

# Classroom coaching that makes a difference

According to the *National School Improvement Tool*, building an expert teaching team to support school improvement requires ‘the development of a culture of continuous professional improvement that includes classroom-based learning, mentoring and coaching arrangements’ (ACER, 2012, p. 10). This notion is supported by data from the reviews of Queensland state schools.

Since school reviews commenced in 2015, staff capability has been consistently identified as one of the three key levers of school improvement. Within staff capability, classroom coaching is identified as a key area for improvement for a majority of Queensland state schools and centres reviewed in 2019 and 2020. This includes aspects related to classroom modelling, observation and feedback, as well as collegial engagement frameworks, and instructional leadership.

In this paper, we explore classroom coaching practices and areas for consideration in Queensland state schools

identified through school reviews. We also discuss key insights from a review of the literature on effective classroom coaching.

This paper presents a detailed overview of evidence-based principles and practical considerations to assist schools to **make it right** and **make it work** so that it **makes a difference** for teachers and students.

## What is classroom coaching?

In this paper, classroom coaching is defined as a set of structured professional learning activities that are:

- collaborative
- conducted in the context of the classroom
- focused on instruction
- using observation and feedback as the key sources for reflection and learning.

## Use this paper as a guide to



Build a common understanding of classroom coaching across the school



Work with others to improve your own teaching practice



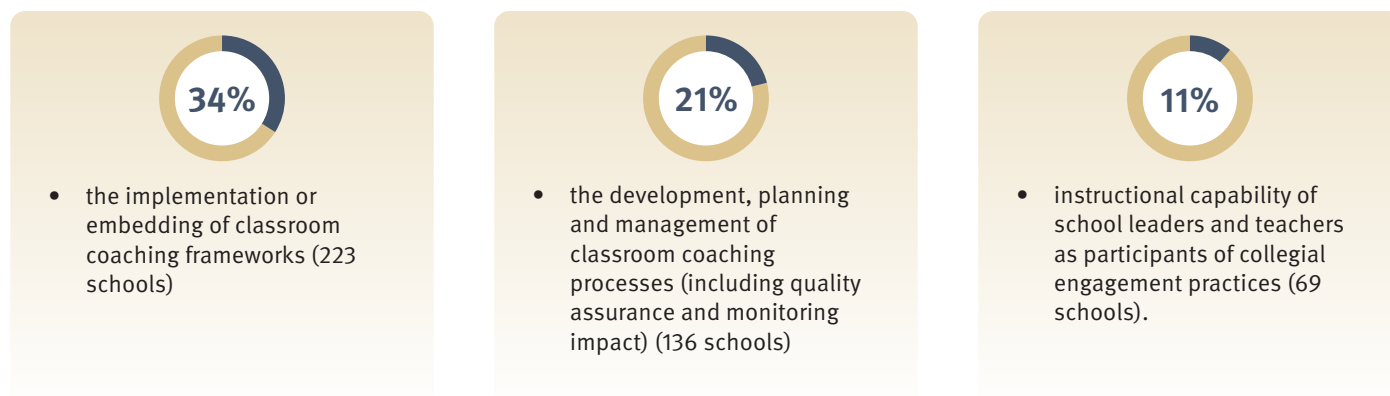
Collaboratively review the school's collegial engagement approach



