Best Practice Report: How Districts and Schools Support Peer Coaching

The Puget Sound Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology (PSCTLT) launched the Teaching+Technology Coaching Initiative (T2CI) in the 2002-03 school year. T2CI supports a professional development model designed to enhance teacher practice through engaged learning and technology integration by training K-12 educators to serve as peer coaches in their schools.

The T2CI model is completing its third and final pilot year in four Washington state school districts: Edmonds, Mukilteo, Shoreline and Seattle. Over time, each of these districts tailored a unique implementation strategy to support its coaching program. In Year 3, the T2CI evaluation takes a look at the lessons learned from the peer coaching experience. This report describes exemplary practices at the district and building levels.

T2CI was initially funded by a U.S. Department of Education Technology Innovation Challenge Grant. The peer coaching curriculum is now being replicated in K-12 schools throughout the United States as the Microsoft Peer Coaching Program.

> *"Coaching is school-based professional development designed in light of the district's reform agenda and guided by the goal of meeting schools' specific instructional learning needs."*
>
> –Neufeld and Roper,
> **Coaching, A Strategy For Developing Instructional Capacity**

Peer coaching is an emerging professional development strategy whose potential is igniting excitement among educators. As one Washington principal noted: *"Coaching has broken down the age-old problem of teacher isolation. We have knowledge out there from conferences, meetings, and book study, but it is hard to get that knowledge into the classroom. On the other hand, sometimes when teachers have had special training, we have knowledge available in the classroom, but it doesn't flow out. Coaching completes a balanced spectrum of professional development."*

Coaching takes form in various structures–it may be used to spark overall school reforms or be focused on improving a specific academic area, such as math or literacy. In the case of T2CI, coaching enhances teaching practice by infusing technology-rich lessons into curriculum. Support from school leadership, particularly at the district and building level, is essential in developing and institutionalizing coaching programs. This report highlights exemplary practices in district and school support of peer coaching.

The mission of the Puget Sound Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology is to leverage the power of technology, diversity and leadership to transform teaching and learning.

Grant Partner District Coaching Programs: Selected Highlights

Edmonds School District

The Edmonds model is grounded in strong district-level engagement and oversight. The Instructional Technology Office allocates significant release time for coaching—10 days to each coach-teacher team— as well as additional planning time to embed the coaching focus in district academic initiatives. Edmonds has also funded a new central staff position, Technology Integration Specialist, whose role is to provide coach support. Coaches and collaborating teachers submit, to the Technology Integration Specialist, documentation of their goals, classroom activities, and how planning time is spent. All coaches are asked to commit to coaching for a minimum of three years. In the first year of T2CI, Edmonds had six coaches in five schools. By the end of the third year, there were 36 coaches in 20 schools

Shoreline School District

The Shoreline schools piloted a peer coaching model two years prior to the T2CI grant through an earlier initiative sponsored by PSCTLT and the U.S. Department of Education. Shoreline integrated lessons learned from this initial experience with the T2CI grant opportunity to expand and embed technology-related peer coaching district-wide. For example, Shoreline institutionalized the model by allocating district funds to support a half-time Technology Specialist, who functions as a peer coach, in every elementary school. The district also supports the T2CI model by directing federal funds for professional development and equipment to provide coaches with release time or hourly compensation, as well as laptop computers.

Seattle School District

Seattle is a strongly decentralized district, with primary decision making, including budget allocation, residing at the building level. The Office of Instructional Technology staff faced challenges in winning support for the project as they needed to recruit each participating school and coach individually. As a result, coaching impacts were school, but not district, driven. Despite these challenges, there were exemplary cases of individual principals and coaches who successfully engaged with the coaching model at the classroom or building level.

