

# THE LEARNING Principal

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF SCHOOL LEADERS ENSURING SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

## *Principal draws up a* **GAME PLAN** *for school coaches*

*"This is what I believe is powerful professional learning. My role is to coach the coaches."* — Dot Schoeller

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

**P**incipal Dot Schoeller doesn't miss a chance to let teachers at Simonton Elementary School know that she supports the work of 19 school-based staff developers in her building.

She allocates money for the school-based coaches out of her building budget. She carves out time for them in the schedule. She finds space for them to work. She drops in on classrooms when they model lessons. And she makes sure that teachers know when she sees changes in their practice that she believes have resulted from coaching.

"This is what I believe is powerful professional learning. My role is to coach the coaches," she said.

Both the state of Georgia and Gwinnett

County Public Schools have endorsed the concept of coaching and have provided opportunities for coach training. (See the December 2006 issue of *The Learning System*.)

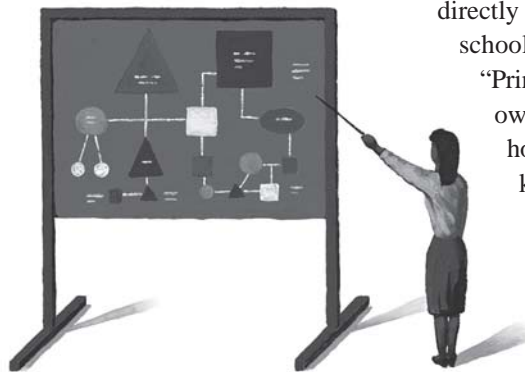
But neither provides funds to directly pay the salaries of school-based coaches.

"Principals make their own decisions about if, how many, and what kind of coaches they're going to have. There is no pattern across the district, it's just building by building, depending on the interest of

each principal," said Lea Arnau, Gwinnett's director of professional learning.

That is both the beauty and the drawback of a system that is so heavily invested in site-based

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Ensuring the creation of professional learning communities requires significant upfront work by the principal.

## Principals play key role in developing learning communities

Schools that have become professional learning communities possess a culture of inquiry, interdependency, collaborative problem solving, and shared accountability for results. These beliefs and actions are grounded by respect for the intellect and leadership capabilities of teachers, principals, students, and others in the school's community. This is a state of being, not a series of activities, for schools that have become professional learning communities. These schools also recognize the need and create the opportunities for leadership distributed across role types. Among the leadership is the essential role of the principal.

Effective principals constantly survey the school's organizational landscape to determine developmental needs, threats, planning, and problem solving. These principals know that professional learning communities are the cornerstones to establishing an effective school environment. Yet, they also recognize that ensuring that such communities lead to an effective environment requires significant upfront personal work by the principal leader. This includes identifying a problem or issue, researching and reflecting on this issue, and designing potential solutions. Additionally, effective principals consider methods to engage other stakeholders in the school community.

The words in the phrase "professional learning communities" connote certain assumptions. **Professional** honors the knowledge and skills that all educators bring to the table. The **Learning** component recognizes the power of continuous inquiry, data-driven needs, dialogue, and support to ensure the success of all towards a common goal. The **Community** component is undergirded by beliefs and actions that honor the collective collaboration

of all stakeholders. These communities function with open, honest, and supportive communication, trust, rapport, and support.

The following questions provide a framework for a principal who is exploring professional learning communities for her school:

- Why is a professional learning community being considered and what are the intended outcomes of transforming our school into a professional learning community?
- What data are available to indicate a need for professional learning communities and what evidence indicates professional learning communities could make a difference?
- How will we build broad school commitment to this concept, removing obstacles and creating opportunities to support professional learning communities?
- Who is ready to begin this work, and who is on the fence but could be valuable to the effort?
- Where do the paths of these key people converge around our data needs and our intended outcomes, and, if they do not converge, how do we create that convergence?
- When do we begin, how will we monitor, share the outcomes and broaden the involvement to all stakeholders?

Principals who make such personal reflections public provide a model for the processes desirable in professional learning communities. These principals also demonstrate skills and knowledge outlined in the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium Standards. Those standards hold leaders responsible for the developing, implementing, and being the steward of the vision for the learning community, nurturing positive school cultures, managing or mobilizing operations and resources, and collaborating with key stakeholders to promote student success.



