

## Coaching Skills for Educational Leaders: Professional Development Experiences in One Public School District<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract:

Twenty educational leaders volunteered to participate in the ten-month long program, *Coaching Skills for Educational Leaders*. The program, based on the International Coach Federation's coaching core competencies and the Inspired Learning Model™ principles, emphasizes the use of ground rules called The Standards of Presence as a tool to create a learning culture of trust, openness, and safety. The program included: 1) an initial four-day session to introduce and teach coaching skills; 2) teleclasses to reinforce skills and learning; 3) practice sessions with peer coaches; 4) a mid-year seminar; 5) practice in coaching offered by participants; and 6) an end-of-year seminar with presentations of "projects of excellence."

The research study evaluated the extent to which the program produced improvements in the coaching skills of participants. By developing new measures of self-reported proficiencies in coaching competencies, the study sought to break new ground by demonstrating methods for quantifying participants' levels of coaching skill and for assessing changes in skill levels over time. Qualitative information also was obtained to provide behavioral reports about how participants applied the skills they learned in their schools.

The study found a significant increase in participants' self-reported proficiency in coaching skills over the ten-month program, as measured by the *Coaching Skills Proficiency Survey* (CSPS). In August, 2004, participants' average self-rating on a seven point Likert scale indicated *Moderate Proficiency*. In January, the average rating indicated *Moderately High Proficiency*, while in May the average rating indicated nearly a *High Proficiency* level. The change in average proficiency ratings from August 2004 to May 2005 represented an increase of one and a half levels in proficiency. The study's findings suggest not only that participants strongly valued their experience with the program, but that they also demonstrated a greater sense of mastery and confidence in their use of coaching skills.

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## **Coaching Skills for Educational Leaders: Professional Development Experiences in One Public School District**

For the past three years, a county-wide public school system in Maryland has offered leadership development programs that included providing one-on-one professional coaching for educational leaders to develop their capacity to promote success for all students. Encouraged by the success of its professional coaching for leadership program, the school system undertook a more recent initiative in August 2004 to sponsor a school-year-long program for interested educational leaders, offering them the opportunity to learn coaching skills to use in schools.

The ten-month professional development course, *Coaching Skills for Educational Leaders*, was designed by a team of master coaches and Certified Inspired Learning Facilitators™. Based on the International Coach Federation's coaching core competencies (www.coachfederation.org) and the Inspired Learning Model™ principles (www.inspiredlearning.org), the course emphasized the use of ground rules called The Standards of Presence, one element of the Inspired Learning Model. These ground rules were used as a tool to create a learning culture of trust, openness, and safety that sought to build participants' capacity to: a) use coaching skills as leaders, b) create positive learning environments, c) become proficient in exploring cultural diversity, d) foster student success by empowering the people they work with, and e) manage challenging conversations.

The *Coaching Skills for Educational Leaders* Program, taught entirely with the Inspired Learning Model, incorporated ICF core coaching competencies as subject matter for the Inspired Learning Model approach. The Program included the following components:

- a) an initial four-day session in the summer of 2004 to introduce and teach coaching skills;
- b) two days of training in January 2005;
- c) 15 teleclasses (2 per month) from September through May to reinforce skills and learning;
- d) 24 coaching practice sessions with peer coaches (3 per month);
- e) practice in coaching from January through May 2005, offered by participants to their staff or clients in schools and offices, with coaching facilitator support; and
- f) a two-day end-of-year seminar in May 2005 with presentations of "projects of excellence."

As the professional development training was funded primarily through Title II federal funds for school improvement, an external evaluation researcher, contracted by the school system to provide consultation to the program, collected data throughout the year to measure program results. Although the aims of the *professional development program* were broad—e.g., developing participants' ability to stay the course, remain engaged, not drop out, and take risks; apply new coaching and leadership skills on the job; integrate the learning into their leadership roles through "projects of excellence;" and shift attitudes toward focusing on "what is working" from "what is not working"—the *research* focus addressed a more narrow goal, due to limitations of resources.

The research study evaluated the extent to which the program produced improvements in the coaching skills of educational leaders. It addressed the research question, **Did participants' coaching skills improve as a result of the program?** [ $H_0$ : no change;  $H_1$ : competencies improved]. By assessing the extent to which changes in self-reported levels of proficiency in coaching could be observed over time, the study aimed to break new ground by demonstrating a method for quantifying the level of change in performance over time.

