ABOUT THIS REPORT

This story from the field was developed by the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation at North Carolina State University to capture stories of instructional coaches from across the state that have participated in the professional learning offerings provided through the North Carolina Digital Learning Initiative.

The mission of the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation at the NC State University College of Education is to advance education through innovation in teaching, learning, and leadership. The Friday Institute conducts research, develops educational resources, provides professional development programs for educators, advocates to improve teaching and learning, and helps inform policy-making. The Friday Institute is in the process of implementing recommendations from the North Carolina Digital Learning Plan, which includes a comprehensive asset and needs assessment of how schools and districts in the state can transition to digital learning to improve student outcomes. The plan includes an emphasis on human capacity, which builds upon the Friday Institute’s extensive experience in providing and evaluating professional learning opportunities for state and district level leaders, principals, instructional coaches, and educators. http://fi.ncsu.edu/

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) is charged with implementing the state’s public school laws, policies, and procedures governing pre-kindergarten through 12th grade public education. The elected State Superintendent of Public Instruction leads the Department and functions under the policy direction of the State Board of Education. http://www.ncpublicschools.org/

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INTRODUCTION

Across the state of North Carolina, there are educators whose role goes beyond improving learning experiences for K-12 students, including the teachers of those students. Some educators have titles like Instructional Technology Facilitator or Library Media Coordinator. Some educators have a full slate of classes they teach, using their planning periods to work with their peers and colleagues, while some educators devote their full day to working with teachers, and yet others are somewhere in between. From August to June, their presence is seen and felt on the campuses they serve. These teachers are instructional coaches and they are one of the greatest influencers of change within their respective districts.

To highlight the impact of instructional coaches in schools across the state, the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation conducted interviews with four instructional coaches from varying parts of the state of North Carolina. All of these educators provided different perspectives and experiences on their roles as coaches. Our interview questions focused on discovering how they evolved as coaches; learning about day-to-day responsibilities; peer interaction; the types of professional development and mentoring they seek; insights about education and the role of coaches; coaching strategies; challenges; and successes.

MEET THE COACHES

Adam Wiseman is the Innovation and Digital Learning Coordinator (IDLC) in McDowell County Schools. Adam has over 15 years of experience with 10 of those years being a teacher in the elementary classroom and five as an IDLC. He loves to share his passion of technology and encourage/empower others to use it purposefully both in and out of the educational environment. You can find him on Twitter at @awisemannnc.

Alicia Ray is the Lead Digital Learning and Media Innovation Facilitator for Surry County Schools in northwestern North Carolina. Alicia has 12 years of experience. She enjoys infusing her love of technology and her love of reading to empower students and teachers through engaging, relevant experiences. You can find her on Twitter at @iluveducating and on her blog at aliciaray.com.

Holly King is the Dare to Innovate Lead and secondary science instructor in Dare County Schools, on the east coast of North Carolina. Holly has 22 years of experience. She loves weaving technology into professional development opportunities for teachers and science content for students to encourage collaboration, enhance communication, and build leadership capacity. You can find her on Twitter at @hollysking and on her blog at hollysking.com.

Marli Boyd is a Media Coordinator in Cabarrus County Schools just outside of Charlotte, North Carolina. Marli has four years of experience. She loves connecting with her teachers to find unique ways to collaborate and meet their professional development needs, as well as finding innovative ways to adapt technology for her K-2 students. You can find her on Twitter at @librarianmarli.
BUILDING CAPACITY

All four of these educators participated in the North Carolina Digital Leaders Coaching Network (NCDLCN) which provides instructional technologists, instructional coaches, mentor teachers, and media coordinators with ongoing and job-embedded professional learning opportunities to build capacity in digital and personalized learning. All coaches interviewed agreed that the NCDLCN was a key driver in their ability to facilitate the kinds of positive, generative relationships that lead to the kinds of trust needed to change instructional practice.

NCDLCN Overall Results by Coach

Marli
- How to be a coach
- Difference between teaching and coaching
- As a young teacher, NCDLCN empowered me and taught me how to teach adults through coaching.

Holly
- Time and space to develop as a coach
- Support from leadership
- Teachers value that I am eager to learn how to be a better coach, making me more approachable.

