



GREAT  
SCHOOLS  
PARTNERSHIP

# Cycle of Action

Goal-Driven School Coaching

# School Coaching: An Introduction

When we establish a coaching relationship with a school, we believe it is vitally important to clarify commitments and expectations in advance. We created this document to answer the four most common questions that schools ask when considering a coaching contract with the Great Schools Partnership:

1. How does school coaching work?
2. What will our school or district have to do?
3. What will the Great Schools Partnership do?
4. How long will it take?

While every school or district is unique—and there are no easy, one-size-fits-all answers to the questions above—the Great Schools Partnership has developed a variety of high-impact coaching strategies that are based on sound education research and the insights we have gained over the many years we have been working with schools. These core strategies are then customized, in collaboration with the administrators and teachers, to address the unique needs of your students, faculty, and community.

School leaders will find detailed information throughout this document that will help them understand the school-improvement process and how a school coach can support, guide, strengthen, and accelerate this work. Each section outlines the general steps a school will take when working with the Great Schools Partnership, including summaries of the major stages, estimated timeframes, the school's responsibilities, and several examples of the kind of support a school coach provides.

## What Is a School Coach?

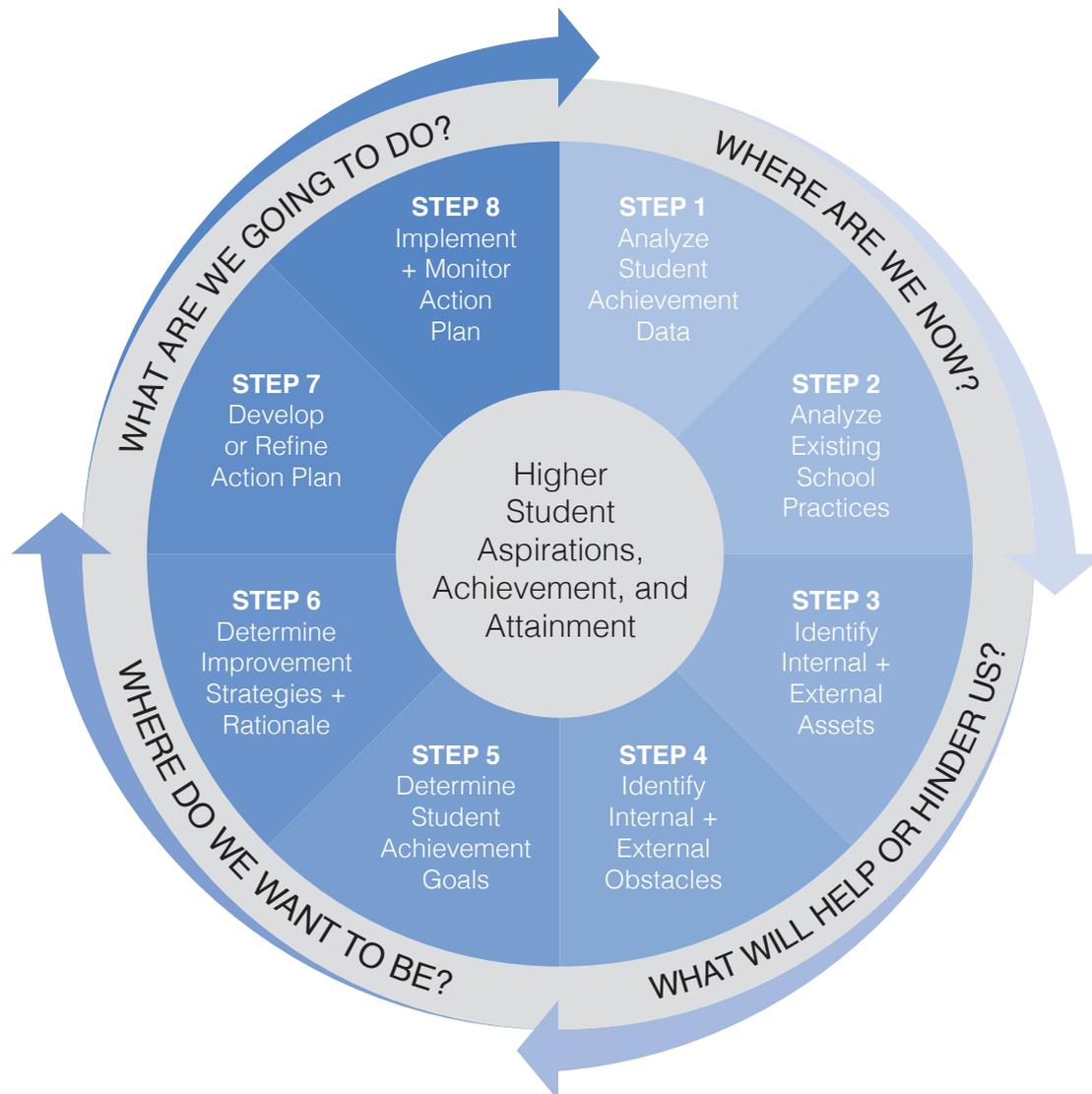
A school coach's primary role is to keep a school community intensively focused on achieving its goals regardless of what obstacles arise or setbacks occur. Unlike some consultants and education organizations, the Great Schools Partnership does not have a prepackaged improvement program that we "sell" to a school. We recognize that every school is a complex, interdependent learning ecosystem, each with its own unique teachers and students, qualities and characteristics, strengths and weaknesses. While every school-improvement plan is developed in collaboration with administrators and faculty, our coaches utilize a repertoire of research-based techniques and strategies that have moved schools from underperforming to excelling. Every action plan is based on specific organizational or student needs, existing resources and capacity, and the school's vision, mission, and goals. Many of our school-coaching relationships last multiple years, not a few weeks, since it takes time to gain a deep understanding of a school, establish trusting relationships with the faculty and community, and build the internal expertise required to sustain the challenging work of school improvement over time. Despite being invested in the school and its goals, our coaches remain "critical friends" who offer objective professional insights and perspectives that have been informed by experience. If the school-improvement process becomes sidetracked by unforeseen crises, budgetary concerns, or internal tensions, for example, the school coach can step in to ensure that discussions and actions remain focused, productive, and goal-oriented. Finally, a school coach works closely with school leaders to build a sustainable school-improvement model. From policy and budgeting to professional development and instructional practices, our goal is to equip schools with the resources, knowledge, and know-how they need to achieve their goals.

