

Building a Statewide Network of Literacy Leaders: The Idaho Reading Coach Academy

The Idaho Reading Coach Academy is part of the Idaho State Department of Education's (ISDE) K-3 literacy project, Striving to Meet Achievement in Reading Together (SMART). SMART is a multiyear cohort project to which teachers and reading specialists must apply. A key element of the SMART project was the development of a statewide network of reading coaches who could provide direct support to participants. This posed a challenge, as not all reading coaches had previous experience in the coaching role.

ISDE collaborated with the Region 17 Comprehensive Center (R17CC) to co-develop the Idaho Reading Coach Academy, which provides training and support to the regional coaches. The R17CC team worked with ISDE to create a logic model for the Idaho Reading Coach Academy. The logic model describes four primary strategies, all of which involve close collaboration with ISDE:

Identify district readiness to benefit from the academy and ability to participate

Collaborate with a small group of districts to co-create a science of reading implementation plan

Collaborate with ISDE to deliver professional services (i.e., in-person events and ongoing support)

Support the development of the online platform for communicating information and sharing resources (i.e., a coaching playbook)

The logic model also describes short-term outcomes in which 80 percent of reading coaches report knowledge of, use of, or engagement in each activity.



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Effective coaching as a key to improved instruction

While Idaho’s recent grade 4 reading scores have been slightly above the national average, nearly a third (31%) of grade 4 students in the state still scored below the “basic” level on the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress, a percentage that has remained consistent for nearly two decades.¹

To address this, Idaho State Superintendent Sherri Ybarra made improving K–3 literacy one of the state’s top educational priorities on the ISDE 2018–2022 strategic plan. Literacy is also a core focus of the Idaho American Rescue Plan to address learning loss that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The state adopted the Idaho Comprehensive Literacy Plan in December 2020, which identified science of reading research as the focus for improving early reading in the state. In May 2021, ISDE launched the SMART project as a professional learning framework to provide science of reading knowledge, implementation practices, and facilitated support to teachers and district-level reading specialists through the Idaho Reading Coach Academy (see sidebar).

Coaches are distributed across six regions. The regional reading coaches are vetted by ISDE and are experienced teachers with deep expertise in literacy instruction, including practices aligned to science of reading research. The Idaho Reading Coach Academy includes three in-person training sessions each year, as well as regular virtual meetings with the 15 coaches and asynchronous support to individual coaches (including district-level reading specialists) as needed. Each in-person training—and the yearlong plan for support—is designed in collaboration with the ISDE team.

The training is focused on evidence-based coaching skills and strategies, including topics such as building trust, modeling best practice, conducting side-by-side coaching in the classroom, building teachers’ capacity to use data to drive decision making, and engaging in autonomous coaching in which teachers set the goals for their own practice. In addition, the first in-person training each year focuses on understanding the roles and responsibilities of a coach and establishing a shared vision across the coaching network. While focused specifically on coaching, all training activities, examples, and resources are grounded in the practical implementation of science of reading principles.

Idaho’s SMART Goals

The SMART project has three goals:

- Advance teacher knowledge of the science of reading by providing facilitated learning opportunities for teachers to study and apply the research to everyday instructional practices.
- Train teachers to use science of reading-aligned instructional materials to improve early literacy learning for students.
- Improve teacher implementation of science of reading-aligned practices through synchronous and asynchronous coaching.

A major goal of the academy is to ensure consistency and cohesiveness across the entire coaching network. To this end, the R17CC and ISDE co-developed a “coaching playbook”. The playbook includes all resources used in the training, additional literacy research, relevant data, and a safe place for coaches to share their experiences and communicate with R17CC staff members and the ISDE team.

Providing tailored support at the local level

For Cohort 2, ISDE and the R17CC decided to add direct coaching support to a small number of districts. This decision was based in part on lessons learned from the Year 1 evaluation of the SMART project. One key finding from the evaluation was that school and district administrators were not fully supportive—or in some cases even aware of—teachers’ involvement in the project. While administrator support was a key requirement in teacher applications, some superintendents and principals appeared to have signed off on teachers’ participation without fully understanding the elements of the project and what would be required of them.

Prior to the 2022–23 school year ISDE identified several districts that could benefit from more hands-on, local coaching support. Rather than focusing on districts with lower levels of administrator support, the state chose to do the opposite, with the goal of creating districts and schools that could serve as models for the rest of the state in how to support continuous improvement of early literacy instruction.

ISDE had three criteria for selection. Districts had to have teachers who were currently participating in the SMART project, had to be actively engaging with their regional coach, and had to have the full support of the superintendent.

Ultimately, the state identified two school districts and a total of nine schools. R17CC staff members began this engagement by meeting with each superintendent and with the principal at each school to identify specific literacy needs and areas of focus. For example, some schools had identified one key area in which students were struggling, such as comprehension, fluency, or phonemic awareness. This allowed the R17CC team to target its coaching support to these specific areas.

This approach is intended to promote local sustainability of the SMART project using a gradual release of responsibility: building the capacity of district-level coaches (reading specialists) and administrators to ultimately serve as literacy leaders. The R17CC team and ISDE regional coach are conducting district planning visits throughout the 2022–23 school to help each district develop a sustainable implementation plan for the 2023–24 school year.

Short- and long-term impact

Based on the external evaluation, the SMART project has reached its short-term outcomes, with at least 80 percent of participants reporting that they had increased their knowledge of effective, evidence-based coaching practices; had begun implementing those practices; and had engaged in the core activities of the program.

In a survey given to reading coaches at the end of Cohort 1, open-ended responses about the value of the program were overwhelmingly positive. As one participating coach said, “This academy has been instrumental in giving context and structure to what we’re trying to do as coaches!”

Another participant said, “I’ve enjoyed the time to learn with the other coaches. It is motivating to be part of something so positive and also something that is directly helping students learn to read.”

As evidence of reaching longer-term outcomes, ISDE plans to expand the project to include a third cohort, which will increase the number of literacy coaches available to school districts across the state. In addition, through the evaluation of the project and coordination with R17CC, ISDE is continuing to improve its implementation of the statewide coaching initiative, has developed a deeper understanding of how coaches can best support teachers, and has increased its own capacity to effectively prepare literacy coaches.

While it is too early to measure the impact of SMART on K–3 reading scores in Idaho, the available evidence suggests that the project is helping to create a core group of educators who are solidly grounded in science of reading principles and effective coaching practices. The influence of this new generation of Idaho literacy leaders is likely to be felt for years to come.

Endnote

¹ Idaho 2019 grade 4 reading snapshot report from the National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pubs/stt2019/2020014.aspx>

References

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