How Can Assistant Principals Be Trained as Instructional Leaders?

Insights from the PLUS Program
School discipline issues, administrative complexities, lunch and safety drill monitoring: No one can say that assistant principals (APs) have easy jobs. Along with tackling challenges and working to build a positive school culture, many APs also play the role of teaching coach via their responsibilities as instructional leaders. In this capacity, APs may observe and evaluate teachers and provide them with feedback to help improve their classroom instruction. Ultimately, high-quality teaching is one of the most important school-related factors that affects student achievement, and empirical studies show that coaching can be an effective way to improve teacher performance. Yet little is known about how to improve APs’ effectiveness in this area.

To help school leaders improve instructional leadership, TNTP (formerly The New Teacher Project) developed the Pathways to Leadership in Urban Schools (PLUS) program in 2014. PLUS is a two-year credentialing program designed to help novice school leaders manage teachers effectively, improve teaching through coaching and feedback, and create a supportive learning environment in schools. TNTP has partnered with several large and small school districts to implement PLUS.

PLUS Program Design

PLUS was different than the district’s typical support for APs in four key ways:

1. Participants were chosen based on their potential for serving as effective instructional leaders.

2. Participants received more instructional leadership preparation. Preparation included a five-day preservice training, biweekly in-person coaching, and monthly professional development sessions. All of these focused primarily on instructional leadership skills.

3. Participants had more responsibilities pertaining to instructional leadership. These included regular classroom observations and coaching for a caseload of up to five selected teachers.

4. Participants’ progress in PLUS was evaluated through multiple evidence-based measures. These included 360-degree surveys by their coaches, principals, and the teachers they coached as well as measures of improvement for the teachers that they coached.

KEY FINDINGS

- Students of teachers coached by PLUS APs had somewhat larger English language arts (ELA) achievement gains than students of comparison teachers who received business-as-usual district supports.

- Teachers whose students had very low achievement gains departed the district at higher rates if they had received coaching and observation from PLUS APs.

- PLUS APs were not significantly different from other new APs in the rates at which they remained in the district or were promoted to principal roles.

RAND Corporation researchers were asked to evaluate the implementation and outcomes of the PLUS program in one district from 2015 to 2018. The PLUS program in this district focused specifically on selecting, training, and supporting newly hired APs. The research team examined how the program was implemented and how it affected student achievement. They also examined job retention among teachers in the schools at which the PLUS APs worked during this period. This research brief summarizes study findings and offers three recommendations for school districts and school leadership training programs to consider as they strive to improve instructional leadership effectiveness.
How This Study Was Conducted

The large, urban district in this study serves more than 40,000 students in more than 100 schools spanning grades K–12. Program implementation was assessed using documentation and metrics collected by TNTP and through yearly interviews with TNTP staff and PLUS program participants. Interviews with program participants also provided insight into their perceptions of PLUS. Program outcomes were assessed using administrative records of school leaders, teachers, and students. Some key impacts, such as improvements in district and school culture and intermediate impacts on PLUS APs’ and teachers’ practices, could not be assessed because sufficient data were not available.
PLUS Program Implementation

The research team found that the program was generally implemented as planned, with high participation rates of APs in the program’s professional development activities. However, there were also challenges related to APs’ balancing the expectations of PLUS with their other job roles and responsibilities. Here are the key findings from the evaluation of the program’s implementation.

PLUS influenced the selection criteria for all new APs in the district, and more than one-third of new APs in the district participated in the program. From 2015 to 2018, PLUS recruited and prepared 37 percent of new APs hired in the district. After three years, participants represented 36 percent of all APs working in the district. The PLUS selection process involved multiple rounds of interviews and activities, such as writing prompts, and was designed to select applicants with the highest potential for success as instructionally focused APs. The district used this process to hire all APs after the first year of the study.

PLUS APs perceived the job-embedded coaching to be the most valuable component of the program.

“PLUS reminds us that being an administrator is not just about running a school but is also about helping other teachers improve so that ultimately our students can do better.”

—PLUS AP
and described their PLUS peers as a key source of support. PLUS APs valued their coaches’ experience and described close, supportive relationships that helped them build confidence. They particularly valued the support on such topics as time management, delegating tasks, having difficult conversations with teachers, and providing actionable feedback to teachers. Most PLUS APs observed that the high quality of the coaching support was unique to PLUS. In addition, PLUS APs described their PLUS peers as like-minded and an important source of emotional and professional support.

