



## Literacy Coaching for Change

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**By implementing a variety of literacy coaching models, an urban school district substantially improved its students' reading achievement.**

Evanston/Skokie School District 65 serves one of the oldest communities in the metropolitan Chicago area, with a richly diverse population reflected in both the teachers and students in its schools.

During the last 10 years, School District 65 has adopted and implemented best practice strategies associated with literacy improvement. As a result of a differentiated literacy program and specific interventions, the percentage of underachieving students in the primary literacy program meeting grade-level literacy benchmarks rose from 55 percent in 2000 to 80 percent in 2003 (Evanston/Skokie School District 65, 2004).

An important feature of the literacy program is developing coaching models for schools with the most mobile school populations. In many such schools in the Chicago metropolitan area, one-third to two-thirds of the students in a classroom may turn over during the course of the school year. Teacher mobility is also higher in schools that have a substantial number of at-risk students. One job of the literacy coach is to monitor the overall instructional program, helping teachers maintain a consistent literacy program as they differentiate for new students.

The coaching role of the reading specialist is increasingly receiving attention in professional development literature (Dole, 2004). The coach's major role is to provide professional development and support to teachers to improve classroom instruction. This typically involves organizing schoolwide professional development and then structuring in-class training, which includes demonstrations, modeling, support for teacher trials of new instruction, and coach feedback.

### Setting Up the Process

Although many resources provide information on best practices in literacy instruction (see Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), few tackle setting up and maintaining the literacy coaching process, particularly in urban schools. Urban settings are challenging for literacy coaches because of high rates of student and teacher mobility, inconsistent professional development, lack of a shared vocabulary and vision of literacy, and the size and complexity of these districts.

School District 65 has a diverse student body of more than 6,600 students. Approximately 41 percent are white, 43 percent are black, 11 percent are Hispanic, and 4 percent are Asian and Pacific Islander. More than 34 percent of district students are low-income, and 5 percent are English language learners. The district has an 8 percent student mobility rate, with the schools with the lowest-income students having mobility rates of 11–13 percent and a chronic truancy rate of 1.7 percent.

As a teacher educator, a district reading director, and a reading specialist all working on literacy in the district, we have found that the following six coaching process strategies effectively supported the change process in our schools. These strategies can assist those who are beginning to develop their own literacy coaching models.

### **Strategy No. 1: Connect to Current Practice**

Too often, urban schools are victims of the "Christmas tree effect" (Raphael, Gavelek, Hynd, Teale, & Shanahan, 2002). Initiative after initiative is introduced into the schools, piling unrelated projects one on top of the other, and

making teachers cynical about real change. Often a “this too shall pass” attitude characterizes teachers' outlooks regarding any targeted professional development.

By starting with a connection to an ongoing literacy initiative, however, the literacy coach validates prior efforts and assists teachers in identifying underlying best-practice principles in their current teaching that can form a basis for new learning. This wards off cynicism and builds from strength.

For example, one school had already identified the need for improved word study in the primary grades. The coaches built on this interest by forming a teacher study group to discuss the book *Words Their Way* (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2000). This dovetailed with teacher interest and initiatives and led group members to investigate new and productive best practices, such as word sorts, in which students categorize words in various groupings, and word walls. Many schools were also interested in issues related to phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary because of the No Child Left Behind legislation.

### ***Strategy No. 2: Choose Generative Practices***

Urban curriculum guides often resemble compendiums of discrete instructional strategies. One of the literacy coach's goals should be to focus on basic practices that raise important questions (Ogle, 2002). The connection initiative for District 65 was the “Everybody Reads” fluency project (Blachowicz et al., in press). In this project, volunteer teachers from each elementary school in the district met monthly with literacy specialists and coaches to study best practices in fluency instruction. In the weeks between meetings, coaches visited each teacher, modeled fluency strategies in the classroom, and supported the teachers in using these strategies on their own. At each subsequent meeting, teachers brought up many issues that underpin good fluency instruction, such as having the right materials, knowing a student's reading level, and measuring student growth in reading. Such issues became the topics for the following month's meetings.

As a result of the project, teachers spontaneously decided that they needed to level books in their schools and set up book rooms, something they might have rejected had we come in and said, “OK, we're now going to teach you how to level and set up book rooms.” The two-year districtwide program resulted in the development of a shared vocabulary about literacy, a district literacy handbook, and a volunteer program.

Reading fluency is one generative process for a richer approach to teaching, but many others are equally rich.

Getting students interested in reading is a huge need in urban settings and brings up the issues of differentiation and matching materials to readers. Flexible grouping is another generative hook, which lends itself to discussions about assessment and managing small groups in meaningful ways.

### ***Strategy No. 3: Establish Your Credentials***

“Teaching creds” are essential. In urban classrooms, it's particularly important that teachers see coaches as capable, hardworking, generous, and able to work with “our kids.” At the beginning of the year, literacy coaches spend at least half their time working with students as the teacher observes or coteaches. Coaches spend the remaining time training teachers in and out of the classroom. District 65 currently has four literacy coaches who work in up to four schools each.

An important starter activity for the coach is locating and organizing literacy materials that can help teachers improve their practice. Schools often have plenty of instructional materials, but these resources may be disorganized or inaccessible. Setting up a shared book room—or, more realistically, a book cabinet—sets the stage for collaboration and gives teachers the tools they need. The inclusion of culturally relevant materials is a must for effective instruction of urban students (Temple, Martinez, Yokota, & Naylor, 2001).

### ***Strategy No. 4: Make Student Learning the Focus***

“Oh, so you're here to ‘fix’ our teaching again,” said one angry teacher at an initial coaching meeting. Teachers who work in difficult school settings with challenging students often receive one “fix” after another, which either angers the teachers or makes them even more insecure about their teaching.

