Meeting the Gold Standard: Preparation of Middle and High School Literacy Coaches in the Field

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Introduction

Picture this ... last year, in-school suspension ... this year, 12 struggling readers rushing to literacy class because they can’t wait to see what will happen next in the book.

I thought I knew what I was doing. In the past when my students struggled, I blamed the students, but later realized my lack of knowledge for discipline-specific literacy strategies kept me from reaching my students. Now, I consider adolescent motivation, and incorporate specific skill needs in my classroom.

What is the connection between these statements? Each was written by a teacher participating in a Striving Readers grant to help struggling readers and writers at the secondary level, and each represents their role as a literacy coach. Part of their day was spent as an interventionist, while other times they were coaching their colleagues to integrate literacy throughout their classroom.

A literacy coach is a teacher who “coaches” other teachers in literacy instruction and assessment. Literacy coaches are usually released from the classroom for a good portion of the day—if not all day—and wear a variety of hats related to literacy development in a school. Literacy coaches can often be found leading groups of teachers to analyze literacy data; assisting in developing a comprehensive school plan to address differentiated instruction; and planning and providing professional development, whether at a faculty meeting, in the summer, or in team professional development during the school day. Coaches mentor new teachers, teach demonstration lessons in classes, research new strategies and information about literacy instruction and assessment, and provide other intensive assistance to advance schoolwide literacy development. While there is little data available, various authors who have described literacy coaching report that some coaches spend part of their time in coaching duties and part of their time teaching struggling readers (Elish-Piper et al., 2008). Others only coach (Kannapel and Moore, 2009). According to Rita Bean, a researcher in literacy coaching at the University of Pittsburgh, there may be a new focus on intervention that is effectively causing more literacy coaches to spend part of their time working directly with struggling readers at the elementary level (personal communication, Aug. 10, 2010).

Secondary level literacy coaches frequently work with the support of a literacy leadership team to help guide the school in literacy development. The leadership team is often made up of the literacy coach, a school administrator (normally an assistant principal), a counselor, department chairs or team leaders representing different content areas and/or programs, a special education teacher, and other adults who
contribute to meeting the literacy needs of students in the school. The team makes decisions about schoolwide implementation of literacy development, realizing that literacy strategies will be implemented differently in various content disciplines. The team must also consider the diversity of the school’s student population as well as teacher experience and preparation. The team contributes to developing a master schedule designed to accommodate the unique needs of struggling readers in intervention classes while insisting on time for the literacy coach to collaborate and work with teachers during their planning times, in their classrooms, and after school in professional development.

Literacy coaching was first widely implemented in elementary school initiatives funded by federal Reading First grants beginning in 2002. However, Frost and Bean (2006) found that the qualifications of educators filling the coaching roles varied from those with no literacy experience to those with graduate degrees in literacy. Elementary teachers who become literacy coaches should probably possess a minimal background in elementary reading instruction and assessment concepts, if not specialized literacy knowledge.

The same should hold true for literacy coaches who work in middle and high schools. But because literacy coaching is a fairly new concept at these levels, experienced coaches are equally hard to find. Because middle and high school teachers hired as literacy coaches are most often content specialists (e.g., in mathematics, social studies, biology, and English literature), rather than reading specialists, teachers who find themselves in the role of a literacy coach at the secondary level frequently find themselves unprepared for the challenge of coaching colleagues.

In 2006, eight federal Striving Readers grants were funded by the U.S. Department of Education (ED) to study “what works” in adolescent literacy. A consortium of 21 Kentucky middle and high schools in seven rural school districts was awarded one of the grants. In this paper, we describe a collaborative effort between faculty members at the University of Louisville and recipients of the Kentucky Striving Readers grant to prepare 23 literacy coaches to work in the schools involved (two schools were large enough to warrant two coaches). The project included interventions for struggling readers at each school as well as coaching in a schoolwide literacy model. In the Kentucky project, the literacy coach is also the interventionist. For two periods a day, the literacy coach teaches a class designed for struggling secondary readers based on the needs of the students in the class. The rest of the literacy coach’s day is spent on the myriad tasks involved in coaching. In short, literacy coaches must possess a comprehensive set of skills. The coaches in the project are also expected to earn a M.Ed. in reading, funded by the grant, to develop these competencies.

The University of Louisville is only one partner in the grant. Others include the Danville (Kentucky) Schools independent school district, the fiscal agent; the Collaborative for Teaching and Learning, the professional development providers who mentor coaches in
the schoolwide literacy development model; the Kentucky Department of Education, the system support entity; and the Collaborative Center for Literacy Development, the outside evaluator. The authors of this paper are responsible for guiding the literacy coaches in the Kentucky project to help them earn the M.Ed. and a state endorsement in reading and writing so they have the skills and depth of knowledge to be effective secondary school literacy coaches. The University of Louisville provides professional development in the targeted intervention and course content of reading instruction foundational knowledge to support the schoolwide literacy model in a cohesive manner.