Enhance the impact of coaching practices on student outcomes

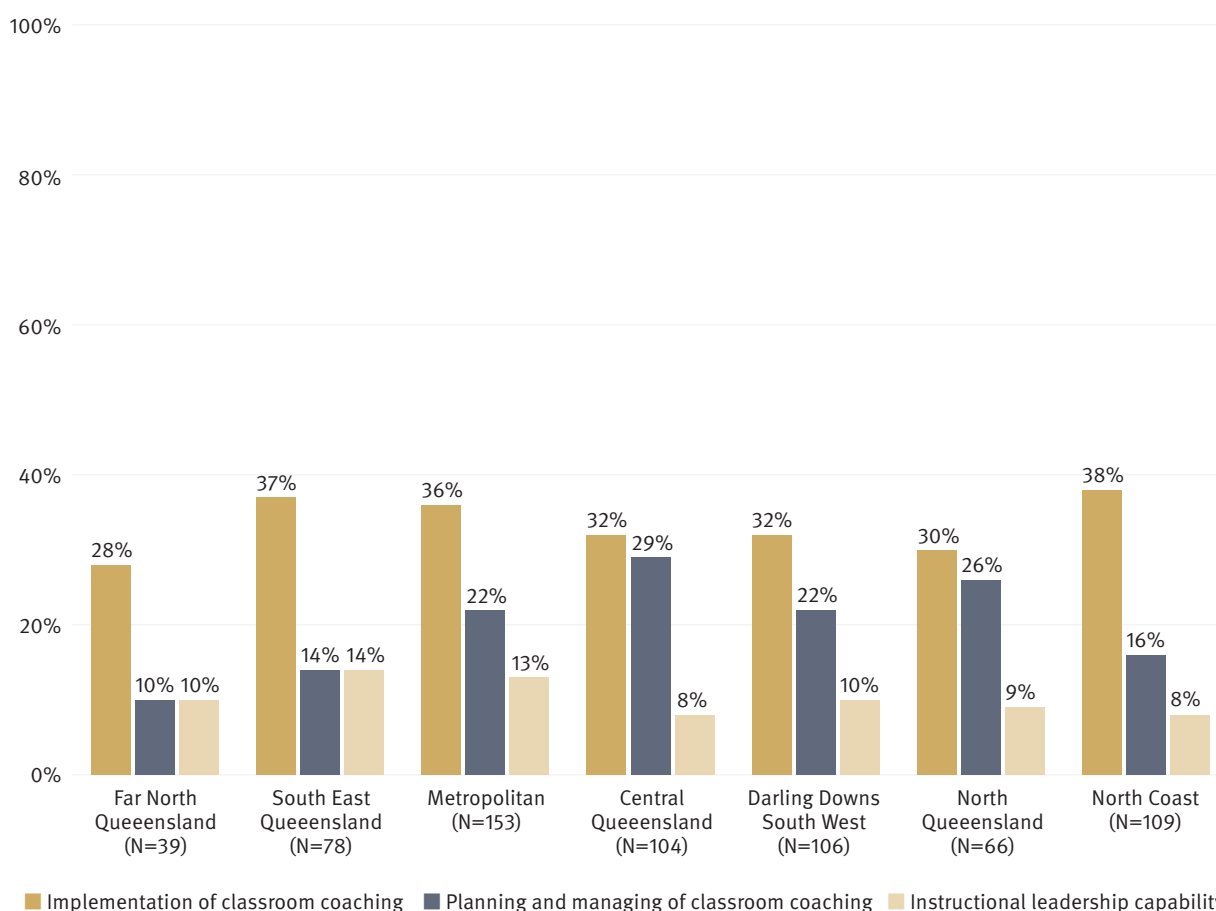
# Insights from school reviews

Classroom coaching is the most common theme in school review recommendations about building staff capability (EIB, 2021). In recommendations from 2019 and 2020 school reviews, three aspects of classroom coaching were commonly raised (N = 655):



In most regions, the largest proportion of schools received recommendations related to implementing or embedding their classroom coaching approaches (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Review schools with recommendations related to coaching, 2019-20**



Successful implementation of classroom coaching models largely depends on how they were planned and developed, and on the instructional leadership capability of staff involved in those practices.

## Why coach?

Classroom-based learning opportunities for teachers are one of the key drivers of school improvement that can help lift student outcomes in Queensland state schools. Too often, however, they may be implemented as a one-off activity that is not always monitored for its impact on classroom practice and student achievement. A recent report discussing teaching improvement in Australia shows the dominance of short-term and small-scale coaching and instructional leadership programs, indicating that teachers ‘value learning from instructional leaders in theory, but in practice their teaching doesn’t change’ (Goss and Sonnemann, 2020, p. 3-4).

