



## R3 Framework Evaluation Brief: Becoming a Coaching Leader

May 2024

Prepared by Measurement Incorporated

Over the past ten years, Pitt County Schools (PCS) has implemented its *R3 Framework: Recruit, Retain and Reward* initiative that focuses on empowering, supporting, and developing teacher and school leaders within its schools and across the district.<sup>1</sup> This work is centered around building a culture of coaching that promotes trust, collaboration, and self-directed growth in individuals. It began with district-level Career Pathway Specialists (CPSs), who were trained in various coaching strategies, including Cognitive Coaching<sup>SM</sup> and Adaptive Schools<sup>SM</sup>.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, CPSs provide coaching support to teachers who are filling an Advanced Teacher Role (ATR) as part of the district's Career Pathway Model for teacher leadership.

More recently, the district has expanded the coaching culture by providing training to all principals and assistant principals in the *Becoming a Coaching Leader* (BACL) program, which is based on the similarly titled book written by Daniel Harkavy (Harkavy, 2007). Harkavy is the CEO and founder of Building Champions, which is an organization that provides coaching services to leaders and organizations to support growth and success. The BACL program in PCS consists of three days of training, with coaching provided between days 2 and 3, to support participants in applying the strategies in their practice. The six key topics covered in the training were: Employee Engagement, Mindset of a Coaching Leader, Developing Your Coaching Skills, Focusing Your Efforts through Four Conversations, Building Your Structure, and Taking Action. Participants have access to ongoing coaching support from two members of the DEEL office who are certified in the program. Over the past two years, 57 principals and assistant principals have participated in the program.

This edition of the *R3 Framework Evaluation Brief* focuses on the coaching relationship between principals who participated in BACL and the teachers whom they coached during the 2022-23 or 2023-24 school year. Evaluative information was gathered by two Measurement Incorporated field researchers who visited three schools in March: one elementary, one middle, and one high school. During their visit, the researchers interviewed the BACL-trained principal and conducted

---

<sup>1</sup> With the support of federal grants, including Teacher Incentive Fund and Teacher School Leader Grant and state funding from the Teacher Compensation Model grant.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.thinkingcollaborative.com/aboutcc>

focus groups with four teachers.<sup>3</sup> The interviews and focus group discussions were guided by the following research questions.

- What were the key features of the coaching relationship?
- How did coaching impact educators (teachers) and principals?

This Evaluation Brief presents the main findings that emerged from a qualitative analysis of the interviews and focus groups.<sup>4</sup>

### **What were the key features of the coaching relationship?**

Three central themes surfaced when teachers and principals were asked to describe their coaching relationship.

- Creating a personal connection was central to ensuring trust in the coaching relationship.
- Communication was tailored to the individual needs and interaction styles of the coachees.
- Accountability coupled with support was critical to the coachee's self-reflection and growth.

Each theme is discussed below.

#### *Creating a personal connection was central to ensuring trust in the coaching relationship.*

By and large, teachers felt that the opportunities to connect with their coaching leader helped to build trust so they could speak more candidly about their goals, pain points, and successes. As one teacher said, "I felt that [the coaching leader's] feedback was genuine because we knew each other more as people; he really wanted me to grow, and it helped me and our students. There was a focus on positive reinforcement but also the feedback to improve."

Another teacher stated, "There is no judgment - it's very comfortable, [the coaching leader] is comfortable expressing herself and so am I. We spent a lot of time talking about other lives. I think it really made a difference in our relationship and my growth because we understood one another and could be honest."

Several teachers also talked about the importance of feeling seen and heard by their coaching leader, which helped to build trust. Their comments are bulleted below.

- "I have worked with so many different administrators. All have been very different. [My coaching leader] sees me and understands me. She makes me feel important."
- "I feel like she sees me as a whole person and not just a person in the building. That's how our students feel too - they want us to see them as a whole person."

