

ELENA AGUILAR 

# The *Art* of Coaching



Effective Strategies for  
School Transformation





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Effective Strategies  
for School Transformation

ELENA AGUILAR

**WILEY**

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# CONTENTS

## **Introduction**

**xi**

Coaching for Transformation • What Might a Transformed Education System Be Like? • One Purpose and Two Promises • Where I'm Coming from and Who This Book Is For • Summary of the Contents and How to Use This Book • A Couple Notes



---

## **PART ONE: FOUNDATIONS OF COACHING**      **1**

### **Chapter 1: How Can Coaching Transform Schools?**

**3**

A Story about What Coaching Can Do • What Will It Take to Transform Our Schools? • A New Tool Kit Based on Ancient Knowledge • What Can Coaching Do for a School? What Does the Research Say? • The Necessary Conditions • Speaking of Race • The Value of Coaching

**Chapter 2: What Is Coaching? 17**

A Story about a Coach Who Didn't Know What She Was • Why We Need a Definition • What Are the Different Coaching Models? • A Vision for Coaching • A Coach Who Knows Who She Is and Can Travel Back in Time

**Chapter 3: Which Beliefs Help a Coach Be More Effective? 33**

The Dangers of Unmonitored Beliefs • The Basics about Beliefs • Coaching Beliefs and Core Values • My Transformational Coaching Manifesto • Identifying and Using Your Coaching Beliefs

**Chapter 4: What Must a Coach Know? 45**

Introducing New Coaching Tools: Coaching Lenses • A Story about a Teacher Who Seems to Struggle with Classroom Management: Part 1 • A Story about a Teacher Who Seems to Struggle with Classroom Management: Part 2 • When Will I Use These Lenses?



**PART TWO: ESTABLISHING COACHING  
WITH A CLIENT 73**

**Chapter 5: Beginning a Coaching Relationship: How Do I Develop Trust with a Coachee? 75**

“Without Trust There Can Be No Coaching” • A Story about Trust • What Is Trust? • Useful Lenses for This Stage • Ten Steps to Building Trust • Assessing Levels of Trust • “The Thin Cord of Trust”

**Chapter 6: The Exploration Stage: What Do I Need to Know at the Outset? 97**

From the Edge of the Field • The Stage of Exploration • Useful Lenses for This Stage • Ten Steps in Exploration • Moving on to Planning

**Chapter 7: Developing a Work Plan: How Do I Determine What to Do? 119**

What Role Does a Work Plan Play? • Useful Lenses for This Stage • Developing a Work Plan • How Do I Use This Work Plan?





---

## PART THREE: THE COACHING DANCE 145

<b>Chapter 8: Listening and Questioning</b>	<b>147</b>
The Three Movements in the Coaching Dance • Listening in Transformational Coaching • Listening as a Vehicle for Whole-School Transformation • Questioning in Transformational Coaching	
<b>Chapter 9: Facilitative Coaching Conversations</b>	<b>163</b>
Coaching Conversations • Facilitative Coaching	
<b>Chapter 10: Facilitative Coaching Activities</b>	<b>175</b>
Engaging Clients in Learning Activities • Scaffolding the Learning • Facilitative Coaching Activities • Conclusion	
<b>Chapter 11: Directive Coaching Conversations</b>	<b>195</b>
When Is Directive Coaching Useful? • A Story about a Principal Who Needed a Directive Coaching Stance • Mental Models • The Confrontational Approach • The Informative Approach • The Prescriptive Approach • Coaching for Systems Change: Institutional Mind-Sets	
<b>Chapter 12: Directive Coaching Activities</b>	<b>211</b>
Further Engaging in Learning Activities • Observations • Conclusion	
<b>Chapter 13: Technical Tips and Habits of Mind</b>	<b>231</b>
Tricks of the Trade • Scheduling • Planning for a Coaching Conversation • The Arc of a Coaching Conversation • Logistics during a Conversation • Coach Responsibility during Conversation • Closing the Conversation • Conclusion	
<b>Chapter 14: Reflection and Assessment: What's Next?</b>	<b>247</b>
A Midyear Crisis • The Midyear and End-of-Year Reflection • Coaching for Systems Change	



