Ohio invests in coaching to improve literacy

ReadOhio initiative emphasizes professional learning to improve instruction

BY MELISSA WEBER-MAYRER, SHERINE R. TAMBYRAJA, AND STEPHANIE VANDYKE

In 2023, Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine made a historic investment to improve literacy proficiency for all Ohio students, from preschool through grade 12. House Bill 33, which was signed into law in June 2023, outlined numerous mandates and funding allocations to ensure that all students in Ohio would have access to evidence-based reading instruction.

These laws, collectively referred to as the ReadOhio initiative, include requirements for the use of high-quality instructional materials, stipends for educators to engage in professional learning about the science of reading, and funding for the provision of literacy coaches for Ohio's lowest-performing schools. Professional learning is at the heart of this work.

This substantial investment in literacy validated what has been a long-standing effort in Ohio to develop robust literacy support grounded in evidence. In 2018, Ohio established a state plan to raise literacy achievement that placed a priority on literacy coaching for teachers.

Decades of research have found that coaching can be a powerful and effective mechanism to improve teachers' instructional practices and, in turn, increase students' literacy proficiency (Kraft et al., 2018; Lockwood et al., 2010). Ohio's coaching framework initially relied on two federal funding sources (the 2016 State Systemic Improvement Plan and the 2017 State Personnel Development Grant) to test two types of coaching models — *systems coaching* and *instructional coaching*.

Systems coaching is used to implement systems-level school improvement initiatives that will build capacity and strengthen infrastructure. Data from systems-level inventories, such as the *Reading – Tiered Fidelity Inventory* (St. Martin et al., 2023), are used to identify gaps in a school building's implementation of a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) that ensures all students are receiving appropriate reading instruction.

In Ohio, the state's regional network of literacy specialists and state support teams for central office and district leaders provided systems coaching to build an infrastructure to support the use of evidence-based language and literacy practices. Coaching addresses school improvement action planning to ensure all students receive high-quality reading instruction.

Whereas systems coaching is implemented at the administration and leadership level and used to build structural support, *instructional coaching* is implemented at the classroom level and used to build teacher knowledge and facilitate changes in teacher practice.

The Ohio Department of Education and Workforce used the instructional coaching model to promote professional learning in the science of reading. The model placed emphasis on allowing for teacher voice and autonomy and empowering teachers to identify gaps in their practices and areas where they would want coaching supports.

Following the passage of the ReadOhio laws, which underscored the urgency of accelerating reading improvement for students, the Ohio Department of Education and Workforce expanded Ohio's coaching framework to incorporate *student-focused coaching* as a way to center student data as the driver of teacher learning and improvements in practice.

In this model, coaches and teachers work collaboratively to examine students' literacy data and identify evidence-based strategies that will augment instructional practices specifically tied to student needs.

To reach as many students and educators as possible using the student-focused coaching model, coaching services are offered within a four-tiered system, in which the dosage and intensity of coaching vary across tiers. All teachers receive support via newsletters that offer important information and links to evidence-based instructional resources.

The self-guided tier of coaching allows teachers to attend biweekly office hours with a literacy coach on an as-needed basis so that teachers can get support on specific topics. Building principals help identify teachers who are potential candidates for small-group coaching, and individual teachers can then choose to receive one-on-one coaching.

Small-group coaching is offered in a format similar to a teacher-based team so that coaches can work closely with teachers within the same grade level to examine student data, discuss student needs, and determine next steps for instruction. Finally, one-on-one coaching is available for teachers who may benefit from a high level of support and structure, with a focus on specific students or a target group.

In the first year of ReadOhio coaching (school year 2023-24), coaching sessions across all four tiers focused on incorporating evidence-based strategies and how to use and analyze student data, which suggests coaching has focused on the intended goals and is meeting the expectations of the coaching initiative thus far. In the 2023-24 school year, 54 schools engaged in ReadOhio coaching, reaching over 1,000 teachers and building administrators.

