AMBITIOUS LEADERSHIP: A CASE STUDY OF COACHING AT DC BILINGUAL

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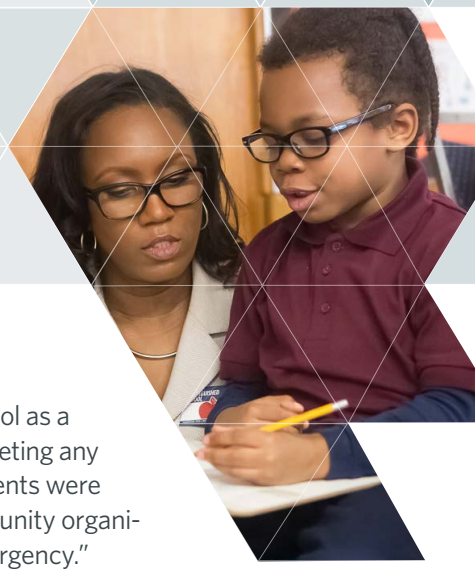

COACHING TO SUPPORT COMMON CORE–ALIGNED INSTRUCTION

When Principal Daniela Anello of DC Bilingual Public Charter School started at the school as a literacy coach seven years ago, it was struggling academically: DC Bilingual was not meeting any of the District of Columbia's academic performance standards, less than a third of students were proficient in reading, and only three percent were proficient in math. "It felt like a community organization where people came to relax," Anello recalled. "We needed to raise the sense of urgency."

Since then, the dual language school, which educates all students in English and Spanish, has made significant progress. By 2014, reading proficiency had risen to 60 percent, and math proficiency to 63 percent. In 2015, the first year of the Common Core–aligned PARCC exams, 65 percent of DC Bilingual students scored at least a 3 (approaching college-readiness standards) on the English language arts test, and 64 percent did so on the math test, compared with averages of 44 percent and 56 percent respectively for the city at large. In fact, DC Bilingual, where 81 percent of students qualify for free lunch and 51 percent are English language learners, had the fourth highest percentage of third graders scoring a 3 or above in math of any DC school.

What accounts for this improvement? Anello and her team point to their laser-like focus on ensuring that all teachers have the skills to deliver the school's standards-aligned curriculum with fidelity. To make the shift to teaching

Practices for Effective Coaching at DC Bilingual

- **Collecting and using data to design an effective coaching team:** Anello and her leadership team examine achievement data, observation data, and survey data to determine the most effective coaching structure.
- **Leveraging pedagogical and instructional expertise:** Anello appoints coaches with teaching expertise and deep knowledge of the standards and research on literacy and math instruction. This expertise comes from coaches' own training, their ongoing professional development, and their work developing DC Bilingual's standards-aligned curriculum.
- **Establishing positive attitudes and expectations around coaching:** At DC Bilingual, every instructional staff member is coached. Receptivity to coaching and feedback infuses the culture of the school, to the extent that existing faculty and potential hires are evaluated based on their willingness to be coached. Coaches review lesson plans weekly, observe classrooms, and help teachers identify next steps for instructional improvement, which they expect to see enacted during subsequent classroom observations. School leaders monitor coach–teacher interactions through weekly coaches' meetings and provide feedback and support to coaches.
- **Using evidence-based coaching pedagogy:** The structure and content of the coaching sessions are based on research on coaching and detailed evidence from practice. The sessions are designed to help teachers effectively implement the school's curriculum, and they focus closely on identifying and developing strategies to address student struggles and misconceptions. The school also makes use of apprenticeship models, in which coaches model for teachers how to enact high-leverage practices.
- **Establishing time in the schedule for coaching support:** The daily, weekly, and master schedules allot ample time for coaches to support teachers both in and outside of the classrooms.

that supports college- and career-readiness standards, Anello said the school had to create a culture of rigorous and ongoing learning for adults in the building. A key way the school has built this culture and increased teacher capacity is through a comprehensive coaching system. The members of the instructional support team design and deliver professional development, coach teachers one-on-one, and work with them in grade-level and vertical team meetings. They also lead small-group and individual interventions with struggling students in their respective content areas, ensuring that the learners with the greatest need have continued access to the best educators in the school.

To carry out this level of instructional coaching, the school maintains several essential practices as listed in the inset on the previous page.