We will discuss the research basis for literacy coaching, the Kentucky Striving Readers literacy coaching component, and the collaboration between the University of Louisville and the participating grant recipients to prepare and certify coaches. We will then describe our research about secondary literacy coach preparation within our own project, illustrate lessons learned, and provide recommendations for districts and institutions of higher education who may want to collaborate on such ventures.

What Does Research Say about Literacy Coaching?

Due to limited studies of teacher preparation and its possible relationship to student achievement, researchers have proposed that the field needs more research to determine which elements of teachers’ preparation (e.g., content knowledge, strategy implementation, clinical experiences) may affect their teaching practice and student achievement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005). However, evidence is mounting that shows that better prepared teachers produce students with higher academic achievement (Boyd et al., 2008).

Literacy coaching is a relatively new field, but the few studies conducted on the relationship between elementary literacy coaching and student achievement have generally shown a positive correlation (L’Allier et al., 2010). A promising study by Biancarosa and colleagues, completed in 2010, of 17 elementary schools across the country suggests that literacy coaching can substantially raise student achievement. The ED-funded study, which reviewed literacy coaching within a K–12 reform initiative (the Reading Recovery Literacy Collaborative), reported that students in schools where teachers had access to literacy coaches increased average rates of learning by 32 percent by the third implementation year. In this study, “teacher expertise also increased substantially and the rate of improvement was predicted by the amount of coaching a teacher received” (Literacy Collaborative, 2010). It is important to note that the literacy coaches in this study were highly trained in reading processes, but did not necessarily earn a M.Ed. in reading.
Research on secondary literacy coaching and student achievement is even more sparse. In 2003, researchers implemented a literacy coaching model in three San Diego schools (one elementary, one middle, and one high school) (Lapp et al., 2003). Literacy coaches in this model were prepared by the researchers to tutor struggling students 40 percent of the time and coach colleagues in the remaining time. Schools saw an increase in student achievement at both the elementary and secondary school level. Another study conducted by RAND (Marsh et al., 2008) found that having a state-funded coach was associated with small but significant improvements in average annual gains for Florida middle school students for two of four cohorts analyzed. Kannapel and Moore (2009) reported that while literacy coaches in middle and high schools working in a 2-year Adolescent Literacy Coaching Project (ALCP) in Kentucky resulted in enhanced instruction and confidence for classroom teachers, student achievement in ALCP schools did not differ significantly from non-ALCP schools. Each of these initiatives had different professional development models, with a few allowing coaches to receive some graduate credit hours, but none including an M.Ed. in reading component.

In a survey of literacy coaches (Roller, 2006), 37 percent of respondents said a master’s degree was required for their position, but only 19 percent indicated that an advanced degree in literacy or a related area was a requirement. A recent national survey of middle and high school literacy coaches (Blamey et al., 2008) found that literacy coaching preparation and duties at the secondary level vary widely. Requiring a M.Ed. in reading would certainly be a substantial change for many literacy coaches.

The Kentucky Striving Readers Grant

The Kentucky Striving Readers project based its grant application on the 15 elements of effective adolescent literacy programs described in *Reading Next – A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy* (Biancarosa and Snow, 2006). According to *Reading Next*, the following elements need to be implemented to increase secondary student achievement in literacy:

1. Direct, explicit comprehension instruction in strategies and processes that proficient readers use
2. Effective instructional principles embedded in content, including teaching students how to read different types of texts specific to each content area
3. Motivation and self-directed learning, including building motivation and skills for workplace and lifelong reading tasks
4. Text-based collaborative learning, which involves students interacting with and discussing texts
5. Strategic tutoring for students who need intense reading and writing support
6. Diverse texts on a variety of topics and difficulty

7. Intensive writing, including instruction in the kinds of tasks students will need to be able to perform in school and beyond

8. A technology component, which includes technology as a tool and topic of literacy instruction

9. Ongoing formative assessments of students, which are informal daily assessments that teachers and students can use to chart progress and adjust instruction

10. Extended time for literacy

11. Professional development that is long term and ongoing

12. Ongoing summative assessments of students and programs, which are more formal and are used for program evaluation and research

13. Teacher teams, which are interdisciplinary and meet regularly to discuss student progress

14. Leadership, which can be principals and teachers who lead literacy efforts

15. A comprehensive and coordinated literacy program that is interdisciplinary and interdepartmental and includes the entire school community (Reading Next, pp. 4–5)

Unless most teachers and principals in a school possess deep background knowledge of these concepts (a wonderful thought, but usually not realistic), an educator in a school needs to be designated to develop the skills and knowledge to lead such an effort.

