

Building Capacity for Continuous Improvement: The Role of External Partnerships in Supporting Sustainable Change Across Schools

By Jorge Peña, Ed.D., *Koru Strategy Group*

William Marroquin, Ed.L.D., *California State University Stanislaus*

Candice Bocala, Ed.D., *Harvard University*

December 2024

Abstract

This study examines the extent to which an external partner helped schools within a public school district in upstate New York build capacity for continuous improvement. By analyzing the experiences of school leadership teams participating in monthly coaching sessions, the research explores how the external partner built capacity for school teams to improve literacy, mathematics, academic culture, and graduation rates. Using Coburn's Scale Framework and Bryk and Schneider's Relational Trust Framework, the study identifies key themes related to sustainability, depth, competence, and relational trust. Findings indicate that the external partner significantly contributed to the sustainability of improvement practices, fostered deeper collaboration among school teams, and enhanced their competence in core responsibilities. The external partner's role in building relational trust was critical in creating a supportive and collaborative environment for change. While areas for improvement were noted, such as time management and the need for more structured support, the study underscores the positive impact of external coaching on school capacity. The research provides valuable insights into how external partners can support continuous improvement within schools and offers recommendations for enhancing future partnerships. Despite limitations, including focusing on short-term outcomes and reliance on self-reported data, the study highlights the importance of adaptive support, goal alignment, and trust in driving sustainable school improvement.

Introduction

In recent years, capacity building within educational settings has garnered significant attention as a critical mechanism for sustainable school improvement. Capacity building in education encompasses developing skills, knowledge, and internal systems within schools and districts to foster continuous

improvement. Elmore (2004) emphasizes the importance of capacity building, arguing that it shifts the focus of educational reform from external accountability to enhancing the internal capabilities of schools. This shift enables schools to implement lasting change and improve student outcomes independently. Fullan (2007) further supports this view, suggesting that sustainable school improvement relies on the ability of educators and leaders to adapt to change and embrace new strategies effectively, thereby ensuring that improvements can withstand challenges and persist over time.

Historically, school improvement efforts predominantly followed top-down mandates, which often failed due to a lack of contextual understanding and internal capacity within schools. Bryk et al. (2010) noted that these early reform initiatives typically imposed external solutions without accommodating schools' unique challenges, leading to limited success. Over time, the focus on educational reform has evolved, with an increasing emphasis on collaborative environments that engage all stakeholders and foster a culture of continuous improvement (Bryk et al., 2015). Current literature further supports this shift by advocating for professional learning communities and data-driven decision-making processes as essential strategies to promote effective and enduring school improvement practices.

The theoretical underpinnings of this study are grounded in three frameworks: the Data Wise Framework, Coburn's Scale Framework, and Bryk and Schneider's Relational Trust Framework. The Data Wise Framework, introduced by Boudett, City, and Murnane (2013), provides a systematic approach to data-driven decision-making and continuous improvement. This framework consists of eight stages, from engaging with data to evaluating intervention outcomes. It emphasizes collaborative inquiry and encourages educators to use data to guide instructional decisions, fostering a culture of reflection and targeted intervention. Research by Park et al. (2013) demonstrates that the Data Wise Framework enables school leaders to make evidence-based decisions that enhance student learning, particularly in underperforming schools. By empowering school teams with a structured process for analyzing data and refining instructional practices, this approach promotes meaningful change within schools.

Complementing the Data Wise Framework, Coburn's (2003) Scale Framework offers a lens to examine the expansion of educational innovations within school systems. Coburn's framework focuses on four dimensions: depth, sustainability, spread, and shift in reform ownership. "Depth" refers to substantial changes in educators' beliefs and practices, emphasizing the adoption of evidence-based instruction and collaborative norms. "Sustainability" considers the conditions needed for school teams to continue using these practices over time, while "spread" focuses on disseminating successful practices across grade levels and departments. Lastly, the "shift in reform ownership" emphasizes the transfer of responsibility for sustaining reforms from external facilitators to local educators, essential for fostering long-term capacity and autonomy.

A growing body of research highlights the role of external partnerships in educational reform, particularly in supporting school capacity-building efforts. External partners, including nonprofit organizations, universities, and private consultants, bring specialized expertise and resources that schools often need more internally. Consultants bring expertise through a coaching lens, offering tailored guidance that empowers school teams to refine practices, solve problems, and implement improvement strategies effectively. They also provide valuable resources, such as access to networks of like-minded professionals, fostering collaboration across districts and introducing innovative, evidence-based practices to address shared educational challenges (Elmore, 2004; Honig, 2004). Aarons, Hurlburt, and Horwitz

(2011) argue that external partners are instrumental in implementing evidence-based practices, as they introduce new perspectives and knowledge to guide schools through complex challenges. Honig (2004) further suggests that external partners often help schools navigate policy complexities, aligning their support with the school's unique needs and promoting contextually relevant changes. However, the success of these partnerships depends on the quality of collaboration, mutual trust, and alignment of goals between schools and external partners (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Trust, a crucial component of successful partnerships, fosters a collaborative environment where all participants feel valued and supported. Bryk and Schneider's (2002) Relational Trust Framework identifies four elements of trust: respect, competence, personal regard, and integrity. These elements are essential in establishing a foundation of trust between schools and external partners, which is critical for implementing new practices effectively. The ACE Habits of Mind framework, proposed by City et al. (2009), complements this approach by promoting collaboration through habits that encourage openness to new perspectives, collective problem-solving, and empowering school staff to take ownership of the improvement process. By fostering these collaborative habits, external partners can create conditions conducive to sustainable improvement.

While external partnerships offer several benefits, such as enhanced access to resources and expertise (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012), challenges also exist. These challenges include a limited understanding of local school contexts and the potential misalignment of goals between schools and partners (Lachat & Smith, 2005). Furthermore, sustainability is a common concern, as partnerships often depend on temporary funding and may need help to maintain improvements once the external partner exits (Coburn & Stein, 2010). Nonetheless, research indicates that effective partnerships—grounded in trust, clear communication, and goal alignment—can significantly contribute to schools' capacity to sustain improvements and drive positive student outcomes.

This study aims to answer the research question: *To what extent does an external partner help schools in a system build capacity around continuous improvement?* The research explores how an external partner facilitated capacity building across schools within an upstate New York school district through a qualitative analysis of survey responses from educators, administrators, and instructional coaches. The study focuses on applying the Data Wise Framework to improve literacy, mathematics, academic culture, and graduation rates, assessing the impact of the external partner on sustainability, depth of practice, competence in core responsibilities, and relational trust. Utilizing Coburn's Scale Framework (2003) and Bryk and Schneider's Relational Trust Framework (2002) for data analysis, the study seeks to provide insights into how structured processes, collaborative norms, and personalized support contribute to school capacity building, as well as how these efforts align with existing literature on external partnerships and school improvement.