---

## **PART FOUR: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR COACHES      265**

<b>Chapter 15: What Is Professional Development for Coaches?</b>	<b>267</b>
The Importance of a Team • Professional Development for Coaches • Developing Reflective Practices • Conclusion	
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>287</b>
A Final Story • The Road Ahead • Fearlessness and Faith	
<b>APPENDIX A: THE COACH'S OPTICAL REFRACTOR (THE COACHING LENSES)</b>	<b>291</b>
<b>APPENDIX B: COACHING SENTENCE STEMS</b>	<b>297</b>
Facilitative Coaching • Directive Coaching	
<b>APPENDIX C: TRANSFORMATIONAL COACHING RUBRIC</b>	<b>301</b>
<b>APPENDIX D: CHEAT SHEETS AND LISTS</b>	<b>307</b>
Essential Frameworks for Transformational Coaching • Coaching for Systems Change • Tips for Using Different Approaches • The Coaching Conversation • Five Steps for a Midyear or End-of-Year Reflection	
<b>APPENDIX E: RECOMMENDED RESOURCES</b>	<b>311</b>
<b>APPENDIX F: GLOSSARY</b>	<b>317</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</b>	<b>321</b>
<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>325</b>
<b>INDEX</b>	<b>329</b>
<b>ABOUT THE AUTHOR</b>	<b>339</b>

FOR MY MOTHER, LINDA,  
MY FIRST AND FINEST COACH



*“Another world is not only possible, she is on her way.  
On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.”*  
— Arundhati Roy (2003)





## INTRODUCTION

Some years ago, during a very difficult time in my coaching career, I was coached by Leslie Plettner, who was then with the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools, a nonprofit organization supporting school transformation. It was hard to describe what happened when we met for our sessions at a café, but I always left renewed and empowered, bursting with new understandings about myself and my work. Sometimes Leslie asked provocative questions, other times she guided me in looking at situations from a perspective I'd never considered, and often she pushed me to try something different in my work—I usually felt stretched, but supported; my coaching improved quickly. After a while, I realized that I could express my fears and expose my worst flaws, and Leslie would still believe in me and work with me. Leslie communicated an unconditional acceptance that I had never encountered in schools.

During the time I worked with her, I found it hard to identify what Leslie “did” as a coach. I couldn’t identify the specific “coaching moves” she made, I couldn’t figure out how she was thinking or how she made decisions about what to ask me. She was an amazing coach, and I wanted to be just like her.

In the following years, as my coaching practice developed, I explored the complicated processes that result in effective coaching and learned how to see the elements that made up Leslie’s coaching. This book is an attempt to make what goes on in an effective coach’s mind visible—to make a coach’s thoughts, beliefs, knowledge, core

values, and feelings explicit so that they can be replicated by others. Coaching is an art, and just as the process of producing a piece of art can be broken down, so can coaching.

Art is a useful metaphor to help us understand coaching. Consider, for example, just a sliver of what a visual artist must know in order to produce a painting: how the chemical elements in the mediums he's working with interact with each other, how they are affected by humidity, and the order in which they need to be applied. A musician plans a piece of music, then carefully crafts and rehearses it many times before it is performed. Although art may seem magical, sometimes effortless, and perhaps impossible to replicate, it requires scientific knowledge and skills and an ability to precisely use a range of available tools and materials. The end product may be a delightful surprise, different perhaps from the artist's original vision, but a great deal of intention, planning, thought, and knowledge lie deeply embedded within the outcome.

Coaching can be perceived as a mysterious process, but in fact it requires intention, a plan, and a lot of practice; it requires a knowledge of adult learning theory and an understanding of systems and communication. An effective coach must possess certain analytical capacities and an ability to think sequentially. Coaching, like creating art, requires intuitive capacities, an ability to see something that is not yet—but could be—in existence, and the willingness to surrender to the process and trust that a worthwhile product will emerge. Like any visual or performing art, coaching requires attention to detail as well as an appreciation for the whole, and an understanding that the artistry is in the process as well as the product.

Although a coach plans and applies a body of knowledge and skills, an artful coach also engages in the work creatively. Our education system is a heavy and serious place these days. The need to improve our schools is urgent. But when a coach taps into and harnesses creative energy, when the process is enjoyable, even fun, the end result is more likely to be transformational.

## COACHING FOR TRANSFORMATION

I coach for transformation—transformation of the adults with whom I work, the institutions in which they work, the lives of the children and communities they serve, and our society as a whole. I coach to help teachers, principals, central office administrators, and all educators transform their behaviors, beliefs, and being. The model of coaching that I propose holds transformation as the end goal; it also assumes that to meet this goal, the process must be transformational. Transformation describes both the destination and the journey.

