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# Coaching for Instructional Leadership: A Case Study of Executive Coaches and Principals

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Coaching for Instructional Leadership:  
A Case Study of Executive Coaches and Principals

Bridget L. Heston, Ed.D.

University of Connecticut – 2013

This case study examined how the Connecticut Association of Schools' (CAS) Executive Coaching program was implemented at five schools. The program was started to improve the instructional leadership capacity of principals via embedded, ongoing professional development. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person and by telephone. Interview questions explored the effectiveness of the coaching program, as measured by the perceptions of coaches, principals, and other key school personnel (such as teachers and leadership team members). In addition, documents provided by executive coaches and principals—including “action plans” and minutes from leadership team meetings—were reviewed. This study found that the majority of sites reported changes in principals' leadership practices after engaging in “joint work” with an executive coach for at least two years. Furthermore, differences in implementation of the program at various sites were linked to individual coaches' philosophies about the purpose of coaching.

Keywords: executive coaching; principal development; instructional leadership; “joint work;” embedded professional development; theories of action

Coaching for Instructional Leadership:  
A Case Study of Executive Coaches and Principals

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APPROVAL PAGE

Doctor of Education Dissertation

Coaching for Instructional Leadership: A Case Study of Executive Coaches and Principals

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## **Problem Statement**

In the current era of high stakes testing and increased accountability for student performance, the focus of school reform has naturally shifted toward how school leadership impacts teaching and learning, and today's principals are expected to be the facilitators of effective instruction. Indeed, a growing body of research suggests that the development of effective leadership is central to the improvement of teaching and learning and to overall successful school reform (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2004). There is also an abundance of research, however, to suggest that most principals have neither the capacity nor the time to function as instructional leaders (Cuban, 1988; Fink & Resnick, 2001; Honig, 2012; Levine, 2005; Spillane & Hunt, 2010; Supovitz & Buckley, 2008) . Consequently, school districts continue to look for ways to support principals in the development of the skills and routines necessary to positively impact teaching and learning.

In many districts throughout the United States, one proposed solution to the dilemma is to employ executive coaches to work with principals to develop their capacity in instructional leadership. Although much research exists about the way principals utilize their time and the need for instructional leadership to be a priority, few studies have been done to explore the efficacy of relying upon coaching to strengthen principals' abilities to engage in instructional leadership. Using a qualitative case study I answer the question, does "executive coaching" lead to changes in principals' leadership practices?



## **Instructional Leadership: The Elusive Practice**

Instructional leadership requires principals to develop within their schools a shared vision, mission, and goals that establish high expectations for the performance of both teachers and students. It also requires leaders to supervise the implementation of a rigorous curriculum and the continual use of data to monitor progress and improve teaching. Tasks such as observing instruction, providing feedback, providing professional development for teachers, and reviewing lesson plans are generally considered under the umbrella of instructional leadership (Connecticut School Leaders Standards, 2012). All of these tasks are what Supovitz and Buckley (2008) refer to as “moderate or high leverage” instructional leadership activities because they are most likely to result in changes in instructional practice and encourage teachers to examine their own instructional practice in order to improve effectiveness.

Research has shown that instructional leadership is critical to school improvement. For example, Heck, Larson, and Marcoulides (1998) found that higher performing elementary and high school principals spent more time directly supervising and supporting teachers, working collaboratively with teachers to coordinate their schools’ instructional programs, solve instructional problems, and support staff development opportunities (Supovitz & Buckley, 2008; Seashore-Louis, et. al, 2010). Unfortunately, however, the bulk of the research shows that the day-to-day actions of administrators have minimal connection to this type of instructional leadership. As Elmore (2000) argued, the primary task of educational administrators is often to manage the processes surrounding instruction. Likewise, other researchers—including Wolcott (1973), Martinko and Gardner (1990) and Spillane and Hunt (2010)—have also revealed that the

majority of principals' time is spent on managerial tasks. Furthermore, Supovitz and Buckley (2008) found that even when principals attempt to function more as instructional leaders than as managers, the result has very little effect on improving teaching and learning. They found that of the time principals spent on what could be deemed as instructional leadership, 50% was on "low leverage" activities (which may help students and/or encourage a "general focus on instruction"); 47% was on "moderate leverage" activities (including "general practice suggestions"); and no time was spent on "high leverage" activities (p. 13). More importantly, the total proportion of time spent weekly on instructional leadership **as a whole** was only 17%. Instead, the majority of principals' time appears to be consumed by unscheduled meetings—"almost 40% [of unscheduled meetings] were initiated by other people and less than 4% were scheduled" (p. 15).

Undoubtedly, principals' time is limited, and therefore a fundamental challenge they face is how to allocate attention to multiple, competing demands and responsibilities (Supovitz & Buckley, 2008). School leaders who attempt to function as instructional leaders must maintain a balance between the tasks associated with day-to-day management and those associated with instructional leadership. As such, principals must understand which tasks that will improve teaching and learning to focus on, even when time is limited by other obligations.

The concept that the *specific tasks* administrators spend time on is more important than the amount of *time* spent on them is grounded in research such as Supovitz and Buckley's 2008 study, which showed that the number of "high quality" instructional leadership actions a principal takes "is not predicted by the amount of time she spends on instructional leadership" (p. 12). In other words, administrators need to know which tasks have the most likelihood of promoting change in teacher behaviors and thus student performance (Supovitz & Buckley,

2008), particularly when their time for instructional leadership is limited. As Hallinger and Heck (2010) have contended, “every school is on its own unique improvement trajectory” and therefore leaders must be able to “adapt their strategies to the changing conditions” (p. 20). The instructional leadership necessary to effect school improvement—i.e., the specific tasks leaders must engage in—is typically dependent upon the needs of a specific school. So, too, then, must professional learning be contextualized to the needs of the instructional leader.

### **Coaching as Professional Development**

A growing body of research suggests that contextualized, job-embedded professional development can be an effective way to develop principals’ capacity for instructional leadership (Blasé & Blasé, 1999; Davis et al., 2005; Fink & Resnick, 2001; Honig, 2009, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2004). Thus, executive coaching has emerged as a way to individualize professional development for principals in order to enhance these vital skills. Generally speaking, executive coaching goals are individualized to enhance performance, build skills, develop strategies to accomplish goals, help leaders cultivate organizational objectives, and/or guide leaders toward recognizing personal professional learning objectives (Elmore & Burney, 1997; Hargrove, 2008; Honig, 2009; Neufeld & Roper, 2002; Reeves & Ellison, 2009; Witherspoon & White, 1996). Typically the role of the coach is to engage the principal in activities that will build his or her capacity for instructional leadership. As Hallinger and Heck (2010) contend, “school improvement leadership is highly contextualized” (p. 19). Therefore, coaching should be utilized as a tool to improve the skills and knowledge of principals within the specific context and situation of school leaders.

## **What is Executive Coaching?**

The Connecticut Association of Schools (CAS) has an executive coaching program that has provided districts in Connecticut with coaches since 2007. CAS maintains that executive coaching is a component of professional development and assistance focused on expanding the instructional and organizational leadership capacity of school leaders for the purpose of improving student achievement. Hence, the CAS model requires executive coaches to engage in dialogue with principals in order to determine goals and objectives that are specific to the needs of the school. Likewise, the coach and the principal jointly develop an action plan to focus the areas of coaching, which includes targeted professional development for the principal and/or leadership team. Such contextualized plans correspond to current research on the purposes of executive coaching, particularly when viewed through the lens of comprehensive school reform, which ultimately holds school leaders responsible for school improvement (Coaches are therefore seen as conduits or catalysts in school transformation and the improvement of the teaching and learning process. Consequently, executive coaching is more than mentorship of new principals. Research suggests that a skillful coach who works within what Vygotsky (1978) deems as the zone of proximal development (ZPD)—i.e., what a learner can accomplish with assistance—can improve the ability or capacity of the individual principal (Wise & Jacobo, 2010).

The executive coach is expected to work collaboratively with the principal to develop and act upon a specific school improvement agenda. The executive coach and the principal maneuver through the issues and needs together, learning about school improvement within the context and perspective of practice. Such coaching is rooted in sociocultural and organizational learning

theory, such as Vygotsky's (1978) assertion that optimal learning happens through social practice and interaction with others. Likewise, coaching as a means of socially transferring knowledge is grounded in Lave's (1996) theory that situated learning occurs via an individual's interaction with the living world and the people in it who encompass an amassed volume of knowledge. This is similar to the idea that learning is a craft to be practiced and coached through, much like an apprentice is coached through a traditional craft (Fink & Resnick, 2001). For example, the framework for coaching school leaders utilized by District Two in New York and based on "cognitive apprenticeship," is rooted in Lave's (1996) theory. With a coach as an integrated member of a school community, principals are able to access ongoing, embedded professional development in the form of social engagement (Honig, 2012).