Alicia
- Catalyst for growth over four years
- Paradigm for Professional Development
- I know that what I learned has truly impacted our school and I can’t get that type of professional development anywhere else.

Adam
- Confidence and courage
- Network across state
- I am ever evolving as an effective coach because of NCDLCN.
COMMON THEMES OF EFFECTIVE COACHES

In addition to learning about our instructional coaches’ experiences in the NCDLCN where educators acquire strategies and knowledge related to best practices in leadership and coaching, interviewees’ provided insight on how they implemented what they learned and how their role as a coach evolved. Our interviews and research revealed four common themes of effective coaches:

- Learn to Identify as a Coach
- Partner with Teachers
- Advocate for Innovative Teaching Practices
- Foster a Professional Learning network

LEARN TO IDENTIFY AS A COACH

Instructional coaches not only hold many titles, they also follow different paths to their coaching role—most of which stem from a prior (or current) role as a classroom teacher. The shift to coaching is more often “trial-by-fire” than seamless transition, driven by a change in title, responsibility, or both. As teachers transition to coaches, they can experience identity issues; specifically, learning to understand their role as a coach.

- Are they responsible for curriculum writing?
- Do they have a separate office or meet with teachers in classrooms?
- Are they modeling innovative instructional practices?
- What does accountability look like for a coach?

Consequently, coaches are often responsible for a self-directed role creation within their school. Some coaches are in the classroom working closely with teachers on a regular basis; others are lead teachers who coach teachers on implementing technology tools into their instructional practice; and yet, other coaches are providing periodic coaching opportunities for teachers. Reporting relationships can also complicate the role of a coach. Some coaches operate within a dual-leader environment where they report directly to a principal or other building-level administrator; however, they receive professional guidance and direction from a district-level administrator. These kinds of relationships can create tension when building-level and district-level administrators have different priorities. To complicate matters further, many instructional coaches do not have role alike colleagues in their school to collaborate with and learn from. Isolation and ambiguity coupled together can be a significant barrier to one’s confidence in their ability to effectively coach. All of these factors make it difficult to know what a coach is, especially if you haven’t traditionally thought of yourself as a coach.

In our experiences through the NCDLCN, coaches articulated the importance of developing their own identity and confidence as a coach. Not surprisingly, a theme that emerges across coaches is the need for a safe place and time to develop their own identity as an instructional coach.
In Action: How do you identify as a coach?

Example

Alicia Ray, the Lead Digital Learning and Media Innovation Facilitator for Surry County Schools in northwestern North Carolina, followed a different path to her current coaching role. She has seen a lot change in her 12 years in education, from overhead transparency carts and erasable markers to a 1:1 environment that combines Chromebooks and student-owned “BYOD” (Bring Your Own Device) devices. Her role has also seen tremendous change, moving from a 5th grade math classroom to a middle school library where she worked with teachers to develop and implement new ideas and finally to coaching at the school level and supporting more than one school then piloting a mentoring role at the district level. As a new media coordinator, Alicia felt well prepared with pedagogical knowledge and a wide repertoire of tools to enhance instruction, but she was unsure of how to best approach sharing what she knew with colleagues in her school. She was seeking time and space to adjust and learn what it meant to her to be an instructional coach. Alicia drew on support from her mentors and also sought out professional learning on instructional coaching through the NCDLCN, conferences, and her growing professional learning network (PLN). Throughout the years following her transition to the media center she focused on understanding what she expected of herself as a coach and what she might accomplish if she took some risks, nudging the teachers she worked with to try small scale changes that could improve teaching and learning. As Alicia grew in confidence and identity as a coach in her media coordinator role, she began to advocate for the district level coaching role. The role which she is currently piloting allows her to work with newly instated Innovation Facilitators and media coordinators across Surry County to continuously improve instruction. Alicia has developed a core group of teachers that she works with regularly, enabling them to each idea-share with their respective teaching groups to continue to build momentum and spread best practices throughout the building.

Marli Boyd, a media coordinator in Cabarrus County Schools just outside of Charlotte, NC, remarks that two schools in her county are re-writing the media coordinator/librarian job description and getting rid of the term “librarian”. Although some of her peers are stressed because they worry about their job security as a librarian/media coordinator, Marli states that the title change “really doesn’t bother me. I read the job description and it is a lot of what I already do. We have to be flexible as our roles change.” As a media coordinator, part of her role is to help students learn to think critically and to coach teachers. Marli has found that the one-on-one approach with teachers is an effective way to make a connection and help them take the first step in trying new pedagogy.