Qualitative information also was obtained to provide behavioral report evidence for a secondary research question, **Do participants' apply the skills they learned in their schools?** Measures, described below, were developed specifically to address these two research questions and provide evidence of the program's impacts on the coaching skills of educational leaders. This report summarizes these efforts.

### Review of Literature

The approaches to coaching, leadership development, and learning applied in the *Coaching Skills for Educational Leaders* Program are informed by various theories and perspectives, chief among them a new learning theory based on the Inspired Learning Model, which fosters a positive learning environment that facilitates self-discovery and celebration of each step towards mastery. Other theories and perspectives are also relevant to these approaches. Adult learning (Knowles, 1975) is described as a process in which individuals diagnose their own learning needs, formulate learning goals, identify the needed resources for learning, choose and implement appropriate learning strategies, and evaluate their learning outcomes. Organizational learning (Senge, 1990) requires the development of five capabilities, or disciplines—systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, building shared vision, and team learning—to create a learning organization. Emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) refers to social and emotional competence needed to motivate oneself and persist in the face of frustrations, to control impulse and delay gratification, and to empathize with others.

Guskey (1995) noted that there is little agreement among experts and researchers about how to implement successful professional development programs and argued (2000) that professional development must be an intentional, ongoing, and systemic process, with clearly stated goals, involving continuous learning both by the individual and by the organization. Guskey's (2000) five-level evaluation model provides guidelines for sustained evaluation activities.

A series of recent studies evaluating the effectiveness of the professional development programs in the schools (Porter, Birman, Garet, Desimone, and Yoon, 2004) identified a number of characteristics of effective professional development activities: sustained and intensive professional development, collective participation of groups of teachers, coherence of professional development activities that link with teachers' other experiences, and active learning opportunities. All are related to improvements in teacher knowledge and skill and changes in classroom practice (p. 35).

The results of the current study will inform the knowledge base for coaching by providing an in-depth empirical example of the development of coaching skills through a professional development program in a public school district.

## **Method**

### ***Sample***

Twenty educational leaders from a public school district in Maryland volunteered to participate in the program, *Coaching Skills for Educational Leaders*. This group, the target audience for professional development, forms a relatively homogeneous purposive sample. While more than half of the participants had experienced coaching from a certified coach for at least 6 months prior to the program, the rest were new to coaching. Therefore, the sample of senior educational leaders had varying degrees of familiarity with coaching. Four were male, 16 were female; two were African American, one was Asian, and 17 were Caucasian. Participants consisted of three principals; eight assistant principals; seven professional development facilitators; and 2 others (a resource teacher and a grants facilitator). All participants shared an interest in developing their coaching skills and a belief that coaching skills would improve their ability to communicate, support their professional learning, and increase their effectiveness as a leader in the workplace.

### ***Instruments***

Three measures informed the key research question, **Did participants coaching skills improve as a result of the program?**. Each instrument was reviewed by four senior and/or ICF certified coaches and Certified Inspired Learning Facilitators. Revisions were made based on their comments. These measures included:

1. *Guskey Evaluation Form* is a series of open-ended questions about what the participant would like to acknowledge in the following areas: the current professional development experience; the entire professional development experience; greatest learnings; organizational supports that were present; what learnings will be used; and what results have been observed for oneself, staff, and students; comments and suggestions.

2. *Coaching Skills Proficiency Survey (CSPS)* is a newly-developed quantitative self-report measure of proficiency in each of eight core ICF coaching competencies. The paper and pencil survey was administered in person and collected at the initial session, the mid-term seminar, and the end of the program. The CSPS is a multiple item additive scale with items derived from selected ICF Core Competencies. The coaching core competencies assessed are creating trust, coming present and connecting, following the client's agenda, listening, asking powerful questions, acknowledging, creating awareness, and forwarding the learning.

These competencies also reflect concepts contained in the Inspired Learning Model's Standards of Presence, such as: maintain confidentiality, connect at a heart level, practice a positive focus, listen deeply, give authentic feedback, be open to acknowledgment, and be fully present. Thus, the CSPPS has a high degree of content validity as an indicator of key aspects of the professional development program's content. The CSPPS, which demonstrated excellent internal consistency ( $\alpha = .95$ ), employed a seven-point Likert-type scale to measure proficiencies from a low of 1, Beginner, to a high of 7, Master. The definitions of these proficiency levels are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.**

**Seven Levels of Proficiency in Coaching Core Competencies from the Coaching Skills Proficiency Survey**

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**Ratings.** The ratings below describe approximately equally spaced points on a 7 point Likert scale, where 1 indicates the lowest level of the rating and 7 indicates the highest level of the rating.