Through participation in shared-problem solving and social interaction within the context of a specific school culture (Knapp, 2008; Mastergeorge, 2001), coaches and principals can engage in the process of developing the skills principals need in order to improve their practice. Reeves (2009) noted that "effective coaching" focuses on improving performance, it must have both a "learning and performance agenda," and it must include timely and specific feedback from the coach (p. 14). Similarly, Wise and Jacobo (2010) maintained that coaching provides a means for principals to engage in shared problem solving and to develop a course of action, based upon the setting and situation. As Honig and Ikemoto (2008) have suggested, intermediary organizations like CAS are "particularly well-suited" for such tasks because the extent of work required to accomplish true reform in teaching and learning practices may be too challenging for the majority of school leaders to simply "add-on" to an already demanding list of professional obligations (p. 332).

## **The Role of the Coach**

CAS, which has provided most of the executive coaches for Connecticut's public schools since 2007, is an intermediary organization that provides coaches who are external providers and have little (if any) affiliation with district offices. All of the executive coaches at CAS are previous school administrators because the developers believe that this will allow principals to more easily accept the executive coaches into the schools as members of the community. Likewise, the expectation from CAS is that the coaches will completely integrate themselves into the school communities they serve and be accepted as members of the school faculty. Coaches, then, can be seen as facilitators of the social transfer of acquired skillsets and knowledge; through their work with coaches, school leaders can "internalize" the key practices necessary for full participation in and transformation of their communities of practice (Lave, 1996).

Coaches can model techniques, engage principals in reflective dialogue, and sustain "social engagement" via conversations about practice in order to facilitate changes in thinking and behavior (Collins et al., 2003; Honig, 2012; Wenger, 1998). Such work between coaches and principals may be deemed "joint work" if it includes activities that the coach and the principal believe are necessary and meaningful, and that they have co-constructed (Honig, 2008). Engagement in joint work provides an opportunity for both coach and principal to engage in endeavors that are not only purposeful, but also highly contextualized by the participants and the site; it reinforces the reciprocal nature of the coaching process by promoting activities that both participants find valuable (Honig, 2008).

## **Coaching as Effective Practice**

Although many suggest that there is promise for change that coaches can enact in schools, very little empirical research exists to measure the efficacy of coaching as a method for improving principals' practice (Reeves, 2009; Warhol et al., 2010). Furthermore, the research related to measuring the effect that coaching has on the instructional leadership capabilities of principals is even sparser. Duncan and Stock (2010), for example, argued that the most important role a principal fulfills is that of instructional leader and concluded that coaching is a fundamental part of building capacity to function as a successful school leader. The study reported findings only related to principals' perceptions of coaching, however, and not the perceptions of coaches or other key school personnel. Moreover, the methods called for no measurement of a change in practice. Similarly, Aguilar, Goldwasser, and Tank-Cresetto (2011) described "transformational leadership" coaching in the Oakland Unified School District as a method of professional development to achieve overall school improvement and reported that the "academic performance index has risen by 74 points per year on average" (p. 70). There is no empirical research to link these findings to specific changes in leadership practices, however.

Honig and Ikemoto's (2008) study did identify specific activities that coaches (or "fellows," as they called them) engaged in with schools and related them to changes in how principals "thought about and engaged in their work" (p. 359), they did not discuss changes in instructional leadership practices in context. And while a clear plan and performance agenda with goals and progress monitoring (such as Reeves, 2009 describes) may measure the efficacy of whatever specific actions are agreed upon by coach and principal, it will not necessarily measure a change in the instructional leadership provided by the principal.

## **Focus of the Research**

The majority of research on leadership coaches in schools has focused on coaching teachers, not building-level administrators. Furthermore, the few studies related to coaching school leaders focused on the perceptions of only the leaders or the coaches, yielding a narrow view. With these issues in mind, this study was designed to explore the perceptions of both the principals and the coaches as well as other key school personnel such as teachers and leadership teams. The primary focus of my research efforts was to determine if coaching results in changes in principals' instructional leadership actions. To this end, I conducted a case study of Connecticut Association of School's executive coaching model in five different school locales and contexts to look for patterns and trends. The study yielded implications for organizations like CAS that employ coaches and school districts that utilize executive coaches as a means of professional development for principals.

## **Research Questions**

This study sought to answer two primary questions and several related sub-questions:

- How does the CAS model of Executive Coaching play out in four different schools?
- Does executive coaching lead to changes in principals' leadership practices?
  - If so, what, specifically, do principals do differently as a result of working with a coach?
  - How do the perceptions of coaches, principals, and key school personnel concerning the effectiveness of executive coaching and its impact on principals' instructional leadership abilities vary?
  - What specific areas of leadership do coaches and principals focus on improving?



## **Methodology**

Primarily, this study sought to understand and interpret individual perceptions of the effects of executive coaching, and therefore, is within the realm of what Creswell (2007) deemed a qualitative research study, focused upon “interpretation.” Multiple sources of data were collected via five case studies, including in-depth interviews and reviews of documents—including “action plans” and minutes from leadership team meetings—provided by executive coaches and principals. The findings in this paper are compiled from data collected over the course of a single school year.

## **Context**

In 2006, the Connecticut Association of Schools initiated its Executive Coaching Program (ECP) to support the Connecticut Accountability for Learning Initiative (CALI), a component of the Connecticut State Department of Education’s comprehensive school improvement efforts. The state identified four separate focal points for school improvement work that were integrated into the (CALI) program: data driven decision making/data teams; effective teaching strategies; power standards; and common formative assessments (White, n.d.). According to the state web site, executive coaching is one way to strengthen and align operational systems in these four focal areas within individual schools and, once implemented, these changes should result in higher student achievement (ibid).

The CAS Executive Coaching Program is best described by a logic model (visually represented in Appendix A). The first step in the coaching process requires a coach to collaborate with a principal to establish goals that are aligned with the school improvement plan and are directly related to student achievement. Next, the principal and the coach develop an action plan

that utilizes the four CALI focal points and identify criteria for successful implementation and benchmarks for student performance. Through both implementation of the action plan and repeated analysis of relevant data to monitor progress and revise the plan as necessary, CAS's theory is that the instructional leadership capabilities of both the principal and the leadership team will be enhanced, resulting in improved student achievement. The majority of principals who have been assigned a coach through CAS's program have been identified as "strong leaders...who with support and assistance, would be able to turn around their schools" (<http://www.casciac.org/excoach.shtml>). Coaches are all retired principals who have been recruited and trained (by CAS) in the four CALI modules, the Common Core Standards, and climate issues (ibid).

### **Description of Sample**

I employed a purposeful sampling method to recruit participants (Creswell, 2007). Working with CAS administrators, I established a list of five possible coaching pairs. The five pairs were selected based on homogenous sampling techniques, in order to reduce variability (Creswell, 2007). Specifically, all three schools were similar in terms of demographics and student achievement, and all five pairs had participated in CAS's Executive Coaching program for at least two academic years. Since much of the first year that the coach and the principal work together is spent establishing relationships, analyzing current school practices, and discerning the willingness and ability of the principal to make necessary changes for school improvement, I decided to sample only coaching pairs that had completed at least two years in the program.

CAS administration sent an email to all possible pairs to introduce the study and ask for their cooperation in participating. Three coaches responded with interest immediately, and two of these three were selected after the principal was contacted to ensure that he or she would also participate. I continued to contact additional pairs from the list provided by CAS until I was able to complete interviews at four sites. Shortly thereafter, the principal at a fifth site contacted me to complete the interview, so I added a fifth pair to the study.

At each of the five schools I interviewed the paired principal and executive coach. I also interviewed one member of the leadership team (referred to hereafter as “key school personnel,” or KSP) at each school. Although the leadership team was referred to by a different name at each setting, each was defined as a group of administrators, teachers, and (in some settings) parents/students who make school decisions. The individual I interviewed at each site had been on the team throughout the coaching process and had witnessed the work of the coach and the principal firsthand, which helped me to reach valid conclusions regarding coaching implementation. My final sample consisted 15 individuals—a principal/coach pair and one member of the leadership team (KSP) from each of the five schools.

All of the principals had previously been teachers and all coaches had been principals; two of the coaches had also been central office personnel. Likewise, all coaches and principals had attained at least a 6<sup>th</sup> year degree. In the interest of maintaining confidentiality, the two coaches who had experience above the role of principal are not identified here, nor is the education level of the one individual with a terminal degree. There are not many in the coaching ranks with similar credentials, and specifying years of experience could reveal individual

identities. Where appropriate in analysis, differences in experience and education and their possible relationship to the skill level of coaches will be referenced in a more general sense.

