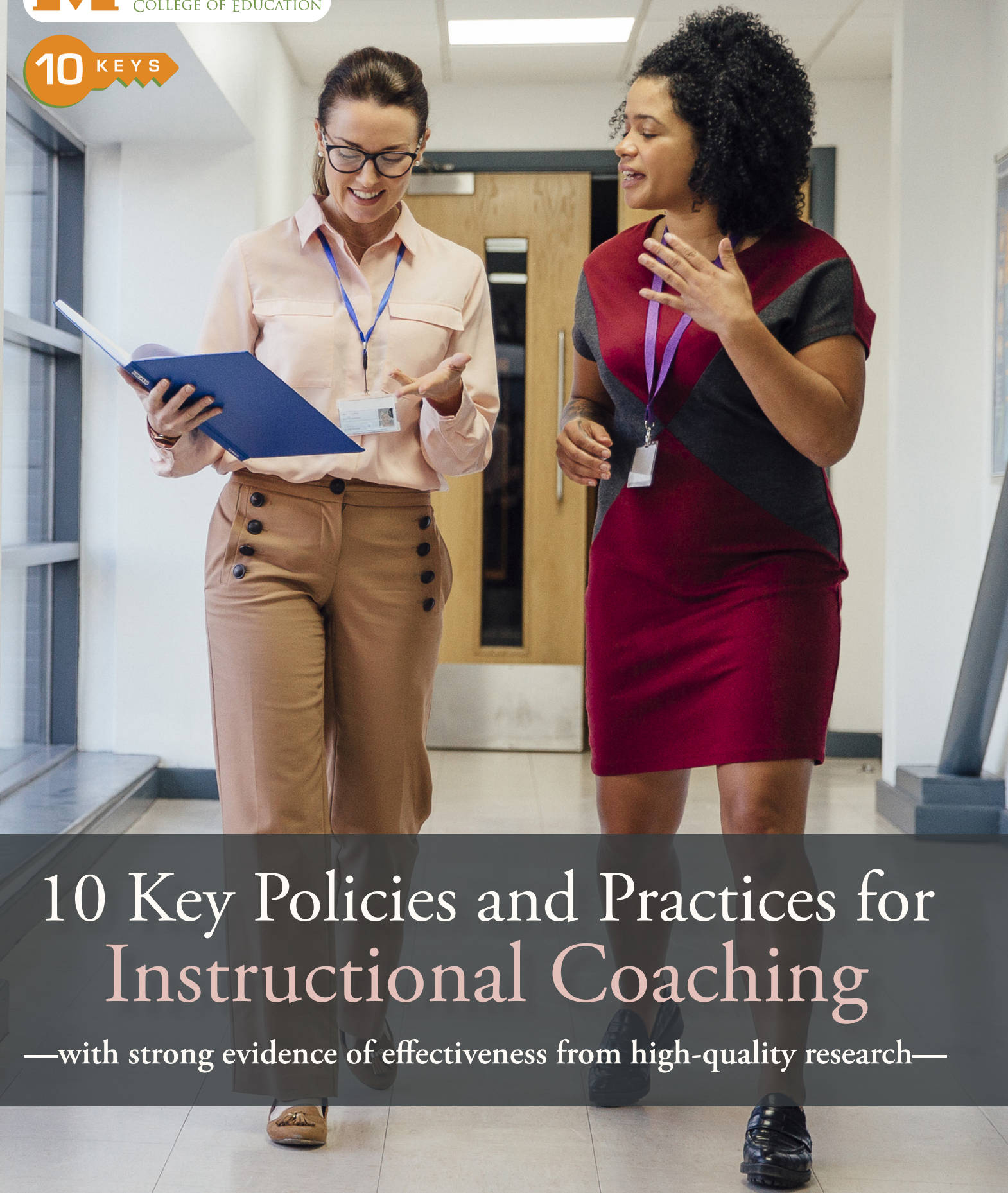




The Meadows Center  
FOR PREVENTING EDUCATIONAL RISK  
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN  
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

10 KEYS



# 10 Key Policies and Practices for Instructional Coaching

—with strong evidence of effectiveness from high-quality research—



# 10 Key Policies and Practices for Instructional Coaching

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Instructional coaching is widely used in schools to enhance teacher professional development. Research has shown that coaching improves professional knowledge, use of evidence-based practices, and, ultimately, student learning. Schools and districts regularly hire experts to provide coaching across grade levels and subjects, which can be a significant investment of resources and personnel. Though much of the research on instructional coaching focuses on reading, math, and science, common principles of high-quality coaching are associated with effective instruction across subjects.