---

<sup>3</sup> Two assistant principals were also interviewed at one of the schools but did not speak directly about the coaching they received.

<sup>4</sup> Responses in the transcripts were classified by emerging themes related to the research questions.

- “He is only one person, and there are so many of us, so it’s hard to find a time to sit down and actually talk like that - 20/30 minutes. I appreciated the undivided attention and I appreciate being heard.”

In his book, *Becoming a Coaching Leader*, Harkavy identifies *discernment*—the ability to determine the motives or challenges that others are experiencing—as one of the core competencies of a coaching leader. According to Harkavy, the more a coach gets to know their people, the more they can connect with them “at a heart level” which helps to see what’s under the surface, including the obstacles to growth (pp. 39-43). Good coaching is designed to end with the coachee taking ownership of their growth and this is made possible through discovery and discernment.

The personal connections were beneficial to principals as well. One principal commented that, “As a principal, you don’t have a ground level view, so getting to know people helps. The coaching helps to keep me grounded... This is a people-oriented business. I don’t want to lose the fact that they are people, working with kids, trying their best.”

One of his (the principal’s) teachers added, “I helped him understand why my performance might have been impacted by my insecurities. All of the Beginning Teachers are young, and it opened his eyes to our struggles.”

Similarly, another principal spoke about the benefits of understanding people’s motives, stating, “Most of the time, people want to be able to explain their why. And sometimes we can all learn from it because maybe they have a better way. I’m willing to try something new, too.”

*Communication was tailored to the individual needs and interaction styles of the coachees.*

“Leadership starts with seeing people as human beings and coaching them according to their needs,” said one principal. “People want to be responded to in different ways. Some need to start at the place of well-being while others want to get right to the work. We identify who needs the pat on the back and who doesn’t feel comfortable being recognized. We let them be human and be who they are, and we find ways to connect with them.”

For example, one principal talked about his process for discerning areas of focus based on conversations he has with teachers. “We start with a well-being check-in because it is the place where most of them need to start. I will start with something like, ‘what would be beneficial to discuss today?’ Then we move on to what an ideal week looks like and how that aligns with their current reality. It helps them to think about how they are spending their time and what might be getting in the way of their ideal week.” According to this principal, he has seen growth in his teachers’ self-efficacy through the coaching conversations.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> This principal administered a self-efficacy survey before and after coaching sessions and found significant improvement in teachers’ ratings.

Similarly, another principal shared how she selected her teachers and applied concepts from the BACL program to differentiate her support. “I selected a newer teacher and a veteran because while they were different, they both had potential for being leaders...One wanted to work on the tone and delivery of her communication. The other teacher wanted to work on providing instructional support to others. Because I already had established relationships with them in prior years, we were able to get right into the goal setting.” She went on to say that her coaching conversations typically involved talking through various interactions with teachers who they were mentoring. “I would share my experiences and then ask them how they would have responded. For one of my teachers, we talked about making a plan to be better prepared for what may come up in her conversation with others. We would go over things like, ‘What are you going to say if they say this.’ We did some role playing.”

According to the principals, the BACL program helped them to learn about the various ways that people naturally operate and how they might respond in different environments. Understanding how people tend to act, communicate, and respond helped the principals adjust their communication to better engage with the teachers they coached. In his book, Harkavy points out, “The mission of a coaching leader is to meet his teammates where they are in order to move them forward” (pp. 36). He further explains that the coaching leader assumes responsibility for making that connection, rather than expecting the coachee to figure out the communication style of the coaching leader.

From their point of view, the teachers appreciated the attention paid to their needs and learning styles. One teacher stated, “My favorite part of the coaching was the goal setting and the adaptability of it. I like that we could move on or evolve my goals...My goals have changed a lot, but I’ve changed too and so have my circumstances, so we’ve had to adjust...I tend to be rigid in my schedule, so going backward was difficult for me because it interrupted the schedule, but [my principal] coached me through it...I’m also the type of person who needs to be Voluntold to take on leadership roles. She helped me think about leadership roles that I hadn’t considered without telling me I had to. I figured out what was holding me back.”