Since we were familiar with the concept of elementary literacy coaching in Reading Next - A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy: A Report to Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2nd Edition and the professional development literature, the role of a secondary literacy coach seemed to be a perfect choice for our Striving Readers project. As part of the project design, the grant partners created and funded a literacy coaching position at each of the 21 middle and high schools participating in the grant. We described a literacy coach as a teacher who would spend half of his or her time teaching the targeted intervention and the other half coaching colleagues and implementing the schoolwide literacy development model. This would obviously require educators to have specialized knowledge of elements like those discussed in Reading Next, but we knew that literacy coaches in middle and high schools would come from many different content backgrounds and have varied experiences in teaching and coaching.
The intervention model we chose was the Learning Strategies Curriculum (LSC) from the University of Kansas (University of Kansas, 2010). One author of the paper is a certified trainer of this curriculum who, in a previous position, created a state network for teachers using the model. The LSC consists of a set of reading and writing strategies for students who are below grade level in literacy that operate within a larger framework called the Strategic Instruction Model (SIM). In our design, each class would meet for 50 to 60 minutes 5 days a week. The class would be an elective for students and would not take the place of English language arts credits. The literacy coach would participate in ongoing professional development in LSC strategies, and then implement the strategies based on the needs of the students in the class. Strategies from the LSC model included word identification, self-questioning, visual imagery, inference, Literacy Information and Communication System (LINCS) vocabulary, summarizing and paraphrasing, sentence writing, and paragraph writing. However, we planned for literacy coaches to also participate in more in-depth professional development in research-based concepts for supporting struggling readers and writers.

We designed professional development sessions in phonics and word recognition strategies, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, motivation, classroom discussion, and administration and interpretation of diagnostic assessments (i.e., Ekwall/Shanker Reading Inventory) and curriculum-based measurements (developing pre- and post-assessments on strategy use and comprehension of various text types). We wanted our literacy coaches to be skilled in diagnosing and differentiating instruction to meet the needs of diverse learners in an intervention class intended for secondary students 2 or more years below grade level in reading. We also wanted them to be able to measure progress in the classroom and analyze standardized evaluation assessments.

To plan for the coaching component, we carefully reviewed the International Reading Association’s Standards for Middle and High School Literacy Coaches (2006). This document, created by a collaborative effort of several major professional organizations representing different content areas, outlines what a successful secondary coach should know and be able to do across a school and within the specific content areas of English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. We wanted our coaches to learn to be skillful collaborators who could function effectively in middle or high school settings and who could act as skilled instructional coaches for teachers in all content areas. We also wanted our coaches to be skilled evaluators of literacy needs within various subject areas and be able to collaborate with secondary school leadership teams and teachers to interpret and use assessment data to inform instruction. We wanted our coaches to be accomplished middle or high school teachers themselves who were skilled in developing and implementing instructional strategies to develop academic literacy in each of the Reading Next elements listed above.

We envisioned that a typical seven-period day in the life of a Striving Readers literacy coach might look like this:
Period 1: Planning; communication (electronic or in person) with classroom teachers and administrators; finding appropriate resources; analyzing school data

Period 2: Intervention class

Period 3: Intervention class

Period 4: Lunch

Period 5: Coaching (meeting with teams or departments for job-embedded professional development like analyzing student work and discussing student literacy needs, demonstrating literacy strategies in a content-area classroom, observing a colleague’s lesson and debriefing with the teacher as a critical friend, etc.)

Period 6: Coaching

Period 7: Coaching

Based on Reading Next criteria and the Standards for Middle and High School Literacy Coaches, we outlined preferred candidates to serve as Kentucky Striving Readers literacy coaches. The ideal candidate needed to possess a master’s degree, a Kentucky teaching certificate, and a minimum of 3 years of successful experience teaching students in grades 6–8 or 9–12 for any discipline area. In Kentucky, teachers are required to have 3 years of teaching experience to apply for a “consultant endorsement” on their state teaching certificate, which allows them to work with adults, as well as students, for part of the day. But we also were concerned about coaches having the credibility and the background experience to develop such a comprehensive skill set. We asked that the coaching candidates possess experience and/or personal qualities that predict success in collaborating with others, coaching others with various levels of experience and knowledge, and acting as a resource for educators. We wanted coaches to be able to effectively communicate with parents and all stakeholders about the impact of the Striving Readers program on student achievement. We wanted them to have excellent reading and writing skills of their own, ability to manage multiple priorities and a challenging work environment, and a commitment to ongoing professional growth and excellence.