CHALLENGES

• Lack of training for coaches
• Difficult to develop your own identity as a coach
• Transitioning from a teacher to a coach
• Dual reporting relationships
• Lack of peers in the building
PARTNER WITH TEACHERS: COLLABORATIVE INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING

As coaches work with teachers, it’s not uncommon to find lesson plans, classroom-style learning environments, and even “homework” as accessible metaphors for learning that is blended with strong instructional, pedagogical practices. Coaches know that professional learning can’t be something done to you, it’s done with you in an act of co-creation. Coaches work with teachers to help them identify areas of growth and facilitate actionable strategies to implement learning into their practice. Coaches model the possibilities with innovative delivery options, including digital tools and applications. Modeling can help change preconceived negative perceptions about the level of effort needed for implementing digital tools for instruction. Coaches support existing curricular objectives through co-teaching; modeling and encouragement. Coaches provide job embedded real-time professional learning in the classroom with teachers as active participants in the process.

In Action: What does collaborative instructional coaching look like?

Example

Holly King, a lead teacher in Dare County Schools, on the east coast of North Carolina, recently hosted an “innovative classroom” inviting other teachers in her school to observe as she demonstrated pedagogical strategies during class. Holly notes that her district does not have any “titled” coaches, but her role as lead teacher afforded her the opportunity to interact and influence dozens of teachers in her school. While Holly does not formally hold the title of coach, her responsibilities as a teacher leader have expanded to encompass adult learning across her school. She has utilized this opportunity to create new professional learning experiences, develop new blended learning models, lead staff book studies, facilitate in-district Twitter chats, and coach teachers as they integrate a slew of new technology tools into their instruction. The district embraced this blended professional development model which began at the building-level and is currently supporting it as it scales to a district-level model for virtual professional development. She created a blended learning environment and facilitated learning walks so that teachers can learn face-to-face and online by physically visiting other classrooms to see best practices in action. Holly notes that in 2017-2018, 82% of the teachers in her building participated in blended learning modules that focused on effectively integrating technology tools into the learning environment. Holly does this all while still teaching middle and high school science classes. Additionally, by focusing on appropriate scaffolding, Holly can amplify the positives of each teacher so that the best ideas permeate the entire building. One of the ways she’s been able to do this is by encouraging teachers to share and collaborate with each other and not just with her. This kind of ‘open-door’ professional learning cultivates a culture of openness and sharing, lending itself to generate conversations between colleagues about ideas to try in their next unit. The blended modules and learning walks have provided just in time, job-embedded support. Teachers may use a tool in a way no one has ever used before. When they take ownership of the tool to meet the specific needs of their students in that moment for that

CHALLENGE

Meeting the varied and changing learning needs of educators is one of the primary functions of an instructional coach.
content, “we are building teacher capacity”, says Holly. This kind of ‘flat sharing’ enables teachers to also be co-learners while validating the efforts of teachers who took risks in trying new ideas in their classrooms.

Holly considers herself fortunate to have the opportunity to continue her work as a classroom teacher, while also expanding her role by working with teachers across her school to continuously improve teaching and learning. Coaches like Holly echo appreciation for the acknowledgement of their work and the leadership opportunity offered by their school/district through a new role, but do not always feel sufficiently prepared to transition to support adult learning. Holly notes that great teachers are not inherently great coaches and that they need professional training to learn how to become an effective coach. She recommends that coaches “seek understanding… how to communicate well isn’t taught in education programs.” Instructional coaches need training and modeling to understand what coaching looks like in the school. As a lead teacher, Holly’s building leadership team understands that ongoing learning is needed to take on this new role and supports her participation in the NCDLCN program to give her the time and space she needs to develop as a coach. Holly has embraced the role of a coach and continues to seek out opportunities to grow as both a teacher and a coach.

