



# Coaching as a Way of Being

In Long Beach, Calif., leadership development means distinct programs for aspiring central-office administrators plus principals and teachers

BY JILL A. BAKER AND KELLY D. AN

**W**hen the Long Beach Unified School District was named a finalist for the prestigious Broad Prize for Urban Education in 2003, the visiting team of site evaluators made a strong suggestion: The central office ought to consider a new approach to leadership development, one that goes beyond teacher professional development to focus specifically on cultivating

aspiring and current administrators so that they could lead any school in the district.

The district's leadership followed that advice, launching a new leadership development program in 2005. The district has spent more than a decade building programs for teacher leaders, aspiring administrators, principals and, most recently, central-office leaders.



**Kelly An (left), director of leadership development in the Long Beach, Calif., Unified School District, with the district's deputy superintendent, Jill Baker.**

In Long Beach, coaching is now a way of being. Professional growth has been transformed from an isolated activity benefiting a few teachers who happened to be part of an induction program to a cornerstone of district culture and the basis of performance expectations across the 72,000-student school system.

### **Multiple Benefits**

Research published this year by RAND on the Wallace Foundation Principal Pipeline Initiative shows that formal programs at the district level for growing new principals are a cost-effective method of improving student performance and contributing to principal retention. In studying 12 district leadership pipeline programs, RAND found professional coaching to be a successful method of building the mindset and performance of administrators.

The existing culture of coaching is deeply rooted in supporting new principals. Initial leadership development programming began with a single central-office administrator conducting a coaching program for new principals offering “just in time” support during their first two years on the job.

The success of this support led to training current principals in coaching methodology

to, in turn, coach new principals. For years, principal-to-principal coaching has been at the heart of relationship and capacity building for site administrators.

This coaching has resulted in multifaceted benefits. The primary payoffs include effective transitions of new principals into their assignments, higher degrees of retention, student achievement gains and the perception of the principalship as a manageable job. Secondary benefits are evident in deepened relationships between principal supervisors and principals, an ability for everyone to be seen as a coach for someone else and the strengthening of an organizational culture where relationships are central.

Continually improving, Long Beach Unified expanded coach training by offering a comprehensive coaching development program that almost every principal, all principal supervisors and a significant number of central-office leaders now complete. A strategy or system must live within a continuous improvement cycle until it develops and matures before becoming part of the Long Beach way. Now in mature form, coaching methodology is used throughout the organization in reflective practice, trusting relationships, interdependence and personal development, all in service to pushing student success to greater heights.

## Leadership Pipeline

Our district's leadership development pipeline consists of 12 programs, beginning with one for teacher leaders exploring the idea of leading others and progressing to an exploratory district program introducing effective principals to the concept of system-level leadership in preparation for a director post or assistant superintendency. The pipeline's primary goal is to build leadership capacity of administrators in every phase of their career.

Coaching practices are embedded throughout all programs, from teacher leader through central office. These practices include strategies described in *Blended Coaching: Skills and Strategies to Support Principal Development* and other appreciative coaching approaches. One of the pipeline's operating principles is the "grow your own" philosophy, the intentional development of internal staff to take on leadership roles. Teacher leaders exposed to coaching strategies and skill development, even while continuing in teaching roles, are better equipped to deepen their coaching practices as they engage their colleagues.

While coaching is embedded into each pipeline program, a more formal coaching program includes all principals in their third year of the principalship. Coach training is held for five days and takes participants through a series of learning experiences. The first two days focus on foundational coaching techniques and strategies, followed by one day of new coach orientation, providing the structure and expectations for those new to coaching.

In the fall and spring, coaches attend additional professional development focused on problems of practice via triad coaching. Triad coaching provides opportunities to practice questioning techniques (consultative, collaborative, transformational and facilitative) around a common coaching challenge and to receive peer feedback and discuss possible next steps.

A foundational tenet of coaching is that it is not a one-size-fits-all process. The strategies depend entirely on the needs of the individual being coached. Often, coaches move between instructional and facilitative coaching and are cognizant of when to make these moves. Above all, the most important aspect of coaching in Long Beach is intentional relationship building. Coaching partnerships begin with careful selection and matching based on an area of need and often continue throughout employees' careers.

Although all third-year principals attend coach training, selected coaches participate in a coach certification process, which requires a yearlong

coaching commitment during which they document their coaching skill set and the progress of participants. Certification requires 40 hours of coaching evidenced by logs, reflections and goal progress documentation. Once certified, a coach must attend annual professional development to maintain current certification.

At the end of every year, the leadership development office uses a survey to gauge the effectiveness of the coaching relationship and support. The survey asks both the coach and the individual being coached about the pairing, number of meetings, types of support and the impact of the coaching relationship. Results indicate 95 percent of the pairings made each year are the right fit for both parties, and the staff members appreciate having a coach who is a current administrator in our system to help them align with current district initiatives and practices.

## Executive Coaching

As part of the Wallace Foundation's Principal Supervisor Initiative between 2014 and 2019, Long Beach Unified started an Exploring District Leadership Program, extending the leadership

## Four Observations about Districtwide Coaching

During the half dozen years our school district has invested in its own leadership coaching, we've learned four lessons.

