

# COACHING SCHOOL CHANGE

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*This paper articulates the development and implementation of the school change coaching process designed for the Oregon Small Schools Initiative. It outlines the critical role of the School Change Coach, describes the scope of coaching responsibilities in small schools, and explains the reflective, inquiry based framework and coaching model that guided the largest high school reform Initiative in Oregon's history. The highlighted text directs the reader to specific coaching tools that can be found on the OSSSI website ([www.e3smallschools.org](http://www.e3smallschools.org))*

## THE REASON FOR SMALL HIGH SCHOOLS

*"The work of Small Schools is all about kids. Each individual, particular kid. Not about some of them or even most of them. Every single one of them."  
Rick Lear, Director of the Washington Small Schools Project*

"The Small Schools Movement is a philosophy of school reform that says many U.S. high schools are too large and should be reorganized into smaller, autonomous schools of no more than 400 students, and optimally under 200. Recent research on small schools offers that "at their best, small schools are seen as enhancing strong personal bonds, home and community involvement, improved instructional quality and accountability, and improved teacher working conditions and job satisfaction."

*(Center for Mental Health in Schools. (2009). Learning Supports and Small Schools. Los Angeles, CA: Author.)*

In the winter of 2003 E3: Employers for Education Excellence was chosen by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Meyer Memorial Trust to launch the largest high school reform initiative in Oregon History, the *Oregon Small Schools Initiative (OSSSI)*.

The intent was to support [diverse school communities across Oregon](#) to engage in the emerging philosophy of small schools as a way to increase educational outcomes for Oregon students, particularly those who traditionally had been underserved.

The first wave of the Initiative included 13 partner schools. Eight large comprehensive high schools were converted into 17 distinct small schools or learning communities, and 5 new schools were designed from the ground up, with small in mind. Whether schools were 'conversions' or 'new starts,' three key goals were at heart and center:

- **Close the achievement gap experienced by low-income students, students of color and students for whom English is a second language,**
- **Increase overall student graduation rates, and**
- **Increase the number of college-ready graduating students.**

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From the beginning, OSSI program designers knew that regardless of whether a partner school or district was taking on a conversion or new start, the work of planning and implementing 'small' would be no small task. Resources to support the change process would be imperative.

### THE ROLE OF SCHOOL COACH

*"Once used to bolster troubled staffers, coaching now is part of the standard leadership development training for elite executives and talented up-and-comers at IBM, Motorola, J.P. Morgan, Chase, and Hewlett Packard. These companies are discreetly giving their best prospects what star athletes have long had: a trusted adviser to help reach their goals." -- CNN.com*

Among the early and primary assets of the Initiative were the **School Change Coaches**, who were hired to provide real-time, on the ground, authentic support for principals, teacher leaders, and district leadership as they initiated change on their campuses. The designers were forward-thinkers as they incorporated the coaching model into the Initiative structure.

The work of the School Change Coach was to assist school leaders in envisioning, planning, implementing and evaluating the development of their small schools. Their daily tasks encompassed a range of discrete and overlapping functions, such as co-creating meeting agendas, facilitating group dialogues, assisting with classroom observation processes, planning professional development opportunities, offering reflection and feedback about specific problems of practice, and providing encouragement and optimism

"What was important for me was that my role as a coach wasn't so clearly defined as it was when I was a principal. I had to learn to "navigate the waters" of coaching. It seemed to me that my role evolved as changes occurred. I noticed that what I did in the beginning of my coaching relationships was a little different than what I offered later".  
OSSI Coach

in the face of overwhelming demands. In order to respond to the unique needs, concerns, hopes and dreams of each school community, the coaches approached their work in a variety of traditional, non-traditional, innovative and creative ways, using various points of entry. They relied on multiple **theoretical perspectives** to inform their actions.

Initially, the role of a School Change Coach was less than clear to schools as they saw coaches providing support in multiple areas. They were often seen and referred to as **instructional coaches, content coaches, literacy coaches, and leadership coaches**. The title of "School Change Coach" was used in the Initiative to describe work

being done on multiple fronts, as their work incorporated all of these tasks. In the third year of the Initiative, an **Equity and Community Coach** position was added, requiring even more role clarification.

