

# Human-Centered Leadership Coaching for School Redesign & Career Connected Learning

INSIGHTS FROM THE FIRST TWO YEARS OF THE  
PRINCIPAL INNOVATION FELLOWSHIP



PRINCIPAL  
INNOVATION  
FELLOWSHIP

BANK STREET COLLEGE OF EDUCATION



Bank Street  
Education Center

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# INTRODUCTION

This report presents a study of leadership coaching in the Principal Innovation Fellowship (PIF), an initiative led by The Education Center at Bank Street College of Education (the Ed Center), in partnership with New York City Public Schools (NYPS). The study of the first cohort of the PIF examines how coaching supported principals as they implemented FutureReadyNYC, the district's career-connected learning initiative. Drawing on case studies of four principal-coach pairs, the report identifies an emergent PIF leadership coaching model with principles, practices, and outcomes that contributed to school-level progress. The purpose is to generate insights for school systems about how coaching can strengthen principals' capacity to lead complex change.

## FutureReadyNYC: Redesigning High School Through Career Connected Learning

FutureReadyNYC (FRNYC) is a NYPS initiative to redesign the high school experience so that every student graduates prepared for both college and in-demand careers. Its core components include career-connected instruction, early college credits and credentials, work-based learning, personalized advising, and financial literacy.

Participating schools receive funding and support that includes pathway-specific personnel through the Office of Student Pathways, which serves as a first point of contact for operational and technical aspects of FRNYC implementation. Schools also receive leadership coaching through the district's Coaching Collective, a group of nine partner organizations, including the Ed Center, that provide specialized

coaching and peer collaboration to help school leaders drive innovation in pathway design. At the time of this study, participating schools were developing pathways in business and finance, education, healthcare, and technology. Schools track progress on key implementation measures (KIMs), which are district-defined benchmarks used to monitor and support high-quality implementation.

## The Principal Innovation Fellowship

The Principal Innovation Fellowship (PIF), now going into its fourth cohort of principals, launched in the 2023-24 school year and led by Bank Street’s Education Center, is a two-year engagement designed to strengthen principals’ capacity to lead complex school change.

Each fellow is paired with a leadership coach selected for their deep knowledge of New York City public schools and their experience as school leaders. Coaching unfolds through one-on-one sessions as well as group formats, including opportunities for fellows to learn alongside peers who share the same coach and through intervisitations across schools.

PIF coaching is anchored in a project identified by each principal to advance one or more FRNYC component, such as career pathways, work-based learning, advising systems, early college credentials, or curriculum redesign. Together, principals and their coaches reflect on existing school structures, envision redesign, and develop roadmaps for implementation.

## Study Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of leadership coaching within the PIF and its connection to principals’ implementation of FRNYC. Specifically, the study aimed to identify the coaching strategies employed by PIF that contributed to improvements in career readiness programming in participating schools.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the PIF director at the time and four principal-coach pairs, which were selected near the end of their two-year fellowship. The interviews, supported by program artifacts, including the PIF Indicators of Success and the FRNYC Playbook, explored experiences, strategies, and reflections on leadership coaching. For privacy and confidentiality, all principal and coach names used in this report are pseudonyms.

## Structure of the Report

The report is organized into four main sections. First, four case studies describe the school context, leadership challenge, coaching strategies, results, and lessons for practice. These are followed by cross-case insights, a synthesis of the emergent PIF coaching model, and implications for school systems and coaching practice.





# CASE 1

Slowing Down to Gain Momentum: How Coaching Helped an Innovative Principal Pace for Impact

# SLOWING DOWN TO GAIN MOMENTUM: HOW COACHING HELPED AN INNOVATIVE PRINCIPAL PACE FOR IMPACT

## Principal Linda and Coach Joe

Linda is the founding principal of a liberal arts high school located on a large Brooklyn campus. She has led the school for 18 years and is known for her innovative spirit and commitment to expanding career-connected learning. Her school participates in both FutureReadyNYC and a career-ready youth apprenticeship initiative. Joe is a former principal and experienced system-level leader who ran leadership development programs for the district before retiring. He was drawn to coaching Linda by her commitment to integrating career-connected learning (CCL) across the entire school, not just for a handful of students.

## Leadership Challenges

Linda's challenge was not a lack of ideas. It was pacing them. As Joe observed, she was "a fountain of ideas," but structuring those ideas so her team could absorb and implement them proved difficult. At the same time, she was managing the ongoing demands of running a high school: attendance, graduation rates, student behavior, all compounded by the lingering effects of the pandemic. The pressure to balance innovation with core operational responsibilities left her feeling, as she put it, "cleaved in half."

