Rethinking Responsive Education Ventures

Innovation Coaching Theory of Change

A Theory of Change for Innovation Coaching

Background

The purpose of this document is to articulate a theory of change for an innovation coaching intervention, based on the Maine Department of Education's (MDOE) Rethinking Responsive Education Ventures (RREV) program. Even though the RREV program will end at the expiration of the federal grant after the 2023–2024 school year, its innovation coaching model can serve as an inspiration for future MDOE coaching initiatives, especially those that share RREV's goal of promoting systemic change in schools.

ICF, the external evaluator of the RREV program, developed this theory of change based on our observations of the RREV program over the past 3 years, including surveys and interviews with MDOE staff, RREV coaches, teachers, administrators, and community partners from schools implementing RREV-funded pilots. We have used these data, plus an environmental scan of other coaching models and research, to identify the problem that coaching is intended to address and to explain how innovation coaching can solve it. While MDOE may adapt this theory of change in response to particular programmatic goals or grant requirements, our intent with this document is to provide a foundation for future innovation programs by articulating the underlying reasons why this model is uniquely capable of helping schools achieve systemic change.

Problem Statement

Achieving systemic change in a complex environment such as a school is an inherently challenging goal. Processes and practices that worked in certain times and places can lose their effectiveness or even become counterproductive to learning when circumstances change. Innovation coaching empowers schools to rethink these systems and create new programs that respond to emergent needs and reflect the ideas, priorities, and lived experiences of educators and students. However, this process of systemic change entails challenges, including resistance from those used to current practices, unintended consequences from altering complex systems, and the trial and error inherent to implementing new ways of thinking and doing.

The Role of an Innovation Coach

The innovation coaching theory of change posits that an external thought partner and ally can help schools navigate the challenges of systemic change because they:

- Help educators develop, test, and refine ideas for innovative education models that are responsive to their schools' local assets and needs.

- Identify the key activities, preparatory steps, and partner schools needed to implement their programs.

- Co-create data collection plans and instruments that allow educators to gather feedback about their program.

- Collaborate with educators to map out downstream effects of changes to avoid unforeseen challenges or unintended consequences.

- Reflect with schools about their experiences with their programs' implementation and outcomes.

- Encourage schools to continually iterate and adapt their programs as needs change and new opportunities arise.

How Innovation Coaches Fulfill Their Role

Innovation coaches can fulfill their role because of their training and tools, experiences and expertise, and relationships. Innovation coaches are trained in design thinking, which is a problem-solving approach that involves the iterative creation, testing, and improvement of ideas and products (Exhibit 1).[1] Design thinking was integral to RREV's purpose of supporting continuous innovation and productive experimentation in response to evolving challenges and opportunities across Maine schools.