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Each coach came to the Initiative with a range of professional experiences and expertise in education that guided their beliefs about change and provided them with a particular set of skills. Many of the coaches had been school principals, some had been professional development and/or curriculum specialists, one had been a school social worker, and most had taught in high schools or in education programs at universities around Oregon. All were committed to improving Oregon's schools and shared the OSSI goals of closing the achievement gap, increasing graduation rates and graduating more students college and work ready.

### DEFINING THE SCOPE OF THE WORK

An essential quality possessed by every School Change Coach was the ability to see and understand both the macro and micro levels involved in **managing complex change**. Their work often seemed paradoxical, requiring an ability to hold a big picture perspective and examine the systemic dynamics of change, while simultaneously maintaining a focus on the individual human needs of those involved in the change process. The OSSI coaches recognized that a comprehensive, holistic approach to changing high schools would require intellectual and emotional work on multiple levels of the educational system. They needed to be knowledgeable of current educational research on school reform, and aware of the historic, current and future implications for educational policy. They also needed to understand and articulate the goals and expectations of the Initiative, align with the mission and vision of their schools and districts, support the teacher leaders in the classrooms, and vigorously advocate for each and every student and their families. A critical inquiry and reflective approach was shared by all coaches; encouraging schools to rigorously question their current practices and change strategies.

They also relied on reflective practices to help staff use their time to feel and think deeply about their work and actively learn from their experiences. The

“There was a moral imperative that we needed to remember and keep alive. This work was about meeting the needs of all children, especially those who have historically been underserved by our schools. This work is about equity as well as academic excellence.”

*OSSI Coach*

coaches recognized the complexity of anticipating and responding to the **multiple spheres of influence** on student success, as well as the range of risk and resiliency factors impacting teaching and learning. They also appreciated the critical judgment, compassionate leadership and collaboration needed to influence the political, organizational, and psychological dimensions of school change. Supporting small schools was a big job.

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**GETTING STARTED: CHANGING OURSELVES**

Early in the Initiative, coaches were intimately involved in the organizational development and launching of the Oregon Small Schools Initiative. The newly developing OSSI team worked together to cultivate a sense of ownership, personal voice, and **relational trust** in their work. The first School Change Coaches worked closely with the E3 | OSSI leadership to create and strengthen guiding documents, develop resource tools and operating processes, and build internal capacity. They were actively involved in the recruitment and selection of partnership schools, hiring new coaches and offering on-the-ground perspectives that kept E3, as the intermediary, grounded in the day to day realities of schools.

These early coaches worked collaboratively to incubate a professional learning community among themselves that valued multiple perspectives. Coaches modeled a willingness to try new things, monitor progress, make mistakes, and adjust.

**“We make the road by walking.”**

*Paulo Freire*

In spite of this effort, the E3 | OSSI team faced the inevitable realities of becoming a real learning organization. Differences in philosophies, practices, and ‘ways of being’ emerged. Personal and professional values were challenged. Focus and direction were disputed, and effective collaboration was, at times, compromised. Coaches knew that they had to be **willing to be disturbed** by the social realities, academic data, heartbreaking stories and disappointing outcomes for Oregon’s students. They also recognized that the coaching team would need to be willing to be disturbed by each other in order to really engage in the kind of honest dialogue that strengthens an organization.

The coaches intellectually understood that disagreement and disturbance provided the possibility to see things in new ways, and that conflict offered authentic opportunities for learning. However, they also recognized the **emotional intelligence** and vulnerability that was required to achieve **transformative change**. E3 | OSSI had set ambitious goals, hired exceptional staff, and ignited the passion and trepidation inherent in venturing into new spaces. Coaches all understood that *not knowing* was a requirement for new learning and acknowledged that for any organization ‘trying to define the work and do it at the same time’ was a tremendous organizational task. This was particularly true as the Initiative worked to articulate and live out its commitment to addressing **educational equity**.