Literature Review

Overview of Capacity Building in Schools and Districts

Capacity building in education refers to developing skills, knowledge, and abilities within schools and districts to improve performance continuously. According to Elmore (2004), capacity building is crucial because it shifts the focus of educational reform from external accountability measures to developing

internal capabilities within schools. Fullan (2007) emphasizes that sustainable school improvement depends on building the capacity of educators and leaders to adapt to changes and implement new strategies effectively. This internal development ensures that schools can face challenges and improve student outcomes without relying solely on external interventions.

Historically, education systems have relied on top-down mandates to enforce accountability and standardize practices across diverse schools. This approach emerged from a need to address widespread disparities in student outcomes and ensure compliance with national or state educational standards. However, these mandates frequently overlooked the specific contexts of individual schools, such as their unique demographics, resource constraints, and organizational cultures. Leadership structures in education systems tended to prioritize uniformity over customization, driven by pressures to demonstrate immediate, measurable results, often at the expense of long-term, sustainable change.

Bryk et al. (2010) highlight that early reform initiatives often failed because they imposed external solutions without engaging educators and stakeholders at the school level. This misalignment resulted in surface-level compliance rather than meaningful improvements, as schools needed more internal capacity to adapt and sustain these changes effectively.

The recognition that sustainable improvement requires ownership and agency at the school level has driven the shift toward models of internal capacity building and professional learning communities (PLCs). The increasing complexity of educational challenges and a growing body of evidence supporting collaborative and context-sensitive approaches have driven this paradigm shift. Research by Fullan (2007) and Bryk et al. (2015) underscores the importance of equipping educators and school leaders with the skills, tools, and frameworks needed to drive their improvement processes. Professional learning communities, data-driven decision-making, and continuous improvement processes have emerged as key strategies, fostering environments where educators collaboratively identify problems, test solutions, and learn from results. This transition reflects a broader understanding that systemic change cannot be achieved solely through mandates but must be cultivated from within, leveraging the knowledge, expertise, and commitment of those closest to the work of teaching and learning.

Theoretical Frameworks for Capacity Building

The Data Wise Framework, as outlined by Boudett, City, and Murnane (2013), is a systematic framework that guides schools in using data to inform instructional decisions and drive continuous improvement. The process involves eight steps, from preparing to engage with data to acting and assessing the outcomes of interventions. This framework fosters a culture of collaborative inquiry, where educators work together to analyze data, identify problems of practice, and implement targeted interventions.

The Data Wise process has been applied in various school contexts to promote collaborative inquiry and data-driven decision-making. Park et al. (2013) argue that this process empowers teachers and school leaders to make informed decisions that directly impact student learning. In particular, using data to guide instructional changes effectively improves student outcomes in underperforming schools.

Coburn's (2003) framework for scaling educational innovations highlights four key dimensions: depth, sustainability, spread, and shift in reform ownership. Depth refers to the extent to which reforms change classroom practices, while sustainability focuses on the ability of schools to maintain these changes over

time. Spread involves disseminating successful practices to other schools or teacher teams within a school, and a shift in reform ownership emphasizes the need for local educators to take responsibility for sustaining reforms.

Depth refers to the profound changes within educators' beliefs and collaborative norms. At this level, the focus is on evidence-driven instruction, which challenges and reshapes existing practices. Teachers and school leaders begin to reflect on their approaches, often expressing how their understanding and methods have evolved. For instance, a teacher might note, "I believe this has changed my practice by..." or "I used to think... and now I think..." indicating a shift in mindset. This profound transformation is not merely superficial but signals a fundamental change in how educators approach teaching, collaboration, and the use of data in their daily practice.

Sustainability concerns the ability of school leadership teams to maintain and embed these improved practices over time. It ensures that the initial changes are not fleeting but take root in the school's operations. The alignment of team efforts, collaborative planning, and the consistent application of new norms and practices marks sustainability. The process requires deliberate planning, time allocation for collaboration, and strong support from leadership to navigate challenges and foster growth. When these elements are in place, the school environment becomes conducive to long-term improvement, with all team members contributing to and reinforcing the new practices.

Spread refers to expanding these improved practices beyond the leadership team to include grade-level teams and other staff members. This dimension captures the ripple effect of change, as the leadership team actively engages others in the continuous improvement process. Through this engagement, the principles of evidence-driven instruction and collaborative norms begin to permeate other areas of the school, influencing objectives, procedures, activities, and meetings across various levels. The successful spread of these practices ensures that the improvement efforts are not isolated but a collective endeavor, enhancing the school's overall effectiveness.

Shift in Reform Ownership involves gradually transferring knowledge and responsibility for the continuous improvement process from the external partner to the school leadership team. Initially, the external partner may play a significant role in guiding and supporting the school's efforts. However, the leadership team takes ownership over time, developing the capacity to independently sustain and lead the reform. This shift is evident when team members start using language such as "we decided," "we developed," "we coordinated," and "we created," reflecting their increased confidence and accountability. The alignment of expectations and the internalization of the reform processes indicate that the school has reached a stage where it can continue the improvement journey independently, with the leadership team fully responsible for its success.

Case studies have shown that applying Coburn's framework can lead to the successful scaling of capacity-building initiatives. For instance, a study by Cannata and Rutledge (2017) examined implementing a continuous improvement model in educational settings, highlighting how Coburn's dimensions of scale (depth, sustainability, spread, and shift in ownership) were integral to the process. The research emphasized the importance of co-constructing practices in context, engaging in continuous improvement cycles, and fostering research-practice partnerships to achieve meaningful and lasting change in schools. Coburn and Penuel (2016) demonstrate that when schools can shift ownership of reforms to local educators, they are more likely to sustain and spread these innovations. However, the

depth of change often requires significant professional development and ongoing support to ensure that reforms lead to meaningful improvements in teaching and learning.

Coburn's Scale Framework provides a robust structure for understanding how significant changes in beliefs, the sustainability of practices, the spread of improvements, and the shift in ownership contribute to the long-term success of educational reform within schools.

One of the foundational elements of effective external partnerships is trust. Trust ensures that the school and the external partner feel confident in each other's intentions, competence, and commitment to the shared goals of school improvement. Bryk and Schneider (2002) argue that relational trust is essential for the success of any collaborative endeavor in education. In their research on trust in schools, they identify several critical components of trust: respect, competence, personal regard for others, and integrity. When external partners demonstrate these qualities, schools are more likely to engage deeply with the partnership and implement the proposed initiatives effectively.

Building trust is crucial in partnerships where external organizations introduce new ideas or strategies that may challenge existing practices. School staff may resist the changes without trust or view the external partner's interventions as intrusive or disconnected from the school's needs. Bryk and Schneider (2002) suggest that cultivating trust requires intentional efforts to foster open communication, mutual respect, and a shared commitment to students' success. These efforts might include regular meetings, transparency in decision-making processes, and opportunities for school staff to voice their concerns and ideas.

In addition to building trust, fostering effective communication and collaboration is crucial for the success of external partnerships. City et al. (2009) propose using ACE (Act, Collaborate, Empower) Habits of Mind as a framework to promote meaningful collaboration between schools and external partners. These habits include being open to new perspectives, engaging in collaborative problem-solving, and empowering school staff to take ownership of the improvement process.