Coaching offers a collaborative model of professional learning, emphasising authenticity, relevance, practical application and continued impact on classroom practice (Mansfield and Thompson, 2017).

Coaching has a long history and applications in many fields. In education, coaching helps teachers transfer newly learnt skills into their pedagogical repertoire. Research shows that coaching can have a powerful impact on the implementation of new teaching approaches.

In Queensland, state schools are encouraged to provide classroom coaching opportunities as part of collegial engagement protocols. These should be embedded in the normal routine of the school, involve school leaders as instructional leaders, and include ‘classroom observations, walk-throughs, peer coaching, classroom profiling, instructional rounds, model lessons, peer and instructional coaching’, according to the [Joint statement on collegial engagement in classrooms](#) (Department of Education and Training, and Queensland Teachers' Union, 2015).

In addition, the department’s new [Leadership strategy 2020–22](#) acknowledges the need to ‘build the coaching capability of leaders to provide collegiate and employee support’ (Department of Education, 2020, p. 6).

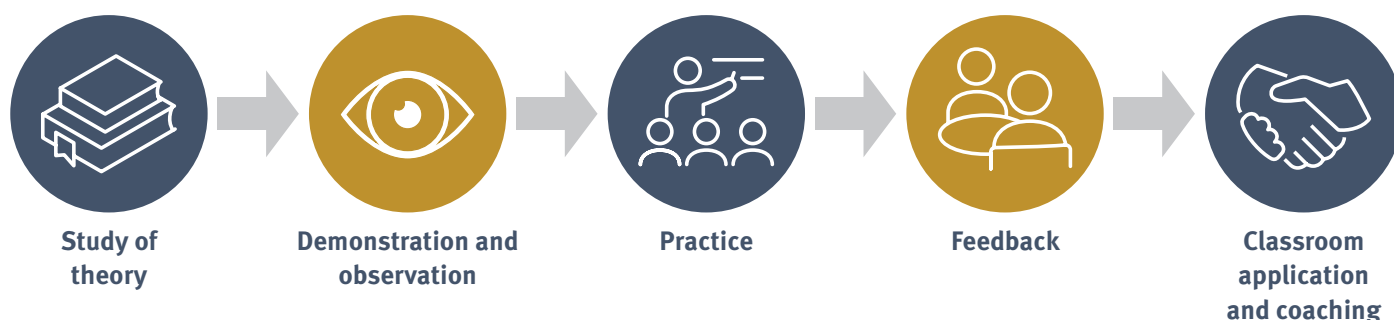




## Make it right

No one set of features defines all coaching models, but at its core, coaching is a form of sustained, job-embedded professional development that includes teacher observation (Denton and Hasbrouck, 2009, p. 155).

Coaching is conducted in the context of the classroom. The literature emphasises that it **complements other professional learning activities**, rather than being a standalone practice. As Joyce and Showers (1980, p. 379) concluded, ‘to be most effective, training should include theory, demonstration, practice, feedback, and classroom application’.



The role of a **coach or expert** can be fulfilled by a range of individuals. In the Australian context, coaching relationships within schools include teacher–teacher, teacher–lead teacher and teacher–principal (AITSL, 2013, p. 3).

Coaching is **focused**, as coaches work with teachers to engage in deliberate practice of specific skills (Kraft et al., 2018, p. 548). It involves **collaboratively co-constructing knowledge** (Charteris and Smardon, 2014, p. 112), where teachers are not passive recipients of knowledge but are co-learners actively participating in an open dialogue.

**Structured feedback** is a key feature of coaching reported in many studies (Lu, 2010). Such feedback is not a random activity, but consists of pre-observation, observation and post-observation conversations. As emphasised in the literature, and the Department of Education and Queensland Teachers' Union joint statement, classroom coaching **is not evaluative by nature** and the feedback should not be used for performance management (Department of Education and Queensland Teachers' Union, 2015).



## Make it work

Coaching practices need dedicated time, resources and a whole-school effort to be implemented successfully. Following a few principles can enhance their effectiveness.

