



Coaching and Mentoring for School Administrators

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ABSTRACT

As educational institutions navigate increasing complexities, the professional development of school administrators has emerged as a critical area of focus. This paper examines the complementary roles of coaching and mentoring in supporting school leaders, emphasizing their distinct yet synergistic contributions to administrative growth. While coaching offers a structured, goal-oriented approach to developing leadership competencies and instructional practices, mentoring fosters long-term personal and professional development through relational engagement and reflective dialogue. Drawing on recent research and qualitative data from new principals, the study underscores the impact of structured support systems on school improvement, leader confidence, and talent retention. Furthermore, it analyzes key skills for effective implementation, highlights the benefits and challenges of both models, and advocates for the creation of a supportive coaching culture within educational environments. The findings reinforce the need for intentional and sustainable coaching and mentoring programs to build adaptive, reflective, and resilient school leaders.

Keywords: Educational leadership, Coaching in education, Mentoring programs, School administration, Professional development, Principal support.

INTRODUCTION

Coaching and mentoring, though often confused, are distinct processes essential for leadership enhancement. Mentoring forms a personal bond where a trusted advisor guides someone in their professional journey, offering valuable feedback and support. This ongoing relationship thrives on reciprocity and can vary in intensity and assistance. In contrast, coaching is a structured method focused on developing specific skills and facilitating future performance. It typically involves one-on-one sessions where an administrator aids someone outside their direct oversight, addressing both technical needs and interpersonal growth. Educational institutions today face numerous challenges and transformations, pushing leaders to embrace innovative strategies for boosting effectiveness and cultivating a culture of continuous professional development. Changing demographics in school districts necessitate a rethink of how individuals ascend to leadership roles. Recent research highlights the impact of coaching and mentoring on personal and professional development, examining effectiveness, performance, and attitudes toward preparation programs. A focus group of 12 first-year principals was formed to provide qualitative insights into the complexities of their leadership roles. The findings, categorized into themes like connectedness, school improvement, and administrator growth, underscore the necessity for formalized coaching and mentoring models. These insights serve to inspire future studies and underscore the significance of collaboration in successful principal transitions [1, 2].

The Role of School Administrators

An administrator is one who acts on behalf of an institution, person, organization, business, or government. School administrators need to be able to cultivate positive relationships with all staff and students, and they need to make themselves available to them at all times. They need to be knowledgeable in both state and federal laws concerning education. Administrators need to understand budgets, hiring and firing procedures, and public relations. The most visible job of the administrator is making the school a safe place for students and staff. Administrators are often called on to hear grievances from both sides. At times, their actions may seem to favor one group over another. Administrators need to work hard to

keep the various groups informed about decisions and procedures. The lines of communication need to be kept open between them and the Board of Education, faculty, students, and parents. The administrator's job is multifaceted. On a daily basis, they need to be able to listen to a teacher's concern about a particular child and help think of ways to remediate problems. Administrators need to enforce policies concerning attendance. Administrators are called upon to discipline students concerning a fight, disrespect to a teacher, or arguing amongst themselves. When students are discovered with drugs or alcohol, the parents need to be called in for a meeting, and necessary procedures need to be laid out for them. Administrators need to be involved in curricular programs, choosing what to teach and how to teach it. School administrators are the public face of their institution, and they actively foster relationships in the community and oversee programs to maintain the public's positive perception and support [3, 4].