The ACE Habits of Mind encourage schools and external partners to engage in reflective dialogue and shared inquiry. This approach aligns with the collaborative nature of capacity-building efforts, where external partners support schools not by dictating solutions but by helping them navigate the challenges of implementation and improvement. According to City et al. (2009), when schools and external partners adopt these habits, they are more likely to develop a shared sense of ownership over the improvement efforts, leading to more sustainable and impactful changes.

Collaboration through the ACE framework also emphasizes the importance of empowering educators to take active roles in decision-making. Empowerment, as outlined by City et al. (2009), involves giving educators the autonomy to adapt external recommendations to their schools' unique contexts. Empowering schools increases the likelihood that they will implement external initiatives that resonate with their culture and meet their students' specific needs. External partners can help create a more supportive environment for change and innovation by fostering a sense of agency among school staff.

City et al. (2009) also emphasize that ACE Habits of Mind fosters collaboration and reinforces trust in relationships between external partners and schools. Consistent actions demonstrating the external partner's respect for the school's autonomy and expertise build trust. When external partners act in ways that align with the ACE framework, they help establish a foundation of trust that can support more

productive working relationships. For example, when external partners collaborate with schools to co-design improvement plans rather than imposing pre-designed solutions, they show respect for the school's context and expertise, which fosters trust. Similarly, when they empower educators by involving them in decision-making, they validate their knowledge and experience, further strengthening the trust between the two parties. In this way, the ACE framework not only enhances collaboration but also reinforces the relational trust that is critical for partnership success.

The benefits of building trust and using frameworks like ACE Habits of Mind extend beyond the immediate success of partnership initiatives. When schools and external partners establish strong, trust-based relationships, they are more likely to sustain their collaborative efforts over time. Bryk et al. (2015) argue that trust and collaboration create continuous learning and improvement conditions. Schools with strong relationships with their external partners are more likely to engage in reflective practice, use data to inform decisions and adopt a continuous improvement mindset.

Moreover, external partners who build trust with schools are better positioned to introduce innovative practices and ideas, as schools are more likely to be receptive to these changes when they trust the partner's intentions and competence. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) highlight the importance of trust in facilitating professional development and other capacity-building activities. When schools trust their external partners, they are more likely to engage deeply with professional development initiatives, which can significantly improve teaching and learning practices.

Examination of External Partnerships in Education

External partnerships have become a key strategy in improving educational outcomes by bringing in specialized expertise, resources, and innovative practices that schools may lack internally. These partnerships can involve a variety of external organizations, such as universities, nonprofit groups, private consultants, and community-based organizations. However, the effectiveness of these partnerships depends on the nature of the collaboration, the roles that external partners play, and how well the partnership aligns with the specific needs of the school or district. This section examines the different types of external partners, their roles and contributions, and strategies that foster successful partnerships.

External partners can take on different forms, each bringing unique strengths and resources. Honig (2004) categorizes external partners into several types: nonprofit organizations, universities, consultants, and private organizations. These partners can vary in scope and focus, but all share the goal of supporting schools in improving student outcomes and building institutional capacity.

Nonprofit organizations are often involved in partnerships focused on providing resources and services to schools, such as professional development for teachers or direct support for students. Many nonprofit organizations work with schools to address specific challenges, such as improving literacy rates or supporting students with special needs. Nonprofits can also act as intermediaries, helping to broker relationships between schools and other external entities.

Universities often engage with schools through research-practice partnerships or by providing expertise in data analysis, curriculum design, and teacher training. These partnerships can offer schools access to cutting-edge research and evidence-based practices, which can be crucial for making informed decisions about school improvement. For instance, Coburn and Penuel (2016) discuss how research-practice

partnerships leverage the strengths of both schools and research institutions to tackle complex educational challenges.

Private consultants and organizations can also play a significant role in leadership development, school turnaround efforts, and strategic planning. These entities often have specialized expertise in implementing large-scale change initiatives, which can be invaluable for districts looking to scale up innovative practices. However, partnerships with private organizations can sometimes raise concerns about aligning goals, particularly if profit motives conflict with the school's educational objectives (Burch, 2009).

External partners contribute to school improvement efforts in a variety of ways. Aarons, Hurlburt, and Horwitz (2011) emphasize the importance of external partners in supporting the implementation of evidence-based practices. These partners often bring specialized knowledge and resources that schools may not have internally, helping to fill gaps in expertise or capacity. Their roles can range from providing professional development to teachers, assisting with data-driven decision-making, offering coaching services to support instructional growth, or providing technical assistance in curriculum design and instructional strategies.

Moreover, external partners can act as catalysts for change by introducing new perspectives and encouraging schools to rethink their practices. For example, Honig (2004) notes that external partners often help schools navigate complex policy environments by guiding them in implementing reforms in contextually relevant ways. This guidance can be important for schools struggling to meet accountability requirements or undergoing changes, such as a turnaround process.

One of the external partners' most significant contributions is their ability to help schools build internal capacity. McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) argue that effective external partners focus on delivering short-term solutions and building the school's capacity to sustain improvements over time. Building internal capacity involves working closely with school staff to develop their skills and knowledge to continue improving student outcomes long after the partnership has ended. In this way, external partners contribute to the long-term sustainability of school improvement efforts.

External partnerships provide several key benefits to schools and districts, particularly enhanced access to resources, expertise, and best practices. For example, Bryk et al. (2015) highlight the importance of external partners in helping schools adopt data-driven decision-making practices. External partners can help school staff better understand and use data to inform their teaching and administrative practices by providing tools and training.

In addition, successful partnerships can lead to improved student outcomes. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) discuss the positive impacts of external partnerships on school improvement efforts, mainly when these partnerships focus on building professional capacity among educators. Schools that engage in meaningful partnerships with external organizations often see improvements in student achievement as teachers become more skilled in using new instructional strategies and resources their partners provide.

Another benefit of external partnerships is that they can help schools stay current with innovative practices. External partners, particularly those from research institutions or nonprofit organizations, often have access to the latest research and evidence-based strategies for improving educational outcomes. By

working with these partners, schools can adopt innovative approaches to teaching and learning that may only have been possible with external support.

While external partnerships can offer significant benefits, they are not without challenges. One of the primary challenges involves understanding the local context of the school. Honig (2006) argues that external partners often need help to fully grasp the intricacies of the school's organizational structure, culture, and history. This lack of contextual understanding can lead to recommendations that must be better aligned with the school's specific needs or capacities, making it difficult for schools to implement the changes effectively.

Another common challenge is the potential misalignment of goals between schools and external partners. Lachat and Smith (2005) discuss how partnerships can sometimes falter when the external partner's goals do not align with the school or district's priorities. Goal misalignment can occur when external organizations come in with preconceived solutions that do not fully address the school's challenges or when they prioritize their metrics of success over the school's long-term needs.