*Transformation* is a term that is at risk of being overused and drained of meaning, so a definition is necessary here. The prefix *trans-* means across, on the other side of, beyond—where we are going is unknown and yet to be defined. A transformation is an end result almost unrecognizable from its previous form, a change so massive and complete, so thorough and comprehensive that until we are there, it is unimaginable. For example, mist transforms when it solidifies into an iceberg; a caterpillar transforms when it becomes a butterfly. How can we create something we can barely imagine? Working toward something unclear and ambiguous can be uncomfortable. This process of creation will require us to suspend our beliefs about whether or not it can be done and to forge onward, creating and transforming in spite of our own preconceptions. Transformation, of course, can be positive or negative. The assumption in my definition is that the destination is a tremendous, positive improvement over the current state.

Coaching that is practiced as an art is coaching that has the power to transform—to completely change the substance, appearance, and even essence of one thing into another. This can be a challenging craft, at first, for those who are goal oriented, driven by strategic plans, seeking benchmarks, and secure working in a sequential, linear progression. Goals and plans will be crucial for this journey, as long as they are guides and not dictators. However, transforming individuals, institutions, student experience, and our society will require a new set of tools and some new ways of being.

## WHAT MIGHT A TRANSFORMED EDUCATION SYSTEM BE LIKE?

I envision an education system that is equitable for all children. Because so many definitions are used for the term *equity*, I would like to share mine here.

In its most simplistic definition, *equity* means that every child gets what he or she needs in our schools—*every child*, regardless of where she comes from, what she looks like, who her parents are, what her temperament is, or what she shows up knowing or not knowing. Every child gets what she needs every day in order to have all the skills and tools that she needs to pursue whatever she wants after leaving our schools, and to lead a fulfilling life. Equity is about outcomes and experiences—for every child, every day.

An equitable education system, therefore, is one in which student achievement and learning are not predictable by race, class, language, gender, sexual orientation, or other such social factors. An equitable school system will be one in which

African American and Latino males do not constitute the largest groups of students who do not graduate from high school. Nor will English language learners with learning disabilities have the lowest passing scores on a high school exit exam, as they do currently in California. Equitable classrooms will be those in which boys are not routinely the students found in time-out chairs. According to a range of measurements including, but not limited to, standardized test scores and high school graduation rates, we will not be able to predict who will perform well in school. All students, regardless of family income levels, home zip codes, primary language, skin tone and gender, will have access to experiences, conditions, and support so that they can graduate from high school ready for college and careers.

This definition of equity is no small task. It describes a transformation that might be hard to imagine. It is this mind-set—that transformation is unimaginable, unattainable—that we must transform. The natural world abounds with transformation: life on Earth emerged from star dust! Human societies have undergone equally massive transformations. Consider the women’s suffrage movement in the United States, Mahatma Gandhi’s nonviolent resistance to British colonialism, and the end of apartheid in South Africa. We can transform our schools. It is possible.

In order to meet the needs of all students, we must also transform the experience for the adults who work in schools. Until we address the social, emotional, and learning needs of educators, we won’t be able to transform the experience for students. We can start by identifying the needs that teachers and administrators have, finding ways to meet those needs, and bringing groups of educators together in different ways. In this way, together and in healthy relationships with each other, we can explore solutions to current challenges and improve outcomes and experiences for kids. This is where coaching comes in. It is a holistic approach to working with people that incorporates an understanding of how institutions and systems impact experience and learning and that fosters transformation at multiple levels.

Coaching alone, however, will not result in the kind of transformation that I envision. First of all, coaching for transformation is not possible in a vacuum—certain conditions must be established in an educational context in order for coaching to be effective. Second, coaching alone will do nothing to address the loss of funding for American schools, an issue that results in fundamentally inequitable schools. Until the current funding structure is changed, we will continue to have difficulty developing equitable schools. Finally, some educational policy and national “reform” efforts have actually made the creation of equitable schools more difficult: as long as the evaluation of a teacher’s quality is reduced to a number, we will not have equitable classrooms. A single number can never encapsulate the experience and outcomes for all students.



It will take time to transform our education system. I find consolation in the Dalai Lama's advice: "Do not despair," he counseled a group of activists. "Your work will bear fruit in 700 years or so" (Wheatley, 2009, p. 83). I also recognize that I have no choice but to engage in this process of transformation. The sages who wrote the Talmud declared, "It is not up to you to finish the work, but neither are you free not to take it up."