Coaching Vs. Mentoring

Although mentoring and coaching are often seen as synonymous, they have distinct differences. Coaching is a continuous, personal-driven process where a certified coach partners with executives to help them achieve specific goals. It focuses on performance improvement, aligning with the executives' insights and self-determination. Coaching may address both personal and work aspects, enhancing overall performance. However, schools adopting a coaching model for teacher development might face disappointment if seen as purely developmental. A coaching culture can foster reflection, collaboration, and professional growth among educators. In contrast, mentoring involves a reciprocal relationship between a mentor and mentee, built on trust and respect, fostering personal and professional growth. Mentoring benefits both mentees and mentors and involves guiding teachers through their development. It's typically a one-time consultation aimed at long-term curricular and non-curricular goals, often leading to heavy workloads for mentoring teachers. It is especially beneficial for inexperienced and new teachers. Some mentoring opportunities are provided by universities, but this approach can lack reflective culture. Mentoring evaluations often critique its effectiveness in bridging teachers' socialization processes. Despite differing methods, coaching and mentoring share the goal of improving professional performance and well-being. Both are integral to developing educators and have long been practiced in schools. While inquiries have focused predominantly on teachers, the needs of administrators in coaching and mentoring remain underexplored. Research has defined these practices, recognizing the different audience groups involved. Coaching and mentoring practices exhibit a dual focus, balancing institutional and teacher development. Observations indicate a necessity for managing controlling, developmental, and sustaining functions while acknowledging that formative assessments pave the way to summative evaluations [5, 6].

Benefits of Coaching for School Leaders

In recent years, coaching and mentoring for school administrators has gained acceptance and interest as valuable strategies to support educational leaders. The literature on coaching and mentoring for educational leaders is limited. Of that research, much of it is focused on new school administrators' needs and offers suggestions for appropriate on-site support strategies. Comparatively, the literature on coaching models or mentoring school administrators once they are employed is sparse. Five peer-reviewed journal articles are referenced. These articles contributed to the knowledge base for this important need and its sustainability. Topics addressed include the context, goals, and impact of the coaching program; the impact of the Emerging Leaders Academy; a model for mentoring new administrators, including specific suggestions; and questions that drive any coaching program. The intention of this literature review is to highlight what the research shows to be needed as well as its limitations and to offer specific areas for further analysis. The coaching program was created as a result of feedback from members and research revealing a national gap in succession planning, particularly for minority leaders at the district level. It included monthly meetings with a capacity-building goal, connection to 67 other future education leaders, expert speakers, and sustained "learning by doing" action research/implemented systems work paired with coaching support. Overall results indicated many positive impacts on both participants and their districts, with particularly notable findings in individual growth in leadership capabilities. Still, districts reported lower gains in systems development, long-term adherence to efforts, and follow-up coaching engagement, especially in the absence of structured, immediate accountability systems. The participants expressed several desires for improvement, including more individualized coaching, greater virtuality, options for smaller group targets meetings, enhanced opportunities for networking and accountability, and expanding the number and types of coach/coachee matches. These needs were subsequently addressed or discussed with coaching participants in Stage One of the process [7, 8].

Benefits of Mentoring for School Leaders

Mentoring offers benefits to both the mentor and the mentee. Mentors should view a mentoring relationship as both an opportunity to teach and an opportunity to learn. Identified by both the mentor and the mentee, were several benefits from the mentoring relationship including: enhancement of leadership skills, affirmation of professional confidence, and developing and retaining talent in administration. With enhancement of leadership skills, the mentor strengthens leadership and coaching skills by working with individuals from different backgrounds. Sunny stated that being a mentor made her reflect on her vision and rejuvenate it. Peter stated that mentoring helps him gather new ideas and reflects on the exciting things happening in education. In affirming confidence, the mentor verbalizes job performance and the ability to manage situations instills strong professional confidence. "You work through things, problem solve, and switch from panic mode to rational. Thinking about how to explain that helps me internalize my own processes," Sunny mentioned. Mentors identified the ability to develop and retain talent in administration as a significant benefit. Watching mentees grow and succeed brings immense joy. Some felt their work would lead to a new administrator, which is returning to the circle. "It's interesting listening to a few of those tell one another, 'You're the last entry in the notebook. You don't want to be here.' And then watch those two become true leaders, think it's not so bad, and fully enter into the craft," Peter observed [9, 10].