Overall, to ensure success of classroom coaching, it needs to fit into a positive organisational culture (belief systems and ways of working). Before developing coaching models, schools may need to carefully consider the **cultural conditions** in which these practices will be implemented. Having strong and engaged communities of practice or professional learning teams may provide a supportive environment for classroom coaching.

**‘A strong culture of leading and learning together has positive impact on the quality of our system, the success of our students and wellbeing of our people.’**

*(Department of Education, 2020, p. 3)*

On the other hand, coaching can be a powerful tool in changing the existing culture by generating a collective learning culture that supports risk taking and innovation (Devine et al. 2013, p. 1385). Therefore, classroom coaching can be seen as an opportunity to either develop

or enhance such values as collegiality, trust, continuous learning and improvement across a school.

## A clear purpose and teacher ownership

Classroom coaching is successful when there is a **clearly defined theme** (Cravens and Wang, 2017), which is the focus of the whole school community. It requires commitment and support from all teachers and senior management, and **alignment with the school improvement area** or practice (Parr and Hawe, 2017). It also needs to be aligned with the whole-school approach to pedagogy to ensure its continuous improvement.

Coaching is most successful when it is ‘embedded within the school system and closely related to the real-time needs and practices of the teachers in their classrooms’ (Devine et al. 2013, p. 1385), but also when teachers participate on a **voluntary** basis.

It is important to first build a **shared understanding** of what coaching is amongst staff (Bennett, 2019, p. 77) and make sure it is **consistent with teachers’ knowledge and beliefs**, as well as with school, district and state reforms and policies (Desimone, 2009, p. 184). Distributed instructional leadership can help ‘foster teachers’ interdependent collaboration and agency’ (Nguyen et al., 2017, p. 162).



## Learning as a core part of coaching

Effective coaching follows the principles of **active learning** (Bell and Kozlowski, 2008) and **experiential learning** (Kolb and Kolb, 2005). Learners need to have an opportunity to complete the full learning cycle, explore, experiment and have control over decisions about their learning. As teachers' responses to coaching may vary, the **perspectives and preferences of individual teachers** need to be considered when developing coaching programs (Jacobs et al., 2018, p. 701).

## Supportive coaching relationship

One of the conditions for successful instructional or peer coaching is the **equality of partnership and mutual learning** between a coach and a coachee (Devine et al., 2013, p. 1385). Coaching is to help learners 'come up with their own answers and generate their own questions' (Knight and Nieuwerburgh, 2012, p. 102). The **companionship** in coaching reassures teachers that problems are normal and encourages them to share frustrations and successes through mutual reflection (Joyce and Showers, 1982, p. 6).

The coach is not to be seen as 'the sole "judge" and "source of knowledge"' (Parr and Hawe 2017, p. 723). In contrast with the common understanding of the coach's role as advice dispenser and solution provider, effective coaching requires **dialogic feedback** — a process of active listening and questioning that helps teachers make sense of their own practice (Charteris and Smardon, 2014, p. 112).

## Other principles

Some research shows that professional development needs to be of **sufficient duration and intensity** to effectively bring about 'intellectual and pedagogical change' (Desimone, 2009, p. 184). It is also important to gain **support at the district or regional level** for instructional leadership practices (Wilkinson et al., 2019).

Finally, designing **robust evaluation** strategies while developing coaching practices, and monitoring the effects, may help achieve intended outcomes (Bennett, 2019).

Figure 2: Elements of high-yield coaching practices – a summary of the research

Clear purpose and teacher ownership	Adult learning	Mutual relationship	Sustainable
Whole-school commitment and ownership	Preceded by the study of the teaching method	Equal partnership	Sustained over time
Shared understanding consistent with teachers' beliefs and state policies	Experiential, active learning	Companionship and mutual reflection	Supported by leadership and resources
Alignment with school's pedagogy and improvement	Tailored to the perspectives and preferences of participants	Open dialogue and constructive feedback	Rigorous evaluation for impact on student achievement