FRNYC implementation presented its own challenges. The school had been assigned to the data science pathway, but it is not a STEM school. "A very small percentage of [our students] are coming in at or above standard in math and science," Linda explained. "Most of them want nothing to do with either subject area." When the pathway was first introduced, "you could hear the kids stampeding in the other direction," she said. "Nobody wants to hear the words 'data science.'" But Linda noticed something else. Her school has a championship football team, and students were already fluent in sports statistics, tracking player performance, debating trades, throwing around data in the hallways. "They know how to do this," she realized. Her goal: leverage students' interest in sports by reframing data science through a sports analytics program, making the pathway accessible and engaging for students who would otherwise resist it.

## Coaching Approach

Joe draws a clear distinction between coaching and mentoring: “Mentoring is when you clearly know more than the person you’re helping, and therefore you have technical expertise that you can just say, ‘do it this way.’” Coaching is when you’re asking them questions because maybe neither one of you knows the answer, at least not right away.” With Linda, who had been a principal longer than most, coaching meant listening, reflecting back, and helping her hear what she was saying. “She knows as much, if not more, than I do about being a principal,” Joe acknowledged. “I’m not there telling her how to do things.”

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### SLOWING DOWN TO BUILD ALIGNMENT

Joe understood that his role was not to supply new ideas. “I don’t feel like I need to be creative with her, because she’s intensely creative,” he explained. “What she needs is someone to help make her ideas concrete, so she can communicate them to other people.” A key strategy was his consistent emphasis on slowing down, not as an end in itself, but as a way to keep Linda connected to her team. “Go talk to your teachers,” he would tell her. “Make sure they’re on board. Involve them in it. Tap their ideas.”

### PRESENCE IN TEAM MEETINGS

Over time, attending team meetings became a key coaching strategy. Joe began by sitting in on meetings; gaining access to that space reflected growing trust and marked a turning point in the work. By being present, he could observe team dynamics firsthand, help keep conversations on track, and support Linda in pacing the work alongside her staff. “They don’t need another person telling them what to do,” Joe noted, “but they do need help.” During meetings, he primarily listened and occasionally asked “provocative questions.”

### STRUCTURED DEBRIEFING

Joe made a point of debriefing after meetings. “That’s the thing that is most likely to be missed,” Joe observed, “because people just move on to the next thing and don’t think about consolidating what they’ve learned.” Linda proved naturally suited to this practice. She would process meetings even while walking down the hall, talking through what happened and what needed to come next. The coaching created dedicated space for this reflection.

## Results

### THE TRUST EARNED TO SPEAK DIRECTLY

A pivotal moment occurred during a team meeting focused on the sports analytics program rollout. As the meeting concluded, Linda proposed adding another element. Joe noticed teachers looking down and recognized the team was at capacity. He intervened directly: “Linda, don’t do it. Just don’t do it!” Linda

was taken aback but listened and agreed to scale back. The team, Joe realized, had not been ready for additional scope. That moment came 18 months into the relationship. “I don’t think I could have said that before then,” Joe reflected. Trust takes time.

## THE FREEDOM TO DO LESS

In the second year of the fellowship, Linda had planned a school-wide Design Week but had to postpone it due to competing demands. Joe helped her reframe the disappointment: “Whenever there feels like there’s a setback,” Linda said, “I’ve learned to say, ‘this was meant to happen. It’s just part of it.’” Joe also helped Linda recognize that arriving at a more realistic place was itself a form of progress. “Gone [is] the grand vision that we’re going to do everything,” Joe observed. “But I think it’s potentially the most productive time, because now we’re at the most real point we’ve been.” A big part of the coaching was giving Linda permission to step back. “There’s this thing where the principal feels like they have to impress their coach,” Joe explained. “It really prevents conversation. I’m glad she and I are past that.”

## DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP IN PRACTICE

Perhaps the most significant outcome was a shift in Linda’s leadership practice. She described how coaching reshaped her decision-making, noting Joe’s constant reminder to ‘slow down, get feedback from the other adults in the room.’” While slowing down initially felt counterintuitive, Linda noted that Joe’s approach to pacing the work and keeping teachers meaningfully involved “made all the difference.” She also reflected: ‘You have to be really humble about what you bring to the table, because you’re not enough.’ Her philosophy now: “My most important job is when I turn on all the burners and let it all cook, but other people are doing the cooking.”