*Accountability coupled with support was critical to the coachee’s self-reflection and growth.*

“When something is off or needs attending, I will start with something like, ‘this is what I’m seeing. Tell me what is going on,’” said one principal regarding his approach to addressing feedback to his staff. “I like to ask a lot of questions because it helps them to think through their process and understanding. I know that it makes them feel uncomfortable, but I want them to be thinkers and to reflect. We need to hear their why and then decide how to put them back on track. And do it with them. We always end with a solution or support. ‘Here is something that you can do.’ We don’t want to leave people feeling unsupported.”

This principal’s example speaks to the heart of the BACL program’s valuing of accountability. According to Harkavy, good coaching leaders point out when “behaviors are incongruent with the convictions or the values you identified” (pp. 169). When there is trust in the relationship, coachees know that the coach has their best interests at heart. The coaching leader wants them

to succeed and is willing to address blind spots or misconceptions that are preventing people from meeting their goals.

The teachers appreciated the ways in which their principals offered grace and support but also held them accountable. Put by one teacher, “Sometimes you need someone to call it out before you see it yourself.”

Another teacher said, “She sees me and understands me and knows how to talk to me. I have a hard time trusting people, but I trust her. It’s not a gotcha. If she sees me struggling with something, she’ll ask ‘What do you think happened here? Does your perception match up with what was said in an email, for example.’ She is also very positive, she’ll send me an email at night and say something like, you did a great job with that email. I really appreciate the acknowledgements, too.”

When thinking about the principal’s feedback, another teacher stated, “He took notes and always remembered everything about me. When we had our sessions, he would start with ‘Last time you were talking about this, where are we at with it?’ Then he would also do a check-in in my classroom.” She went on to say, “He provides consistent feedback but always asks how he can help. He does walk throughs regularly. That’s not something that really happened in the past - that accountability wasn’t there in previous years with our previous administrator. I do believe the captain of the ship has a big effect, our leader affects us, and we affect the kids.”

### **How did coaching impact educators (teachers) and principals?**

The coaching relationship had positive impacts on both the teachers and the principals. Specifically, several teachers talked about changes in their confidence to lead. For example, one teacher said, “I co-chair the climate committee and I’m the tech support person for my grade level. I would not have felt confident enough to do these things without [coaching from my principal] to do the baby steps first. Now, I want to do National Board and eventually take over the Beginning Teacher program at my school. He has really encouraged me to step out of my comfort zone, do the things that make me uncomfortable, to make me a better leader to others and in the classroom.”

Another teacher assumed the role of Exceptional Children Contact Lead this year. She said, “The whole team is [comprised of] brand new teachers. If anyone had even jokingly asked me to do this last year, I would have said no. This year, I thought about it for a couple of days, and talked through it with [my principal] and I decided to step up. I’ve gotten more OK with saying, ‘I don’t know the answer, but we will find it together’ and then reaching out to someone higher than me to help. Leading doesn’t mean that you must have all the answers. I see that now.”

One teacher talked about multiple changes in her perceptions and interactions with others. “I’ve seen a huge change in myself...[My principal] has been working with me on positive self-talk, a lot of the time it’s been reflecting on my reactions to things. A lot of it is looking at myself and the growth within myself. I can do a lot in this building...I need to take that leadership and apply it in

a way that's more positive and impacts more people, that's my goal." She went on to say, "I used to be louder, and I've changed the way I talk to students. I've been thinking of my tone a lot. It's about trying to make a connection. This is their home for a lot of days and hours. They need to feel connected. We brought back positive referrals. I make a point of writing one for every 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grader even if they don't know me. I also had no wait time in my response to my colleagues before. Before I would be critical. It's been a habit for so long. Now before I respond, I think about it for 24 hours. If it's still bothering my spirit, I will address it. I would explain my why, this is what I'm feeling. Sometimes I'll send it to [my principal] to review. She gives me positive solutions."