Key Skills for Effective Coaching

A key skill for effective coaching is developing instructional capacity, which must support continuous professional development to enhance practice through a cycle of planning, enacting, assessing, and reflection. Close relationships between coaching rates and instructional practices, like higher-order questioning or opportunities to respond, have improved student achievement. Longer planning periods, curriculum support, and strong rapport from the coach to the teacher correlate with the implementation of best practices. Virtual coaching, through modeling or pre-teaching sessions, allows gradual responsibility release for new teachers, who find it relevant and convenient. With effective technology access, virtual coaching can match the effectiveness of live coaching and leave a lasting impact on teaching. However, inconsistencies in applying best practices learned during coaching can hinder student learning. Barriers to effective implementation can arise from various sources, including the principal's unpredictable demands, rigid schedules, and outside distractions. If leaders divert their focus from outcomes, results may stagnate. It often takes time for leaders to identify focus areas, as these can shift over time. Coaching is personalized, reflecting individual goals and unique ways of processing information; some individuals prefer direct, candid feedback, while others need more gentle guidance, shaped by initial communication agreements. Stronger relationships foster openness to direct feedback about behaviors. High-impact questions (HIQs) can aid in identifying areas for professional growth by prompting reflection on decision-making and solution creation. Leaders who integrate HIQs into their practices are more likely to engage in meaningful dialogue focused on improvement, understanding diverse perspectives, and increasing accountability. Consequently, many leaders adopt new behaviors through coaching and reflective questioning, leading to innovative ways of collaborating with their teams and adapting to changing workloads [11, 12].

Key Skills for Effective Mentoring

Mentoring and coaching do not require extensive degrees of expertise. The best way to help someone is to walk beside them and ask questions that allow them to be self-reflective and develop their knowledge, skills, and competencies. That opportunity is sometimes recognized just in time, at other times, it's missed. Whatever the situation, crucial learning occurs frequently diurnally. The key is to recognize it and use it well. It's worth it. As a whole, mentoring for school-based coaches does not have to be complex and lengthy. Whatever the coach might want to do could be done in 10 minutes or so, and they need to think about what to do while observing the team and players. Contrary to requiring lengthy periods of time, mentoring clarifies and simplifies the question, and accordingly minimizes unnecessary elaboration. It focuses on fine-tuning what is actually a complex and dynamic context without complexity. It's worth thinking of Blake's meme: "The more people talk about this, the less I understand it. It's so simple." Even one hour-long mentoring discussion on a school-based coach would be a great meeting, not only for the school-based coach but also for the mentors themselves. Coaches in a school-based setting deal with a multitude of pressures every day from coaches, players, parents, principals, and administrators. Balancing all those concerns and creativities while maintaining high quality is not easy. However, there are many opportunities for mentoring, coaching, and feedback in coaching specifically and education broadly. Most every event and nuance in the coaching dynamic is a chance for reflection and discussion. Some are immediately recognized as great moments for analyzing and learning, some are willfully ignored in a

hurry, and some are unrecognizably missed but then come to the fore months later. Either way, every day has innumerable resource opportunities [13, 14].

Creating a Coaching Culture in Schools

Research indicates that 90 percent of teacher development happens on the job, rendering traditional staff development methods mostly ineffective. As a result, coaching has gained popularity as a professional development strategy. When well-executed, coaching can significantly impact teachers' instructional practices, both positively and negatively. It emphasizes day-to-day practices and encourages continuous experimentation and professional discourse, which are crucial for teachers' growth. Coaching fosters collective efficacy by nurturing a culture of collaboration, responsibility, and evidence-based practices, ultimately enhancing teacher development and student achievement. However, implementing coaching is challenging. Interest in instructional coaching has grown, positioning it as a powerful staff development policy gaining global traction. Despite its rapid growth, coaching is not a catch-all solution for educational challenges, and research on its effectiveness is still developing. Questions regarding the sustainability of coaching persist, particularly around creating and maintaining supportive environments. Addressing barriers that novice teachers face in applying best practices learned during coaching can help foster a more productive coaching culture. Coaching can vary in form; instructional coaching focuses on improving teaching methods, while mentoring aids novice teachers in developing skills and adapting to their roles. Effective coaching requires a systemic approach encompassing the whole school to enhance pupil learning through improved teaching practices and sustainable outcomes. Supporting novice teachers through coaching is crucial, as their early experiences significantly influence their careers and student learning. Both novice and veteran teachers can benefit from peer coaching for professional development and a shared understanding of teaching practices [15, 16].

