ERS Education Resource Strategies

Sustaining High-Quality Instructional Coaching in a Challenging Budget Environment

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When done well, instructional coaching works.

Research is clear that well-executed coaching can drive instructional improvement, **teacher retention**, and **student achievement**. But when school systems face intense budget pressures—as many are now as they grapple with the end of ESSER funding and declining enrollment—instructional coaching is often the first thing on the chopping block.

Why this happens is no mystery, and it isn't unique to instructional coaching. Forward-thinking leaders design and implement research-backed strategies. Early impact is positive, but as with any innovation, strategies need adjustments to realize their full potential. Forced to choose between a still-evolving strategy and other resource demands, system leaders often narrow their focus to "the basics."

So long, innovation. In these situations, the path to major—and much needed—improvements in instruction, learning experiences, and student outcomes is cut short.

Sustaining instructional coaching, especially with pressure to cut costs, requires a different approach grounded in understanding and systematically improving coaching's return on investment.

How to Adopt an ROI-Based Approach

1 Assess the Current Instructional Coaching Model's Practices and Cost

In systems that practice **high-quality instructional coaching**, teachers participate in weekly **expert-led, curriculum-focused collaboration** and **regular cycles of observation and feedback** from expert coaches.[1] These supports are intensive, sustained over an extended period, and provided by leaders who deeply understand the content and curriculum being taught.

If the current coaching model lacks these attributes, it may be time to clarify your theory of action and how you're working toward it.

The investment side of high-ROI instructional coaching also merits close examination. Even small changes in the amount of time allocated for collaboration, coaching preparation, and each step in the observation and feedback process can have a big impact on the per-teacher and per-pupil costs of coaching. Conversely, assigning too-large caseloads to coaches puts pressure on those same time allocations, stretching coaches' capacity and potentially undermining their impact.

1 We use the term "instructional coach" to describe the function of delivering instructional support directly to teachers, rather than as a specific job title. In some schools or districts, this function may sit with principals, assistant principals, deans of instruction, teacher leaders, or other instructional experts.

Consider Exhibit A, for example. In this composite district, a model where coaches spend marginally more time with each teacher would require lower coaching caseloads, thereby increasing the total instructional coaching spend from 1.5% to 2.2% of the district's operating budget. See Exhibit A for more details on how small changes can drive big impacts.

2 Target Your Strategy to Maximize Your System's Strengths – While Responding to Budget Realities

Leaders facing deep fiscal deficits often end up making cuts that diminish the impact of their instructional coaching strategy. Reducing instructional coach roles and placing those coaching responsibilities on principals and assistant principals, for example, decreases the investment side of the ROI equation. However, without reducing other responsibilities and protecting the time needed for effective coaching, offloading coaching to overworked school leaders may erode their impact on teaching and learning. And less impact with marginally lower investment does nothing to improve ROI.

Instead, leaders can design variations that preserve the integrity of effective instructional coaching within their district-specific context. In a district where coaching is well-established, widespread, and effective, for example, leaders may decide to scale back on central support or coaching in schools where instruction is strongest. In a system where the quality and impact of instructional coaching varies widely, on the other hand, leaders may choose to focus their investment on reallocating the most effective coaches to the highest-need schools.

Alternatively, where it's possible to adjust school schedules and teacher assignments, leaders may assign some coaching to effective **teacher-leaders** who are granted additional release time, rather than full-time instructional coaches, which has the added benefit of strengthening collaboration within educator teams. Explore Exhibit B to learn about more strategies—and things to watch out for—for shifting resources to effectively support coaching initiatives.

3 Focus on Continuous Improvement and Adjustments that Increase Impact and Maintain Sustainable Cost Structures

Like any research-backed strategy, the success of instructional coaching depends on implementation, and actual results will naturally vary from one community to another. Tracking impact and adapting your approach based on what you learn through a structured **continuous improvement** process helps ensure that, no matter the level of investment in instructional coaching, the returns on that investment continue to improve over time.

The unique challenges of the moment are significant—but they shouldn't force education leaders to walk back strategies, like high-quality instructional coaching, that help improve instruction, strengthen teacher capacity, and accelerate student learning. By leveraging the approaches outlined here, leaders can expand on their successes and build toward a bold, new vision for teaching and learning.

EXHIBIT A

Understanding the Cost of Instructional Coaching

In a typical district, total spending on instructional coaching ranges from roughly 1.5% to 2.5% of the operating budget. This total translates to about $4,600-$6,700 per teacher and around $230-$335 per student (assuming class sizes of 20). The cost of instructional coaching per teacher depends on the dosage and frequency of instructional coaching and, therefore, the number of teachers each instructional coach can support. Relatively small variations in these designs can lead to big variations in the cost of coaching on a per-teacher basis, as illustrated by the difference between Scenarios A and B below.