The principals talked about how they changed their approach to working with teachers. For example, one principal said, "I learned that I'm a fixer. I want to go straight to providing a solution. I learned that I need to let people go through the process. I am there to support them when they need it. I will observe their process so that I know where I might be able to support. Then I can ask questions."

Another principal added, "It has helped me coach adults better — to make that jump from teaching kids to teaching adults. The question stems and the crucial conversations—using those strategies has helped me to work with adults."

Several principals also discussed the impact of coaching on their school. For one principal, she has been able to spread her leadership, stating, "I realized that I was spread too thin. Now I have quality time with two people and the indirect effect is that they are working with BTs and they are helping me. We turnkey the leadership. I can't spend 45 minutes with the BTs, so they are both pouring into BT teachers. Now I have leaders to help do that - that's been the most rewarding."

Another principal spoke about how coaching helped to set expectations and consistency in their approach to relationship building throughout the school. "Our plan to build relationships is strategic and intentional because we focus on building consistency. Consistency is a focus of our SIT (School Improvement Team). We want everyone to be approaching the work and the focus on relationship-building in the same way. We hold each other accountable for being on the same page. We want students to understand that all staff in the building are working for them. In our building, kids respect the instructions from any adult, title doesn't matter. Even the custodian calls out misbehaviors. When kids are from homes of poverty, they lack consistency, and they thrive with structure. This is what we are building."

## Conclusions

This edition of the *R3 Framework Evaluation Brief* presented key themes that emerged from interviews and focus groups with principals and teachers regarding their coaching relationship and its impact on them. The principals participated in BACL training and provided one-on-one coaching to the teachers, either during the 2022-2023 or the 2023-24 school year. The main findings gleaned from our data collection and analyses included the following.



- Creating a personal connection was central to ensuring trust in the coaching relationship.
- Communication was aligned to the individual needs and starting points of the coachees.
- Accountability coupled with support was critical to the coachee's self-reflection and growth.
- Teachers improved their level of confidence to serve in leadership roles and improved their interactions with peers and students.
- Principals improved their ability to support self-directed growth in the teachers.
- Coaching helped to grow teacher leaders in the schools and consistency in a schoolwide approach to building relationships with students.

While there is no commonly accepted definition of a coaching culture, most would agree that it is designed to create connectedness, collaboration, shared values in an organization, as well as self-directed growth and self-efficacy in individuals (Kapoutzis et al., 2024). These key concepts were evident in the three schools that participated in this study. They affirm a growing culture of coaching in the Pitt County Schools.

Before closing, it is worth mentioning several challenges identified by the principals. Specifically, the principals indicated that maintaining an ideal cadence for the coaching sessions was difficult. Ideally, the principals wanted to meet with their coachees every three weeks, but realistically, the range was three to five weeks. They felt that newly developed habits by teachers were more difficult to maintain when there were longer periods between sessions. On the other hand, maintaining a specific schedule was not always feasible due to the constant changes in schedules for both the principal and teachers.

Similarly, finding the time to attend training during the school year was a challenge. Administrators felt it was difficult to stay focused on the training with all their building responsibilities and they did not like leaving their buildings. They agreed that summer training was preferable.

In summary, these results paint a positive picture for the PCS coaching programs and its culture of coaching. Our next Evaluation Brief, to be published in July, will focus on another area of support that is provided to Beginning Teacher (BT) Mentors.

## References

Harkavy, D. (2007). *Becoming a coaching leader: The proven system for building your own team of champions*. HarperCollins Leadership.

Kapoutzis, N., Whiley, L. A., Yarker, J., & Lewis, R. (2024). Coaching culture: An evidence review and framework for future research and practice. *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, 17(1), 50–76.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17521882.2023.2250458>