Sustainability is another concern in many external partnerships. Coburn and Stein (2010) note that many partnerships need help sustaining improvements after the external partner exits. The lack of sustainability is often due to a need for more internal capacity within the school, making it difficult to maintain the changes introduced by the partnership. Furthermore, funding constraints can also impact the sustainability of partnerships, mainly when external partners rely on grants or other temporary funding sources to support their work.

External partnerships offer valuable opportunities for schools to access new resources, expertise, and innovative practices that can enhance their capacity for improvement. However, for these partnerships to be truly effective, they must be built on a foundation of trust, mutual understanding, and a shared commitment to the school's goals. Schools and external partners must work together to align their efforts, ensure that external recommendations are contextually relevant, and focus on building the school's internal capacity for long-term sustainability. By addressing the challenges and leveraging the benefits, schools can maximize the impact of external partnerships and ensure that they lead to lasting improvements in educational outcomes.

Effective external partnerships between schools and outside organizations can be crucial in building school capacity for continuous improvement. When managed strategically, these partnerships can enhance school performance by providing access to additional resources, expertise, and innovative practices. However, for these partnerships to be effective, they must be grounded in trust, clear communication, and alignment of goals. This section elaborates on the key strategies that can foster successful partnerships, including building trust and relationships and the role of the ACE Habits of Mind.

An additional strategy for fostering effective partnerships is ensuring the alignment of goals between schools and external partners. Honig (2006) emphasizes that one of the common challenges in external partnerships is the need for more alignment of goals. When external partners and schools have different priorities or visions for improvement, it can lead to clarity, satisfaction, and a lack of progress. To avoid this, schools and external partners must engage in early and ongoing discussions to clarify their goals and ensure they are working toward the same outcomes.

External partners should also be flexible in their approach, adapting their strategies to fit the unique needs of the school. This flexibility is essential for maintaining alignment as schools' needs may evolve. Lachat and Smith (2005) argue that effective external partners can tailor their interventions to align with the school's specific context and challenges. By responding to the school's needs and priorities, external partners can ensure that their work remains relevant and impactful.

Finally, sustainability is a critical factor in ensuring the long-term success of external partnerships. Coburn and Stein (2010) note that many partnerships struggle with funding challenges and dependency on external support. To be effective, external partners must structure partnerships sustainably, ensuring that schools can maintain improvements even after the partnership ends. Achieving sustainability involves building the internal capacity of school staff to continue implementing and refining the strategies introduced by the external partner.

One approach to fostering sustainability is building the school's leadership capacity. Fullan and Quinn (2016) argue that school leaders are more likely to achieve long-term success when equipped with the knowledge and skills to sustain improvements. External partners can be key in supporting leadership development and helping school leaders develop the competencies needed to drive continuous improvement.

Effective external partnerships in education require trust, collaboration, alignment of goals, and a focus on sustainability. By building trust through transparent communication and shared decision-making, using frameworks like ACE Habits of Mind to foster collaboration, and ensuring that partnership goals align with the school's needs, external partners can support meaningful and lasting improvements in school capacity. These strategies are essential for maximizing the impact of external partnerships and ensuring that schools can sustain their progress over time.

Methodology

Research Design

This study answers the questions, To what extent does an external partner help schools in a system build capacity? The study employs a qualitative research design to explore the extent to which an external partner facilitated capacity building for continuous improvement across schools within a public school district in upstate New York. The research focuses on the experiences of school leadership teams utilizing open-ended survey responses from coaching sessions provided by the external partner to gather insights from educators, administrators, and instructional coaches involved in implementing the Data Wise Framework to improve literacy, mathematics, academic culture, and graduation rates.

Participants

This study's participants are school-level educators, administrators, and instructional coaches from 43 schools. The participants are members of school leadership teams who actively participated in monthly coaching sessions in academic years 2020-2021 and 2023-2024. Six external coaches coached the school leadership teams. The engagement with the Data Wise Framework aimed to enhance instructional quality, leadership effectiveness, and student outcomes.

In the 2024-25 school year, the district in New York state served approximately 22,820 students across pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. The student body is predominantly Black (51%), followed by Latino (34.2%), White (9%), Asian or Asian Pacific Islander (2.8%), and other races. The district's budget for the 2024–2025 academic year is approximately \$1.07 billion, equating to about \$30,972 per pupil. The median teacher salary is \$71,997. The district faces challenges, including a 72% graduation rate and proficiency rates of 13% in math and 16% in reading. Despite these challenges, the district remains committed to providing quality education to its diverse student population.

Data Collection

The data was collected from 772 open-ended survey responses provided by participants at the end of a 60-minute monthly coaching session. The surveys, administered online, asked participants to respond to two questions: "What worked from today's coaching session?" and "In what ways can we improve today's coaching session?" Researchers collected responses from four coaching sessions during the partnership's initial year (2020-2021) and responses from nine coaching sessions in the final year (2023-2024), enabling longitudinal analysis.

Analytical Frameworks

The study uses deductive analysis with Coburn's Scale Framework (Coburn, 2003) and Bryk and Schneider's Relational Trust Framework (Bryk & Schneider, 2002) to guide the coding process (Saldana, 2016). Researchers applied predetermined themes to the survey data, allowing for a structured and efficient analysis.

The survey responses were entered into an online data collection system and transferred to a shared spreadsheet where each researcher had access to individual tabs for coding. Separate tabs were created to analyze the data based on Coburn's Scale Framework and Bryk and Schneider's Relational Trust Framework. This dual-coding process allowed the research team to categorize responses systematically for educational reform and relational trust.

The study employs two established frameworks to analyze the open-ended survey data: Coburn's Scale Framework and Bryk and Schneider's Relational Trust Framework.

Coburn's Scale Framework provides a lens for understanding the capacity for continuous improvement across four dimensions:

- **Depth:** Examines changes in beliefs, collaborative norms, and instructional practices driven by evidence.
- **Sustainability:** Considers the conditions for leadership teams to continue using continuous improvement practices.
- **Spread:** Investigates how leadership teams expand these practices across grade levels and departments.
- **Shift in Reform Ownership:** Evaluates the transfer of ownership for continuous improvement from the external partner to the school leadership teams.

Bryk and Schneider's Relational Trust Framework assesses the social and relational dynamics critical to fostering a trusting and collaborative environment for improvement, focusing on:

- **Personal Regard:** The willingness of participants to go beyond formal job requirements in the support of others.
- **Competence in Core Responsibilities:** The ability of participants to achieve desired outcomes and meet professional expectations.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data analysis involved a systematic coding process guided by definitions and keywords provided in the scale and relational trust frameworks, see Table 1. The decision to apply these codes directs the analysis toward understanding how the coaching impacts the participants' perception of trust within the team and the scalability of Data Wise practices.

Two researchers coded each of the 772 survey responses to ensure reliability and minimize bias. The data was first coded individually for the Scale and Relational Trust dimensions, using specific keywords and phrases aligned with the codes defined in Table 1. Codes for each response were assigned in the spreadsheet, with columns for the coded term and the corresponding category (e.g., "depth," "personal regard").