Efforts to define equity and understand the **achievement gap**, while attempting to close it, elicited a full range of emotional and tactical responses and provoked many courageous conversations among coaches and Initiative staff. Examining systems of power and privilege that have created and maintained our current system required critical inquiry into the personal, professional and organizational beliefs about policies and best practices that have historically proven ineffective for many of Oregon’s children. In

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order to fulfill the Initiative's commitment to equity and social justice, and to genuinely address the needs of students of color, those who live in poverty and English language learners, it was determined by all that professional development in Educational Equity needed to be a priority for the organization.

### SHAPING SCHOOL LEADERSHIP MODELS

All partner schools in the Initiative had a coach assigned to them. Some pairings were driven simply by location. Other assignments were based on the fit between the coach's skill set and the needs of the school. And some assignments were based on a previous working relationship between a coach and a school or district.

In addition to the School Change Coach's role, two other roles were critical in supporting a distributive leadership approach. Expanding the concept of leadership to include classroom teachers and others was essential to building a collaborative community that could respond to the multiple leadership demands of a small school. **School Change Coordinators** were hired to help support schools with their initial design and planning process. They worked closely with OSSI coaches and principals to understand and manage the grant requirements, keep the OSSI mission and vision in front of the staff, and attend to the primary needs of developing school structure and culture. The relationship and support between coach and coordinator was crucial because the coordinator served as a key teacher leader in guiding the early work at each site. School Change Coordinators also provided a vital link between the school staff and OSSI regarding concerns and lessons learned in the initial school change process.

As schools moved through their planning and design phases, the coaching and support needs began to shift toward a focus on instruction and classroom practices. In order to establish a clear focus on instruction in each small school, as well as a focus on instructional leadership development, Initiative staff created the role of the **Teaching and Learning Facilitator**. **Teaching and Learning Facilitators (TLF's)** were also teacher leaders who functioned as part of the school leadership team. Their roles were critical in planning professional development, developing peer observation processes, collecting and analyzing data, and serving as an internal instructional coach. Many of the TLF's opened their classrooms to other teachers, modeled best instructional practices, and shared a range of classroom observation tools. Their leadership helped schools develop and strengthen their instructional frameworks and encouraged open practices. They also provided an insider perspective on the teaching and learning challenges occurring in the classroom that the Initiative might be able to support. TLF's and principals worked side by side to lead their schools' instructional improvement efforts.

To support the development of these teacher leaders, OSSI provided both real-time coaching and regular professional development. In these professional development sessions, TLF's were offered protocols and

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processes to plan effective meetings, strengthen facilitation skills, deepen the level of discourse among staff, and provide **instructional leadership**. Coordinators and Teaching and Learning Facilitators developed leadership knowledge and skills that served them as they moved into administrative positions or continued in key teacher leadership roles in OSSI schools.

### Professional Development

A primary support strategy for all schools in the Initiative was the delivery of powerful professional development opportunities. Four areas were identified and workshops were provided by outside consultants and supported or co-facilitated by the OSSI coaching staff:

- Project Based Learning ~ Swanson and Cosgrave Consulting
- Math Best Practices ~ Teachers Development Group
- Literacy for Social Justice ~ Linda Christensen
- Leading for Educational Equity ~ BayCES in partnership with OSSI coaches

Because coaches had intimate knowledge of their schools, understood the needs of the leaders, and had a great deal of contact with staff, they were able to collaborate with consultants to provide rigorous, relevant and personalized professional development. In fact, during the professional development sessions the coaches had the opportunity to further develop rapport and trust with teaching staff, which created stronger alliances for shared work back at school. While much of the professional development took place away from the school, coaches clearly understood that well-planned follow-up sessions back at school were necessary to support and sustain the learning. Coaches also planned as many professional development sessions on site as possible in order to use the school as a learning laboratory, and to make it more convenient for staff to attend.

During formal coaching meetings, professional development sessions, staff meeting, retreats, district events or informal gatherings, coaches strengthened their relationships with the school staff. They listened closely to the stories that students, parents, teachers and leaders told about their school community in order to gain as many perspectives as possible about the context in which they would be coaching.