**Table 1. Study Participants**

<b><u>Participant</u></b>	<b><u>Role</u></b>	<b><u>Years in Role</u></b>	<b><u>Years Paired</u></b>
Bob	Principal	7	3
Sam	Coach	6	3
Dawn	KSP	22	3
Lisa	Principal	2	2
Kate	Coach	5	2
Jim	KSP	5	2
Gene	Principal	10	3
Joe	Coach	6	3
Irene	KSP	4	2
Sarah	Principal	2	2
Brenda	Coach	4	2
Ken	KSP	6	2
Neil	Principal	3	2
Bill	Coach	5	2
Karen	KSP	11	2

Note: “Years paired” for KSP refers to number of years individual was on school leadership team with coach/principal.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection took place at the end of the 2011–2012 school year or the beginning of the 2012–2013 school year. Principals, coaches, and leadership team members took part in formal, semi-structured interviews that each lasted approximately one-and-a-half hours. The interview protocols (Appendix B) and document analysis were piloted in March 2012 at a high school in which the coach and principal had worked together for two years. The protocols focused on what leadership practices the coach and principal concentrated on each year, their perceptions of how effective the work was, and to what extent the coach influenced a change in instructional leadership practices by the principal.

I offered participants the option of doing interviews at their respective schools, or at a mutually convenient location for the researcher and participant, or via phone. Most coaches chose to be interviewed in person, while the majority of principals were interviewed via phone. Three out of five KSP interviews were done by phone as well. The interviews were recorded and I also took supplemental notes during the conversations. Follow-up interviews were done by phone for two of the five principals after review of the transcripts showed the need for clarification of a few responses.

I collected “action plans” from two of the five pairs. The other pairs had not created action plans at the time of the study. In addition, CAS provided a comprehensive set of documents related to the implementation of their Executive Coaching Program and professional development offerings, as well as meeting summaries for coaches during the 2011–2012 school year. I reviewed these documents for data specifically related to implementation of the coaching program or the leadership practices of principals at each site in order to corroborate and triangulate data from interviews.

### **Data Analysis**

Within 48 hours of each interview the audio recordings were transcribed by a transcription service. This allowed early analysis and rudimentary coding (Glesne, 1999). I read transcriptions several times to ensure accuracy and make necessary corrections. In addition, I wrote analytic memos after each interview to familiarize myself with the data and to begin to see themes (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 1999). Although the initial analysis was intended to discern patterns in perceptions of the coaching process and possible changes in principal behaviors, codes were primarily data-driven (i.e., derived inductively) (Ruona, 2005). Once the major

themes were established, the software program *Dedoose* was utilized to develop a matrix and quantify the codes, to partition variables to aid in comparing and contrasting, and to identify outliers (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In addition, after I coded the interview data I examined the action plans created by the principals and coaches as well as the CAS documents to triangulate findings related to specific actions taken by principals and to corroborate key school personnel perceptions (Creswell, 2008). Finally, I completed thematic summaries to seek recurrent and interconnected themes amongst all data sources (Creswell, 2007). Utilizing the constant comparative method, I compiled thematic summaries for all data sources and determined patterns in order to interpret findings and produce a narrative discussion (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

### **Validity**

I have taken care to avoid including details that would compromise confidentiality of either the participants or the sites, given the nature of discussions with participants and the small, location-specific sample. That said, wherever possible, I share specific quotes from participants to promote authenticity, validity of assertions, and transferability of the research (Creswell, 2007). Likewise, the triangulation of interview and document analysis data enhances the validity of my findings because it allows me to corroborate specific data points (Creswell, 2007). The analytic memos written after each interview helped to surface my own assumptions and provided an opportunity for me to reflect upon the research process and plausibility of preliminary findings (Ruona, 2005). In addition, peer examination was conducted to “facilitate the raising of alternative views” (Ruona, 2005, p. 249).

As described in the Subjectivity Statement included in Appendix C, I am a high school principal who participated in the CAS executive coaching program for three years. As such, I

may have biases regarding the efficacy of the program. Furthermore, because I have worked closely with a coach, I may have preconceived notions regarding the necessary parts of an action plan or of what a principal or coach “should” do. I am also aware that the executive coaching process is meant to provide individualized support that considers the needs of specific principals and schools; hence, I worked to suspend my perceptions of what was necessary for me as a principal and for my own school, and to focus on what the participants deemed necessary at the sample sites. Likewise, because my own experiences may have made it difficult for me to see multiple perspectives, I incorporated other viewpoints by interviewing personnel other than the coaches and principals (i.e., the KSP) and triangulating my findings via document analysis (Creswell, 2008).

### **Limitations**

Although this study is unique in that it includes perceptions of key school personnel rather than only principals and coaches, there are still important limitations to consider. Specifically, most of the data collected were self-reports from the participants. These data should therefore be interpreted with caution because participants may misremember information or they may report inaccurate information to present themselves more favorably. Likewise, participants may not have interpreted questions or terms in the same manner that I understood them, and therefore they may have responded with different meanings in mind, although through triangulation and analysis of multiple responses, I attempted to mitigate this possible limitation.

### **Findings**

Overwhelmingly, principals and coaches both described the executive coaching process as highly contextualized work. Interestingly, even the way they utilized the term “contextual”

varied based on their perceptions of the role of the coach. During data analysis, it became clear that the practices of coaches and the perceptions of principals were highly dependent on their individual theories about the purposes and useful practices of coaching. As such, my framework for analysis is based upon Argyris and Schon's (1978) theory of action (ToA) framework. Simply stated, this framework states that theory determines practice. Consequently, findings are organized in a manner consistent with explaining the alternate points of view or practices of both coaches and principals. As an overview, Table 2 lists the specific coaching practices that were implemented and the number of coach/principal teams that used them in their first three years of working together.

**Table 2. Implementation of Specific Coaching Practices (N=5)**

<b>Practice</b>	<b>Overall Frequency</b>	<b>Year 1</b>	<b>Year 2</b>
<i>Principal &amp; Coach</i>			
Data Teams	5	5	5
Time Management	3	3	0
-Delegation of Tasks	2	2	1
Determine Principal's Needs	1	1	0
Define Instructional Leadership	3	3	0
Climate/Leadership Style	3	2	1
-Communication Skills	3	3	1
-Difficult Staff/Morale Issues	2	2	1
Walkthroughs	4	2	4
School Definition/Good Instruction	3	1	3
<i>Coach only</i>			
Walkthroughs	2	1	2



Facilitate Data Teams	1	1	1
Work with Teachers in Professional Learning Communities	2	1	1
Plan Lessons w/Individual Teachers	1	0	1

### **Differences in Implementation: Principal Improvement vs. School Improvement**

**Coaches’ perspectives.** All of the coaches spoke about their work related to instructional leadership, but how they specifically worked with principals was dependent upon whether they perceived themselves as coaches to improve schools, or as coaches to improve the practices of principals. In other words, coaching was implemented differently at each site depending on the theory of action of the individual coach. Three of the five coaches believed that their main role was to develop the instructional leadership capacity of the principal and, as a result, they were more likely to work nearly exclusively with their principals than directly with teachers or other members of the leadership team. These coaches spoke specifically about their duty to provide support to their principals, and their work included conducting walkthroughs, writing evaluations, developing professional development sessions for faculty, and communicating a common vision about “what good instruction looks like.” As one coach explained, the overarching goal of these activities was to improve teaching and learning by improving the instructional leadership skills of the principal:

I’m here to coach [the principal]. I’m not here to coach the faculty. I’m not a literacy coach, or a differentiation coach, or a math coach. I’m an executive coach. The executive in the building is the principal. I’m there for him. I’m there to help him develop his skills. He works with them when I’m not there,

and long after I'm totally gone. If he can't do the instructional leading when

I'm gone, what good have I done? (Neil, coach, Interview October 12, 2012)

All three of the coaches who saw their primary role as developing principals' instructional leadership skills also reported that they occasionally worked with the school-wide data teams or with teachers. When they worked with the data teams, they did not do so in isolation; rather, the principal was typically present and part of the process. Furthermore, each of these coaches discussed a personal philosophy that working in isolation from the principal in "his/her building" was both "disrespectful" and ineffective. The majority of coaches defined this joint work with principals as the primary means not only for improving instructional leadership capabilities, but also for improving teaching and learning in the school as a whole, because the principal would replicate the efforts when s/he was alone.

The two coaches who believed that their main function was to improve the school and/or student achievement reported that the work they did was "highly contextual," but they were referring to the context of the school needs, not the principal's needs. These coaches saw their work as variable from setting to setting due to the issues associated with certain school deficiencies, regardless of what the individual principal's skills might be. Both described the work they did as directly aligned with school improvement plans. Hence, the specific work that they engaged in was quite different than the work of coaches who believed their primary goal was developing instructional leadership capabilities in principals. They reported doing walkthroughs without principals, working on curricula, lesson plans, and assessments directly with teachers, and leading faculty meetings or data teams.