Mukilteo School District

Mukilteo also employs a centralized planning model to support peer coaching. Mukilteo constructed its T2CI coaching program on the foundation of two existing district initiatives. Prior to T2CI, the district had trained all Library Media Specialists (LMS) as technology leaders. Mukilteo capitalized on this earlier initiative by encouraging all LMS faculty to deepen their skills through T2CI coach training. As a result, technology integration coaching is now part of the LMS job description. Mukilteo allocated over $14,000 to ensure that every librarian received coach training; several received an extra year of advanced training. In addition, the district built on another technology-related initiative, a three-level, competency-based, professional development program. Classroom teachers who accomplished the highest level of this training were invited to participate in the coaching program. As a result, LMS and technology-proficient classroom teachers form a cadre of technology integration coaches throughout the Mukilteo district.

District and Building Best Practices

Successful programs explicitly linked peer coaching to stated school improvement plans, and built on the success of related endeavors. They seized opportunities to pursue an overall vision by combining resources from a variety of initiatives—school improvement block grants; technology-related programs sponsored by foundations, such as the Gates Teacher Leadership Project; or district technology levies. Some embraced the idea of coaching and expanded the concept through math or literacy coaching models.

Structure the Coaching

- Focus coaching efforts. For example, one district trained all Library Media Specialists as coaches; another requires that all coaching be linked to reading and math improvement.

- Assign multiple coaches to one school. This way, the coaches have their own built-in support network and the coaching has a wider impact in a school. Some chose to have a coach "go deep" by concentrating the coaching on one grade level or one subject area.

- Insure that coaching activities align with district goals, initiatives and priorities.

Supply Sufficient Time, Compensation, and Resources

- Provide funding for substitute time, or compensation for coaching teams to meet outside of regular hours. Some districts directed ESEA Title II A and D funds to provide equipment and release time for training and coaching. One district allocated funds that allow each coach-teacher team to meet for up to ten days, and teams can decide how to apportion these funds between substitute time or compensation for overtime.

- Offer coaches first priority for receiving resources such as technology hardware, or in attending technology-related workshops.

- Supply sufficient hardware, or access to hardware such as laptop carts, to coaches and collaborating teachers.

- Afford structured opportunities for coaches to share experiences and learn from peers. Continue these sessions as part of a second year of advanced coach training.

Instill Clear Expectations and Accountability

- Provide a clear orientation as part of the coach recruitment process. Present all expectations up front. Ensure that principals are engaged in the recruitment process and understand the coach and school responsibilities. One district convenes an informational meeting for prospective coaches and their principals. Handouts include a comprehensive packet with a calendar of training opportunities and forms required to document use of release time. All information and forms are also available on a "coaching support" district webpage.

- Instill accountability at both the coach and collaborating teacher levels. One district requires documentation of lessons implemented from both coaches and collaborating teachers.

- Request that coaches commit to coaching for a multiple year period.

Provide Support and Leadership

- Take responsibility at the district-level for assistance and oversight.

- Assign coaches to schools where the principal has a building-wide vision of how coaching fits into school goals over a several year period.

- Provide leadership opportunities for outstanding coaches.

- Keep communication lines open. In one district, the technology specialist copies all principals on e-mails to coaches, to ensure school leadership is in the communication loop.

- Build a coach support network. One district convened coaches, teachers and principals for a year-end celebration with presentations and story boards that described coaching efforts.

How Principals Support Peer Coaching

At exemplary coaching sites, principals described how they created a supportive coaching environment and built a climate of trust. They ensured positive building-wide communication about the endeavor by asking coaches to report at faculty meetings. Often, their stated school vision involved a collaborative environment and group decision making. In the T2CI model, principals are asked to attend one of the coaches' required training sessions held on a Saturday. Supportive principals went out of their way to mention the benefit of attending and learning together as a member of "their" team.

Set the Stage

- Support coaching as a building-wide professional development strategy, not just a strategy for learning to integrate technology. Embed coaching in the school improvement plan.

- Foster a culture where it is okay to ask for help. Some principals model being coached themselves.

- Take responsibility for framing how coaches and collaborating teachers approach their work. Set expectations about how closely coaching efforts will be tied to building goals and meeting standards.

