

"THERE'S ALWAYS SOMEONE AT A LEVEL ABOVE YOU THAT YOU CAN CALL UPON FOR HELP." — Erin Scott



PHOTO BY T. WAYNE PRIM

Erin Scott, left, presents a lesson as a reading coach while reading coach trainer Teri Prim observes at Joseph Lisenby Elementary School in Ozark, Ala. This school year, Scott is a technical assistance coach.

ADDING LAYERS *of* SUPPORT

ALABAMA'S PROGRAM HELPS SITE-BASED COACHES SUCCEED

BY JOHN NORTON

Erin Scott has spent her 17-year teaching career in Ozark, Ala., a small city school system tucked in the southeast corner of the state, less than an hour's drive from the borders of Georgia and Florida. For more than half her pro-

fessional life, Scott has specialized in reading intervention, most recently as a reading resource teacher at Joseph Lisenby Elementary, a Title I school where 65% of the students live in poverty.

In early 2005, Lisenby agreed to join the Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI), a multiyear effort to implement a scientifically based approach to reading instruction in all schools with grades K-3. Scott became

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Lisenby’s ARI reading coach, a job that would require her to devote all of her time to school-based staff development.

“I soon found that my reading coach role was very different than my resource teacher role,” Scott says. “In the resource role, I usually worked with just a few teachers and a few children. But a reading coach provides day-to-day leadership for the overall reading program in the school, working with both classroom and resource teachers.”

As she entered the new position, Scott knew she had a lot to learn, both about ARI’s approach to instruction and about leading adult learning in a school. Fortunately, she says, “The power and success of the Alabama Reading Initiative is that there’s always someone at a level above

you that you can call upon for help. And it’s someone who knows how to help you. You are never thrown to the sharks.”

THE ARI STRUCTURE

Since 1998, using a process of continuous evaluation and improvement, the Alabama Reading Initiative has fashioned a multilayered professional development system that now trains and supports more than 1,000 school-based coaches working in ARI schools.

The ARI model was recognized as a literacy program that successfully improves student learning and teacher practice by the National Staff Development Council, National Education Association, and University of North Carolina Greensboro as part of NSDC’s results-based staff develop-

ment initiative. The model is built on vertical collaboration. From the perspective of the school-based reading coach, this includes:

- Initial training in ARI content during a weeklong summer academy, as part of the whole-school faculty team;
- Ongoing professional development provided by a regionally based reading coach trainer, who works with coaches individually at their own schools and in small groups at a host school, where coaches and trainers have easy access to teachers and students for modeling purposes; and
- Additional support from a regional principal coach, who not only helps principals become

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effective leaders of reading instruction but models the kind of collaboration between principal and school-based reading coach that leads to significant changes in teacher practice.

“With 1,000-plus school-based coaches, we have diverse professional development needs,” says Georgina Pipes, ARI’s coordinator of statewide reading coach professional development. “Some coaches are new, some are experienced. They are working in large and small schools, some with many struggling readers. It’s quite a challenge, but we believe we’ve designed a system to meet it.”

PREPARING A NEW READING COACH

When a school joins the Alabama Reading Initiative, one of the principal’s first jobs is to select a reading coach. Most often, the principal will choose a current faculty member with a track record of student success in reading achievement and some knowl-

edge of scientifically based approaches to reading instruction. Even with a strong background, says Erin Scott, a new reading coach will spend many hours “reading and thinking about the ARI content” as he or she prepares for the new role.

When Joseph Lisenby Elementary began the process of ARI induction in spring 2005, the school principal was asked to organize a literacy leadership team that included herself, Scott, and a classroom teacher at each grade level. The team attended three training sessions with state ARI staff, where they learned about ARI’s recommended instructional planning and scheduling procedures, including a protected

daily 90-minute reading block for all students and an additional 30-minute intervention block for struggling readers.

The training also prepared Scott and her principal to lead a schoolwide book study of *Put Reading First: The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Children to Read* (Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement, 2001), which provides the scientific basis for ARI’s program. The book discussion, says Pipes, helped lay the groundwork for a week of summer study at the Alabama Reading Academy, which all new ARI schools must attend.

The academy, staged each June at regional summer schools funded by ARI, “is all about content,” Pipes explains. “We require the entire faculty, the principal, and the reading coach to attend. Our new reading coaches go through the academy like any other teacher.”

At this stage in the reading coach’s development, “we really haven’t gotten our hands on them” for specialized training, Pipes says. “We want them to be thoroughly immersed in the content first, and we’ve found that there’s real value in having them participate with their teachers as peers in this learning experience.”