► **Leadership pipelines are cost-effective, impact students and build culture.**

Pipeline programs, which typically cost 0.4 percent of a school district's budget, positively contribute to student achievement, reduce principal turnover and affect the entire district. In addition, we found that one of the most effective ways to grow and sustain the district culture and performance expectations is through leadership pipeline programs.

► **Perception data are useful for all leaders.**

If we don't offer perception feedback to our leaders, they don't have the opportunity for improvement. While it might be difficult to communicate perceptions, our experience has taught us that leaders grow from and manage their leadership actions differently based on the feedback.

► **Effective coaching requires an investment in training and practice.**

While coaching often comes naturally to leaders, developing a consistent coaching approach across a district requires an investment in training and follow-up. Executive coaching helps to reduce leaders' blind spots and increase coaches' effectiveness, especially in addressing issues of equity and performance.

► **Coaching is for everyone.**

Great athletes have coaches. So should aspiring and current administrators.

— JILL BAKER AND KELLY AN

development pipeline to include central-office administrators. The original Exploring District Leadership Program in 2015-16 included classroom learning and discussion, research on effective central-office practices and job shadowing. As the program evolved, new ways of incorporating feedback (perception and performance) enhanced both the Exploring District Leadership and principal coaching program, and the district's executive coaching (coaching the coaches) was added in 2018.

Because Exploring District Leadership Program participants also are assigned as coaches (new principal or administrator credential candidate coach), a natural opportunity for authentic observation and executive coaching existed. The deputy superintendent and leadership development director, both of whom have been trained in multiple coaching methodologies (cognitive coaching, evocative coaching, listening leader, coaching for equity), use their coaching skills to support program participants and principal coaches.

Executive coaching allows Exploring District Leadership Program participants to connect their individual leadership goals, perception feedback

that they receive through program participation, and the application of their coach training into one continuous improvement cycle.

Executive coaching includes a discussion of the coach's session goals, live observation of the program participants and their coaching subject, and feedback consultation. The feedback consultation provides the participants an opportunity to hear affirmations about coaching methods and specific feedback for improvement. At the end of the session, participants gain a set of ideas that incorporates their own reflections with executive coaching feedback, to use in improving ongoing coaching.

While executive coaching has completed only its second year of operation, observations and testimonies suggest the method is having a positive impact. One program participant stated, "After two decades of coaching mainly teachers, this was the first time I have received feedback on my coaching. ... I truly appreciated the specific and honest feedback I received. The delivery and format of the feedback lowered my anxiety level, and I felt extremely comfortable during the debrief. I also appreciated the reflective questions that caused me to focus on my areas of growth."

The quality of coaching is markedly improved, including the development of stronger coaching agendas and the use of higher-quality facilitative, instructional and transformative questioning techniques. Methods of tracking progress of participants are more developed, and coaching relationships have deepened. In addition, as districtwide professional development for principals focuses on new ideas for addressing issues of equity, so have the coaching conversations among administrators in peer and coaching relationships.

### Cultural Benefits

The work in Long Beach has shown us that coaching impacts all relationships through a ripple effect. If central-office leaders embrace coaching methodology in their interactions with principals, principals will use coaching skills with peers and in their supervision of staff. Teacher leaders will interact in teams with intention, and coaching will regularly show up across relationships in school buildings.

Ultimately, if students experience the tenets of coaching, they may build stronger social emotional and life skills. ■

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## Additional Resources

Co-authors Jill Baker and Kelly An suggest these informational resources relating to the subject of their article.

### BOOKS

- ▶ *Blended Coaching: Skills and Strategies to Support Principal Development* by Gary Bloom, Claire Castagna, Ellen Moir and Betsy Warren, Corwin Press, Thousand Oaks, Calif.
- ▶ *Candid and Compassionate Feedback* by Joseph Jones and T.J. Vari, Routledge, New York, N.Y.
- ▶ *Cognitive Coaching: A Foundation for Renaissance Schools* by Arthur L. Costa and Robert J. Garmston, Rowman & Littlefield, London.
- ▶ *Evoking Greatness: Coaching to Bring Out the Best in Educational Leaders* by Megan and Bob Tschannen-Moran, Corwin Press, Thousand Oaks, Calif.
- ▶ *The Listening Leader: Creating the Conditions for Equitable School Transformation* by Shane Safir, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, Calif.

### JOURNAL ARTICLES

- ▶ "The Sweet Spot of Coaching: Where Teachers and Administrators Find Common Ground While Developing a Comprehensive Literacy System" by Jill Baker and Kathy Brown in *Journal of Reading Recovery*, Spring 2019. [www.lbschools.net/Asset/Files/Public\\_Information/News\\_Story/Reading-Recovery-May2019.pdf](http://www.lbschools.net/Asset/Files/Public_Information/News_Story/Reading-Recovery-May2019.pdf)
- ▶ "What It Takes to Operate and Maintain Principal Pipelines: Costs and Other Resources" by Julia Kaufman, Susan Gates, Melody Harvey, Yanlin Wang and Mark Barrett, RAND Corp., Santa Monica, Calif. [www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2078.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2078.html)