drawn from observing the demonstration lessons, and changes in the studio teacher's practice. A condensed version with an abbreviated timeline follows:

- 2003-2005: Elementary teacher Caryn resists the idea of coaching: "Why are we taking good teachers out of the classroom and having them coach teachers who probably already know what they're doing?"
- Summer 2005: Approached by her principal, Caryn agrees to be the studio teacher. At first she finds "being the center of attention…was really, really uncomfortable."
- The CEL consultant works with students in Caryn's classroom while Caryn observes.
- January 2006: Caryn tries out strategies she observes and agrees to be videotaped. Her studio team views a video of her conference with a student. Caryn debriefs with the CEL consultant, who asks: "What was your intention when you conferenced with Tommy?" Caryn: "I don't think I have enough intention. I just want to talk to the kid."
- Caryn reflects on the exchange, visits another teacher's classroom, and tries some new ideas. She begins reading professional literature with her coach.
- Sheryl, the school's literacy coach, reflects on what she has observed, and begins to coach Caryn on how to confer with students.
- April 2006: The studio session observers see a new video of Caryn demonstrating how she conferences with a student, with Sheryl coaching at her side.
- May 2006: Caryn "eagerly invites a group of strangers into her classroom to show them how she conducted individual reading conferences with children."

The delivery model for coaching at the high school includes some of the same elements as the Elementary Studio/Residency Project: a CEL consultant who works with literacy teachers; the learning cycle of planning lessons, observation or co-teaching of that lesson, and a debrief to inform future practice; and the designation of one teacher as the focus teacher of study. The model differs in that schools are not paired, all of the literacy teachers in the school participate in the coaching/observation cycle, and the coaching cycles range from two-four full days per school.

This model represents a shift for Highline from the practice of having literacy coaches in every secondary school, and learning that these coaches were good "helpers" but not necessarily "expert teachers of content knowledge and pedagogy." After observing the rapid improvement of a cadre of 9th grade teachers who had been working with a CEL consultant, district leaders increased their investment in coaching services by "trading in the literacy coach" at some of the high schools so that more teachers could benefit from CEL coaching. The professional development model at the high school, researchers explained, "shifted from a school-based 'coaching model' to one of building lead teachers through embedded coaching."

Central office leaders are pleased with the "positive and relatively rapid" changes they are seeing at the high school. According to the director of secondary schools, "The most powerful work has been Jenn [CEL consultant] working directly with teachers…And so Jenn's just been able to move practice, you know, in really identifiable ways."

Summer school in Highline is an opportunity for both student and teacher learning. Lessons learned from the use of a CEL summer school coaching model for Tyee High School as early as 2003 informed the development of a model in 2006 that included classroom coaching, lead teachers paired with less experienced teachers from the same school, and after-school sessions to debrief lessons and plan the next lesson. The opportunity for professional development did not end with the teachers delivering instruction. Teachers from other schools observed these summer school "studios" as did central office leaders.

District leaders took a page from both the high school summer school experience and the Elementary Studio/Residency Project to create an embedded coaching model for elementary programs in summer 2006. Over 70 teachers were paired to work together in classrooms and participate in these learning activities:

- *Sessions led by CEL consultants prior to the start of school and twice a week during the four-week summer session*
- *Visits to the classrooms of other teachers*
- *Observations of model lessons conducted by the CEL consultant, followed by debriefing*
- *Instruction provided by literacy coaches related to the content focus three days a week at the school site*
- *Coaching conversations, demonstrations, and lesson planning at each site*
- *Daily observations and feedback from teaching partners.*

Support for coaching from school principals and district leaders

As illustrated above, school principals and central office leaders are active participants in coaching/learning activities. Researchers found evidence that the level of involvement goes far beyond participation in observations and discussions. Using Caryn's elementary principal as one example, they noted his leadership practice included selecting the studio/residency participants, supporting individual and small group learning through dialogue, and reallocating resources originally dedicated for professional development prior to the start of the year to purchase extra days of coaching work. The factors the principal weighed in selecting Caryn to be a studio teacher are revealed in this excerpt:

> *"…if we are ever really going to be successful with the initiative, it couldn't just be with what were often very young people in the profession that maybe haven't seen the cycles of change. So, selecting Caryn was about selecting someone who I thought would be receptive to the work, but who was also veteran enough to have experienced cycles of change. She would be a good test case for how much traction or gravity there really is around this work.*
>
> *She would filter out the faddish aspects of it and she would connect with the pieces that would ring true. And if they ring true to her, she would have the credibility with others to give this another look…."*

At the high school level, principals interpret their role differently from school to school, with some intent on being part of all the classroom observations, others committed to fill in for teachers who leave their classroom to observe other colleagues, and some advocating for the work "from a distance with broad expectations that all teachers will implement the workshop model in their classrooms."

One central office leader was present at each of the 50-plus studio/residency sessions in 2005-06, but again, these leaders moved beyond observation to action, incorporating coaching in summer school professional development at both elementary and high school levels and into plans for the next school year. They also aligned the work taking place in schools and classrooms with leadership seminars for elementary principals by determining that the CEL consultant who provided coaching for the studio/residency sessions would also conduct the leadership seminars.

The impact of coaching on student achievement and professional learning

While the outcome everyone wants to see from a school improvement initiative is an increase in test scores, that outcome is difficult to prove without extraordinary means and highly controlled measurement. The good news for the partnership is that the achievement trend in reading and writing is definitely in the right direction, and the achievement gap in reading is closing for some groups. The researchers were careful not to make causal claims for this improvement, particularly given that the district just introduced specific strategies to improve writing instruction in the academic year when they were conducting their observations. As is true of many districts, Highline is working on multiple fronts to improve student outcomes, introducing a number of variables that can contribute to increases in test scores.

