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Organizational Barriers to Effective Literacy Coaching

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When I was first hired as a literacy coach in 2003, on the tail end of the Reading Excellence Act (1998), few people I met had heard of literacy coaching. Four years later, literacy coaching has become a popular trend in public education. The number of articles and books written on the subject, the number of people I meet who have a working knowledge of what a literacy coach is, and the number of districts that employ literacy coaches has ballooned in recent years. Currently, 5,600 schools employ literacy coaches as a requirement of Reading First (2007) grants over 500 schools hire coaches as part of NCEE's America's Choice program (www.americaschoice.org), and 600 more have literacy coaches through Ohio State's Literacy Collaborative (Scharer, Desai, Williams, & Pinnell, 2003), all established within the last two decades. Numerous other districts employ coaches who are unaffiliated with any of these major initiatives, as many in the field of educational reform have latched onto this latest trend in professional development as a means to solve the woes of the American public school system. The recent creation of the Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse (www.literacycoachingonline.org), a joint venture of the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English, further suggests that coaching has become a well accepted and respected endeavor. There appears to be widespread belief that creating a literacy coaching position at a school will improve student achievement, teacher effectiveness, and overall school success.

It is certainly the case that literacy coaches have the ability to embed professional development into a school culture and that they are in a unique position to transform instructional practice in a way that one-shot workshops or drop-in experts simply cannot (Joyce & Showers, 1995). Coaching is grounded in the real work of teaching, in the context of real classrooms filled with real students. Teachers who work with literacy coaches are more apt to put their new learning into practice and to become more reflective, self-extending instructors (Riddle, Coskie, Robinson, & Ekawa, 2004). However, as I have learned from my own and other's experiences as coaches, literacy coaches work within, and can be confined by, the structure of their district and school building. In order to be successful, district and school cultures need to support the work of coaches. Simply put, literacy coaches will be ineffective change agents in districts or schools in which their work is undermined by ineffective policies or counterproductive agendas.

District-Level Obstacles to Successful Literacy Coaching

Districts across the country are hiring literacy coaches to rescue failing, and not-so-failing, schools. In part as a result of the requirements of REA and Reading First, the position of

literacy coach has become widespread in recent years and is currently gaining a foothold in secondary schools as well (Toll, 2005). School boards and superintendents are encouraged by the potential for coaches to raise student achievement and teacher competence. However, there are ways in which otherwise supportive school districts can undermine that potential. The manner in which a district structures the position, the roles that coaches are asked to fulfill, and the curricula that coaches are asked to support may all leave literacy coaches with little freedom to support teachers in ways that are best.

In many instances, literacy coaches work in district-level positions in which they serve more than one school. Often, these coaches act as liaisons between their "home" schools and the district offices. There are two problems associated with being in such a position. First, a coach who is a district-level employee is automatically positioned as an outsider. Teachers are less likely to see these coaches as peers and more likely to lump them into the category of "administrator." Additionally, coaches who do not have one home school often do not see themselves as an integral member of the school community. A lack of shared experiences can mean that coaches are less invested in the school and less motivated to transform the instructional practices at the school.

The second reason that coaching in more than one school can be problematic is that a coach who is supporting teachers at several schools is, quite simply, being spread too thin. In order to do the difficult work of coaching teachers, coaches need to have the opportunity to build relationships with the teachers with whom they work, to spend time in their classrooms, and to follow up on teachers' requests for assistance. Guskey (2002) found that teachers were far more likely to change their instructional practices and master new learning when they received regular feedback on their progress and when they were provided with continued follow-up and support. Coaches who spend only part of their time at a school are limited in their ability to provide feedback and support on a regular basis. When coaches are not highly visible members of a school community, teachers are less likely to seek out the support of a coach. When coaches are not available to follow up on observations or requests for resources, teachers lose trust in their coach, sometimes permanently damaging the coaching relationship. This is not to say that coaches who work in several schools can't be successful. However, it is important that coaches who work in several buildings find a specific goal or focus area for each school and limit their work so as to make it more manageable.

As in the case of Reading First, coaches are often hired by a district to ensure that teachers in a building or a district are implementing a reading program, or other curricula, with fidelity. In some circumstances, especially when the curriculum is fairly scripted, a coach in this position may fall into the trap of not actually "coaching" the teachers to develop their instructional skills. Instead, the coach serves as an enforcer of the program, a watchdog who demands that teachers jump through the curricular hoops as outlined by the program or district. When I began coaching in my current school, I was the fourth coach with whom veteran teachers of the school had worked. Each previous coach had been affiliated with a national program and each had demanded that teachers adhere to that program with absolute conformity. As a result of their past experiences, teachers were initially reluctant to work with me and were clearly hesitant to allow me into their classrooms. Rather than seeing a literacy coach as a peer or mentor who could guide them to improving their practice, teachers viewed the coach as a tool of the district administration, someone to avoid and, in some cases, to fear.

While coaches should never serve in an evaluative manner, too often coaches are asked to report back to district-level or building-level administration about which teachers are toeing the

party line or are implementing a certain program. When coaches are expected to fill this particular role, they lose credibility with teachers. The real work of guiding teachers to reflect on their practice is impossible under these guidelines. Lyons and Pinnell (2000) assert that trust is a critical component of successful coaching. Indeed, my experience has shown me that building trusting relationships with teachers is a vital prerequisite to my job.