Implementing a Mentoring Program

The expected outcome of the program was to provide administrators with the opportunity to communicate with and be supported by colleagues in parental and professional ways while being provided with assistance in completing paperwork, organizing faculty meetings, conducting professional development, and other general day-to-day duties. Ultimately, the intent was for participants to realize a sense of belonging and acceptance. The preliminary outcome data revealed that mentoring had a significant impact on the subjective experience of becoming an administrator. A mentoring program was established, and a research study of its effectiveness was conducted. This required the completion of a request for proposal for approval. The research question was, "To what extent did the mentoring program for new school administrators change perceptions regarding the subjective experience of becoming an administrator?" The aim was to gather information regarding specific changes in the attitude of participants before and after the implementation of the mentoring program, as well as the specific elements of the program held in highest esteem. The secondary goal was to gather demographic information from participants as well as their current position and district. Five districts were selected to receive a grant for the establishment of mentoring programs for their new administrators. It was decided to use a quantitative research design for the involved districts with a pre- and post-participant survey of response to Likert-type statements concerning the specific question. A cross-sectional design was employed. Common questions were sent to each district to obtain uniform data concerning the extent of any changes and perceptions statewide. A second section of the survey for qualitative review was developed to assist in further identifying the most positive elements of the program [17, 18].

Challenges In Coaching and Mentoring

Administrators who become mentors or who are responsible for overseeing mentoring programs face unique challenges. While they have vast experience and knowledge regarding school operations and personnel issues, they also have concerns regarding confidentiality, time to devote to mentoring, and access to the new administrator's inner working environment. Although all mentoring program participants perhaps struggle with confidentiality issues, the situation is especially acute for mentoring administrators. The knowledge that a new administrator struggles with decision or interpersonal issues raises concerns about that individual's ability to perform crucial job functions. Individuals who work within the same building will likely have the strongest concerns regarding confidentiality. Budding relationships can be complicated by explanations of what can and cannot be shared. District-level administrators may have less concern regarding confidentiality since they operate outside the new administrator's environment but their lack of access makes it difficult to understand the specific context in which that administrator operates. New school administrators often seek help with interpersonal relationships and may fear that others will judge them because they chose to ask for help. Also at this time, new administrators may be disoriented in their position and require time to make sense of their job.

Mentors and new administrators alike may feel that sufficient time is lacking for mentoring meetings, particularly in the weeks right after the start of school. Even if the meetings do occur, the “real” issues may still go unaddressed. Mentoring may have to wait on a new administrator’s understanding of the job situation and on his or her ability to navigate that situation. Professional Jack-of-all-trades positions such as curriculum and instruction directors and technology coordinators may also create conflicts with mentoring if the mentor has supervisor responsibilities that result in limited access to the new administrator. If efforts are not made to include those in these types of positions in mentoring efforts, it is possible that the mentoring program will not succeed [19, 20].