*“I don’t know if we could have done this without her (the coach). There was so much to learn having a new principal.”*

*School Teaching & Learning Facilitator*

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**A COACHING FRAMEWORK**

The OSSI **School Change Rubric** (see below) provided coaches with a framework for understanding the scope of their work within the E3 organization, in their schools, with district leaders and with the larger school communities. While areas of the rubric often were approached through discrete coaching efforts, each worthy of its own concentrated study, it remained clear that all four areas together established a comprehensive framework for achieving change. These quadrants of the rubric delineate strategic entry points and provide basic parameters for assessment, intervention and evaluation. It is vital, however, that they work in concert to provide a comprehensive approach to school change.

**OSSI School Change Rubric**

<p><b>School Structure and Culture</b></p> <p>This quadrant was often a point of entry for schools in the early stage of conversion or development.</p> <p>Issues of school identity formation, autonomy over budgets, scheduling, and facilities are negotiated here.</p> <p>School climate, personalization, meaningful relationships, and collaboration are also considered.</p>	<p><b>Teaching and Learning</b></p> <p>This area of focus places attention on teaching and learning practices and student outcomes.</p> <p>Disaggregated student data, instructional frameworks, curriculum choices, culturally responsive instruction and differentiated learning shape these dialogues.</p> <p>Personalization, proficiency, tapping into home and community culture for relevance, building on students' knowledge and interests influence these coaching conversations.</p>
<p><b>Leadership development</b></p> <p>Instructional leadership is central to supporting teaching and learning.</p> <p>Distributive leadership, effective governance, staff feedback, supervision, professional development, and professional learning communities dominate this quadrant.</p> <p>Student, parent and teacher leadership strategies are discussed here.</p>	<p><b>Community Engagement</b></p> <p>Community awareness, understanding and support for small schools are critical and often missed opportunities.</p> <p>Family involvement in and out of school is central to ongoing conversations for coaches and schools.</p> <p>Student voice, employer and community partnerships also provide feedback and support to schools in a myriad of ways.</p>

In the early stages of school design, conversion or development, leadership teams naturally gave their attention to **structure and culture**. Who they were going to be, where they were going and how they were going to be together dominated the coaching conversations. Facility use, schedules and teaching assignments, school themes and resource allocation were often-discussed topics.

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As coaches continued to look at data and collaborate with members of their school leadership teams, they found that coaching needs were different in different communities. As school development progressed, coach roles shifted in different ways and at different rates in response to school needs.

For some schools, **leadership development** was paramount to successfully establishing the new school. Schools with young principals and new staff in particular relied heavily on the leadership experiences of their coaches. Supporting all principals to become stronger instructional leaders was essential for all coaches. Principals and coaches knew that **teaching and learning** was the heart of the work, and that teachers wanted and needed to provide differentiated, culturally relevant and rigorous instruction for all of their students.

**Community engagement**, another of the four quadrants in the rubric, occurred sporadically for many schools. Coaches noticed that some schools had involved the community heavily in the planning stages, but tended to lose contact as they moved forward. Other schools saw the community as an integral part of achieving their mission and engaged daily with community businesses, neighbors, and other schools. For some, the coaches played an important role in brokering and supporting community partnerships. Co-planning exhibitions for families and community members, facilitating student summits and focus groups, and helping to develop communication and marketing plans were among the schools' many coaching requests.

Given the diversity of needs in each community and the fluid nature of their work, two critical issues continued to surface:

- How to recognize the uniqueness of individuals and communities, while simultaneously developing a collaborative approach to coaching that would provide a strong measurable impact on teaching and learning.
- How to develop the coaching team's cultural competencies and build their capacity to understand and address issues of educational equity.

Overall, the coaches knew their work made a difference in their schools. Leaders, teachers and students told them so in multiple ways. They grappled however, with the challenge of measuring and demonstrating the impact of coaching practices on high quality teaching and learning for all students. Addressing the academic achievement gap was a primary goal of the Initiative, yet it was clear that Oregon's educational system, the Initiative, and the coaches themselves had a great deal of work to do in order to step to this charge with the necessary confidence and efficacy. It became apparent that the OSSI School Change Coaches would benefit from stronger collaboration and more professional development.

