

Position Statement on the Roles and Qualifications of Literacy Coaches in Florida

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Throughout the state, school districts are implementing research-based programs designed to improve literacy. Sturtevant (2003) stated in order for these programs to be effective, continuous and supportive staff development is critical for teachers, administrators, and key district-level personnel. With this recent focus on reading achievement at the federal, state, and local levels, the role of literacy coaches has changed from classroom instruction to one where more emphasis is placed on leadership and professional development roles (IRA, 2004). Because of the changing roles for literacy coaches, we feel there is a need for ongoing professional development opportunities designed for literacy coaches to improve their skills as well as joining together to support the literacy needs of all stakeholders in schools across Florida.

Literacy coaches are a key part in the success of a school's efforts to improve the literacy scores of their students. Sturtevant (2003) stated the literacy coach's leadership includes helping to coordinate and support ongoing staff development that supports the implementation of the literacy programs being used.

We believe there are many roles that literacy coaches are required to assume within the school. One of the roles of the literacy coach is working with classroom teachers to "ensure quality 'first' teaching" (Pipes, 2004 as cited by IRA, 2004) at every level. It is important to realize that a curriculum that supports learning and literacy "cannot be a rigid, one-size-fits-all program" (Sturtevant, 2004). Coaches guide and support teachers in making professional, informed instructional decisions based on student needs and ability levels. Coaches must also aid the teachers working to combine literacy strategies into their content areas. We acknowledge literacy coaches may also organize literacy teams to review assessment data to aid in the development of their school's literacy goals, attend meetings and professional development

sessions to bring information and ideas for curriculum revision back to their school colleagues, and facilitate professional development training sessions for those colleagues; however, we believe the primary role of literacy coaches should be presenting specific and focused school based professional development.

Because coaches are incorporated into their school's improvement process, they are able to meet with teacher teams, teacher study groups, and individuals on a continuing basis after training sessions are completed. Literacy coaches are able to work with teachers as they review student assessment data, guide lesson planning, and ensure that strategies learned are effectively used in classroom instruction. Furthermore, we believe that coaches can provide "an essential link between teachers within a department, between departments, and to school administrators, and help to resolve problems and conflicts before they become insurmountable" (Sturtevant, 2003).

We agree with the IRA statement in 2004 that there is "little consistency in the training, backgrounds, and skills required" in becoming a literacy coach. The IRA (2004) stated the lack of consistency is due in part to the fact that "there are no agreed upon definitions or standards" for literacy coaches. We believe that if literacy coaches are to be successful in promoting long term, systemic change in the teachers' classroom instructional practices, the role of the literacy coach must be clearly defined. Additionally, literacy coaches need to be supported in furthering their own educational and professional goals by having the opportunities to attend reading conferences, collaborative meetings with other literacy coaches at the local, district, regional and national levels as well as having access to current, research-based instructional practices.

Based on the Standards for Reading Professionals, Revised 2003 (IRA, 2004), we agree that literacy coaches should hold a master's degree or a reading specialist certificate. However,

knowing the immediate need for literacy coaches, we realize that some school districts may need to select candidates who do not meet the standards listed above but may have other qualifications that make them suitable for these positions. Literacy coaches should:

- Be proven reading teachers with experience in the level they are coaching.
- Demonstrate in-depth knowledge of reading processes, acquisition, assessment, and instruction.
- Work effectively with other teachers to improve classroom instruction.
- Be dynamic presenters with knowledge of adult learning styles.
- Model, observe and provide feedback regarding instructional practices for a variety of classroom teachers.

We believe it is important for literacy coaches to have been effective classroom teachers in order to gain the respect of the school faculty and administrators. Furthermore, it is important for literacy coaches to have in-depth knowledge of the reading processes. Coaches cannot be expected to help classroom teachers improve reading instruction and student achievement if they lack an understanding of the range of effective instructional methods, materials, and practices that could be used with the students at their school. Additionally, literacy coaches should have experience working with teachers to improve their instructional practices. Coaches should also be accustomed to reflecting on their own practices and making changes that will improve instruction. We also believe that literacy coaches should be dynamic presenters who are prepared to meet the needs of their colleagues. Literacy coaches should be skilled in facilitating small groups who can explore relevant topics which lead to reflection, goal-setting, and strategic changes. Finally, literacy coaches must have the experience or training that will help them master the complex process of observation, modeling, conferencing, and providing constructive

feedback to teachers that will result in long term, systemic changes in their teaching practices. The skills necessary for these tasks can and must be developed on a continuous basis (IRA, 2004).

The literacy coach model is a powerful intervention with great potential; however, that potential will be unfulfilled if reading coaches do not have sufficient depth of knowledge, range of skills, and high levels of reinforcement from their district and building level administrators. Education reform is riddled with examples of potentially powerful interventions that disappoint reformers and fail the students they are intended to help.

Cuban, 1993 and Alvermann, et al., 2002 (as cited by Sturtevant, 2003) found that “traditional instruction is resistant to change.” Sturtevant (2003) further summarized reasons for the “lack of implementation of research-based instructional practices” that include the following structural and contextual limits:

- Lack of time for professional development;
- Lack of funding for professional development;
- Ineffective instructional beliefs and practices held by teachers and administrators.

The combination of these and other limitations often result in a “constant juggling act for teachers and others who wish to make changes, as they strive to balance competing demands” (Sturtevant, 2003).

In conclusion, we ask those districts, schools and principals who are involved in implementing the literacy coach model pay close attention to the hiring of literacy coaches and commit to the ongoing professional development of those who are working as literacy coaches. Furthermore, we ask the literacy coaches throughout the state to join our organization to help support our goal of providing ongoing professional development opportunities for literacy

coaches and support our mission of uniting literacy coaches to support and advocate for the literacy needs of all stakeholders in schools across Florida.

Recommendations

In order to achieve these goals, we recommend the following policies be adopted by all parties involved in education:

State Policymakers

- Provide an extended contract for Literacy Coaches.
- Provide compensation and/or incentives for teachers working on reading endorsement or other professional development (outside contract hours).
- Provide National Board stipends to coaches who complete certification.
- Provide adequate supervision of and infrastructure for literacy coach models.
- Provide paid summer institute trainings for teachers.
- Provide a budget to provide resources for staff development.

School boards

- Insist that the literacy coach model is carefully conceptualized.
- Insist that the infrastructure to support the coaching model is in place *before* implementation.

School district and building level administrators

- Ensure that individuals hired as literacy coaches have adequate initial qualifications and an ongoing program of professional development.
- Provide principals with adequate training for understanding their relationships with the literacy coaches.

- Support literacy coaches as they, in turn, support classroom teachers in the daily work of reading instruction.
- Provide paid summer institute trainings for teachers.
- Provide professional development during the school calendar using substitutes, planning days, and/or early release days twice per month.

Literacy coaches

- Recognize that the position of the literacy coach requires one to be a lifelong learner.
- Request support from district personnel, building level administrators, staff developers, fellow coaches, and teachers.
- Interact with other coaches on a regular basis as a means of reflection.
- Seek feedback from the teachers and building-level administrators.

Classroom teachers

- Have a clear understanding of the coach's role.
- Participate in ongoing building-level professional development.
- Provide ongoing feedback to coaches.

References

- IRA. (2004). *The role and qualifications of the Reading Coach in the United States: A position statement of the International Reading Association*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association. Available from http://www.reading.org/resources/issues/positions_coach.html.
- Sturtevant, E. G. (2003). *The literacy coach: A key to improving teaching and learning in secondary schools*. Available from Alliance for Excellent Education <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/LiteracyCoach.pdf>.