

DATA DRIVE THESE COACHES

**LITERACY PROJECT MERGES SCHOOL GOALS
WITH TEACHERS' LEARNING NEEDS**

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Go to any school board meeting and you will hear about the projects, goals, and initiatives taking place in the district's schools. School-based staff must continue to learn and enact more effective instructional practices to ensure that students are reaching higher benchmark expectations.

Research highlights the importance of individualized approaches and coaching to ongoing professional learning (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009).

An initiative that set out to help all students become proficient readers by 3rd grade demonstrates how coaching can support both collective and individual learning. Literacy coaches in the project balanced the goals of the initiative with professional learning that addressed the varying



needs and aspirations of individual teachers.

The project was a three-year partnership among six schools (both public and charter schools), a research university, a nonprofit organization, and a private corporation in the Twin Cities metropolitan area of Minnesota.

Four components bolstered the work: enacting quality



core literacy instruction in all classrooms, using data-based instructional decision making, providing tiered supports for students who were not progressing well, and augmenting teacher learning through embedded professional learning (Burns et al., in press).

Project-focused literacy coaches at each school site,

guided by university faculty members and district leadership personnel, were key to the initiative's success. Coaches used data to design professional learning to improve student outcomes over the course of three professional learning community sessions during a school year.

Through follow-up coaching and observations, they tailored professional learning to meet individual teachers' needs. By the end of the school year, data revealed positive changes in the instructional practices of individual teachers as well as the strengthening of quality core instruction schoolwide.

PLANNING

Implementing purposeful support for teachers to become even more effective in literacy teaching requires forethought and planning. Professional learning embedded throughout the day using tools such as observations, modeling, reflective dialogue, and professional learning communities allows the learning to happen in real time.

The daily presence of coaches in classrooms and throughout the school community could ensure a deeper understanding of the work at hand and would give them access to both student and teacher data to inform their work.

The literacy coaches understood the importance of using Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011) to guide their work. These standards became touchstones for developing professional learning structures and leveraging resources at each school.

At the heart of their planning, literacy coaches focused on improving schoolwide literacy practices as well as teachers' individualized learning. They hoped that attending to these two goals would result in the most important outcome of all: increased student learning.

The literacy coaches chose tools and structures that reflect these goals of schoolwide and individualized learning.

WAYS TO SUPPORT POWERFUL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

- Actively engage with data.
- Share practices with peers.
- Create lesson plans to use in class.
- Provide collaborative feedback.
- Reflect on learning.
- Set an action step.

For example, results from the observation tool used to collect data on classroom practices were aggregated to show schoolwide trends that could be used to inform objectives for professional learning communities.

IDENTIFYING AND ANALYZING TRENDS

Coaches used outcome data for both teaching and learning throughout the initiative. Twice a year in every classroom, coaches used an observation tool called the Literacy Environment and Instructional Survey (PRESS Research Group, 2014) to gather data on the physical environment in classrooms as well as the instructional practices in evidence.

The research-based, faculty-designed measure included a rubric that detailed critical components of a rich classroom literacy environment and elements of effective literacy instruction. The survey’s purpose was to identify high- and low-scoring trends overall in schoolwide literacy practices.

The aggregated data provided a snapshot of classroom practices across the school, and literacy coaches used the information to help teachers and instructional leaders address professional learning. When handling the data, coaches used codes in place of teacher names to focus on schoolwide trends.

To check for inter-rater reliability, two observers conducted 20% of all observations. When there was a discrepancy, scorers calculated the average. The rubric accompanying the survey detailed 28 components of the classroom literacy environment and 25 components of effective literacy instruction.

After collecting data from all K-3 classrooms, coaches averaged the scores in each grade level for each survey element. Scores ranged from 0 (the element was not evident in the environment or instructional practices of the classroom) to 3 (exemplary). Grade-level averages below 1.75 were deemed low-scoring trends; averages 2.5 or higher were considered high-scoring trends.