After individual coding, the researchers compared their codes to ensure consistency. Discrepancies were discussed, and a final set of codes was agreed upon for each response. This process enabled the identification of themes and patterns across the two distinct periods (2020-2021 and 2023-2024), providing a comprehensive view of how the partnership with the external Data Wise Coach evolved and impacted the schools' capacity for continuous improvement.

Ethical Considerations

The research adhered to ethical standards for qualitative research ensuring confidentiality and maintaining transparency in data collection and analysis. All data were anonymized to protect the identities of respondents and schools.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Several strategies were employed to ensure the study's trustworthiness.

- **Analytical frameworks:** Using two analytical frameworks, Coburn's Scale Framework and Bryk and Schneider's Relational Trust Framework, allowed for a comprehensive examination of the data from different perspectives.
- **Inter-coder Reliability:** Two independent researchers coded the data, and any discrepancies were resolved through discussion to enhance reliability.
- **Member Checking:** Preliminary findings were shared with key stakeholders to verify interpretations and enhance credibility.

- Researcher Positionality:** We, the researchers, bring unique perspectives to this study, with two of us having served as external Data Wise coaches in the district during the study, guiding school teams in using evidence for continuous improvement. The third researcher is a university faculty member. All three researchers have educational leadership and improvement science expertise. Together, we are interested in exploring how external coaching impacts the capacity of school teams to engage in sustainable improvement processes. We aim to understand better how external support can foster collaboration, build team capacity, and ultimately enhance student educational outcomes.

The methodological approach provided a robust means of analyzing how an external partner supported schools in building capacity for continuous improvement and how these processes evolved.

Table 1: Scale Framework and Relational Trust Codes for Keywords in Survey Responses

Scale Framework

Depth codes for keywords: Belief, Our practice, New approach, Change, **Collaboration**, Work done by the team, Data analysis, ACE Habits of Mind, I believe this has changed my practice by, I have changed my mind about, I used to think and now I think, Change practice, Focused

Sustainability codes for keywords: time allocated, our environment, support, **coaching support**, leadership, and growth, Alignment, All team members, Follow the process, Norms, Challenges, Planning, We decided to keep it going by, We found funding to keep doing, We plan to continue, Next year, We will

Spread codes for keywords: Other procedures, Other activities, Other processes, Other meetings, Other classes, Support grade-level teams, Objectives, Implement, Direction, We tried it in a new team, We used the practice in a new way, Other people started asking us about

Shift in reform ownership codes for keywords: I made the decision to, I really believe in this, I want this to succeed, Capacity, Ownership, Set expectations, Accountable, Responsibility, We decided, We developed, We coordinated, We planned, We created

Relational Trust Framework

Personal Regard codes for keywords: Goes above and beyond, Exceeds expectations, Extra effort, Goes the extra mile, Approachable, Friendly, Personable, Warm, Open to feedback, Welcoming, Accessible, Listens, Engages with parents/teachers/students, Reaches out, Communicates regularly, Connects with the community, Sets a positive tone, Creates a supportive environment, Fosters a sense of community

Competence in Core Responsibilities codes for keywords: Effective, Achieves goals, Produces results, Meets expectations, Skilled, Knowledgeable, Capable, Proficient, Delivers results, Fulfills duties, Consistently performs, Dependable, Reaches targets, Accomplishes tasks, Successfully manages, Efficient

Findings

This study answers the question, *To what extent does an external partner help schools in a system build capacity?* by exploring the extent to which an external partner facilitated capacity building for continuous improvement across schools within a public school district in upstate New York. The study focused on school leadership teams' experiences as they worked with the external partner, specifically investigating themes aligned with Coburn's (2003) Scale Framework and Bryk and Schneider's (2002) Relational Trust Framework. Through qualitative analysis of open-ended survey responses, researchers highlighted four primary areas where the external partner influenced capacity building: *Sustainability, Depth, Competence in Core Role Responsibilities, and Personal Regard.*

Under the *Scale Framework*, responses to the question, "What worked from today's session?" showed strong evidence of *Sustainability* and *Depth*. Specifically, the researchers matched 108 mentions of *Coaching Support* and *Follow-the-process* related to Sustainability, which indicated that the external partner provided structured guidance and consistent support to help teams establish lasting improvement practices, see Table 2. For *Depth*, *Collaboration* was a prominent theme, with researchers matching 104 mentions, reflecting the external partner's role in fostering a collaborative environment that engaged all team members in open discussion and planning.

Table 2: Scale and Relational Trust Frameworks Categories, Codes, Researchers match, and Supporting quotes for *What worked from today's session?*

Framework Category	Code	Researchers match	Supporting Quotes
Scale: Sustainability	Coaching support	108	<p>"[External Coach name] provided very detailed feedback on the action plans/plans to assess progress for each department."</p> <p>"The feedback and questions that probed our thinking from the [External Coach name] were helpful!"</p> <p>"[External Coach name] is always able to refocus us on what is most pressing."</p> <p>"[External Coach name] helped us focus and gave us good ideas for the next steps."</p> <p>"The questioning from the coach to guide our discussion."</p>
Scale: Sustainability	Follow the process	108	<p>"Sticking to the agenda and revisiting our goals (Literacy, Math, School Culture)."</p> <p>"Reviewing the SIP [school improvement plan], figuring out next steps, being assured we are going in the right direction."</p>

			<p>“I felt very grounded in today's meeting with a clear objective and outcome.”</p> <p>“Team discussion. Listening to each other. Having a well organized agenda and protocols.”</p> <p>“It's a 'well-oiled machine' so we know what it is we are analyzing, and how to reflect on our commitments, and what we can do to continue working towards/exceeding them.”</p>
Scale: Depth	Collaboration	104	<p>"Collaborative voices and ideas."</p> <p>"Having everyone in the room so we can talk with each other and bounce ideas off organically."</p> <p>"The collaboration with our team, and the different perspectives are validated."</p> <p>“We had an open discussion on teacher strategies regarding multi step equations and the solving process”</p> <p>“Brainstorming together how to move forward under the current constraints of our time.”</p>
Relation trust: Competence in core responsibility	Accomplishing tasks	42	<p>“We accomplished all the tasks efficiently and the suggestion for video taping will be effective.”</p> <p>“Stayed on task and agenda”</p> <p>"Identifying the next steps and putting a due date to it so our work and focus on this occurs in between meetings."</p> <p>"We need to review when we have certain tasks that are data-driven to our school's data cycles."</p> <p>"Staying more on task with the agenda, also having some pre work done so we are not trying to do it all in an hour."</p>
Relation trust: Competence in	Knowledgeable	32	<p>“What was helpful for me was [External Coach name] know exactly where we are and helping</p>

core responsibility

us move to the next step. We just finished step 3 and we are ready to move into Step 4. [External Coach name] explained the purpose of Step 4, and provided resources (for us to complete Step 4 before our next meeting.”

“[External Coach name] allowed us to ask questions to further our understanding. She made sure we knew what was expected and our next steps as a team.”

“[External Coach name] is very explicit on what we need to do as a school to be successful in following our School Improvement Plan.”