KSP in these two schools agreed that they often worked directly with the executive coaches without any interaction with the principal, and that their understanding was that the coach was there to “work with the school as a whole” to broker assistance in any way that they were needed. At one school, for example, KSP referred to the executive coach as the “school coach” and explained that his primary purpose was to help them raise scores in reading and writing because the school was on “the list” (i.e., had not met AYP) and the coach was a literacy expert (Ken, KSP, Interview November 2, 2012).

The most notable example of the differences in how the CAS executive coaching model was being implemented differently based upon the coach’s or principal’s perception of the coach’s role was delineated by one coach who described his role as being there to improve the school “as a whole,” rather than the principal, specifically:

The key to success in the executive coaching program is to find the person or persons who could leverage the greatest change. In [the principal’s name] that was the case. But in some schools that is not necessarily the principal. At one school, for example, it is a strong assistant principal and solid instructional data teams that I work with; I really only check in with the principal.

Technically, I am his coach, but I am doing what it takes to improve the school as a whole. And I do that where the leverage exists to do so. This is why I keep reiterating that the work I do is very contextual from school to school. You figure out what the school needs, you figure out who there can help you get that done, and you move forward. (Sam, coach, Interview, December 12, 2012)

**Principals' perspectives.** All five principals reported that they expected the primary work of the coaches in their schools would be joint work (Honig, 2012). The work often involved participation in meetings with teachers/professional learning communities (PLCs), data team meetings, and leadership team meetings, but the principals' expectations were that these were instances of joint work rather than work done in isolation by coaches. Two of the principals remarked that their coaches had spent time "getting to know" them and determining what specific goals they wanted to work on as professionals, rather than "just the typical school improvement type" goals (Bob, principal, Interview September 17, 2012). Yet another explained that her coach had worked on a questionnaire with her to determine her strengths and weaknesses as a leader, subsequently working their mutually agreed upon goals into the action plan they turned in to CAS. She described the CAS program and her coach:

This is what works about the executive coaching program: a confidante, a person to help, to problem solve with, who understands the context of the building and the issues. It's nice to go to workshops with the experts, but it's a completely different experience to have the experts embedded with you in your school. (Lisa, principal, Interview October 17, 2012)

Given the principals' perspectives, it is perhaps not surprising that one of the most common codes that surfaced during data analysis was "coaches who work alone/in isolation" as a recurrent theme in the category of principals' perceptions of what "doesn't work" in the coaching program. Most principals expressed that not only were they uncomfortable with coaches working in isolation with faculty members, but also that any work done without them did not yield any

changes in practice in the building. For example, one principal whose coach initially often worked in isolation cited a specific example of an unsuccessful exercise:

In the beginning, [the coach] often worked with teachers to write more effective lesson plans, as that was one of our school goals. He coached them through the process, met with departments to tease out skill and content based objectives, common formative assessments, instructional strategies, the whole nine yards. He continued to collect them, give feedback, and so on. And you know what happened once he didn't meet with them anymore? They went right back to what they were doing before. No change. No change at all. It was crazy; the amount of time he spent on it, for nothing. (Bob, principal, Interview/October 17, 2012)

**Fluidity of CAS model promotes different perceptions.** Besides the obvious differences in coaches' philosophies regarding effective coaching practices, I also found ambiguity in the directives provided by CAS for coaches. The initial documents given to coaches at the beginning of the 2011–2012 school year include “CAS Executive Coaching Program Role of the Coach” (see Appendix D). In this document, coaches are told to work with both the leadership team and the principal. Likewise, there is a list of activities that coaches may participate in, “with or without the principal,” including providing “individual or small group PD to teachers.” The majority of both coaches and principals reported that any work carried out by the coach without the direct involvement of the principal was unsuccessful in promoting any sustainable changes in either behavior of personnel or school policy.

### **Successful and Unsuccessful Coaching**

**Relationships matter.** The principals (and most coaches) believed that work done in isolation from the principal was not only ineffective, but also an impediment to building a trusting relationship. More than any other descriptor, principals utilized the word “trust” to describe what was necessary for a successful coaching experience. Ultimately, each principal reported that the relationship he or she developed with the coach was the single most important aspect of the coaching practice.

Contextually, principals discussed the notion of trust in several ways. The baseline definition for all five principals was basic and related to the expectation that coaches would keep the conversations and candid thoughts in confidence. But there was another, equally important version of trust that principals described as a necessity for a positive coaching experience: a trust in expertise.

**Perceptions of coaches’ skills.** Principals explained “expertise” in different ways, sometimes describing it as respect for the coach, or a mutual understanding of the responsibilities and difficulties of the principalship, or an expectation that coaches would treat principals as “equals” with whom they could discuss problems of practice, rather than as someone that they had to impress or who would evaluate them. For example:

I think that’s part of the reason I got so much out of [the coach]...because I didn’t have to put up a barrier with him. It was his approach. It was never a concern that you know, I couldn’t let this guy know this because...he’s going to look at me differently or something. We had a give and take relationship. We hashed things out; we said “let’s see if this works.” I enjoyed doing that, having those talks. I was in a relationship where I enjoyed working with

another professional to think about teaching and learning, and how to run an effective school. I knew I was working with someone who got it. This wasn't somebody who came from a university or the business sector and had no clue about the realities of doing my work. No. He was a principal. He ran a school. And, he knew how to make improvement possible, and what may not work as well, from his own experiences. I respected that. I trusted his judgment. I couldn't – I wouldn't – have worked the same way with anyone else really. Well, maybe on the surface. But I would have just been going through the motions. (Bob, principal, Interview September 17, 2012)

The same principal went on to explain that he had another coach with whom he had a “good relationship,” and who he trusted to maintain confidence, but who he did not feel had the qualifications to be able to truly help him. Another principal who had more than one coach described exactly the same phenomenon; she described the “other” coach as a “very nice woman” who was “good to sit behind closed doors and commiserate with,” but who she “felt could not really help her to develop her skills” because she did not think that the coach “really knew anything more than” she did (Lisa, principal, Interview October 17, 2012). In general, principals who described coaches in this manner described a relationship where the coach was more of a “confidante” or “sounding board” than someone from whom they received strategies for improvement of either instructional leadership skills or the school more broadly.

Similarly, as I coded my data I found an overlap between principals' perceptions of “relationship” and “coach skills.” More precisely, when principals spoke about positive relationships with coaches as a requirement of successful coaching, they also spoke about

coaching skills related to listening and asking questions. All five principals expressed a desire for coaches to not only be good listeners, but also to be able to ask questions that would prompt them to reflect upon their practice in a way that would help them make changes or negotiate solutions. They were clear that although they wanted coaches who had the expertise to help them, they did not want coaches who simply imposed solutions upon them. Instead, they expected coaches to talk through problems and lead them to figure out their own needs and action plans. For example:

[The coach] had a way of asking very pointed questions that made you think and sort of led you to some solutions, some understanding of what you were and weren't doing. "Look, this is what you need to do," wasn't his approach, and I would not have worked well with that. It was more, "so...what happens when this happens," or "what do you ask someone when X happens." If a coach comes in with the thought that he's got a set way to fix everything, they have the wrong approach. They have to come in and listen. They have to take the time to find out what's happening. Ask questions. It's a lot like being a critical friend. (Bob, principal, Interview June 26, 2012)

Notably, KSP echoed the same thoughts about what skills were most important for a coach to have. Several described the work they did with coaches as positive because it included the opportunity for reflection and discussion. Teachers brought concerns forward, shared work in PLCs, and engaged in discussions about teaching and learning because they considered the coach a fellow practitioner. For example:



I think the coaching techniques are to listen, to ask questions, to, you know— questions are the key. The kinds of questions you ask will either lead to defensiveness or they lead to actual reflection....So, how you pose them, when you pose them, who you pose them to can either get you the stone wall or can get you someone who's thinking for a few seconds and says, "I never thought of it that way." Which then leads them to their own questions and I think that's the process. Ask a question that will make people think enough that they ask questions in return. That's what [the coach] did. And the three years we worked with him was better than my last 15 years of professional development. He worked side by side with us. He listened and asked the right questions, so we trusted him enough to allow him to impart some knowledge to us...to take his suggestions and run with them. (Karen, KSP, Interview September 12, 2012)

**Building a strong relationship.** Another factor that both coaches and principals discussed as important to whether the coaching relationship would be successful or not was how it began. CAS's implementation model is supposed to start with an initial meeting between the coach, principal, and assistant superintendent, and two principals reported being a part of the process for selecting the coach who would work with them. On the other hand, the remaining three reported that they did not have this meeting. In fact, two principals reported that the first time they met their coaches or had any discussion about the executive coaching program was the first day that the coach worked with them in the school.

