

Understanding the Role of Professional Networks in Instructional Coaches' Growth and Development

AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Problem of Practice

Instructional coaching is one of the most impactful forms of professional development that results in improved teacher instruction and student achievement in a K-12 setting (Kraft et al., 2018), yet little consensus exists on how to best support coaches. Lakota Local Schools has a team of 17 instructional coaches, known as Team Inspire, who support educators across the entire district by providing many forms of professional development.

"...when you're an instructional coach, there's so much baptism by fire."

-Focus Group Participant

Due to COVID-19, Team Inspire was not afforded as many opportunities to formally gather as an entire team to focus on their own professional development related to coaching teachers, leaving coaches feeling isolated and struggling to keep up with supporting teachers through the pandemic. Experienced educators, such as instructional coaches, benefit from an opportunity to network with others in a similar role (Frank et al., 2011; Stoetzel & Shedrow, 2020). While this team has traditionally focused on providing high quality professional development (HQPD) to the educators they serve, less is known about what constitutes as HQPD specifically for coaches and the impact those learning experiences have on their individual growth and development as an instructional coach.

About Lakota Local Schools

Lakota Local Schools is the 10th largest school district in Ohio, located just outside of Cincinnati. The 2,000 teachers and staff across the district serve nearly 16,000 students in 20 buildings. Lakota has a team of 17 instructional coaches (called Innovation Specialists) that make up their Team Inspire. These 17 coaches are responsible for supporting all teachers with their instruction, and they provide both content and technology integration support. Being such a large district, Lakota traditionally has not sent their coaching team to network outside of the district.



Faced with feelings of isolation and the need to better understand how to support their coaches, Lakota formed a network of coaches across the state of Ohio called the Ohio Coach Network (OCN). A total of 28 coaches across eight districts joined the OCN; nine of them were Lakota coaches, including the OCN facilitator. Lakota was interested in learning more about the benefits of the OCN for coaches.

Research Questions

- **RQ1:** To what extent does a professional network of instructional coaches provide HQPD opportunities to those within the network? How does this compare to professional development provided in the past?
- **RQ2:** Do instructional coaches report learning gains and increased confidence in their coaching abilities as a result of engaging in a network of coaches?
- **RQ3:** What additional support is needed for the growth and development of participants beyond the network?

Research Design

Prior to collecting data, an extensive literature review was conducted around instructional coaching, HQPD for educators, and educator professional learning networks (PLN). To answer the three research questions, seven sources of data were collected from Lakota’s coaches: a pre- and post-survey of network participants, a survey of non-network participants, a focus group with participants, an interview with the network facilitator, and coding of the meeting slides and Slack channel.