<b>1. Beginner</b>	Indicates an interest in the skill without proficiency.
<b>2. Very Limited Proficiency</b>	Indicates the barest beginning level of proficiency in the skill. Performance is limited to occasional demonstrations of the competency under very limited and carefully structured conditions, circumstances, or settings.
<b>3. Limited Proficiency</b>	Indicates a developing ability to demonstrate the skill under a limited range of conditions, circumstances, or settings but not yet at a consistent level of performance.
<b>4. Moderate Proficiency</b>	Indicates an ability to demonstrate the skill consistently under moderately varied conditions, circumstances, or settings.
<b>5. Moderately High Proficiency</b>	Indicates a moderately high ability to demonstrate the skill consistently under varied conditions, circumstances, or settings.
<b>6. High Proficiency</b>	Indicates a high ability to demonstrate the skill consistently under a wide range of conditions, circumstances, or settings.
<b>7. Master</b>	Indicates a very high ability to demonstrate a complete mastery of the skill consistently under all conditions, circumstances, or settings.

3. *Pivotal Event Report Form* (PERF) is a newly-developed qualitative protocol for systematically collecting participants' narratives describing behaviors associated with their coaching experience. The PERF was sent to and received from participants electronically. Adapted from the critical incident technique developed by John C. Flanagan (Flanagan, 1954), the PERF is a formal qualitative methodology that includes three pieces of information: a) a description of the situation that led to the incident, b) the actions or behaviors of the Program participant in the incident, and c) the results or outcome of those actions.

This technique is useful for understanding the performance of individuals, systems, and organizations and for analyzing complex jobs in which the performance addresses situations for which there is no immediately obvious solution. The PERF asked participants to describe an experience or an event in which they used or observed coaching skills in their work. Participants were asked to provide the basic details of the event (the situation), describe the behaviors of the main actors (actions), and indicate the outcome of those actions (outcome). They also were asked to identify relevant coaching competencies and suggest factors related to student learning.

### ***Procedures***

Based on the professional development evaluation methods of Thomas Guskey (2002, 2000, 1997), information was gathered at four of Guskey's five levels: 1) participants' satisfaction, 2) participants' level of learning, 3) organizational support, and 4) participants' use of their new knowledge and skills on the job. While no direct measures were obtained about the fifth level, student learning outcomes, participants were asked to report their perceptions about the impact of their coaching skills on student learning.

The study used observational and descriptive procedures in a quasi-experimental one-group pre-test, post-test design. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected at the beginning, middle, and end of the ten-month-long program. In August 2004, January 2005, and May 2005 each participant completed an evaluation form and a Coaching Skills Proficiency Survey. In addition, participants were invited to complete four Pivotal Event Reports, two per semester, using the form provided. Although no participant provided four, nearly half provided three reports. In light of how busy school leaders are during the crush of school year activities, the number of reports received seems acceptable and provides sufficient data to identify key themes about participants' experiences using coaching skills in their schools.

Some of the methodological limitations of the study should be noted. The use of a small, self-selected sample limits the generalizability of the results. The study cannot be said to demonstrate causal impacts of the professional development program or of the coaching models on which the program was based. To make any claim of causality would require an experimental design with a control group, often not feasible in field-based studies. Finally, the lack of known available measures for assessing change in coaching performance required the researchers to develop new qualitative and quantitative measures suited to the purposes of the study. Though these measures rely on self-reported behavior and self-assessment of skills, they are appropriate as measures of participants' self-perceptions. However, as such measures are subject to response set bias, these results should be interpreted with caution.

## Results

The program began in August of 2004 and ended in May of 2005. Results are presented for August 2004, January 2005, and May 2005.

### *Guskey Evaluation Forms*

Based on evaluation comments from the initial, mid-point and final seminars, educational leaders' level of interest and enthusiasm for a program that emphasized coaching, Inspired Learning, and cultural diversity were high at the start and remained positive through the completion of the Program. Participants acknowledged the program staff for their knowledge, skills, and openness; for creating a trusting, welcoming, and safe learning environment; for providing opportunity to practice coaching skills; and excellent planning and coordination. Specific comments emphasized the value of seeing coaching skills modeled by experienced coaches, having group discussions about cultural diversity, and using the Standards of Presence in their schools.

### *Coaching Skills Proficiency Survey (CSPS)*

Proficiency ratings from the CSPS were analyzed using the *Statistical Program for the Social Sciences* (SPSS). Descriptive statistics and significance test results are presented in Table 2.