COLLECTING AND USING DATA TO DESIGN AN EFFECTIVE COACHING TEAM

Anello and her leadership team collect a range of data to analyze their coaching systems and determine if any changes need to be made for the following year. To inform more immediate adjustments and refinements to the system, they collect coaching "experience" data from teachers after workshops, during coach-evaluation periods, and after coach-led grade-level or vertical team meetings.

Based on these analyses, as well as data from observations and assessments, Anello realized a few years after the Common Core standards were introduced that teachers needed significantly more support to successfully enact standards-aligned math instruction. In response, she tripled her math coaching staff. She asked two teachers to join the coaching team as math specialists, dividing their time between coaching and professional development and small-group math intervention work with students. This change expanded the school's coaching staff to 10 — six staff members who split their time between coaching and teaching (in literacy, math, specials, and technology), and four full-time coaches (in math, literacy, Spanish, and pre-K) who also develop curriculum and design professional development. The increase in the coaching team staff enabled each math coach to work closely with one-third of the school's teachers.

The school continues to refine its coaching system through teacher surveys and self-reflection by the instructional leadership team. At the end of the school year, DC Bilingual also has a "think-tank" process, during which teachers volunteer to analyze the school's systems, reviewing data and determining what is working, what needs to change, and how. Through the think-tank process, Anello was able to determine at the end of the first year of the expanded coaching system that teachers were finding it difficult to work with so many different coaches each week. She also determined that there was a need for coaches across content areas to pool their collective expertise, since students in some subjects were demonstrating better uptake of relevant strategies such as note-taking. To address some of these shortcomings, Anello and her leadership team made changes. They reorganized coaches around grade bands to enable more sustained relationships with teachers: One math coach and one literacy coach are assigned to the lower grades, and one of each to the upper grades. At the same time, Anello has made more time in the schedule for coaches across content areas to collaborate and share successful strategies.

LEVERAGING INSTRUCTIONAL EXPERTISE

The school's math specialists, who divide their time between coaching and small-group interventions, have each been at the school for at least five years and have taught several different grade levels at DC Bilingual. When they were assigned to the leadership team, they had already had the opportunity to work closely with the lead math coach, building expertise about effective, Common Core–aligned math instruction. The team also took the lead in designing and overseeing the implementation of the school's math curriculum. The process of designing a standards-aligned math curriculum significantly deepened the coaches' Common Core expertise.

As a result, coaches' feedback to teachers is informed by a deep knowledge of the curriculum and standards-aligned instruction. "The coaches rehearse the lessons as the student so they can anticipate what misconceptions might come up," said Anello. "What were the parts that were challenging? What are the things kids are going to have hiccups with?"

This process is used in English language arts as well. The literacy coach reads all the books the teachers are using in their classes, getting to know the stories, the characters, and their motivations, so that she can help the teachers ask questions that deepen students' learning. "She is pushing the teachers to understand how to get the kids thinking that way," Anello said.

Added one teacher, "There's a team of knowledgeable experts who come in, observe, and not only give you feedback, but give you quick action steps that are really easy to implement immediately."

In addition to hiring experienced and knowledgeable coaches, Anello provides opportunities for their ongoing development. The pre-K coach was a pre-K teacher at DC Bilingual for four years before becoming a coach. When she noted that pre-K needed a better curriculum, Anello paid her to develop a new curriculum over the summer, and she became the expert on pre-K instruction at the school. The pre-K coach furthers her development through a partnership with Fight for Children's Joe's Champs program. The program provides coaching to build her adult and instructional leadership skills, so she can more effectively evaluate and support the early childhood educators on her team.

Almost all of DC Bilingual's coaches have attended the Coaching Institute at Teachers College, and they also occasionally visit other schools to observe coaching and professional development for coaches. But the primary source of development for DC Bilingual's coaches is the two-hour meetings they hold every other week. Coaches videotape their sessions with teachers and bring them to meetings for review and discussion. They have also started observing each other's coaching sessions and giving feedback, though Anello has not yet worked this practice into the regular schedule.

ESTABLISHING NORMS AND EXPECTATIONS

The consistency of the coaching at DC Bilingual, and the common expectations for what it should look like and how both teachers and coaches should use the feedback, have been critical to the system's success. Using a procedure established by the former principal, all coaches follow the same steps for gathering information from teachers and giving them feedback.