Weekly Coach Schedule	**Scenario A** Lower Coaching Dosage per Teacher / More Teachers per Coach	**Scenario B** Higher Coaching Dosage per Teacher / Fewer Teachers per Coach
Coach observes teachers	15 min. per teacher	20 min. per teacher
Coach preps for 1:1 feedback conversation	15 min. per teacher	20 min. per teacher
Coach delivers 1:1 feedback	15 min. per teacher	20 min. per teacher
Coach preps to facilitate curriculum-focused teacher collaboration	60 min. per teaching team x3 teams	90 min. per teaching team x3 teams
Coach facilitates curriculum-focused teacher collaboration	60 min. per teaching team x3 teams	90 min. per teaching team x3 teams
Instructional leadership team	2 hours	2 hours
Coach's professional learning	2 hours	2 hours
Resulting coach caseload	**22 teachers**	**15 teachers**
Cost as a percent of typical district operating budget[1]	**1.5% of district operating budget**	**2.2% of district operating budget**
Cost per teacher coached	**~$4,600**	**~$6,700**
Cost per student	**$230**	**$335**

1 Illustrative example of District X, a composite district based on the characteristics of 25 medium and large school districts in ERS' national comparative database. Calculations assume coaching reaches all core teachers. Coach compensation (salary plus benefits) is $100,000 on average, and average class sizes are 20 students.

EXHIBIT B

Options for Shifting Existing Resources and Prioritizing Coaching Investments

Option	Reasons to Consider This Option	Watchouts
Shift existing resources away from lower-leverage strategies.		
Enable teacher leaders, rather than full-time instructional coaches, to provide some coaching.	This strategy strengthens collaboration within educator teams and creates meaningful leadership roles for effective teachers without requiring them to fully leave the classroom.	Teacher leaders must have a **schedule that includes release time** from teaching. There should be criteria in place to select teacher leaders or instructional coaches that have expertise in the content area and curriculum they support.
Reduce scope of central-office academics roles and shift team members into school-based roles that increase site-based instructional leadership capacity.	This strategy can increase coaching capacity at schools without increasing overall district costs.	Consider the base level of central capacity needed to support the ongoing development of school-based instructional leaders.
Streamline the array of coaching roles across the district and within schools.	Some districts have established a range of teacher support that each may sit under different central-office leaders (e.g. instructional coaches, data coaches, or behavior coaches). This array of support structures can lead to a disjointed experience for teachers, while streamlining may support a more coherent experience.	Consider which of these coaching roles have a clear purpose, are aligned to research, and target specific needs.
Use school-level resources more strategically, such as to consolidate low-enrolled courses or moderately increase class sizes.	Class-size reductions most often benefit core academic classes with fewer than 17 students. Increasing class sizes outside of those parameters can free significant resources without negatively impacting student outcomes.	Increasing average class sizes districtwide often requires making differentiated increases across schools and classes. Leaders should carefully match student needs with teacher expertise and invest in expert teachers for core-subject, small-group instruction.
Click here to read about other opportunities to reduce or reallocate spending, both within and beyond academics.		

Option	Reasons to Consider This Option	Watchouts
Concentrate support into a shorter time period.		
Provide coaching for a subset of teachers for a six-week cycle, rotating through teachers over the course of the year.	This approach can spread a single coach's capacity to more teachers over the course of the year, while ensuring that teachers still receive intensive support through a complete coaching and improvement cycle. This approach also keeps the coach's caseload at any given time manageable.	This approach may be more appropriate for experienced rather than novice or struggling teachers who would benefit from sustained support.
Focus on a subset of teachers.		
Focus on rookie teachers and teachers who need additional support.	On average, rookie teachers are less effective than more experienced teachers. Accelerating the growth of early-career teachers can lead to **meaningful improvements in student learning**.	Consider whether this approach will divert attention from cultivating a deeper bench of potential instructional leaders and how it might impact a culture of continuous improvement among more experienced teachers.
Focus on teachers in priority schools, such as schools in which students have the greatest learning needs.	**Teaching quality has an especially strong impact on student learning for students who are further behind**. Therefore, investing in the growth of teachers in these schools can meaningfully impact student learning.	High-needs schools often have the least experienced teachers. Consider whether these schools currently have the existing bench of instructional leaders needed to provide high-quality support, or whether the district may need to assign coaches differently across schools or better incentivize these roles in high-needs schools.
Prioritize specific components.		
Focus only on expert-led teacher collaboration and deprioritize observation and feedback cycles.	For districts that are still early in their adoption of high-quality instructional materials, focusing on expert-led professional learning cycles can accelerate teachers' ability to effectively use the materials. Expert support can help teachers unpack and internalize the curriculum and plan appropriate scaffolds.	Connecting observation and feedback cycles to curriculum-focused collaboration is the most effective way to support teachers' professional learning.
Focus only on observation and feedback cycles and deprioritize expert-led teacher collaboration.	Releasing coaches from facilitating teacher collaboration in schools may make sense in schools in which 1. each team includes at least one teacher with deep knowledge of high-quality instructional materials and aligned instructional practices, and 2. there are strong teacher-led collaboration structures in place.	Connecting observation and feedback cycles to curriculum-focused collaboration is the most effective way to support teachers' professional learning.