

INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING WORKS, BUT IT MAKES A HUGE DIFFERENCE WHO YOUR COACH IS

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CENTRAL QUESTION

Coaching works. But how much of the benefit of coaching as an instructional improvement model depends on the specific coach with whom a teacher collaborates? What implications does this have for scalability?

Teacher training through one-on-one instructional coaching has grown increasingly popular in the United States, and experimental evidence shows that coaching is one of the most powerful ways to improve teaching quality and student outcomes.¹ At the same time, it is unclear how best to scale programs while maintaining their efficacy because coaching relies entirely on the skills of individual coaches.

This brief investigates variation in effectiveness across coaches through a research-practice partnership with TNTP (formerly known as The New Teacher Project). TNTP provides instructional coaching at scale to pre-service teachers as part of its alternative-route teacher certification program, with sites in Washington DC, Baltimore, and across the country. Over the summer, teachers work with a coach for roughly 30 hours, which includes at least four observation and feedback cycles and explicit modeling of strong teaching by the coach.

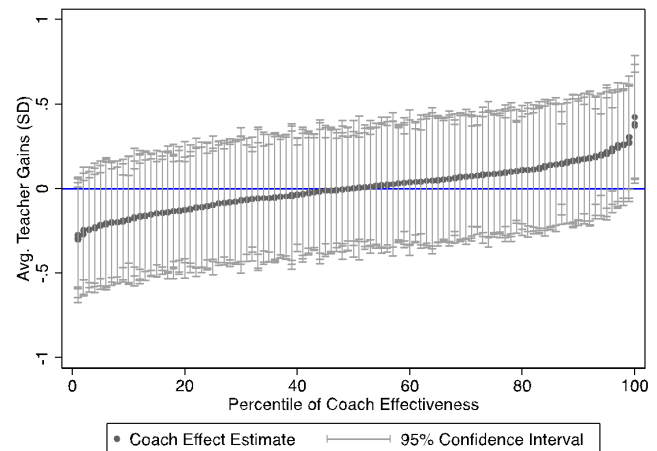
KEY FINDINGS

Coaches vary substantially in their effectiveness.

We find substantial variability in effectiveness across coaches, as measured by changes in pre-service teachers' instructional practice. A one standard deviation (SD) increase in coach effectiveness increases observed measures of teachers' classroom practice by roughly 0.3 SD. In other words, a teacher assigned to a highly effective coach at the 84th percentile in the distribution of effectiveness will move the median-performing teacher to

the 65th percentile in teaching quality. Figure 1 shows the distribution of coach effectiveness.

Figure 1. Distribution of Coach Effectiveness



A high-quality coach is worth it, but a low-quality coach may not be.

Our estimates of coach effectiveness heterogeneity are very similar to average effects of coaching programs on teaching practice identified in other research (which compare the outcomes of coached and non-coached teachers). We infer that a teacher assigned a high-quality coach improves substantially. However, a teacher assigned to a low-quality coach may not improve at all relative to non-coached teachers.

Patterns generalize across large urban school districts in the United States.

Patterns are very similar across the 14 TNTP teacher training sites included in these analyses. Many of the sites are urban school systems—including two in the Maryland/DC area—with large shares of novice teachers

About this Brief. The University of Maryland College of Education's **Maryland Equity Project (MEP)** seeks to improve public education through research that supports an informed public policy debate about the quality and distribution of educational opportunities in Maryland and nationally. To learn more, [follow us on X](#) and [subscribe to our email list](#). The full academic paper accompanying this brief is posted on our website. Citation: Blazar, D., McNamara, D., & Blue, G. (Online 2023). **Instructional coaching personnel and program scalability**. *Education Finance and Policy*, 1-32.

and students of color. These are the contexts where implementing and scaling teacher coaching is most important.

RESEARCH METHODS

To answer our central question, we compiled data on coaches, teachers, and teacher performance across six years and 14 summer training sites from TNTP's Teaching Fellows and Residency programs. Our sample includes 3,526 pre-service teachers and 317 coaches. Using a "value-added" framework, we first estimate the amount of growth teachers make from before to after coaching. Then, for each coach, we estimate the average growth across the set of teachers they support. Performance measures come from TNTP's observation instrument, which is used both to guide the coaching process and to make summative decisions regarding provisional licensure. For example, on *Demonstration of Learning*, outside observers assess whether teachers check for student understanding and report student misunderstandings.

Our preferred sample includes teachers in one site who were observed by an outside rater other than their coach. Results are very similar when we extend the analyses to all sites and include teachers whose observation scores were collected by their coach.

Our research design addresses two primary concerns in the value-added literature: (i) the fact that teachers are not randomly assigned to coaches, and (ii) measurement error in the observation scores. Our findings are very similar across a variety of sensitivity analyses.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Coaching is an attractive alternative to traditional teacher training and development.

Currently, school districts spend approximately \$18 billion on teacher development programs each year, with very little return on investment.² Most "traditional" teacher professional development programs do not work to improve teacher practice or student outcomes. Coaching

does work, and our study shows that high-quality coaches help teachers make very large gains in their instructional practice. Particularly in urban school settings with large shares of novice teachers, coaching should be a key investment.

Before scaling coaching, districts need to know who is an effective coach.

Adopting and scaling instructional coaching programs is a risky proposition without knowing how to identify effective coaches—and how to recruit, train, and support more of them. Our value-added methodology offers one way to measure coach effectiveness. Additional research also is needed to identify specific coach characteristics and coaching moves that explain differences in effectiveness. Are coaches effective because of the rapport they develop with teachers? Do these coaches use specific techniques when working with teachers (e.g., providing direct feedback, helping with lesson planning)? We do not yet know the answers to these questions.

Be strategic about allocating coaches to teachers.

Coaching *can* work (with the right coach) but also is expensive given its intensity and requirement for hiring personnel. Because coaching is purposefully differentiated and individualized, not all teachers need a coach. As districts work to identify and train skilled coaches, it may make sense to provide coaching only to some teachers who need it most and only in some school years.

Acknowledgements

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Endnotes

¹ Kraft, M. A., Blazar, D., & Hogan, D. (2018). The effect of teacher coaching on instruction and achievement: A meta-analysis of the causal evidence. *Review of Educational Research*, 88(4), 547-588.

² Education Next. (2018, June 12). EdStat: \$18 Billion a Year is Spent on Professional Development for U.S. Teachers. *Education Next*. Fryer, J., & Roland, G. (2017). The production of human capital in developed countries: Evidence from 196 randomized field experiments. In *Handbook of economic field experiments* (Vol. 2, pp. 95-322). North-Holland.