While the partners outlined the desired qualifications for the literacy coaches, schools had authority under Kentucky law to hire any coach they believed was best for their school. The schools hired coaches who possessed a variety of backgrounds and experiences. As a group, all of the Striving Readers coaches had more than 6 years of teaching experience, with the majority having from 6 to 10 years of experience. Three of the coaches had more than 25 years of teaching experience. Each coach had a
specific certification area that was either elementary, middle, or high school with a K–8th-, 7th–12th-, or P–12th-grade concentration. English language arts and social studies were the most reported content-area concentrations, although science and mathematics were also represented. While a few of the coaches already possessed a Kentucky Reading and Writing endorsement, none had an M.Ed. in reading, which they were expected to earn during the course of the project. Nearly all the coaches reported having taken at least one literacy course as part of a teacher preparation or master’s degree program, but only 48 percent stated they had actually taught literacy strategies in their own content areas before being hired as a literacy coach. Because the majority of them had only taught in their own content areas, many said they did not feel prepared to work with struggling readers and writers in a targeted intervention class. Clearly, intensive preparation would be needed for the literacy coaches to be able to work with students and colleagues in such an important project.

Collaborating to Prepare Secondary Literacy Coaches

One possible question about preparation of literacy coaches was outlined by the Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse National Advisory Board (International Reading Association [IRA]/National Council of Teachers of English, 2006): “What is or ought to be expected of literacy coaches—course work, reading specialist certified, reading specialist plus advanced certificate, MA in an area of curriculum and instruction plus coursework in literacy and coaching?” The IRA recommends that individuals hired as literacy coaches possess a reading specialist certification and a master’s degree in literacy or, if they do not, obtain these credentials within 3 years of becoming a literacy coach (IRA, 2004). This recommendation is known as the “Gold Standard” for preparation of literacy coaches (Frost and Bean, 2006).

But how reasonable is it to expect a middle or high school teacher, newly hired as a literacy coach, to attend university classes to obtain a master’s degree in reading in 3 years as an expectation of the job? And, if this is not reasonable, how will they receive the intensive training needed for success in this position?

At the University of Louisville, we contemplated the question of how to prepare the Striving Readers middle and high school literacy coaches. Our M.Ed. in reading program had recently undergone a major revision to meet the IRA Standards for Reading Professionals (2003) and Standards for Middle and High School Literacy Coaches (2006). The revised M.Ed. in reading program consists of 24 hours of literacy coursework and 6 hours of supervised practicum, which meets the Gold Standard. Because the Kentucky Reading and Writing endorsement entitles a teacher to be a K–12 reading specialist, the coursework was designed to prepare our candidates to work with K–12 students in reading and writing education and to develop competence in literacy leadership to prepare for coaching colleagues and supporting the school community.
The University of Louisville program also aligned with the National Council of Accreditation for Teacher Education (NCATE) requirement to establish key assessments for each course in the program. Each of the 12 courses in the program contained a key assessment called a “Hallmark Assessment Task,” which was designed so candidates could demonstrate mastery of the IRA standards, which is the professional organization NCATE recognizes for advanced reading teacher preparation. Most of the course Hallmark Assessment Tasks we designed were field-based and required our candidates to work with students and teachers within their own classrooms or schools. Our on-campus graduate candidates completed the Hallmark assessments as well as other assignments, prepared an exit portfolio, and had the option to take the national PRAXIS Assessment for Reading Specialists on completion of the program.

Because we decided that our Striving Readers literacy coaches should be required to meet the Gold Standard of completing the M.Ed. in reading, we included funds for the degree as part of the grant application. However, for the Striving Readers coaches, who mostly lived and worked quite a distance from campus in more rural areas of the state, we decided to make earning the degree as convenient as possible. Not only did we fund tuition, books, and materials, we implemented a total field-based master’s degree pathway. This meant that, instead of attending university classes on campus, the Striving Readers coaches would participate in in-depth summer institutes; regular ongoing professional development; distance learning and social networking through sites like Ning.com; and on-site classroom coaching from grant partners. Striving Readers literacy coaches would be required to complete the same 12 Hallmark assessments as the candidates in the university-based program, but Kentucky Striving Readers literacy coaches would be encouraged to earn the field-based M.Ed. in reading as part of their coaching position. They would just carry out their field-based assignments within their literacy coaching roles instead of inside the college classroom. To our way of thinking, Striving Readers coaches who successfully completed the M.Ed. Hallmark Assessment Tasks would be able to demonstrate that they could perform key reading specialist/literacy coach functions just as well as their on-campus counterparts (table 1).
Table 1: Striving Readers M.Ed. Coursework
(in the order introduced)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course Number</th>
<th>Course Title</th>
<th>Course Credit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EDAP 614</td>
<td>Supporting Struggling Readers and Writers</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDAP 636</td>
<td>Advanced Reading Methods</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDAP 693</td>
<td>Teaching Writing</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDAP 641</td>
<td>Literacy Leadership and Schoolwide Planning</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDAP 615</td>
<td>Measurement and Diagnosis of Literacy</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDAP 610</td>
<td>Literacy Research and Theory</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDAP 642</td>
<td>Literacy Learning and Cultural Differences</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDAP 678</td>
<td>Language Knowledge and Acquisition</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDAP 540</td>
<td>Teaching Adolescent Readers*</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDAP 687</td>
<td>Literacy, Teaching, and Technology*</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDAP 618</td>
<td>Capstone Practicum in Literacy: Reading Specialist*</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDAP 679</td>
<td>Capstone Practicum in Literacy: Literacy Coach</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Acted as electives in the Striving Readers M.Ed. program. All others are required courses. On-campus M.Ed. candidates take an education research course and one elective. Candidates who already have a master’s degree take two electives. All Striving Readers coaches had a previous master’s degree.