"[External Coach name] is always well planned, knowledgeable and supportive in walking the team through the learning process to help us engage and own the process." – This highlights the coach’s knowledge in guiding the team effectively through a learning process.

"What was helpful for me was [External Coach name] knowing exactly where we are and helping us move to the next step. Deirdre explained the purpose of Step 4, and provided resources for us to complete Step 4 before our next meeting."

"[External Coach name] is very explicit on what we need to do as a school to be successful in following our School Improvement Plan."

Relation trust:
Personal regard

Sense of
community

71

“Smaller group, Zoom, all voices were heard and positive comments, everyone took inquiry stance”

“Hearing all voices and suggestions to continue to improve our outcomes within all Commitment areas.”

“Hear all voices! We do a great job of building off of each others thinking:)”

"Smaller group, Zoom, all voices were heard and positive comments, everyone took inquiry stance."

"Having everyone in the room so we can talk with each other and bounce ideas off

organically."

When asked, "In what ways can we improve today's coaching session?" feedback again highlighted areas within the Scale Framework, particularly under *Sustainability*. Here, researchers matched 31 responses referencing *Time Allocated*, with participants expressing a need for additional time to complete tasks and engage in discussions, see Table 3. Researchers matched another 23 responses focused on *Coaching Support*, underscoring a desire for more structured, step-by-step guidance from the external partner.

Table 3: Scale and Relational Trust Frameworks Categories, Codes, Researchers match, and Supporting quotes for *In what ways can we improve today's coaching session?*

Framework Category	Code	Frequency match	Quote
Scale: Sustainability	Time allocated	31	<p>"I wish we had more time to actually workshop some of the things we need to complete. We have important conversations but then have to stop due to time."</p> <p>"NA - I wish we had more time as this was a very effective use of time."</p> <p>"The times goes so quickly, perhaps can make the meeting 45 min."</p> <p>"I would love more time to review and get more feedback on our progress."</p>
Scale: Sustainability	Coaching support	23	<p>"More support step by step. It was very overwhelming and I think that the coaches need to understand that we have other pressure as well."</p> <p>"I appreciated the help from [external coach] with the gradual release on control."</p> <p>"I feel [external coach] is able to work with us conveying our message and having all voices heard."</p>
Relation trust: Competence in core responsibility	Accomplishes tasks	11	<p>"Identifying the next steps and putting a due date to it so our work and focus on this occurs in between meetings."</p> <p>"Staying more on task with the agenda, also having some pre work done so we are not trying to do it all in an hour."</p> <p>"Having the committees complete the</p>

questions, which will help us focus on agenda items thoroughly."

Applying the *Relational Trust Framework* to the same questions provided insight into critical relational dynamics for capacity building. In response to "What worked from today's session?" under *Competence in Core Responsibility*, researchers matched 42 responses for *Accomplishing Tasks* and 32 for *Knowledgeable*. This feedback highlights the external partner's effectiveness in guiding teams toward meeting objectives and providing clear, knowledgeable support. Under *Personal Regard*, 71 responses emphasized a *Sense of Community*, reflecting the external partner's ability to create a welcoming, collaborative environment where participants felt supported.

For the question, "In what ways can we improve today's coaching session?" responses within the *Competence in Core Responsibility* category included 11 matches for *Accomplishing Tasks*, suggesting that participants sought additional support for meeting objectives and staying on task throughout the sessions.

Overall, the feedback analysis underscored the external partner's significant contributions to Sustainability, collaboration, task accomplishment, and relational trust while also identifying areas for enhancing time management and structured support.

Coburn's Scale Framework: Sustainability

The data indicated that the external partner played a role in establishing systems and processes that support long-term improvement. Within the theme of sustainability, two sub-themes emerged: *Coaching Support* and *Follow the Process*.

The data revealed that the external partner played a role in establishing systems and processes that supported long-term improvement, particularly in fostering sustainability and depth. Feedback from participants emphasized that the coach's support was critical to sustaining the improvement efforts. One of the key factors in this sustainability was the coaching support provided by the external partner. The coach helped teams refocus, guiding their thinking with structured agendas and offering actionable feedback. Participants found this support valuable, with one participant noting, "[External coach] provided very detailed feedback on the action plans/plans to assess progress for each department." Another participant added that the coach "helped us focus and gave us good ideas for the next steps." These comments highlight how the external partner's guidance aligned the teams with their improvement goals, fostering a sense of direction and purpose.

Additionally, adherence to structured processes, such as using agendas and revisiting goals, played a crucial role in maintaining the momentum of improvement efforts. Participants appreciated the protocols the coach introduced, keeping them grounded in their objectives. One participant remarked that sticking to the agenda and revisiting goals like "Literacy, Math, School Culture" was particularly helpful. Another described the process as a "well-oiled machine" that ensured clarity on what to analyze, how to reflect on commitments, and how to continue progressing toward goals. This structured approach provided teams with a consistent framework to rely on, reinforcing the sustainability of the practices introduced by the external partner.

However, some feedback suggested areas for improvement in terms of time allocation. A few participants expressed the need for more time to engage with tasks and discussions, with one participant requesting "more support step by step" to avoid feeling overwhelmed by the process and another noting, "I wish we had more time to actually workshop some of the things we need to complete." These responses highlighted the importance of balancing structured support with adequate reflection and task completion time.

In addition to sustainability, the external partner's role in fostering depth through collaboration and reflective inquiry emerged as a force in building capacity. The external partner facilitated an environment where collaboration was prioritized, and team members felt their ideas were valued. Participants described the coaching sessions as collaborative, with quotes such as "Collaborative voices and ideas" and "The collaboration with our team, and the different perspectives are validated." One participant highlighted the value of having "everyone in the room so we can talk with each other and bounce ideas off organically," reflecting the inclusive and open atmosphere the external partner fostered. This collaborative culture encouraged team members to share perspectives, brainstorm solutions, and make collective decisions, resulting in a unified approach to improvement.

Reflective inquiry was also central to the depth of the improvement process. The external partner's ability to ask probing questions and encourage critical thinking helped teams engage in reflective practices that deepened their understanding. One participant noted that the "feedback and questions that probed our thinking" had an impact on their ability to assess progress and make evidence-based adjustments. This structured reflection helped the teams rethink their strategies to their goals, emphasizing the importance of inquiry in building capacity and driving continuous improvement.

The external partner's influence sustained long-term improvement efforts and fostering deeper collaboration and reflection among school teams. While areas for improvement, such as time management, were identified, the feedback suggests that the external coaching partnership played a role in building the capacity of school leadership teams to engage in a meaningful, sustainable improvement process.

Relational Trust Framework: Competence in Core Role Responsibilities

Competence in core responsibilities was another area where the external partner had a measurable impact, as demonstrated by themes of *Accomplishing Tasks* and *Knowledgeable Support*.

The external partner helped teams meet objectives efficiently, reinforcing their ability to manage responsibilities and achieve outcomes. Responses indicated that teams appreciated the structure that allowed them to stay on task. One participant said, "We accomplished all the tasks efficiently, and the suggestion for videotaping will be effective." Another noted, "Identifying the next steps and putting a due date to it so our work and focus on this occurs in between meetings," illustrating how task-oriented guidance from the external partner enabled progress beyond individual sessions.

