

What Supports do Literacy Coaches Need from Administrators in Order to Succeed?

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Both principals and school districts hire literacy coaches with the clear hope that they will succeed in improving teachers' instruction and, in turn, students' literacy learning. Unintentionally, however, they can overlook putting into place supports that coaches themselves may need to reach these goals. This Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse brief outlines the supports that administrators need to embed to increase coaches' chances for success. These supports need to be in practice even when the most qualified coaches are hired. Literacy coaches must be well qualified for their positions, but their work will go faster and deeper if these supports are part of a school's and district's infrastructure.

A Clear, Detailed Job Description

The position of literacy coach is new for many schools. Frequently, principals hire the best literacy or content teacher available as a coach without thinking through an exact job description for a coach or a school schedule that would most facilitate a coach's ability to work with groups of teachers and individuals. A principal just knows that s/he wants the coach to do "something" about instruction to raise test scores. Coaches themselves may be new to a building and/or district and not know what to suggest that might work best. At a minimum, it is important for the principal and coach to work out the job description carefully before school starts, so that the coach's role can be explained to all stakeholders by the principal, or other administrative personnel, and subsequently reinforced by the coach.

Looking at the roles of coaches across the country, there are some areas where agreement about the role and job description is beginning to emerge.

Coaches need time to analyze individual, classroom, grade level, and school literacy data and to work with teachers to do such analysis that then leads to targeted instruction. They need time, ideally during the school day, to meet with teaching teams, grade levels, or departments on a rotation that is frequent enough to promote growth in teacher practice. They need time to implement study groups that meet on, at least, a once a month basis. They need time to coach individual teachers in their classrooms and to debrief these coaching sessions. They need time to plan for all of the work that they are doing. Finally, at least one time per month, they need the opportunity to attend professional development sessions to enhance their own knowledge and skills. This view of coaches' jobs assumes that they are not working with individual students, or are only doing so for some part of each week.

There is equal data on activities that literacy coaches are being asked to do that may be questionable uses of their time. Some examples include the amount of student assessment they are asked to do, data input, substitute teaching, materials ordering, and other administrative tasks. A school's literacy team needs to ask: Are these the best uses of a coach's time given the school's goals? Could some of these tasks be given to other school staff? What ought to be the differences between the job description and skills of a literacy coach and an assistant principal?

Commitment to Developing a School Literacy Team & a Vision for Literacy Learning

The work of a literacy coach is enhanced if a school literacy/leadership team is already in place. Along with administrators, this team can help to write the job description of the literacy coach. They can also act as pioneers that implement work with a coach in their own classrooms and with their

grade level or departmental colleagues. This team can work to help the school clarify its vision for students' literacy learning and assess whether progress is being made.

When the vision for literacy learning is not shared widely among teachers in a school, the job of a literacy coach is much harder. In such circumstances, the coach and teachers often do not share a common vocabulary or knowledge of literacy strategies that can be used in classrooms to enhance students' literacy development. Then when a coach makes suggestions in group meetings or in individual coaching sessions, the information may not be understood.

If a school literacy team has helped to develop the job description of the literacy coach, they can help the coach gain entry into classrooms. The school literacy team can help the coach build trust with teachers – especially if they demonstrate that they have trust in the coach. They can help to subtly hold teachers more accountable to each other to make progress on suggestions made by the literacy coach that link to the school's literacy goals. The team may also help the coach reflect upon a log of his/her time to see if the time is being used well. If some items seem to be unrelated to the school vision, they can help to persuade others that adjustments need to be made.

Assistance in Building Trust

Most literacy coaches will say that in order to assist teachers with reflecting upon and improving their instruction, they must build trusting relationships with them. The books reviewed in the LCC website are filled with ideas for how coaches might go about building these trusting relationships with teachers and administrators. Accomplished only from the ground up, these efforts can take much of a coach's time (and worry), and may not move teachers' instruction towards improvement. Jump starting this process of trust building is urgent in some schools.