Using the schoolwide survey data helped open up discussions that promoted schoolwide reflection and change. Coaches first met with school and teacher leaders to examine schoolwide literacy practices using a tool called Analysis to Action (see above). By acknowledging the high-scoring trends found in the classroom environment and instructional practices, coaches confirmed the work of past professional learning. Then the instructional leadership team discussed low-scoring trends.

FOCUSED CONTENT LEARNING

The literacy coaches determined that the best place to discuss schoolwide trends and opportunities for professional growth would be in professional learning communities, which were designed as a space to use data to foster collective learning. Project leaders assigned the literacy coaches the role of facilitating the content to be shared, with support from site instructional leaders and teaching staff.

Coaches planned professional learning that would expose

ANALYSIS TO ACTION

Literacy Environment and Instruction Survey

Element number	High-scoring trends Classroom environment and instruction
40	Identifiable focus on core element.
41	Adequate time to address content.
42	Practice or review is provided.
43	Effective support of concept development.
Element number	Low-scoring trends Classroom environment and instruction
37	Provides a summary.
48	Differentiates based on students’ levels.
50	Fosters discussion.
51	Gives students an opportunity to ask questions.
52	Checks for understanding.

teachers to content and instructional methods that addressed the site’s low-scoring trends. Over the course of three monthly professional learning community meetings, literacy coaches zeroed in on seven learning objectives driven by the data that had surfaced from the survey observations.

Learning designs included modeling evidence-based practices, time for teachers to practice together, and small-group discussions. At the beginning of each session, a short activity immersed teachers in working with data and connecting it to their teaching practices.

For example, on one occasion teachers used a Likert scale activity to comment on how they fostered discussion in their classrooms. Because the Turn and Talk discussion strategy was part of their school’s literacy lesson plan, teachers were asked to comment on this sentence: “I incorporate Turn and Talk into my comprehension lessons.”

Teachers responded: 18% always, 39% sometimes, and 42% never. These responses verified the survey observation results. The example data, as well as teachers’ remaining reflection data on the low-scoring trends, prompted further planning of professional learning on fostering discussions and differentiating in literacy lessons. Coaches shared data from this activity with teachers in subsequent sessions and used a preassessment to monitor changes in the use of these literacy practices.

The coaches used several learning formats to foster and sustain understanding of the six learning objectives. During professional learning community meetings, grade-level teams of teachers sat together at tables to facilitate small-group discussions. As literacy coaches guided the sharing of essential components in effective literacy instruction, teachers developed lesson plans collaboratively, thereby incorporating the learning directly into their classroom practice.

INDIVIDUALIZED DESIGNS

The literacy coaches employed key principles of effective professional learning. Powerful professional learning is active (Donnelly et al., 2005): Coaches prompted teachers in the professional learning community sessions to use the lesson plans they created to practice fostering discussion by providing feedback to each other. Brandt (1998) says that powerful learning often occurs through opportunities for social interaction, getting helpful feedback, and acquiring and using strategies.

Further, sustained learning takes place when learners receive additional support in implementing new strategies. Each session ended with a reflection and action step in which teachers could decide how the learning would be demonstrated in their classrooms.

Coaches asked teachers to come to the next session with information about how they used specific literacy practices in their classrooms. The third and final session began with teachers sharing their experiences implementing new strategies into literacy instruction.

To continue the momentum of learning and reflection after the final session, literacy coaches shifted to individualized feedback and coaching. They created a walk-through form that reflected the low-scoring trends of the school. The walk-through form mirrored the rubric used in the survey tool.

To be transparent about expectations, coaches emailed the walk-through form to teachers before visiting classrooms. During the walk-through, coaches spent seven to 12 minutes in classrooms and shared their written feedback with the teacher by following up with an email and leaving a copy of the walk-through form in the teacher’s mailbox.

Several weeks later, coaches visited classrooms for another observation. In a postobservation meeting, coach and teacher discussed the learning objectives from the professional learning community sessions. In some cases, coaches extended the support by modeling lessons or creating materials. This process ensured that issues were addressed as teachers implemented the new literacy practices.