“No, we're here to see how we can work together to improve student reading achievement,” we replied. To make this a reality, we adopted a strategy of starting our twice-a-month meetings with an analysis of pupil progress (Dorn, French, & Jones, 1999). We had begun the year by having teachers assess their students on district benchmarks and post their students' names on a large chart. At the beginning of each meeting, we unrolled the chart and teachers advanced the sticky notes with the students' names to signify students' progress.

This practice had several outcomes. It emphasized that we were all in this together for the good of the students. It required ongoing informal assessment and provided visible, heartening signs of progress. It also gave us a basis for cross-classroom grouping and helped identify those students who were not making progress. As more grades were added to the coaching process over the years, it strengthened the impetus for cross-grade dialogue. As one teacher remarked to another, “You need to push that boy! He was reading beyond that level at the end of last year. He's just playing possum!”

### ***Strategy No. 5: Use a Repertoire of Coaching Strategies***

Just like their students, teachers deserve differentiation in service models. The coach generally suggests possible coaching models, and each teacher chooses the one that most closely matches the school context and his or her goals for the class. For example, when teachers want to try something on their own, the *guide on the side* might be the right approach to free them to experiment. If teachers want more specific feedback, the *observation aide* model might be preferable.

The District 65 coaching model included several coaching options (Obrochta, 1995):

*Strategy coach.* This is the most common literacy coach role, in which the coach models a strategy, discusses the modeling session with the teacher, assists in planning the teacher's trial for guided practice, and then helps the teacher reflect on the experience to refine the model. This gradual release of responsibility—from coach to teacher—is key to effective coaching.

*Guide on the side.* In this role, the coach facilitates the teacher's trial of a new strategy by sitting with students who may have difficulty with the strategy to help them through the lesson. This frees up the teacher to try something new because he or she no longer needs to closely monitor a given group of students. It also provides both teacher and coach with follow-up ideas for discussion on differentiation or grouping.

*Observation aide.* This coaching role has three forms. In one form, the teacher observes the coach teaching a lesson before doing his or her own trial. The teacher jots down observations, using a plus mark to note strategies that he or she liked and wants to try, a minus to note things that didn't go well or could stand improvement, and a question mark to note questions or concerns. In a second form, the coach observes the teacher and provides similar feedback. In the third form, the teacher observes the students. When the coach teaches a lesson, the teacher should sit at the front or to the side of the room—not in the back—and take notes on the students: Who is lost? Who could use extra support? Who is fidgety because the lesson is redundant? These kinds of observations raise good questions about differentiation.

*Grouping coach.* Organizing and managing classroom groups is one of the greatest challenges for teachers. The grouping coach can help the teacher implement flexible grouping and organize classroom reading, writing, and listening centers to facilitate group work. The coach can assist the teacher in organizing meaningful independent work for these centers and setting up management mechanisms that enable the work to flow smoothly and productively. We designed a grouping board using Velcro and student nametags, which the teacher can use to organize the groups for each day (D. Sullivan, personal communication, 1999). The teacher might divide students into such groups as Read with Teacher, Read with Partner, Read Alone, Work at Writing Center, Work at Reading Center, Work at Listening Center, and so on. A simple chalkboard or chart space for grouping often makes the difference between a successful lesson and a disaster.

### ***Strategy No. 6: Video, Video, Video***

One of urban teachers' most common refrains in staff development situations is, "Sure, that's a great idea. But it won't work with *our* kids!" By videotaping strategies that teachers are effectively practicing in their classrooms, the coach can produce compelling evidence of best practices at work with city students. The best videos are often the ones with glitches. Good but less-than-perfect examples provide fruit for discussion and relieve teachers of the burden of thinking that they need to be perfect, as so many commercial education videotapes inadvertently suggest. Coaches should get into the habit of setting up a camera on a tripod and letting it roll during teaching demonstrations. This provides lots of snippets of lessons to discuss and accustoms teachers to having the camera in the classroom. It also encourages teachers to "stealth" videotape their own lessons. After reviewing the tape privately, they can either trash it or share it with their colleagues.

Coaching for literacy improvement in urban schools is a challenging and vital undertaking. In their varying roles, urban literacy coaches can help ensure that all students get the instruction they deserve and that all teachers get the professional development and support they need to make this happen.

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Change is hard. Ask anyone who has tried to switch careers, develop a new skill, improve a relationship, or break a bad habit. And yet for most people change will at some point be necessary—a critical step toward fulfilling their potential and achieving their goals, both at work and at home. They will need support with this process. They need a coach. This is coaching for compliance, and it can be effective in helping someone achieve a specific predetermined goal, such as earning a promotion. But when it comes to broader behavioral goals, such as becoming a dynamic leader or a great listener or finding a better work/life balance, this strategy is less successful. Indeed, as our studies and other research have shown, it can trigger a stress response that hinders rather than helps progress. Theodore saw literacy coaches become change agents when she was delivering professional development in New Mexico. At a literacy leadership team meeting, some teacher leaders and coaches told the principals that observing other schools and districts had caused them to examine their school's literacy initiative more closely and understand it within the context of the entire school improvement initiative. With the support and trust of their principals, the coaches began offering more professional development sessions, including after school sessions, and focusing on how the work would influence student outcomes in all areas, not just literacy. Everyone was impressed with the openness, honesty, and courage of the discussion and follow-up actions. Coaching for Literacy empowers coaches, their teams and fans... Reading is important, but so is listening. We are listening and working to create change for our future. If you are looking for age-appropriate books to explain racism and protests to your kids, check out this list from The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/18/kids-books-racism-protest.html> The conversation about race needs to start early and keep happening. nytimes.com.