Measuring The Impact of Coaching

Coaching programs based on adult learning principles, a co-constructing process of reflecting-in-action, and technical assistance are most common types of instruction. These definitions of coaching distinguish it from similar terms of mentoring and consulting. Mentoring focuses on personal growth issues, typically between a novice and expert in the same field, benefitting a less experienced teacher. Conversely, instructional coaching concentrates on improving student achievement through changes in pedagogy, based on. Descriptive analyses from interviews and focus groups were done for 35 schools in 7 educational systems from 4 western states. Quantitative evaluations included participant surveys, pre-and post-assessment analysis of classroom observations, and relevant state statistics to measure student performance, graduation rates, and retention and attendance. Systematic observations of coaching services utilized a survey specific to important principles. Each component was delivered with fidelity and ensured the reliability of results for generalization. A valid self-report scale was used to measure outcomes. Up to 100% feedback from all data sources to 4 different types of providers over two years resulted in actionable recommendations. State-level policy recommendations also resulted in one case. The validity and applicability of evidence-based theories, research-based coaching protocols, varied instructional coaching models, and systemic implementation of innovations were suggested as important considerations for future coaching efforts. School administrators with a commitment to improved support for teachers face a complex implementation challenge that requires multi-layered interventions. Co-design and co-facilitation by external agents can promote quality implementation, understanding the local context and building a trust-based partnership. A multi-layered formative evaluation strategy can minimize the burden on program implementers while maximizing its usefulness. Understanding evidence attributes is critical for effective implementation and interpretation of evidence during school improvement efforts [21, 22].

Measuring The Impact of Mentoring

Measuring the impact of mentoring on the leadership development of individuals and the advancement of careers is a challenge for those involved in mentoring programs. Various studies have been conducted to assess the impact of mentoring on leadership development and/or career advancement and success. The papers presented from these studies addressed one of the critical elements in the process of leader development, that of mentoring. One paper outlined a successful program involving mentors for women entering administration. This program has been operating for a number of years in a large southwestern state. The mentoring program is voluntary and imparts the knowledge and skills needed for the leadership of schools. There was general agreement in the data analysis that mentoring enhances the knowledge and skills required for effective educational leadership. The importance of a structured approach to leadership preparation if mentoring was to be effective was noted. In a second paper, the challenges faced by graduate schools of education as they address the preparation of future school administrators in the context of mounting evidence of the need for effective preparation and training for educational leadership were examined. The general principles derived from research to improve leadership development and training programs offered as a framework for evaluating redesign efforts in schools of education. A final paper introduced a qualitative research project extending the first author’s previous work from assessing informal mentoring practices to exploring those of students mentored formally. Overall findings of the study indicated that through mentoring more students became actively involved in the life of the educational administration program. What began as one-on-one conversations and discussions between students and faculty developed into mutually beneficial professional relationships. Faculty and student mentors assisted more students in admitting self and identifying the desires and aims that fueled their commitment to pursue the position of school administrator [23, 24].

Case Studies of Successful Coaching

Instructional coaching has become increasingly popular across school districts and states across the country. In order to address the needs of teachers, this approach has been implemented with the hope of improving the school climate and increasing the use of effective instructional practices, thereby positively

impacting student achievement. Yet, with the growing popularity of instructional coaching, questions arise about what makes an instructional coaching program effective, in terms of developing, implementing, and monitoring one. This descriptive case study examined the journey of the instructional coaching program in an urban, Title I, elementary school, and the perception of a cadre of stakeholders regarding the development, implementation, and monitoring of it. The findings suggest a wide range of factors including quality training, defined roles and responsibilities, high accountability, and a supportive culture, all of which supported the development, implementation, and monitoring of the instructional coaching program. The findings also indicated an equally broad range of elements hindering the development, implementation, and monitoring of the instructional coaching program. Among them were the inability to effectively address tensions between the instructional coach and the school principal and a lack of clarity around the coach-initiated agenda. Also, the absence of an observation tool to monitor Component 6 of the coaching model was identified as problematic. Overall, the findings suggest that the desire to improve teaching and learning through the addition of instructional coaching needs to be packaged with careful consideration for both implementation and acceptance of the process, if the coaching program is to be effective. The impact of instructional coaching initiatives in schools across the United States is examined. There is widespread variation in coaching practices and models and a lack of research on the critical elements of coaching, such as the fidelity of the coaching process relative to improving teacher learning and practice [25, 26].