## Cycle of Action

This school-coaching overview follows our Cycle of Action—a simple tool we developed to frame the critical steps schools take when engaged in an evidence-based, goal-driven school-improvement process designed to raise the educational achievement, aspirations, and attainment of all students. The Cycle of Action is not a linear process that begins and ends, but a series of thoughtful, purposeful steps that schools undertake as they refine and focus their action plan, make progress towards goals, review what's working and what's not, and adjust priorities in response to emerging needs.

The Great Schools Partnership's goal-driven approach to school coaching helps schools remained focused on the larger mission—preparing every student for success in the colleges, careers, and communities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century—when institutional issues, budgetary concerns, or preexisting beliefs threaten to undermine or impede progress.

The four essential questions on the outer perimeter represent the four overarching stages in the cycle: (1) an objective assessment of where a school is in terms of performance or progress; (2) identification of the obstacles and assets that will hinder or support a school-improvement process; (3) a determination of goals and a supporting rationale based on the first two steps in the process; and (4) a comprehensive action plan that will outline precisely how a school community will work together to achieve its goals.



# PHASE I: Where are we now?

## STEP 1: Analyze Student Data

### OVERVIEW

The purpose of the first step in the Cycle of Action is to take a thorough, objective look at where your students are doing well and where they are not. By analyzing graduation rates, college-going patterns, assessment scores, course failures, and behavioral data, for example, and then disaggregating this information by socioeconomic status, race, ELL status, special needs, and other criteria, schools develop long-term goals based on hard evidence and identified areas of strength or weakness.