Key Findings

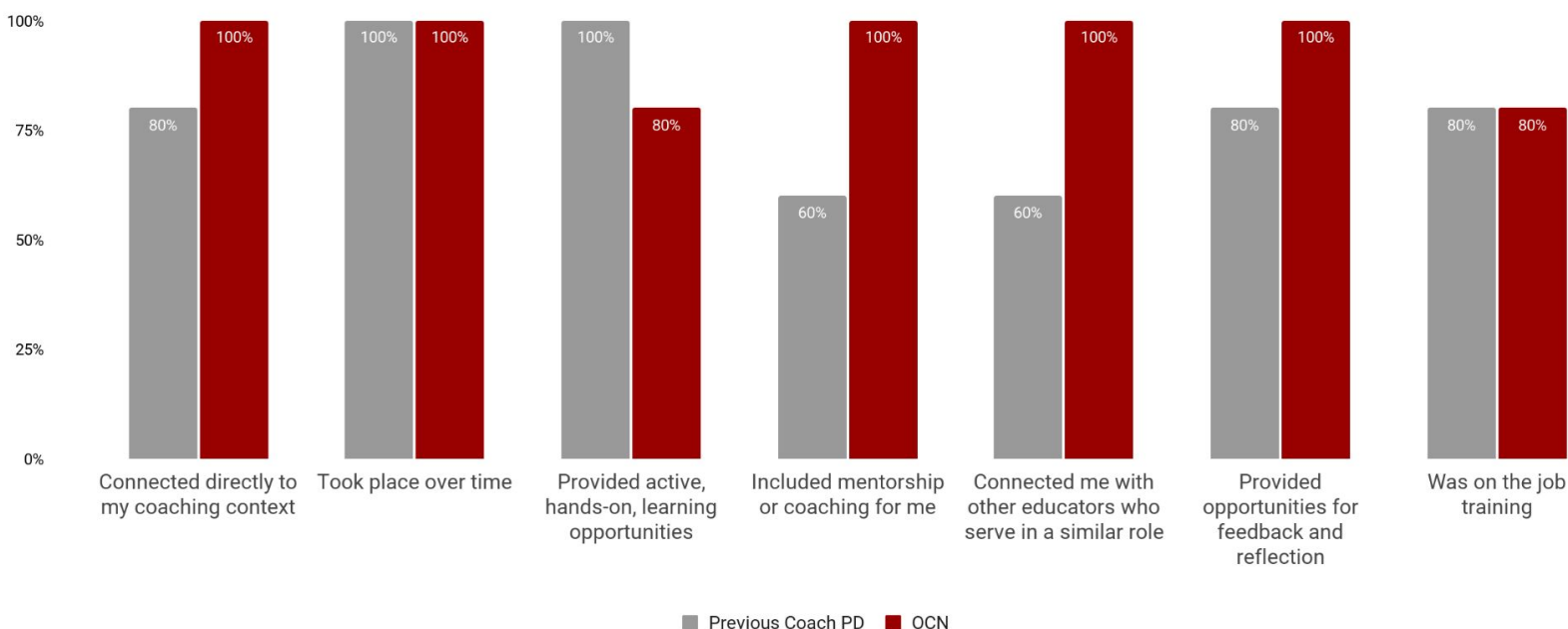
1. **Participation in OCN is HQPD**
2. **OCN Contributed to Coach Learning & Confidence**
3. **Coaches Prefer OCN, and Cross District Collaboration**
4. **Additional Districts Need to Join**
5. **PD Needs: Tech for Coaches; Leverage Coaches PD for Admin**

Lakota’s coaches found the network to be a valuable source of professional development that met all seven key components of HQPD cited across the literature. When compared to previous professional development provided in the past two years, coaches favored the network, and in particular the cross-district coach-to-coach collaboration. Furthermore, the OCN contributed to 100% of participants’ learning as a coach, and 80% of participants’ confidence as a coach.

The most popular suggestion for improvement to the OCN was to have additional districts join.

Furthermore, there are two primary areas of professional development needed to further support coaches. First, coaches need training on the technology tools and programs used by teachers. Second, building principals need support in understanding the role of coaches in the district and how to best support them.

Percent of respondents who selected "Strongly Agree" and "Agree" that Previous Coach PD and OCN met seven HQPD traits.



The **importance of working with coaches outside of the district** was the most mentioned topic in the focus group, with coach networking and hearing from different contexts or perspectives the next two highest areas.

Recommendations

All recommendations were formed based on close alignment with the literature and this study's conceptual framework to support learning needs specific to coaches. By ensuring continued HQPD for their coaches, Lakota will, in effect, ensure high-quality instructional support for all teachers in their district.



Continue OCN Bi-weekly

Regular attendance is important to build connections and have meaningful discussions. Weekly meetings may be too large of a time commitment, and monthly is too infrequent. Team Inspire leadership may also consider setting a personal learning expectation, such as encouraging all 17 coaches to join a PLN.



Invite Additional Districts, Including Outside Ohio

The predominant request from Lakota coaches was to extend the network to more districts to ensure they have an opportunity to engage with coaches outside of Lakota and to hear their perspective. Inviting districts outside of Ohio would allow Lakota to network with other similar, innovative districts while providing coaches with the out-of-district coach collaboration they seek.



Avoid Mondays & Include Additional Topics

To ensure regular attendance, Mondays should be avoided. The best days for scheduling may be Wednesday through Friday. Future OCN facilitators should also include pre-planned meeting discussions on 1) defining the role and responsibilities of a coach, and 2) working with building & district administration.



Tech & Shadow PD for Coaches; Leverage Coaches PD for Admin

Additional professional development is needed in three major areas to support the growth and success of Team Inspire coaches. First is the need for ongoing technology-specific training for coaches on tools teachers regularly use, such as their learning management system. Secondly, coaches need an opportunity to experience on-the-job shadowing of other coaches within or outside of Lakota. Finally, providing building administrators with training on how to leverage their instructional coach to both support teachers and achieve building goals would have an astounding impact on instruction across the district.

References

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