Because of the varied backgrounds and knowledge of the teachers who were hired, the partners created a professional development plan for coaches based on the IRA standards. In addition, because the project was designed to be completed in 4 years, we included a 4-year coaching curriculum map that detailed developmental behaviors and activities. The curriculum map focused on a linear and spiraling coaching content that included the targeted intervention training, professional development in school-based literacy development strategies and techniques, coaching techniques, and the foundational knowledge required to successfully complete the Hallmark Assessment Tasks as part of the M.Ed. in reading coursework. This meant that the Striving Readers coaches actually had 4 years to complete the degree instead of only 3 years, which is the Gold Standard recommendation.

The project curriculum map was created for each year of the grant based on specific needs observed by on-site mentor coaches and the intervention trainer in classroom visits as well as coaching journals kept by the literacy coaches. We also took into account the progress that schools had made, and anticipated and targeted goals. Each literacy coach drafted his or her own annual instructional plan for coaching and mentoring needs. Continuous, job-embedded professional learning opportunities about literacy coaching were certainly part of everyday work. Coaches also participated in coaching institutes, monthly face-to-face trainings, and on-site mentoring with distance network discussions. The authors of this paper were responsible for professional
development in the intervention model and for providing background knowledge and strategies in adolescent literacy research concepts (phonics and word recognition strategies, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, motivation, classroom discussion, and classroom assessment techniques) as part of summer coaching institutes and monthly face-to-face trainings throughout the school year. The Collaborative for Teaching and Learning led the professional development in coaching for the schoolwide literacy model.

**Life as a Striving Readers Literacy Coach**

Literacy coaches began their new positions armed with 2 weeks of summer professional development in the intervention model, schoolwide content reading strategies, and basic coaching concepts. They began the school year with half their time scheduled with students in intervention classes and the other half set aside for work as literacy coaches in a schoolwide effort to increase literacy achievement. Below we discuss in greater detail how the work of literacy coaches proceeded.

**Intervention Classroom Tasks**

In intervention classes the first year, coaches implemented aspects of the Learning Strategies Curriculum they had been taught in professional development. By the beginning of the second year, literacy coaches were expected to diagnose student needs and plan appropriate instruction in the LSC intervention model. Coaches had been trained in the Ekwall/Shanker Reading Inventory, which is a series of diagnostic assessments through ninth grade. First they were asked to administer the San Diego Quick Assessment, a series of graded word lists that can be used to determine a rough reading grade level for each student in the class. Using the results from the San Diego, coaches administered an Informal Reading Inventory (IRI) using graded reading passages from the Ekwall/Shanker to determine each student’s individual instructional needs. To administer the IRI, students read orally while teachers coded for miscues; then students read silently and answered comprehension questions. The combination of miscues and comprehension results helped coaches decide which LSC strategies were appropriate for their students. The University of Louisville professional development provider in the intervention initially double-checked all assessments to ensure accuracy. Literacy coaches then planned intervention instruction to meet the needs of students in the class and help them move toward grade level.

Over the course of the project, literacy coaches taught students a number of LSC strategies, including word identification, self-questioning, visual imagery, inference, LINCS vocabulary, fundamentals of summarizing and paraphrasing, sentence writing, and paragraph writing. Students were taught to apply these strategies to content-area materials used in the school. Before coaches began any new teaching strategy they first administered a pre-test using materials provided in LSC books or grade-level materials. They were asked to keep careful records of results. Throughout instruction, coaches asked students to complete an assessment consisting of comprehension and strategy-
use questions on leveled materials that gradually became more difficult until they reached grade level. At the conclusion of each LSC strategy instructional unit, coaches administered a post-test, again keeping careful records of each student’s progress.

Literacy coaches also taught a strategy from the LSC curriculum titled “Possible Selves,” where students learned to set goals and become more effective learners.

**Coaching Tasks**

Striving Readers coaches took on the leadership role for implementing a schoolwide literacy model developed by the Collaborative for Teaching and Learning. This model consists of a core set of schoolwide strategies to be implemented across all disciplines, including strategies and tools for vocabulary development, reading comprehension, writing to learn, academic dialogue, and writing for publication.

