



# Literacy and Math Coaching

## PSEA Promising Practices to Close Student Achievement Gaps

Coaching is school-based professional development that assigns educators with specific knowledge and skills to work with teacher colleagues to improve classroom practice. An effective coach makes teachers' jobs easier by demonstrating how and why certain strategies will make a difference in student learning, and then working alongside teachers to develop the knowledge and skills they need to put those strategies into practice.

In some cases coaches work full-time at an individual school or district; in others they work with a variety of schools throughout the year. Most coaches are former classroom teachers; some continue to have some teaching duties while they coach. Most commonly, coaching positions are designed to support classroom teachers in developing effective strategies to teach mathematics and literacy. Often they work with teachers in other content areas to help them infuse math and literacy into their content-area curriculum.

There are several issues to consider when trying to make sense of coaching programs:

**Coaching is not evaluation.** In order to be done right, teachers must view coaching as part of professional development, not part of evaluation. Coaches are teacher-colleagues; no information from coaching should ever inform the evaluation of a professional employee. In many districts with literacy and math coaches, the coaches are a part of the bargaining unit.

**Coaching should be distributed among all teachers.** In order to maintain coaching as a non-evaluative activity, administrators should not designate specific teachers as "in need of coaching." All teachers can benefit from a coaching relationship, and an effective coach knows how to individualize the coaching experience for each teacher. Using coaching to "target" particular teachers is inappropriate, unless that teacher has received an unsatisfactory evaluation and part of their improvement plan includes working with the coach. In such a case, the coach should support the professional growth of the teacher, but evaluation should be done by the administrator without input from the coach.

**Effective coaching is good professional development.** Many kinds of professional development—such as conferences, lectures, and workshops—are unpopular with teachers and ineffective at improving teaching practice. To actually be effective, professional development should be ongoing, embedded in teachers' classroom experience, focused on student work, specific to the grade levels or academic content of a teacher's assignment, and focused on research-based practices. Effective professional development also builds collaboration and community among teachers. At its best, coaching meets all of these criteria.

**Coaching can be done poorly.** In Pennsylvania, there are no certification requirements for coaches. Nor are there any agreed-upon standards for the job of a coach (there is a set of national voluntary standards for middle level literacy coaches, but these generally have not taken root in PA at this point). To be effective, coaches need to be experts in K-12 teaching and learning *as well as*

*in adult learning and motivation*; sometimes people are hired to be coaches because of their effectiveness with students, not with adults. Coaches also need their own high-quality training and support, which can be hard to find since coaching is a new concept in many places.

**Coaching can't solve everything.** Effective coaching can probably help a school improve, but not alone. As with everything else coaching is probably best viewed as one part of a comprehensive strategy to support teachers and improve student learning. In some schools, coaching is seen as "the solution" to student achievement problems, which is a problem in itself.

**Coaching takes a lot of time and effort.** Teachers need release time to participate in coaching, whether they are doing the coaching or being coached. Some research into coaching suggests that districts underestimate what it takes, in terms of time and effort, to do effective coaching.

**Evidence of effectiveness is largely anecdotal.** Few, if any, empirical studies provide evidence that coaching strategies lead to improvements in student learning. However, coaching models are based upon a substantial body of research that defines elements of effective professional development. In the coming years, more research should be completed that clearly defines the benefits, and challenges, of peer math and literacy coaching.

**Coaching can make people uncomfortable.** In most schools, the role of "coach" is new and different; a coach is not exactly a classroom teacher, and is certainly not a supervisor or an administrator. Educators are not used to these sorts of colleagues; nor are they used to talking about their classroom practice in the way that effective coaching requires. If people are uncomfortable with a coach, the coaching program can never be successful.

### **Coaching in Pennsylvania.**

In 2005, The Annenberg Foundation partnered with the Pennsylvania Department of Education to implement the Pennsylvania High School Coaching Initiative (PAHSCI). PAHSCI is a three-year, \$31 million instructional coaching initiative that places literacy and math coaches in 26 high-need high schools located in 16 school districts across Pennsylvania, with a total enrollment of over 32,000 students. More information about this initiative can be found online:

<http://www.pacoaching.org/>

### **Conclusion.**

The Harvard Education Letter (2004) says that: "both the spotty track record of traditional professional development and the success stories that have emerged from coaching so far suggest that this new strategy may have a great deal of untapped potential. At least in theory, school-based coaching helps educators envision a world where professional development means showing and not telling; where teachers can learn and improve their practice in a reflective, supportive setting, and where coaches serve as liaisons between research and practice, bringing the latest findings to where they are most needed - the classroom." In other words, many people believe that the reform is promising, but there is a long road between theory and practice in the area of coaching, and much of the success of coaching has to do with the qualifications of a coach, the receptiveness of teachers, and the resources of the district.

For more information, contact Carla L. Claycomb, Ph.D., PSEA Education Services Division, [cclaycomb@psea.org](mailto:cclaycomb@psea.org).