This guide provides research-based guidance to educators interested in adopting new coaching programs or refining existing ones. We define instructional coaching as a significant and important element of an overall professional development plan. Coaching involves an instructional expert working with teachers to deepen their understanding of content and practice, strengthen their use of effective practices, and refine their teaching routines to optimize student learning. Cycles of observation and feedback are integral to coaching. Coaching is often accompanied by collegial and collaborative activities, such as professional learning communities or shared planning sessions. Interestingly, research has not found a significant difference between in-person coaching and virtual coaching if the coaching model incorporates key elements of effective coaching.

## 1 Coaches maintain a sharp focus on specific content, evidence-based practices, and how to contextualize these practices.

Specificity matters in effective coaching. Teacher learning is enhanced when coaching sessions are content focused (e.g., reading, mathematics) and address specific practices learned in professional development.

## 2 Coaches spend most of their time in classroom-based activities, such as lesson planning, observing, modeling, consulting with teachers, and facilitating small-group sessions.

Coaching is more effective with a well-planned schedule that maximizes coaches' and teachers' focus on instruction. Coaching logs and teachers' lesson plans should reflect the content of professional development goals and show clear evidence of coaches' collaborative work with teachers.

### 3 Coaches support implementation through an observation-feedback cycle.

To support implementation of ideas and practices addressed in professional development, coaches observe teachers in classrooms. Coaches often use fidelity checklists or take anecdotal notes to share with teachers in feedback sessions. Coaching sessions should focus on what went well and what areas may need closer attention, ending with planning the next round of observation and feedback. Coaches also encourage teacher reflection to self-identify areas for growth for future coaching sessions.

### 4 Coaches meet with teachers frequently (e.g., weekly, biweekly, monthly) to ensure continuity.

Teacher learning is more effective when there is an established schedule of frequent observation-feedback cycles. Scheduling regular coaching sessions ensures continuity from one session to the next, allowing teachers to fully use feedback and prior experience.

### 5 Coaches build depth of teacher expertise through sustained implementation.

Professional learning takes time. Maintaining coaching over a long period of time allows coaches and teachers to build productive working relationships through successive observation-feedback cycles. Findings vary, but it is generally recommended that at least 10 hours of coaching per teacher follow initial professional development.

### 6 Coaches maintain a strong focus on student response to and engagement in instruction, including classroom and school data.

Coaches continually connect student outcomes through observations and consultation sessions with teachers. During observations, coaches note not just teachers' instruction, but also how students respond. Additionally, coaches and teachers regularly review and discuss assessment results.



### 7 Coaches work effectively in both in-person and virtual formats.

Preliminary research findings show that coaching produces positive teacher and student outcomes when implemented virtually and in person. In both formats, the quality, duration, and consistency of coaching are important.



**8**

**Coaches facilitate a professional learning community with opportunities for teachers to collaborate.**

Teacher learning is strengthened when it occurs in a collective community. Within grade-level or content area teams, group learning supports individual implementation. Coaches encourage collaborative planning, sharing of ideas, and peer support in group sessions.

**9**

**Coaches and site administrators establish and maintain clearly defined and separate roles in supporting effective instruction.**

Unlike principals, who have primary responsibility for teacher evaluation, coaches need to take a supportive and collegial role that is separate from formal teacher evaluation. This means that a mutual agreement is needed between principals and coaches that separates coaches from formal evaluations of personnel. It is helpful to draw up and distribute a written principal-coach agreement statement that clearly defines coaching and specifies the types of instructional support coaches provide.

**10**

**District and school leadership teams regularly assess coaching effectiveness to make needed adjustments.**

It takes time and teamwork to refine coaching practices that fit within a school context and provide optimal instructional support. It is important for district and school leadership teams to regularly assess the impact of instructional coaching by using data sources such as student data, teacher perceptions, coach perceptions, observations, and coaching fidelity checks.

### **Critical Features of Effective Professional Development**

Coaching enhances and personalizes teachers' professional development. Research has identified the following features of effective professional development:

- **Content Focus.** Professional development must enhance teachers' knowledge of the content they teach and how to deliver it.
- **Active Learning.** Passively listening to a presenter leads to only short-term and surface-level teacher learning. To deepen teacher learning, professional development must actively engage teachers in the strategies and techniques presented. Activities such as simulations, group problem-solving, collaborative planning, observation feedback, and model demonstration sessions promote active learning.
- **Coherence.** What teachers learn in professional development must align with and support context-specific initiatives, educational policies, and designated focus areas. Professional development that conflicts with the local context rarely results in long-term implementation.
- **Sufficient Duration.** Professional development and coaching over an extended time period, such as a semester or school year, are more likely to lead to deep learning and strong implementation.
- **Collective Participation.** Learning along with colleagues strengthens implementation and deepens professional learning. Teachers and coaches should have ample opportunities to engage in rich discussions and collaborative planning about the principles learned in professional development.