Because the state does not yet have sufficient funding for all schools to have in-house literacy coaches, the education department considered ways to capitalize on teachers' knowledge and ability to support one another. Specifically, the department supported a peer coaching model, which uses the instructional coaching model as a guide to maintain consistency of focus on teachers' instructional practices.

The companion piece to this article describes one way peer coaching was implemented in an Ohio district, with teachers completing professional learning in reading instruction in tandem with a peer coach. The article describes this process in greater detail and reports preliminary findings on the feasibility of this coaching model to support teachers' reading instruction.

Although this model diverges from the current direction of Ohio's coaching framework with respect to the focus on student data and the four-tiered framework of coaching support, the general model of peer coaching has the

potential to be effective in schools and districts that have seasoned educators who are skilled in using student data to drive instruction.

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Pilot study examines the feasibility of a peer coaching model

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Peer coaching involves two or more professionals collaborating to reflect on and refine current skills and practices (Yee, 2016). In K-12 education, peer coaching is a collaborative and nonevaluative approach to developing professional expertise of teachers, with a peer coach providing feedback and insight to a fellow teacher (Allison & Harbour, 2009).

Research indicates that peer coaching improves classroom instructional practices (Bowman & McCormick, 2000; Hasbrouck, 1997; Shaaban, 2022). Most studies have been conducted with preservice teachers, but some studies among elementary school teachers have found positive changes in instructional practices and routines for collaborative learning (Kohler et al., 1997; Murray et al., 2009).

We conducted an evaluation to examine the feasibility of peer coaching for improving teachers' reading instructional practices in an Ohio elementary school. The peer coaching model described in this article focused on grades K-2, a critical time for the

development of students' reading skills.

Ohio's Model for Peer Coaching for Literacy (Ohio Department of Education and Workforce, 2019) was based on research in instructional coaching (Knight et al., 2015) and the four-step process of planning, observation, analysis, and debrief that is detailed in Sheehy and Ceballos (2018). In this model, teachers work in pairs to identify goals, observe each other, and provide each other with feedback for improvement.

In the 2022-23 school year, we conducted a small pilot study of a program based on the model at Clermont Northeastern Elementary in Batavia, Ohio, initiated that year. The school is in a rural area and had an enrollment of 603 students, the majority of whom were white (92.5%), while 2.6% were Hispanic, and 4.4% were multiracial. Students from economically disadvantaged families, defined by those eligible for free and reduced lunch, represented 35.9% of the population, and the percentage of students identified as having an educational disability was 12.6%.

We began with six teachers — teams of two matched by grade level — who were part of the instructional leadership team and were enthusiastic about piloting peer coaching in preparation for a possible schoolwide rollout.

The six teachers began by completing a series of online modules about peer coaching developed by the state department of education. The research team then tested the teachers' knowledge with a quiz they created based on the state's model and shared with teachers a checklist of peer coaching components that they could use as a reference throughout their coaching.

To establish a baseline measure of teachers' instruction, we conducted video observations of teachers' classrooms. We assessed teachers' practices with a measure we created based on Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS), a professional learning program rooted in the science of reading and a structured literacy approach (Folsom et al., 2017; Moats & Tolman, 2019) and on the LETRS Applications of Concept Tool (Moats & Tolman, 2019). This measure was designed to be used as a self-assessment as well as an observer-rated tool. All teachers had previously engaged in LETRS professional learning and were familiar with the target practices.

IMPLEMENTING THE PEER COACHING MODEL

During planning, the teacher and peer coach jointly assessed the teacher's instruction and identified a skill to target for improved instructional practice based on LETRS. Teacher and coach jointly agreed on a measurable goal that was individualized to the teacher's needs.

Observation, the next phase of the peer coaching model, involved the direct observation of the teacher's instructional practices. With technical support from the researchers, teachers video recorded their instruction for 10 to 15 minutes at times of their choosing.

During analysis, teacher and coach viewed the video together to evaluate the teacher's implementation of the instructional practice they had previously prioritized, using the LETRS-aligned rubric. They noted up to three areas of strength and up to three areas of growth.

