Lessons for Boosting the Effectiveness of Reading Coaches

Study of Florida middle school reading coaches suggests ideas for both policy makers and practitioners.

JENNIFER SLOAN McCOMBS AND JULIE A. MARSH

Despite recent progress in reading achievement among elementary school children, literacy levels among U.S. adolescents remain low. Many middle schoolers struggle to develop advanced reading skills, such as the ability to analyze and synthesize complex ideas or to comprehend multiple points of view within a text. Possessing such advanced literacy skills is increasingly becoming a key to success.

A popular approach for improving students' literacy skills is school-based literacy or reading coaches — specially trained master teachers who provide leadership for the school's literacy program and offer on-site and ongoing professional development support for teachers so they can improve the literacy skills of their students. Unlike other staff who support reading (e.g., reading resource teachers), coaches generally don't work directly with students and, in most cases,

■ *JENNIFER SLOAN McCOMBS and JULIE A. MARSH are policy researchers at the RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, California.*
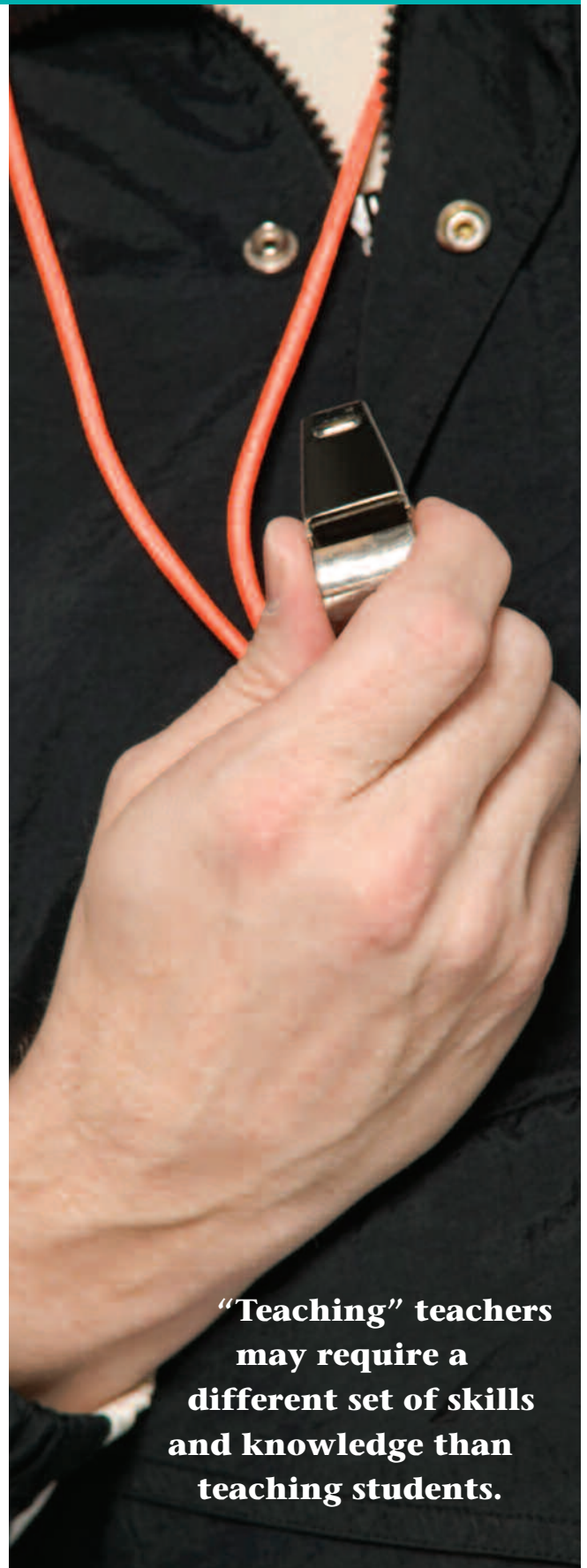
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serve in a nonevaluative, support role for teachers. Using the coaching model to improve adolescent literacy is compelling because middle and high school students generally receive instruction from content-area teachers who have received minimal preservice training in how to teach reading.

Coaching models are designed to fit the best practices suggested by the literature on professional development and learning theory. Research has suggested that traditional one-shot workshops result in little instructional change and little to no improvement in student learning (Garet et al. 1999; Garet et al. 2001; Hawley and Valli 1999; Showers and Joyce 1996). Instead, learning theory suggests that learners should have opportunities to discuss and reflect with others, to

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practice applying new ideas and receive feedback from an expert, and to observe modeling (Vaughn 1996; Lave and Wenger 1991; Rogoff 1990; Tharp and Gallimore 1988; Brown, Collins, and Duguid 1989; Lave 1988). As on-site personnel who interact with teachers in their own workplaces, coaches should theoretically be able to facilitate learning that is context-embedded, site-specific, and sensitive to teachers' actual work experiences (Toll 2007; Walpole and McKenna 2004; Hasbrouck and Denton 2005).