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**DEVELOPING A COACH COLLABORATIVE**

Because of the range of experiences that each coach brought to the work, and the fact that they worked all over the state of Oregon, it was important to place focused attention on developing the coaching team itself. It was essential to move beyond a network of coaches who operated as congenial independent contractors into a true collegial collaborative that created, refined and modeled ways for school leaders to work together to achieve meaningful change. From the beginning, coaches met monthly to build their connection with each other. They established community agreements that allowed them to ask for what they needed to function optimally in the group. These norms were revisited at each meeting and refined over time as the needs of the group changed. The commitment of the coaches to authentic collaboration is evident not only by the depth and breadth of the community agreements designed to foster trust, deal with each other honestly, and confront conflict, but also by the honesty, vulnerability and courage the coaches exhibited in upholding the agreements.

*Coach Norms*

- ~ Show up
- ~ Stay engaged with process and with one another
- ~ Speak your truth without blame or judgment
- ~ Accept and expect non-closure
- ~ Support talking to think, thinking to talk
- ~ Be open, not attached to outcome
- ~ Be willing to be disturbed
- ~ Maintain confidentiality

*OSSI Coaches*

A variety of protocols and processes were also used to assist in team building and facilitate movement toward becoming a **professional learning community**, a key feature of effective small schools. At one

“I remember one of our early retreats where we worked together in small groups. There were four of us in a small hotel room offering the abbreviated versions of our life stories. We started sharing our best professional selves and emerged from that room a couple of hours later having revealed family highlights, childhood trauma, sexual orientation, and a shared appreciation for the people that we would have the opportunity to work with. We were real with each other. Not because we had to be, but simply because we were offered the time, space and invitation to be who we were.”

*OSSI Coach*

point, after adding several new coaches to the team, the OSSI staff worked with the Personalysis Corporation of Houston, Texas to look at the personality traits and work styles that each member brought to the group. It functioned as a catalyst for conversations about the potential alignments and conflicts that might emerge between group members. They also provided a good deal of self recognition and laughter. In addition to the regularly scheduled and clearly structured monthly meetings, annual coach retreats provided time and space for

strategic planning and relationship building.

Even with a concentrated effort to build group cohesion and open communication, the team, like many teams, had to work through several changes in order to create the optimal structure. At one point the

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role of **Coach Coordinator** was created to support the growing number of coaches needed in the field. This was later discontinued; one person offering coach support across the state was not efficient and did not allow the contact time needed to build supportive relationships and small professional teams. Later, three geographically structured coaching teams were briefly tried, but they did not yield the degree of connectivity and consistency intended. Several subsequent restructurings occurred, all bearing limitations that rendered each one suboptimal. These structural changes were not viewed as failures. They provided learning. They exemplified and affirmed the benefits of a professional learning team that was small enough to collectively recognize its needs and then respond accordingly. Ultimately, the coaches reverted to one collaborative team to support their work with the Initiative staff, school districts, and individual schools.

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### Professional Development for Coaches

By the winter of 2006-07, Initiative partner schools were developing in 13 districts across Oregon. As the coaching team formed, stormed, normed and performed, several questions persisted:

- What consistent message have we offered our schools about the role of the coach?
- How do the concepts of rigorous and relevant learning and the critical role of trusting relationships apply to us as a learning organization?
- Does the group have a shared definition of rigor?
- How might we personalize our own learning?
- How might the coaches' work be continually assessed and evaluated?
- What does the organization believe about the causes and solutions to the achievement gap and disproportionate discipline issues?
- How are issues of equity, historical racism and classism talked about in the organization and in our schools?

All of these questions had serious implications for the coaching work. Because OSSI emphasized school communities of traditionally underserved students, understanding issues of educational equity became imperative. Most of the coaches had done little work in this area of education.

**An Equity Leadership Coach** had recently been added to the team to bring an additional perspective to coaching. As discussions about educational equity evolved, it became clear to all coaches that issues of equity existed in all facets of their work and that all coaches needed to become Equity Coaches. Perhaps one of the most important roles of the Equity Coach was delivering the message that equity was not an add-on to instructional or leadership practices, but a way of understanding and adapting all practices to meet the diverse learning needs of all students.