Literacy coaches were responsible for coaching their colleagues in implementing the schoolwide strategies and developing a schoolwide literacy plan. The literacy coach in each school organized administration of a norm-referenced school literacy assessment that was used as an evaluation tool and to place students in intervention classes. Coaches planned professional development sessions, led data analysis groups, led teacher study groups, and located resources for teachers. They demonstrated literacy lessons in content-area classrooms, collaborated with colleagues on planning instruction with a literacy focus, and supported teachers in developing the necessary skills and strategies to motivate and help students read and write in their content areas. Along the way, they communicated with administrators, colleagues, and other school personnel, and engaged with parents and community partners.

Coaches often carved their own pathways. One coach, who we will call Ms. Z., described her methods this way:

> Many days I prepare to provide modeling and demonstration of teaching strategies specific to content discipline areas. Teachers provide a brief outline or conversation starter and we collaborate to come up with the appropriate intentional strategy to achieve their objectives. I provide a consistent coaching cycle that includes [many opportunities] for dialogue. Follow up and support is key to my coaching ... without the routine, I could be mistaken [for] a one-stop shop and [for] not supporting accountable implementation.

As coaches learned to complete the tasks of their literacy coaching positions, most were also completing requirements for the M.Ed. in reading, which, as we have noted, is the Gold Standard in literacy coach preparation.
What Happens When Middle and High School Coaches Are Expected To Achieve the “Gold Standard” in Literacy Coach Preparation?

After a year of the project, we were curious to know the answer to the question posed by the Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse: What happens when middle and high school literacy coaches are expected to achieve the “Gold Standard” in literacy coach preparation? With a fully funded master’s degree as part of the project and intensive professional development in major concepts of reading, writing, schoolwide literacy development, and coaching, we had anticipated that coaches would jump at the opportunity to obtain a degree that would support their work and that they could complete in the field. We soon found that our expectations were skewed. Twenty-one of 23 coaches (91 percent) enrolled in the first 12 hours of coursework and most signed written commitments to complete the degree, but it quickly became obvious that completing the Hallmark assessments while learning and performing the job of literacy coach was difficult. Coaches told us they were willing to do the Hallmark assessments, but were drowning in the expectations of their new role. We began giving lenient deadlines for the coursework related to the Hallmark assessments and were more sensitive to the time demands of the job. This did appear to relieve some stress, but without definitive deadlines, it was easy to concentrate on aspects of the project rather than on the master’s degree work. As a result, assignments came in slowly.

To learn more about the coaches’ attitudes and opinions, we created an online survey about the master’s degree expectation using SurveyMonkey.com, and then conducted follow-up interviews (Overturf and Bronger, 2008). From this study, we were surprised to find that most Striving Readers coaches initially enrolled in the M.Ed. program for reasons other than to better prepare for their literacy coaching role, such as for future career opportunities or to earn free graduate credit hours, which could apply toward a state pay raise. To our chagrin, coaches reported that they were not aware of the scholarly work involved in the M.Ed. component (i.e., completing Hallmark Assessment Tasks) before being hired and that university expectations for a job-embedded M.Ed. experience differed vastly from their perceptions of what should be expected. Background data indicated that many of the coaches had some prior experience in literacy preparation through a college course or professional development program; however, most reported feeling inadequately prepared for their roles before being hired. The Striving Readers coaches believed that professional qualifications, prior experiences, and training are related to success in the coaching role, but while some felt they could learn “on the job,” others were clear that they needed intensive background and support before beginning the literacy coach position.
Even though coaches felt that learning the literacy coach role plus completing coursework expectations were too overwhelming to finish in the 3-year timeframe, a high percentage of them reported that literacy coaches should be required to obtain a master’s degree in reading. More telling, coaches in the field-based Striving Readers cohort who completed the coursework requirements demonstrated that they could meet the IRA national standards associated with the course.

**Was There a Difference Between On-Campus M.Ed. Preparation and the Striving Readers Field-Based Model?**

In fall 2009, we wanted to know if Striving Readers literacy coaches perceived the quality of their preparation in the field-based pathway to the M.Ed. in reading any differently than the candidates attending graduate reading specialist/literacy coach preparation classes on campus. In Kentucky, teachers are required to obtain a master’s degree to keep their teaching certificate after 10 years. Therefore, most of the candidates in our on-campus graduate program are practitioners attending weekly classes in the evening after teaching all day. On-campus M.Ed. candidates usually complete assignments requiring work with students in their own classrooms and schools. They also complete their coaching experiences during their planning periods and before and after school.

