1 Student-Centered Coaching at the Secondary Level

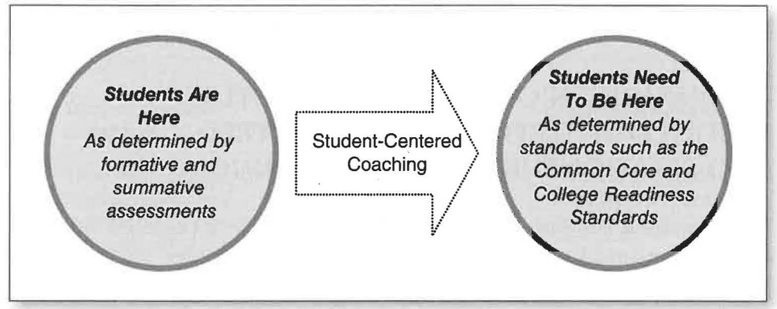
This book is driven by a single question: How can we be certain that coaching improves student learning? A decade ago, when coaching was a new strategy for school improvement, very few people were asking how it impacted student learning. We made the assumption that if we improved instruction, then student learning would improve along with it. Our focus was on getting teachers to use what we considered to be effective instructional practices, and we assumed that if the teachers used these practices, then the students would learn. But now that coaching exists in so many of our schools, we have to be certain of its impact.

Student-centered coaching is about providing opportunities for a coach and teachers to work in partnership to (1) set specific targets for students that are rooted in the standards and (2) work collaboratively to ensure that the targets are met. It eliminates any guesswork or assumptions about the students' performance. We no longer have to cross our fingers and hope that student learning improves; we'll know for sure.

WHAT IS STUDENT-CENTERED COACHING?

Student-centered coaching is central to moving students toward success, because it occupies the space between where they are and where they need to be (Figure 1.1). It is driven by standards and employs the use of

Figure 1.1 Student-Centered Coaching



data—such as student work and assessments—to help teachers make informed decisions about their instruction.

Student-centered coaching is organized by a set of core practices that keep the conversation firmly rooted in student learning. As a result of these practices, teachers understand that the conversation is about their students and is not a judgment of whether or not they are doing a good job. Instead, the coach and teacher work as partners with the shared goal of designing and implementing instruction that ensures that the students have met all of the necessary standards—a timely objective with the introduction of the Common Core Standards in most states within the United States.

CORE PRACTICES FOR STUDENT-CENTERED COACHING

- Conversations are framed by specific learning targets.
- Coaching involves regular analysis of student work.
- Coaching is driven by evidence of student learning.
- Collaboration may include co-planning and co-delivery of instruction.
- Coaching is ongoing and occurs with individuals and teams of teachers.
- Coaching is led by the school leader.

Student-centered coaching is a departure from coaching models that focus exclusively on the actions taken by the teacher or that make the assumption that if we improve teaching, then student learning will improve as well. There is some logic to these approaches, but an

unintended outcome is that we've spent so much time thinking about what teachers *should* be doing that we've lost touch with whether or not the students are learning.

A COMPARISON OF COACHING MODELS: STUDENT-CENTERED, TEACHER-CENTERED, AND RELATIONSHIP-DRIVEN COACHING

Most coaching programs are a combination of student-centered, teacher-centered, and relationship-driven coaching. While all three are under the umbrella of *coaching*, they maintain different foci and practices. They also get different results (Figure 1.2).

While student-centered coaching focuses on student performance, teacher-centered coaching is framed by the theory that if we develop the technical expertise of teachers, then student achievement will increase as well. The focus is on guiding teachers to use a specific program or set of instructional practices. It often blurs the lines between coach and evaluator, because the emphasis is on "getting people to do things," which often creates distrust and resistance among teachers.

Due to the fact that teacher-centered coaching focuses on helping teachers use specific programs and practices, this type of coaching may make sense in some cases: when a school is inducting a novice cohort of teachers, when a school is introducing a new curriculum or program, or in schools where the coach plays a greater role in teacher evaluation and accountability. Yet even in these situations, it is important to remember that the focus of a teacher-centered model is not student learning, so the impact on students may be secondary to the impact on teachers.

Relationship-driven coaching is less about holding teachers accountable and more about providing them with resources and support. It often feels safer, because the coach's role is about making the lives of teachers easier. And since coaches learn rather quickly that teacher resistance is par for the course, some may choose to back off and provide a more resource-based style of coaching. Though there is no doubt that this approach is helpful to teachers, it makes less of an impact on student learning.

