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What Is Coaching?

Before moving into this opening chapter, consider the following questions for reflection:

- What is the role of a mathematics coach?
- How would you define coaching? What images come to mind?
- What renders coaching effective?

There are coaches in many professions. There are athletic coaches. There are business coaches. There are financial coaches. And now there are coaches in schools. Operationalizing a definition of coaching in schools, however, can be elusive. What does this coaching look like in practice? What does the coach do in a school or classroom? What does the teacher do when he or she is being coached? How do you know if coaching has been successful or effective?

This opening chapter presents a case intended to provide one example of a coaching encounter; by analyzing this interaction between a teacher and coach, essential elements of coaching will surface. Discussion will then turn to several research-based models of coaching that reflect these essential coaching elements. This sets a foundation for the chapters that follow in which cases unpack and illustrate essential elements of coaching and describe how various coaching dilemmas are navigated.

- **Build relationships.** Begin with teacher conversations and meetings in which you listen carefully and intently to teachers as they share their concerns, needs, goals, and learning styles.
- **Get organized.** Developing a system of note-taking and logs for coaching sessions allows you to notice patterns in the work and monitor fidelity and consistency with teachers.
- **Decide "who."** By prioritizing who will work with a coach, an overall agenda for learning for teachers can be created. This can ensure targeted, intentional planning for each teacher in your coaching work. To ensure equity from the perspective of student learning, this also entails considering the other vehicles for professional growth that you will harness with those teachers who are resistant or not yet the focus of a coaching cycle.
- **Connect with the administrator.** Conversations with the administrator should be ongoing, scheduled, and consistent. These are conversations initially to define the coaching role and discuss confidentiality, but they then should shift to conversations that provide broad feedback regarding mathematics in the school, develop a shared understanding of effective practice, and note ways that an administrator can support the work of the coach.

Questions for Reflecting and Linking to Practice

1. Consider the understanding of coaching that exists in your school. How would you go about communicating and clarifying the role of the math coach to staff members?
 2. Draft a set of initial coach meeting questions that you might use at the opening of the school year with staff members. Use the template in this chapter as a beginning draft if that is helpful. What questions would remain the same every year and what questions would be different as your work with a teacher grows from year to year?
 3. Based on how the role of math coach (or coach in other curriculum areas) has been defined in your school or district, what explicit conversations are important for you to have with your building administrator at the beginning of the year to ensure shared understanding of the coach's role and work?
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MAKING THE MOVE: QUESTIONING TO UNCOVER THE MATH

I only had a half-hour for this conversation—I was already feeling pressed for time—so I decided to move the conversation at this point to the mathematics of the activity. I decided that I would draw our attention to the fact that all of the puzzles on the student sheet were the same and ask Nancy what she saw as the mathematics of the activity.

KRW: Now on this student sheet, all of the pattern block puzzles are the same. What do you see as the purpose of that?

Nancy: Well, it says that they needed to fill them in different ways.

KRW: Did they notice anything as they were filling them in different ways?

Nancy: It's funny. At the end, I had them share what blocks they used to fill in the puzzles and they all read what they wrote. They got all excited when they noticed that someone else used the same number of blocks as they did. But then they'd notice that the blocks were put in different places on the puzzle. They thought that was so neat!

KRW: Were there any who used different numbers of blocks?

Nancy: Oh, yeah, they started talking about that too (pointing to one student sheet on the table). Peter used five blocks here and then seven the second time. And then Kimberly used eight in one of hers. It was so funny how they were talking about all of that.

KRW: So they were noticing that they could use different shapes to fill the same space. That's a really important idea.

I wanted to push a little more here to uncover any other relationships the children may have explored, so I continued with another question.

KRW: Did they notice anything about the shapes when they were putting them together to fill the space?

Nancy thought for a moment. She did not have an immediate response and I noticed that I was just about to jump in with a new question. But then I reminded myself that wait time is as important when posing questions to teachers as it is when posing questions to students. A moment later, Nancy responded.