Participants highlighted the external partner's expertise as a resource for guiding teams through improvement. Participants valued the coach's ability to set clear expectations, share relevant resources, and provide detailed explanations. One participant observed, "[External coach] is always well planned, knowledgeable, and supportive in walking the team through the learning process." Another stated, "What

was helpful for me was [external coach] knowing exactly where we are and helping us move to the next step." This knowledgeable guidance helped participants feel confident in navigating the improvement process, ultimately enhancing their competence in fulfilling their responsibilities.

Relational Trust Framework: Personal Regard

The external partner's approach fostered a sense of *Personal Regard*, which played a role in relational trust, as seen through the theme of *Sense of Community*.

The external partner's approach to coaching encouraged a supportive and inclusive environment where participants felt valued. Responses underscored the importance of this sense of community, as one participant described, "Smaller group, Zoom, all voices were heard and positive comments, everyone took inquiry stance." Another participant highlighted the benefit of "Hearing all voices and suggestions to continue to improve our outcomes within all Commitment areas." The emphasis on listening to all perspectives and building off each other's ideas fostered a collegial atmosphere beyond formal job requirements, enhancing relational trust and the willingness to collaborate.

Overall, the findings indicate that the external partner contributed to building capacity across schools by fostering sustainability, deep collaboration, competence, and a sense of personal regard. The external partner's structured processes and coaching support ensured that school leadership teams could establish lasting practices, engage in reflective collaboration, and gain confidence in meeting their responsibilities. Additionally, the partner's relational approach strengthened the sense of community within teams, creating a positive and inclusive atmosphere conducive to improvement.

Unexpected Findings

While the study primarily focused on sustainability, depth, competence, and relational trust, an unexpected finding emerged regarding the external partner's adaptability. Participants noted that the coach provided tailored support in response to unique challenges, such as school closures, reflecting a flexible approach beyond the prescribed coaching content. For example, a participant shared in the feedback, "Appreciate us doing what the agenda said and because [sic] our school is closing we did not focus on next year." This adaptability suggests that the external partner's ability to understand the context and adjust support accordingly is crucial to successful capacity building.

Discussion

This study examined the impact of an external partner on building capacity across schools in a public school district, focusing on fostering sustainability, depth, competence, and personal regard. The findings provide valuable insights into how external support can reinforce structured, collaborative, and trust-based practices that contribute to school improvement. This section discusses the significance of these findings, situates them within existing literature, considers theoretical implications, suggests practical applications, and outlines recommendations and limitations.

The study findings reveal that the external partner played an instrumental role in creating sustainable practices, fostering depth in school collaboration, enhancing competence in core responsibilities, and nurturing personal regard. These aspects were critical in answering the research question, showing how an

external partner can drive effective capacity building in a school system.

The external partner's structured approach was central to establishing sustainable school practices. The partner provided a consistent framework that helped schools remain focused and organized by using agendas, clear action steps, and protocols. Participant feedback underscored the value of these tools, which enabled schools to maintain momentum and make incremental progress, even beyond individual coaching sessions. These structured processes formed the foundation for sustainable improvement, indicating that external partners can help schools embed long-lasting habits and systems that endure after their involvement.

The external partner facilitated meaningful changes in school culture, promoting reflective practices and deeper collaboration. The external partner helped schools move beyond superficial adjustments to achieve systemic shifts by fostering inquiry-based discussions and encouraging critical thinking. This depth of engagement allowed teams to share ownership of the improvement process, as evidenced by the increased collaborative norms and evidence-based practices across schools. This emphasis on deep collaboration helped establish a culture of continuous improvement, suggesting that external partners can be pivotal in transforming school teams into cohesive, reflective communities.

The external partner's expertise enhanced school teams' capacity to manage responsibilities and make informed decisions. Participants highlighted the value of the partner's guidance, which clarified tasks, aligned actions with improvement goals, and reinforced the importance of data-driven decision-making. This emphasis on real-time support helped school teams refine their processes and better align with their objectives, showing that external partners contribute significantly to developing operational and strategic competence.

The partner's approach to building trust and fostering a supportive environment was instrumental in creating a sense of personal regard among participants. By tailoring support to meet the unique needs of each school, the partner fostered an environment where staff felt valued, respected, and motivated to contribute beyond their formal roles. The external partner's emotional support enhanced team morale and commitment, illustrating their vital role in cultivating relational trust and a sense of community within schools.

The findings largely align with and expand upon existing literature on capacity building and the role of external partners in school improvement. Previous research has underscored the importance of sustainability in educational reform, highlighting the role of structured processes in creating lasting change. This study confirms that external partners facilitate sustainability through practical tools like agendas and action steps, extending Bryk and Schneider's (2002) emphasis on trust and Elmore's (2004) focus on structured guidance.

In terms of depth, the findings echo Fullan's (2011) work on transformative change, which emphasizes shifts in beliefs and collaborative practices. This study expands on Fullan's work by detailing specific strategies, such as inquiry-driven reflection and collaborative planning, that external partners use to deepen school engagement. Similarly, the findings support Bryk and Schneider's relational trust theory by showing that personal regard and competence in core responsibilities plays a fundamental role in building capacity. The study reveals that external partners can foster trust by creating supportive, respectful environments encouraging school staff to extend beyond formal expectations.

While previous studies have discussed external partners' technical and relational roles, this study provides a nuanced view, showing that both are essential for effective capacity building. Unlike more prescriptive models, the findings suggest that successful external partnerships balance structured support with adaptive, context-sensitive approaches that address each school's unique needs.

The findings contribute to theoretical understandings of *scaling*, *relational trust*, and *external support* in educational improvement.

The results suggest that schools can scale improvement practices across schools by using structured practices derived from frameworks that adapt to diverse contexts, such as rolling agendas and systematic reviews. However, the findings suggest that schools need more than uniform practices to achieve scaling. The external partner's ability to customize support and adapt to school-specific challenges indicates that scaling requires standardization and flexibility, which points to the importance of adaptive leadership in educational reform.

The study reinforces Bryk and Schneider's concept of relational trust as a foundation for school improvement. However, it also highlights the need for trust to be paired with technical guidance and task completion to achieve sustainable outcomes. Trust was built through consistent, respectful interactions. However, the combination of trust and structured processes drove improvement, suggesting a more nuanced role for relational trust in capacity building.

The findings underscore external partners' critical role as technical advisors and relational facilitators. Effective external support must balance expertise with personalized, context-aware interactions, challenging more rigid external partnership models. The study suggests that successful external support is highly relational and adaptive, emphasizing the need for external partners to engage in relational and technical support roles.