**OUTCOMES:** A detailed, objective understanding of student learning needs.

**ESTIMATED TIMEFRAME:** 2-4 weeks

### REPRESENTATIVE ACTIVITIES

- Collect and organize all relevant student-performance data
- Disaggregate data by student demographics/subgroups
- Engage faculty, students, community, and school board members in the data analysis process
- Allocate staff time to lead and coordinate the responsibilities above

### REPRESENTATIVE COACHING SUPPORT

- Facilitating staff/faculty meetings focused on data collection and analysis
- Supplying relevant tools, resources, and guidance to assigned staff
- Conducting formal or informal training in effective data-analysis strategies
- Identifying the most useful or revealing trends and patterns in the data
- Assisting with the presentation of findings to faculty, community, and school board

## STEP 2: Analyze School Practices

### OVERVIEW

The purpose of Step 2 in the Cycle of Action is to audit school practices—both organizational and instructional—to identify areas in need of improvement and determine action-plan priorities. Based on the student-learning needs identified in Step 1, this audit will help schools connect student performance to specific practices, content areas, grade levels, teams, and other factors.

**OUTCOMES:** A detailed, objective understanding of which programs are working well and which are not.

**ESTIMATED TIMEFRAME:** 2-4 weeks

### REPRESENTATIVE ACTIVITIES

- Audit existing organizational and instructional practices
- Analyze data by mapping student achievement to practices and programs
- Engage faculty, students, community, and school board members in the process and help them understand the results
- Allocate staff time to lead and coordinate the responsibilities above

### REPRESENTATIVE COACHING SUPPORT

- Facilitating staff/faculty meetings focused on practice analysis
- Supplying relevant tools, resources, and guidance to assigned staff
- Reviewing and mapping school policies and organizational structures
- Observing school and classroom practices
- Facilitating the Global Best Practices self-assessment and reflection process
- Facilitating a program of studies review and analysis process
- Assisting with the presentation of findings to faculty, community, and school board

## PHASE II: What obstacles do we face, what assets do we have?

### STEP 3: Identify Internal Obstacles and Assets

#### OVERVIEW

Now that a school is equipped with a detailed analysis of its performance and a review of its practices, school leaders need to determine what obstacles stand in their way and what existing resources, expertise, and conditions can be harnessed or leveraged. Specific examples of obstacles might include school policies that limit innovation, outdated programs and courses that should be phased out, limited staff expertise in a critical area, insufficient funding for professional development, a complicated schedule that does not provide teachers with sufficient time to collaborate, or a teachers' contract with rigid parameters. Assets might include a high-functioning professional learning group community, classrooms equipped with digital whiteboards and other learning technologies, staff members with specialized expertise in a critical area such as literacy, or a cohesive, motivated leadership team. In some cases, an obstacle at one school could be an asset at another—for example, contractual obligations for teachers or the school schedule. Assets and obstacles are always local and contextual.

**OUTCOMES:** A prioritized list of internal obstacles that need to be addressed, modified, or removed, and a list of internal assets that can be integrated into the action plan.

**ESTIMATED TIMEFRAME:** 2-4 weeks

#### REPRESENTATIVE ACTIVITIES

- Develop prioritized lists of obstacles and assets
- Survey (when appropriate) faculty, parents, students, and community members to surface obstacles and assets
- Allocate staff time to lead and coordinate the responsibilities above

#### REPRESENTATIVE COACHING SUPPORT

- Facilitating leadership meetings to identify obstacles and assets
- Supplying relevant tools, resources, and guidance to assigned staff
- Helping to identify critical assets and develop strategies to overcome obstacles based on what has worked in other schools or similar contexts

## STEP 4: Identify External Obstacles and Assets

### OVERVIEW

In Step 4, the school will identify external obstacles, resources, expertise, and conditions that can be harnessed or leveraged to execute the school's strategies and achieve its goals. Specific examples of obstacles might include district, state, or federal policies that limit innovation, local political factors, or even the community's economic situation. Assets might include a supportive school superintendent and school board, grant opportunities, or district, state, or federal policies and funding that align with and support the school's goals and strategies. Again, an obstacle for one school might be an asset in another—for example, the requirements associated with a grant or an external review process.

**OUTCOMES:** A prioritized list of external obstacles that need to be addressed, modified, or removed, and a list of external assets that be integrated into the action plan.

