

The School Board Wants to Know: Why Literacy Coaching?

Rita Bean, Professor, University of Pittsburgh

William Isler, President, School Board, Pittsburgh Public Schools

School board members, teachers, university faculty, school district administrators, and even literacy coaches themselves often have questions about literacy coaching. These questions generally focus on several major issues: What should literacy coaches do? What qualifications should they possess? Is the cost worth it? A key question often revolves around what evidence there is to support the presence of coaches in schools.

The two questions related to cost and cost-benefit are ones that school board members often ask when faced with a proposal to support literacy coaching in schools. When asked for such funding, they often ask, "Why don't teachers have the knowledge they need to teach their students; didn't universities and colleges do their job of preparing teachers?" "Why aren't coaches working with students rather than with teachers?" "Why money for literacy coaching; we need support for the band or athletics, or...?" "What do I tell my constituents when they ask about the cost?"

As a member of the Pittsburgh Public School Board, Mr. Isler has heard these and other questions. He recognizes the need to inform school boards and the citizenry about what coaching is and how it can serve as a means for improving student achievement. The purpose of this brief is to provide information for school boards and administrators to help them understand literacy coaching. We address three major questions: What is literacy coaching? Why is there a need for coaching in the schools? What evidence do we have that it works? We conclude by discussing three key points that are essential if a coaching plan is to be implemented in a school.

What is Literacy Coaching? Literacy coaching is defined most often as a job-embedded approach to professional development (Shanklin, 2006). Such professional development is based on what teachers need to know in order to teach their students, is

literacy-focused, and provides on-going support that may include classroom observations and feedback to teachers. There is evidence that this type of professional development (AERA, 2005; Joyce & Showers, 2002) is more effective than the more traditional one-day or short-term workshops often seen in schools. In the one day format, teachers may come together once for a large workshop on a specific topic, i.e., small group reading instruction. In the short term format, districts may schedule meetings during which consultants provide an overview of a new curricular framework or reading program. These consultants who oversee these meetings may make follow-up visits to schools to respond to teacher questions.

However, one day or even multi-day workshops often do not provide the support teachers need to help them think more reflectively about how they can improve instruction to better meet the needs of students in their classrooms. Literacy Coaches provide this long-term support. They can co-plan, co-teach, model, or observe and provide feedback to support teacher learning; they can lead study groups or hold large group workshops. In other words, Literacy Coaches can help teachers achieve their short-term goals of learning how to implement a specific program or instructional strategy and their long-term goals of becoming more effective literacy teachers.

Literacy coaches are professionals who know their content area, have classroom experience, possess excellent interpersonal and communication skills, and know how to work effectively with adults (Frost & Bean, 2006; International Reading Association, 2004). Literacy coaches are often selected from within the school, have a strong literacy background, and are known to be effective teachers; they also have great credibility with their peers. They work in a non-evaluative, non-judgmental manner to provide support to teachers who are attempting to try new approaches to teaching or to differentiate instruction so that the needs of all students are met. Coaches are there to work cooperatively and collaboratively with teachers to solve problems that teachers may face. Coaches help teachers with such goals as how to (a) meet the needs

of students who can't read the content textbook, (b) create more active engagement in the classroom, and (c) differentiate reading instruction in a specific classroom, given the identified needs and abilities of students. They are there to help teachers at all levels (Pre-K through grade 12) become better at their craft and to improve student learning.

But why literacy coaching? Shouldn't teachers have the skills and competencies they need upon graduation from teacher preparation programs? The job of Colleges of Education is to provide schools with effective first year teachers. These teachers though are novices and, like other professionals, need on-going professional development to move from novice to expert. The initial years of teaching provide the basis for the development of that expertise--expertise that cannot possibly be learned in the several years of coursework and field experiences provided in any teacher preparation program. Coaching for these novice teachers is money well spent. With coaching feedback, these young teachers become experts more quickly.