The approach that a school takes often depends on its philosophy about how to improve teaching and learning. It may also depend on the school culture and the relationships that a coach has with teachers. It isn't uncommon for coaches to engage in all three types of coaching in a single school—or even in a single day. But one has to wonder: if we really want to ensure that our students are learning, doesn't it make sense to make coaching about them?

Figure 1.2 Student-Centered, Teacher-Centered, and Relationship-Driven Coaching

More Impact on Students ⟵ ⟶ Less Impact on Students

	Student-Centered Coaching	Teacher-Centered Coaching	Relationship-Driven Coaching
Role	The coach partners with teachers to design learning that is based on a specific set of learning targets.	The coach moves teachers toward implementing a program or set of instructional practices.	The coach provides support and resources to teachers.
Focus	The focus is on using data and student work to analyze progress and then collaborate to make informed decisions about instruction that is differentiated and needs based.	The focus is on what the teacher is, or is not, doing and addressing it through coaching.	The focus is on providing support to teachers in a way that doesn't challenge or threaten them.
Use of Data	Formative assessment data and student work are used to determine how to design the instruction. Summative assessment data is used to assess progress toward mastery of the standards.	Summative assessment data is used to hold teachers accountable rather than as a tool for instructional decision making.	Data is rarely used in relationship-driven coaching.
Use of Materials	Textbooks, technology, and curricular programs are viewed as tools for moving student learning to the next level.	The use of textbooks, technology, and curricular programs is emphasized.	Sharing access and information to textbooks, technology, and curricular programs is the focus of coaching.
Perception of Coach	The coach is viewed as a partner who is there to support teachers in moving students toward mastery of the standards.	The coach is viewed as a person who is there to hold teachers accountable for a certain set of instructional practices or materials.	The coach is viewed as a friendly source of support who provides resources when needed.
Role of Relationships	Trusting, respectful, and collegial relationships are a necessary component for this type of coaching.	Trusting, respectful, and collegial relationships are a necessary component for this type of coaching.	Trusting, respectful, and collegial relationships are a necessary component for this type of coaching.

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT: THE FOUNDATION FOR STUDENT-CENTERED COACHING

The idea of formative assessment as "assessment for learning" is nothing new. In the article, "Inside the Black Box," Black and Wiliam (1998) write, "we use the general term *assessment* to refer to all those activities undertaken by teachers—and by their students in assessing themselves—that provide information to be used as feedback to modify teaching and learning activities."

Many teachers have embraced the notion of formative assessment. They have more than enough grades to put in the grade book: exit slips, checks for understanding, graphic organizers, and writing prompts. So why are so many of our students still struggling? Isn't it true that if we are assessing *for* learning, then we are also making adjustments or modifying teaching and learning activities to move our students toward success?

It may be that teachers are overwhelmed by the demands of curriculum and assessment. With hundreds of students in several class periods a day, adjusting instruction based on the needs of the students can be a daunting task, especially since teachers often feel pinched for time, given the avalanche of curriculum that they feel they must cover. Decades ago, this very subject was tackled by Madeline Hunter, when she famously said,

> To say that you have taught when students haven't learned is to say you have sold when no one has bought. But how can you know that students have learned without spending hours correcting tests and papers? . . . Check students' understanding while you are teaching (not at 10 o'clock at night when you're correcting papers) so you don't move on with unlearned material that can accumulate like a snowball and eventually engulf the student in confusion and despair.

As Hunter suggests, if our goal is to graduate career- and college-ready students, then teachers need the knowledge, skills, and support to address the ever-so-persistent gap between what's taught and what's learned. We must support teachers in moving away from "teaching by mentioning it" (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 21) and toward teaching students to deeply connect with, and respond to, what they are learning. Learning is at the center of student-centered coaching.

A CASE IN POINT: COREY AT BENTON HIGH SCHOOL

The hallways were crowded as the students at Benton High School found their way to their last class of the day. Corey was tucked away in his office, preparing for his first meeting with Jeff, an eleventh-grade social studies teacher.

When he was hired as an instructional coach, Corey's role shifted from high school social studies teacher to coaching across all subjects and grade levels. As a former social studies teacher, he recognized that Jeff had a firm grasp of the content and was passionate about teaching history. With this in mind, he organized their first conversation around nailing down the broader standards that Jeff wanted his students to master. Once they had the standards in mind, they could determine the learning targets.