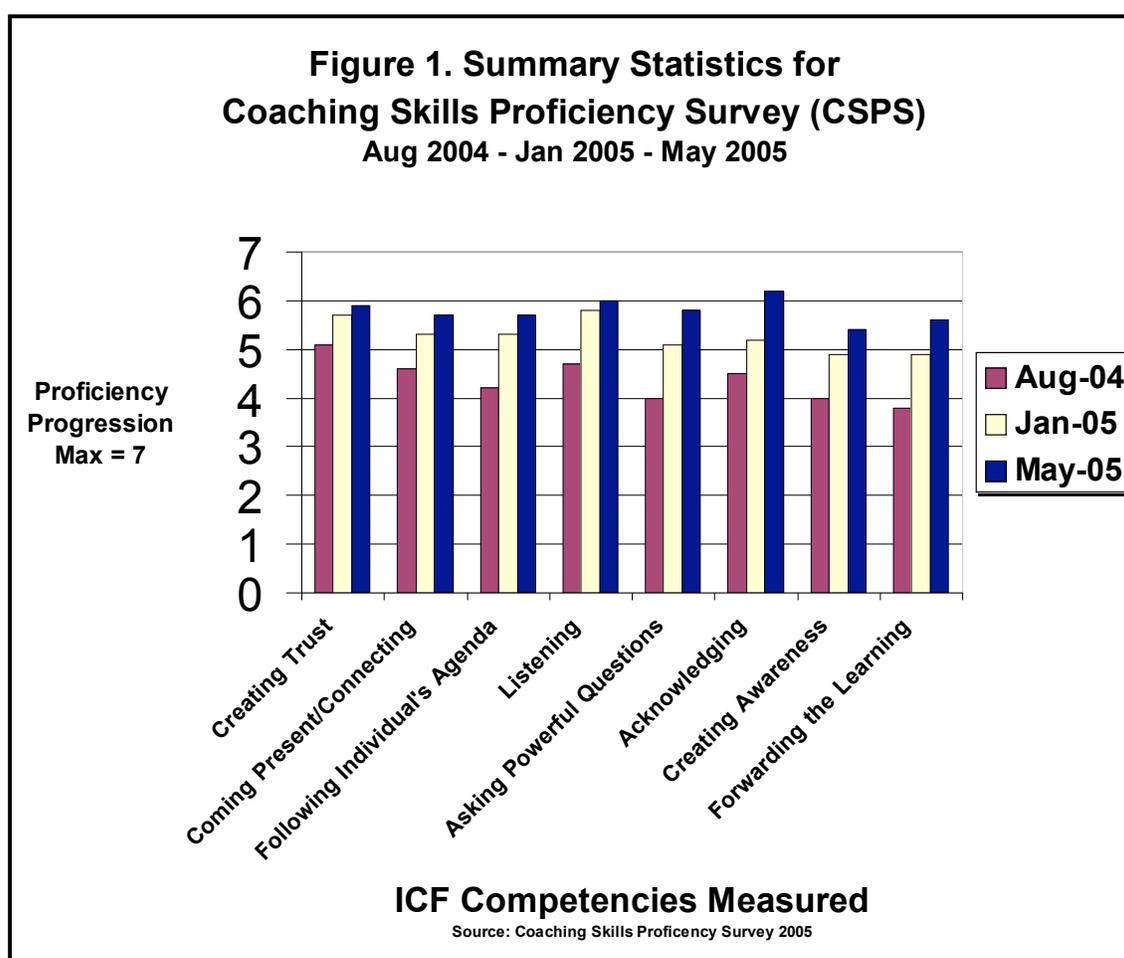
<b>Overall Scale</b>	Aug-04	Jan-05	May-05
Sample Size	20	20	20
Number of Variables	8	8	8
8 Variables - Mean	4.3	5.2	5.8
8 Variables - Minimum	3.8	4.9	5.4
8 Variables - Maximum	5.1	5.8	6.2
Average Variances	0.20	0.11	0.06
<b>Individual Competencies</b>			
Creating Trust	5.1	5.7*	5.9
Coming Present and Connecting	4.6	5.3*	5.7**
Following Individual's Agenda	4.2	5.3**	5.7**
Listening	4.7	5.8**	6.0**
Asking Powerful Questions	4.0	5.1**	5.8**
Acknowledging	4.5	5.2*	6.2**
Creating Awareness	4.0	4.9**	5.4**
Forwarding the Learning	3.8	4.9**	5.6**

Note: Significance tests compared average ratings in January 2005 with results in August 2004, and results in May 2005 with results in August 2004, by competency.  
\*p < .05. \*\* < .01.