Provide Depth at the School Level

- Use faculty meetings to promote coaching. At several schools, coaches are asked to take a few minutes to teach a new skill. At one high school, a group of coaches developed and performed a skit on coaching at a faculty meeting

- Embed coaching in the school culture. Encourage teachers to acquire coaching skills through whatever sources are available. In some districts, coach training is provided through leadership development efforts or specific math and reading reforms.

- Encourage faculty to experience both serving as a coach and being coached. At one school, a T2CI "coachee" is also the literacy coach.

- Communicate at every level. One principal promotes coaching through school-home communications, staff newsletters, PowerPoint presentations at faculty meetings, and through faculty committee communications.

Be Innovative with Time and Resources

- Go the extra mile to provide whatever is needed, whether it is flexible release time or equipment.

- Use scheduled staff meeting time for teachers to meet in collaborative groups. Hold full staff meetings less frequently.

- Use block grants creatively. One principal used most of a $6,000 grant to purchase substitute time for coaches and collaborating teachers to work together.

Insights from Principals

"It is the principal's responsibility to make sure people feel they can speak up."

"If you do want to make a difference, this work must be seen as part of work day. Sub time and pay honor their efforts."

"Some is my leadership style, a subliminal message that I encourage teachers to take a risk. I talk a lot about self-evaluation and lifelong learning."

quotes

District Support Matters

In year-end reports, coaches were asked to rate their satisfaction with district support of coaching. The chart below shows coach satisfaction with six types of district support. For each question item, the chart shows the following: overall mean; mean for the district where satisfaction was rated lowest; and mean for district where satisfaction was rated highest. Districts are not identified by name. In general, coach satisfaction with district support correlates positively with the amount of support provided.

> *The two people I coached knew they were supported and appreciated having someone close by to call on for suggestions. Because my support for them was also followed up with help from our district, they were willing to take more risks and try new things.*
>
> –T2CI Coach

Developing Teacher Leaders

Districts and schools have found ways to capitalize on the successes of their coaches. Several coaches have used their training as a springboard to positions 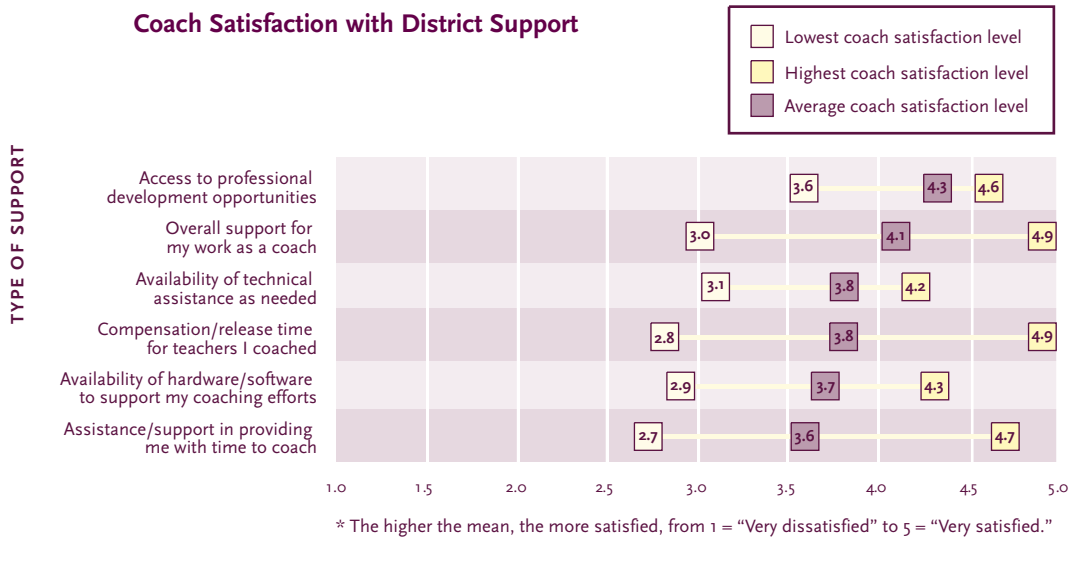of increased responsibility. For example, in the T2CI Year 2 progress report, 67% of coaches said they helped create or revise their school or district technology plan. Several collaborating teachers have signed up for further technology integration courses or to train as coaches themselves. Coaches have presented on their experiences at local and national conferences, and provided training to international education leaders.