All principals and coaches acknowledged that a principal needed to be comfortable with the individual coach that was assigned and the coaching process in general in order for it to work. Several coaches spoke about the difference between starting the process with a principal who was “adequately prepared” to engage in executive coaching by having been part of the preparation for the coaching process and working with a principal who was assigned a coach but not prepared or adequately consulted before the process began. Coaches reported that when the principal was not a part of the process, the coaching experience was ineffective—in some cases only in the beginning, and in others, for the entirety of the assignment. For example:

The first thing that has to be considered is how well the principal understands why the coach is coming in. In one particular school’s case, the superintendent did an excellent job of preparing the principal for the coach’s position in the school and the coach’s role so that the principal did not perceive this as punishment. The principal did not perceive this as corrective action, but rather, the principal’s perception was that this was just another set of eyes and ears and that I could help focus the work around school improvement. In another case I was in, the superintendent didn’t really talk about it at all with the principal....It probably took half the year for the principal to even warm up to the fact that I was there so that he didn’t feel that I was threatening in some manner...to his work, his authority, his position, or his expertise. In the meantime, the initial six months or so was pretty much wasted because he was guarded and not interested in working with me (Bill, coach, Interview, September 20, 2012).

Two other coaches spoke about similar experiences, including one who reported that in the second year of the coaching relationship, there were tensions that did not exist the first year because the funding source had changed from the State of Connecticut to the local district, and with that came a different “feel,” as she described it, to the coaching. As described by both the principal and the coach, the practices changed because the principal did not have the same level of trust in the coach. With the knowledge that the coach reported directly to the principal’s supervisors, the principal was less willing to work on individual tasks with the coach. The entire first year had been spent largely on what both deemed “professional development” for the principal, but in the second year they instead utilized the coach to work exclusively with teachers on data analysis and the development of common formative assessments. The principal said that she “knew whatever she worked on with the coach would be discussed with her assistant superintendent” and so she chose simply to focus on coaching for school improvement, rather than to “accentuate what [she] needed to do better as a leader.” This change is notable because it demonstrates not only a change in the relationship and the perceived trustworthiness of the coach, but also in the purpose of coaching, from professional development for the principal to general school improvement.

### **Coaching as Embedded Professional Development**

While the implementation of coaching varied greatly across all five sites depending upon how the coaches and principals defined their work and the level of trust they were able to develop, definitive examples of coaching as professional development for principals did emerge from three of the five schools. In one, the coach reviewed the State of Connecticut’s Common Core of Learning with the principal, had a discussion with her about the strengths and weaknesses

that they saw, and then formulated a plan with two leadership priorities for the principal (in addition to those developed for the school), and a plan for improvement. Both the principal and the coach relayed how effective this was over the course of their first year, and gave several examples as evidence. The two personal goals they developed were related to the principal's organization and time management:

[The coach] was the best thing that ever happened to me last year. I was never able to get out of this office, just continually overwhelmed with the paperwork, the discipline, the management of the school. I wanted to change that, and she worked closely with me to do it. From a theoretical aspect, we read articles about instructional leadership together, and I decided I wanted to be able to give more feedback to teachers about instruction. Obviously, that meant getting out of my office. [The coach] got me using my calendar, monitored it with me, and modeled ways to both delegate work and to restructure how my time was spent. We charted how often I did walkthroughs and observations. We did them together and discussed the feedback I would give to teachers. I learned so much from her, I have been able to carry it into this year. (Sarah, principal, Interview, June 18, 2012)

The coach described the same process and results, and attributed the success to the fact that they completed the Common Core for Leading Scale, because “it gave a basis and framework” for the improvement plan that the principal bought into, rather than an externally-driven school improvement goal that “she might have found outside of her control.” The KSP interviewed in this school also reported that the amount of time the principal spent in classrooms had “risen dramatically” and that she typically did “10 or 15 walkthroughs a week” and between

“five and ten” observations each week, as opposed to the same amount over the course of an entire year before working with the coach. As the principal herself said, “Now, if you want to find me, you usually have to look in a classroom.”

At another site, the data suggested that there was an embedded form of professional development happening for the principal. The principal did not describe it as such, however, though the coach did. The coach explained that in an early meeting with central office personnel, he was asked to focus on improving the “diplomacy and communication skills” of the principal. The coach intimated that he did not want to “damage the relationship with the principal before it even began” and so he never discussed this explicitly with the principal. Rather, he waited for opportunities to arise where he could make the principal aware of how his actions/reactions might affect his relationships and, consequently, his ability to get work done. In addition to their work that was directly aligned with the school improvement plan over the three years of the pairing, the coach described the ways he provided coaching specific to the principal’s interpersonal skills:

I had to do it delicately....I would say “[principal], let’s stop a minute and talk about whether what you have written is going to elicit the kind of response you want. Is it really going to change things for the better, or make it worse?” And, you know, guide him through what might need to be changed and help him craft a more diplomatic response. This evolved into a process over the first couple of years, where we would strategize his responses and even do role plays before he went into what might be difficult situations, so that he could be prepared with measured responses. (Joe, coach, interview/September 9, 2012)

He went on to explain that in the last year he had not made it an explicit part of their work together, but he had continued to encourage the principal to use him as a “sounding board and editor,” and so the principal began to bring the issues to him for advice. He also felt he had been successful in truly changing the principal’s practices because there were “fewer and fewer occasions” when he had to work with him on the issue. Likewise, he said that central office personnel remarked on the “noticeable changes in [the principal],” and that climate survey results from staff, as they specifically related to the principal’s communication, were much improved by the end of the third year.

Although he did not characterize it as a specific part of the professional development process, the principal commented on these aspects of their work together as well, corroborating what the coach relayed. He explained that the coach had been what “helped him keep it together” and that he trusted him as a confidante, so he was able to work closely with him to “manage [his] emotions and stay focused on the work.” Since an instructional leader must be able to promote a shared vision and maintain a positive climate conducive to learning, his/her communication skills are an important part of the job. In this case, ongoing, embedded professional development led to changes in leadership practices for the principal.

The third coaching pair whose specific actions were directed at building the instructional leadership of the principal described yet another way in which professional development goals were developed: they surfaced over time. This particular pair had two noteworthy differences from the others. First, the principal had been a principal longer than either of the other two (longer than any other in the study, in fact). And second, the pairing between principal and coach was the longest in the study, ending after more than four years. In this instance, the accounts of

how the principal's needs were determined, the support the coach provided to address them, and the resulting changes in practice were nearly identical in the interviews of both principal and coach.

The coach described a principal who was “well versed” in curriculum, instruction, and comprehensive school reform, and who was regarded as an “instructional leader” in the building when he began working with him. Subsequently, as they had initial meetings and went through past school improvement plans and the related data, neither the coach nor the principal came up with a leadership priority that was specific to the principal. Rather, the priorities required the coach to work with other KSP and members of the leadership team. The principal and the coach at this site recounted that the first year saw no “real change,” even anecdotally, with the exception that the teachers with whom the coach worked were producing lesson plans under his direction. So, in year two, the coach and the principal decided the coach would shift from working with individual and small groups of teachers on lesson planning to working with department-level data teams. Along with this came a change in the way the work was done; the principal and the coach worked with the groups together.

As a result of this shift, the coach and the principal engaged in more joint work than they had done in the first year, which gave the coach more opportunities to see how the principal worked with the faculty. The coach reported that the principal “asked all of the right questions” and worked “continually and methodically toward advancing the school improvement goals” and that he facilitated the meetings with ease (Sam, coach, Interview, December 12, 2012). Still, both principal and coach remarked that they “did not see sustainable change” and described a phenomenon that mimicked the work done by the coach and the teachers: whenever the coach

and the principal moved on to work with a different data team, the ones they previously worked with gradually resorted to the same practices they had before working with the principal and coach. The coach described what he termed “their epiphany” as follows:

It just dawned on me one day. [The principal] knew what needed to be done and told them to do it. And, typically, he asked them to bring something back to the next meeting to show the results. But still, there was no real accountability. No long-lasting accountability. I needed to help him figure out how to make accountability a part of the school culture. (Sam, coach, Interview, December 4, 2012)

Similarly, the principal reported that it was his coach who made him “understand the importance of accountability” as a part of “school identity.” He began to think of expectations for students and adults alike as a truly embedded piece of not only improvement but also school culture. He spoke about his coach’s role in this change by saying:

I realized I needed to communicate in a different way to people so that they could actually do something with the information, as opposed to just sitting in our lecture hall to listen to me, and then walk away to do what they had already done for 18 years. This is where [the coach] came in. He started to say things to me like “what happens when this happens?” “What do you do when somebody...” And then I would have to stop and realize, oh, right, I never ask them that. And this was the beginning of me getting what I needed most from the coaching process: to learn how to implement change in a way that I could see it through. Start to finish. Everyone is accountable. (Bob, principal, Interview June 26, 2012)



He went on to explain that what he learned from his coach over the remaining two years was to have more effective conversations with faculty. The coach helped him structure them more efficiently, ask the “right questions,” and “most importantly, think about and require evidence that will truly show the end result of the work.” While this was not the only priority that the coach worked on at this site over the remaining three years, it continued to be the area in which the coach and principal participated in shared-problem solving and social interaction within the context of a specific school culture (Mastergeorge, 2001; Knapp, 2008). As a result, and in contrast to the other pairs, this principal was able to do what Lave (1996) would refer to as internalizing the key practices for transformation of his community of practice.