With strong theoretical and intuitive appeal, coaching has become increasingly prevalent. But there is little empirical evidence about coaching's effectiveness in changing teacher practice and improving student achievement, particularly at the secondary level (Marsh et al. 2008). RAND, with funding from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, sought to address this gap in knowledge by studying a statewide reading-coach program in Florida middle schools. To understand the implementation and effects of coaching, researchers surveyed principals, coaches, and reading and social studies teachers in 113 middle schools in eight large Florida school districts; conducted interviews, focus groups, and observations; interviewed state officials and coach coordinators; and examined results from state middle school examinations in reading and mathematics (Marsh et al. 2008).

Coaching in Florida may be distinct from similar interventions elsewhere because of the presence of reading teachers and reading courses in middle schools, and because Florida middle school coaches often prioritize work with these reading teachers (as opposed to content-area teachers). Despite the potential difference in target audience, Florida coaches face many of the same goals, pressures, and constraints as coaches elsewhere. Thus, even though we lack definitive evidence to suggest that our findings from this study can be generalized to other states or districts, we believe the experiences and effects of Florida reading coaches nonetheless provide important insights for policy makers and practitioners interested or involved in similar coaching efforts.

Key Findings

Administrators voiced common concerns about recruiting and retaining high-quality coaches. Some administrators voiced concerns about a shortage of qualified candidates (as one coach supervisor noted, middle school teachers are generally not "reading people"). Others identified problems with high turnover among coaches, who frequently move on to administrative positions. Still others questioned principals' ability to adequately judge the quality of coach candidates because they lack the background in reading. Some administrators and coaches also noted concerns about adequate compensation for coaches' time. In most districts, coaches remained on the teachers' salary schedule, despite additional responsibilities and duties. Furthermore, some cited disincentives for teachers certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards because such teachers could earn only their board supplement if the majority of their work is directly with students.

Coach quality, and particularly the ability to support adult learners, was positively related to several outcomes and viewed by some as an area of potential weakness. Although principals and teachers were generally satisfied with the qualifications of their coaches, some questioned particular skills and knowledge of their coaches — most notably their ability to support adult learners. In essence, many seemed to acknowledge that "teaching" teachers may require a different set of skills and knowledge than teaching students. As one principal noted, "A challenge is finding the right person who can deliver the information they know to teachers in a manner that is easy for teachers to take back to their classrooms and use without a lot of planning." Moreover, many coaches requested additional professional develop-

ment about supporting adult learners. In addition, teachers who rated their coaches highly on their skills and knowledge were more likely to report that the coach positively affected their instruction.

The day-to-day work of coaches took on many shapes and forms. Coaches generally divided their time among many different activities, including formal work with teachers (e.g., observing and modeling instruction, planning lessons), informal coaching (e.g., lending an ear), coaching-related administrative duties (e.g., coordinating assessments, managing reading materials), data analysis, and, to a lesser extent, noncoaching duties (e.g., lunch and bus duty). While one-on-one work with teachers headed the list of activities on which coaches spent significant time, only 15% of coaches reported spending 30% or more of their time working one-on-one with teachers. These figures fall short of the state's goal that coaches spend 50% of their time working with teachers in classrooms.

District and school administrators, coaches, and teachers identified several factors constraining coaches' ability and opportunity to provide instructional support to many teachers. Most notably, lack of time was seen as a serious barrier to getting into teachers' classrooms — a finding that echoes past research (Marsh et al. 2005; Neufeld and Roper 2003*a*; Neufeld and Roper 2003*b*; Smith 2007). As one coach noted, "The only thing I would change would be to have more time to get into all the classrooms, just to sit and listen. And I don't have enough of that time." More than half of coaches cited the large amount of time to coordinate and administer assessments as a moderate or great hindrance to their work, and about one-third said the school schedule did not provide teachers with adequate planning time during which they could meet with their reading coach. About one-third of coaches also reported that teacher reluctance to work with a coach was a moderate or great hindrance to their work. Slightly less than a third of coaches and principals thought the ratio of teachers to reading coaches negatively affected their ability to coach, and many district coordinators and coaches noted the challenges involved in supporting many teachers at once. Several case-study coaches described themselves as being "spread too thin."

Most coaches viewed school and district administrators as key supports for their work. Similar to past research, administrative support appears to be an important enabler of coach effectiveness (George Washington University 2001; Poglinco et al. 2003; Neufeld and Roper 2003*a*). Most coaches believed

school and district administrators supported their work and clearly defined and communicated their roles and responsibilities. A minority of coaches and some district coordinators, however, voiced concerns that some principals assigned coaches duties that hindered them from serving as instructional resources for teachers. Nevertheless, most case-study coaches noted that they could not succeed in their work without the support of their principals and assistant principals.