# Scenarios

## Western Elementary School

Ms. Roberts, a reading coach, has worked with the school principal and the leadership team to clearly define her coaching roles and responsibilities, establish a schedule for coaching sessions, and structure ongoing professional development on the science of reading. She works with teachers in grade-level teams, facilitates group sessions, and provides individual observation-feedback sessions. Ms. Roberts also meets regularly with other district coaches and administrators to ensure that each school's coaching model supports the district's professional development goals and initiatives.



## Sample Coaching Schedule

8–9 a.m.	Teacher and principal coaching conversations
9–11:30 a.m.	Classroom observations
Noon–2 p.m.	Teacher individual sessions
2–3 p.m.	Grade-level team sessions

There is some flexibility in the coaching schedule for Ms. Roberts to attend district meetings and professional development. However, she maintains a strong focus on working with teachers in classrooms. She models specific practices and often jumps in to co-teach with a teacher trying a new practice. She also assists with ongoing assessment and reviews student data regularly in individual and group coaching sessions.

## Example

Ms. Roberts has supported the second-grade teachers in establishing routines for explicit vocabulary instruction. Early in the coaching cycle, she arranged for class coverage for all the second-grade teachers to come together in Ms. Dunn's classroom for 20 minutes. During this time, Ms. Roberts took over the teacher role to model the routine while teaching one word and then turned it back over to Ms. Dunn to teach the next two words. Later that day, Ms. Roberts met with the second-grade team to lead a reflective discussion of the lesson and plan further implementation. In subsequent weeks, Ms. Roberts visited classrooms during prearranged times to observe the vocabulary instruction. In follow-up individual and group sessions, teachers discussed their instruction and the impact on student learning.

## Santos Middle School

Mr. Shah, the instructional coach, analyzes campus data to identify areas of need, selects evidence-based practices that fit student needs, and communicates the need and solution to school administrators and teachers. He provides ongoing professional development that aligns with best practices in adult learning and encourages teachers to implement practices with fidelity. He works across grade-level and content area teams.

Santos Middle School has adopted a schoolwide literacy model, so Mr. Shah began the most recent academic year working with content area teachers to build more evidence-based and engaging literacy practices (e.g., explicit vocabulary instruction, text-based discourse) into classroom instructional routines. Next, he began observing and modeling in classrooms and conferencing with teachers. He holds monthly profes-

sional learning community meetings, offers planning sessions by request for teachers or groups of teachers, conducts weekly individualized coaching sessions to monitor classrooms, offers performance feedback and goal-setting sessions, and checks in to identify and address teachers' immediate needs.

### Sample Coaching Schedule

#### Daily

8–8:50 a.m. Coaching conversations with teachers (except first Tuesday of the month)  
9 a.m.–4:10 p.m. Classroom observations and feedback sessions and sessions by request

#### Monthly

8–8:50 a.m. Coaching conversations with instructional leadership (first Tuesday of the month)  
2–4:10 p.m. Rotating grade-level and content-specific professional learning communities (early release every first Monday of the month)

### Example

Mr. Shah began the year by introducing a comprehensive routine to provide background knowledge and gauge what students know about a topic as part of introducing new content. Once teachers had time to practice with the routine and incorporate it into their instruction, he began to schedule classroom observations and feedback sessions with individual teachers. The science teachers wanted more help, so Mr. Shah modeled in their classrooms as they began new units and then joined the weekly science grade-level meetings so that teachers could practice, plan, and discuss implementation. After all teachers had time to add the routine to their new units, Mr. Shah followed up so teachers could share their perspectives and any impact identified.

### Adult Learning Principles

Coaches must understand principles of adult learning to work effectively with teachers, taking into consideration individual teachers' professional knowledge, experiences, and classroom contexts. Adults have complex demands that can interfere with new learning, and coaching must accommodate these demands. When adults view learning as an essential component that enhances their work, they become more self-directed and self-reliant in approaching new learning. The following adult learning principles form the foundation of effective coaching models:

- **Experience.** Teacher learning occurs through experience, including opportunities to make mistakes that lead to changes in practice.
- **Relevance.** The immediacy of need drives teachers' readiness to learn. Teachers need to see what they are learning as directly related to their own contexts.
- **Participation.** Teachers' motivation is enhanced by being involved in planning their professional learning.
- **Problem-Solving.** Teacher professional learning is deepened through the process of ongoing classroom-based problem-solving.
- **Prior Knowledge.** Teachers draw on their prior knowledge and experience to integrate new learning into their practice.



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