For this second study (Overturf and Bronger, 2009), we again collected survey data using SurveyMonkey.com. With permission, we adapted questions from the Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse’s *Self-Assessment for Elementary Coaches* (2009) and the *Self-Assessment for Middle and High School Literacy Coaches* (2007). We imported the electronic survey results into a spreadsheet and created graphs to portray results for both the on-campus M.Ed. candidates and the Striving Readers coach candidates according to each of the nine criterion of literacy coach preparation included in the Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse surveys. These are knowledge of foundations of literacy, ability to conduct assessment, content-area literacy, writing instruction, planning and delivering differentiated instruction, classroom coaching, facilitating adult learning, building capacity within the school, and working within a broader school reform context.

We then completed a statistical analysis to see if there were any differences in how prepared the two groups felt. We found there was actually no significant difference in how candidates perceived their preparation except for writing instruction—the Striving Readers coaches stated they felt better prepared in this area.

**Results**

We believe our field-based pathway to earning a M.Ed. in reading is a viable method for preparing secondary literacy coaches. The Striving Readers coaches in our project have met the same national standards as the on-campus graduate candidates. They have
gone from feeling inadequate for the countless expectations of the position to
demonstrating, via Hallmark assessments, that they are able to complete a myriad of
tasks related to teaching struggling readers and writers and coaching colleagues for
schoolwide literacy achievement. We believe this is an impressive accomplishment for
secondary teachers who had little experience out of their own content-area classrooms
before they were hired as literacy coaches!

Striving Readers coaches earning a M.Ed. in reading demonstrated the following
capabilities:

• Diagnose a struggling middle or high school reader’s strengths and areas of need
  in word recognition, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension
• Analyze student writing and plan next-step lessons
• Analyze language development and acquisition for struggling readers or English
  language learners
• Analyze their own literacy teaching to examine attention to diverse learners
• Develop case studies of progress with struggling readers
• Choose and implement pre- and post-classroom assessments and plan and deliver
  instruction based on assessment results
• Analyze school literacy data and develop a school long-range literacy plans
• Research literacy concepts and methods in professional literature and apply them
to intervention and schoolwide instruction
• Recommend and demonstrate appropriate literacy instructional methods and
  resources to content-area colleagues
• Demonstrate how to use current instructional technology with students across the
  curriculum
• Assist content-area colleagues in fostering student academic dialogue to increase
  comprehension
• Demonstrate mastery of IRA *Standards for Middle and High School Literacy
  Coaches* and *Standards for Reading Professionals*.

We also found there is little difference in how prepared each coaching group believes
themselves to be, whether on campus or part of the field-based group. Of the 14
original Striving Readers coaches who were hired at the beginning of the grant, all were
on track to finish the M.Ed. by the expected time. Five coaches who were hired later in
the grant period to replace coaches who retired or took other positions were also
completing requirements for the degree. All coaches participated in the professional development, but coaches who completed requirements for the degree more effectively processed and demonstrated their knowledge in the challenges of adolescent literacy development and grew in confidence and competence. Several of them have written articles, presented at state and national conferences, served on advisory boards and task forces, and are considered leaders in adolescent literacy in our state.

Ms. D., one of the literacy coaches in our project, had this to say about her experience:

_As I reflect on my coaching experience over the last 4 years, I am amazed at how much personal growth I have made. I have been pushed to do things I had never attempted or thought in ways I had not thought of before. While dealing with challenges and difficulties that are never ending, I became more flexible than ever before. However, the pleasure of seeing my own growth and the growth of others has made the job rewarding. I have seen an increase in student performance as evidenced by informal measures and standardized test scores. I have watched teachers who were unwilling to learn new instructional strategies change their ideas and teaching practice. I have collaborated with experts in the field of literacy and have learned so much from them. In fact ... I have learned again what I thought I already knew._

We consider the M.Ed. in reading process to be a successful component of the Kentucky Striving Readers project.

**Lessons Learned about Secondary Literacy Coach Preparation**

Based on the studies we conducted and our own observations of the M.Ed. in reading process, we also learned some significant lessons about the challenges of implementing a field-based M.Ed. program as part of secondary literacy coach preparation. We detail them below.

1. We must be realistic about how much a secondary school teacher, who is fairly new to literacy instruction and coaching, can be expected to absorb all at once. In our project, coaches were learning to implement an intensive intervention for students and learning to coach colleagues in schoolwide literacy strategies as well as participating in comprehensive professional development and completing M.Ed. assignments. In hindsight, it was probably too much. Our research revealed that some coaches were extremely uncomfortable learning so many new things “on the fly” and felt inadequately prepared for beginning their new role. This finding mirrors that of the
RAND report on middle school literacy coaching (Marsh et al., 2008). In a new coaching project with a field-based M.Ed. component, we would provide ongoing professional development during a preparation period at the beginning of the project (possibly during a training year) and then expect the official coursework to begin after the first semester on the job when coaches got more comfortable in their roles.

2. We would make expectations about the M.Ed. component very clear from the beginning. It seems obvious now, but our coaches did not realize what we expected of them because we did not make it clear. They then became overwhelmed with having to learn so many new things all at once. In a new project, we would make sure that the M.Ed. component was described well as part of the expectation of the literacy coach position. We would also ensure that communication procedures were in place before, during, and after the project.