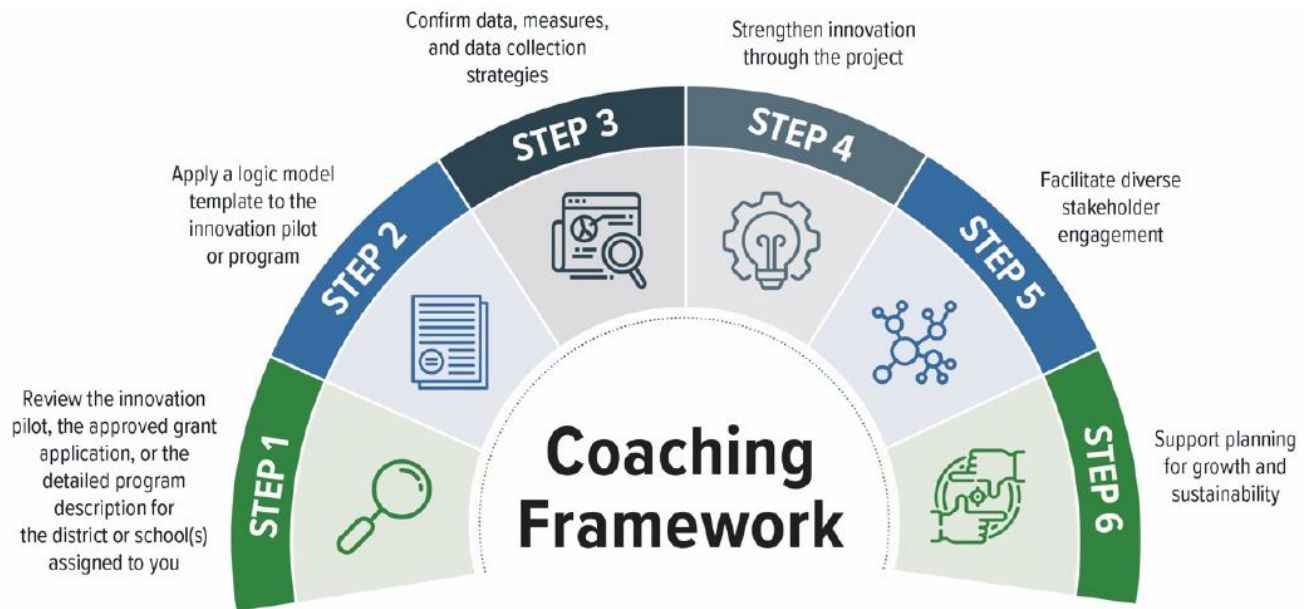EXHIBIT 1. PRINCIPLES OF DESIGN THINKING
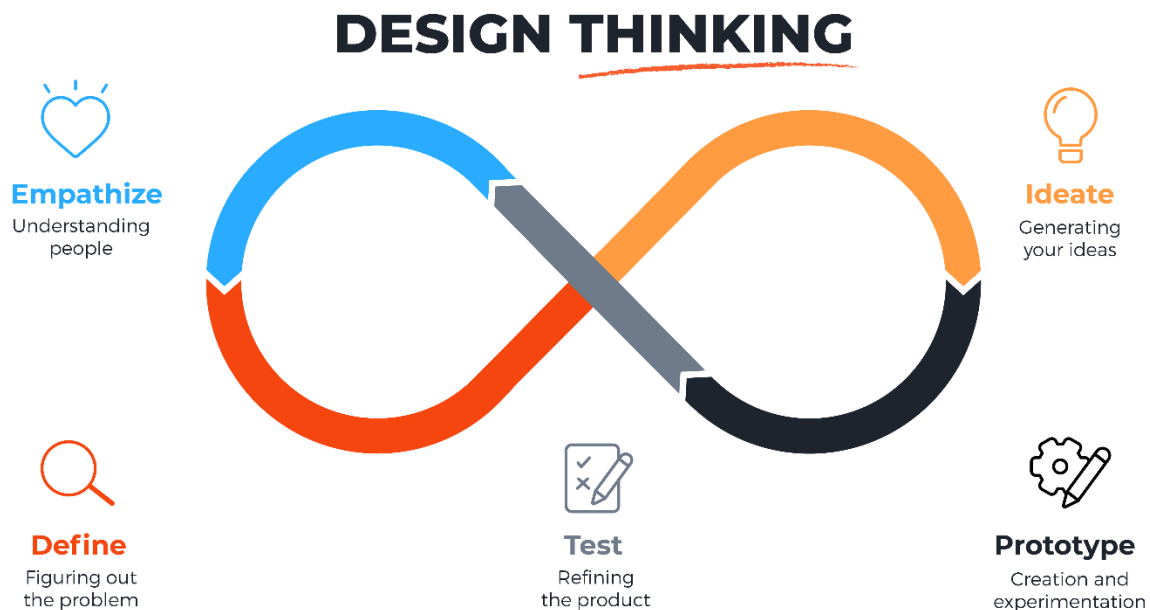
Source: MAQE (2020)

Innovation coaches apply the principles of design thinking while working closely with a small number of schools implementing a locally developed innovative education program ("Adopter Schools"). The work coaches do with schools is based on the RREV Coaching Framework, which provides coaches with a six-step process to engage with schools throughout their term (Exhibit 2).

