

# Making Every Dollar Count: Districts Are Moving the Training Room Into the Classroom to Improve Teacher Skills and to Save Money

By: Bradley Williams



In Arizona, open quarrelling over whether schools are underfunded or overfunded may have reached a temporary impasse. Politicians and educators seem to be closer than ever to agreeing that increasing student academic performance is less about total dollars and more about return on dollars invested.

As one lawmaker put it, “We all want to support our schools. We also want to ensure that taxpayer dollars are generating the greatest bang for each buck.”

For most voters, the scenario is confusing. Each year, dozens of districts request support for tax overrides that fund new programs and purchase new tools for classrooms. Proponents cite research and promise the newly funded initiatives are key to quality education and will quickly increase test scores.

Then, year after year, statewide test scores are released showing little to no statistically significant change in student performance.

It’s much the same for many schools and districts across the country: more money spent on materials and training, yet lower student achievement. For districts serving low-income, minority and non-English speaking populations, the trends are even more severe.

Increasingly, voters and policy makers have been wanting more information about the amount of spending on education, and more pointedly, what student achievement results support the continuation of funding. But among site and district leaders a very different conversation is gaining ground that has been historically stifled.

## What can we actually do today about the differences in teacher quality that seem to consistently correlate to student achievement?

Indeed, as educators across the country analyze their local data, many find that the consistent trends in their students' overall achievement correlate directly with each teacher's individual strengths and weaknesses.

"The truth is," says one veteran principal, "I can tell you a lot about how successful a child will be at my school based on the teacher he or she is assigned. That is so hard for me to say, but it is the reality."

Another school leader paints a similar picture. "We may not be an "A" school," says another elementary school principal. "I would honestly be happy to tell families that we achieved a "B" label this year. But if I could enroll students consecutively in the classrooms of my five most skilled teachers, I know that we could rival the scores of any premier district or charter school in the state."



Though difficult to admit and uncomfortable to discuss with both teachers and parents, this analysis of individual teacher skills has brought about new hope and approaches to teacher development. In several forward-thinking schools and district, they look at teacher learning in many of the same ways highly skilled teachers view small-group student learning.

- Individualize teacher development based on specific skill needs
- Move staff development from theory in a training room to real-world application in a classroom
- Coach teachers in real time to adopt specific behaviors that improve student learning

This approach rejects the traditional theory and pattern of teacher development in favor of methods and funding that look more like those used in professions like law and

medicine. Instead of large capital investments in mass training and the purchase of new materials, these educational leaders are spending less and getting more.



Here in Arizona, a number of schools and districts have changed both the form and function of professional development by:

- Reducing or eliminating out-of-classroom trainings
- Shrinking the size of training groups based on diagnosed teacher needs
- Working with professional in-class coaches on specific skills and teacher behaviors

By grouping teachers based on diagnosed skill needs, professional development responds to an immediate area that can be improved for the benefit of students. And by structuring teacher learning within the context of a real classroom, the learning is more applicable and immediately useable.

It also saves money and increases the overall instructional minutes by reducing substantially the cost of substitute teachers typically needed for out of class trainings and eliminates the need for numerous early-release or weekend mass trainings.

The lynchpin for many of these schools and districts has been a fundamental change in how teachers are coached. Using a system known as *Performance-Based Coaching*, teachers work in real time with an expert external coach who acts much like an athletic coach, complete with direct feedback about their teaching that is designed to accelerate the correct implementation of new knowledge, methods and skills.

Unlike other coaching approaches that place heavy reliance on elaborate out-of-class discussions and complex scheduling, this type of coaching provides teachers with lots of in-class support to reach district- or site-established teaching priorities.

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As a byproduct, site and district leaders relate higher teacher engagement in their learning, more participation by administrators, and cost savings through minimized substitute teacher needs. Maybe most important, the coaching helps teachers learn and adjust their practices to more effectively deliver lessons based on the needs of their own students and the complexity of the Arizona College and Career Readiness Standards (AZCCRS).

“My teachers now work with an expert for more time in one week than I could possibly provide them in a year,” says a middle school principal. “And I can see the results immediately during and after each coaching session.”

Another principal relates that this approach to teacher learning has transformed professional development on her campus. “Teachers actually look forward to the coach visits because they know that every minute of their time is going to be spent working on how to provide better teaching to our own students. That is huge.”



Dr. Becky Henderson, principal of San Marcos Elementary in Chandler and recent winner of the Rodel Foundation Exemplary Principal Award,

asserts that traditional teacher learning models tend to inhibit the maximum effectiveness of teachers and schools, in addition to stifling the transformation of school culture, especially for low-achieving schools looking to improve.

“As a principal,” Henderson explains, “it has become increasingly important to find ways to help teachers become successful inside of the classroom. Long gone are the days when teachers could attend a four-hour seminar and implement a program with fidelity. This has nothing to do with the ability or willingness of teachers. Rather it has to do with the rigor that is expected in classrooms. Performance-based coaching is the only successful way to support teachers while learning new teaching methods. This impacts student learning immediately because teachers are not afraid to implement new skills.”

District leaders in Paradise Valley Unified School District have been impressed by the results across sites and grade levels. “Performance-based coaching is designed with the understanding that implementation of practices is expected and will be supported,” says Rita Tantillo, Director of Language Acquisition for the district. “Coaches and trainers consistently support teachers as they teach through systematic coaching methods, give real-time feedback, allow time for practice, and revisit. This cycle is repeated, and practices become routine as implementation is accelerated.”

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Annie Millar, a long-time district administrator and advocate for low-performing students in Northern California, believes that this approach significantly accelerates the learning curve for teachers.

“Our teachers have overwhelmingly embraced performance-based coaching,” Millar says. “In a survey of teachers’ experience with performance-based coaching, they indicated that continued coaching was one of their highest priorities. They look forward to being coached as a commitment to improving their instructional practices and to solidifying the implementation of our programs.”

Perhaps the school-funding debates will never fully subside, but the trend toward maximizing return on investment by moving teacher development into the classroom seems to be gaining steam.

And why not?

As educators and policy makers look to maximize resources, there is no better investment than teachers who feel supported and excited about learning new knowledge, methods and skills that positively impact student learning.