Every Sunday evening, coaches review and comment on teacher lesson plans. They observe teachers daily; meet one-on-one with teachers weekly or biweekly, depending on the teacher's coaching plan; sit in on grade-level and vertical team meetings; and design and lead professional development sessions, including occasional walk-throughs. Coaches differentiate their support to meet teachers' needs — as determined through observations, videos, self-reflection, and student assessments — and help teachers carry out improvement plans and meet professional goals. Coaching sessions always end with the coach and teacher determining action steps, which the coach and the principal or assistant principal expect to see enacted in subsequent classroom observations. The feedback and goals are recorded and monitored by Anello in the school's online tracker. Exhibit 1 shows the format of the tracker.

EXHIBIT 1. COACH–TEACHER MEETING NOTES

Date	Observer	Praise	Action Step	Planning / Next Step
Jan. 22	Coach	You have created clear anchor charts that support student understanding of a game AND provide definitions and examples. Your chart of addition strategies with doubles and combos of 10 is a great way to support and cue students. Also, transitions are great!	Guide students through suggestion to practice strategies they are "using and confusing" (doubles, combos of 10) during the number talk by starting with a turn-and-talk about strategy selection.	Observe number talks

Coaches' and administrators' observations of teachers are kept in the tracker, enabling school leaders to compare notes and work together to devise a plan to support teachers who need it. After Anello observes a teacher, she shares her feedback with the relevant coach and asks about next steps for supporting that teacher. Goals or next steps are also kept in the tracker. When a teacher meets a goal, the goal is highlighted in green; if the teacher does not reach the goal by the intended time, it is highlighted in red. Anello is able to scan the tracker and quickly follow up if she sees a teacher has goals in red for consecutive weeks.

The literacy and math coaches regularly meet to discuss certain teachers and teacher teams. For example, when the coaches compared notes and saw they had both observed one grade-level team veering from lesson plans, not collaborating well, and not differentiating instruction effectively, the coaches decided to talk with the team about how to divide planning roles and then share plans. When both the literacy and math coaches observed a new teacher struggling to control her classroom, they agreed that one coach would go in and model a morning meeting to help set the tone for the class, while the other coach would work with the teacher on setting a goal for herself.

The school's culture of high expectations is clear in the coaching sessions. During a recent coaching session between the literacy coach and a third-grade teacher, following a morning observation, the coach pushed the teacher to deepen her questions to elicit better discussion among students. Rather than asking students to name different characters in the book, the coach suggested the teacher ask students to describe characters' emotions. She told the teacher she would be looking for the teacher to "raise those questions up a notch" in her lesson plan, and in the classroom when she came to observe the following week. When a

coach sees a teacher struggling to implement feedback, she may step in to model part of a lesson.

Said one teacher, "Your coaches aren't just on the outside; they'll say, 'I see that you did this, and I like that. Can I show you another way to do it?' They'll model it for you, and then they'll want to watch you do it. Then you can discuss what worked and what didn't work, so that it can be a part of your personal practice."

Of course, this relationship does not develop overnight. Coaches spend the first month of school building relationships with teachers. "We have to get to this place of trust so that later we can say, 'What happened there? What are you doing?'" explained Anello.

Soliciting feedback from teachers helps build this trust. Said one teacher, "The coaches ask, 'What do you want, in terms of your instruction?' They value teacher feedback, and they listen to what we need, because we are the ones in the class all day."

"We are all learning," said Anello. "We are all learning alongside the teachers and alongside the students."

Anello describes the coaching feedback style at DC Bilingual as "warm-strict." Coaches open sessions by complimenting the teacher on some aspect of his or her practice, then shift to concerns based on observations and hard data. "We are respectful, but we also expect that all of us are using our time effectively to increase student learning," Anello said.

Screening teachers for openness to learning and coaching is an important part of the hiring process at DC Bilingual. Applicants are asked to teach a lesson, receive feedback, and then teach the lesson again with modifications based on the feedback. "There is no other way to know if they are receiving feedback well and responding to it immediately," Anello said. After a few years with this interview process in place, she said, all but two of the teachers fully embrace the coaching process.