## Lessons for Leadership Coaching

Joe’s coaching with Linda demonstrated that effective leadership support for experienced, innovative principals requires grounding their vision rather than generating new ideas. His approach offered several lessons:

- 1 Support leaders to pace innovation in relation to team readiness.** Joe’s coaching emphasized slowing down as a strategy for aligning the pace of change with staff capacity. By helping Linda avoid getting too far ahead of her team, Joe supported more durable implementation.
- 2 Use presence to keep leaders connected to their teams.** Attending team meetings became a deliberate coaching move that allowed Joe to observe group dynamics, surface signals of readiness, and provide timely feedback.
- 3 Provide direct, in-the-moment feedback when necessary.** Joe’s “don’t do it” intervention during a live meeting demonstrates the value of honest, real-time feedback, even when it carries relational risk. Such moments can prevent overload and protect team momentum. However, this kind of directness requires trust. The coach’s intervention was only possible after 18 months of relationship-building.



## CASE 2

From Isolation to Impact: How Leadership Coaching Rejuvenated a Veteran Principal

# FROM ISOLATION TO IMPACT: HOW LEADERSHIP COACHING REJUVENATED A VETERAN PRINCIPAL

## Principal Evan and Coach Steve

Evan is a veteran principal of a transfer school for overage and undercredited students. Steve is a recently retired principal with a long career spanning alternative schools and leadership roles. He is relatively new to formal leadership coaching. Steve intentionally chose to coach Evan, drawn by his interest in transfer schools and his belief that most often, “innovation is not created with the students who are most vulnerable [in mind].” He saw an opportunity to support a leader doing difficult work in a community that had often been overlooked.

## Leadership Challenges

Evan was experiencing professional isolation. By the time he joined PIF, his earlier professional support networks had ended. “Most of the time, you’re pretty alone as a principal. It’s obviously rewarding work, but it’s pretty lonely work, too,” he said. He faced “impossible choices” with few trusted colleagues to consult. “Who can you really talk to about these things?” The isolation was compounded by the emotional weight of leading a transfer school serving students “having all these negative experiences in school.”

FRNYC implementation proved particularly challenging and came with “tons of accountability measures.” The school’s KIM data showed persistently low numbers. Although he was assigned to the education pathway, Evan’s vision was broader: improving post-secondary planning for students who often arrived just trying to reach graduation. “As a transfer school, it’s a really big challenge because we only have the students here on average for two years,” he explained. Students came with interrupted educational histories, making the traditional four-year pathway model difficult to implement. His goal: develop eight to ten career areas where students have in-school resources to explore careers and connections to relevant post-secondary institutions.

## Coaching Approach

Steve described his coaching philosophy as being grounded in Ubuntu, the African concept of interconnected humanity. “If there is no human connection, and that connection does not reinforce each other’s humanity, then the coaching is going to fail,” he noted. Given Evan’s professional isolation, he recognized that relationship-building had to come first. Steve began with a “clearing protocol,” asking about principals’ lives outside of school: their families, their well-being, what was on their minds. This gives principals space to share what made them happy and set aside what was distracting them before turning to the work at hand. “If you ask people about their lives, then they welcome you into their lives,” he explained.

**“If there is no human connection, and that connection does not reinforce each other’s humanity, then the coaching is going to fail.”**

## **CREATING THE RIGHT TERRAIN**

Steve began with creating what he called the right “terrain” for the coaching relationship with Evan. “When you establish a relationship, if you are comfortable, you can let the person choose the terrain,” he explained. He invited Evan to set the meeting days, times, and location.

## **ESTABLISHING THE COACHING BOUNDARIES**

Steve also established clear boundaries around his role. He told Evan early on, “My job is not to force you to meet the KIMs. My job is to help you understand the KIMs and figure out how you can make sure you achieve them.” Making that distinction mattered. Steve created what he described as space for principals to “complain, construct, and contemplate.”

## **DATA-INFORMED PREPARATION**

Steve came to each session having reviewed the KIM data in advance and tagged both the highs and lows to guide their conversation. This preparation was essential because it demonstrated that Steve understood Evan’s reality and valued his time. It also allowed Steve to ask informed questions rather than requiring Evan to spend coaching time explaining context.

