SUPPORTING TEACHERS’ PROFESSIONAL LEARNING DURING A PANDEMIC:
Teachers’ Experiences with the Shift from In-Person to Virtual ISA Coaching
When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in Spring 2020, ISA pivoted quickly from providing on-site coaching to virtual coaching for teachers and leaders in its partner schools. After a year and a half of offering virtual coaching supports to individual teachers and teacher teams, we wanted to learn about and from teachers’ experiences with ISA virtual coaching. To do so, we conducted teacher focus group discussions and a teacher survey during Spring 2021. In this brief, we focus on what teachers told us about their experiences with the shift from in-person to virtual ISA coaching.

What Teachers Say Changed with the Shift from In-Person to Virtual ISA Coaching

A considerable portion of teachers in our study (45%) reported that they received ISA coaching for the first time during the COVID-19 pandemic, which means these teachers only knew virtual ISA coaching. However, among teachers who had received ISA coaching prior to the pandemic, about two thirds (65%) perceived that the amount of ISA coaching they received had not changed with the shift from in-person to virtual coaching (Figure 1).

Several teachers identified not having their ISA coach in the classroom (either remotely¹ or in person) as the biggest and most challenging change. Teachers also pointed to ISA coaches’ increased support for teachers’ use of technology as a key change. One teacher felt there was no substantive change with the shift from in-person to virtual ISA coaching and attributed this to the strength of their relationship with the ISA coach:

> I feel like we communicate very well... whether we’re in class or not, or in person or not, there’s just a world of things to talk about, and my relationship with [my ISA coach] is such that I feel like we can do that effectively over the computer as much as we could in person.

What Teachers Say Has Been the Focus of ISA Virtual Coaching During the Pandemic

We asked teachers to tell us about the focus of their work with the ISA coaches during the pandemic. Most teachers in both our focus groups and survey identified improving student participation and engagement in the virtual classroom as a primary focus of the ISA coaching support. The challenges teachers faced with low student participation and the urgent need for improvement were aptly conveyed by one teacher:

> That’s the major goal, and the major focus moving forward [is]...‘How do I get students engaged?’ You...can lead a horse to water, but [my ISA coach] really told me...‘What are you doing to make [students] thirsty?’ So that’s what I’m trying to work on right now.

¹ Policies in certain districts prohibited ISA coaches from participating in virtual classrooms.
Teachers also mentioned addressing students’ social and emotional well-being as another key focus area of ISA virtual coaching, which two teachers described as increasing 100% and 150% in time spent on this area during the pandemic. One teacher described their ISA coach’s support for their students’ social and emotional well-being this way:

**What Teachers View as the Strengths and Drawbacks of Virtual Coaching**

We asked teachers what they felt were the advantages and disadvantages of virtual forms of coaching. Teachers identified several upsides including describing it as “super efficient.” Teachers pointed to access to on-demand coaching sessions in which teachers could call coaches for quick online sessions rather than wait until a coach’s in-person visit. Other teachers referred to improved frequency and accessibility of coaching in a virtual format, noting that because ISA coaches did not have to travel to different schools or different classrooms within a school, they were able to provide more coaching time to teachers overall. Others perceived that with a virtual coaching format, teachers had dedicated time to reflect and unpack with their coach at length. As one teacher explained, “The hardest part [with on-site coaching] was always trying to find that time to talk, because that wasn’t necessarily as built in as it is now.”

A disadvantage of the virtual mode of ISA coaching most frequently identified by teachers was not having the coach in person in the classroom, which one teacher felt disadvantaged the students:

**What Teachers Say Is Their Preferred Format of ISA Coaching Moving Forward**

We asked teachers to tell us the mode of ISA coaching they prefer: in-person only, virtual only, or a hybrid approach (a combination of in person and virtual). Most teachers, in both the focus groups and survey expressed a preference for a hybrid approach to coaching. Among surveyed teachers (Figure 2) about two thirds of surveyed teachers (68%) expressed a preference for a hybrid approach.

“\[quote\]It’s necessary . . . to really reach students particularly in this remote setting when they’re so disconnected and so isolated, and so many of my students are struggling in so many ways emotionally, relationally, loneliness, loss, all of that. I appreciate that [my ISA coach’s] emphasis is always on social emotional wellness . . . the holistic student, the whole student, the whole teacher, our emotional wellness, our emotional preparedness, our emotional presence. [\quote]

Considerably fewer teachers preferred in-person only ISA coaching (15%) or remote/virtual only ISA coaching (9%).

**Figure 2. Teacher Preferences for ISA Coaching Format**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Format</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hybrid coaching</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-person coaching only</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual coaching only</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Teachers appreciated the flexibility and efficiency allowed with virtual coaching but also felt the need for in-person coaching particularly for having the coach in their classrooms. As one teacher explained:

“I actually like the thought of hybrid coaching because [the ISA coach] coming into the space is good. But then, I like the in person . . . when we need to sit and meet and speak [and] being able to do that at another time as opposed to trying to cram it all in that school day or you know within that 40-minute block that she's in my room.”

About ISA

For more than 30 years, we have partnered with schools and districts to improve student achievement by transforming how teachers and administrators approach learning. At ISA, we believe that every student can succeed—in school and in life—and that every educator can nurture that success. Teachers, principals, and other school and district leaders simply need the right support at the right time. ISA’s coaching and professional development accelerate student learning outcomes by supporting educators as they further enhance, develop, and refine their practice.

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Photos by Allison Shelley for American Education: Images of Teachers and Students in Action