3. Constant and consistent connections with the coaches during the field-based M.Ed. process are critical. It is too easy to be “out of sight, out of mind.” When we began allowing more flexibility in coursework timelines, coaches began allowing other components of the project to take over. If the purpose of the M.Ed. is for coaches to be highly trained professionals who can competently fulfill all the roles of a literacy coach, we would offer that reasonable but unambiguous timelines are important for them to be able to acquire the deep knowledge they need and keep themselves on track.

4. One of the realities of working with human beings is that people’s lives change. Procedures must be in place to train new coaches as the project progresses. We found ourselves constantly repeating professional development and training as new coaches who wanted to earn the M.Ed. took the place of people who had moved on to other positions or places. In a new project, we would develop a process to introduce new coaches to the M.Ed. component and use technology-based solutions, knowing that teacher turnover is a fact of school life.

5. A final lesson learned deals with the best way to navigate the bureaucracy of a sizeable university. The field-based M.Ed. program was an innovative concept requiring flexibility in enrollment, registration, and university procedures, which are notorious at most large institutions for being inflexible. For example, we budgeted for tuition, books, and materials for our Striving Readers coaches. When we enrolled them the first semester, we quickly found that coaches were required to pay fees that were not reimbursable from the grant. Coaches had to pay the fees themselves, which, while small compared to the price of a degree, nonetheless surprised coaches who were already apprehensive about the degree process.

A second problem was the nature of the computerized system designed to deal with the whole degree process. For example, sometimes coaches received automatically generated letters informing them that they owed tuition for 12 graduate credit hours. Although they knew the grant was responsible for paying their tuition, it was
disconcerting to the coaches (and their spouses) when these letters appeared in the mail.

A third problem was access. Because our coaches were not readily available on campus, paperwork glitches could and did easily happen. Although our graduate advisor worked diligently with us, it became very confusing at times. In a new project with a field-based M.Ed. component, we would hold regular meetings with any university administrative office that would be affected by the process and could help us make it smoother, including officers and staff from advising, grants and awards, the graduate school, and the registrar’s office. Given that both authors of this paper have considerable school district and state agency experience, we imagine the same could be said for organizations involved in any innovative process outside the established system.

Recommendations for District and University Collaboration

State requirements for reading specialist certification differ. College and university requirements nationwide vary in the amount and type of coursework required to become a reading specialist (Abbott and Williams, 2009). Although there are a few exceptions (Sturtevant, 2003), there is little mention of literacy coach preparation in many programs. The university program needs to ensure it is producing teachers who can perform the job of literacy coach well. At the time we revised our M.Ed. in reading program at the University of Louisville, we looked to the IRA recommendations to design our new program. Our state requirements for a Reading and Writing Endorsement were minimal—there is now a new set of literacy specialist requirements on the way in Kentucky that will align better with the IRA standards—and we felt that a reading specialist/literacy coach must be able to know and be able to do much more than the state specified. The University of Louisville took the initiative to redesign an outdated program and make it more relevant for the candidates it serves.

School districts should review their university M.Ed. program requirements and ask how they align with the most up-to-date IRA Standards for Reading Professionals as well as the IRA Standards for Middle and High School Literacy Coaches. If the university program does not align with current national standards, school districts and the university should work together to review the competencies outlined by the standards and develop a program that not only prepares a literacy coach to increase achievement of struggling readers, but to perform the duties of a literacy coach to increase schoolwide achievement.

School districts need to find ways to put literacy coaches in place in middle and high schools, and literacy coaches should have a wide range of skills and knowledge to be able to do the job. Certainly, all school districts will not have grant funds available to
pay the expenses associated with providing a 36-hour graduate degree for a literacy coach, which at the University of Louisville averages about $15,000 per candidate. A recommendation we might make is for the school or district and the coach to share the cost of the degree. This would provide accountability for the coach and not put the school district in the position of financing an entire degree. We would recommend offering a financial incentive or salary increase when the degree is completed, much like the National Board Certification process allows. If earning an entire degree is not realistic, then we feel literacy coaches at least need to earn graduate credit and to complete assignments that demonstrate competency in the different aspects of the role.

We believe that school districts and universities can design creative field-based programs to certify secondary literacy coaches, but it requires dedication, clear communication about expectations and progress, and willingness to take risks. Practitioners should identify key people in each organization and begin a conversation about possibilities. Using some of the lessons we have learned along the way may spark new and better ideas for collaboration.

As Johnny, one of the high school students in our project, said, “I will be the first person to graduate in my family because reading has given me power.” We want all of our students to experience that power! Our middle and high school students who are still struggling readers deserve no less than the best qualified teachers to help prepare them for the future.
References


