



WHAT WE KNOW—AND DON'T KNOW— ABOUT COACHING

A Conversation With Professor Michael Kamil

You would expect Michael Kamil to be one of the nation's strongest boosters of reading coaches. The distinguished Stanford University education professor has written compellingly and at length about the sorry state of literacy among America's youth. He was one of 14 members of the National Reading Panel, whose work gave rise to the Reading First initiative that mandates the use of coaches in K–3 classrooms. And, Kamil collaborated on the recent *Standards for Middle and High School Literacy Coaches*—a publication “meant to stiffen the resolve of education policymakers and schools that embrace coaching to do so mindfully, so this reform will not go the way of so many good intentions and produce minimal results.”

Still, Kamil isn't shy about pointing out there's scant research specifically supporting literacy coaching. He's also up-front about the fact that many coaches are ill-prepared for their job. In a May 2006 visit to the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory—where Kamil serves as an advisor on research methodology—he sat down with *Northwest Education* to talk about the present state of coaching.

Q. *A hefty amount of public and private funding is being invested right now in literacy coaching. What evidence supports that investment?*

At this point, we have absolutely no single piece of evidence that coaching is effective: no research studies, no published research, no randomized control-style studies. There is literally nothing out there that would justify the kind of money that we're spending in states like Florida, where they're putting a coach in every school. So far, the data suggest that many of these coaches don't have advanced credentials in reading instruction. I think that's one of the problems. But, here's the other conclusion: If coaching is done right, there's every reason to believe that it should work.

You've said there are very few ways to do it right and many ways to do it wrong. If the research isn't there, how do we know what the right ways are?

What we do know—and this is from the National Reading Panel—is that if teachers learn what you're teaching them in professional development and if you get them to do that with their students, and then you measure the student outcomes, the kids do better.

What are some of the reasons why some coaches may not be effective?

First, they're not prepared. [Some] don't have the proper credentials or the proper knowledge. They're very often chosen because they were good teachers, but they were good teachers of children. They often know very little about adult learning, which is dramatically different from the way kids learn. So, that's part of the problem.

At the middle and high school level, it becomes even more difficult because there's a content issue. What we have learned is that reading in different content areas requires different skills. If you don't believe that, you can just think about reading history and reading science. If you want to

summarize some science material, the details are very important. You know, the detail about two hydrogens and one oxygen is pretty critical. In history, it won't matter whether William the Conqueror arrived in 1066 or 1065. What really matters is a whole series of things that were put in place because of that—the broad sweep of political movements, of world events. Was the *Magna Carta* on two sheets of paper or one sheet of paper? It doesn't matter. But in science, those details are absolutely critical.

How do we develop literacy coaches who have knowledge of the research in literacy and experience in adult learning, but can also work with specific content-area teachers?

I'd go after preservice licensing first. I would work on that end of things. We turn out a lot of teachers in the middle and high school levels who have never had a course in how to teach reading to middle and high school students.

So you'd put that into the requirements for teacher certification?

That's the first thing. But to rely only on that would mean that we're going to write off kids for four or five years while those teachers are being trained. Or even longer, because we're not going to replace all those teachers who don't have that training all at once. The second thing is that we need dramatic professional development. We need intensive, coordinated professional development that's sustained and organized over multiyear periods so that teachers begin to focus on what they can do in their classrooms.

And what role would literacy coaches play in that?

They could do the fine-tuning of this general information, [which would be] different from the kind of professional development that's done outside of the classroom. You need both: what I call declarative knowledge, which is the stuff you have in your head about how to teach, and then you need practical knowledge. You know, "when I was in this situation, did I do the right thing?" That's what a coach can do. [She could say] here's a new reading strategy that you could use or here's another way to teach vocabulary, for example.

So, what's the bottom line on coaching?

If done right, I believe it has to work. You know, all the evidence would suggest it has to work. But, that's only if it's done right. And there are infinitely more ways to screw this up than almost anything else. ■

SETTING THE STANDARD

Trained literacy coaches offer one line of attack in dealing with adolescent literacy—a problem of epic proportions. In *Standards for Middle and High School Literacy Coaches*, Michael Kamil and his colleagues define the "ideal" coach. But, they emphasize that few newly minted coaches will possess all the needed skills. It may take coaches two to three years to meet these standards:

- Skillful collaborators—able to function effectively in middle and high school settings
- Skillful job-embedded coaches—able to act as instructional coaches for teachers in core areas such as language arts, science, social studies, and math
- Skillful evaluators of literacy needs—able to collaborate with school leadership teams and teachers to interpret and use assessment data to inform instruction
- Skillful instructional strategists—able to develop and implement instructional strategies to improve academic literacy in specific content areas

Five organizations partnered in establishing the coaching standards: the International Reading Association and the national councils of English, mathematics, science, and social studies teachers. They envision coaches as master teachers who lead the school's overall literacy strategy.

According to the authors, the best coaching candidates are experienced secondary school teachers with a master's degree in literacy or a reading endorsement. Furthermore, successful coaches are "skilled listeners, good questioners, accomplished problem solvers, and professionals who embody strong reflective capabilities and are able to develop trusting relationships with a variety of people" (p. 8).

For more on the standards, see International Reading Association, (2006), *Standards for middle and high school literacy coaches*, Newark, DE: Author. The full text of the publication can be downloaded as a PDF at www.reading.org/resources/issues/reports/coaching.html