Pat Roy is co-author of *Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards Into Practice: Innovation Configurations* (NSDC, 2003).

Learn more about NSDC's standards, [www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm](http://www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm)

## Delicious irony of leadership

Most of the principals I know are tired! They are expected to manage a building, take care of transportation issues, keep the lunchroom clean and quiet, and attend to stakeholder concerns while serving as an instructional leader who focuses staff on high levels of learning for all students despite second languages, special needs, or emotional or behavioral issues. One administrator told me that even though he wants to be an instructional leader, 95% of his day seemed to be focused on managing the building leaving little time or energy for the educational conversations and activities that led him to become a principal in the first place.

One task of leadership within a learning community is the development of collaborative interactions and relationships. Collaboration requires a different type of leadership — namely distributed leadership. Distributed leadership means that leadership is not viewed as a formal role but as a set of skills and behaviors that many individuals perform in order to move the group forward. Therefore, one way to help a school focus on important educational work is to build the leadership capacity within the school (Lambert, 2003). Building leadership capacity means engaging teachers, among other stakeholders, in the work of leadership.

The learning principal **creates experiences for teachers to serve as instructional leaders within the school**. The challenge of high levels of learning for all students cannot be met when there is only one leader in the school — all educators need to be encouraged to lead others to focus on improving teaching and learning.

How can this be accomplished? First, the principal **creates experiences for teachers to lead schoolwide committees that make decisions about curriculum, instruction, resources, and professional development**. When teachers lead, they also need the authority to make educational decisions that matter within the school beyond the placement of the microwave or organizing the staff luncheon.

**Leadership:** Staff development that improves the learning of all students requires skillful school and district leaders who guide continuous instructional improvement.

Encouraging leadership capacity also means **establishing school guidelines that support new practices**. Many schools function as egalitarian cultures in which “being the nail that sticks up” is not sanctioned. The principal is responsible for working with teachers to establish norms of collaboration that support the development of teaming. The principal will want to help teachers develop leadership skills which ensure that educators can make

joint decisions, resolve conflicts, and build trusting relationships with colleagues.

The principal can **create experiences for teachers to serve as mentors, master teachers, and instructional coaches** while ensuring that they have the skills to function effectively within these roles. These roles support a focus on high-quality instruction for more staff members without putting an additional burden on the principal.

Here is the delicious irony of leadership — a principal will be a more effective leader when helping others to serve as instructional leaders rather than trying to do it all alone.

### REFERENCE

Lambert, L. (2003). *Leadership capacity for lasting school improvement*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

## DEVELOPING A PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT BETWEEN A COACH AND A PRINCIPAL

**By answering these questions, a principal and a school-based coach can develop a set of agreements that can guide their work in a school. Being clear about the parameters and expectations for the coach's work also helps a principal explain to staff this important new role in a school.**

### ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND BOUNDARIES

*Agree on the roles coaches will fill within the school, other responsibilities the coach will have, such as teacher duties, etc., and what coaches will not do.*

#### Coach

- What expectations do you have of me and the work I do?
- What responsibilities will I have as a member of this staff?
- What are the boundaries of my work?
- What is outside the boundaries of my work?
- How do you feel about me . . . e.g. serving on a district committee, facilitating a school committee, etc.

#### Principal

- What do you expect of me?
- What do we think teachers expect of you?
- What does the district expect of you?
- What are the defined responsibilities of your role as a coach?
- How much flexibility do we have to adjust your work to meet the needs of our students and staff?

### CLIENTS

*Identify who the coach will work with: teams of teachers, individual teachers, novice teachers, departments/grade levels/teams, etc.*

#### Coach

- Which teachers will I work with?
- How will I determine which teachers to work with?

#### Principal

- Where are the greatest needs in our school?
- Which teachers have expressed interest in receiving your support?

### SUPPORT AND RESOURCES

*Specify the support and resources the coach can expect.*

#### Coach

- Here is how you can support me in my role as a coach . . .
- What resources are available for me? Technology? Space? Money for professional publications or development?

#### Principal

- What support do you want from me?
- What resources do you need to feel comfortable?
- Here's how you will share in the school's resources for professional development . . .

### EXPECTED RESULTS

*Identify the expected results of the coach's work. Define process goals which describe how the coach will work and results goals which describe the outcome of the work. For example:*

**Process:** *The coach will work one-on-one with 75% of the staff and every grade level.*

**Results:** *Student achievement on the state math assessment will increase by 20% over the next two years.*

#### Coach

- What percentage of the staff do you expect me to work with?
- What results do you expect over the next year, two years, and three years?
- What are the school improvement goals?