When I met with Carolyn and she shared that she was several weeks behind in pacing, I knew that she was hoping I would begin to offer suggestions as to how to compact lessons or omit certain experiences in the unit altogether for students. In the past, I think I had responded to pacing issues teachers raised in just that way because I wanted them to realize that I was hearing them and recognized their struggle. But this response never felt quite right, not only in terms of the impact on student learning but also in the sense that it never got at the heart of pacing issues. Certainly, we could compact lessons or omit some as a short-term fix that would bring a classroom back onto the pacing guide, but what was the underlying issue that had caused pacing to veer so far off course to begin with? How, as a coach, could I get at that with a teacher? I had been thinking about this the night before as I prepared for my meeting with Carolyn.

MAKING THE MOVE: QUESTIONING TO REFINE THE FOCUS

This time I didn't respond to Carolyn with a list of suggestions for compacting or omitting lessons. Instead, I responded with more questions.

KRW: OK, so let's try to tease out what it is that is so challenging in the pacing of the curriculum for you. . . . Is it that you're struggling with pacing within a lesson, meaning you look up at the clock and realize that you only have a few minutes left but are only halfway through the lesson; then it's taking you two days to get through one lesson?

My tone indicated that I had other aspects of pacing for her to think about before she answered. I paused to let her think for a moment about this first pacing scenario.

KRW: Or is it that you are struggling with pacing within the unit as a whole, meaning that after you teach a particular session, you are worried that some students have not mastered that concept, so rather than move on the next day, you are reteaching that same lesson.

Again I paused to let her consider this possibility.

KRW: Or is it that the lessons and unit are fine but you find that you keep including extra math activities that you have done in past years even though they aren't a part of this unit?

Of course, my hunch was that it was a bit of all of this, but if I could push Carolyn to isolate one that she felt was at the root of her pacing issues, then we

Case: Creating Urgency Through Data ∞ Peggy, Grade 5

In this case, my meeting with a Grade 5 teacher focused on her students' recent state testing performance data. When I observed the teacher's reaction to the data, I needed to reframe her analysis of the data in a manner that would not allow for excuses but would also not leave her paralyzed by her sense of failure. I needed to reframe the analysis in a manner that would create a sense of urgency as well as efficacy on her part in terms of growing her practice.

SETTING THE STAGE

As I arrived at Peggy's classroom for our September coaching meeting to discuss her student testing data, I did not anticipate any surprises. For the third year in a row, all Grade 5 teachers had been provided with the spring state testing data for those students they had taught in the previous year as well as those students that they would be teaching in this year ahead. They were all familiar with the set of guiding questions I sent with the scores to focus their analysis of and reflection on the data. They were always eager to see the results of their past year's students. At team meetings in September, they would talk with each other about what strategies they had used to develop student competency in the various strands of the test. They often used the data to select strands that they wanted to work on in the year ahead as a grade level.

I expected to hear many of the same responses from Peggy that I had heard from teachers in past years. With that in mind, I was determined going into the meeting not to allow Peggy to find excuses for poor student performance, excuses such as the home environment or emotional issues of a student. I felt that if we were truly going to move forward with practice and responding to the needs of all students, then we needed to own the data results and not dismiss any to factors that were beyond our control. I would need to state that explicitly but matter-of-factly if I heard "excuses" in response to the data.

I had been working with Peggy for three years; while we had built a friendly relationship over these years, I was not satisfied with the growth in her classroom over this period. I was determined to push her further this year. I knew that to move forward I was going to need to be firm if she put forth excuses for the poor student performance at our meeting. I was all the more shocked then when I heard the response from Peggy just minutes after I arrived. Peggy said, "I was really surprised when I saw this data. . . . I feel like such an awful teacher. They did horribly."

Her body language demonstrated to me that these were feelings of sincere remorse and disappointment. I too had noted in my review of the data that students in her class performed poorly compared to the school popula-