Recommendations for Capacity Building

The findings offer actionable insights for schools, districts, and external partners aiming to enhance capacity building:

1. **Adopt Structured Processes:** Schools and districts can implement tools like rolling agendas and action trackers to foster sustainability. Initial training by external partners ensures consistent use of these processes across schools.
2. **Encourage Collaboration and Reflection:** Regular reflection sessions, led by external partners, help teams analyze data, reflect on practices, and make evidence-based decisions. This approach cultivates a culture of continuous improvement.
3. **Build Competence in Core Responsibilities:** Targeted professional development on goal alignment, data analysis, and task management enhances school teams' strategic decision-making capacity.
4. **Balance Relational Trust with Technical Guidance:** External partners should focus on building relational trust while providing clear, structured guidance to support task completion and goal attainment.
5. **Tailor Support to Each School's Needs:** Adapting approaches to fit each school's unique context ensures strategies are relevant and impactful.
6. **Create System-Wide Support Networks:** Districts can establish networks that include external partners, district leaders, and school teams to foster collaboration and share best practices across schools.

Limitations

The study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. The feedback is primarily based on individual coaching sessions, which may limit the ability to assess the broader, long-term impact on system-wide scaling and relational trust across schools. By focusing on immediate outcomes such as task completion and adherence to processes, the study may underrepresent the deeper relational dynamics essential for sustained capacity building. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of bias, as participants may emphasize short-term successes only after fully considering long-term effects. Furthermore, the context-specific nature of the findings means they may not apply to districts with varying resources or challenges, which limits the generalizability of the results.

The data collected for this study is also constrained by its focus on participants' perceptions of monthly 60-minute coaching sessions, gathered through two open-ended questions: "What worked from today's coaching session?" and "In what ways can we improve today's coaching session?" While these questions provide valuable insights into immediate reactions, they do not capture the long-term effects or how participants will apply the skills and strategies discussed once the coaching ends. This makes it difficult to assess the sustainability of the coaching and how participants will independently implement the strategies when the external coach is not present.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into how the external partner facilitated capacity building across schools by offering structured support, promoting collaboration, and enhancing relational trust. In alignment with Coburn's Scale Framework and Bryk and Schneider's Relational Trust Framework, these elements played a crucial role in helping school teams engage in continuous improvement. However, the study's limitations highlight the need for further research to explore the long-term outcomes and broader impact of external coaching, particularly its influence on relational trust and system-wide scaling.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should investigate the long-term effects of external partner support, focusing on sustainability and scaling across schools. Studies could explore how the balance between relational and technical support impacts capacity building, as both elements appear crucial for effective school improvement. Examining how capacity-building efforts endure beyond external involvement also provides insights into the lasting effects of structured processes and relational trust in educational systems.

Conclusion

Overall, the study demonstrates that external partners play a role in building capacity within schools by fostering sustainability, depth, competence, and personal regard. These findings confirm and expand on existing literature, offering detailed insights into the structured and relational aspects of effective capacity building. By balancing adaptive support with standardized processes, external partners can help schools develop the tools, trust, and technical expertise needed to sustain progress, achieve meaningful change, and foster collaborative improvement across schools in a system.

References

- Borman, G. D., Hewes, G. M., Overman, L. T., & Brown, S. (2003). Comprehensive school reform and student achievement: A meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 73(2), 125-230.
- Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L. M., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P. G. (2010). *Learning to improve: How America's schools can get better at getting better*. Harvard Education Press.
- Burch, P. (2009). *Hidden markets: The new education privatization*. Routledge.
- Cannata, M., & Rutledge, S. A. (2017). Continuous improvement in schools: Understanding how educators respond to reform initiatives. Vanderbilt University. Scaling Up Center. Retrieved from <https://my.vanderbilt.edu/scalingupcenter/files/2017/04/improvement-model-and-scaling-up-042117.pdf>
- Coburn, C. E., & Penuel, W. R. (2016). Research–practice partnerships in education: Outcomes, dynamics, and open questions. *Educational Researcher*, 45(1), 48-54.
- Coburn, C. E., & Stein, M. K. (2010). *Research and practice in education: Building alliances, bridging the divide*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Coburn, C. E., White, P., & Taylor, A. R. (2015). Practice partnerships: Leveraging lessons from two fields. *Journal of Educational Change*, 16(2), 175-195.
- Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. E., & Gardner, M. (2017). *Effective teacher professional development*. Learning Policy Institute.
- Desimone, L. M. (2009). Improving impact studies of teachers' professional development: Toward better conceptualizations and measures. *Educational Researcher*, 38(3), 181-199.
- Desimone, L. M., & Garet, M. S. (2015). Best practices in teachers' professional development in the United States. *Psychology, Society & Education*, 7(3), 252-263.
- Fullan, M. (2006). *Turnaround leadership*. Jossey-Bass.
- Harris, A., & Lambert, L. (2003). *Building leadership capacity for school improvement*. Open University Press.
- Harkavy, I., & Hartley, M. (2012). University-school-community partnerships for youth development and democratic renewal. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 2012(134), 7-17.
- Henig, J. R., Riehl, C. J., Rebell, M. A., & Wolff, J. R. (2010). *The new education philanthropy*. Harvard Education Press.

- Honig, M. I., & Venkateswaran, N. (2012). School-community partnerships: A typology for leveraging the community's resources. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 48(3), 438-470.
- Kidron, Y., & Lindsay, J. (2014). The effects of increased learning time on student academic and nonacademic outcomes: Findings from a meta-analytic review. Institute of Education Sciences.
- King, M. B., & Newmann, F. M. (2001). Building school capacity through professional development: Conceptual and empirical considerations. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 15(2), 86-94.
- Leithwood, K., Louis, K. S., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). How leadership influences student learning. Wallace Foundation.
- Mapp, K. L., & Kuttner, P. J. (2013). Partners in education: A dual capacity-building framework for family-school partnerships. SEDL.
- Mandinach, E. B., & Gummer, E. S. (2016). Data literacy for educators: Making it count in teacher preparation and practice. Teachers College Press.
- O'Day, J. A., & Smith, M. S. (2016). Quality and equity in American education: Systemic problems, systemic solutions. In E. L. Glennan Jr., S. J. Bodilly, J. A. Galegher, & K. P. Kerr (Eds.), *Expanding the reach of education reforms: Perspectives from leaders in the scale-up of educational interventions* (pp. 137-165). Rand Corporation.
- Odden, A. R., & Picus, L. O. (2014). *School finance: A policy perspective* (5th ed.). McGraw-Hill.
- Saldana, J. (2016). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Sanders, M. G. (2013). The role of community in comprehensive school, family, and community partnerships. In S. Sheldon & T. Williams (Eds.), *The Wiley handbook of family, school, and community relationships in education* (pp. 32-47). Wiley.
- Stoll, L., Bolam, R., McMahon, A., Wallace, M., & Thomas, S. (2006). Professional learning communities: A review of the literature. *Journal of Educational Change*, 7(4), 221-258.
- Warren, M. R. (2005). Communities and schools: A new view of urban education reform. *Harvard Educational Review*, 75(2), 133-173.
- Weiss, C. H., Murphy-Graham, E., & Birkeland, S. (2014). An alternative route to policy influence: How evaluators affect policy through influence on intermediaries. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 26(1), 12-30.