While the whole system may take generations to transform, the coaching you do today can impact students immediately. The effort is well worth it for them. We cause transformation all along the road to greater transformation.

## ONE PURPOSE AND TWO PROMISES

My intent in this book is to propose a model of coaching that can foster transformation in schools and beyond. This model emerges from several theoretical frameworks, proposes dozens of specific activities, and suggests belief stances and habits of mind that coaches can adopt. Coaching in schools is an emerging field. I hope to contribute to our knowledge and understanding of what coaching is and what it can do.

I make two commitments to you. First, I promise that this book will be full of immediately applicable and useful ideas and resources. I write for an audience who may not have much time to read and who may read this book in short chunks, consulting it when looking for information that might provide guidance at a specific moment. With this awareness, I promise that this book will be useful and that you won't need to read more than a few pages without getting ideas for something you can do today. At the same time, I don't want to give the impression that coaching is merely a checklist of strategies. It is much more than a set of tools, and a coach must cultivate a particular way of being—I will define this "way of being" and suggest how it can be developed.

Second, I promise to tell a lot of stories. Our brains are wired to learn through stories, we remember what we hear in a narrative, and we enjoy stories. I will use stories to illustrate theories, to provide concrete examples of the ideas I'm presenting, and to share how these coaching practices actually play out.

## WHERE I'M COMING FROM AND WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

After one year teaching high school in rural Salinas, California, I moved to Oakland (in the San Francisco Bay Area), where I have taught and coached in our public schools for seventeen years. For most of the time I've worked here, the demographics in our schools have been roughly 40 percent Latino, 40 percent African American,

and the remainder divided between Asian Americans, whites, Native Americans, and Pacific Islanders. About 25 percent of our students are English language learners, and over 70 percent are eligible for free and reduced-cost lunches. My stories and experiences emerge from this complicated and dynamic urban context.

I transitioned into coaching after over a decade of teaching. First, I coached teachers new to the school where I taught. Working with adults was a shift—sometimes rewarding and other times frustrating, but something about it hooked me. After a few years in the hybrid teaching-coaching role, I left the classroom for a full-time instructional coaching position in a large middle school. I knew I was in for a challenge, but assumed I'd find resources to help me.

I learn best by watching others—and as a teacher I was lucky to work with a fantastic coach, but I also learn from books. When I turned to the usual places for resources in print, I found barely a handful of books written on coaching. I read everything I could, but some of it was too specific, or not basic enough, or not grounded in an education context.

I've always heard that you should write the book you want to read. This is the book I wanted to read as a new, struggling coach, and it's still the book I want to read. I am not yet fully the artful coach I aspire to be—I have many years of practice to go to approach mastery. Writing this book is a way for me to reflect on and develop my coaching.

One note: this book focuses on coaches working with individuals. Many of the approaches are applicable to facilitating groups of educators, but the art of coaching teams is worthy of an entire volume itself.

Beyond myself, I write for three audiences:

1. **Coaches working in schools.** I hope that regardless of which area a coach works in—whether beginning teacher support, math, literacy, classroom management, leadership, or school improvement—you will find relevant resources, tools, and ideas. I also hope that regardless of whether you are a brand new coach or an experienced coach, you will find something here to augment your practice.
2. **Principals and other administrators working toward school transformation.** Coaching strategies can be used by anyone. Site-based leaders, central office administrators, school counselors, deans, and other educators engaged in school change will find resources for refining skills such as listening and asking questions, building trusting relationships, understanding adult learners, and more.

In order to highlight sections that might be useful to those who are not coaches but who want to use coaching strategies—primarily principals and other site-based

administrators — specific sections throughout this book have been flagged as tips for principals. Look for the circular arrow icon.

3. **The coaching community outside of education.** I frequently read literature from the broader field of coaching. Regardless of where they work, the goals for many coaches are similar — the growth and development of an individual and the authentic integration of skills and passion for a greater good. I hope to share some of what has been learned in the education context with coaches who work in other fields; we have much to learn from each other.

## SUMMARY OF THE CONTENTS AND HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Even if you could read this book cover to cover in one sitting, I'm not sure I'd recommend you do so. Coaching is effective in part because it is experienced over time: you keep coming back to your coach, exploring a different aspect of your work, and then venturing out to try new approaches. In the same way, I hope this book will act as a coach — that you'll get some ideas, go try them, and then come back to reflect and learn more.