Additionally, literacy coaches are often called upon to roll-out new curricula or new literacy materials. This role is an important one, and one in which coaches can provide the support needed for teachers to be successful with unfamiliar content or materials. However, it is critical that coaches be given the opportunity to become expert in new content before supporting teachers in its implementation. When coaches are learning new content at the same time as teachers, they are only one small step ahead of the teachers they have been asked to support and cannot fully provide the type of guidance that teachers expect and deserve. As noted in the IRA position paper on reading coaches (2004), this model diminishes a coach's credibility with teachers and moves the coach beyond his or her level of expertise, effectively diluting his or her ability to coach. Literacy coaches should be given the professional support necessary to build their knowledge and understanding of new content, strategies, and techniques before being asked to coach others on it. District-level personnel can ensure coaches have this time by protecting time for coaches' professional learning and for allowing coaches time to collaborate with one another.

Each school community is unique and has its own individual set of strengths and areas of need. When districts allow coaches the flexibility to work with a school's personality, rather than imposing a new one upon it, coaches build trusting relationships with administrators, teachers, and parents that support opportunities for transformational work. As good teachers differentiate their instruction based on the needs of their students, effective literacy coaches differentiate their coaching to meet the needs of the teachers in their schools. Districts can support this work by releasing coaches from ensuring that all schools and all teachers are teaching in lockstep.

Building-Level Obstacles to Successful Literacy Coaching

Even when a district's policies and structure support the success of literacy coaching, there are building-level obstacles that can interfere with a coach's effectiveness. In order for coaches to promote real change in practice, teachers must have a certain degree of autonomy. Sometimes, principals and teachers can have a basic misunderstanding of a literacy coach's role. Coaches serve many functions in schools, but their primary role should be to support teachers as they become self-extending, reflective practitioners. Coaches can encourage this process by providing opportunities for professional collaboration, structured reflection, and team problem-solving. They can model effective instructional strategies and find professional resources for teachers. Coaches shouldn't, however, try to fill the role of resident expert (Toll, 2005). When coaches are positioned as the sole authority on literacy instruction in the school, teachers can become dependent on the coach. Rather than making strong instructional decisions based on their own professional judgment, student data, or team feedback, teachers may begin to demand that the coach just "tell them what to do." Rather than building self-extending, confident teachers, a coach who is the "expert" may have the opposite effect and can actually stifle the growth that he or she has been hired to promote.

For real change to occur in a school, teachers must have the power to effect that change. In buildings in which teachers are required to teach in a prescribed manner, there is little

impetus, or even freedom, for teachers to alter any of the instructional decisions that they make. A coach working in a school that expects cookie cutter instruction can only be effective in ensuring that teachers are following the prescribed plan. They can never engage in the more meaningful work of supporting teachers to become reflective practitioners who make conscious choices about instruction based on student outcomes.

Occasionally, principals will enlist coaches to "fix" teachers whose methods have proven ineffective. There are certainly teachers such as those in our schools. Tucker (2001) asserts that "5-15% of teachers in public classrooms perform at incompetent levels" (p. 52). In some isolated cases, an expert coach can transform the teaching in these classrooms. In other cases, a coach can remedy enough of the problem (often by isolating one or two manageable goals) to make the instruction in a particular classroom "passable." A coach can be successful when a teacher is simply unaware of more effective instructional practices or when a teacher has a specific problem, such as classroom management, which is stymieing his or her ability to be an effective instructor. However, in cases where a teacher is reluctant to change any of his or her practices or when a teacher's underlying educational philosophy is at odds with the goals of a school or district, a coach will most probably make little headway in "fixing'" the teacher. In fact, this is an administrative issue, one that may best be resolved by the teacher finding another school that is a better fit. When coaches find that their sole function in a school is to "fix teachers," the results are rarely as dramatic as one might hope (Riddle, Coskie, Robinson, & Ekawa, 2004). Literacy coaches can promote positive changes most easily and efficiently when they are allowed to devote the bulk of their time to working with responsive, competent teachers.

Walpole and McKenna (2003) believe that literacy coaches can also effect change much more effectively when they work collaboratively with the school's administration. In some schools, however, "principals are managers who leave literacy coaches to do the instructional work alone" (p. 224). When principals are not directly involved in instructional decisions, and when principals and coaches are not clear with one another about instructional expectations, teachers are left with fragmented messages about building-level expectations. In some cases, teachers may feel that they have the option of ignoring a coach's recommendations. Even worse, resistant teachers may begin to play the administration and the coach against one another. For coaches to be most successful, they must work closely with administrators so that coaches and principals are supporting one another's work rather than undermining it.

Literacy coaches, by their very nature, press institutions and people to change. For many people, change, no matter how drastic or miniscule, can be scary and disconcerting. In order for coaches to promote positive changes in instruction, a school community must be at ease enough with a coach to be able to work through uncomfortable, even frightening, times of upheaval and transformation. In the end, this work is worth the discomfort and unease that teachers feel, but a coach needs to have built relationships founded on trust and mutual respect for these adjustments to feel genuine rather than forced.

As more and more schools look to literacy coaches to improve student achievement, it is critical that structures be in place to support the coach's work. Coaches cannot work miracles, and often a school or district's needs for improvement reach beyond the scope of an individual coach. When coaches are supported, however, at both the school and district level, literacy coaches can help move a school community to significant instructional change. he hard work of effective coaching, supported by a school community, can have radical, positive effects on student achievement.

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