Like many other districts, we have just been through a period of change that has felt both rapid and far-reaching. Teachers and school and district leaders alike have been overwhelmed by a series of new initiatives, each of which has set off a ripple effect of ways that everyone has had to change their work, sometimes in drastic ways. This includes the transition to a new Educator Evaluation Framework, the transition to the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks (including the Common Core State Standards), and the resulting adjustments to the way we assess students’ understanding at the state and district levels.

When we stepped back from this whirlwind, we realized that if we wanted these new initiatives to be implemented well, we needed to rethink the way that we supported teachers through the changes. At the district level, this meant breaking down all the new expectations into smaller, more manageable pieces. Still, we knew that teachers would benefit from ongoing support.

So we decided, in order to be most successful, we would slow everything down and help all teachers manage the multitude of new initiatives by giving them a strong core of teacher leaders from within their own ranks who they could rely on. We had two questions to consider: **Who would serve in these roles? And, how could we create a layer of support without creating additional burdens on our teachers?**

“I’m Here to Help”
When it came to developing this strong core of teacher leaders, we felt that the best descriptor for their work would be “coach.” Our vision was that coaches would support teachers by observing lessons, offering suggestions, finding resources, guiding team meetings, and using a bird’s eye view to help ensure vertical and horizontal alignment across schools and grades.

We had had a lot of discussion about whether the roles would be part of Unit A (teachers) or Unit B (administrators) contracts. On the one hand, we knew with the overwhelming demands administrators face with the supervision and evaluation process, using these “coaches” as evaluators would help alleviate the pressures of observing and evaluating large caseloads of teachers while also providing teachers with quality feedback.

On the other hand, we wanted to create an environment where people—both coaches and teachers—felt free to take risks and try new things.
This meant that we had to place a premium on developing collegial, collaborative roles.

We ultimately decided that coaches would be a part of Unit A and would retain some classroom teaching responsibilities. We felt it was important that the coaches have some skin in the game so that they are not seen as “just sitting behind a desk pulling strings.”

“Are we for this or against it?”
When we first announced these new roles, we hoped that some of our top teachers from within the district would step up and apply. This was part of our vision: we wanted these new roles to recognize and retain some of our best teachers and help spread existing best practices.

However, we didn’t receive the flood of applications we had hoped for. This was in part because there was a lot of uncertainty about how the role would actually work. How would coaches manage to be in a slightly “elevated” role, while still being part of their larger peer group? Would the work be manageable in addition to maintaining classroom responsibilities? Would they provide feedback timely enough to effect teaching practice? Would the district leaders commit to these new roles or was this just going to be the latest fad? Could a historically inconsistent budget sustain these positions or would they be the first on the chopping block when facing budget cuts?

We knew that the first few months of rollout would be crucial to the long-term success of the initiative. Teachers were going to be watching closely to figure out: are we for this? Or against it? As one elementary teacher stated, “Are they just looking for a ‘gotcha’ or are they really here to support us?” But as time passed and more staff fostered relationships with our coaches and coordinators, the results have been grounded in trust and yielded successful teaching and learning.

“A Word about Scheduling
At the elementary levels, we decided to create K-4 Literacy Coaches whose main role and responsibility would be to support the teachers in literacy instruction. By effectively using our data and benchmark scores for our students’ reading levels, we created tiered reading groups. Literacy Coaches provide targeted instruction, once a day, to learners who need tier three supports. This unique teaching load allows the coaches to impact student achievement through direct instruction. It also gives them a flexible, open schedule so they can provide in-class support for teachers, co-plan upcoming lessons, and provide job-embedded PD for the teachers on reading skills and strategies like close reading techniques.

Our coaches at the middle school and high school took on the role of coordinators for our ELA, Math, and Science departments. These 5th-12th grade coordinators each play significant roles for their fellow colleagues by collaboratively working on the design and implementation of common assessments, prepping and analyzing data at grade level PLC meetings, and unpacking their respective subject’s curriculum standards into tangible and applicable concepts that students and teachers alike can understand. Just like their elementary counterparts, each teaches one course a day, for only one period, ranging from an accelerated math course for advanced MCAS math students at the middle school, an Automation and Robotics course for 8th graders, and a writing elective at the high school level.

