

Lessons Learned about Coaching from Reading First in Georgia

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Reading First, the largest and most ambitious beginning reading initiative funded by the United States Department of Education, is entering its sixth and final year in Georgia. I currently serve as a coordinator for the project as well as serve as a Regional Consultant to six schools near my home in South Georgia. I am one of fourteen consultants who are responsible for supporting as many as ten schools. In my role with the schools, I visit each one at least one time a month, meet with coaches and administrators, visit classrooms, provide support, and monitor progress. This part of my job has been a joy because of the close personal relationships that it has allowed me to form as I work together with others to create the best possible situation for the teachers and students in their schools.

The progress in the design and implementation of Georgia Reading First has not been constant; rather, it has progressed in fits and starts. In spite of this, those of us who have been involved at the ground level and from the beginning are saddened – we have achieved a high degree of momentum just as the funding is ending. We know, though, that our own learning and the learning of the principals, coaches, and teachers who have participated with us will continue to serve the state. In this brief, I share lessons gleaned from my own coaches as well as from other Regional Consultants and their coaches. These are the lessons that seemed most salient to me and those with the most promise of helping those of you who will launch new initiatives to support teachers in struggling schools.

Reading First was established to improve schools with high numbers of children with a history of low achievement in reading. Funds could be used for instructional materials, assessment systems, and professional development for grades kindergarten through third. Virtually all of the more than 5,000 schools that participated in Reading First nationally elected to use some of their funding to employ a literacy coach to provide professional development; Georgia was no exception. However, because coaching is such a new field, standards were not even published until after the project was well underway (International Reading Association, 2006) and those are for coaches in middle and high schools.

In addition, the many publications, websites, and books now available to support coaches were not available when we wrote our state plan in 2003. As the field has evolved, a myriad of publications, websites, and books have appeared to support literacy coaches, notably the Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse website (www.literacycoachingonline.org). Very recently, a variety of rubrics, lists of qualifications, checklists, and job descriptions have been developed to help us begin to get a sense of what literacy coaches should do, what they actually do, and how we might measure their performance. So, while a great many literacy coaches have been added to schools over the last ten years, we have not had access to a standard measuring tool that would have allowed us to assess the contribution they are making to their schools. We hear that schools find their coaches invaluable, but that value may not yet be quantifiable. Therefore, much of the information we have gathered is anecdotal.

To set the stage to share our lessons learned, a Georgia Reading First primer might be helpful. Funding for the Georgia schools was generous, intended to be used for coaches, assessments, library books, and extensive classroom libraries. In addition, schools were to provide funding and tools for evaluating and selecting instructional materials, including a core or basal reading program to guide instruction, supplemental materials, and intervention programs. Coaches provided much of the leg work for selecting, organizing, and introducing these new resources. This embarrassment of riches was not limited to materials. We also had continuing access to professional learning that was so extensive and targeted to our needs that it seemed that we could not learn quickly enough. Over the course of each year, we learned from lectures, participated in book studies, analyzed data, and hosted and traveled to research conferences. Our state staff, partnering with two university-based consultants who served as Professional Development Architects for Georgia Reading First and with regional coaches, maintained both coherence and choice for schools. Our Architects analyzed the data yearly to determine the most critical needs in our schools. In response to that analysis, we were given information, strategies, and instructional routines based on the latest research in the field of reading. Though the delivery model changed throughout the project, the Architects provided monthly professional learning for coaches, administrators, system-level coordinators, and consultants.

Recently, I queried my colleagues, their coaches, and mine to identify lessons mined from our experiences as well as from our commitment to meeting the needs of the teachers in our most challenging schools. The following list outlines their suggestions:

Use start-up time for intensive, collaborative professional support for project leaders.

Our coaches yearned for frontloading of their own professional learning. They all say that the first year was extremely stressful—as is the beginning of any new venture. However, they wish that they had felt better prepared before the teachers arrived. In particular, they said that they felt that they needed more help learning to use the new instructional materials they had chosen. Before writing their grant applications, districts had been required to select materials after evaluating them on the basis of their alignment to scientifically based reading research. For this reason, not only were the coaches often unfamiliar with their new core program but the regional consultant might be advising ten schools, none of which were using the same core program. While some of this learning could have been accomplished through statewide workshops for coaches from schools using the same program, in the rush to get personnel hired and materials in place, that support did not happen. A coach who has deep understanding of the design and materials to be used will be in a stronger position to help teachers adapt them to the time they have for instruction and the needs of their students.