To build the coaches' capacity to address Educational Equity, the Initiative's director contracted with the **Bay Area Coalition of Equitable Schools** to provide professional development. BayCES had done extensive work in this niche, had a keen understanding of organizational development and approached coaching from both a cognitive and affective perspective. A strong recommendation by two OSSI coaches who had experienced their transformative work led to a series of powerful professional development opportunities, and an on-going partnership with BayCES that would last throughout the Initiative. One of these opportunities, a Leading for Equity Institute, was particularly impactful in examining the concepts of oppression and equity, and gave profound meaning to the Initiative's equity goal of closing the achievement gap. The four coaches who attended this institute returned to Oregon determined to develop and implement similar institutes here for our school leaders.

The work with the BayCES team focused on three key areas:

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1. Strengthening coaching practices and developing the coaching team.
2. Building the coaches' "will, skill, knowledge, capacity and emotional intelligence", to facilitate conversations about equity among the coaching team, as well as within schools and with district leadership.
3. Co-developing and facilitating Leading for Educational Equity Institutes. These LFEE's were fashioned after the BayCES Leading for Equity Institutes, but were tailored and customized for Oregon educators, and ultimately facilitated solely by OSSI coaches.

Learning with the BayCES team had tremendous influence on the coaches' ability to serve their schools more effectively and compassionately. Conversations about coaching roles and responsibilities were enriched, professional development planning was strengthened, and issues of educational equity were addressed more directly and expeditiously. Their coaching cycle and framework in particular resonated with the OSSI team, as it aligned so closely with the reflective, inquiry-based approach that had driven the OSSI coaching work. Their framework validated OSSI coaching practices and offered a clear structure and succinct language. It helped the coaching team articulate their roles, methods, and principles more precisely with each other and their schools.

### THE CORNERSTONE: REFLECTIVE COACHING

The OSSI approach to coaching has primarily been a reflective process that has relied heavily on posing clarifying and probing questions; responding with research supported considerations, strategies, and tools; and structuring time to reflect and consider meaning. The work of the OSSI coaches has been guided by the use of **school assessment** and **work plans**, team reflection and consultation, reflective journaling, and **coaching work plans**. The **BayCES coaching cycle** outlines five key areas of focus that support and mirror the five driving questions posed by the OSSI coaches.

OSSI Coaching Reflection Questions	BayCES Coaching Cycle
What am I paying attention to, what do I see, what meaning do I give it?	Assessing and Observing
What action do I believe is needed here and why?	Developing a Theory of Action
Do I have your permission to coach you in specific areas that we have identified?	Enrolling the Client
Who do I need to be in relationship with to accomplish this work?	Establishing relationships
What specific strategies or actions have we agreed to work on together?	Providing coaching interventions

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Most significant to the coaching experience was the notion of coaching ‘from the inside out’. It emphasized the belief that coaching practices reflect the world view, disposition and skills of the coach. What they see, what they say, and what they do, all emerge from who they are and what they believe. Central to this inside-out notion is that supporting the leadership of others requires a great deal of self-reflection, critical judgment and personal insight. The real art of coaching is about the effective use of self - lending your eyes, ears, head and heart to others. It hinges on a deep belief that with the appropriate support, people and organizations have the capacity to solve their own problems and manifest their own dreams.

**Reflective Inquiry**

The following questions offered coaches an inquiry process to guide schools through the assessment, intervention and feedback process.

**1. What am I looking for, what do I see, what meaning do I give it?**

Deciding what to observe and assess, what methods to use, and who exactly would be coached were important considerations in the early phase of the coaching relationship. Observation and assessment were also recognized as an ongoing part of the coaching process that consistently revisited questions such as:

- What exactly am I trying to impact here?
- What assessment approach am I taking, what tools am I using and why?
- What data am I collecting to determine if the coaching is meeting its intended outcomes?

It has also been important to the OSSI coaches to remember the subjective nature of assessment. The use of multiple observers and multiple methods of assessment need to be considered. This was especially true when coaching in schools where the population served is culturally different from the coach or those being coached. Cross-cultural misinterpretations can and frequently do occur throughout the coaching process. For the OSSI Coaches, **learning visits, classroom observation tools, and satisfaction surveys** provided important data on instructional practices and school climate to be collaboratively assessed. **The Center for Educational Leadership (CEL)**, a non-profit organization at the University of Washington, was also an important partner in strengthening the practice of classroom observation and instructional coaching. CEL believes that the single most important factor in supporting student learning is the quality of classroom instruction, and they emphasized the importance of real time classroom observation and instructional assessment.