All participants responded to all items on the CSPS at all three points in time. Thus, there were no missing data. The average rating (and variance) for the seven point Likert scale

was 4.3 (.20) in August 2004, indicating an overall *Moderate Proficiency* level of coaching competency; 5.2 (.11) in January 2005, indicating a *Moderately High Proficiency* level; and 5.8 (.06) in May 2005, approaching a *High Proficiency* level. Over time, not only do the ratings increase, but the variability in the ratings declines, suggesting either greater integration of skills as participants progressed in the program, or the ceiling effects due to more ratings clustering at the high end of the scale, or both.

As shown in Figure 1, participants' self-reported proficiency levels on the eight individual competencies ranged from *Moderate* to *Moderately High Proficiency* in August 2004, and increased in range from *Moderately High* to *High Proficiency* levels by May 2005. Comparisons between self-ratings in August 2004 and May 2005 were highly significant ( $p < .01$ ) for all competencies but one, Creating Trust. In August 2004,



participants' ratings were higher for Creating Trust (5.1) than for any other competency and by May 2005, these had increased to 5.9, a change of nearly one level. It is possible that with a larger sample, this change would have been found to be significant. Ratings on the other seven competencies increased by more than one level: Coming Present and Connecting (4.6 to 5.7), Following the Individual's Agenda (4.2 to 5.7), Listening (4.7 to

6.0), Asking Powerful Questions (4.0 to 5.8), Acknowledgment (4.5 to 6.2), Creating Awareness (4.0 to 5.4), and Forwarding the Learning (3.8 to 5.6).

These results, combined with the Guskey evaluation comments, suggest that respondents strongly valued their experience with the program, and they reported a growing sense of mastery and self-confidence in using their coaching skills.

### ***Pivotal Events Reports***

As of May 2005, 18 participants had provided at least one usable Pivotal Event Report, 14 had provided two, and 8 had completed three, for a total of 40 reports. Two participants did not provide a pivotal event report. Based on their narratives of a *Pivotal Event* related to coaching in schools, educational leaders identified the coaching core competencies related to the event and indicated their views about the implications for student learning. The content of the 40 reports were analyzed for their references to the ICF coaching competencies, settings, participants, and outcomes discussed.

*Coaching Competencies.* Among the 40 Pivotal Events reported, most described behaviors that demonstrated the competencies of Asking Powerful Questions (30 reports), Deep Listening (28), Creating Trust (23), and Acknowledging (22). Other coaching competencies described less frequently were Forwarding the Learning (18), Following the Individual's Agenda (16), Creating Awareness (16), and Coming Present and Connecting (10). The use of the Standards of Presence was mentioned in six of pivotal events.

*Settings.* Most of the coaching conversations (32 of 40) took place in meetings, such as committee meetings, staff meetings, teacher team meetings, parent meetings, IEP meetings, or one-on-one meetings. Settings for other Pivotal Events were classrooms (7) and administrator offices (2).

*Participants.* The most frequently cited people involved in the Pivotal Events were Principals and Assistant Principals (32) and Teachers (31). The next most cited participants were in a category comprised of Mentors, Professional Development Facilitators, and Central Office Staff (19). Students (9) and Parents (7) also were featured, but less often.

*Outcomes.* Most of the participants' analyses of their Pivotal Events suggested outcomes of coaching that positively affected students (29), teachers (29), or teams of teachers or mentors (17).

Key themes that emerged from the Pivotal Event Reports are:

- 1) Educational leaders applied the coaching skills they learned to coaching conversations that took place in meetings, primarily with teachers and staff;
- 2) These coaching conversations addressed a variety of situations and included a variety of participants (teachers, administrators, parents, and students); and
- 3) Participants expected student learning to improve as a result of their use of coaching skills. The route to improved student learning includes fostering improvements

in school climate, facilitating better relationships among teachers and instructional teams, helping teachers improve the content of their instruction, creating more coherent instruction, reducing student referrals, strengthening teachers' problem solving skills, creating safer more nurturing environments, and improving the emotional well being of teachers and instructional teams. There were some examples of participants whose coaching conversations influenced student behavior directly but most of the anticipated influence was through educational leaders coaching the school's teachers and staff.