> *"Enable some coaches to become 'coach leaders' "*
>
> –Neufeld and Roper, p. 14

In some cases, new positions have been created to take advantage of coaches newly acquired skills. At the district level, former coaches have been hired to provide technology integration support, or to conduct coach trainings. In one district, a high school teacher now conducts training for faculty at both of the district's high schools. In addition, several former coaches are now in positions where they are involved in developing and replicating this program on a national and international level. Others have noted that the experience led them to seek leadership training.

Coach Satisfaction with District Support

- ☐ Lowest coach satisfaction level
- ☐ Highest coach satisfaction level
- ▨ Average coach satisfaction level

TYPE OF SUPPORT

Type of Support	Lowest	Average	Highest
Access to professional development opportunities	3.6	4.3	4.6
Overall support for my work as a coach	3.0	4.1	4.9
Availability of technical assistance as needed	3.1	3.8	4.2
Compensation/release time for teachers I coached	2.8	3.8	4.9
Availability of hardware/software to support my coaching efforts	2.9	3.7	4.3
Assistance/support in providing me with time to coach	2.7	3.6	4.7

Scale: 1.0 1.5 2.0 2.5 3.0 3.5 4.0 4.5 5.0

* The higher the mean, the more satisfied, from 1 = "Very dissatisfied" to 5 = "Very satisfied."

District and School Support: What T2CI Coaches and Collaborating Teachers Say

quotes

"We also still have the wonderful help of our half-time Tech Specialist who helps all grade levels with tech integration. In addition, our school has been extremely lucky to receive 100 laptops as part of a district pilot. So, not only do teachers have the support of staff members with technology, we now have the hardware to support it as well. Students are now using technology for every subject and in ways that I can see they are benefiting from academically."

– T2CI Year 1 Coach, reflecting back
  a year after training

"Our school is still using the peer coaching model and this makes all the difference in continuing to offer support and help to the teachers. I don't see these sorts of projects succeeding without schools allowing time (for teachers to plan and meet) and money for buying the necessary tech stuff. We could have all the technology in the world and without knowing how to use it and being given help and support, ongoing, it wouldn't make this effective or positive."

– T2CI Collaborating Teacher

Further Resources

Other Reports in the Peer Coaching Evaluation Series
(all reports available at: http://www.pugetsoundcenter.org/t2ci/evaluation_b.html)

- T2CI Year One Evaluation Report Summary
- Changes in Technology Skills and Classroom Practices
- Impact of Coaching Time and Strategy on T2CI Teacher Outcomes

Information on T2CI and Coaching Resources

- Professional Development Coaching Research   http://www.pugetsoundcenter.org/t2ci/pcresearch
- Teaching+Technology Coaching Initiative   http://www.pugetsoundcenter.org/t2ci
- Microsoft Peer Coaching   http://pc.innovativeteachers.com

For information on T2CI contact:
Karen Peterson, Executive Director
Puget Sound Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology
Canyon Park Heights, 21540-30th Drive SE, Suite 310, Bothell, WA 98021-7015
425.368.1028, kpeterson@pugetsoundcenter.org

For information on the individual district initiatives contact:
Les Foltos, Director, K-12 Programs, lfoltos@pugetsoundcenter.org

This evaluation report was prepared by Carolyn Cohen, Project Evaluator. For more information on the evaluation, contact Carolyn Cohen, Cohen Research and Evaluation, 206.523.9296, cohenevaluation@seanet.com