## Make a difference

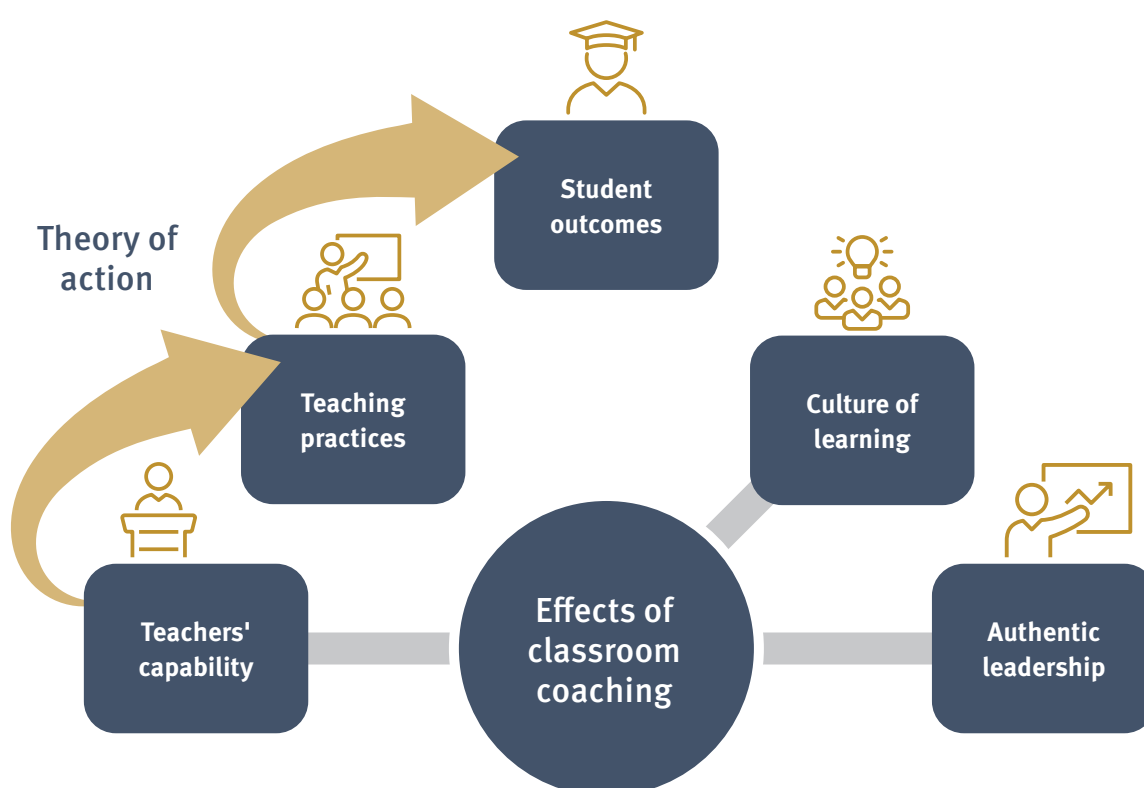
What is the impact of coaching? What difference can you make by engaging in coaching activities?

Research shows the significant potential impact of classroom coaching for teachers and students.

Coaching has been shown to improve the extent to which teachers **implement evidence-based practices** (Kretlow and Bartholomew, 2010). In addition, according to the Cravens and Wang's (2017) study, expert teachers who are responsible for **leading coaching practices** contribute to system-wide **instructional improvement** by encouraging bottom-up **action research**. This helps teachers identify instructional areas for improvement and test out new strategies.

Studies have demonstrated that teachers who receive coaching are rated as more effective (Kraft and Blazar, 2017), displaying a higher level of **pedagogical and didactical teaching skills** (Tasa et al., 2018), and increased **self-efficacy** (Nugent et al., 2016), **agency and leadership capabilities** (Charteris and Smardon, 2014).

The increased teacher capability, translated into the improved teaching practices, eventually results in improved student learning and achievement. This theory of action (Desimone, 2009) explains the positive, although indirect, effect of classroom coaching on student outcomes.



Furthermore, coaching can change the whole school by creating a coaching environment in which all staff can see themselves as one another's coaches (Joyce and Showers, 1982, p. 6). It promotes ways of working that strengthen a **school's learning culture and collective efficacy beliefs** (Goddard et al., 2015, p. 501).

