

The Power of a Coaching System

*Austin East High School Supports Teachers through
High-Quality Coaching*

Fall 2019

Summary

Heading into the 2018-19 school year, Principal Nathan Langlois and his leadership team at Austin East High School in Knoxville, Tennessee, prioritized building a culture of support to recruit and retain strong teachers. To do this, the leadership team designed and implemented a whole-school coaching model to help teachers better understand student mastery criteria and how to design ambitious lesson plans.

Yet in the course of supporting teachers, they hit a major stumbling block: classroom management and understanding student behavior challenges. While keeping an eye on their instructional goal of better aligning lessons to help students achieve mastery, leadership adapted their 2018-19 coaching plan to focus on strategies for classroom management.

District Context and Challenge

Austin East is a performing arts magnet high school in Knoxville, Tennessee, that is home to 643 students. Knox County has over 88 schools that span urban, suburban, and rural contexts – over 70% of the students it serves are white and nearly 17% are African American. In contrast to the district at large, Austin East is one of the schools in Knoxville’s urban core and serves a student population that is 81% African American.

While Austin East is not designated as a Priority School (meaning a school whose performance ranks in the bottom 5% of schools in Tennessee), many of its feeder schools are at or near the Priority Schools level. As a result, many of the students who enter Austin East aren’t ready for high school level work, which is reflected in their relatively low test scores – passing rates on the state test are around 10%.

In SY17-18, its passing rates on the Tennessee state exams in 9th grade math, science, and English hovered around 10% across all tests. Yet, Principal Nathan Langlois notes the school has “pockets of excellence” consisting of students who are ready for college level work.

Austin East has the dual challenge of closing gaps for students who are behind academically, while also pushing their high-school-ready students toward mastery and college readiness. As a result, Austin East has struggled to attract and retain teachers, in large part because teaching so many students with varied academic, social, and emotional needs is professionally and personally challenging work for teachers.

In 2012, Austin East was selected as part of a cohort of 14 schools in the district that received federal funding to create school-based systems of teacher support through the development of a cadre of teacher leaders working with administrators.

Using the TAP System for Teacher and Student Advancement (TAP) model, school leaders developed a teacher support system, with professional learning led by teacher leaders, and teachers were offered additional pay through performance incentives and stipends for taking on additional instructional leadership responsibilities. The additional compensation and professional support helped the school develop a robust instructional support system that aided recruitment and retention.

When Langlois took over in 2017, he and his leadership team focused on identifying and continuing to sustain the most impactful elements of the instructional support system.

The support system was a key factor in addressing the disadvantage Austin East faced when recruiting teachers who were in demand at other schools in the Knox County district that had fewer instructional challenges. To fund this school-based instructional support, Langlois identified existing school funding along with seeking targeted outside funding.

Building a Teacher Support System for the Long Term

Langlois and his leadership team understood that keeping and supporting strong teachers is critical to providing each student with a high school education that prepares them for success after graduation, regardless of their academic needs.

Langlois defined the challenge as this: “How can I keep teachers here and create a culture that teachers want to be a part of?”

Langlois and his leadership team knew from working with the TAP System that teachers benefit the most from support and professional learning opportunities when they are given the time, space, and resources to collaborate and receive support from coaches.

He spent his summer poring over the research on teacher retention. The research confirmed that more than anything, teachers want to feel valued, professionally supported, and led by strong leaders, who most often bear responsibility for creating a positive working environment for teachers.

Based on these findings, Langlois’ initial question took on a new shape: **“How can we create a system of support at Austin East that teachers will really gravitate toward?”**

Goal Setting and Resource Gathering

Langlois’ critical question guided discussion in early leadership meetings and led the group to settle on a layered coaching model that provides in-classroom support for teachers and dedicated time during the school day for coaching conversations and professional learning communities (PLCs) to take place.

Austin East supported instructional coaches with Title I funds and adjusted the school schedule and signed teachers to extended contracts to create additional time and space for PLCs and coaching to take place during school hours. However, Austin East lacked the funding to implement the full coaching model they wanted.

Even though Austin East wasn't a Priority School, Langlois argued that the school needed the additional resources that are allocated to Priority Schools because of Austin East's feeder pattern. While the state and district were not able to provide additional resources, Langlois found a local funder that was willing to provide additional financial resources to support an effective and impactful teacher support system at Austin East.

The Coaching Role

With the resources for the coaching model in place, Langlois and his leadership team discussed the most important elements of the instructional coach role and how it would support schoolwide instructional goals.

Austin East decided to bring in NIET Executive Program Specialist Natalie Szakacs to help the leadership team identify pitfalls that could hinder implementation and provide support and critical observations as coaching was rolled out into classrooms.

Langlois observed, "There were no other principals that I could go to that were doing this work in our school's unique context – leading and teaching can so often get reduced to a bubble. We knew Natalie had experience doing this work in many different school contexts, so **we wanted to draw from her experiences to help inform our coaching model.**"

To make sure the coaching was connected with schoolwide goals and informed by the latest student data and work, the leadership team assigned an administrative member of the leadership team to act as a coach for each instructional coach. To create alignment between schoolwide goals and the coaching structure, Langlois asked each administrator to lead a leadership meeting on an aspect of coaching that was relevant to the school's instructional needs.

Identifying a Schoolwide Instructional Coaching Goal

With a structure in place for carrying out and monitoring instructional coaching in the building, the leadership team's next challenge was to determine what were the most pressing instructional needs of the teachers in the building. Austin East was using Tennessee's TEAM rubric, which is based on and aligned with NIET's instructional rubric, but acknowledged they sometimes lack the depth of understanding about each rubric indicator to effectively apply it in teacher feedback and coaching conversations.