## **RESOURCE BROKERING**

Steve brought his professional network into the work. He connected Evan with outside professionals for the school’s Career Fair and helped surface resources that aligned with Evan’s post-secondary planning goals. This resource brokering was necessary because isolated principals often lack access to the networks and connections that could expand opportunities for their students.

## **Results**

### **FRNYC METRICS IMPROVEMENT**

The most immediate impact came from diagnosing a systems problem. The school’s KIM data showed low completion rates on digital advising tool usage (18%) and career plan development (52%). Steve helped Evan realize the issue wasn’t effort but tagging: students weren’t appearing correctly in the system because of how information was being entered. “I know you’re doing the work,” Steve told him. Once identified, Evan worked with his AP and staff to correct the tagging. Within a month, digital advising tool usage jumped to 92% and career plan completion rose to 93%. As Steve observed, “We suffer in silence because we don’t want to be embarrassed. And that suffering makes us angry.”

### **STRENGTHENED CAREER-CONNECTED LEARNING PROGRAMMING**

With Steve’s thought partnership and resources, the school designed and implemented a Career Fair with extensive student participation in its design. All staff joined advisory sessions at a 1:3 ratio with students; students prepared questions and completed career interest surveys so staff could guide them toward relevant speakers; alumni participated; and presenters shared not just their careers but their life journeys, with staff debriefing afterward. The result was a more meaningful, connected experience aligned with Evan’s vision for post-secondary planning.

## PROFESSIONAL RENEWAL

Perhaps the most notable outcome was Evan's own sense of renewal. He described his PIF coaching experience as "something that has helped excite me about the work as principal, rejuvenate me, and make me feel appreciated and respected by somebody that I respect."

"PIF coaching is something that has helped excite me about the work as principal, rejuvenates me, and makes me feel appreciated and respected by somebody that I respect."

## Lessons for Leadership Coaching

Steve's coaching with Evan demonstrated that effective leadership support is rooted in relationships as much as problem-solving. His approach offered several lessons:

- 1 Create a humanistic connection before focusing on tasks.** Steve's approach (asking Evan about his life, letting Evan set the terrain, showing up prepared but not prescriptive) established trust and created conditions for honest conversation.
- 2 Create space for authentic expression.** Steve's "complain, construct, contemplate" approach gave Evan permission to voice frustrations without judgment. Steve validated Evan's frustrations while working toward solutions.
- 3 Distinguish between technical and adaptive challenges.** Steve helped Evan realize that his low KIM metrics weren't due to poor practice but rather technical system issues, illustrating the importance of accurate problem diagnosis in coaching.



## CASE 3

Vision into Action: Strategic Coaching for Pathway Expansion and Resource Mobilization

# VISION INTO ACTION: STRATEGIC COACHING FOR PATHWAY EXPANSION AND RESOURCE MOBILIZATION

## Principal Rita and Coach Liz

Rita leads a high school that serves newcomer English language learners, 70% of whom live in shelters. She has been at the school for more than two decades and is the first woman to serve as its principal. Liz is a former principal, deputy superintendent, and consultant in principal preparation programs. Rita had sought out Liz as a personal coach even before the fellowship, valuing her deep familiarity with the international schools' model and her "valuable, authentic, meaningful and productive feedback."

## Leadership Challenges

Rita's school has a 30-year history of internships, and she saw FRNYC as an opportunity to link classroom learning to these existing work-based learning structures. "For many years, I wanted to improve the quality of internships to make sure that every single kid, not just that few, was benefiting," she explained. "Future Ready was my ticket." Managing the school's daily operations, however, stretched her capacity thin. Rita juggled managing 40 teacher observations, urgent situations involving students in the foster care system, and instability caused by shelter closures. On top of this, she set a personal goal of developing new skills in political networking and fundraising. "I know I'm not going to have the same budget for the next five years," she said. "After 20 years at the school with all the connections that we have made, ... why am I not taking my experience and connections to the next level to be a better bring in more for the school?"

FRNYC implementation presented its own challenges. Designing multiple pathways that served English language learners required careful attention to scaffolding and accessibility. Her goal was to work with the FRNYC pathways to bring the existing resources and structures of the school to another level.

## Coaching Approach

Liz describes her role with experienced principals like Rita simply: "I am really a sounding board. The benefit of coaching for experienced principals is that they need a thought partner," Liz explained. "There is no one in the building with whom they can just hit on everything that's on their mind."