During the academy, teachers are divided into grade-level teams. They delve more deeply into the research on effective reading instruction, watch facilitators demonstrate lessons with summer school children, participate in guided reflection about what they’ve observed, and then offer feedback to the teacher facilitators. In the second phase of what will become a familiar coaching cycle, the teachers-in-training develop a lesson with facilitator support, using real student data. A volunteer then teaches the lesson, and the group once again participates in the structured reflection and feedback process.

“The whole coaching and collabo-

ration method is being modeled in front of the teachers so they can see how it needs to work,” Scott says. “Of course, those of us who are new reading coaches are observing the process with our roles in mind. What we’re all seeing is how we need to work together to change the instructional practices in our school.”

CONTINUOUS SUPPORT FOR THE SCHOOL-BASED COACH

In early August, the new school-based reading coaches enter their own formal training. During an intensive two-day workshop, they begin to develop what will become a close, synergistic partnership with an ARI reading coach trainer.

“We spend the first day with all of our new people exploring the reading coach’s job,” Pipes explains. “On the second day, we break into two groups — one group is coaches in brand-new ARI schools; the other group is new coaches in existing ARI schools. They have different training needs.”

The state program employs nearly 40 reading coach trainers, who are spread throughout Alabama at host sites. A host site is an ARI elementary school willing to provide office space and permit the coach trainers to conduct training in the school’s classrooms.

Each reading coach trainer serves 20 to 25 school-based coaches and offers monthly training in the host sites — typically to no more than three schools at a time.

School-based coaches attend these monthly trainings with two carefully selected teachers from their school. “ARI doesn’t want school-based coaches to appear to be the keepers of all the knowledge,” says Scott. “My team members are successful reading teachers who are able to go back to our school, share some of the content, and do some demonstration lessons.” Over time, this strategy also creates a pool of potential replacements when a

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reading coach retires or moves to other work.

During the sessions with the reading coach trainer, the school teams often examine a particular issue in depth. “It might be effective vocabulary instruction,” Pipes says, “and they spend the day learning more about what the research tells us about vocabulary, what that means for us as a coach, and how you can turn your own training back around for your faculty.”

In addition to the monthly training offered at host sites, reading coach trainers regularly visit their cadre of reading coaches in their own buildings. Teri Prim, a second-year reading coach trainer who serves 23 schools in southeast Alabama, was Erin Scott’s coaching partner in 2005-06.

“I really tailor my on-site support to each reading coach’s unique needs and situation,” Prim says. “In Erin’s case, she had been a resource teacher for quite a few years and had good leadership skills. But new coaches fresh from the classroom often need help just working with adult learners. Sometimes it’s difficult for them to get perspective. They’ve been teaching in isolation, and now they have a responsibility for whole-school change.”

Something seemingly as simple as entering another teacher’s classroom can be daunting for novice coaches, Prim says. “We talk a lot about establishing trust and helping teachers get past the traditional thinking that if an adult comes into your classroom, they are there to evaluate you. Our mes-

sage is that when we as reading coaches go into a classroom, it’s all about learning — learning how to reflect on what we see and give that teacher feedback that will motivate or stimulate her own learning.”

During visits to the schools of new coaches, reading coach trainers rely on the same coaching cycle used at every level in the Alabama Reading Initiative. After planning together, the reading coach trainer models the coach-teacher relationship in an authentic situation, then the reading coach trainer and coach work with teachers in concert, and finally the reading coach trainer observes the coach as she flies solo. At each stage, reflection and feedback deepen understanding.

“Of course,” says Prim, “the

teachers are aware of my role, and it helps them see that the reading coach is heavily involved in her own professional development. I think that is the starting point in becoming a successful coach. You have to show your teachers that you are the chief learner.”

The entire training and support process, Prim says, revolves around structured professional conversation, using protocols, formats, and action planning tools. “We certainly trade a lot of knowledge and information informally through e-mail, phone calls, and more casual conversation. But ARI has really worked with all of us who are in professional development roles to carefully structure our work — from the reading coach who is working with faculty, to the work I do in giving guidance to the school-based coaches, to my own relationships with the state staff who oversee my work.”

BUILDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PRINCIPAL AND COACH

ARI also emphasizes the critical need to develop a strong collaborative relationship between the principal and his or her reading coach. To support these agendas, ARI has established a

network of principal coaches, made up of former principals who have led other ARI schools to reading success.