We don't see the world as it is, we see the world as we are. *Anis Nin*

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**2. What actions do I believe are needed here?**

A subject of considerable conversation was the importance of developing a clear theory of action that can be articulated, developed and agreed upon by the leadership team. OSSI coaches found a variety of tools that helped to lay out their theories of action, but agreed the specific tool being used is less important than having a tool that the coach is comfortable using and that the schools can easily understand, and that addresses the following questions:

- What specific coaching dilemma or challenges am I focused on?
- What are my specific coaching objectives, strategies and intended outcomes?
- Why do I believe that these strategies will be effective?
- How will I communicate this theory to others?

**3. Who do I need to be in relationship with to accomplish this work?**

It was often surprising to notice how many of the coaching conversations revolved around relational dynamics and their impact on collaborative work. Who gets along with whom, who can't speak openly to whom, and related issues had enormous implications for coaching. The OSSI Coaches found this to be painfully true, both for themselves and for staff members in a school or district. The critical nature of **relational trust** to honest communication, self disclosure, risk taking, and confidence became a vital and consistent message from the coaching team. Articulating the connection between trusting relationships, rich school culture, and learning (for adults and young people) was a constant coaching task.

There are often many undiscussables in schools – those things that just aren't okay to talk about. Commonly referred to as 'the elephant in the room,' these topics create a good deal of discomfort and limit the straightforward communication needed to address complex issues with depth and honesty. Staff competency is quite often one of those elephants. The fear of not knowing, not performing well, not feeling confident or recognized all feed the silence or tentative conversations that delay progress and frustrate participants. In this respect, talking and **listening protocols** were useful tools for coaches as they helped staff uncover, discover, and name their competing or complimentary agendas. Structures and processes such as constructivist listening dyads, personal experience panels and support groups provided containers for difficult dialogue and helped to create **zones of safety** for

*“Community isn't always synonymous with warmth and harmony. Politeness is often a veneer for understanding, when in reality it masks uncovered territory, the unspeakable pit that we turn from because we know the pain and anger that can dwell there. It is important to remind ourselves that real community is forged out of struggle. This is the crucible from which a real community grows”.*

*Linda Christenson ~ Reading Writing and Rising up*

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sharing thoughts and ideas. Schools were supported to use these protocols in authentic ways to deepen the discourse among and

**“The single factor common to every successful change initiative is that relationships improve. If relationships improve, things get better. If they remain the same or get worse, ground is lost.”** *Michael Fullan*

between multiple stakeholders. Coaches recognize that changing the discourse in schools -

changing what is talked about and how - has tremendous impact on the effectiveness of any change strategy that a school takes on. Honest talk about critical issues was an essential tool for building connections and working collaboratively. Coaches were committed to applying these beliefs to their own coaching relationships.

#### **4. Do I have your permission to coach you in specific areas that we have identified?**

If it is true that there is nothing as annoying as an answer to a question that one didn't ask, then the same could hold true for being coached by someone that has not been invited to coach. A coaching relationship must be mutually agreed upon for it to be most effective. When a client actually wants support, and the coach has agreed to provide it, the door is opened for the personally and professionally revealing work that coaching involves. Concerns can be identified more readily, shortcomings exposed with less trepidation and options can be explored freely. The OSSI Coaches understood this as a critical, yet often overlooked step in the coaching process. It was clear early on that simply because a coach was assigned to a school as part of the Initiative's support package, a firm agreement to be coached was not a given. The agreement to participate in a coaching relationship needed to be explicit. It required an understanding of why and how people change, as well as the psychological tasks that each person faces in the process of change. Authentically enrolling a client required the development of trust that could only be achieved through honesty and confidentiality. Coaches found that school leaders enrolled for different reasons, at different points in their work. Coaches also found that some clients never really enroll, but engage in a polite surface agreement to have a coach in their building. Most schools in the Initiative welcomed and made use of the coaching provided. Understanding the various reasons for which individuals or schools did not enroll was important learning for the coaches.