A principal and school literacy team can do much to facilitate teachers' development of trust with a literacy coach. They can make clear the exact

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nature of the work that the coach will be doing. They can reinforce that the coach's role is not to be evaluative, but to assist teachers in reflecting upon their work, learning new practices, analyzing student work and assessments, and designing more effective lessons. They too can reinforce the extent to which teachers will be expected to work with the coach and to make changes to their instruction.

Assistance in Using Time, Managing Projects, & Documenting Their Work

For many teachers tapped to be literacy coaches, the job can seem overwhelming at first. Juggling all of the tasks that a literacy coach may be asked to assume is not easy. Being a literacy coach represents a new kind of job for teachers, and they often need help learning how to most efficiently and effectively use their time, manage various projects, and document their work for those who wonder what they are accomplishing. The work is more independent and less well defined than classroom teaching.

Coaches will benefit from learning about time management techniques found in articles and books, and sharing with each other what they are finding works in their district and school context. They need to be on the look out for ways that technology can help them and participate in training on new programs and devices. They need tools that will help them manage various facets of the job – examples of time logs that they can use, forms for various kinds of coaching sessions, discussion questions and forms that help teachers to examine student data are some examples.

Finally, coaches need chances to discuss ways that they document their work both orally and in writing to administrators and other teachers. This part of the job can make coaches feel a bit uncomfortable at first, but it can be managed more easily as coaches gain confidence in what they are doing and build teachers' trust in them. Those training to be literacy coaches report that they gain new insights about the job when they have opportunities to shadow and talk with experienced coaches.

Assistance in Organizing Study Groups

Coaches sometimes need help thinking through how to begin study groups. The stumbling block is often figuring out how to build in time for such groups. Coaches may also need help deciding how to form study groups or how to recruit members.

The fact is that study groups are an important part of coaching. They are a format through which teachers can engage in situated professional development during or after the school day. Through such meetings, the coach can help

teachers understand new teaching strategies. They can also learn new vocabulary. Coaches can then follow up with individual teachers through classroom coaching. Study groups can also observe particular teachers as models, or engage in lesson study.

Assistance in Planning Effective Professional Development for Teachers

Some teachers hired as literacy coaches have little experience acting as teachers and mentors for other adults. There are key concepts to adult learning and development that become important for coaches to

understand. They need to know that adults often respond best to choice and ownership of their own learning. They need to understand that adults engage best in professional development when it is personally relevant to the jobs they are doing and when feedback is specific and immediate to their needs.

Coaches may need to learn technology that will help them give more powerful presentations and useful handouts. Some will need to learn to develop materials that can be used in online formats. They will need to learn protocols that can be effective in examining both teacher and student work samples. They may need to learn ways to probe teachers' thinking in pre and post-observation conferences.

Assistance in Helping Teachers to Analyze Data

Literacy coaches need to assist teachers in analyzing data that is available about students' literacy progress. Such data includes both formal and informal assessments and

Examples of Literacy Coaches' Comments

From the Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse website

<http://www.literacycoachingonline.org>

- I have been recently hired as a Literacy Support Teacher. I am so excited, but also scared. Where do I begin? HELP!!!
- How do you effectively gain entrance into classrooms? I came to the school as a new teacher, so I don't have any past relationships to utilize.
- How do we explain who and what we are to our adult audience and have them trust a position that is still being defined?
- I think that if I had specific knowledge about working with adult learners, I could more easily move teachers to examine their classroom practices.
- I was worried how the teacher I was going to ask to participate in a coaching cycle would react.
- If administration does not support your efforts to offer consistent observation, debriefing, and discussions in a schedule that works so everyone knows what to expect, you will be walking uphill (and meeting more resistance).
- After our district's coaching summer training, I have some new beginnings to think about. I plan to sit down with my new principal this July and hear what his visions are.... Thanks for the summer of growth and encouragement.

analysis of student work samples. Analysis of such data makes clear the extent to which current practices are effective and can serve as a catalyst for change. If coaches are new to a district or a school, then they may need orientation to what data is collected and how the data is currently analyzed. They may also need help learning to use a school's or district's data management system and learning how best to present data to teachers. They will also need to learn how to lead teachers in discussions of their data. While coaches may already possess skills in these general areas, they may need to be fine-tuned to fit assessments currently in use.