**ESTIMATED TIMEFRAME:** 2-4 weeks

### REPRESENTATIVE ACTIVITIES

- Undertake a review of local policies, external requirements (state or federal), staffing, and the school budget
- Survey (when appropriate) faculty, parents, students, and community members to surface obstacles and assets
- Present preliminary findings and plans to superintendent and school board to determine levels of support or resistance
- Allocate staff time to lead and coordinate the responsibilities above

### REPRESENTATIVE COACHING SUPPORT

- Facilitating leadership meetings focused identifying obstacles and assets
- Supplying relevant tools, resources, and guidance to assigned staff, including information about state and federal policies and programs that could impede or support the work
- Helping to identify critical assets and develop strategies to overcome obstacles based on what has worked in other schools or similar contexts

## PHASE III: Where do we want to be?

### STEP 5: Identify Student Achievement Goals

#### OVERVIEW

The identification of student-achievement goals is one of the most critical steps in the school-improvement process. Reforms typically break down or lose momentum when a school becomes narrowly focused on the implementation of short-term strategies, losing sight of the long-term goals that should be guiding the process. Higher student aspirations, achievement, and attainment are the organizing rationale of every school-improvement plan, and establishing clear performance goals helps schools remain results-driven and outcome-focused. Schools should identify a relatively small set of goals (3-5) that can be measured and tracked over several years. Long-term goals should be few in number, but schools can develop shorter-term annual targets to help them evaluate progress over time.

**OUTCOMES:** A set of 3-5 student-performance goals to be achieved over a 3-5 year period. In addition, schools will establish annual interim indicators to measure progress made toward the achievement of its goals.

**ESTIMATED TIMEFRAME:** 2-4 weeks

#### REPRESENTATIVE ACTIVITIES

- Analyze student-performance data alongside the school practices audit
- Determine goals for student achievement (assessments, standards)
- Determine goals for student aspirations and attainment (graduation, postsecondary enrollment)
- Allocate staff time to lead and coordinate the responsibilities above

#### REPRESENTATIVE COACHING SUPPORT

- Facilitating faculty/community meetings focused on goal setting
- Supplying tools, resources, and guidance to assigned staff, including research literature and relevant protocols
- Providing constructive, critical feedback on goals (i.e., vetting for strength, feasibility, appropriateness, etc.)

## STEP 6: Identify Improvement Strategies

### OVERVIEW

Once a school has determined its short-term and long-term goals for student achievement, it becomes much easier to identify the strategies necessary to move the school community closer to its goals. Strategies should always serve goals, not the other way around. As part of this process, schools often visit other schools to learn about specific programs and implementation strategies. In addition, the improvement strategies a school pursues should not only be based on sound research and concrete evidence of success, but they should also be coherent (systemically aligned with other strategies) and feasible (capable of being executed with existing capacity and resources). While an effective school-improvement plan should not be unrealistically ambitious, a school community should nevertheless challenge itself to take risks, strengthen professional expertise, and work more collaboratively.

**OUTCOMES:** A selection of research-based strategies aligned with identified goals.

**ESTIMATED TIMEFRAME:** 2-4 weeks

### REPRESENTATIVE ACTIVITIES

- Research best practices and school-improvement strategies
- Visit other schools to learn about effective programs
- Determine needs for short- and long-term faculty development
- Select practical, high-impact improvement strategies
- Allocate staff time to lead and coordinate the responsibilities above

### REPRESENTATIVE COACHING SUPPORT

- Facilitating faculty/community meetings focused on the identification of appropriate strategies
- Supplying relevant tools, resources, and guidance to assigned staff, including research literature and protocols
- Providing constructive, critical feedback on strategies, and assistance customizing strategies to meet identified needs and goals
- Providing samples/case studies of effective strategies from other schools
- Assisting with the coordination of site visits to other schools or programs employing effective practices

## PHASE IV: What are we going to do?

### STEP 7: Develop or Refine Action Plan

#### OVERVIEW

Armed with the insights gleaned from a comprehensive assessment of its performance, practices, obstacles, and assets, the school is now ready to develop an action plan. The best action plans are uncomplicated, practical, and focused on implementing a selection of concrete, high-impact strategies intended to achieve measurable outcomes. Once a thoughtful action plan is in place—which includes a broad-based distribution of responsibility for its execution—educators can move forward with confidence, knowing that they are executing a series of proven, practical, and coherent school-improvement strategies.

