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Three Techniques for Successful Literacy Coaching

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I just wanted to let you know that Mrs. L and I both tried your vocabulary activity in class this week; and we were thrilled with the results. The students thoroughly enjoyed it. The raps and poems the students wrote surpassed my expectations. In my class I gave a pre and post test on the words used in the exercise and saw marked improvement in their scores. Thanks again for the great idea. It is refreshing to go to an in-service and come out with an activity that you can try right now with little effort, expense or materials which reaps benefits of learning. I really appreciate the positive energy you bring to EHS.

Kindest Regards,

Amy

(Moxley & Taylor, 2006, p. 10)

Students' literacy achievement tends to lessen as they progress from elementary to middle level to high school as measured by state and national assessments. To ensure that secondary school students retain their literacy skills, many states and districts have created the position of literacy coach for middle level and high schools.

Literacy coaches, as we define them, are full-time teacher leaders who have been relieved of their classroom responsibilities so they can provide professional development, modeling, classroom coaching, and other services to improve students' reading and writing. These teacher leaders are most effective when they support the implementation and monitoring of research-based literacy interventions that classroom teachers can infuse into their instruction to develop students' vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.

Roles and Responsibilities

Faculties tend to be suspicious of any staff member who is in a nonteaching position, and the literacy coach position is no exception. To overcome faculty members' skepticism and maximize learning gains, the position of literacy coach must be developed carefully. This begins by making professional development a priority in all of its forms: workshops, coaching, modeling, study groups, one-on-one assistance, and resource support. Sooner rather than later, the literacy coach



PREVIEW

Effective literacy coaching involves overcoming faculty members' skepticism by including them in defining the coach's responsibilities.

Literacy coaches are expected to be experts in literacy learning, teacher leadership, and professional development, skills they must often develop on the job.

Literacy coaches are powerless without the support of the principal.

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and the faculty will learn exactly what to expect and how assistance will be provided to groups and individual teachers.

The first practice for successfully leveraging the literacy coach position is to clearly define the coach's roles and responsibilities. If this is not done collaboratively at the district level, then principals can collaborate with the literacy coaches and the faculty members in their schools to determine how the coach will meet their schools' data-based literacy learning needs. For example, at Lake County (FL) Schools (2004), the literacy coach's roles and responsibilities include:

- Designing and providing professional development support for the district's literacy program
- Leading the school literacy leadership team
- Helping develop and implement the school literacy plan
- Keeping administrators up to date on the literacy progress, success, and needs at the school
- Maintaining a professional library of literacy materials
- Advising and assisting teachers in assessing student needs and appropriate teaching strategies
- Promoting the processes of literacy in classrooms
- Analyzing student data
- Keeping abreast of scientifically based reading research
- Engaging parents and the community in the literacy process
- Promoting reading motivation programs.

Professional Development

After the coach's role and responsibilities have been collaboratively developed and communicated to the people who will provide, receive, and monitor the literacy coaching, the second practice for success involves the literacy coach becoming an expert in literacy learning, teacher leadership, and professional development. A principal who finds a teacher who already has

knowledge and skill in these areas is both unusual and lucky.

A principal generally selects a literacy coach from the teaching staff because they already have a positive relationship and the principal perceives that the teacher



has the potential to develop positive relationships with faculty members. These new recruits have varying degrees of expertise in literacy and may have no experience working with adults, particularly middle level and high school teachers. Therefore, it is imperative that the professional development of the literacy coach become a priority.

Large districts can create a cadre of literacy coaches who can study, collaborate on professional development and coaching, and resolve issues together, which is ideal. In smaller districts, literacy coaches can join a professional community of learners regionally, nationally, or online.

In addition to seeking out professional development opportunities for themselves, literacy coaches must also provide training for teachers in their schools. One professional development model is to create research-based professional development for classroom teachers on selected key topics that can be taught during planning times and before or after school. This approach has worked well in several districts and yielded gain in student achievement within one academic year.

According to Boulware (2006), high school literacy coaches reported that modeling literacy strategies in the classroom was the professional activity that affected learning the most, but it was also the activity that they had the least time for. Boulware's study examined the experiences of 27 high school literacy coaches in rural, suburban, and urban areas in Florida. The coaches who perceived that they spent the most time in professional development-related service with teachers had the greatest gain in student achievement as measured by 10th-grade reading on the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT) 2006. On the other hand, literacy coaches who reported that they spent the majority of their time on non-professional development activities—such as student supervision and assessment and monitoring data for the principal—had the least gain in student achievement on the same standardized test.

Two models for developing and implementing professional development appear to be successful. In Lake and Citrus Counties in Florida, literacy coaches collaborated to develop professional development modules that were presented in each elementary, middle level, and high school (with modifications for different grade configurations). This approach ensured that a common language and philosophy related to literacy learning was implemented throughout the districts. After one year, Lake

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County experienced a gain in its students' FCAT reading mean scale scores. The greatest gains were noted in grades 3, 4, 5, and 9. When increases in the percentage of students scoring at or above grade level were considered, all grades except 8 and 10 experienced improvement. Gains continued in the following year, particularly at the middle level.

During the 2005–06 school year, schools in Seminole County, FL, used a different professional development model. The literacy coaches attended professional development training in the areas they thought were most important for content-area teachers, such as using classroom libraries, questioning, and connecting reading and writing. Then the coaches worked in pairs to develop specific content-focused literacy professional development to teach to the high school content-area teachers. The district provided released time for the teachers to attend the training. The teachers appreciated the clear relationship the coaches established between a common literacy focus—such as fluency, vocabulary, or comprehension—and their specific curricula and textbooks. Although all the content-area teachers were supposed to attend the districtwide training, some did not, so the literacy coaches often provided the training at their home schools. In spring 2006, FCAT results for ninth-grade students supported this approach: the percentage of students meeting high standards or making learning gains increased in each school.

The Principal's Role

The third and perhaps most important practice for leveraging a literacy coach's ability to improve reading and writing is to develop and maintain a positive relationship and regular communication with the principal. Literacy coaches are powerless without the direct support of the principal. Some principals find it effective to include the literacy coach on the school's leadership team so that he or she sees the big picture and begins to understand schoolwide decision making. Regular communication provides an opportunity for the coach to share updates on successes or challenges with the principal so he or she can provide needed support.

In schools that experience the greatest gain in literacy, the principal and the assistant principals consistently participate

in the professional development training that literacy coaches provide. The active participation of the administrative team sends a powerful message to teachers about the value of the training and expectations for incorporating the new literacy strategies in classrooms. Moreover, if administrators experience the same professional development that teachers do, they are in an excellent position to conduct walk-throughs and to coach and reward excellent implementation of the new literacy strategies. After performing walk-throughs, administrators can be candid in their feedback to teachers. Without such feedback, continued growth and measured improvement may not take place.

In the annual implementation monitoring, a high school literacy coach whose school made gain after one year noted:

Administrators attended all in-services, they conducted regular walkthroughs to seek evidence of implementation. Monetary support was great, if I asked for it, I got it! Schedule considerations of low-performing students was given top priority—the administration was super! (Taylor & Moxley, 2004)

Leadership for Literacy Coaching

Literacy coaches are teachers, and therefore, they have a great advantage in building credibility and positive relationships with classroom teachers—if they were good classroom teachers themselves. To be truly effective, however, a literacy coach must become an expert in literacy learning, teacher leadership, and professional coaching. The coach must also regularly communicate with his or her principal to examine the literacy learning needs of the faculty. The principal is then in a position to provide the coach with the help and resources he or she needs. Improving student achievement as it relates to literacy begins with the principal. **PL**

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