### **Summary of Findings**

As workload and accountability pressures mount for principals in most public schools, principals and their superintendents are looking for ways to improve principals’ skills, particularly in the area of instructional leadership. Executive coaching is one form of professional development that is gaining momentum as a way to assist principals in developing coherence and vision, clarifying goals, delineating actions, improving instructional effectiveness, and leading, rather than simply managing. Coaches can be used as confidential, critical friends who will challenge assumptions, ask tough questions, and suggest new possibilities (Wise & Jacobo, 2010; Elmore & Burney, 1997; Neufeld & Roper, 2002).

Unlike other forms of professional development, coaching is highly contextualized by both the site and the practitioners involved. In this study, I found that the individual theories of action of both principals and coaches—in the initial stages, primarily coaches—played an important role in determining how the coaching process was implemented. Coaches who

believed that their primary function was to improve school performance as a whole often worked in isolation to focus on improvement of teaching and learning. In contrast, coaches who believed that their primary role was to develop the instructional leadership capacity of the principal as a conduit of whole school improvement engaged in various forms of joint work with school leaders. Likewise, principals who reported changes in practice also reported that they had a common understanding with the coaches about what work needed to be done and how to do it. This echoes earlier research demonstrating that when coaching is approached as an endeavor of joint work, it truly engages the participants in the work because it allows them to construct the focus so that it is meaningful and valuable to them (Honig, 2008).

The CAS coaching model relies upon CALI as a focus for the work of coaches and principals. If coaches and principals utilize it as the center of their work, the CALI principles can provide a starting point for joint work. Even though the most common joint work done by coaches and principals was related to data analysis and the development of a school-wide data team, the other elements of CALI were not consistently implemented at any of the sites in my sample. Although coaches, principals, and KSP at all five sites mentioned other aspects of CALI (common formative assessments and effective teaching strategies) as parts of large-scale school improvement work, they all reported that any work done with the coaches related to developing common assessments, developing lesson plans, or implementing “new” teaching strategies was both “sporadic” and “unsuccessful.” In fact, at three sites, principals and KSP remarked that their coach was not skilled in these areas of CALI, even though they were highly skilled in the data team process. Again, this finding points to the idea that in order to fully engage in an effective assistance-based relationship like coaching, both participants must find value and importance in

the work that they are doing (Honig, 2012). Although all five principals reported being “well-versed” in the CALI modules, they did not see the value in following them with the coach. Thus, they did not deeply engage in activities associated with CALI, and therefore the modules were not essential to their learning or to the joint work they constructed with coaches.

Coaches engaged in work related to CALI without the direct involvement of the principals, even though all five principals reported that any work carried out in isolation by the coaches was unsuccessful in garnering sustainable changes to practice. In addition, principals were more likely to report issues of distrust and perceived poor relationships with coaches who engaged in work with the school staff without their involvement. Finally, coaches and principals alike stressed the importance of a “good” relationship starting with the initial conversations between CAS, central office personnel, and principals before coaches were hired as a means of establishing the principals’ buy-in to the coaching process.

In cases where principals reported that the coaches helped them change their practice, they mentioned a specific set of skills demonstrated by coaches. Regardless of what other knowledge or skills coaches possessed, principals reported that the most important were questioning techniques and listening strategies that helped promote reflection. This finding is closely linked to the finding that differences in how coaching was implemented were determined by individual theories of action. More specifically, principals who believed that the coaches were there to improve their skills as leaders also believed that coaches needed to utilize effective questioning and listening techniques. Similarly, principals who reported that their coaches possessed these skills were the same principals who reported that their leadership practices—

particularly those deemed instructional leadership—had changed as a result of working with a coach.

Although my methods do not allow me to claim that the work done with executive coaches actually caused changes in instructional leadership practices by principals, at three of the five sites the principals themselves attributed changes in their leadership practices to their work with coaches. While some changes are easier to delineate as changes to instructional leadership practices (such as increased walkthroughs, feedback to teachers, promoting a common vision, and developing a culture of accountability) others might be classified as changes to the organizational management techniques utilized by school leaders (e.g., time management, improved communication, delegation of responsibilities). In either case, the changes in leadership practices were reported as positive and necessary to both school and principal improvement at all three of these sites.

### **Recommendations**

The primary focus of my study was specifically on how the CAS model of executive coaching was implemented at five sites. Nevertheless, the majority of my findings reflect generalizations related to the process of coaching school principals, rather than the CAS model in particular. As such, the recommendations that emerged are useful not only for CAS to consider, but also for any school district or intermediary association that is looking to implement executive coaching as a way to improve the practices of school leaders. Five key recommendations emerged:

1. Discuss school and principal needs with both district and school leaders before matching a coach with a school.

2. Develop a screening process for coaching candidates.
3. Train coaches in coaching methods.
4. Develop or agree upon a common definition of instructional leadership with the principal, coach, and district leaders.
5. Develop and implement an instrument to assess the efficacy of the coaching process.

### **Discuss Needs Before Matching Coach with School**

Currently, CAS administrators meet with district leaders to discuss specific school needs prior to a coach assignment. School principals are not always a part of those meetings, however. Furthermore, even when principals are involved, the discussion is geared more toward what “the school needs” than what the “leader needs.” Therefore, the coach selected to work with a particular school may be the right choice for the school, but not for the individual principal. School officials at the central office level may have a good grasp of what is needed to enact whole-school improvement, and may even have insight as to what the school leader needs to improve about his/her leadership, but they still may not know all of the intricacies of the school climate and culture, staffing issues, or even the day-to-day actions of the school principal.

Several principals mentioned that they would have appreciated the opportunity to be a part of the process of selecting their coach. “Coaching is like a marriage,” as one put it, “and you need to have professional chemistry with the coach.” Initial meetings to determine needs could provide principals with opportunities to interact with potential coaching candidates so that they can be a part of selecting the “right” coach for them and for the school. Discussion of the coaching process, purposes of the program, and the roles and expectations for both principals and coaches should also be a part of these initial meetings. In order to make appropriate matches,

CAS, or any intermediary agency planning a coaching model, must understand the professional needs of the principal and the school improvement needs.

### **Develop a Screening Process**

CAS hires retired, experienced school administrators to work with principals, and principals reported that working with coaches who had previous experience as principals was valuable. There were particular skills that they needed their coaches to have depending upon the type of school improvement or principal development being worked on. For example, one principal reported that while her coach was able to help her with the “personal, professional goals” related to organizational management, she was unable to provide much support for the main school improvement work of K–5 curriculum overhaul because she had spent the majority of her career at the high school level. CAS, or any agency employing coaches, must have a way to determine the strengths and weaknesses of coaches to effectively pair them with principals. Besides curriculum vitae from potential coaches, a survey instrument might yield useful information from coaches about their educational philosophies, skills, and preferences. Implementing this secondary survey instrument may be a way determine the individual theory of action that a coach possesses, which would assist CAS not only in pairing coaches with principals, but also in customizing professional development offerings for coaches and in refining their expectations and procedures.

### **Train Coaches in Coaching**

CAS requires coaches to attend one five-hour meeting each month from August through December. While the majority of the meeting (typically between three and four hours) is spent on professional development, the content is similar to the professional development offered to

school personnel (e.g., data teams, common core standards, instruction for student engagement, etc.). Certainly, coaches need to be well-versed in these areas in order to work in schools, but they must also know how to perform as coaches. For example, principals valued the ability to listen and ask effective questions more than the ability to facilitate a data team meeting. My study also suggests that coaching must take the form of what Honig (2012) refers to as “joint work,” which requires coaches to work alongside principals to deepen their understanding of and model successful practices. Coaches should be trained in effective methods for reinforcing the particular actions and activities of principals as a way to promote changes in behavior. They need training in modeling techniques and engaging principals in conversations as reflective practitioners in order to fully implement a form of job-embedded professional development that can promote internalization of the key practices necessary for a principal to transform his leadership and community of practice (Lave, 1996; Honig, 2012; Wenger, 1998).