Principal coaches regularly invite principals and their coaches to visit schools designated as demonstration sites. During their visits to these best-practice schools, the visitors observe while the resident principal and coach demonstrate the effective

application of several key ARI improvement strategies, including the grade-level data meeting and the class-

room walk-through.

In a grade-level data meeting, the principal and reading coach sit down with teachers from the grade level to review individual student data. They may identify a struggling reader, ask the teacher to describe her efforts to improve the child’s reading, and discuss additional ways to address the problem. Classroom walk-throughs are often triggered by these discussions. The walk-throughs are carefully planned. During the walk-through, the reading coach (often accompanied by the principal) stays in the background, focusing her attention on the specific teaching practice or individual student she’s come to observe. “It’s not an evaluation,” says Scott. “It’s a structured observation designed to give us more information that can improve instruction.” After a walk-through, the coach and teacher debrief and plan next steps.

“We know the principal and the reading coach both have essential roles in improving reading instruction,” says Pipes. “They have to understand their respective roles and also understand how to work together effectively.”

ADVANCED SUPPORT FOR EXPERIENCED COACHES

After their first year, school-based reading coaches must complete a two-week internship, which takes place within the context of the summer Alabama Reading Academy.

The now somewhat-seasoned reading coaches observe teachers coming through the academy. “We pay attention to the way they are trained, to the quality of their reflections, and make observations about the trainer’s corrective feedback to those teachers,” Scott says. The reading coaches also have opportunities to practice their own leadership skills, observing each other and sharing reflection and feedback.

In the fall, as their second year

begins, school-based coaches enter into an advanced relationship with their coach trainers. The reading coach trainers continue their regular school visits, and the coaches share experiences and insights during monthly “job alike” meetings at the reading coach trainer’s host school, usually in groups of 10 or less.

“Our work with the first-year coach,” says Teri Prim, “really focuses on content — helping them become experts in phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and comprehension. In their second year, we’ll talk more about their schedules, about how to use the coaching cycle effectively. They do a lot of videotaping of themselves, and we look at those together and do reflection and feedback. If they need more help with content, we can do that as well.”

A school-based coach will continue to participate in these monthly sessions throughout his or her coaching career.

“There’s always more to learn,” says Pipes.

SUPPORT FOR THE ARI MODEL

ARI leader Katherine Mitchell and her small staff began developing the initiative’s professional development model in 1998 with 16 schools. Each year since, they have redesigned ARI’s professional development components to yield greater results.

In one early modification, the ARI leadership team shifted from a total reliance on summer training for school faculties and embedded more staff development during the school year. “We learned quickly that intensive, ongoing professional development is the heart and soul of lasting change,” says Mitchell, now assistant state superintendent for reading.

Early evaluations of ARI schools by an independent researcher documented the positive impact on student achievement of full-time coaching. In response, Mitchell and her col-

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leagues began a multiyear effort to secure the resources necessary to place a full-time reading coach in every ARI school and build a larger support network of reading coach trainers and principal coaches.

The reading initiative received a huge boost in 2003, when newly elected Gov. Bob Riley became its most powerful advocate. Riley proposed that the state legislature invest in the program and expand ARI to serve every school in Alabama with grades K-3. In 2005, the legislature appropriated \$40 million to begin the expansion, raised the support to \$56 million in 2006, and has continued that level of support for 2007.

ARI now can fund reading coach positions in each of Alabama's nearly

800 K-3 schools, support ongoing training for all 900 schools in the network (including 100 grade 4-12 schools), and offer differentiated training for every school-based reading coach in the state.

A NEW LAYER AND NEW JOB

Over summer 2006, Scott left Joseph Lisenby Elementary to become one of 30 new ARI technical assistance coaches — the latest example of the Alabama Reading Initiative's penchant for continuous improvement.

Technical assistance coaches will work exclusively with 200 struggling ARI schools where reading achievement lags significantly behind state averages. These trainers will work intensively with school-based coaches

in no more than seven of the struggling schools, making weekly and even daily visits as needed. Reading coach trainers will offer additional monthly training at their host sites.

The technical assistance coaches will be able to call on the reading coach trainers for extra help when needed. In addition, the 30 technical assistance coaches will have their own system of professional development support, including mini-internships and monthly training with state ARI specialists.

"It's a brand-new position," Scott says, "but ... I know that in this new role, I will still be fully supported. This will be folded into the total system of support that's the hallmark of ARI. I'll never be out there alone." ■