As they got started, Corey asked, "What standards are you going to hit on in the next unit?"

Jeff pulled out the district curriculum and said, "Okay, so the next unit I'm working on is the Civil War. I could use some help with that. I need to teach the students the causes of the Civil War, they need to learn the major battles, and we also have to get at the reasons why the war began and ended. I have some activities in mind, but I'd love to pick your brain about resources and some lessons that I might teach."

As is often the case with teachers who are passionate about what they teach, Jeff's focus was more on the content he wanted to cover than on any particular standard. Corey worried that if they didn't focus on the standards, then the coaching wouldn't be student centered. He had been hoping to avoid taking a "coverage" approach, or as Wiggins and McTighe (2005) write, "an approach in which students march through a textbook, page by page in a valiant attempt to traverse all the factual material within a prescribed time" (p. 16), and decided to redirect things a bit.

He broached the subject by saying, "I agree that this is important information for the students to know, but if we refer to the Common Core Standards, we'll be able to see what is expected in terms of the reading that they will be doing to learn the content." He explained that since social studies was embedded in the reading standards of the Common Core Standards, they might be able to use both the standards and district curriculum to make sure that the students learn not only the content but also how to read and think in relationship to the content. He said, "Let's look at one of the standards as an example: 'Grade 11–12 students will evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain'" (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 61).

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Jeff nodded. "I like that. They will have to get most of their information from texts, and this will help me make sure they think critically about what they read. If we focus on textual evidence, then we can hold the students accountable for what they are supposed to learn. That said, I still want to make sure that I cover what I'm supposed to cover—you know, based on the curriculum. . . ."

Corey nodded and said, "We can definitely check the district curriculum to make sure you are on track with the content, too."

As he headed back to his office, Corey realized that he had landed on a dual focus in his work with Jeff. Jeff would be able to tackle the content that he felt was important and at the same time, they would focus on how the students were thinking in relationship to the content. This would move them beyond a coverage-based approach and toward a mastery-based approach to instruction. He was glad that he had been able to push the conversation more toward the standards while also addressing the content that Jeff valued.

Focus on Content—the facts and other information that the students should learn; for example: what were the causes of the Civil War, what were the major battles, how did geography influence the war, and what were the factors that led to the end of the war?

Focus on Standards and Skills—how students read and interact with the content as is outlined by standards such as the Common Core Standards, ACT Standards, or College Readiness Standards.

COACHING CYCLES AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL

Designing effective coaching programs at the secondary level presents a unique set of challenges. One of the most common challenges is finding a balance between in-depth work while also honoring teachers' busy professional lives. It is important to be flexible when it comes to scheduling, but there is also a need for coaching to be ongoing in order to make a measurable impact on the students and teachers.

I became aware of this challenge when I was hired to work with Corey's team to design, implement, and measure the impact of their K–12 coaching program. Their goal was to create a data-driven model of coaching that made a measurable difference for the students, and the coaches knew that they wouldn't accomplish this with "drive-by" coaching. So we introduced what we called *coaching cycles*.

We originally aimed for coaching cycles to last 6–9 weeks, with the coach spending 2–3 days a week in the classroom along with a weekly planning session. While this framework worked well in the elementary setting, the secondary team struggled to reach all of the teachers in their schools. Their schools were just too big, their schedule was too fragmented, and the needs were too vast. So we decided that a solution for the secondary coaches was to focus more of their time on coaching teams of teachers rather than individuals. They had the time, thanks to a structure that provided job-embedded professional development for teachers. By using this time to coach teams, they could make a broader impact across a school.

We also adjusted the length of the coaching cycles. We decided that if the following conditions existed, then it would make sense to decrease a coaching cycle to 3–4 weeks in length. If these conditions didn't exist, then teachers most likely needed a more traditional coaching cycle lasting approximately six weeks.

- If the focus of the coaching cycle is tight, clear, and measurable, then the students may reach the goal in a shorter period of time.
- If teachers are highly motivated and spare no time in applying the concepts and practices that are discussed, then it may make sense to decrease the length of the coaching cycle.
- If a coaching cycle is about refinement of existing practices and there is a strong foundation to build on, a coach and teacher may move through a coaching cycle more quickly.

