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Florida’s Middle School Reading Coaches

What Do They Do? Are They Effective?

Despite recent progress in reading achievement among elementary school children, literacy levels among U.S. adolescents remain low. Many middle school students struggle to develop advanced reading skills, such as the ability to analyze and synthesize complex ideas or to comprehend multiple points of view within a text. Middle schools have traditionally emphasized the disciplines, such as history or mathematics, rather than explicit reading instruction. Moreover, most middle school teachers have received only minimal preservice training in how to teach reading.

One popular approach for improving adolescents’ literacy skills is the use of school-based literacy or reading coaches. Reading coaches are trained master teachers who provide leadership for the school’s literacy program and offer onsite and ongoing support for teachers so that they can improve the literacy of their students. Coaches generally do not work directly with students but instead provide support to teachers.

While reading coaches have become increasingly prevalent, there is little empirical evidence regarding their effectiveness in changing teacher practice and improving student achievement. RAND sought to address this gap in knowledge by studying a statewide reading coach program in Florida middle schools. Researchers surveyed principals, coaches, and teachers in 113 middle schools; conducted interviews, focus groups, and observations in a sample of the surveyed schools; interviewed state officials and coach coordinators; and examined results from state middle school examinations in reading and mathematics.

Although the State Gives Districts Much Flexibility, Districts Implemented the Program in Similar Ways

Florida’s coaching program, which is part of a broader statewide effort known as Just Read,

Key findings:

- School-based reading coaches in Florida divided their time among many activities and typically spent less than half their time in the classroom assisting individual teachers.
- Teachers and principals reported that coaches had a positive effect on instructional practice.
- However, evidence is mixed regarding the impact of coaches on student achievement.
- The greatest reported barrier to coaching was lack of time.

Florida!, provides funding to school districts to hire full-time, site-based reading coaches for schools. The state defines basic goals for the program but leaves details up to districts. The state provides districts with a job description suggesting basic coach qualifications, recommends that coaches work with all teachers across all content areas, and suggests that they spend at least half their time in the classroom working one-on-one with teachers. The study found that districts tended to establish similar policies and supports for coaches regarding hiring, compensation, evaluation, and training.

Coaches Divided Their Time Among Many Activities

Reading coaches typically divided their time among many activities, including formal work with teachers, informal coaching, administrative duties, data analysis, and noncoaching duties. Although coaches spent the most time on one-on-one work with teachers, this activity typically accounted for less than half of coaches’ time

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Headquarters Campus
1776 Main Street
P.O. Box 2138
Santa Monica, California
90407-2138
TEL 310.393.0411
FAX 310.393.4818

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(the amount recommended by the state). Moreover, coaches tended to work mostly with reading teachers, and were much less likely to focus on teachers specializing in other disciplines, such as English, mathematics, or science.

Teachers and Principals Reported That Coaches Had Positive Effects

The majority of reading and social studies teachers reported that the coach had influenced their instructional practice. More than 40 percent characterized this influence as “moderate to great” in magnitude; approximately two-thirds believed that these interactions helped them feel more confident in their ability to teach reading to students. The vast majority of principals also reported that their coaches had a positive effect on their own knowledge, the school climate, and students’ motivation to read.

Coach Effectiveness Was Associated with Perceptions of Coach Quality and Administrator Support

On average, those coaches who received higher teacher ratings for their knowledge and skills also tended to be perceived as having greater influence over teachers’ practice. Coaches’ ability to support adult learners (i.e., teachers) (as reported by principals) was also associated with positive perceptions of coach influence in the classroom. Principal and district support for coaching appears to be another enabler of coach effectiveness.

However, ensuring the quality of coaches was a concern for many administrators. Some administrators raised questions about schools’ ability to recruit and retain high-quality coaches, and some questioned the particular skills and knowledge of their coaches. Moreover, many coaches expressed a desire for additional professional development to help them understand specific needs of adult learners and how to support them effectively.

Evidence Is Mixed Regarding the Impact of Coaching on Student Achievement

Researchers found that having a state-funded coach was associated with small but significant improvements in average annual gains for middle school students (as measured by the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) Sunshine State Standards reading test) for two of the four cohorts analyzed (those schools first receiving a coach in 2003 and 2005). However, significant effects were not seen for the 2004 and 2006 cohorts.

Frequent Review of Assessment Data Was Associated with Positive Outcomes

There was a significant, though small, relationship between

the frequency with which coaches reviewed assessment data with reading teachers and better student scores in reading and mathematics. Moreover, social studies teachers’ perceptions of coaches’ effectiveness in influencing their instruction were strongly related to the frequency with which the coach reviewed assessment data with them.

Barriers to Coaching Included Lack of Time for Coaching, Teachers’ Reluctance to Work with Coaches, and High Teacher-Coach Ratios

The study identified several barriers constraining coaches’ ability and opportunity to provide instructional support to teachers. Most notably, more than half of coaches cited the large amount of time needed to coordinate and administer assessments as a moderate or great hindrance to their work, and about a third felt that the school schedule did not provide teachers with adequate planning time to meet with coaches. About one-third of coaches reported that some teachers were reluctant to work with them.

Nearly a third of coaches and principals indicated that the ratio of teachers to reading coaches negatively affected the ability to coach, and many district coordinators and coaches noted the challenges involved in supporting many teachers at once.

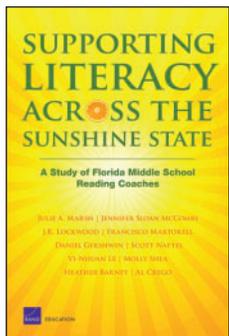
Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, researchers offered several recommendations for policymakers, administrators, and other school officials.

- *Develop a pipeline of qualified candidates.* District administrators might consider recruiting and training a pool of qualified candidates from which to draw in future years or when positions turn over.
- *Nurture administrator support for reading coaches.* In particular, many administrators would benefit from additional guidance concerning how to identify, recruit, and retain high-quality coach candidates.
- *Continue professional development for coaches, with additional emphasis in certain areas.* More support was requested for supporting adult learners, teaching reading to special populations (English language learners, special education students), and incorporating literacy across all the content areas.
- *Encourage coaches to review assessment data with teachers.* Administrators should continue to provide coaches with professional development in data analysis, with a particular focus on taking action in response to data assessment results.
- *Address barriers to enable coaches to work more with teachers.* District and school leaders might consider minimizing administrative demands on coaches, providing

additional training to coaches to help them work with resistant teachers, and basing coach assignment on the needs of each school (i.e., student performance, numbers

of inexperienced teachers), potentially allocating more than one coach to large, high-needs schools when possible.



This research brief describes work done for RAND Education documented in *Supporting Literacy Across the Sunshine State: A Study of Florida Middle School Reading Coaches* (available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG762/>), by Julie A. Marsh, Jennifer Sloan McCombs, J. R. Lockwood, Francisco Martorell, Daniel Gershwin, Scott Naftel, Vi-Nhuan Le, Molly Shea, Heather Barney, and Al Crego, MG-762-CC, 2008, 268 pp., \$35, ISBN: 978-0-8330-4509-6. This research brief was written by Kristin Leuschner. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. **RAND**® is a registered trademark.

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