

Qualifications for Literacy Coaches: Achieving the Gold Standard

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The call for highly qualified teachers that can improve student literacy performance has led to increased attention to job-embedded approaches to professional learning. Such approaches call for intensive, on-going efforts that include coaching and feedback (National Staff Development Council, 2001; American Educational Research Association, 2005) in order to help teachers learn to better meet students' needs. Given this focus, many school districts are employing literacy coaches to serve as catalysts for implementing this model of professional development in schools. The proliferation of these positions at all levels (preschool through grade 12) has left many school districts scrambling for qualified people to fill them. While the qualifications for teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals tend to be clearly articulated, given the newness of the position, the same is not true for the literacy coach. The result has been literacy coaches with varied professional experiences, certifications, and training. Many educators worry that the literacy coaching approach to professional development will not be implemented effectively if literacy coaches are not prepared to handle the responsibilities of the role. What *should* a school district look for when hiring a literacy coach?

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The Gold Standard

The International Reading Association (IRA) published a brochure in 2004 titled "The Role and Qualifications of the Reading Coach in the United States." When hiring a coach, they recommend that districts find individuals who (a) have had successful teaching experiences, especially at the grade levels in which they are expected to coach, (b) have in-depth knowledge of reading process, acquisition, assessment, and instruction, (c) have experience working with teachers, (d) are excellent presenters and group leaders, and (e) have experience in observing and modeling in classrooms and providing feedback to teachers. The IRA's "Roles and Qualifications" brochure also recommends that individuals have a reading specialist certificate and that if they do not have one, that they obtain this certification within a three year period of becoming a literacy coach. The National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) also believes that literacy coaches ought to be highly knowledgeable and experienced in teaching reading, writing, and encouraging language development. What is critical is that the literacy coach be fully qualified to serve in that position. Just as teachers of special education, speech pathologists, or school psychologists must demonstrate competence before they are permitted to assume their respective positions, so too must literacy coaches.

Certainly, the knowledge requirement can be verified if candidates have a reading specialist certificate and a master’s degree in reading/literacy. Also, some universities are now offering a credential in literacy coaching. In most cases successful candidates enter these programs holding a master’s degree in reading and then complete additional hours in literacy coaching. These programs have an emphasis on “coaching topics” such as working with adult learners, team building, doing presentations, leadership, and effective communication and interpersonal skills. We anticipate that state certifying agencies and universities will be developing programs that provide coaching candidates with experiences that enable them to develop both in-depth understanding of literacy *and* the coaching skills that they need to be effective coaches. Certainly, the current IRA *Standards for Reading Professionals, revised 2003*, provide an impetus for those preparing reading specialists to include coaching in their programs (2004b).

The most qualified candidates for literacy coach positions then would be those who have a master’s degree in reading/literacy, an additional credential in coaching, and meet all of the other recommendations described in the IRA brochure.

The problem is that, given the demand for literacy coaches, some school districts are not likely to find candidates who meet “the gold standard.” Even if they do find them, their budgets may prevent them from hiring the best candidates.

The Great Choice: What to Do?

Many schools have learned that even if their literacy coach doesn’t meet the “gold standard” initially, they are worth their weight in gold! Some states do not have reading specialist certification. Some literacy coaches hold master’s degrees, but not necessarily a literacy degree. Their degrees are in areas such as special education, early childhood education,

Figure 1. Levels of Qualifications for Literacy Coaches

The Gold Standard	The Great Choice	Good Enough for Now	Not Good Enough for Now
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Master’s degree in literacy • Additional credential in coaching • Has had successful teaching experience, especially at the grade level to be coached • Has experience working with teachers • Is an excellent presenter • Has experience modeling lessons • Has experience observing in classrooms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Master’s degree in another area • Has had successful teaching experience, especially at the grade level to be coached • Has experience working with teachers • Is an excellent presenter • Has experience modeling lessons • Has experience observing in classrooms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bachelor’s degree and some graduate level coursework • Has had successful collaboration experiences • Is eager • Is hard-working • Is willing to learn 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Placed in the coaching position for reasons other than qualifications to do the job

elementary or secondary curriculum development, or administration and supervision. “The great choice” has had successful teaching experiences. They are hard-working and dedicated. They go the extra mile. “The great choice” has good people skills. They are respected by their peers. Teachers trust them and welcome them in their classrooms. The great choice is organized and knows how to make good use of time and handle tasks based on priority. The “great choice” may also have had extensive professional development in reading/literacy. Or the “great choice” is learner-ready and willing to do all that is necessary to gain in-depth knowledge of reading/literacy. If “the great choice” is provided with quality professional development and ongoing support, it is likely that the “great choice” is indistinguishable from the “gold standard” when one watches him or her in action.

The Good Enough for Now Choice

In the mad dash to fill literacy coach positions, some school districts have hired coaches who have teaching experience but do not have advanced preparation, e.g., they lack a master’s degree or have little education beyond a bachelor’s degree. This candidate is an excellent teacher who has earned the respect of his/her peers. The “good enough for now” coach is a hard-working, dedicated teacher. S/he has a history of collaborating with other teachers. S/he is eager and open to learning. The “good enough for now” coach will have to learn the job while doing the job; this coach, like the “great choice”, will need ongoing professional development and support. Moreover, the “good enough for now” coach will benefit from being in a coaching network that is working to build his/her capacity.

The IRA, in its position statement, and the NCTE strongly discourage hiring the “good enough for now coach.” They believe that it would be better to delay implementing the coaching program if one can only find candidates that are “good enough for now” (IRA, 2004a). IRA and NCTE worry that “good enough for now” coaches are not necessarily good enough to help teachers learn and implement literacy strategies that will positively affect student achievement. If there is no impact on student learning, literacy coach positions and programs can be placed in jeopardy.

Not Good Enough for Now

Unfortunately, candidates have been hired for literacy coach positions who aren’t even “good enough for now,” for a variety of misguided reasons, e.g., to move an ineffective classroom teacher into a coaching position; to keep a teacher who would be terminated because of budgetary factors; to select a coach who has only to know and be responsible for monitoring the implementation of a specific program; to select coach a for political reasons. The real danger of employing coaches chosen for these misguided reasons is that they threaten the future of literacy coaching and its potential for improving reading performance. A school district can not expect to make gains in students’ literacy achievement with such coaches in place. Policy makers and stakeholders will justifiably question the value of literacy coaches.

In Figure 1 we summarize the qualifications and criteria for each of the categories described above. We encourage school districts to search for that candidate who can meet the gold standard or is a great choice!

Summary

The Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse recommends that school districts use as a basis for employment the criteria identified in Figure 1, with special attention given to the essentials. Literacy coaching, and its potential for improving student learning, is too important to place individuals into the position who do not have the qualifications to handle its roles and responsibilities.

References

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