Use the first year to build rapport and trust among the faculty.

Coaches see the task of persuading teachers as one of the central challenges in their jobs. Without that buy-in, participation may occur only sporadically and is destined to be short lived. Even with administrative support, until and unless teachers see the initiative as helpful to their students and reasonable in terms of planning, their participation may be half hearted.

From the beginning of the initiative, state staff conducted formative walk-throughs and observations of teaching to guide the coaches. One coach told me that if they had it to do over again that she would ask the Regional Coach to spend the first year observing the coaches as they demonstrated lessons. Coaches felt that this would have changed the way teachers perceived the initiative. Teachers would have seen that the literacy coach was the one who was learning and that he or she was the first one taking the difficult step of teaching in public. It would also have forced those coaches into that most difficult of the coaching roles early on. Many coaches admit that, of their responsibilities, modeling was the most threatening and the one that they were most likely to put off.

Another coach said that she had learned that the only person she could actually change was herself. She needed to perfect her own instructional skills so that she could model the things that she was asking others to do. In doing so, she could have used her own growth as a demonstration of change over time, proved herself as a teacher and as a learner, and demonstrated that any new procedures were indeed skills teachers could learn.

Provide coaches with sufficient deep understandings of evidence-based practices that they have enough confidence to take ownership of instructional practices.

One Regional Consultant told me that she wished that her coaches had taken greater ownership of evidence-based instruction rather than saying, “Reading First says” or “our consultant says.” Such statements imply that the coaches were not convinced that the instruction would be effective. This tentativeness on the part of coaches most likely springs from the fact that many coaches had only recently left the ranks of teachers and were feeling a bit overwhelmed and alone in their new role. It is less threatening to appear to align oneself with one’s former colleagues than to attempt to stand against the tide as a newly minted expert. However, in doing so, coaches were unwittingly undermining what they would be trying to implement in the years to come.

Establish guidelines for how often, when, and how coaches will work with individual teachers in advance.

Coaches are often in the awkward position of recruiting reluctant teachers to participate in coaching cycles. One coach said that she wondered, if she were to start out in another setting in which participation by teachers were voluntary, whether it might not be better to begin with a few willing teachers and let the work spread from there. That would allow the coach to establish her or himself as having expertise that others would request rather than trying to impose cooperation.

Be clear about how, when, and why coaches will give feedback to teachers.

One of these same coaches also said that she wished that she had understood about giving feedback earlier. McKenna and Walpole (2008) suggest that coaching models fall on a continuum from diamond (hardest) to talc (softest). We viewed videos of a debriefing in which a teacher was given “diamond-like” feedback that was focused exclusively on the requirements of a specific strategy and how it had been executed. Both the teacher and the coach had had access to a checklist outlining the specific steps in the instructional strategy. Before offering her opinion, the observer asked the teacher what she thought had gone well and what she

wished she had done differently. After that, the observer shared her feedback referring to the specific steps of the strategy. Using the strategy as the standard for discussion of teaching, feedback was focused on the specifics of a particular teaching episode rather than on a general evaluation of the teacher's performance. The coach said that providing feedback this way would have made her more effective and she wished she had understood this dynamic sooner.

Use a recursive professional development loop from theory to demonstration to practice to feedback.

In Georgia Reading First, the idea of the professional development (PD) loop was introduced early on, but somehow failed to take root until late in the project. The professional development loop is simple, but extremely powerful when fully implemented. The PD loop is derived from Joyce and Showers' (2002) schematic of a professional support system beginning with theory, followed by demonstration, then practice, and finally observation and feedback.

We learned to use the PD loop in stages, focusing on small portions of instruction at a time. After any one of the monthly day-long sessions with our Professional Development Architects, coaches were charged with condensing and redelivering that information to their teachers. Consultants and coaches worked together to develop checklists so that formative observations could be targeted only to those parts of instruction that had been the focus of professional learning. Limiting the focus of the observation reduced stress for the teacher. Knowing that he or she would only be observed for a small segment of the day, teachers were more willing to venture into unfamiliar territory. Success in that one area appeared to make them more willing to take the next step. Because the PD Loop added accountability at each step of the process for all of the educators involved, it accelerated the rate of implementation within sites.