We found that introducing a compressed model for coaching cycles allowed the team to make more of an impact across the large middle and high schools where they worked.

Shifting to a Student-Centered Focus

Teachers often view coaching as being about them instead of about their students. Consequently, the first conversation in a coaching cycle often includes some redirection to establish a standards-based goal for the students. It can be helpful to think about a student-centered goal as beginning with "Students will . . ." and a teacher-centered goal with "Teacher will . . ." Goals for student learning tend to be content specific and are based on standards such as the Common Core Standards or ACT Standards. By comparison, goals for teacher learning are less specific and focus on pedagogical practice.

Focusing a coaching cycle on a goal for student learning doesn't exclude the coach and teacher from having conversations about effective teaching

practice. There are plenty of opportunities throughout the coaching cycle to discuss pedagogy—the difference is that pedagogy is discussed within the context of what students need to know, rather than in isolation. By taking a student-centered approach, teachers are often more motivated to change what they do instructionally in the classroom, because it is framed around doing what's best for their students rather than introducing a laundry list of what they *should* be doing.

Figure 1.3 provides a comparison of goals for student and teacher learning. The goals for student learning are derived from the standards, while the goals for teacher learning are based on effective instructional practices.

Figure 1.3 A Comparison of Goals for Student and Teacher Learning

Goals for Student Learning	Goals for Teacher Learning
Students will use coordinates to prove simple geometric theorems algebraically.	Teachers will create a warm-up activity, or "do now," based on what the students need to learn about coordinates. This will streamline the time it takes students to transition at the beginning of class and get them involved in the math content right away.
Students will cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.	Teachers will use explicit modeling to demonstrate to students how to identify and cite evidence from the text.
Students will compare and contrast the information gained from experiments against the information gained from reading a text on the same topic.	Teachers will use a variety of organizational tools, or graphic organizers, to support students as they learn to compare and contrast information.

Analysis of Student Work and Assessment Data

Student work is the foundation of student-centered coaching because it provides teachers with relevant data about how their students are doing in relationship to the standards. In contrast, teacher-centered coaching is often about brainstorming and planning without a clear sense of where the students are at any given point in time. Teacher-centered coaching leaves the coach and teacher in a plan–teach–plan cycle that often involves little-to-no reflection on what the students actually learn as a result of the instruction that takes place. A student-centered approach creates systems and structures to carefully monitor student learning every step of the way.

In my early work as a coach, I believed that if the instruction was well designed and matched my thinking about best practice, then the students would most certainly learn. But that wasn't always the case. Even in classrooms where the instruction looked perfect, there were kids falling through the cracks. I had to figure out how to make sure coaching was meeting the needs of *all* students.

I began using student work to guide my conversations with teachers. I found that anything that demonstrated whether or not students were reaching the standard was helpful. This included student writing samples, assignments, tests, interim assessments, exit slips, and even anecdotal data around student engagement. At first, the student work simply served as a tool to keep me focused. But I've found that when we use student work, the teacher and I are far more successful at addressing the students' needs through differentiated instruction.

In addition to student work, collecting student evidence during the class period is an invaluable role for the coach to play. By watching and noting what the students do in relationship to the learning targets, the teacher and coach can make informed decisions about instructional next steps.

Corey and Jeff's work followed a similar pattern. Having identified a goal for student learning, their next conversation involved unpacking the standard to identify a clear set of learning targets. Then they would be in the position to design and analyze the work that the students produced. They created the following criteria:

Students will

- read and comprehend history texts at an 11th grade level of text complexity,
- identify important events from the Civil War (refer to the district curriculum to identify the key events),
- evaluate the historical implications of each event using evidence from the text, and
- recognize when the historical implications are uncertain and back this up using evidence from the text.

Collecting Baseline Data

Jeff had already given the students a pretest that focused on the facts, dates, and major events of the Civil War. But having reviewed the Common Core Standards, he and Corey understood that they must also assess whether the students could read and understand a text at an 11th grade level of complexity. The Common Core Standards state,

> Being able to read complex text independently and proficiently is essential for high achievement in college and the workplace and important in numerous life tasks. Moreover, current trends suggest

> that if students cannot read challenging texts with understanding—if they have not developed the skill, concentration, and stamina to read such texts—they will read less in general. (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010, p. 4)

They created a straightforward assessment to use at the beginning of the unit. They kept it simple by asking the students to read a text and use a graphic organizer to demonstrate their thinking about key events, to provide textual evidence, and to identify important historical implications (Figure 1.4). With this information, Jeff and Corey were able to plan instruction that was based on where the students were in relation to the learning targets.