Most PLUS APs viewed PLUS as good preparation for the role of school leader, but some desired training in areas other than instructional leadership. Most PLUS APs said that the program was doing a good job of preparing them for the role of school leader and that they appreciated the focus on instructional leadership. However, some said that PLUS was not sufficiently preparing them for the non-instructional aspects of school leadership—such as budgeting, community relations, staffing, or legal compliance—and that they wished that PLUS would include these topics. For these APs,

“It feels like we don’t have enough time to focus intentionally on implementing the changes that we know are needed for our students to be successful academically or behaviorally.”

—PLUS AP
non-instructional responsibilities were a large part of their job.

For many PLUS APs, non-instructional leadership responsibilities often took priority over coaching teachers. Participating APs were expected to practice instructional leadership by observing and providing feedback to five teachers in their school. Most APs were not able to coach the number of teachers that PLUS expected or to meet with them as frequently as PLUS guidelines recommended. For these PLUS APs, it was difficult to find the time because other, non-instructional aspects of their job, such as addressing student behavior incidents, required immediate attention.

PLUS APs reported receiving varying amounts of support for instructional leadership from their host principals. Host principals were not selected by PLUS to participate in the program. Principals who had a PLUS AP in their building became a host principal by default. About half of PLUS APs reported that their host principals helped them focus on instructional leadership and supported their PLUS activities. PLUS APs who had challenging relationships with their host principals said that their host principals did not support their PLUS work because they were busy, overworked, and generally unavailable.

Over time, the district’s expectations for APs shifted to place more emphasis on instructional leadership. In the first two years of the program, PLUS APs reported that the district did not place the same emphasis as the PLUS program on APs taking on instructional leadership responsibilities. Over time, participants perceived that the district’s expectations shifted to prioritize AP instructional leadership. However, host principal support for APs’ roles as teacher coaches remained inconsistent.
PLUS Program Outcomes

Students of teachers coached by PLUS APs had somewhat larger English language arts (ELA) achievement gains than students of comparison teachers who received business-as-usual district supports. Across a pooled sample of 65 ELA teachers in grades 4–8 who were coached by PLUS APs during their time in the program, students of coached teachers made significantly more gains in ELA than the students of comparison teachers in the same schools (see Figure 1). The difference in ELA achievement gains was small, roughly equivalent to raising the performance of the median student from the 50th percentile to the 52nd percentile. Students of teachers who received coaching from a PLUS AP performed no differently on mathematics exams than students of comparison teachers.

Teachers whose students had very low achievement gains departed the district at higher rates if they had received coaching and observation from PLUS APs. For teachers whose students’ achievement gains were in the bottom 20 percent, coaching from a PLUS AP was associated with higher rates—86 percent more likely—of leaving the district within two years. The results suggest that coaching from a PLUS AP played a substantial role in spurring lower-performing teachers to leave the district. There were no significant differences in retention among higher-performing teachers who received coaching.

PLUS APs were not significantly different from other new APs in the rates at which they remained in the district or were promoted to principal roles. The retention and promotion rates of PLUS participants were not significantly different from rates for other APs in the district when controlling for all other factors.
Broader Lessons for Assistant Principal Instructional Leadership Programs

The findings from this study suggest that the implementation of the PLUS program went as intended, and most participants found the program helpful in preparing them for instructional leadership. Moreover, participants’ instructional leadership work may have contributed to improvements in student ELA achievement and more-selective teacher retention. The study offers three insights that may inform other programs dedicated to fostering instructional leadership among APs.

Selection and training of APs focused on instructional leadership can significantly influence outcomes for students and teachers. The findings in this study indicate that focusing on APs’ skills in instructional leadership and expanding their responsibilities in that area can have positive impacts in schools.

When designing programs, consider job-embedded coaching, professional development with a peer cohort, and training in operations and management, in addition to instructional leadership. Although relatively little is known about what novice APs found most valuable in their leadership training programs, the findings in this study suggest that these three aspects were most valued by PLUS-participating APs.

Set realistic instructional leadership expectations for APs. Districts and external partners can support APs participating in an instructional leadership training program in a number of ways. One possibility is to adjust the expectations for AP instructional leadership broadly, and teacher coaching specifically, to fit in the time allowed by non-instructional duties. Another possibility is to adjust APs’ non-instructional tasks to allow more time for instructional leadership activities. Finally, early, systematic engagement with host principals may help set principals’ expectations as APs take part in job-embedded learning.