### PERSONALIZED AND UNSTRUCTURED

Liz prioritized serving Rita's identified needs rather than imposing her own agenda. "I take my cues from Rita. I know she is really clear about what she wants to do." Liz noted that the coaching was not rigid: "It does not feel like it has to follow a tight, structured, controlled agenda." Meetings could happen anywhere: "We have met at the store, garden, the coffee shop," Rita said.

## PIVOTING TO MEET SHIFTING NEEDS

When Rita expressed concern about funding, Liz shared that Rita recently said to her, “For many years, I really just focused on the school, and now what I have to do is focus on building political and financial support for the school. I want to figure out: How am I dealing with [elected officials].” Liz understood the need and swiftly pivoted the coaching focus, “She’s actually done a lot, but she needs to be more strategic about it.” She supported Rita on strategic planning for political outreach and funding.

## PROVIDING HANDS-ON SUPPORT FOR PATHWAY DEVELOPMENT

Liz’s role extended beyond leadership coaching. She was directly involved with supporting the school in the creation of the education pathway curriculum, and she worked with two teachers, leveraging her expertise (i.e., in language learner needs, entry points, scaffolds) to ensure the pathways were designed to serve the school’s English language learner population.

## Results

### STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR POLITICAL OUTREACH AND RESOURCE MOBILIZATION

With Liz’s support, Rita developed a clearer roadmap for political outreach and resource mobilization. When Rita expressed concern about future funding, Liz pivoted the coaching focus to address this need. Together, they created a strategic plan identifying key contacts, outreach strategies, and timelines. Liz explained, “So I’m now working with her on a strategic plan for who are these [elected officials], what are the opportunities, and what is the calendar of the year that we need to pay attention to?”

### PATHWAY EXPANSION AND IMPLEMENTATION

Rita’s school launched three FRNYC pathways: software engineering, education, and performing arts. The education pathway held particular meaning for Rita. “I’m a graduate myself,” she explained, “and I have hired four alumni that are professionals now.” The performing arts pathway served English language learners specifically: “There is a silent period in the beginning. I only have four years to get them ready. The performing arts is a great way to help them through that transition for the real world in a new world.” Liz supported this work by collaborating directly with teachers on curriculum development. As she observed about Rita, “Her sense of how to roll something out and have other people take responsibility is the essence of her distributed leadership.”

### SUPPORTING PRIORITIZATION AND FOCUS

The coaching helped Rita maintain clarity amid competing demands. Rita asked Liz to “help me keep balance.” “Sometimes, when we lose priority ... after she comes, sometimes she pins me. And after we sat down, I shifted and re-prioritized.” Liz’s presence helped Rita step back and identify what required her direct attention. “It just helps me redirect to what I need to implement the immediate action where nobody else in the organization can do it,” Rita said. This kind of focus is essential in a role

**“[PIF coaching] helps me redirect to what I need to implement the immediate action where nobody else in the organization can do it.”**

Rita described frankly: “If you honestly look at the whole thing, it’s an impossible job. So you have to go by faith, and by that good spirit, and seeing the best in people.”

## Lessons for Leadership Coaching

Liz’s work with Rita illustrates how coaching can help experienced principals translate vision into sustainable action by providing thought partnership, strategic support, and direct implementation support:

- 1 Be willing to shift coaching focus when priorities change.** When Rita identified funding as a critical concern, Liz immediately pivoted the coaching focus to address this urgent need, demonstrating the importance of responsive coaching that adapts to emerging challenges.
- 2 Combine direct leadership support with hands-on support.** Liz’s direct involvement in curriculum development and teacher collaboration, shows that effective coaching can include both strategic guidance and tactical participation.
- 3 Leverage existing distributed leadership structure to create capacity.** Liz helped Rita enlist assistant principals in the funding work, freeing her to focus on relationship-building while others managed operations.



## CASE 4

Supporting Leader Agency in School Transformation Through Empathetic Coaching

# SUPPORTING LEADER AGENCY IN SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION THROUGH EMPATHETIC COACHING

## Principal Claudette and Coach Lisa

Claudette is in her fourth year as the principal of a small career and technical (CTE) high school in one of the city's most under-resourced neighborhoods. The school has an established nursing pathway, and Claudette entered the PIF seeking to expand career options for all students, especially the large population of English language learners. Lisa is a former principal with deep experience in school design, principal development, and youth workforce programming. She started a transfer school built around internships and later led one of New York City's largest youth workforce non-profits. She was drawn to coaching Claudette by her commitment to expanding pathways for students who are often overlooked.