### *Selected edited examples of Pivotal Event Reports*

*Example 1. Coaching a student.* An assistant principal utilized the coaching skills of Acknowledging, Asking Powerful Questions, Making Requests to Forward the Learning, and Listening when talking with a new fifth grade student with a history of behavioral problems. The conversation enabled the student to change from acting out, hiding under the desk, leaving class, and being disrespectful, to deciding to return and apologize to the teacher and the class. As a result, the student acquired an increased sense of belonging to the class, pride, self-respect, and greater motivation for learning.

Participant's comment: "Coaching skills are invaluable for administrators and mentor teachers in making [students and] staff members feel empowered."

Implications for student learning: Since the event, the sense of pride acquired through this process of self-reflection greatly improved the student's motivation for learning.

*Example 2. Coaching teachers.* An assistant principal utilized the coaching skills of Listening and Asking Powerful Questions with a team of elementary school teachers meeting to discuss a student—below grade level in reading and mathematics—who entertains other students to avoid working and is disrespectful to adults. The teaching team at this school tended to solve their problems by asking for outside assistance. When the teachers suggested that the student be sent to the office and disciplined, the assistant principal listened some, asked some questions, and then asked a powerful question that made the difference: "What can you do to keep the child on the team, remove the child from the immediate attention getting situation, and allow the child to complete assigned work?" The teachers considered this; then one suggested sending the child to a place where all teachers on the team could see the child, the child would be isolated from an audience, and they could ensure the student was doing the work. The outcome has been a great improvement from the daily referrals to the office that were occurring.

Participant's comment: "The thing that made this powerful for me was that I knew I needed to step up and ask the question and I was able to do so quickly."

Implications for student learning: the team is handling an issue itself and doing it well.

*Example 3. Coaching with a Colleague.* A resource teacher, experienced in working with young children, was invited by the principal of an elementary school to observe a kindergartner whose parents wanted the child accelerated to first grade and to share observations and recommendations at the team meeting with the parents. Though the child's classroom teacher and parents felt the child should be accelerated, the principal did not. The resource teacher utilized the coaching skills of Following the Individual's Agenda, Listening, Asking Powerful Questions, Acknowledging, and Creating

Awareness to help foster a change in the principal's attitudes and assumptions about skipping a kindergarten child ahead to first grade. The resource teacher listened to all parties involved and presented alternative information for their consideration, while following the agendas of those involved. By fostering greater awareness on the part of the principal, the resource teacher encouraged a decision to accelerate the child.

Participant's comment: "Educational leaders in the system need to be coached or coach their staff on designing through empowerment the best possible solutions for problems that affect student and staff learning."

Implications for student learning: recognizing a student's advanced ability, challenging ability through acceleration, recognizing parental influences and support, considering data from formal and informal assessments, and respecting teacher recommendations.

### **Discussion**

By describing how one group of educational leaders learned to use the ICF core coaching competencies, how these skills were measured over time, and what the participants reported about their experiences, this study seeks to contribute to the knowledge base for both the coaching field and professional development.

Schools increasingly are seen as places to help develop children's social and emotional competence, to fill the gaps when their families are unable to do so. Schools help students to become more tolerant, manage anger without fighting, handle stress, and show greater sensitivity to others' feelings (Goleman, 1995). According to Goleman (1995), programs designed to help students manage their emotions and increase their social and emotional competence have been found to improve children's academic achievement scores and school performance (Goleman, 1995). Educational leaders' use of coaching skills helps to foster greater reflection, confidence, self awareness, sense of acceptance, and feelings of empowerment among teachers, school staff, and even parents—qualities that better enable them to do their jobs.

Having reliable and valid measures of coaching competencies will provide an important contribution to the advancement of coaching as a professional field. Preliminary results from this study found a high degree of internal consistency and reliability for the CSPS. It is recommended that the CSPS, along with other measures of coaching skills, be applied in larger and broader segments of the coaching community—from novice learners to experienced master coaches, from educational leaders to executive leaders as well as coach trainees—to validate the use of these measures in other populations.

Educational leaders in the Maryland program reported significant increases in proficiency in their coaching competencies following ten months of coaching professional development. It is not known whether educational leaders less familiar with coaching would have achieved similar results. To extend the findings from this study into new areas, it is recommended that similar studies be undertaken not only with broader, more diverse, samples of educational leaders, but also with teachers. A longitudinal study, though more costly, is well worth considering as a way to evaluate the longer term impacts of coaching in the schools and on student learning. Based on the positive

response educational leaders have given to this Program, and the preliminary results from this study, the application of coaching skills as professional development appears to have considerable value in school settings.

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