Figure 1.4 Graphic Organizer to Demonstrate Student Thinking in Relationship to the Content—An Example of a Student's Response on the Pre-Assessment

Key Events	Textual Evidence
Robert E. Lee invaded Maryland and Pennsylvania during the Battle of Gettysburg. One of his main goals was to obtain food and supplies for his troops.	"General Lee's hungry Confederates crossed the Potomac River, the border between Virginia and Maryland, and marched into Pennsylvania. There they found food, supplies, and frightened civilians."
Overall Historical Implications The Confederate Army had diminished resources due to the battles being fought on the farmland in the south. Part of Robert E. Lee's strategy involved obtaining food and supplies for his troops.	

When Jeff and Corey sat down to review the students' work, they found that many of the students clearly identified the key events that were featured in the text, but few were able to pull the information together and synthesize the overall historical implications. There was also a group of students who struggled to read and comprehend the text. This was alarming to Jeff and required that he and Corey figure out how to scaffold future texts for these learners. As a result of the assessment, they had what they needed to plan instruction that was targeted to the students' needs.

Data-Driven Instructional Design

With the data in hand, Jeff and Corey designed the instruction that they would deliver over the next few weeks. First, they created a note-taking

template that was similar to the graphic organizer they used for the pre-assessment. They decided to use the template for note taking as a vehicle for formative assessment. They also selected challenging and engaging texts for the students to read about the Civil War. Then, they planned how to teach the students to highlight and annotate the text in order to tease out the major events and textual evidence.

Since Jeff was a new teacher and not experienced in teaching reading, many of the instructional practices they discussed were unfamiliar to him. To help ease the transition, Corey decided to spend a few days each week in one of Jeff's tougher classes. During that time, he observed the students, took notes on what they were doing as learners, and co-taught some lessons with Jeff. They also met each week to look over the students' work and plan future instruction.

After four weeks, it was time to wrap up the coaching cycle. Due to Jeff's motivation and willingness to partner with Corey, they were able to accomplish their goals within a shorter amount of time. To capture the growth of Jeff's students, they reassessed the students using the same assessment that they had given at the beginning of the coaching cycle with a different text. That way, they were able to determine which of the students had reached the learning targets and which still needed additional support.

Jeff was pleased with how his students did in relationship to the learning targets. He admitted that when Corey first suggested it, he thought it would be challenging to blend the content of the Civil War with a standard that seemed to be more about reading. But as they engaged in the instructional design, Jeff realized that they blended quite well. His students gained greater depth of understanding about the content than he had expected, and he now understood that the students wouldn't only need the facts and dates from the Civil War to be college-ready—they'd need to read complex text to get there.

LEADING THE COACHING EFFORT

Creating a culture of high expectations and thoughtful reflection is often the first step in leading a coaching effort. In schools where expectations are high, the demand for coaching is also high. But when the reverse is true—when little is expected from the students or teachers—coaches often find that they can't get teachers to engage in the process.

It would benefit us to refrain from thinking of coaching as a silver bullet; instead, it should be thought of as an important component within a system that is focused on ensuring the success of each and every student.

Coaching is one element within a system that includes the following essential components for moving teacher and student learning forward:

- A learning-oriented and collaborative school culture in which all members of the school community collaborate to engage in doing what's best for the students
- Leadership that is focused on, and holds teachers accountable for, moving all students toward mastery of the standards
- A data-driven assessment framework that tracks student learning and creates opportunities to modify instruction to meet the students' needs
- High-quality instruction that is differentiated and based on the required knowledge and skills
- Coaching that provides teachers with support to plan, teach, and assess students so that they will graduate career- and college-ready

In schools where the coach and school leader work in partnership, coaching becomes a vehicle for deep implementation, refined teaching practice, and most important, increased student learning. When principals have clear goals for student growth, they understand that the coach is an invaluable partner in the process.

A well-designed coaching effort also involves careful consideration of how teachers will be supported and held accountable for continuous improvement. It is the role of the school leader to set expectations and then hold the teachers accountable to deliver results. The coach, on the other hand, provides support so that everyone can get there. As Michael Fullan (2009) suggests, the principal and coach establish a seamless system of pressure and support that moves the learning forward: "The more that pressure and support become seamless, the more effective the change process will be at getting things to happen" (p. 17).