All of the coaches interviewed talked about the importance of developing strong working relationships with peer teachers. “They’ll roll their eyes when you walk in,” Alicia notes, “but don’t take things personally. It’s human nature to resist change.” Reflecting on her personal development as a coach, she notes that the most important thing along the way was relationships. Relationships that provided support for her to push the envelope and relationships that she developed with the teachers she works with to allow them to feel supported in taking risks alongside her. In these times, Alicia relies on her district-level Director, Lucas Gillispie, for support. “Lucas is in my corner to try something different,” she says, “like a safety net if something goes wrong.” Alicia uses Lucas’ model of being a capacity-building leader and “wants to be a Lucas for my teachers.”

**LEADERSHIP: LEVERAGING THE ROLE OF COACHES**

The quality and intentionality of school-based leadership varies widely from one building to the next. Depending on the culture, the role of coaches to gain buy-in for changes, foster a common vision for teaching and learning, and remove barriers to shift to a more personalized learning environment varies. Flexibility and creativity are required as many coaches are charged with leading change without any formal authority. As agents of change in our schools, coaches must not only leverage the strengths of school leadership, they must also develop and utilize sophisticated leadership skills that take time and reflection to improve. Coaches are often charged with “leading from the middle” by motivating teachers and leaders to change, modeling the expected change, adapting along the way, and developing systems and structures that make changes both accessible and sustainable. But there’s no denying it: it’s difficult to
change instructional practice. It takes time, trust, and tremendous amounts of practice with just-in-time, embedded feedback, according to Joyce & Showers (1995, 2002). It’s more than just new ideas or even new examples to follow, teachers need coaching. This means one-on-one, face-to-face conversations with teachers to help them practice and improve.

In Action: How do coaches show leadership?

Example

Shifting the Culture

Adam Wiseman, a Digital Learning and Innovation Specialist in McDowell County Schools, spent ten years as an elementary teacher before stepping into his current role at the high school level. He works closely with the media coordinator in his school to create new kinds of learning for the teachers he serves. Adam works to shift the culture of his high school by using the media center to drive change. Adam’s vision is to create an active, collaborative space in the school where students would choose to go. He started with small changes like introducing flexible seating options, new lighting configurations, and renaming it from ‘media center’ to ‘innovation arena’. He also prioritized items within the budget to facilitate the addition of 3D printers and other technologies that aren’t yet available for every classroom. However, his vision isn’t just to create a cool hangout spot, it is to create the kind of environment where curiosity and creativity feel at home and where students can pursue learning that is meaningful. He is hopeful that modeling this different approach to learning will spark new questions and push teachers’ thinking about what’s possible. Adam has worked to use a common space as a hub to show off the work students are doing. His main focus right now is making sure he is promoting his innovation arena as a safe place for teachers to see the work of other students and begin wondering how they might utilize those ideas in their own classrooms. Rather than trying to “push into” classrooms with ideas, he’d rather draw teachers out and let them see firsthand what students can do when teachers are willing to try something new. Adam leads from the middle by advocating for less conventional priorities in the budget, while also modeling the possibilities and fostering an open and engaging culture for teachers and students. Adam’s motto for the innovation center is “Where creativity, learning, innovation, and collaboration come to life!”

Dispelling Myths: Creating Innovative Instructional Practices

Marli Boyd, a media coordinator in Cabarrus County Schools just outside of Charlotte, NC, acknowledges that leadership isn’t just something someone else does. Many districts lack the funding or the flexibility to create formal coaching roles; so it’s incumbent upon teachers to recognize and then take advantage of the opportunities at their schools to demonstrate leadership. Successful coaches know that leadership is a mindset, not an activity. To this end, Marli is constantly working to confound expectations, stepping up and implementing...
new instructional ideas on a regular basis. She is taking on the “librarian stereotype” as the quiet bookworm who shushes people. In fact, her library frequently prompts teachers to ask, “what’s all the noise?” and “what’s going on?” She’s proud of the title librarian, but she’s also actively working to change expectations about what a librarian does in a school. As part of her space, she wants her elementary-age students to know that it isn’t her space, it’s their space. “Teaching kids to be more autonomous and to own the library,” she says, “is a big deal for me”. And she’s not just using the library as a means to connect with students, she’s supporting teachers as well. When the kindergarten was working through a nontraditional measurement unit, she saw an opportunity. She would have her students read a nonfiction book about giant squid, lay out tape on the floor to show the size of the squid, and then have students measure the length in units of “kindergarteners.” In doing so, she’s able to reset expectations for what’s possible in the library to support student learning beyond the value of reading books. Marli leads and coaches by taking on a flexible role based on the needs of the teachers she works with and makes herself approachable to help teachers with anything they need. “I try to be wherever the teachers need me to be, even if it’s just another pair of adult hands in the room,” she remarks. Marli knows that teaching teachers is a key part of the role of the media coordinator. She has implemented “Appy Hour” to give teachers a space to have these conversations outside of their normal daily routine. And, of course, she provides snacks.