COACHING IN ACTION

All coaching sessions at DC Bilingual, regardless of format, share several key elements. All are evidence-based, with discussion of quantitative data (from student assessments) and qualitative data (from classroom observations). They also support the implementation of the school's curriculum and focus on identifying and responding to student thinking (e.g., addressing misconceptions). In addition, all use modeling, with the coach demonstrating how to enact high-leverage practices. Below we describe two coaching sessions, a grade-level team meeting and a one-on-one coaching session.

Grade-Level Team Meeting

Two math coaches led a first-grade math team meeting focused on laying the groundwork for computational fluency in the early elementary grades. After reviewing the meeting agenda with the team, the lead coach distributed a map of the school's K-2 math fluency progression. The progression started with knowing the number names, then moved to counting out objects, parts of 5, combinations of 10, and finally 10 + *n*. To the side of the map, the coach had inserted the Common Core standard the progression comes from: *Add and subtract within 20, demonstrating fluency for addition and subtraction within 10, as well as some of the strategies associated with that standard.*

"Think about the progression and where your kids might fall as you are teaching computational fluency," the coach said. "What's that big hurdle we want to get over?"

The teachers discussed the trouble some of their students had been having with counting on. The lead coach noted, "Counting on is largely developmental. You need to give them that meaningful practice."

As is typical in these meetings, the lead coach then distributed student-level data from the most recent first-grade assessments. "How can this data be on your radar every day to design those number talks?" she asked.

One first-grade teacher said she had been struggling because her students were in such different places: Some students could add groupings of, for example, three and seven dots, while others had to count them out one by one.

Pulling from strategies outlined in the math curriculum, the coach suggested the teacher use a 10-frame to help the student. "We want kids to be relating to the 'ten-ness,'" she said. "Be really strategic about the model you use in the number talk that day."

The math specialist then introduced the teachers to a math activity she wanted them to try with their students, one that was not a part of the curriculum but that one coach had used successfully in small intervention groups. The coaches devoted the next 15 minutes of the meeting to having the teachers try out and analyze the activity. First, a coach demonstrated how the activity was done; then the coaches divided the teachers into pairs to try it out themselves. The coaches observed each pair as one teacher played the student, the other the teacher.

The lead coach told the teacher who was playing the teacher role, "Ask, 'Can you pick up five?'" The teacher asked the question to her partner.

To the teacher playing the student, the coach said, "Say, 'I can. I can pick up the red four and the blue one.'"

"Is there another way?"

"There is another way. The orange three and the yellow two."

The math coach had the two teachers continue to practice the activity.

In thinking about how the teachers would talk about the activity with their students, the coach advised, "One sort of meta thing to be aware of in your instruction is how often you ask kids to count off. Maybe we should ask kids how they 'found out' rather than asking them to 'count off.'"

The coach asked the teachers to spend the last few minutes of the meeting thinking about where in the lesson they would insert the activity, and asked them to let her know their plan. Finally, she gave them an article to read on mastering fact fluency.

One-on-One Coaching

In a third-grade classroom at DC Bilingual, the school's lead literacy coach asked a first-year third-grade teacher to read aloud from the book her class had just started reading, *Because of Winn Dixie* by Kate DiCamillo. When the teacher had finished the passage, the coach asked her to compare and contrast the feelings of the two characters in the scene. "Show me evidence from the book to support your answers," the coach said.

A few hours before this visit, the coach had made her daily observation of this teacher's class and held a feedback session with her. First, she praised the teacher for making improvements from the previous week based on earlier feedback from the coach: She had incorporated more turn-and-talk into the lesson, and reduced transition time from one activity to another by 30 seconds.

After looking over and discussing some student work from the previous few days, the coach asked how the teacher planned to set students up to actively participate in the next day's read-aloud lesson. The teacher said she had not yet thought about the ideal student outcome for the lesson. "What are you learning through student discussion and building on ideas?" the coach asked. "What will your questions or prompts be to get to that action?"