**OUTCOME:** A practical, data-driven, goal-oriented action plan covering at least twelve to eighteen months of activity within a three to five year overall time frame.

**ESTIMATED TIMEFRAME:** 2-4 weeks

#### REPRESENTATIVE ACTIVITIES

- Research school-improvement implementations and effective action plans
- Finalize action plan and assign responsibilities for its execution
- Develop an accountability system to make sure responsibilities are executed
- Develop an evaluation plan for measuring progress toward goals
- Refine and implement a communications strategy to build support for the action plan among faculty, parents, and community
- Create a one-page summary of the core features of the school-improvement program, including graphics

#### REPRESENTATIVE COACHING SUPPORT

- Facilitate and/or participate in all action-plan retreats
- Assisting with the organization of community presentations and media outreach
- Supplying tools, resources, and guidance to assigned staff, including examples of effective action plans, communications, accountability strategies
- Building staff/faculty capacity for strategic collaboration and planning

## STEP 8: Implement and Monitor Action Plan

### OVERVIEW

Implementing the action plan is a combination of activities that directly impact students and build faculty capacity to sustain improvements over time. As the implementation proceeds, professional learning and planning need to be woven into the work. Schools will be collecting data, reviewing progress, and adapting strategies as needed. Knowing what's working, and being able to measure how far you have come, are the primary goals of an evaluation plan.

**OUTCOME:** Implementation of the Action Plan

**ESTIMATED TIMEFRAME:** 12-18 months

### REPRESENTATIVE ACTIVITIES

- Fidelity to the action plan, making changes publicly as necessary and appropriate
- Regularly review progress using the evaluation plan
- Refine and implement the communications strategy to build support for the action plan among faculty, parents, and community
- Create a one-page summary of the core features of the school-improvement program, including graphics

### REPRESENTATIVE COACHING SUPPORT

- Facilitate and/or participate in all leadership-team retreats
- Assisting with the organization of community presentations, communication strategies, and media outreach
- Supplying tools, resources, and guidance to assigned staff, including examples of effective action plans, communications materials, and accountability strategies
- Building staff/faculty capacity for strategic collaboration and planning
- Monitoring implementation and guiding responsive, in-process adjustments
- Providing regular coaching reports summarizing observations and progress
- Providing training for professional learning group facilitators

## Tools and Resources

Over the years, the Great Schools Partnership has developed a variety of tools to help schools undertaking a systemic improvement process. The following tools are often used as part of our work.

### iWalkthrough

The iWalkthrough system is a technology-driven classroom-observation tool and reporting system that has been used by thousands of school administrators and teachers across the country. The iWalkthrough database includes more than 80,000 entries—quite possibly the world’s largest repository of classroom observations in the world. iWalkthrough provides schools with a comprehensive system for consistently, objectively, and efficiently tracking patterns of instructional practice. During brief classroom observations, iWalkthrough users record evidence of research-based instructional characteristics on handheld digital devices that automatically upload records to a secure online database. A proprietary reporting system allows users to quickly sort, compare, and analyze a wealth of instructional data—collected over weeks, months, and years—with only a few clicks of the mouse. The system can generate thousands of possible data comparisons, giving educators unprecedented control over and insight into the data they have collected. The longitudinal data profile generated by the iWalkthrough system can uncover deeply entrenched cultural or instructional issues that might otherwise go unnoticed for years. The secure online tools, let users generate real-time reports 24-hours a day and review school-wide data or only those observations recorded in a specific classroom, grade level, or content area. When analyzed alongside student performance and outcomes, iWalkthrough data helps schools strengthen teaching and develop a coherent plan for instructional improvement that is based on sound evidence and a common understanding of student learning needs—a process that we have seen energize and inspire faculties.

FMI: [iwalkthrough.org](http://iwalkthrough.org)

### Global Best Practices

Developed for the New England Secondary School Consortium, Global Best Practices is an action-oriented self-assessment resource that helps secondary schools review learning standards, organizational structures, leadership models, teaching strategies, professional development, and student outcomes in relation to research on high-performing educational systems and research-based practices. Global Best Practices was created to (1) promote a more global perspective in secondary schools, (2) distill hard-to-find research—on both American and international education systems— and make it more accessible to busy educators, (3) translate selected international best practices for an American audience and context, (4) help schools assess their relative performance in critical areas and develop focused, evidence-based improvement priorities, and (5) provide a practical, step-by-step process that secondary educators can use to shape and refine school-improvement plans. A companion facilitator guide helps school leaders conduct a productive faculty self-assessment process and a research summary presents the foundational studies that informed the development of the tool.