Last, but not least, coaching also enhances **leadership** in schools by providing authentic opportunities for teachers to develop ideas and practices around instructional leadership (Mansfield and Thompson, 2017, p. 680).

So, what are the features and principles of classroom coaching implemented at your school? Are these practices making a difference? The following questions may help you to review the current approach to classroom coaching, or collaboratively develop a new collegial engagement model.



## To generate discussion

### In our school...

- How does our school culture support collegiality and practice sharing?
- What opportunities exist for all teachers and leaders to receive regular feedback on their classroom practice? Are these practices making a difference?
- How can we collaboratively develop a shared understanding of coaching?
- How can we collaboratively develop or enhance our approach to classroom coaching?
- How can we enhance the opportunities for all staff to be instructional leaders?
- How can we foster collaboration with other schools, including clusters and other regions, to further improve classroom coaching?

### In my own teaching practice...

- How do I work on continuous improvement of my teaching practice?
- How do I share my practice with others within the school and beyond?
- How do I know my practice improves?
- What has been my involvement in classroom coaching so far? What worked well and did not work well for me? Why?
- How can I benefit from sharing my teaching practice with peers and leaders?
- How can I contribute to improving the practice of my peers and leaders?



## Practical considerations

### Foster a whole-school commitment to classroom coaching

- Enhance teachers' voice in classroom coaching.
- Grow a positive and collaborative learning culture among staff through a range of collegial engagement opportunities.
- Encourage an openness to sharing and feedback, based on trust and collegiality.
- Consider classroom coaching as a way of fostering collegial engagement and growing the culture for collaboration across the school.
- Collaboratively determine a shared understanding, philosophy and focus of coaching across a school.

### Build a strong alignment between professional learning and whole-school improvement

- Align the classroom coaching focus to the school's explicit improvement priorities, so it's helping to develop school-wide classroom practices.
- Enable professional learning on instructional leadership and evidence-based coaching for key staff leading classroom coaching activities in the school.
- Consider teachers' previous experience, perspectives and beliefs.

- Provide a balance of focus on both individual and whole-school areas.
- Structure coaching conversations to provide opportunities for collegial dialogue and constructive feedback.

### Seek continuous feedback and monitor impact

- From the outset, identify success indicators for the school's coaching approach and processes to get continuous feedback from all involved.
- Implement strategies to sustain momentum of the program. Consider strengthening classroom coaching opportunities through collaboration with clusters or other schools.
- Connect with knowledgeable others, such as personnel in regional offices, on how the implementation and success of classroom coaching could be further supported.
- Monitor for impact over time. Regularly review classroom coaching models to ensure their responsiveness to changing school priorities and support for continuous improvement.



## Resources to support classroom coaching

### Classroom coaching approaches

#### A summary of selected literature, models, current practices, and resources for teachers

Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), *Coaching toolkit for teachers overview* (online), [www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/coaching-toolkit-for-teachers-overview.pdf?sfvrsn=7fa6ec3c\\_0](http://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/coaching-toolkit-for-teachers-overview.pdf?sfvrsn=7fa6ec3c_0) [accessed 19 May 2021].

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Mansfield, C & Thompson, G 2017, 'The value of collaborative rounds for teacher professional learning in Australia', *Professional Development in Education*, vol. 43, pp. 666–684.

### Department of Education resources

EDTV – videos describing a range of teaching approaches used in Queensland schools

Intentional collaboration website — online space dedicated to learning and sharing how we work together to help students achieve their best

Leadership strategy 2020–22

Mentoring Hub — tools and templates



### QELi resources

#### Online individual and team coaching

The programs provide highly effective professional development strategies for individuals and teams to target specific areas for growth and learning and to improve performance.

#### The Impact Cycle program

The program, developed in partnership with GCI and Dr Jim Knight, is primarily of interest to instructional coaches, pedagogical coaches, learning specialists, professional learning leaders, and others whose core function in schools is to help teachers develop their practice.

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