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Many teachers and principals said the coach had positive effects on them and their schools. Most reading and social studies teachers reported that the reading coach had influenced them to change their instruction during the year. About two-thirds of reading and social studies teachers who had interacted with the coach believed these interactions helped them feel more confident in their ability to teach reading to students and helped them plan better and organize instruction. One teacher described how the coach helped her improve practice through use of assessment data:

> She is teaching us how to make instructional decisions based on assessment. It's not just okay that they took the test and failed it. She teaches us how to group kids for small groups for DI [direct instruction] lessons. . . . I found out a lot of my kids were not getting the main idea. . . . So she told me that I needed to put those kids together. I did a small-group lesson up here [at her desk].

In addition, most principals reported that their coach had a positive effect on their own knowledge, on the sense of community among teachers, and on students' motivation to read. One teacher noted that the coach had changed the school's climate: "She is creating a culture. . . . I think that the whole culture is starting to change — like it's okay to read. It's good to read."

Teachers and principals were more likely to report positive effects when the coach spent more time working one on one and reviewing assessment data and when the coach emphasized integrating reading across the content areas.

The evidence is mixed regarding the impact of

coaching on achievement. Having a state-funded coach (not taking into account quality of implementation) was associated with small but significant improvements in average annual gains in reading for two of the four cohorts analyzed. For the 2003 cohort (the group of schools with state-funded coaches for the longest periods, 2003 to 2006), the average, standardized effect size of coaching on annual achievement gains in reading for all middle grades was .06. After four years of implementation, we estimate that the performance of this cohort is .24 standardized units higher than it would have been in the absence of coaching. For the 2005 cohort, average annual growth increased .04 standardized units (or .08 by 2006). Thus, for these two cohorts, coaching was associated with improvements in the growth trajectory of schools over time in reading. We did not find significant effects for the 2004 and 2006 cohorts. In mathematics, we found a significant effect only for the 2003 cohort (.04 standardized units) and did not find significant results for the other three cohorts.

The frequency with which coaches review assessment data with teachers was associated with positive student outcomes. We found a significant, albeit small relationship between how often the coach reviewed assessment data with reading teachers and better reading and mathematics scores. In other words, we found higher student achievement in schools where coaches spent more time working with reading teachers to analyze and use student data. Interestingly, in a few schools where coaches spent little time reviewing assessment data with reading teachers, a greater frequency of one-on-one work with teachers was negatively associated with reading scores — a puzzling result indicating that individual work with teachers may be ineffective without a clear focus on students' needs as identified by assessment data.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Provide guidance to school administrators in how to identify high-quality coach candidates. District coordinators and state administrators may want to assist principals and assistant principals to adequately judge coach candidates. Since many middle school administrators don't have a reading background, they may not know how to evaluate a candidate's knowledge of research-based reading instruction or their skills in integrating reading across the curriculum. As such, state and district administrators might provide training to principals or directly assist in hiring, as some district coordinators in our study reported doing (e.g., co-in-

terviewing candidates, prescreening candidates).

Develop a pipeline of qualified candidates. Given principal and district coordinator concerns about identifying qualified coach candidates — particularly teachers with experience teaching reading at the middle school level — and replacing coaches when they move on, it may be useful to replicate some of the efforts under way in several of the study districts to develop a pool of qualified candidates. For instance, two districts were launching training programs for interested teachers. By building the capacity of potential coaches during the school year and summer, the districts intended to have a supply of qualified coaches available when needed.

Consider offering incentives and support to attract high-quality coaches and retain them over time. In order to attract high-quality teachers to apply for and remain in coaching positions, policy makers (in conjunction with teacher associations) should review state rules and regulations to ensure that there are no disincentives to taking a coaching position (e.g., losing National Board supplemental salary). In addition, if turnover among high-quality coaches is of concern, leaders should consider nonfinancial incentives for coaches to take on long-term assignments in schools and remain in coaching, including recognition for service and leadership opportunities, such as serving as mentors or trainers in the district. Since coaches frequently cited support from school admin-

istrators as essential to their sense of satisfaction and efficacy, continued efforts to ensure that principals and assistant principals understand the coaching position are also warranted.

Provide ongoing professional development for coaches, particularly for supporting adult learners. The ability to teach adult learners is often cited as a requirement for coaches and essential to their effectiveness (Toll 2005; Snow, Ippolito, and Schwartz 2006), and not surprisingly, the state of Florida also identifies it as a qualification. Administrators can enhance coach capacity by defining what it means to be competent in working with adult learners, for example, listing the required knowledge and skills (Brookfield 1986; Brundage and MacKeracher 1980; Knowles 1980; Mezirow 1981; Zemke and Zemke 1984) and then identifying effective ways to instill this knowledge and skills in coaches using high-quality state- and district-sponsored professional development.