Case Studies of Successful Mentoring

In a large urban district characterized by its twelve reorganized schools, a pressing effort was underway to recruit capable school leaders amidst the complexities introduced by a newly elected school board member who was advocating for nontraditional approaches to education. The quest for quality candidates proved to be challenging, as experienced educators were proving to be a rare find in this competitive landscape. Meanwhile, there was a burgeoning hope that significant transformation could emerge from drawing in "outsiders"—individuals who offered fresh perspectives and could effectively challenge the entrenched status quo that had prevailed within the district for far too long. Recognizing the unique hurdles that these candidates would face, a carefully crafted strategy became imperative to assist them in navigating the district's notoriously insular political environment and the often turbulent culture present in its schools. To ensure the success of these new hires, the role of mentors was deemed crucial, providing them with immediate support and guidance throughout their critical first year in their new roles. The urban district, which was home to a population numbering fewer than 300,000 residents, was notable for its diverse array of schools that were clustered across a wide spectrum of demographics and socioeconomic backgrounds. However, the success of the mentoring initiative was largely reliant on the commitment and engagement of outgoing school administrations, which were operating under the hopeful assumption that they were effective leaders—an assumption that was regularly called into question. Volunteers who stepped forward for mentorship roles were required to possess a minimum of five years of administrative experience, having previously guided numerous candidates through the often-arduous process of obtaining administrative certificates. These mentors adopted a customer service-oriented mindset, dedicated to working collaboratively with the new leaders to foster an environment of support and mutual growth. To kick off this initiative, a comprehensive workshop was meticulously organized, assigning each mentor specific agenda items that were centered on enhancing employee and school climate. The topics that were selected for discussion were the result of input gathered from mentoring groups and conversations held with mentors from each of the candidate schools. These insightful sessions were strategically scheduled for the month of August, aiming to lay a robust and supportive foundation for mentoring before the academic year commenced. In anticipation of the new school leaders, mentees were sent introductory letters and timely reminders, along with packets filled with important information and personal notes of encouragement that were intended to uplift and motivate them on the days of their initial meetings [27, 28].

Technology In Coaching and Mentoring

During the past decade, advances in instructional coaching, embedded professional development, and social media have augmented the coaching experiences of both coaches and teachers. An executive summary of what has emerged in the field of coaching is presented, followed by glimpses for the future. The construction and development of peer coaching based on the IRDC criteria is an emerging technique that allows peer coaching to take place in support of adult learning needs. It will help fulfill opportunities for individual growth while increasing group capacity to achieve goals. Although there are many opportunities for coaching structural change in school systems, peer coaching warrants further consideration as a method of professional enhancement that is replicable and cost-effective. As the

maturation of virtual peer coaching models continues, it is essential to examine the impact that these techniques may have on individuals and their practice in supporting and mentoring others. Research has demonstrated that students do not necessarily use information communication technology (ICT) appropriately, or to its full advantage when pursuing specific educational objectives. An important aspect of using the technology is to obtain media richness so you can communicate more deeply and comprehensively. By having full audio and visual communication, it is much easier to read body language, respond to facial cues, and interpret messages. This is important for a rich coaching experience. It is important, of course, for the coach to have some rapport with the coachee so you can read cues about whether something is on track and depth of understanding. The richness is diminished when there is reading only of eye information; in the same scenario, 70% of the information is lost and much is misinterpreted [29, 30, 31].

CONCLUSION

Coaching and mentoring are indispensable tools in the professional journey of school administrators, particularly in today's demanding educational landscape. By distinguishing the unique purposes and outcomes of each, educational institutions can better design and implement developmental support systems tailored to the evolving needs of their leaders. Coaching, with its focus on performance and reflective improvement, and mentoring, with its emphasis on relationship-building and long-term growth, together provide a holistic framework for nurturing effective leadership. However, successful implementation demands addressing challenges such as confidentiality, time constraints, and contextual mismatches. By investing in a culture of collaboration, ongoing feedback, and shared leadership learning, schools can ensure their administrators are not only equipped to manage but also inspired to lead transformative change. A structured, thoughtful approach to coaching and mentoring can empower school leaders to foster environments where educators thrive and student outcomes improve.

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