## Leadership Challenges

Claudette's challenge was leading transformation while managing the daily pressures of the role. Her school was in turnaround, with a graduation rate that needed to increase from 67% to 80%. She was the only female principal in a shared building where safety incidents were routine. "Time robbers as a principal is ridiculous," Claudette reflected. Lisa understood this as the central tension: "the big picture, beautiful, rigid vision of redesigning the school, and then the very real brass tacks of, I gotta... there's just things that I have to do to make sure that we're on track."

FRNYC implementation presented its own challenges. Claudette aimed to expand beyond nursing into broader healthcare pathways, including diagnostic medicine and other non-nursing health careers, so that more students could graduate with employable skills. By December of her first year in the fellowship, the school had enrolled 75 newly arrived immigrant students in a school of 200, many of them English language learners blocked by language barriers from accessing the existing nursing program. Her goals were to meet the demanding metrics of FRNYC, foster a school culture that prioritized work-based learning, and keep students on track to graduate, all while managing daily fires.

## Coaching Approach

Lisa's coaching drew on what she referred to as an "ontological" approach: attending not just to what principals say, but also to how they say it, what's getting in their way, and what they need to move forward. Claudette described the approach simply: "Wherever I am on the journey, she joins me there, but pushes me to the next." Lisa met with Claudette monthly, often for three hours or more. Sessions began with immediate concerns like "How can I be most helpful today?" and moved into deeper reflection on FRNYC progress, leadership challenges, and next steps. Communication continued between visits through emails and check-ins.

## USING A FRAMEWORK FOR TRUST

Lisa also drew on a framework that breaks trust into three components: sincerity, competence, and consistency. “I find that breakdown really helpful, especially in coaching principals,” she explained, “because it kind of dispels this idea that either you trust me or you don’t, or [prevents] confusing trust with ‘do we actually get along?’” This frame helped Claudette pinpoint what was actually getting in the way with her team.

## FOSTERING PRINCIPAL OWNERSHIP THROUGH INQUIRY

Another core principle of Lisa’s coaching approach is inquiry rather than direction: “What’s on your mind? How do you feel about where you are? What do you want to do?” Claudette deeply appreciated that Lisa never told her what to do and helped her reflect without imposing an agenda. This contrasted sharply with other coaching she had experienced, where “the plan wasn’t my plan. It was really their plan.” What Claudette valued most was ownership: “I never walk out of it like these ideas didn’t come from me.”

## Results

### EMPATHY AND RESPONSIVENESS IN CRISIS

A pivotal test came at the start of Claudette’s second year in the fellowship. Her science teacher unexpectedly left just before Labor Day, forcing Claudette to teach five science classes herself while running the school until November. Lisa set aside the planned agenda and focused instead on Claudette’s mental state and capacity. “What I appreciated about my coach was that she understood,” Claudette said. “She knew that at that moment, the planned agenda wasn’t going to happen.” This empathetic response was crucial. “If I didn’t have that,” Claudette reflected, “I wouldn’t have been able to be a leader.”

### BUILDING PRINCIPAL AGENCY

Through coaching, Claudette developed greater capacity to act independently. When she was rejected for an additional FRNYC pathway, Lisa helped her reframe the setback. “She allowed me to see I don’t need Future Ready to make the things I want happen,” Claudette said. “If you really want to make it happen, you just make it happen.” Claudette is now building alternative credential programs, including community health and cosmetology. Lisa’s trust framework gave Claudette a new lens for analyzing why certain FRNYC efforts were stalling and whether the issue was commitment, capacity, or follow-through. And coach-facilitated peer learning led Claudette to a time management program that transformed her practice. “It rejuvenated my whole life,” she said. She restructured her week: two days for classroom visits, three for meetings and compliance. Her secretary now enforces meeting limits. “Twenty minutes up, she’ll come and knock on my door. She’ll tell me, you gotta go.”

“As principals, we’re always in the moment. I got interrupted three or four times just during this conversation! People knocking on my door. We never get time to think. [My PIF coach] helps me with that, giving me space to think and allowing me to do it.”

### TIME AND SPACE TO THINK

Perhaps most importantly, the coaching gave Claudette space to think. “As principals, we’re always in the moment,” she said. “We’re always lighting fires. I got interrupted three or four times just during this conversation. People knocking on my door. We never get time to think. She helps me with that, giving me space to think and allowing me to do it.”