The coach pulled out a copy of Bloom's Taxonomy to rate the level of the teacher's questioning in her class that morning. Reading from her observation notes, the coach recalled the questions the teacher had asked her class: *What is the name of the dog in the book? How did the main character come up with that name?*

The teacher realized that these questions involved remembering, which fell low on Bloom's Taxonomy. "Those are the ones that are easy to answer," the coach said. "The deep thinking happens with the inferential questions, where students have to search for answers." She suggested that, in her next class, the teacher ask students to describe the feelings of each character, and suggested she create a compare–contrast table to support a discussion comparing and contrasting characters. She showed the teacher a sample graphic organizer she could use.

"Critical-thinking questions lead to the richest discussion," the coach said. When the teacher said she was unsure how to structure the discussion, the coach suggested, "Ask open-ended questions, and then scaffold back from there." The coach suggested that the ideal outcome for this lesson could be that students are able to describe and compare how the characters are feeling.

To help the teacher prepare for upcoming lessons, the coach practiced with her. She read aloud to the teacher and asked her to take notes and fill in the compare–contrast table. They brainstormed questions the teacher could ask her students related to the excerpt. "So one question I might ask is, 'How would you compare the reaction of one character to another?'" the coach said. She had the teacher try her hand at answering the question. "What details in the text support your answer?" The coach also emphasized the importance of the point of change in a scene. "How would I discuss that?" the coach asked. "Ask, 'How did the character feel at the beginning of the scene, and how did he feel at the end?'" The teacher added these questions to her lesson plan for the next day.

"When I go in to review your plans for next week on Sunday night, I'll look for how you are raising those questions one notch," the coach said. And she told the teacher she would look out for these improvements when she returned to observe the class early the following week. After the meeting, the coach recorded her feedback notes in the online tracker (see Exhibit 1), which the teacher and her supervisors could access at any time.

CREATING TIME IN THE SCHEDULE FOR COACHING

Scheduling is critical to the success of coaching at DC Bilingual. Teachers are coached once a week, alternating weeks between math/science and literacy. Exhibit 2 shows a sample teacher schedule for coaching and collaboration time with colleagues.

EXHIBIT 2. COACH–TEACHER MEETING SCHEDULE

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday*
45-minute planning time (collaborative or individual)	30-minute individual coaching meeting — literacy 15 minutes of independent lesson-prep time	45-minute grade-level team meeting — math/science	45 minutes of planning time	1:30–1:45: team building 1:45–4:00: vertical team meeting — literacy

* Students are dismissed at 1:00 on Fridays to accommodate teacher collaboration time.

Weekly grade-level team meetings are held when students are at specials (music, art, library, physical education, dance, and technology) or, for pre-K, when children are napping. These meetings are organized into four-week cycles, alternating focus on literacy, data, Response to Intervention, and math/science. Vertical team meetings are held biweekly, alternating between literacy and math/science. Coaches also meet as a team every other week.

Exhibit 3 gives a sense of what a coach's meeting schedule looks like in a given week. Any unscheduled time is used for individual coaching sessions and classroom observations.

EXHIBIT 3. MASTER COACHING SCHEDULE

Week 1	8:00–9:00	9:00–9:30	9:40–10:25	10:30–11:00	11:10–11:55	1:00–1:45	1:20–2:05	2:10–2:55
Specials		Studio 4	3rd and 4th grade	Pre-K 4	1st and 2nd grade	Pre-K nap	5th grade	Kindergarten
Mon.								
Tue.	Biweekly coaching team meeting							
Wed.			3rd-grade-level team meeting		2nd-grade-level team meeting	Pre-K 3 grade-level team meeting	5th-grade-level team meeting	
Thu.			4th-grade-level team meeting		1st-grade-level team meeting	Pre-K 4 grade-level team meeting		Kindergarten grade-level team meeting
Fri.							Literacy vertical team meeting	

The master schedule supports coaches' work by showing what times teachers within grade levels cover each subject. For example, all first-grade classes have literacy from 8:10–9:40 every morning, and then math and science from 9:50–11:10. Thus, coaches know what lessons they will see whenever they go into a classroom and can schedule their observations accordingly, based on what they are working on with a teacher.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

What aspects of the coaching practices described in this case study appear to have had a substantive impact on teacher capacity and performance? What was the principal's role in developing and supporting these practices?

What does this case study suggest are the systems and structures necessary for coaching and feedback to be impactful?

How might schools that lack the coaching personnel and systems described in this study draw on other human and social capital resources — such as professional learning communities or the principal — to provide ongoing support for instructional improvement?