When test scores are disaggregated for low-income students and those with greater means, a promising reduction in the achievement gap between these two groups is apparent for 10th grade students, which "may be related to the investment in embedded coaching at the 9th grade level over a period of several years."

Highline observed other positive trends by noting the progress of different groups:

- The percent of 4th grade English Language Learners meeting standard in reading improved from 26% in 2005 to 46% in 2006. For the same period, the percent of Native English Speakers meeting standard dropped slightly from 87% to 81%. The gap in performance—the difference in the percent of Native English Speakers meeting standard vs. the percent of English Language Learners doing so—narrowed from 61 to 35.
- There was a similar reduction in the achievement gap between 4th grade white students and Hispanic students, with Hispanic students moving from 48% meeting standard in 2005 to 63% in 2006, closing the gap in performance from 39 percentage points to 19 percentage points.

In addition to examining achievement test data, researchers looked and listened for evidence of learning for the education professionals in Highline. They found that some elementary teachers are trying out specific aspects of reading instruction which had been introduced in seminars and demonstration lessons, including "accountable talk, invitational questioning,

Table 3. Change in Achievement Scores by Student Groups

Grade 4	Reading			Writing		
Year	Non Low Income	Low Income	Difference in % points	Non Low Income	Low Income	Difference in % points
2004-05	84.9%	60.0%	24.9	61.8%	39.5%	22.3
2005-06	87.2%	64.5%	22.7	67.1%	42.0%	25.1
Grade 7	Reading			Writing		
Year	Non Low Income	Low Income	Difference in % points	Non Low Income	Low Income	Difference in % points
2004-05	78.0%	48.6%	29.4	67.0%	40.0%	27.0
2005-06	69.0%	36.9%	32.1	65.5%	42.3%	23.2
Grade 10	Reading			Writing		
Year	Non Low Income	Low Income	Difference in % points	Non Low Income	Low Income	Difference in % points
2004-05	75.4%	54.7%	20.7	66.0%	44.7%	21.3
2005-06	78.5%	64.1%	14.4	71.7%	57.6%	14.1

Comparison charts developed by Highline School District and reported by the Panasonic Foundation in *A System of Learners from Superintendent to Kindergarten*, December 2006.

conferring with individual students, and use of student data to guide instructional decisions." Using data such as running records and benchmark testing has prompted some teachers to take a second look at how they were teaching. In addition to learning more about these aspects of instruction, literacy coaches are learning how to coach teachers in the moment and in public, providing observations in real time. One literacy coach described the studio work as a challenge to get better:

> *And I think that is a new mindset for a lot of teachers. They always think of it in terms of, 'Here comes another program.' But I think the whole approach to this is not a program. It's how can we refine our craft? How can we get better and add to our knowledge base and be willing to take some risks?*

At the high school, two changes are pronounced: a change in the kind of questions literacy teachers asked their students, and a change in expectations for what students could do. Teachers are asking questions that demonstrate they are moving beyond basic implementation of a literacy program to a deeper understanding of how to improve their practice. "Rather than concerning themselves with the basic structures of Readers/Writers Workshop," researchers observed, "high school teachers who had at least a year of embedded coaching under their belts were able to use the workshop structure to 'fine tune' their language arts instruction."

Teachers also described a change in how they viewed students, most notably as learners rather than as behavioral problems. The use of classroom data prompted them to think differently about

their students' abilities, while the demonstration lessons and classroom coaching helped them see what students can achieve with skilled instruction.

> *So my expectations are so much higher than they ever were before, or could have been before, because I never really had a vision of what my kids are capable of….*

Challenges of bringing instructional improvement to scale

With a view to providing food for thought for Highline leaders, the researchers identified five challenges that are "typical" for districts engaged with instructional reform and that surfaced in these research findings:

- *Keeping instructional reform central among the district's priorities, and communicating a strong and coherent vision of system-wide improvement.* In addition to the CEL partnership, Highline is also focused on developing an accountability system, managing aspects of high school redesign, and rethinking the overall *system*. For the benefit of all practitioners, keeping the core work of education—instructional improvement—central among the district's other priorities is critical.
- *Increased urgency for improvements in math.* Within the arena of instructional improvement, there is competition among subject areas for the limited time a district/school/teacher can devote to professional development. While not abandoning its efforts to improve reading and writing instruction, Highline is also actively engaged in improving math instruction. It takes strong building leadership to translate across priorities and maintain high expectations for change.
- *Professional development for school leaders.* When the district moved resources to schools to provide for embedded coaching and modifications were made to the district leadership seminars, some principals expressed a desire for time to work together on instructional issues. The researchers proposed that "principals at both elementary and secondary levels might benefit from a structure that brings them together for concentrated, job-embedded and externally-guided leadership work."
- *Define all roles with clear expectations.* The roles of building coaches at the elementary level and the studio/residency teachers are not always clearly defined, and their work varies across schools. Role descriptions need to be clear, and set high expectations , especially for teacher leadership. Continued leadership development for principals about how to guide and support capacity building at their schools, seizing upon growing teacher leadership, is needed to address the variation.
- *Competing demands and initiatives.* Related to the challenge of keeping instructional improvement high among district priorities is the challenge of understanding the big picture when there are so many dots—in the form of initiatives, programs, and school reform models— for practitioners to connect. With strong building leadership, the researchers noted, "school staffs can overcome the confusion across initiatives."

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