**Driving Systemic Change in Pedagogy**

Alicia has used her own growth as an educator as a template for understanding the path other teachers might take in their own development. As she began to explore new ideas, she noticed her pedagogy changing. She did away with rows-and-columns seating arrangement. Her lessons began expanding beyond the walls of her classroom including one of the district’s first classroom uses of Skype to connect with other students, educators, and even professionals from other industries. These small-scale experiments serve as prototypes that can be piloted with other teachers and gradually rolled out to willing participants in a way that facilitates cultural change within the building but also cultivates professional growth in educators as they begin stepping outside of their comfort zone. This slower, more methodical approach to instructional innovation lowers the barrier to entry for teachers who might otherwise be uncomfortable with such technological leaps and would prefer to see how it plays out in other classrooms before experimenting themselves. Additionally, it positions Alicia as a supportive leader and not a wild-eyed radical, as might be the case if she delivered sweeping demands for how all educators should be using technology in the classroom. She is quick, however, to point out how important it is to know your staff and to value the various levels of experience they bring to your building. Newer teachers might have the technology skills, she reflects, but they could learn some key pedagogical practices from the veterans in their building and vice versa!
FOSTER A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING NETWORK

Coaching is as much an art as science. Available coaching strategies are as numerous and varied as the coaches themselves. Coaching – seeing teachers as co-learners. The underlying core value of lifelong learning will manifest itself differently for each of these coaches, but it informs their practice and facilitates their growth and development not just in their role, but for the teachers they serve. By cultivating a strong network for professional learning, these coaches are tapping into the collective wisdom and practice of coaches across the nation. They’re able to take these ideas and try them in their own contexts and then share back with their results, thus facilitating more growth and development in their peers. This cycle of improvement drives the profession forward in addition to supporting coaches who, like each of the four highlighted here, may not be given a handbook on exactly what being a “coach” is really about. And just as the coaches see themselves as learners, they bring this spirit to the teachers they work with, consistently working to increase agency in the process of learning for teachers. Put simply, coaches work with teachers building the mindset and opportunity to pursue learning for themselves. One thing all four of these coaches agree upon, however, is the role and power of being a lifelong learner with a strong professional learning network.

Key Driver
The NCDLCN is a key driver in their ability to facilitate the kinds of positive, generative relationships that lead to the kinds of trust needed to change instructional practice.

In Action: What does a professional learning network encompass?

Example

Holly references the network of peers and mentors she’s built relationships with via Twitter and Voxer (a voice-based asynchronous chat app). Alicia points to the NCDLCN and the like-minded coaches she’s been able to grow with. For Adam, the NCDLCN helped him prepare for resistant teachers and provided actionable strategies to incorporate into professional learning experiences. And Marli notes how important it is to not only have your own PLN, but to actively facilitate others’ development of their own networks. Marli hopes that she can model the kind of network that is available to her teachers as well. She wants them to take advantage of the opportunities afforded her but also to build on them. And to do this, she ties it all back to teacher support. She wants them to just take the first step and she’ll help them along the way. Adam echoes this sentiment. He wants to show teachers what’s possible and spark their curiosity about what they might pursue in their own classrooms as well as possible collaborations with him.

It’s a spiderweb that helps with change and reflection.

–Marli Boyd on PLN

Adam, Alicia, Holly, and Marli have provided a window into their development as a coach that included successes, struggles, and strategies that supported both their personal growth and impact as a coach. This insight highlights commonalities in their schools and districts that allowed
them to be an effective coach. The following themes emerged as fundamental supports in leveraging the role of instructional coaches:

- Identify roles and responsibilities for coaches
- Recognize your coaches as an integral part of the instructional team
- Inspire coaches to become school leaders
- Encourage coaches to join professional learning networks

REFERENCES