### Lessons for Leadership Coaching

Lisa’s coaching with Claudette shows how blending empathy with intentionality can help principals sustain transformational change amid intense demands. By providing both space to process immediate pressures and tools to build agency, her approach offers several lessons:

- 1 Be responsive to the leader’s immediate needs.** When Claudette faced the crisis of teaching five classes while running the school, Lisa shifted the planned agenda to focus on Claudette’s mental state and capacity. Responsive coaching meets leaders where they are so they can move beyond it.
- 2 Cultivate leader ownership of solutions and ideas.** Lisa’s approach of inquiry rather than direction (“What’s on your mind? How do you feel about where you are?”) ensured that Claudette felt all ideas came from her.
- 3 Coach the whole person.** Lisa’s ontological approach attended to Claudette’s emotional state and personal well-being, not just the demands of the role. Effective leadership coaching addresses the leader as a complete human being facing complex challenges.



# CROSS-CASE INSIGHTS



## CROSS-CASE INSIGHTS

Although each principal worked in a distinct school context, the four cases reveal consistent patterns in both the challenges principals faced and the coaching practices that proved most effective.

### Shared Leadership Challenges

Across cases, principals encountered a recurring set of challenges shaped by both school-level realities and broader system expectations.

**Professional isolation and the need for thought partnership.** The principalship emerged as isolating in all four cases. Evan faced impossible choices with no trusted colleagues to consult. Linda's rapid innovation left her disconnected from her team. Rita, despite two decades of experience, had no one in her building to think things through with. Claudette faced constant firefighting with no time to reflect.

**Managing competing demands.** Every principal faced tension between daily operations and strategic goals. Evan managed extensive accountability measures while serving students who typically stayed only two years. Linda balanced innovation with running a school. Rita juggled dozens of teacher observations, students in crisis, and instability from shelter closures. Claudette faced turnaround metrics, safety incidents, and an influx of immigrant students that increased enrollment by a third.

**Navigating technical and adaptive challenges.** Principals encountered problems of different types. Some were technical: Evan's low KIM numbers stemmed from data tagging errors rather than instructional practice. Rita faced the complexity of designing multiple pathways accessible to English language learners. Other challenges were adaptive. Linda generated ideas faster than her team could absorb them. Claudette needed to shift from depending on official approval to acting on her own authority.

**Sustaining emotional well-being.** The emotional toll of leading complex change surfaced in every case. Evan needed professional renewal after years of isolation. Linda felt pressure to accomplish everything and struggled to accept a more realistic pace. Rita described the principalship as an impossible job requiring faith and good spirit to sustain. Claudette faced the most acute test when a teacher's departure forced her to teach five classes while running the school.

## Shared Coaching Practices

Despite variations in style and approach, the four coaching partnerships shared core practices that enabled both leadership effectiveness and sustainability.

**Building trust as the foundation.** Every coach prioritized establishing a non-judgmental relationship before focusing on tasks. Steve grounded his work in Ubuntu, the concept of interconnected humanity. Joe recognized that effective feedback required trust earned over time. Liz built a relationship with the principal that extended beyond formal meetings. Lisa applied a framework that distinguished components of trust.

**Providing thought partnership rather than direction.** Coaches positioned themselves as thought partners rather than having all the answers. Steve distinguished his role from compliance monitoring of the DOE coach. Joe distinguished between mentoring and coaching. Liz described herself as a sounding board. Lisa used inquiry rather than direction, asking principals what was on their minds and how they felt about where they were.

**Supporting prioritization and focus.** Coaches helped principals organize complexity. Steve reviewed KIM data before sessions with Evan to guide conversation. Joe emphasized debriefing Linda after meetings so learning could be consolidated rather than lost. Liz helped Rita identify what required her direct attention versus what others could handle. Lisa helped Claudette restructure her week, dedicating specific days to classroom visits and others to meetings.

**Attending to the whole person.** Coaching addressed principals as complete human beings, attending to their well-being and resilience. Steve's clearing protocol created space for the principal to share what was on their minds before turning to work. Joe gave Linda permission to scale back and helped her accept setbacks as part of the process. Liz met Rita wherever she was, whether at school, a coffee shop, or a garden. Lisa shifted her agenda when Claudette faced a crisis, focusing on her capacity rather than planned goals.

**Fostering ownership and building capacity.** Coaches encouraged principals to develop their own answers and strengthen their leadership capabilities. Steve helped Evan diagnose the tagging problem himself rather than prescribing a fix. Joe supported Linda's evolution toward distributed leadership. Liz helped Rita enlist assistant principals in funding work, freeing her to focus on external relationships. Lisa's inquiry-based approach ensured Claudette felt ownership of her decisions and to act without waiting for official approval.