#### Principal

- What procedural goals are appropriate for your work in this school?
- Here are our improvement goals . . .

## TIMELINES

*Setting timelines for achieving goals gives the coach and the principal the ability to measure progress toward their goals so that they can make mid-course adjustments.*

### Coach

- When do you want this finished?
- What are the short- and long-term timelines for my work?

### Principal

- When will you be able to meet with all departments?
- When will you complete one-on-one visits with every teacher?

## COMMUNICATION

*Decide when to communicate, how often to communicate, and the purpose of your communication.*

### Coach

- When shall we meet to discuss my work plan? How often shall we meet to discuss my work?

### Principal

- When can we meet to discuss how you plan your work to serve teachers?

## PROCESSES

*Identify the processes the coach will use for various tasks, such as providing services to teachers, deciding priorities, how often to work with individual teachers or teams of teachers, how teachers access coaching services, how to document their work, how to report their accomplishments, etc.*

### Coach

- What process do we want to establish to help teachers access my assistance?
- What is the best way for me to spend the majority of my time?
- How will I log my work? What evidence do you want?

### Principal

- What process do you think will help teachers access your services easily and conveniently?
- How will you demonstrate how you spend your time?

## CONFIDENTIALITY

*Be explicit about what is confidential and how to alert each other about confidentiality concerns.*

### Coach

- What information do you expect me to provide about my work with individual teachers or teams of teachers?
- What agreements will allow teachers to feel comfortable interacting with me, sharing their strengths and weaknesses, and being willing to take risks to change their instructional practices?
- What's the best way for me to tell you when I feel you are asking for information that is outside our agreement area?

### Principal

- What agreements will allow teachers to feel comfortable interacting with me, sharing their strengths and weaknesses, and being willing to take risks to change their instructional practices?
- How will we monitor our agreements about confidentiality?

[See the Winter 2007 issue of JSD to learn more about how principals can support school-based coaches.](#)

**Source:** Adapted from *Taking the lead: New roles for teachers and school-based coaches*, by Joellen Killion and Cindy Harrison. NSDC, 2006.

## Principal draws up a game plan for school coaches

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decision making.

At Simonton, however, coaching is king and that's primarily because of the conviction of its principal.



**"I have 1,500 kids in my buildings. I need massive change. I can't work on six kids at a time. If we continued that way, it was never going to happen. We need to change teachers," Schoeller said.**

See Pages 4 and 5 for a tool that principals can use as they design a partnership agreement with a coach.

### BIRTH OF COACHING AT SIMONTON

The suburban Atlanta school buzzes with the noise of 1,500 children and 197 adults who work with them each day. About half of those students eat breakfast at school each morning in a cafeteria festooned with the flags of 57 different countries, each flag representing the birthplace of at least one child in the building.

The massive Title I school has between 10 and 14 classrooms per grade level. Daily common planning time for grade-level teachers is a given in this school since Schoeller became principal. At first, teachers didn't know what to do with that time, Schoeller said. Now they've figured it out — and they want more time together.

Schoeller introduced coaching into the school when she became principal in 2004. She wants coaching to be pervasive in her building because she believes this type of professional learning makes a difference in the way teachers teach and therefore enables children to learn more. "I'm driven to learn. I want a staff that will thrive on wanting to learn for themselves," she said.

Before her career in Gwinnett County started 11 years ago, Schoeller had spent five years as a college women's basketball coach (including leading her team at Florida Southern College to the women's Final Four competition in 1994) while also teaching in Polk County, Fla.

She imported what she had learned about coaching when she became technology coordinator at another Gwinnett County school and was charged with helping teachers integrate technology into their instruction. "I used coaching techniques to convince teachers to try things," she said. Schoeller started with volunteers and watched as word spread about what those volunteer teachers were trying.

"That's how I got passionate about coaching," Schoeller said.

When she became Simonton's principal, one of Schoeller's first changes was to transform 11 literacy specialists who had been working primarily with children in pull-out programs into 11 literacy coaches who work primarily with teachers to improve their instruction. Every Gwinnett principal gets one point (FTE) to spend on literacy and most schools have used that to hire a literacy specialist. "I have 1,500 kids in my buildings. I need massive change. I can't work on six kids at a time. If we continued that way, it was never going to happen. We need to change teachers," she said.