In the debrief phase, teachers asked each other a few scripted reflective questions (e.g., What worked well in the lesson? What was challenging? How do you think the lesson went based on your goal?) to guide the conversation and encourage each other to reflect on the lesson to inform and guide their professional learning. The teacher and peer coach then discussed actions that could be taken to improve instructional delivery.

Teachers met weekly, and each team engaged in five to six coaching cycles over the course of the year, following the same steps in each cycle.

FINDINGS: PEER COACHING'S VALUE AND CHALLENGES

According to researchers' observations, results indicated high levels of implementation fidelity to Ohio's Model for Peer Coaching for Literacy, with average percentages of steps completed between 87% and 98% across the three teams.

Results also suggested that teachers' literacy instruction, as measured by alignment with LETRS, improved over the course of the peer coaching. It's important to note that the teachers who participated already had strong literacy instruction practices before the peer coaching, as assessed by baseline observations. The selection of strong teachers was intentional so that the school could pilot the intervention under the most conducive conditions and then determine next steps for the rest of the school.

Nonetheless, among each of the teacher teams, at baseline, one teacher demonstrated higher fidelity implementation of LETRS-based instruction and one teacher demonstrated fidelity at a slightly lower level. After peer coaching, the teacher with lower-level fidelity improved enough to close the gap.

For example, in one pair, one teacher's fidelity to LETRS remained high throughout the process, with an average of 99.5% fidelity. Her peer coach partner averaged 82.9% fidelity at baseline, but after peer coaching, she was implementing LETRS-based instruction at an average of 95.6% fidelity — a change that represented a statistically large effect size.

We also developed a survey to assess teachers' perceptions of the coaching. All of the teacher participants agreed or strongly agreed that peer coaching helped them apply LETRS-based instruction in practice, achieve their instructional goals, increase

their confidence in their instructional practice, improve their use of inquiry and reflection (in leadership, instruction, and teams), and improve student engagement and learning.

Responses to open-ended questions showed that teachers found many aspects of peer coaching valuable. Themes included: giving and receiving feedback from a teacher they trust, learning from one another, sharing ideas about opportunities to improve student engagement and instructional practices, and having the opportunity to reflect on their practice and work toward goals in a structured way. One teacher said, "Peer coaching allowed me the opportunity to feel validated with successes and struggles within my classroom with a peer going through similar trials."

But teachers also noted some challenges. Five of the six teachers reported that it was difficult to find time to meet to discuss the observation. In addition, some teachers found video recording to be challenging and said that sometimes the students got distracted by video recording and had more energy than usual. Some cited lack of coverage for their classrooms while they were engaged in peer coaching in another classroom. One of the teachers suggested that peer coaching should occur on a monthly basis instead of weekly basis.

NEXT STEPS

We designed the pilot study to examine the feasibility of peer coaching. The small sample size (six teachers total) does not allow for causal claims about impact, but it is a helpful way to document and understand the process and teachers' experiences to determine whether to keep investing time and resources in both the program and a more rigorous evaluation.

Following the pilot year, the school is continuing to gradually roll out peer coaching to other teachers, with some modifications to the process. For example, teachers are observing each other in person rather than recording and reviewing video. The work is now also supported by a district literacy coach.

Based on the results of our pilot study, we recommend that, as schools and districts implement peer coaching, they pay close attention to readiness for implementation, preparing teachers for their new roles and responsibilities as peer coaches, and logistical details such as the scheduling needs of the teachers. For example, schools may benefit from implementing peer coaching during designated, protected time for professional learning rather than adding additional expectations to reduce demands on teachers.

With attention to feasibility, peer coaching has the potential to benefit teachers and students. Future studies should continue to examine changes in teachers' instructional practices and monitor student outcomes. In this pilot study, we heard teachers describe their peer coaching experiences by saying things like, "When I watched that part of the lesson (that my peer coach did), I was like, 'Oh, I definitely want to incorporate that the next time I teach.' " That kind of learning should be documented, measured, and expanded.

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