### **Common Definition of Instructional Leadership**

Even though coaches and principals approached the executive coaching process with varying perspectives on whether the goal was primarily to directly improve the school as a whole or to improve the school by working on the individual principal’s skills, they all agreed that at least a portion of the work had to focus on the instructional leadership skills of school leaders. Understandings of just what constituted instructional leadership varied amongst all individuals in the study, however. Some defined it simply as doing an “appropriate amount” of classroom observations and providing feedback, while others provided a laundry list of skills that a principal must demonstrate to be an effective instructional leader. Settling on a common definition—even if only among the pairs of coaches and principals—is important; coaches and

principals need to have a common understanding of what, specifically, they are working to improve.

### **Assess Efficacy of Coaching Process.**

CAS suggests that coaches “work [their] way out of the job” (CAS Program materials, Appendix D); there is no objective evaluation to determine when a coaching relationship ends. Likewise, there is no standard way to determine if the interventions provided by the coach have yielded any measurable change, either in the principal’s skills as a leader, or the improvement of the school as a whole. Coaches, principals, and KSP at several sites intimated that sustainable change had occurred during or by the end of the time that a coach worked with a principal. But without a study such as this at the end of each year that coaches work with principals, neither CAS nor the participants has a means to determine if the coaching relationship is successful and/or producing desired changes.

If the primary work of coaching is focused on the improvement of principals’ instructional leadership skills, then a baseline measurement must be determined, followed by a summative means of evaluation. As two principals in this study reported, an instrument such as the Common Core for Leading provides principals and coaches with a common language to determine initial strengths and weaknesses and to devise their action plans. Subsequently, the work done by a coaching pair is contextualized according to the needs of the individual principal, and CAS would need to utilize different mechanisms for evaluation. For example, a survey may be given to teachers and/or students before coaching begins and at the end of the year (and in subsequent years), though the questions may have to be tailored to the goals of the principal and



coach. In addition, each principal and coach should complete a survey or questionnaire about the work done, which needs have been met, and which needs remain.

## **Conclusion**

Although my study focused upon the Connecticut Association of Schools' implementation of executive coaching, the findings and recommendations may assist any school district or intermediary organization in developing a coaching program that meets the needs of instructional leaders in any school setting. Executive coaching holds promise for becoming an effective means of providing principals with the necessary professional development they need to hone instructional leadership skills. With purposeful training of executive coaches in both school reform and coaching methodologies, intermediary organizations and the school districts that employ them can ensure that coaching is implemented in a way that will allow principal and coach pairs to engage in the ongoing, embedded form of joint work necessary to improve the instructional leadership of principals. Further research to determine which aspects of coaching actually *cause* measurable changes in the instructional leadership practices is recommended. Likewise, linking such leadership changes to resultant changes at the instructional level is necessary to determine a causal relationship between coaching for instructional leadership and improved student achievement.

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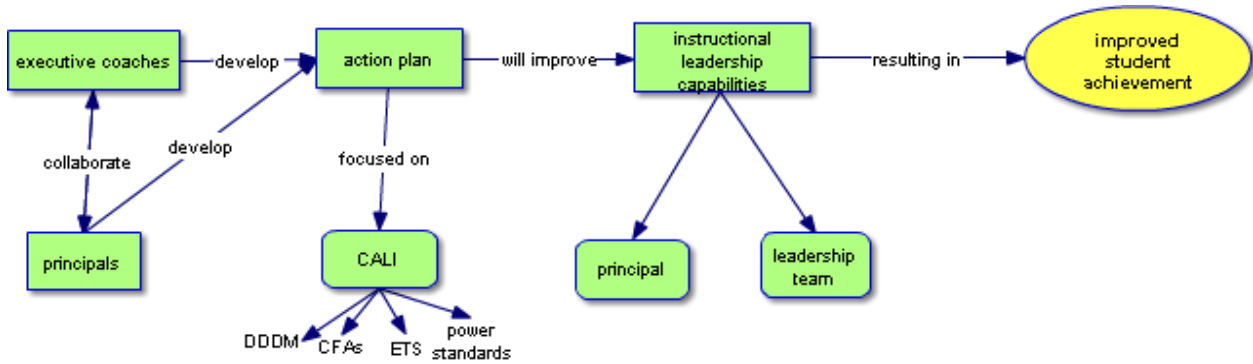
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## APPENDIX A

Figure 1. Logic Model for Executive Coaching via CAS



Definition of acronyms: CALI = Connecticut Accountability for Learning Initiative;

DDDM = Data Driven Decision Making; CFAs = Common Formative Assessments;

ETS = Effective Teaching Strategies.

## APPENDIX B

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

#### A. Principals

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
  - a. What other positions have you held? How long in them?
  - b. What is your educational background?
2. How did you first become involved in the executive coaching program?
  - a. What were your initial feelings about participation?
  - b. How long have you worked with this coach?
    - i. Have you had any other coaches?
3. Tell me about the relationship you have with your coach.
  - a. What attributes does the coach possess that you find most helpful? In what ways?
  - b. Is there anything about your coach – attributes, personality, background, for example – that you feel hinders the relationship or the work that you do together?
4. How often do you and the coach meet? Tell me about the work that the two of you do together.
  - a. How were goals decided upon?
  - b. Is there a leadership team? Does the coach work with the team or anyone in the building other than you?
  - c. How was the coach perceived by faculty/staff?
5. Did you and the coach develop an action plan? Can you tell me about that process?



- a. (If not, how have you decided what to work on? How are you measuring it?)
  - b. How do you measure your progress toward meeting the goals you set together? As this year comes to completion, where do you see yourself in terms of accomplishing what you set out to do?
6. How do you define instructional leadership?
  - a. On a scale of one to ten (with ten being completely proficient), how would you rate yourself as an “instructional leader” prior to working with your coach? Why did you give that rating?
  - b. On a scale of one to ten (with ten being completely proficient), how would you rate yourself as an “instructional leader” since you began working with your coach? Why?
7. Do you believe you have changed any of your leadership practices as a result of the work you have done with your executive coach?
  - a. If so, how?
  - b. If not, probe for why not.
8. Has executive coaching changed or improved your school as a whole in any way? If so, how?
9. What, if anything, do you value most about executive coaching?
10. What, if anything, would you change about the process?

## B. Coaches

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
  - a. What other positions have you held? How long in them?
  - b. What is your educational background?
2. How did you first become involved in the executive coaching program?
  - a. How were you hired? Was there an interview or screening of any sort?
  - b. What do you believe is the most important skill for a coach to possess? What part of your education or job experience was most helpful in preparing you to be an executive coach?
  - c. Did CAS provide any training for coaches? What type(s)? Is it ongoing?
  - d. How would you describe the CAS executive coaching program? What is the “CAS model” of coaching?
3. Tell me about the relationship you have with your principal.
  - a. What qualities does the principal possess that make him/her an effective principal? Or, what are his/her strengths? Which aspects of the job is s/he most effective at?
  - b. What qualities does the principal possess that may hinder his/her effectiveness? What are his or her weaknesses? In which aspects of the job does he or she need to improve?
  - c. How do you utilize these strengths and weaknesses as a coach? How do they affect how you work with the principal?
4. How often do you and the coach meet? Tell me about the work that the two of you do together.

- a. How were goals decided upon?
  - b. Is there a leadership team? Do you work with the team or anyone in the building other than the principal?
  - c. How do you think you were perceived by faculty/staff?
5. Did you and the principal develop an action plan? Can you tell me about that process?
  - a. (If not, how have you decided what to work on? How are you measuring it?)
  - b. How do you measure your progress toward meeting the goals you set together? As this year comes to completion, where do you see yourself in terms of accomplishing what you set out to do?
6. How do you define instructional leadership?
  - a. On a scale of one to ten (with ten being completely proficient), how would you rate the principal as an “instructional leader” when you first began working together? Why did you give that rating?
  - b. On a scale of one to ten (with ten being completely proficient), how would you rate the principal as an “instructional leader” now? Why?
7. Have you witnessed any changes in the principal’s leadership practices as a result of the work you have done with him/her?
  - a. If so, what has changed?
  - b. If not, probe for why not.
8. Do you think that the work you have done with the principal or the leadership team has resulted in sustainable changes or improvement in the school? In what ways?

- a. What role would you say CALI played in the work you did with the principal or leadership team? Was it the primary focus of improvement efforts? What other strategies for school improvement, if any, did you utilize?
9. Do you believe that this coaching relationship has been a successful one? Why/not?
- a. If you could change anything about the program, what would it be?

C. KSP

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
  - a. What is your current position? How long have you been in this one?
  - b. Have you held any other positions within a school?
2. What is your role on the leadership team?
  - a. What does the leadership team do as a whole? What does a typical meeting look like? How often do they meet?
  - b. Does the leadership team have an action plan?
  - c. Does the executive coach have a role on the leadership team?
3. What kind of work does the leadership team engage in?
  - a. Probe for connection to CALI, action plan, SIP.
4. Do you work with the executive coach?
  - a. If so, in what way?
5. What do you believe is the role of the coach at your school?
  - a. Probe for knowledge about CAS's program, goals, focus on CALI.
6. Tell me about the relationship you have with your principal.