The number of literacy coaches at Simonton grew to 17 during this school year. "In order to turn the Queen Mary, I needed to get 17 coaches on board to work with three or four teachers who would then go work with all of their kids. There's a sense of urgency in my school. I don't have a lot of time. When I get a new teacher, I don't have time to give them three or four years to get it. I need to have them become good teachers right away," she said.

Schoeller enrolled two of the literacy coaches in a literacy instruction program at Georgia State University with the expectation that those coaches would return and share what they learned with the other literacy coaches. About the same time, she transformed her school's math specialist into its first math coach; a year later, she hired a second math coach.

In the beginning, the coaches mostly learned from each other, observing each other coach and then talking about what they had seen, what they had learned, and what they could do differently. When Gwinnett started its own districtwide coaching academy, several Simonton coaches attended in order to deepen their expertise about coaching. Both math and literacy coaches also attend monthly meetings with district-level specialists to deepen their content knowledge.

### COACHING IN PRACTICE

The practice of coaching at Simonton looks very similar in both math and literacy. Of particu-

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# Principal draws up a game plan for school coaches

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lar interest at Simonton is the creation of several demonstration classrooms in which volunteer teachers open their rooms for regular observations by other teachers.

Teachers can volunteer to observe in the demonstration classrooms whenever they are interested but Schoeller requires every classroom teacher to visit a “literacy host room” and a “math model classroom” at least once each year. She hires 12 substitutes for a day and releases classroom teachers in two-hour blocks. Because of the size of her building, it takes weeks to ensure that every teacher has released time for the observations. The literacy observations and the math observations occur on different days and typically at different times of the year. Schoeller invests \$20,000 a year in substitute teacher time for these observations.

The observations follow the same pattern each time. The coaches, working in consultation with grade-level teachers, identify a math or literacy strategy for the focus of the observation. The strategy may be new or it may be one that challenges many of the teachers. Classroom teachers will visit a demonstration classroom, typically in their grade level, for the observation.

Following the observation, the classroom teacher will have a conversation with the coach about how he or she could use the same strategy. The teacher will commit to practicing the strategy and schedule a time when the coach will observe the teacher using the strategy with his or her own students. Sometimes, the classroom teacher will ask the coach to do another demo lesson before trying it independently. Then the coach observes the teacher using the strategy with his or her own students. Finally, the coach reflects with the teacher about the experience.

Schoeller sees the demonstration classrooms as a way to develop teacher leadership. “We weren’t using a cookie cutter to create the volunteers. We took whoever was interested. Some were new teachers; others were veteran teachers. The key is that they all wanted to learn how to be better,” she said.

## COACHING THE COACHES

Last summer, Schoeller added one more piece to her coaching plan when she took all 19 coaches on a retreat together. “They work with common teachers and they encounter similar kinds of problems. They wanted to talk about how they made gains in different classrooms and how they worked with teachers who were not receptive to having them there,” Schoeller said.

Because of the in-depth conversations at the retreat, she sees a greater sense of ownership among the coaches for the results in the school. “I want to extend that further. What I want is to create this collaborative team feeling among all of the teachers,” she said.

The coaches often become frustrated by the slow rate of change. With more and different experience, Schoeller is able to offer perspective about the difficulty of the change process for teachers. Teachers who are confronting a request that they change the way they teach are much like people standing on the edge of a pool of water, she said. “You’ve got some folks who will just jump right into the deep end of the pool, splash around a little and then take off. You’ve got some who will walk into the pool real slowly. Then, they’re ready to go. Then you have a whole bunch of people who will put in a toe or put on those waist-high waders. We have a lot of waders. But we’re throwing them a lot of life rings to help them make it through,” she said.

As she ponders Simonton’s success with coaching, Schoeller cautions principals about who they select as coaches. “You’ve got to be careful who you pick. Your good teachers aren’t necessarily good coaches,” she said. Deep content knowledge is important but so are keen people skills, humility, and patience.

Schoeller still has more items on her coaching agenda. She wants her coaches to have more opportunities to observe and learn with each other and she especially wants a math coach for every grade level in her K-5 building. “I believe that if I could find the right people, I could make our math scores go through the roof,” she said. ■

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