Hurry Up and Build Trust!
A large part of that determination would be based on their day-to-day interactions with coaches and thus we knew that getting the right people into these roles would be crucial. After some discussion, we decided that since we were still not
getting enough internal candidates to apply, we
would open the role up to people outside the
district.

In hiring for these roles, we emphasized the usual
skills: content expertise, strong instructional
practice, and experience designing and/or leading
PD. However, we equally valued leadership skills
such as building relationships, facilitating difficult
conversations, and navigating the “politics” within
a school. Finally, we put a premium on people who
presented themselves as humble and
unassuming. We wanted to create an atmosphere
that was focused on support; rather than “I know
more than you,” it was about “Let me see how I
can help you…and if I don’t know something, then
I will find out.” We looked for people who could
position themselves as teachers and as learners,
people who held a belief that everyone can grow
and improve.

We also knew we would have to double down on
efforts to build trust right away. This concept
seemed a bit at odds with itself—is it possible to
build trust quickly? Would external candidates face
a harder time than internal ones, given their
“newcomer status?”

Because of these concerns, we decided to give
the coaches time before they were engaged in too
much other work to position themselves as the
“I’m here to help” people. This meant allowing
them the first three to four months on the job to
spend time building relationships with peer
teachers.

Coaches have all agreed that it is important that
they wait to be invited into teachers’ classrooms
rather than suggesting a visit. However, once
invited, they are sure to follow up and make the
experience “low stress” and positive to ease fears.

In an overall environment where we felt pressure
to move quickly, slowing down the hiring and
decreasing the coaches’ duties in the first four
months was not an easy decision. But, in
retrospect, it was absolutely the right one. Now, a
half a year into our work, we have more teachers
expressing interest in coaching roles.

What’s Next:
We are eager to see how the coaching roles might
evolve over time. In our 2015-2016 school budget,
we were able to add Math Coaches at the
elementary levels whose role and responsibility
will mirror the Literacy Coaches. Additionally we
were able to support our 5th grade teachers at the
middle school with a Reading Coach who will do
some important work around training and
benchmarking while being an in-class support
system to enhance concrete reading skills.

Our next venture is creating a new layer of teacher
leaders who are not fully coaches, but who are
also engaged in developing and spreading strong
instructional practices. However, we are wary of
creating “exemplar” or “model” classrooms for a lot
of the same reasons outlined above. We would
prefer to retain a collegial environment wherein
teachers feel free to experiment and work together
toward the ultimate goal of improving instruction
without the burden of doing everything right the
first time around.

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**Example Activities of Coaches during Early Implementation (Months 1-4)**

We set aside the first four months for coaches
to perform “entry level” supports to their peers.
These are not the activities we saw coaches
taking on in the long term, but we wanted to
create some building blocks that would allow
coaches to develop trust of their peers.

Therefore, for the first four months, they did
things like:

- Opening up his/her classroom for others
to observe
- Sharing resources and demonstrating
follow through - “If I don’t know the
answer, I will find it and get back to you.”
- Attending team meetings more in a
listening capacity
- Taking on some duties for the team that
help lighten the load for others, such as
reorganizing shared book room to make
leveled books more accessible.
Therefore, we are working to implement “Learning Lab” classrooms. These will be led by teachers who are willing to open up their classrooms to their colleagues. While we are still in the infant stages of the Learning Labs, we are excited that a teacher leader from each grade level will be opening their classroom to their peers. We will be welcoming more and more “Lab Teachers” as the program moves forward. This will take the burden off our pilot group by bringing in new Lab Teachers. Lab Teachers receive support from their Literacy and/or Math Coach as well as administration on providing the time and coverage for their peers to come and observe. The expectation is by utilizing the valuable resources we have in our teachers, best practices will be implemented more easily, teachers will be open to new ideas and instruction, but most importantly, there will be continuity across the grade level and across the district. Ultimately, we want our teachers to feel that they are working as a cohesive team to support our students and drive their learning more effectively.

We hope that the coaches and Learning Labs will offer support that is both broad and deep. We are eager to see how this support system benefits all teachers, and ultimately our students.