Austin East also acknowledged that they often identified so many student learning needs that coaches debated which needed to be prioritized first.

This is where Szakacs, who is an expert in high-quality instruction using the TEAM rubric, helped the leadership team identify an instructional focus area for the year that could be leveraged to address other instructional needs. After going on some initial classroom walk-throughs, Szakacs noticed that teachers needed support to accurately assess the quality of student work against academic standards.

Put another way, teachers wanted to understand the “mastery criteria” for student work. This didn’t come as a surprise to leadership. **“We knew in the back of our minds that’s where we needed to go,” Langlois said, “but we lacked the vocabulary and full understanding to describe what we ought to do to get there.”**

In order to build up teacher understanding of mastery criteria, the leadership team, with Szakacs alongside as a coach, chose lesson planning as a schoolwide instructional focus area that would guide coaching conversations and discussions in PLCs.

In other words, all professional learning activities would seek to answer one big question: “What kind of lesson would you have to plan in order to get students to produce work that demonstrates subject mastery?”

Adjusting Course to Address a Need

As Austin East began to support teachers with lesson planning and execution, they ran into another problem: Teachers were struggling with classroom management and, as a result, weren’t able to get through the lessons they had spent so much time and thought in planning.

Classroom management wasn’t just a major obstacle to achieving the schoolwide instructional improvement goal – it was bringing down teacher morale in the building. A goal of the teacher support system was to retain teachers, and yet teachers found themselves in frequent emotional distress due to student distractions causing their lessons to get off track. Langlois feared this distress would lead to more turnover.

The extent of this teacher need sparked a critical decision point for school leadership: Do we stay the course to improve lesson planning or shift to address classroom management needs first? Or do we try to do both? Leadership reasoned that doing both at the same time could be too complicated and overburden teachers with too much feedback.

They also recognized that pushing through with planning and hoping classroom management would get better on its own seemed unlikely. **Ultimately, they decided to shift the focus of coaching for the year to provide intensive and focused support for classroom management.**

Tackling the Classroom Management Challenge

Based on a new round of classroom observations and coaching conversations, the leadership team found that most teachers struggling with management weren't fully aware of what was causing their lessons to fall apart. In order to give teachers the appropriate strategies and techniques to manage their class well, leadership first needed to help teachers build awareness of where and how a lesson might break down.

However, building a theoretical awareness of behavior is one thing – it's much harder for teachers to maintain that awareness throughout any one lesson. The fact is that classrooms are complex and teachers can often get so absorbed in teaching their lesson that they lose awareness of what is really happening in their classroom. As Langlois puts it, "When you are teaching 25 students, there are 25 individual behaviors you have to track."

After some initial walk-throughs to help diagnose the behavior challenges teachers were facing, Langlois and Szakacs grappled with a critical question: "How can we share with teachers everything that is going on in their classroom?"

Teachers were especially struggling with seeing how one small action could lead to more disruptive actions in their classroom. On an early walk-through, a student asked the teacher a question about the activity they were doing. The teacher responded but immediately moved on and did not

notice that the student wasn't satisfied with the teacher's answer. Since the student wasn't sure what to do, they turned to the students next to them and started having a conversation that wasn't related to the learning activity. In short order, multiple students were no longer on task, in part because the teacher was unable to properly support a student in a moment of confusion.

This dynamic was emblematic of the complexities that Langlois and Szakacs wanted their teachers to see and understand. They put their heads together and agreed that teachers must be able to know at any one time what individual students are doing, how students respond to what the teacher is doing, and how students respond to each other. **Yet, no one observer could capture all that in one observation. So, instead, they decided to form an observation team to conduct a multiperspective classroom walk-through that would examine individual student actions, teacher actions, and student dynamics.**

Each member of the walk-through team, which consisted of Langlois, Szakacs, and the school's behavior interventionist, tasked themselves with viewing the classroom through one of those three perspectives. After compiling their notes from each observation, each observer would try to connect their observations to a specific domain of the rubric (environment, instruction, planning) and a relevant indicator within each domain.

After the walk-through, the observation team would talk with the teacher about how each of the three aspects of classroom activity (teacher action, student action, student dynamics) interacted with each other. Then, they would work to pinpoint one high-leverage growth area, tied to the rubric, and prescribe a behavior management or instructional strategy to try out in the next lesson.

The multiperspective walk-through notes improved teacher awareness and understanding of a teacher's impact on student behavior, which helped teachers better anticipate where their lessons might falter.

The notes also informed coaching debrief conversations and guided teachers to finding the appropriate strategies to help them manage their classroom in real time.

Conclusion

In many ways, the year at Austin East was defined by one of Langlois' favorite leadership quotes: "Action is better than inaction." But he adds, "It has to be thoughtful action."

Taking thoughtful action at the beginning of the year didn't lead to what they expected, but taking action did reveal the path to success more clearly. While developing, implementing, and adjusting the coaching model was the focus of the 2018-19 school year, it has truly become a multiyear plan for the school.

While understanding that teacher classroom management skills will always be a need, especially as new teachers join the staff, Langlois and his leadership team reestablished lesson planning to facilitate student mastery as the schoolwide instructional goal in 2019-20.

Improvement is a constant process that must be brought down to manageable and concrete steps. **What is promising for Austin East is that their improvement journey has enabled them to create a support system that can be adjusted to address needs as they arise, while continuing to keep the focus on strategies that will enable students to reach mastery.**

They have cultivated a strong and collective understanding of where they need to grow, have a tested, clear plan for working toward growth, and have built into their coaching model the ability to continuously adjust and improve to address new challenges. With a culture and system of continuous improvement in place, Austin East's pursuit of academic excellence for all students should only accelerate in the years to come.