Part One, "Foundations of Coaching," will be very useful to those new to the field. It's what I wish I could have read during my first year. This is also the information I review with principals when they're considering hiring a coach. I recommend that you read this section first.

Part Two, "Establishing Coaching with a Client" explores how to build trust, get to know a client, and determine a coaching focus. The information in this section will help a coach set up the coaching agreements and relationship.

Part Three, "The Coaching Dance" describes the listening, questioning, conversational approaches, and activities that a coach typically engages a client in. At the end of the chapters in Parts Two and Three are sections on Common Challenges that coaches experience, followed by suggested solutions.

Part Four, "Professional Development for Coaches," is geared for coaches and those who supervise them. It proposes some structures and activities that coaches can engage in either independently or in teams to refine their practice. (See the following table of Essential Frameworks for Transformational Coaching.)

## Essential Frameworks for Transformational Coaching

I offer three frameworks that I suggest are essential in transformational coaching.

	Framework	Description
1	The Ladder of Inference (See Chapter Three)	A framework to help us understand what's underneath behaviors that we observe and to help us deconstruct beliefs. This is based on the work of Peter Senge.
2	The Coach's Optical Refractor (See Chapter Four)	A set of analytical tools that can help us see a situation in many different ways. There are six lenses which help us look at evidence from different perspectives. These are based on the work of the National Equity Project and Daniel Goleman.
3	Coaching Stances (See Chapters Nine–Twelve)	An analytical framework for coaching conversations and activities. These can help us plan coaching conversations, make decisions during the conversation, and guide the next steps we take. These are based on the work of John Heron.

The Appendixes offer a glossary of commonly used terms and recommended resources on topics raised in each chapter. On my website, [www.elenaaguilar.com](http://www.elenaaguilar.com), you'll find a bank of additional tools and tips.

## A COUPLE NOTES

### *On Terminology*

As someone very interested in the power of words, I am unsatisfied with any of the terms that are currently used to describe the person who receives coaching: the “coachee” or the “client.” *Coachee* sounds too cute, informal, and like a derivative of “coach.” *Client* references the business world, but our work in schools is about transformation, which lies too close to the heart and soul to be associated with financial transactions. As much as I dislike these two terms, there are no other alternatives currently in use, and rather than attempting to be innovative, I’m going to grudgingly settle for using these two interchangeably.

### *On Anonymity and Pseudonyms*

To protect the privacy of every teacher and administrator I have ever coached, as well as the schools where they worked, I have changed names and most identity markers so that the people about whom I write will be unrecognizable even to themselves.

# The *Art* of Coaching



PART ONE

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# Foundations of Coaching









## CHAPTER 1

# How Can Coaching Transform Schools?

*Read this when:*

- You are a coach, supervisor of coaches, or principal who wants to articulate what coaching is and can be
- You are an administrator considering developing a coaching program in your school

### A STORY ABOUT WHAT COACHING CAN DO

The best way to describe how coaching can transform schools—through improving teacher practices, addressing systemic issues, and improving outcomes for children—is by offering an example.

Karen, a young white woman, was in her third year teaching English in an urban middle school. Before I started working with her, I had been warned that she was “not good with Mexican kids.” One principal had already moved her out of his school, and her new principal, whose student population was 80 percent Latino, was very concerned. I found Karen to be well intentioned, able to create engaging lessons, and capable of building good rapport with students. She was also eager to receive coaching.

A significant percentage of Karen's eighth graders were several years below grade level in reading. Karen agreed to explore her students' skill gaps and selected Angel, a Mexican-American boy, as a focal student. She hoped that digging deep into what was going on with one student would reveal insights and practices that could be applied to other struggling students. Angel was bright, well liked, and had a stable home life; his parents had both graduated from high school in California. He was also goofy and frequently off task in class. Karen had no idea why Angel read at a second-grade level.

As a first step, I coached Karen in using a set of reading diagnostics. She discovered that while Angel had a tremendous mastery of a set of sight words, and therefore could read some text, he could not decode multisyllabic words. Karen dug deeper, finding that Angel struggled with the sounds of certain phonemes. Karen identified the precise skill gaps that made reading difficult for Angel. Now it was just a matter of filling those gaps. Angel leapt at the offer of extra help and extra homework, regularly skipping recess and coming in after school; Karen was enthusiastic about supporting him. In the course of six months, Angel's reading advanced three grade levels.