It takes a bit more than accountability to create a system that moves teacher and student learning forward. Establishing a learning-oriented school culture is paramount to leading a coaching effort. Roland Barth (2007) writes, "Schools exist to promote learning in all their inhabitants. Whether we are called teachers, principals, professors, or parents, our primary responsibility is to promote learning in others and in ourselves" (p. 163). Leaders who create a school climate that is based on trying new things, taking risks, and not settling for the status quo find coaching to be a great fit. But when these qualities are not in place, coaching often falls flat.

The most important message that a principal can send is that everyone is a candidate for coaching because everyone has students with

needs. If the school leadership understands and communicates the rationale and practices that underpin student-centered coaching, then the teachers begin to understand that coaching is not about fixing teachers but instead is about working collaboratively to move the student learning forward.

The disappointing reality is that there are many examples of coaches who find it difficult to get leadership support, aren't being used to their full potential, and are frustrated and unsure of whether they are making an impact. Typically, these are your committed teacher-leaders who became coaches and then found that nobody really knows what to do with them.

Often this is the consequence of failing to adequately prepare principals to collaborate effectively with coaches. They know that they have to improve student achievement but aren't sure how to create conditions that support the coaching effort. Unfortunately, this is a common scenario that leads to an obvious waste of resources.

TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Corey spent a fair amount of time observing Jeff and his students throughout the coaching cycle. He designed the following note-taking tool to gather information about how the students were acquiring content knowledge (Figure 1.5).

Figure 1.5 Corey's Note-Taking Tool

Learning Targets: • Identify important events from the Civil War (refer to the district curriculum to identify the key events). • Evaluate the historical implications of each event using evidence from the text. • Recognize when the historical implications are uncertain, and back this up using evidence from the text.	
Evidence of Students' Mastery of the Content of the Civil War:	Evidence of Students' Mastery of the Common Core Standards:

Coaching Logs

The following logs can be used with individuals, teams, or pairs of teachers. As is the case with any tool that is provided in this book, you are encouraged to adapt and adjust these logs to suit your needs (Figure 1.6).

Figure 1.6 Student-Centered Coaching Logs

Coaching Log: Identifying a Goal for Student Learning

1. What is our goal for student learning for this coaching cycle? How does our goal connect with the standards?
2. What are the learning targets for this standard?
3. What are some options for assessing students in relationship to the learning targets?
4. When will we meet again and what are our next steps?

Coaching Log: Creating a Plan for Assessment

1. How will we assess the students to show growth across the coaching cycle? (Note: You can use an existing assessment or create your own.)
2. What is the timeline for collecting pre-assessment data?
3. When will we meet again to analyze the data that we collect?

Coaching Log: Documenting Baseline Data

1. Which students were assessed? Please attach a copy of the assessment used.
2. How many students performed at a proficient level, based on the baseline assessment?

   _____ % of students performed at _____ level as determined by the assessment.
3. Based on the data, what are our plans for instruction?
4. Does the data indicate any ways in which we should differentiate learning for students? If so, how?
5. When will we meet again and what are our next steps?

Coaching Log: Delivering Instruction and Monitoring Student Learning

1. How are the students progressing toward the learning targets? What is our evidence?
2. What are the next steps for instruction?
3. What should we do about students who aren't moving forward?
4. When will we meet again and what are our next steps?

Coaching Log: Measuring Impact of the Coaching Cycle

1. Which students were assessed? Please attach a copy of the assessment used.
2. As a result of the coaching cycle, how many of the students performed at a proficient level?

   _____ % of students performed at _____ level as determined by the assessment.
3. Does this data indicate any next steps for student learning?
4. What support does the teacher still need from the coach?

IN SUMMARY

We are aspiring to accomplish something that has never been done before—preparing our students to be career- and college-ready, no matter what city, town, or background they come from. There are plenty of teachers who understand that they have to push against a system of seat time and credits and toward one of standards mastery, but they can't make this happen as individuals in isolated classrooms. It's just too hard.

Using the practices outlined in this chapter establishes a partnership between the teachers and coach. By having a clear goal for student learning and using student work to monitor progress and plan instruction, coaching doesn't have to be about making teachers do things that they don't want to do. Coaching can be about our students.