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Coaching for impact starts with collecting data

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Instructional coaches can boost outcomes by collecting certain data in the first 30 days, writes Donna Spangler.

7 min read

By [Donna Spangler](#) 08/13/25

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As a new school year begins, instructional coaches often jump into role clarification, new partnerships and new school initiatives. Amid the whirlwind of new names, rosters and expectations, one critical element often gets overlooked during that first month: **intentional data collection.**

Why start with data?

While data is sometimes associated with later-in-the-year reporting or future student achievement metrics, the first few weeks of coaching offer a powerful, often-missed opportunity. The first 30 days set the tone for coaching regarding what is tracked and how the coach is perceived. In a time when instructional coaching programs are being scrutinized for return on investment

(especially post-ESSER), the best coaches don't just coach. They document, demonstrate and drive impact from the beginning.

Instructional coaching is about [relational influence, not positional authority](#), which can make it harder to quantify. However, without evidence of progress, growth or teacher confidence, it becomes challenging to advocate for coaching programs, demonstrate alignment with school goals or reflect on our practice.

In my previous SmartBrief articles, [“7 Ways to Measure Instructional Coaching for Impact, Not Activity,”](#) and [“Track the Instructional Coaching Impact Across District Coaches,”](#) I outlined how individual coaches and entire districts can measure the impact of coaching. This piece goes back to the very beginning — the first 30 days — and lays out a personalized plan for what and how to start collecting during that first month, which coaches often overlook.

What to track in the first 30 days

While deeper learning and achievement data points may not be available during the first 30 days, as teachers work with students to establish relationships, identify learning strengths and needs and implement

classroom rules and procedures, you can still collect meaningful and purposeful data. To start the year, I recommend a blend of 4 key categories:

1. Teacher participation and goal alignment

What to collect:

- Names of coachees
- Instructional goals
- Alignment to school/district priorities
- Coaching status (i.e., intro., in progress, paused)

Why it matters: District leaders want to know you're spending time where it counts, on goals that connect to building-wide initiatives or student learning needs.

2. Early indicators of student impact

What to collect:

- Formative assessment data
- Classroom visitation and/or walkthrough notes
- Exit tickets and/or student engagement trends
- Teacher anecdotes about student shifts

Why it matters: Too often, coaching data stops at the adult level. However, instructional coaching exists to benefit students. Data doesn't need to be high-stakes at this point in the year, just enough to show a connection. When we connect

coaching to the classroom, we connect it to why we're here.

3. Teacher voice and trust building

What to collect:

- Quotes from teachers
- Reflection responses
- Observations of trust-building behaviors
- Relational “green lights” (e.g., teachers initiating feedback or asking for help)

Why it matters: Coaching is relational work. And relationships aren't just fluff; they're predictive. This section shows whether your foundation is strong enough to grow from.

4. Coaching outreach and engagement

What to collect:

- How many teachers you reached out to
- Mini-coaching consults held
- PLCs attended
- Resources shared
- Invitations extended
- Coaching cycles started as a result of outreach

Why it matters: In the first 30 days, **building a coaching culture** is as important as completing coaching work. Documenting outreach helps districts see the strategic visibility work you're doing. Outreach is about planting seeds. Documentation shows which ones are starting to grow.

A balanced approach to qualitative and quantitative data

Don't collect data you'll never use. Focus on what fuels relationships, reflection and results.

Coaches should strive to balance qualitative and quantitative data, even during the first 30 days, as both types offer critical insights. Quantitative data shows what's happening; qualitative data explains why it matters. Together, they provide a more comprehensive story of your coaching impact. Start your coaching year with clear, manageable and meaningful data, without getting bogged down in documentation.

For years, we've heard that data is the answer — but not all data is created equal. And not every coach starts from the same place. This article offers two flexible 30-day pathways: one for coaches just beginning to collect data and one for those in an intermediate stage ready to build on what they've already started.

The framework: two paths, four choices

Whatever path you choose, the structure remains the same: Pick four tools, two

quantitative and two qualitative. Then, use those tools consistently for the first 30 days to collect, reflect, and communicate your impact.

Path 1 – Just getting started

If you're new to collecting coaching data or building systems from scratch, these eight data options help you get going with minimal overwhelm. This [beginner's data options chart](#) outlines eight possible data collection activities, comprising four quantitative and four qualitative options, along with the “what,” “why” and “how” for each one, as well as the connection to each of the four coaching impact categories.

Path 2 – Intermediate coaches with data collection ready to level up

If you already have coaching logs or a dashboard, these eight data options help you deepen insight, connect to student impact, and extend your influence. This [intermediate's data options chart](#) outlines eight possible data collection activities, comprising four quantitative and four qualitative options, along with the “what,” “why” and “how” for each one, as well as the connection to each of the four coaching impact categories.

The importance of a two-tiered coaching

report system

Coaching confidentiality is a crucial factor for instructional coaches. To balance transparency with professionalism and to maintain the relational integrity of instructional coaching, I recommend using a system of two complementary reports. Trust fuels transformation. Two reports enable us to protect relationships while still achieving results.

1. The Working Coaching Report (Coach Use Only)

Here's a *brief example* of a [beginning-level, coach-facing path report](#) for the individual coach incorporating four beginner data tools, richer quotes, teacher names and specific classroom examples. This internal, coach-facing document includes:

- Detailed teacher-specific notes
- Trust-building observations
- Reflective feedback
- Starting, in-progress and completed coaching actions
- Early evidence of impact

Why it matters:

Coaching relationships are built on the foundation of confidentiality and psychological safety. This working version for the coach's eyes only allows the coach to reflect honestly, analyze trends and plan responsive next steps without breaching trust.

2. The Leader-Facing Summary Report (For Admin/Stakeholder Review)

Here's a *brief example* of a [beginning-level leader-facing path report](#) to share with leaders that maintains confidentiality while highlighting coaching trends, outreach and early instructional impact. This public-facing version includes:

- Aggregate metrics
- Summary-level insights
- Impact highlights
- Coaching trends and next steps

Why it matters:

District and building leaders deserve to understand coaching efforts' value, reach and direction, especially when aligning to strategic priorities. This high-level snapshot communicates coaching effectiveness and identifies areas for collaboration without compromising teacher confidentiality.

What to do with the data

Once you've collected your 30-day starter data, use it in three key ways:

1. Personalize your coaching: Tailor strategies, resources and pacing to the teacher's stated goals and preferred ways of working.

2. Demonstrate alignment and impact:

Show others how coaching supports school or district priorities by connecting teacher goals to broader instructional outcomes.

3. Reflect on your practice: Review your data every week to ensure accuracy and consistency. Ask: *What's working? What needs to shift?*

No matter where you start, the point is to begin. Coaching data is about making your invisible work visible, building trust with others and growing in your practice.

Choose your path. Pick your four starting tools. And let the next 30 days tell the story of your coaching impact, reflecting not just activity but intention. The best coaching data doesn't just show what you did; it helps you become who you are.

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Donna Spangler, a 35-year education veteran, was a former K-12 instructional coach department chair in Hershey, Pa., from which she retired. Spangler served on the board of the Learning Forward PA, ran a school induction and mentoring program and has co-authored a book. She is currently the executive director for Edjacent and a virtual coach for Sibme.

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