#### **5. What exactly have we agreed to work on together?**

Although coaching needs and practices varied from school to school and changed over time, the OSSI coaches generally found themselves addressing one or more of the following areas:

- Collaborating on school (re)design and structures that support rigorous teaching and learning
- Utilizing data-based inquiry to examine students' academic achievement

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- Building the capacity of instructional leaders to assess, demonstrate, and coach strong pedagogical practices, and encourage continuous teacher development
- Facilitating professional learning communities and professional development opportunities to improve teacher collaboration and reflective practices
- Supporting schools and districts to partner with families and communities
- Building the cultural competence of school leaders and teachers to help them better meet the social and academic needs of diverse students

Specific agreements about the focus of the coaching help both the coach and the client direct the use of their precious and limited time. Clear intentions can also prevent coaching from drifting into areas where the client is not yet willing to go. On occasion, coaches determined a coaching need in an area that the client had not identified, and needed to rely on their own critical judgment about when, where, how, and if they would surface their concern and offer their support. Their decisions hinged on the quality of the relationship and the significance of the issue.

“Coaching is hard work both for those doing the coaching and those being coached. “

*OSSI coach*

The collaborative and often unpredictable nature of the coaching relationships required astute observation, courageous conversation, and judicious flexibility. These skills, filtered through genuine care and concern, enhanced relationships and created the conditions for real change.

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**ANNUAL COACHING CYCLE**

Each year the coaches and schools organized their work around a seasonal coaching cycle. Key activities, reports, deadlines and areas of focus were carefully planned and implemented to provide additional structure and consistency to a variable coaching process.

**Summer (July/August):**

- OSSI Coach renewal (non-work time in July) often included extensive reading and/or attending conferences or other professional development opportunities
- Plan activities and events for the year, including institutes, workshops, conferences, etc.
- OSSI meetings to focus on emphases for the year and explore individual and group Theories of Action; the work is very contextualized and each coach brings personal and professional perspective to the work
- Enrollment or re-enrollment of the client (with periodic changes in assignments, previous coaches met with newly assigned coaches to provide transition and assist with continuous planning and support)
- Plan with school administrators before teachers return
- Assist with the development of a professional development calendar
- Prepare to assist with professional development when teachers return for the school year

**Fall (Sept-Dec)**

- Build and extend relationships with staff at the school site and with the districts
- Help school leaders analyze student data
- Assist schools with action plans and budgeting
- Assist with the implementation of the planned professional development
- Assist with the development or enhancement of professional learning communities, including peer observation schedules

**Winter (Jan – March)**

- Mid-year narrative report prepared by principals
- Mid-year coaches' evaluation
- Mid-year corrections and ongoing coaching interventions

**Spring (April – June)**

- Simultaneous completion of current year's goals and planning for the future
- Plan the Report Of Progress (ROP) event for formal sharing and feedback

## Coaching School Change

**THE SUNSET OF THE INITIATIVE**

The Initiative formally concluded in June 2010. The schools themselves, however, are really just beginning. In the last nine months of funded support, coaches assisted schools in looking forward and planning for their future. Using a **futures protocol**, each school had the opportunity to take stock of the work that they had accomplished, and then identify strategies to sustain momentum. Coaches also worked with school to tell their stories; how they started, what they discovered, and who they had become. The April 2010 **Report of Progress** which included all principals, superintendents, and TLF's, was designed to help schools celebrate together, share their visions for the future, and connect with potential resources that could support their forward movement.

As coaches approached the final months of the Initiative, they also had to take stock of their journeys and prepare themselves and their schools to disengage from one another. Much had happened over the years: schools opened and closed, OSSI coaches came and went, seniors left for college and precious friendships were incubated. There were marriages, births and deaths, disappointments and amazing successes.

The OSSI coaches approached June 2010, the end of the Initiative, in buoyant celebration of teachers, students, and communities that allowed them to share in their incredible journey. With the help of authentic and meaningful coaching relationships, small, equitable, high-achieving high schools had been successfully seeded across the state. These schools will serve as models and learning laboratories for educators who wish to take up the challenge of creating meaningful and positive changes that truly benefit all students.

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