Access to Instructional Resources

As part of doing a good job, literacy coaches need access to resources and the ability to purchase materials that will help teachers improve instruction. They need access to the newest books and articles on literacy coaching. They may need to purchase reading materials that can be used in demonstration lessons. It is very helpful if school librarians, teaching teams, and department chairs work with literacy coaches to honor suggestions about materials that might help offer a wider range of reading materials to students and help to further differentiate instruction.

The Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse website contains a wealth of resources for literacy coaches, teachers, principals, district level personnel, and other stakeholders. The library section of the site holds reviews of over 30 books on literacy coaching, 100 articles, and 20 research studies. The site is updated continually. LCC briefs contain much useful advice about qualifications for literacy coaches, considerations for setting up coaching programs, and other specific topics such as what coaches ought to know about working with English Language Learners. The on-going blog allows coaches to dialogue with one another; the forums allow coaches to learn from one another, and experts, about specific topics.

Opportunities for Professional Development

Literacy coaches need to be well-apprised of the latest research-based techniques for improving students' literacy. At times, the job of literacy coaches can be lonely, and they wonder if they are doing an adequate job to help teachers and students. Even when the best people available are hired as coaches, they may not know or yet be confident about 1) applying evidenced-based strategies in their own classrooms, 2) working with English Language Learners, 3) literacy teaching at other grade levels, 4) literacy as it applies to various academic disciplines, 5) using new assessment practices, and/or 6) effective methods for adult teaching and learning. The need for further professional development as literacy coaches does not diminish – the topics and nature of the professional development simply change to fit ongoing needs.

Thus, it becomes important for principals to allow a coach to meet with other coaches on a periodic basis – perhaps every few weeks. They also need to set aside monies so that coaches can attend important conferences. Of course, coaches need to select carefully what will benefit them the most, and balance what they do so that progress at the school site remains consistent.

In some areas of the country, districts are growing their own literacy coaches. They begin by selecting teachers who want to become literacy coaches. These would-be coaches attend professional development sessions themselves for a year and try new literacy strategies that they are learning in their own classrooms. They may also facilitate study groups during the first year. It is not until they are comfortable using new strategies themselves that they begin to coach others in their use. Such a professional development plan around increasing the number of qualified literacy coaches makes practical sense.

Feedback on Their Work

Finally, literacy coaches need caring, consistent feedback on their work. Coaches themselves need

to take responsibility for using evaluation forms with study groups, demonstration lessons, and professional development sessions. Summaries of these results ought to be shared with administrators and the school literacy team to help all reflect and plan next steps.

Coaches may want to take the Self-Assessment for Elementary School Literacy Coaches (under development as of the writing of this brief) or the Self-Assessment for Middle and High School Literacy/Instructional coaches, available on the Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse website. Honest, careful self-reflection about one's practice using one of these assessments can help coaches pinpoint areas to target for professional growth. They can then more thoughtfully plan for experiences that will help them achieve such targeted growth.

The principal or other building administrator ought to have a scheduled, standing meeting time with the literacy coach. Again, the purpose of the meeting is to examine the coach's progress on meeting goals, not to report on the instruction of particular teachers. Successes need to be shared, and feedback about concerns needs to be shared professionally, in problem-solving, constructive ways.

Contexts with Support help Literacy Coaches "Reach for the Stars"

In the end, the job of a literacy coach can be highly rewarding or frankly frustrating. The coach needs to be very knowledgeable about literacy and able to build trusting relationships within a school. At the same time, much of the coach's success will depend upon on supports put in place so that the coach can do a good job. Coaches can gradually put many of these elements in place themselves, but the pace of progress may be slower. Some schools have no time to wait.

When supports are in place, then a coach is more free to help a school "reach for the stars," a topic of another brief in the LCC site. Simply put, the coach can really help the school and district move forward their vision for students' literacy development.

Resources

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