## The Broader Influence of PIF Coaching

In several cases, coaching extended beyond the individual principal to shape team dynamics and school capacity. Joe attended Linda's team meetings, observing group dynamics and providing real-time feedback. Liz worked directly with teachers on curriculum development for Rita's education pathway.

Coaching also helped principals reframe FutureReadyNYC from a compliance requirement into leverage for goals they already held. Rita saw the program as an opportunity to improve long-standing internship practices. Linda used it to pursue her vision of making data science accessible through sports analytics.





# **AN EMERGENT PIF COACHING MODEL**

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The four cases reveal a consistent set of coaching practices that supported principals as they implemented FutureReadyNYC. This section situates those practices within the research literature on leadership development and presents an emergent model of PIF coaching.

## Situating the Model in the Literature

School leadership is an essential driver of change. Principals shape school culture, guide teacher practice, and influence student outcomes, yet they are often asked to lead ambitious reforms without sustained, job-embedded support. Leadership coaching addresses this gap by giving principals structured opportunities to reflect, problem-solve, and adapt in real time.

Research highlights three features of effective professional learning for principals: content focused on core levers of leadership practice, authentic applied learning anchored in real problems of practice, and expert support through coaching, mentoring, or peer networks (Darling-Hammond et al., 2023; Zepeda et al., 2014). Research also shows that professional learning networks expand principals' capacity to communicate, collaborate, and innovate (Sciarappa & Mason, 2014; Tingle et al., 2019).

PIF coaching embodies these features. Principals receive individualized coaching and participate in networks that provide thought partnership, case-based problem solving, and opportunities to connect with peers across schools. The fellowship draws on the work of Heifetz and Linsky (2014) to distinguish between technical challenges, which have known solutions, and adaptive challenges, which require shifts in beliefs, behaviors, and organizational culture. By centering leadership development within the implementation of FutureReadyNYC, the fellowship offers a model of human-centered coaching grounded in relational trust and responsiveness to individual needs (Aguilar, 2013), combined with an adaptive leadership orientation that helps principals navigate the technical and cultural dimensions of school change.

Bank Street's perspective on student-centered and project-based learning further shapes this work, keeping the focus on the quality of student learning experiences as the ultimate measure of success. This approach equips principals to lead complex school transformation, including leading instruction, developing people, building school culture, and using data for decision-making (Learning Policy Institute, 2022).



# The Emergent Coaching Model

The PIF coaching model that emerged from this study reflects seven interconnected practices.





# CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL SYSTEMS

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This study documented the coaching practices that supported four principals as they implemented FutureReadyNYC. Across diverse school contexts, principals faced common challenges: professional isolation, competing demands, the need to distinguish technical from adaptive problems, and the emotional toll of leading complex change. Coaches responded with a consistent set of practices grounded in trust, thought partnership, attention to the whole person, and a focus on building capacity rather than dependence.

## Implications for School Systems

The findings offer several implications for school systems seeking to strengthen leadership capacity and support principals leading complex change.

**Invest in sustained, job-embedded leadership coaching.** Principals described coaching as essential professional support. The two-year fellowship structure allowed trust to develop and coaching to evolve alongside implementation. School systems should view leadership coaching as a long-term investment rather than a time-limited intervention and should consider how coaching can be sustained or transitioned.

**Design coaching that attends to leadership well-being.** Effective coaching attended to the whole leader. Principals navigated strategic demands while managing emotional strain, isolation, and fatigue. School systems should recognize well-being as integral to leadership capacity, supporting principals to pace themselves and sustain motivation over time.

**Emphasize adaptive leadership and broaden the scope of leadership development.** Implementing career-connected learning required principals to lead through uncertainty and shifting conditions. Coaches helped principals distinguish technical fixes from adaptive challenges and develop executive skills, such as strategic communication, networking, and engaging external partners. School systems should prioritize coaching that strengthens adaptive leadership and extends beyond traditional instructional leadership.

**Embed coaching within professional learning networks and system strategy.** Principals benefited from coaching, especially when it was complemented by peer networks and external partnerships. School systems should position leadership coaching as a core strategy, embedding it within broader networks that reduce isolation and support peer learning. The partnership between New York City Public Schools and Bank Street College of Education illustrates how districts can collaborate with external organizations to provide high-quality leadership support.



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