FINNEY
THE FINNEY SEARCH GROUP

The Teacher-Coach Advantage: Why Independent Schools Should Prioritize Hiring Faculty Who Also Coach Interscholastic Sport

Rob Heubeck — The Finney Search Group

Think of this scenario: the best pitcher on the baseball team is slated to take the mound for an important league game. The coaches have prepared the players as best they can and are excited about the prospects of a victory. What they don't know is that the star pitcher has failed a science test and was caught using his cell phone during a math quiz—all in the same day. The coaches, not affiliated with the school in any way other than coaching baseball, are completely unaware of their pitcher's poor decisions earlier in the day. Unfortunately, the young man pitches his worst game of the year—obviously focused on the consequences that await him the next day and not the hitting line-up of their rivals. After learning about the situation facing his ace pitcher, the coach, a local club coach, wants to learn more about the details of infractions so he can support his player. However, he has never met the young man's teachers or advisor, the dean of students, or the Upper School Head—the adults who are responsible for implementing the appropriate blend of restorative and punitive measures. The coach, who also coaches the young man in the summer, is not equipped to support his player in a way commensurate with the school's culture. An opportunity is potentially lost.

One of the most consequential — and often underestimated — hiring decisions an independent school makes is whether to staff its athletic program with teacher-coaches or community coaches. The challenges of finding candidates who can both teach a core academic subject and lead a competitive athletic program are real and should not be minimized. The talent pool is genuinely narrow: schools need individuals who hold content expertise in a teachable discipline, possess the technical knowledge to coach a sport at a competitive interscholastic level, and carry the emotional intelligence to work effectively with adolescents in two very different high-stakes environments.

Further, compensation structures pose an additional hurdle, as teacher-coach salaries must reflect the full scope of the role. Most coaching stipends are low, and candidates with strong coaching credentials have little interest in classroom teaching. The hiring timeline adds further complexity, since athletic staffing needs often emerge in late spring or summer when the strongest teaching candidates have already accepted offers elsewhere. Independent schools that treat the coach search and the faculty search as separate processes often lose strong teacher-coaches to schools with more integrated, proactive hiring practices. Oftentimes, academic leaders are enamored of highly credentialed academicians, knowing that the school community demands academic excellence so they can, with pride, detail the school's college acceptance list. Friction is created between the Athletic Director and the Head of School. The AD, if involved in the hiring process, wants to hire an experienced coach with strong relationship skills who can elevate an athletic program. Classroom inexperience can be developed with the support of mentors and professional development. The Head of School, following the advice of the Upper School Head and the department chair, "needs" to hire an experienced, credentialed teacher. Too often, the department chair's preferred choice wins out, and the school hires the academician who's an expert in their field but lacks strong relationship skills and/or is unwilling to contribute to school life beyond the classroom. No doubt, this process can become contentious and lengthy. Despite these very real friction points, schools that commit to solving this problem structurally — building the teacher-coach hire into their faculty recruitment pipeline rather than treating it as an afterthought — find that the investment pays compounding dividends across the academic, athletic, and relational dimensions of school life.

The benefits of hiring teachers who also coach interscholastic sports are deeply embedded in what makes independent school education distinct and powerful. When a student's history teacher is also her lacrosse coach, the relationship between them transcends any single domain — that adult knows her as a thinker, a competitor, a teammate, and a young person navigating the pressures of adolescence simultaneously. This dual knowledge is not incidental; it is transformative. A teacher-coach can read a student's distraction in the classroom and connect it to what she witnessed on the practice field the day before, or recognize that a student's drop in academic performance coincides with the fracturing of social dynamics in the locker room. Community coaches — however talented athletically — simply do not have access to this layered understanding. They arrive for practice, they coach the sport, and they leave. In some cases, these coaches attempt to build culture by offering team-building exercises, but these efforts are often done in the context of winning

games. They are often unaware of what is happening in a student's academic life, their social struggles, the anxiety of college applications, or the particular culture and expectations of the school community they serve. This creates a meaningful gap in the school's ability to deliver on its most foundational promise: to know and support each student as a whole person. Research on adolescent development consistently affirms that the number and quality of trusting adult relationships a young person has during the high school years are among the strongest predictors of resilience, motivation, and long-term well-being. Teacher-coaches multiply those relationships in uniquely high-impact ways, because they encounter students in contexts — the sideline, the locker room, the late bus ride home from an away game — where young people are often more emotionally available and honest than they ever are in a classroom.

Schools that default to community coaches because they are less expensive or more immediately available are, in effect, accepting a structural disadvantage in student support that no supplemental program can fully compensate for. A community coach who is unfamiliar with the school's mission, academic calendar, advisory system, or language around social-emotional learning cannot reinforce those values in athletic spaces — and athletic spaces are among the most formative environments in a teenager's life. The locker room and the practice field are where lessons about leadership, failure, resilience, equity, and identity are negotiated every day, often without any adult deliberately shaping them. When the coach in that space is a trusted faculty member who also sits in department meetings, attends all-school events, and eats lunch with students, the school's culture extends seamlessly into its athletics program rather than fracturing at the gymnasium door. Conversely, when community coaches model values or communication styles that conflict with what the school teaches in the classroom, students receive a confusing and sometimes damaging message about what the institution actually stands for. Independent schools that invest in teacher-coaches are also investing in faculty retention, as the additional purpose and relationship depth that coaching provides frequently deepen a teacher's connection to the school community, reducing the professional isolation that drives turnover.

In a competitive landscape where schools are asking families to make a significant financial investment based on the promise of a distinctive, relationship-centered education, staffing the athletic program with people who know students only as athletes — and know the school only from the outside — is a quiet but serious erosion of that promise.