

EDITOR'S NOTE

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“The dictionary is the only place that success comes before work. Hard work is the price we must pay for success. I think you can accomplish anything if you’re willing to pay the price.”
—Vince Lombardi, former coach of the Green Bay Packers and Washington Redskins

It used to be that the word “coach” conjured images of a beefy guy in a sweat suit with a whistle around his neck. Or, in the case of my elementary school, a well-tanned former tennis pro in sparkling white shorts with a permanent swath of zinc oxide on his nose.

Today, the coach is just as apt to be a teacher who spends her time strengthening fellow teachers’ practice rather than someone who builds prowess on the football field or basketball court. “At its best, coaching helps educators make informed decisions about instruction and school organization that will lead teachers to teach in ways that help students gain a deeper knowledge of subject matter so that they can bring that knowledge to bear on problems and questions that matter,” write Barbara Neufeld and Dana Roper of Education Matters in a 2003 report (*Coaching: A Strategy for Developing Instructional Capacity—Promises and Practicalities*).

Literacy coaches—also called reading coaches—are perhaps the most common type of coaches off the athletic field. The training and placement of literacy coaches in elementary schools figures prominently in the federal Reading First initiative. According to a recent study by the Center for Education Policy, 98 percent of the 5,666 Reading First schools in the country report that they’ve hired coaches. Increasingly, non-Reading First and secondary schools are also flocking to the model.

While it’s difficult to estimate the number of literacy coaches in the United States, the ranks are swelling in some of the country’s largest school districts including Boston, New York City, Chicago, and San Diego. Florida alone has deployed 2,000 coaches this year and is lobbying the legislature for funding to double that number next school year. The goal is to place one coach in each of the state’s 4,000 K–12 schools.

You need only look to national statistics on reading achievement to understand why the idea of coaches is gaining traction:

- One in four adolescents can’t read well enough to understand information text, according to a 2003 study by Stanford University Professor Michael Kamil.

- The national testing company ACT reported that about half of high school graduates in 2005 lacked the reading skills needed to succeed in college.
- National longitudinal studies show that three-quarters of students who exit third grade as struggling readers continue to read poorly in high school.

While there’s only limited evidence that coaches can help turn around those numbers, there’s substantial research on the benefits of embedded professional development. And, the literacy coach is logically seen as the means to develop, coordinate, and support targeted professional development. “It’s well-documented that ongoing, school-based professional development is what makes the difference,” says Barbara Elcie, deputy director of JustRead Florida. “It’s powerful having coaches because [under our model] 100 percent of their time is devoted to serving the teacher.”

The International Reading Association and National Council of Teachers of English have teamed up to underwrite a national clearinghouse to increase research on literacy coaching as well as help districts and schools develop quality programs. A Web site (www.literacycoachingonline.org), launched in October 2006, will offer information on coaching qualifications and best practices.

According to Clearinghouse Director Nancy Shanklin, who operates out of the University of Colorado at Denver, the lack of clarity on the coach’s role—and even the different names used to describe that individual—remain an issue. “These problems of definition and qualifications lead to concern about whether we can prove that literacy coaching is effective. Or, if there is such a range in coaching that it will be proven ineffective,” she notes.

In this issue of *Northwest Education*, we visit some places in our region where coaches clearly are making their mark. At one Oregon high school, a coach inspires teachers to incorporate literacy lessons whether the subject is biology or geometry. In Alaska’s largest district, coaches are helping to boost elementary reading scores. And, in Idaho and Washington, intensive professional development provides robust coaching for coaches.

Whether they’re working in preschools or high schools, we can only urge coaches to get their game on. In the words of Vince Lombardi, “It is time for us all to stand and cheer for the doer, the achiever, the one who recognizes the challenges and does something about it.”

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