Position coaches as part of the total curriculum leadership team at a school.

An issue that might be characterized as a silo problem was mentioned by one respondent. The idea of a silo problem originated with computers in which information was housed in incompatible systems that could not communicate with one another. Similarly, educators and business people alike are often so locked into their own disciplines, divisions, or companies that they are unaware of issues occurring outside of their own "silos." At times our coaches became so focused on the areas within their specific realm of responsibilities that they failed to be aware of all of the different initiatives vying for teachers' time and attention. This failure to integrate can make teachers feel as if they are required to march to several drums at the same time, and their frustration

level is understandably high. An alternative metaphor for a coach working as part of the overall instructional leadership team is the crafting of a symphony during which different instruments are highlighted at different times.

Include ongoing support for administrators.

While the initiative included training for administrators in the characteristics of effective instruction, there was another issue that was more important. Because coaching is such a new phenomenon, many administrators did not know how to best support or utilize their coaches. These coaches asked that the professional learning for the administrators be more targeted so that individuals in these two leadership positions could better support one another.

While coaches should not be given administrative duties, they can provide administrators with a window into the instructional realities within the school that they might otherwise miss. At the same time, the administrator can support the coach with timely suggestions about what teachers seem to need. One expert we worked with likened the relationship to a well-rehearsed dance. In the best situations, this dance is so graceful that observers cannot tell what unspoken cues are being given and received.

Make up-front commitments to time and personnel for interventions.

Literacy coaches in our project did not take on many of the traditional roles of reading specialists, in particular that of working directly with groups of children; however, oftentimes, the coordination of the work of reading specialists and intervention providers became an additional responsibility for them. With the advent of RTI (Response to Intervention), the provision of intervention services within schools has taken on much greater importance. It is no longer a matter of getting "someone" to help "whenever they can." For that reason, administrators would benefit from assistance in setting up a master schedule to include reading intervention as well as suggested options for staffing it. There are definite advantages and disadvantages to almost all of these options and administrators need to have as much information as possible to make the best choices. In addition, coaches need to know the programs well enough to understand how each is supposed to work and to anticipate obstacles that might occur. One obstacle often encountered is that the personnel assigned to teach these programs may not be fully trained in their use; or they may not have the background to understand how to proceed when progress stalls, or even to recognize the need to alter course.

Manage the type and amount of professional learning so that it fits into the rhythm of schools.

One of the thorniest problems Reading First coaches have had is trying to provide professional support to teachers who are

distracted or exhausted. When to do professional development is an ongoing issue in a school which is too large to make monthly modeling in each classroom feasible. Some systems have elected to have an early release day once a month. Others hire substitutes to cover classes for half days so that coaches can have uninterrupted blocks of time for their redeliveries. However, these are the exceptions. All too often, coaches are allowed an hour after school only one day a month because of the press of numerous other initiatives. There is much said about the need for highly trained teachers; but until this issue is addressed, the effectiveness of the coach in any school setting will be compromised.

Allow time for new learning to translate into new teaching.

A final lesson would be that we must consider how long it takes any new learning, much less a new teaching routine, to take hold. We had the chance to learn so much, to change so much that we may not have given teachers enough time to internalize these new ideas. Each year our leadership identified the next most pressing issue in the data and then gave teachers the tools to address it. In year one, teachers studied their instructional materials and began dealing with the logistics of small group instruction. By year two, they were mastering the art of providing and managing meaningful centers. By year three, we asked teachers to ensure that interventions and read-alouds were occurring and were accomplishing what they were intended to do. Years four, five and six were devoted to

the idea of differentiation for all students, including the highest achieving. In retrospect, it looks very logical. In practice, it was often a painful process of lurching forward and falling back.

Perhaps the most important lesson learned is that change is not easy, no matter the resources, the leadership, or the good intent. We have not failed when change is not smooth or quick. Every coaching situation is different. Every coaching situation has challenges. Each of us as coach, mentor, or supervisor has strengths and limitations. We need to recognize those and navigate accordingly. We need to use our strengths and take steps to ameliorate the limitations. We need to ask for help when we know we need it. We need to be constantly looking for ways to improve. Above all, we need to celebrate the many times when coaching has made a teacher's professional life more satisfying.

References

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