CHANGES IN TEACHER PRACTICE

The table above details the change from fall to spring of one school year in the low-scoring trends observed using the survey tool. Literacy coaches used the fall scores to develop learning objectives and design learning spaces to improve schoolwide literacy practices and individualize teacher support.

Low-scoring trends were those where grade-level averages scored below 1.75, and high-scoring trends were those with averages of 2.5 or higher. Though the change was positive in almost all areas of core instruction that had started as a low-scoring trend, only three of the elements surpassed the low-

LOW-SCORING TRENDS

Element of quality core instruction	Fall	Spring	Change
Provides summary.	0.9	1.3	+0.4
Provides feedback on student performance.	1.4	2.1	+0.7
Asks questions for evaluation.	1.4	1.9	+0.5
Assesses student work during the lesson.	0.9	1.9	+1.0
Differentiates based on student’s levels.	0.6	1.0	+0.4
Fosters discussion.	1.2	1.0	-0.2
Gives students an opportunity to ask questions.	0.5	1.1	+0.6

scoring trend range.

The most likely reason for this is the time it takes for teachers to transform their practice. The professional development cycle of mastering a new teaching skill through learning, implementing, and coaching can take up to 80 hours (Corcoran, McVay, & Riordan, 2003). Though this instance did not meet the criteria for the 80 hours needed, teachers reported through an online survey and email communication how the professional learning sessions and further coaching had given them tools and support to start improving their practice.

SUPPORTING TEACHER LEARNING

Building systems to support effective teaching requires a dual approach that uses evidence-based tools to increase content knowledge and ongoing support during implementation of new teaching practices.

For this initiative, the observation tool gave instructional leaders, literacy coaches, and teachers the common language around effective teaching and how to recognize it. In professional learning community meetings and during individual coaching sessions, coaches and teachers focused their conversations on the elements of quality core instruction outlined in the survey tool.

A primary responsibility of a literacy coach, or any other instructional support person, is to help teachers continuously improve through job-embedded professional development (Elish-Piper & L’Allier, 2010). In this initiative, data-based systems for sharing schoolwide trends informed the professional learning. Identifying high- and low-scoring trends in literacy instruction at the school level provided a focus for developing professional learning that built content and pedagogy as well as tailored coaching and ongoing support.

When literacy coaches spent time in teachers’ classrooms after the professional learning community sessions and coaching, they saw teachers attempting new instructional methods and students reaping the benefits of quality core instruction.

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tive about what is effective and meaningful in the classroom. With this increase in collective ownership has come an increase in student success. Graduation rates are on the rise, climbing from 46.3% in 2010 to 65.7% in 2013. The number of students enrolled in AP courses has increased from 137 in 2010 to 536 in 2014. College-ready transcripts increased from 29% in 2008 to 59.4% in 2013.

“If we see ourselves as a team that is going to be successful year after year, we need to embrace a culture where it is OK to rely on each other as coaches, supporting our growth individually and collectively,” says principal Pat Erwin. “As the leader, it is my charge to empower all teachers to focus on what is happening in the classroom and their own learning, which includes risk taking and making mistakes, often revealing new opportunities for growth and learning.”

This changing culture has also meant changes for school leaders. For Erwin, that means becoming a partner in learning. “I must model being coached and being a coach to my staff,” Erwin says. “I have to be transparent about my inquiry questions. I must take time to be reflective and to be a collaborative partner, which can mean allowing my ideas and assumptions to be challenged. I have to invest in the intellectual and social capital of my staff. An interesting byproduct is that, as the adults in the school, teachers feel honored as professionals and a deeper sense of ownership and commitment to each other and our students.”

COLLEGIALITY AS THE NORM

Both of these school examples point to adult interaction based on deep professional inquiry, strong collaborative prac-

tices, and time and space for individual and collective reflection. This form of collegiality is the norm and way of doing business in these schools.

By developing sustainable structures and processes that support adult learning focused through collaboration, inquiry, and reflection, the capacity to maintain a coaching culture is strong enough to withstand the external factors and changes that systems continually face. By accelerating adult learning, these schools accelerate student learning and, in both cases, student achievement is increasing.

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Data drive these coaches

Continued from p. 24

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