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[1] MAQE, (2020, April 20), Insights: The Design Thinking Process – How does it work?

EXHIBIT 2. RREV COACHING FRAMEWORK

STEP 3 — Confirm data, measures, and data collection strategies

STEP 4 — Strengthen innovation through the project

STEP 2 — Apply a logic model template to the innovation pilot or program

STEP 5 — Facilitate diverse stakeholder engagement

STEP 1 — Review the innovation pilot, the approved grant application, or the detailed program description for the district or school(s) assigned to you

STEP 6 — Support planning for growth and sustainability

Coaching Framework

STEP 1 — THIS STEP HELPS an innovation coach acquire baseline knowledge about the program and identify questions for further exploration with district teams.

STEP 2 — THIS STEP ENABLES an innovation coach to highlight the internal consistency of a proposed program or innovation and discuss potential misalignments and assumptions with district teams.

STEP 3 — THIS STEP ENSURES that an innovation coach can facilitate conversations with project teams about key data and measures.

STEP 4 — THIS STEP SUPPORTS an innovation coach to conduct conversations with the project team that maintain a focus on the innovative nature of the program and the desired change and improvement.

STEP 5 — THIS STEP POSITIONS an innovation coach to explore with project teams the nature and extent of stakeholder involvement in the program, including engagement of traditionally underrepresented stakeholder groups.

STEP 6 — THIS STEP PREPARES an innovation coach to facilitate planning by project teams that improves the likelihood of sustaining and growing the program or project to impact greater numbers of students.

While their training in design thinking and the Coaching Framework provide innovation coaches tools to fulfill their role, the experiences and relationships they bring to the role—and those they form during their engagement—are also vital to the innovation coaching model. Their position as a fellow educator, who is also external to the specific school they support, gives them credibility and independence to see their school's challenges clearly and gain buy-in for their proposed solutions. The relationships they cultivate with key stakeholders at their schools, and more broadly in the fields related to the innovation, helps them build coalitions and leverage outside support for their schools' programs.

In short, the role of an innovation coach is a unique and challenging one. The success of the innovation coaching model rests on finding individuals who are passionate about innovation in education and giving them the tools and support they need throughout the year to empower schools to design and implement the systemic changes suited to their local needs and assets.

Logic Model

A logic model is a visual representation of a theory of change that shows how program components fit together to achieve intended outcomes. The logic model below summarizes the inputs, activities, outputs, and intended outcomes of an innovation coaching model.

EXHIBIT 3. INNOVATION COACHING LOGIC MODEL

Resources	Strategies & Activities	Outputs	Short-term Outcomes	Long-term Outcomes	Impact
• RREV Coaching Framework developed in conjunction with the Region 1 Comprehensive Center • Pre-year coaches orientation retreat • Coaches Corner tools, templates, and resources in EnGiNE • Shared curriculum resources between Adopter Schools & coaches	• Recruit innovation coaches who are fellow educators with relationships and expertise in innovative models • Train innovation coaches on principles of design thinking • Innovation coaches help Adopter Schools develop a logic model • Innovation coaches communicate regularly with Adopter Schools about pilot progress • Coaches meet with each other to discuss successes & challenges related to coaching practice • Coaches help schools choose and interpret data on their pilot implementation & outcomes • Coaches help schools draft plans to sustain and grow their innovative programs	• # of innovation coaches recruited • # of coaches trained • # of logic models created • # of meetings between coaches and Adopter Schools • # of performance measures chosen and reported on • Sustainability plans created with Adopter Schools	• Innovation coaches feel prepared to help schools navigate systemic change • Pilot teams build buy-in for change across their school communities • Pilot teams apply design thinking principles to solve problems and iterate during implementation of their program • Pilot teams gather valid data aligned with their logic model	• Adopter Schools use data and design thinking to continuously improve their programs • Innovative pilot programs are self-sustaining • Educators and students have enhanced high-quality options for responsive learning • Improved student engagement and learning outcomes	• Maine schools embrace a culture of innovation where educators feel empowered to create and implement programs to address emerging needs and support students

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