FMI: [greatschoolspartnership.org/global-best-practices.html](http://greatschoolspartnership.org/global-best-practices.html)

### Action Planning Resources

The Great Schools Partnership has developed a variety of templates, protocols, and planning tools that help schools develop a coherent, focused, high-impact action plan. These resources are provided to all schools that have a school-coaching contract with the Great Schools Partnership.

### Harnessing Teacher Knowledge

Harnessing Teacher Knowledge is a comprehensive suite of resources designed to help school administrators and teacher-leaders engage in a thoughtful self-assessment process as they work toward creating a high-functioning professional learning and planning program in their school. Research on common planning time and teacher

collaboration over the past few decades has isolated a certain characteristics and strategies that appear to have a significant impact on instructional quality and student achievement. Rather than promoting a specific model or program, the tool distills a variety of features and practices from research that can help schools efficiently and effectively build a collaborative, job-embedded, teacher-driven professional development program. Harnessing Teacher Knowledge also includes several supplemental materials that will help school leaders and teachers facilitate a productive work session, use protocols to structure faculty conversations, design effective professional learning and planning meetings, and track the impact of teacher collaboration over time.

FMI: [greatschoolspartnership.org/harnessing-teacher-knowledge.html](https://greatschoolspartnership.org/harnessing-teacher-knowledge.html)

## Professional Learning Group Training

Professional Learning Groups (PLGs) are small teams of six to twelve teachers who meet regularly to discuss teacher work, student work, research, or data share. In most cases, these teams share common students, interests, or teaching responsibilities, such as the same content area, grade level, or team assignment. The groups give structure to professional conversations and provide a safe forum in which colleagues can exchange pedagogical philosophies, content knowledge, and instructional strategies, while working through challenging issues or dilemmas in collaboration rather than isolation. PLGs are designed to capture and build on the knowledge and skills of participating teachers in ways that will help them increase the aspirations and achievement of their students. The core services offered by the Great Schools Partnership include (1) training teachers in facilitation, group dynamics, and our organization's nationally recognized PLG model, (2) working with leadership teams to design, plan, and direct their own PLG work, and (3) assisting faculties with the implementation of a purposeful PLG program that is aligned with a school action plan. Our training program equips schools with a sustainable, teacher-driven professional development model, one that national and international research has shown to be among the most effective strategies for strengthening school cultures and practices.

## High Leverage Policy Framework

Drawing from the fields of education policy, school redesign, organizational change, leadership development, and program evaluation, the High Leverage Policy Framework is a detailed exploration of education policy from rationale to development to implementation. By taking into account the larger social and political "ecosystem" in which policy is formed, written, and implemented, this tool provides policy makers and school leaders with a easy-to-use framework for developing effective, high-impact policies in their states, districts, and schools. Using a common definition of high-leverage policy—i.e., policies that not only increase educational equity, aspirations, achievement, and attainment for all students, but that also generate positive change throughout the educational system—the High Leverage Policy Framework is a first step toward a more holistic view of education policy, leading the way for more thoughtful and sustainable guidelines for learning in the 21st century.

FMI: [greatschoolspartnership.org/res\\_tools.html](https://greatschoolspartnership.org/res_tools.html)

## Learning in Action

This tool helps educators plan a thoughtful, coordinated, purposeful site visit to another school to learn about successful programs and strategies. The guide provides school leaders with a process for turning a site visit into a powerful professional learning experience, including selecting the right schools, investigating the evidence of success, and following up with a strategy for sharing and implementing what they have learned with colleagues. This practical, user-friendly tool features guiding principles for success, checklists for both visiting teams and host schools, and recommended site visit schedules.

FMI: [greatschoolspartnership.org/res\\_tools.html](https://greatschoolspartnership.org/res_tools.html)