- a. What qualities does the principal possess that make him/her an effective principal? Or, what are his/her strengths? In your opinion, which aspects of the job is s/he most effective at?
  - b. What qualities does the principal possess that may hinder his/her effectiveness? What are his/her weaknesses? In which aspects of the job does s/he need to improve?
  - c. Do you think the coach is working with the principal on the areas in which you believe need improvement?
7. How do you define instructional leadership?
  - a. On a scale of one to ten (with ten being completely proficient), how would you rate the principal as an “instructional leader” before working with the executive coach? Why did you give that rating?
  - b. On a scale of one to ten (with ten being completely proficient), how would you rate the principal as an “instructional leader” now? Why?
8. Have you witnessed any changes in the principal’s leadership practices since the executive coach began working with him/her?
  - a. If so, what has changed?
  - b. If not, probe for why not.
9. Do you think that the work the coach has done with the principal or the leadership team has resulted in sustainable changes or improvement in the school? In what ways?

- a. Probe for changes in teacher practice, professional development, improved student achievement.
  - b. Probe for how critical the coach was to these efforts, e.g., was this already underway?
10. What role would you say CALI played in the work done by the principal, coach or leadership team? Was it the primary focus of improvement efforts? What other strategies for school improvement, if any, were utilized? Examples?
- a. How was progress measured and monitored?

## APPENDIX C

### SUBJECTIVITY STATEMENT

As a high school administrator, I have worked in three different high schools with three different executive coaches. In the first I was an assistant principal; the coach worked primarily with our principal and I had limited interactions with him. When our leadership team (department heads, guidance coordinator, social worker or psychologist, union representative, and administrators) met, the coach was typically present. Generally speaking, he spoke very little except to interject probing questions regarding the work we were doing for school improvement, which was focused on literacy. He often met with our principal one-on-one, and our principal communicated any of his suggestions that affected our individual work to us.

My perception was that this coach was primarily a confidante for the principal; he seemed particularly good at helping our principal stay on message and stay positive. Frankly I believe that was what our principal needed most at the time; the coach understood teaching and learning well and had a knack for implementing systemic change. On the other hand, change was an arduous process at this urban, “in need of improvement” school, and it was obvious to me that our principal was often frustrated with how difficult it was to implement any improvement initiatives. Nevertheless, the executive coach was a veteran principal known for making great changes in his own school, and he provided a human connection for our principal in an otherwise lonely job; in that way, I saw him as an effective coach for the school.

When I was promoted to principal myself, I was assigned an executive coach. Up to that point I had spent the majority of my time in urban schools, and the school I took over was quite different in that it served primarily suburban and rural white students. The improvements needed

were more climate-based than student achievement-based, so the coach I was given had a strong background in PBS (positive behavioral support). She was also well-versed in SRBI and special education, skills that were useful to me because a large achievement gap existed between regular and special education students at the school. Unfortunately, she had spent her entire career in elementary education, which created challenges when we had to implement reform tailored to my individual school needs. While she was great at providing professional development sessions on topics such as RTI and data team processes, she was unable to help me develop a comprehensive school improvement plan. I took advantage of the fact that I had a confidante, a sounding board, and someone who understood many of the challenges of being a principal, but I did not feel that I gained any tangible new knowledge as a result of our work together.

After one year, I was transferred to my current school. Within a week after my arrival, I was assigned a new coach because the distance was too far for my previous coach to travel. Back in an urban, Title I, “in need of improvement” high school, CAS found me a coach with a similar background. We have worked together for the last two years and she has been an instrumental part of many of our school improvement reforms. The first year was little more than getting to know each other and determining each other’s strengths and leadership styles; now, in the second year, we have begun working together to develop and implement our school improvement plan. She has worked with me almost exclusively on tasks related to instructional leadership, from developing a theory of action with the faculty to classroom observations together.

My coach is a very knowledgeable school leader. She is an associate professor in an Ed.D. program within the state and she has been both a principal and a superintendent. In our work together, she has become something close to my avatar. She understands what I need to do



in my building and how to do it. I trust her to work with teachers, department heads, and my assistant principals. Whether by attending instructional data team meetings when I am unavailable, asking tough questions at leadership team meetings that members view “more objective” than if I asked them, or facilitating professional development for us on developing our theory of action, she is helping me to do the work I need to do. I believe there are three key reasons for this: she is an “outsider” who the faculty have come to trust; she is a knowledgeable school leader with a wealth of relevant experience; and we have developed a relationship of mutual respect, a common language, and professional trust.

I would argue, however, that I have learned very little from my coach, and this is the crux of my subjectivity. Like my principal before me, I need little coaching in instructional leadership practices. I have a strong background in curriculum and instruction and I am trained in all of the CALI modules and have been practicing them at various levels for years. I can analyze data, develop plans for improvement, and implement reforms. In short, my coach provides very little professional development for me. I believe that in at least some cases where a coach and principal are successful at developing effective instructional leadership practices, both are already capable of doing so and are effective together simply because two “principals” are better than one. Thus, I believe that my coach is quite valuable, albeit not necessarily in the way that CAS envisions.

**APPENDIX D**

**CAS EXECUTIVE COACHING PROGRAM DOCUMENTS**

## **CAS Executive Coaching Program**

### **Theory of Action**

We believe that student learning will improve and be sustained through strengthening and aligning operational systems closest to the instructional core within schools. We believe further that the results achieved by students are governed by the actions of the adults in the system more than anything else, and that the primary responsibility of leadership is to improve the knowledge and skills of the adults in the system in a continuous manner. We also believe that, with the proper support and accountability systems in place, school leaders can develop their instructional and organizational leadership capacity for the purpose of improving student achievement.

Executive coaching is an effective component of professional support and development for school leaders and leadership teams. If the executive coach and school leader and leadership team commit to and act on a collaboratively developed action agenda emphasizing data-based strategic planning, principal-empowered staff collaboration, and quick-response cycles of instructional improvement, then the performance and efficiency of school leaders and leadership teams will be enhanced and student achievement will improve.

### **Role of the Coach**

The role of the coach is to facilitate and support the professional growth and development of the principal and the leadership team within a school in order to increase student achievement, and to build capacity and ensure the sustainability of the school improvement efforts. The coach's fundamental commitment is to student success, and because the principal is central to that success, the coach will appropriately push the principal to that end.

The role of the coach is contextual and is directly related to the skills that the school leadership already possesses; the day to day organization and operation of the school; the functioning of the school within the larger context of the district and its culture, history and operational systems. The coach will assist the principal and the school leadership team in taking the school from where it is, to where it should and, more importantly, can be.

Whether the principal is a novice, a veteran or a rising star, the role of the coach is to assist the principal to move to the next level of management and leadership expertise, to broaden and deepen his/her skills, in order to move the school improvement agenda forward. The coach is successful if s/he has strengthened and fortified the skills of the principal and the school leadership team in their school improvement efforts.

The principal will develop with the coach an Action Plan to support the goals outlined in the School Improvement Plan. The Action Plan should reflect the leadership skills that need to be developed to fortify the school improvement efforts.

It is critical that the coach work with the principal, not in place of the principal, not in addition to the principal, and not as a shadow principal.

**The coach should be assisting the principal and the school leadership team by helping them to develop the ability to . . .**

- Clearly articulate and focus the work of the school, *concentrating on a few changes with a big, fast payoff*.
- Use data to guide building level decisions, *keeping and expanding what works and eliminating what doesn't*.
- Have and *communicate frequently consistent, high expectations* for staff and students.
- Understand curriculum and instruction thoroughly enough to provide leadership in these areas.
- Consistently *monitor classroom instruction* providing feedback that is helpful in changing behaviors.
- Consistently *follow-up and follow-through*, "walking the walk" as well as "talking the talk".
- Delegate effectively and *distribute leadership and responsibility* among teachers.
- Maintain a safe, secure physical and emotional learning environment for staff and students.
- Draw on the resources of the community with particular emphasis on engaging parents as supportive partners.
- Build and maintain efficient organizational systems including time management and policies detailing building procedures and processes.

**The coach may participate in any or all of the types of activities listed below with or without the principal being in attendance or participating in each activity. It is understood, however, that coach participation in these activities is as a collaborator, a contributor, as a partner to the principal, not as an independent authority within the school.**

- Analyze and chart data for specific purposes
- Conduct classroom walkthroughs
- Attend data team meetings
- Provide individual or small group PD/TA to teachers
- Attend parent/community meetings
- Observe individual students
- Observe specific individual teachers
- Meet with literacy/numeracy consultants/data team facilitator for planning purposes
- Participate in difficult decisions with the principal/teachers/parents
- Serve as a sounding board for ideas/initiatives
- Get feedback for the principal regarding initiatives and activities

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