

Kane, Britnie & Rosenquist, Brooks. (2018). [Making the most of instructional coaches](#). Phi Delta Kappan. 99. 21-25. 10.1177/0031721718767855.

District-hired coaches reported spending substantially more time doing instructional work with teachers than did school-hired coaches. District-hired coaches spent an average of 92% of their time, averaged over two years, working with teachers in what researchers have called “potentially productive coaching activities,” such as co-teaching, modeling, observing, giving feedback, or preparing for collaborative work with teachers (Gibbons & Cobb, 2017). By contrast, school-hired coaches reported spending 40% of their time in these activities. One reason that district-hired coaches spent more time working directly with teachers on issues of instruction was that district leaders emphasized these activities as defining features of their work.

Yet, district-hired coaches’ work was not without its drawbacks: District-hired coaches tended to visit individual schools just once per week. They reported struggling to build relationships with both teachers and principals, which meant that they were disconnected from the larger instructional goals of the school and did not have equal access to all teachers. Although the situation improved if district-hired coaches worked in a particular building for more than one year, they often described difficulties earning teachers’ trust, particularly from veteran teachers, whose doors were described as “open, but just a crack.” Thus, district-hired coaches worked most often with new or struggling teachers, but principals worried that even this work was too inconsistent to support teachers in a long-term or substantial way.

School-hired coaches had a different set of obstacles. Teachers and principals generally reported having greater trust in them, noting that they spent every day in their school and, in most cases, had worked there as a teacher prior to becoming a coach. However, their time to work directly with teachers on issues of instruction was more limited than district-hired coaches’ time because they had too many disparate jobs. School-hired coaches typically held at least one job title in addition to mathematics coach, including teacher of record, department head, substitute teacher, tutor, Title I coordinator, or building assessment coordinator. This meant that school-hired coaches spent substantial time working directly with students

The best of both worlds

In the second year of our qualitative analysis, the district hired coaches and assigned them to work in only one school each, effectively capitalizing on the best of both the district-hired and school-hired coaching models. Because the coaches were now accountable to district leaders — who were shielded to some extent from the accountability pressures that principals faced, giving them more freedom to invest in long-term instructional improvement — district-hired coaches were less likely to be assigned to non-coaching duties meant to help boost test scores. And because they now spent their time in a single building, they were able to develop stronger relationships with teachers and staff.

Further, in this redesigned model, principals were required to apply to the district to be assigned a coach. Specifically, they had to demonstrate their need for assistance, request a coach by name, and — most important — agree to set aside specific times for the coach to work with teachers on their instruction (which meant also that they had to reserve time for teachers to work with their coach). In short, the coaches were given a guarantee that they would be able to devote the bulk of their time to the work they were trained to do.