In an end-of-year reflection with me, Karen revealed that initially she had thought that Angel was "just lazy." She looked at the boy's photo, which decorated the outside of his file. "I really thought he was just a lazy boy," she admitted. She was embarrassed by her previous beliefs and that she'd fallen into believing stereotypes about Mexican immigrants. In our coaching, I carefully and intentionally pushed Karen to explore her belief system; I challenged it and helped her shatter an assumption that she held about some of her students.

I also coached the English department to which Karen belonged. That year, I facilitated an inquiry process to help teachers identify students' key missing skills and provide small-group and individual instruction to close those gaps. By the end of the year, these teachers concluded that it was an imperative to know, from day one, what their incoming students' exact gap areas were. They devised a process in which information could be gathered on students in certain achievement groups as part of the registration process. With these data, teachers could get a head start on planning to close these gaps.

As a result, my coaching led to a systems change—a change in how much teachers at one school know about their students, when and how they get certain information, and what they do with the information they gather. This change was initiated by teachers, welcomed by them, and resulted in a sense of empowerment about changing the outcomes for children. As evidenced by multiple measures, student achievement increased dramatically at this school for the next two years. This is what coaching can offer.

## WHAT WILL IT TAKE TO TRANSFORM OUR SCHOOLS?

Speaking in the early 1980s, poet and activist Audre Lorde warned that true change could only be realized when those engaged in enacting it operate from an entirely different set of thoughts, beliefs, and values and take radically different actions from those taken in the past. Without a new set of tools, Lorde warned that we risk reproducing structures of oppression. Coaching offers a new set of tools that have the potential to radically transform our schools.



*The master's tools will never  
dismantle the master's house.*

AUDRE LORDE (1984)

In the United States, our public school system is in crisis. On this point there is little disagreement. Something must be done. Beyond that, there is a raging debate on what to do and how to do it. Those who ride the chariot of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) deliver one message, which perhaps crudely summarized comes down to this—teachers, principals: improve your test scores or you will be penalized or even fired. Perhaps their intentions are positive, but over ten years have passed since NCLB went into effect, and this method has not worked. The “achievement gap” remains, and there have been many devastating side effects from NCLB, such as the narrowing of curriculum, the time and focus dedicated to test preparation, and the increase in rote learning. Coaching must be contextualized within a broader conversation to “reform,” save, or transform public education. As such, coaching—as a method and theory—is a political stance. Coaching rests on a few basic assumptions that place its supporters in a unique location in this discussion of school transformation.

First, a coaching stance views teachers, principals, and all the adults who work in schools *as capable of changing practices*—coaches fundamentally believe that people can learn and change. Second, in order to understand the current reality and challenges in schools, coaches analyze larger systems at play as well as the historical context. We consider the impact of complex organizations, the macro socioeconomic system, and the roles of all individuals; we do not blame one group of people or seek any quick fixes.

It is essential that we explore the nature of the so-called “achievement gap”—why it exists, who benefits from it, and why current federal legislation can’t eliminate it. But it is more important and absolutely critical that we are thoughtful about the way we are going about doing things—the “how”: how we reflect on and analyze the

past, how we confront the present, how we change our schools and create the future. If we are not mindful, the change process will end up replicating the structures of oppression that produced our current system.

This is where coaching comes in: when we explore the “how.” An understanding of this historical context is essential when we work in schools. Teachers have been blamed for poverty and told they are lazy, untrustworthy, and unintelligent. I believe that the most effective coaches were once teachers, and that they carry this awareness with them. Our communication with teachers and principals must be imbued with this empathy and contextual understanding or we risk (perhaps unconsciously) falling into the dominant discourse around what’s wrong with schools.

Former superintendent of San Diego’s schools, Carl Cohn, cautions that “school reform is a slow, steady labor-intensive process” contingent on “harnessing the talent of individuals . . .” (quoted in Ravitch, 2010, p. 66). Herein lies the essential question for us to grapple with: How do we harness the talent of individuals? How do we develop conditions for adults to learn and develop their talents?

## A NEW TOOL KIT BASED ON ANCIENT KNOWLEDGE

Coaching is a form of professional development that brings out the best in people, uncovers strengths and skills, builds effective teams, cultivates compassion, and builds emotionally resilient educators. Coaching at its essence is the way that human beings, and individuals, have always learned best.