Coaches also provide on-going professional development for experienced teachers and help them increase their knowledge base about how to teach reading (PreK-12), and about differentiating instruction within the classroom.

Increasing Teachers' Understanding of How to Teach Reading. In the last twenty years and particularly in the last decade, there has been an increase in knowledge about how to teach reading. This new knowledge has created a need for ongoing learning by teachers. For example, research at the adolescent level has helped us understand that teachers in the various disciplines can be more effective if they know how to help students read their textbook effectively and know how to create classrooms in which instruction is not just lecture-based, but draws on various collaborative, social activities, and builds on prior knowledge of students (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Conley, 2008; Sturdevant, et al., 2006). At the elementary level, the field has come to understand that one-size does not fit all (National Reading Panel Report, 2000) and that teachers need to understand their students as readers and teach to those needs.

Increasing Teachers' Knowledge of How to Differentiate Instruction. Schools today are more heterogeneous than ever and all stakeholders are increasingly more cognizant of the responsibility to educate every one of the students in the school, e.g., students from

diverse racial, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, English Language learners, and students who range in abilities from the gifted to those identified as special-needs. Response to intervention guidelines (RTI) require schools to initiate practices that provide for differentiated instruction in classrooms. There is ample research which demonstrates ways to meet the needs of all students and teachers need to learn these new ways to address the multiple demands of the students they meet each day.

Does literacy coaching "work"? As some say, "this is the million dollar question." There are several ways to answer this question: we can ask teachers (self-report), we can look at teacher and classroom practices, and finally, we can try to relate achievement improvement directly to coaching in the school. Obviously, the gold standard would be relating coaching to student achievement, and that is the hope of many researchers studying this approach to professional development. However, this is complex, given the many other factors that may be contributing to student achievement, e.g., new reading programs, increases in time allotted to reading instruction in schools, more use of data to modify instruction, small class size, etc., and it will take researchers some time to answer this question of coaching and its influence on student achievement.

At the same time, we do have evidence that gives us much hope in terms of the power of coaching. First, teachers do report that coaching is valuable and helps them to do their job better (Bean, et al., 2008; Brown, et al, 2007; Neufeld & Roper, 2006). Such findings exist at the elementary and secondary levels. For example, in the Pennsylvania High School Coaching Initiative (PAHSCI), English and math teachers who participated in the program reported benefits from their participation in the project (Brown, et al., 2007), including increased levels of student engagement and improved teaching.

We also have evidence that teachers who have been coached are changing their practices in positive ways (Bean, et al, 2008). These include such practices as increasing the numbers of high-level thinking questions being asked, more active engagement of students, and increased ability to make adaptations in academic materials and skills.

Key points. In sum, what are the key points for administrators and school board members if they decide that literacy coaching is a worthwhile investment and decide to implement such a program in their schools? We believe the following three points are essential.

- Collaboration. A literacy coaching program must be developed collaboratively. Administrators should consult with key teachers, union representatives, and school board members, to discuss and come to a consensus about key issues such as the qualifications and roles of coaches. Building job descriptions that help all understand the role is critical.
- Support. Various types of support are essential. Principals must help coaches by designing school schedules that provide them with the time to work with teachers; they must serve as “cheerleaders” for coaches to help them establish good working relationships with teachers. Moreover, coaches within a district need opportunities to network and continue to learn their craft. And there is a need for fiscal support, so that the coaches have the resources needed to accomplish their goals.
- On-going evaluation and assessment. When a district commits to a coaching program, it needs also to commit to an on-going evaluation effort that is both formative and summative. Formative data, which includes providing feedback to coaches about how to improve their performance, is essential. Summative data, which addresses questions about changes in teacher practices and student achievement, will help the school district make future decisions about how to make the literacy coaching program as effective as possible.

Rita Bean is Professor of Education, University of Pittsburgh, and member, Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse Advisory Board.

William Isler is President, Family Communications (Producers of Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood) and President, School Board, Pittsburgh Public Schools. He is also President, Council of Great City Schools.

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