Encourage coaches to review assessment data with teachers. Since coaches reviewing assessment results with teachers mattered to several types of outcomes, administrators might consider why this type of activity is so important and how to encourage more of it. Our case study data in this project and evidence from other research suggest that this practice is effective when it goes beyond helping teachers interpret the data to also helping teachers identify instructional strategies in response to the data. Analyzing data and taking action based on data are two different tasks. Taking action is often more challenging and requires more creativity than analysis. Yet, to date, taking action generally receives less attention, particularly in the professional development provided to educators (Marsh, Pane, and Hamilton 2006). Thus coaches may be bridging this important divide for teachers, helping them identify students' strengths and weaknesses and providing them with specific reading strategies aligned with student needs.

To encourage this data analyst and support role, administrators should continue providing professional development for coaches in this area, with a particular focus on responding to these results. Important questions to answer before designing such professional development include: What types of data are important (e.g., state test scores, diagnostic assessment results, observational data on quality of instruction)? What is the most effective way to engage with teachers in this activity (e.g., individually, in groups)? What tools would assist coaches in their data work with teachers (e.g., user-friendly displays of student data, reflection protocols)? What specific reading strategies are recommended to align with students' specific needs?

Addressing barriers could enable coaches to work more with teachers. District and school leaders should attend to several factors that may be constraining coaches' opportunities to provide instructional

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support to teachers. First, policy makers and administrators should consider ways to free more time for coaches to spend in classrooms. For example, there may be easy steps to minimize administrative, assessment-related demands on coaches. For instance, can other school staff or volunteers do more of this administrative work? It also behooves school, district, and state leaders to discourage coaches from participating in excessive assessment tasks not related to reading (e.g., cases where coaches are state assessment coordinators for all subjects across the school).

Second, a lack of planning time during the school day may be minimizing opportunities for coaches to work individually with teachers. Obviously, addressing this barrier would require structural policy changes at the school or district level to make teachers more available for one-on-one work.

Third, given that teacher resistance or lack of rapport between coach and teachers may constrain coaches' ability to support all teachers, administrators may consider some of the suggestions for coach quality listed above, such as ensuring that principals know how to hire high-quality coaches, providing professional development focused on how to develop relationships with teachers and build trust, and linking new coaches with mentors who have faced similar situations.

If policy makers want coaches to spend half of their time working one on one with teachers, then barriers need to be addressed. Although our analysis did not find a positive relationship between one-on-one work and student achievement, this form of coach-teacher interaction is highly valued at all levels of the system. As noted, coaches' one-on-one work appears to matter to teachers — it is strongly associated with their perceptions of coach influence on instruction and on student motivation to read — yet

many teachers don't get to work with the coach in this way, and many coaches don't spend the majority of their time doing this type of work. Although more research is needed to understand why one-on-one work is not occurring more frequently, our data indicate that many of the factors cited above contribute to this problem and deserve attention, including lack of time, teacher-coach relationships, and coach caseload. In addition, state and district leaders should continue investments in professional development for school administrators — to ensure that administrators understand the expectation that coaches prioritize one-on-one activities and encourage teachers to be open to working individually with coaches — and for coaches — to provide strategies and techniques for developing relationships with teachers and gaining their trust to work individually with them.

School administrator support should continue to be nurtured. Our findings suggest that school administrators play a pivotal role in enabling coaches to work effectively in their schools. As such, leaders should continue to provide education and training for administrators not only on the proper role of the coach, but also on literacy more broadly, to build a common understanding about coaching as well as literacy goals, basic principles, and best practices.

Carefully consider placement of coaching resources. The lack of consistent evidence on the effect of coaching on achievement across cohorts implies that, although coaching is a popular intervention, it is not a panacea for all schools. However, these findings suggest that coaching may have a greater effect for the lowest-performing schools that have implemented it for a number of years. Since these are the schools of greatest concern to policy makers and are likely targets of the coaching intervention, these findings may be viewed as promising. These results suggest that districts and states may want to consider targeting coaching resources toward low-performing schools and making long-term investments in coaching, rather than pulling a coach out of a school after one or two years.

Conclusion

While having a coach will not in and of itself result in improved student achievement, this study shows that coaches are valued by principals and teachers and are associated with improved student achievement under certain circumstances. As the field gains more evidence on the effects of coaching on teachers, schools, and students, researchers can work to determine whether the benefits of coaching are worth the cost when compared to other interventions.   **K**

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File Name and Bibliographic Information

k0903slo.pdf
Jennifer Sloan McCombs and Julie A. Marsh, Lessons for Boosting the Effectiveness of Reading Coaches, Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 90, No. 07, March 2009, pp. 501-507.