The apprenticeship is an ancient form of coaching. An experienced practitioner welcomes a learner who improves her practice by watching, listening, asking questions, and trying things out under the supportive gaze of the mentor. While there are critical distinguishing factors between a mentor and a coach, the sensibility and outcome are the same: the learner is met and accepted wherever she is in her learning trajectory, she is encouraged and supported, she may be pushed, and in the end, she’s a competent practitioner.

Coaching is also, essentially, what any parent does with a child. When my son learned to walk, I supported him in his first steps, standing close by and offering a hand when necessary. I let him stumble and fall, looking for that fine line between his need for reassurance and his need to remain upright. I’d crouch a few feet away, with my hands outstretched, rambling, “Come on, sweetie, I know you can do it! Come on — take a step, you can do it.” Gradually, I’d scoot backward on the floor, allowing

my toddler to take more steps as he was ready, until eventually he was running across the living room.

With our children, we use a gradual release of responsibility model, providing just enough help for them to do it, but not so much that they don't develop the skills by themselves. When they're nine months old, we don't scream, "I can't carry you any longer. You need to walk now or I'm leaving you here!" Threats and coercion don't work.

In order to transform our education system, we need to pay attention to the people who make up this system and all of their needs. This requires everyone to develop tremendous patience, compassion, humility, attentiveness, and a willingness to listen deeply. We need to meet people wherever they are and then together devise a "how," and, most likely, we'll have to try a few "hows" before we see the results we want. There's just no other way.

## WHAT CAN COACHING DO FOR A SCHOOL? WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?



*Administrators:* this next section will be very useful if you are considering hiring a coach or setting up a coaching program.

There's generally an agreement that educators need more knowledge, skills, practice, and support after they enter the profession. Malcolm Gladwell, the author of *Outliers: The Story of Success* (2008), calculates that it takes ten thousand hours of deliberate practice—practice that promotes continuous improvement—to master a complex skill. This translates into about seven years for those working in schools. The majority of teachers and principals want professional development; they want to improve their craft, be more effective, implement new skills, and see students learn more.

Opinions diverge as to what professional development (PD) should look like. Traditionally, PD has taken the form of a three-day training, say in August before school starts, and then perhaps a couple of follow-up sessions throughout the year. This kind of PD by itself, which just about every teacher has experienced, rarely results in a significant change in teacher practice and rarely results in increased learning for children. According to a 2009 study on professional development, teachers need close

to fifty hours of PD in a given area to improve their skills and their students' learning (Darling-Hammond and others, 2009). While the research on the ineffectiveness of “one-shot” PD continues to pile up, a search is under way for PD that might work. Learning Forward (the international association of educators formerly known as the National Staff Development Council) has developed an invaluable set of Standards for Professional Learning that identifies the characteristics of professional learning that lead to effective teaching practices, supportive leadership, and improved student results. It is very useful to all engaged in designing or leading PD. You can find these standards online here: [www.learningforward.org/standards](http://www.learningforward.org/standards).

Coaching is an essential component of an effective professional development program. Coaching can build will, skill, knowledge, and capacity because it can go where no other professional development has gone before: into the intellect, behaviors, practices, beliefs, values, and feelings of an educator. Coaching creates a relationship in which a client feels cared for and is therefore able to access and implement new knowledge. A coach can foster conditions in which deep reflection and learning can take place, where a teacher can take risks to change her practice, where powerful conversations can take place and where growth is recognized and celebrated. Finally, a coach holds a space where healing can take place and where resilient, joyful communities can be built.

When considering hiring a coach, principals often ask the following kinds of questions about the impact of coaching: What does the research say about how coaching can transform a school? Is there a model that is most effective? Is there evidence that coaching will result in increased student achievement?

As coaches, it is our responsibility to know what can be expected. We can't go into schools purporting to raise test scores by 50 percent in the first year. We need to articulate what we might be able to accomplish. Fortunately, there is a growing body of research indicating that coaching can help create the conditions necessary for instructional practices to change and student outcomes to improve. These are valuable data points for coaches to be aware of as they help direct the work we do; our work is not simply about working individually with teachers to improve their practice—it must extend farther.

To date, the most thorough and comprehensive study on coaching was done in 2004 by the Annenberg Foundation for Education Reform. It reports a number of findings that offer powerful validation for coaching. First, the report concludes that effective coaching encourages collaborative, reflective practice. Coaching allows teachers to apply their learning more deeply, frequently, and consistently than teachers working