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Topic: A Study of the
MPS Literacy Coach Initiative
Years 1 and 2*

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**Based on: Study of Literacy Coach Initiative, Phase 1 Report (May, 2006) by Robert Meyer, Eric Camburn, Steven Kimball & Tony Milanowski; The Relationship of Literacy Coaching Implementation to Value Added Student Achievement in Reading (September, 2007) by Robert Meyer, Anthony Milanowski, & Michael Christian; The Study of Milwaukee Public Schools Literacy Coach Initiative, Year 2 Report (August, 2007) by Steven Kimball, Eric Camburn, and Rachel Lander.*

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Year One Study and Results

The Value Added Research Center at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research began a study of the Milwaukee Public Schools Literacy Coach initiative at the request of the Division of Assessment and Accountability in November of 2005. The first phase of the study was conducted from December 2005 to April 2006. Three major research questions guided the study:

1. How has the initiative been implemented?
2. What is its impact on teachers?
3. What is its impact on student achievement in reading/language arts?

These questions were addressed using mixed methodology, including interviews with district leaders, literacy coaches, principals and teachers in eight schools, and surveys of principals, teachers and literacy coaches. In addition, the relationship of literacy coaching to student achievement was examined using value-added methodology. The first year analyses yielded the following conclusions:

1. Literacy coaches functioned as key members of school Learning Teams and helped to focus administrators and teachers on literacy. As well as being the 'go to' people in the school for literacy, they were also key links with the district office on literacy matters.
2. There was less emphasis on coaches doing one-on-one coaching with teachers aimed at instructional improvement than the original design seems to have envisioned, and less than portrayed in the literacy coaching literature. Over time, the role of literacy coaches appears to have shifted away from direct coaching interactions with teachers toward more time and effort spent in quasi-administrative activities. Survey results indicated that coaches spent less time in coaching roles than their official time appointment would suggest.
3. Coaches appeared to have the support of leaders and teachers at their schools, had positive attitudes toward the Comprehensive Literacy Framework, and understood the expectations of the initiative.
4. While many coaches did not appear to be literacy experts, they appeared to be credible to teachers, and seemed to have the skills they need for their coordinative and administrative responsibilities. New coaches could have benefited from additional introductory training, as was provided in the initial year of the initiative.
5. Factors such as literacy specialist turnover, high school/specialist ratio, and increased emphasis on using the specialists to communicate district-level priorities limited the scope for one-on-one interaction between coaches and specialists around literacy instructional practices. The transition of specialists to a more coordinative role paralleled the evolution of the coach role within the schools.
6. Given interview and survey responses, on average coaches' impact on instruction was not perceived as deep. There is not, in most schools, the emphasis on the kind of intensive one-on-one or small group coaching that research on teaching practice improvement suggests is needed to make major changes in how teachers teach.

Based on these results, we advised the district to consider how much flexibility schools should be allowed in the use of the coach positions, how to hold principals and coaches accountable for the roles coaches play and their performance, what type of training and oversight would be most helpful for coaches, and how to move the program closer to the original design. These results and recommendations were provided in a report titled, "Study of Literacy Coach Initiative: Phase 1 Report" and shared with the Superintendent's leadership team during the spring of 2006. Following the report and briefing, several meetings were held within MPS to react to the findings.

When Wisconsin Knowledge and Concept Exam results became available in the fall of 2006, the last study question from the first report was addressed. This part of the study was designed to explore the impact of

literacy coaches on student achievement using value-added methodology. Ideally, the impact of coaching would be estimated using a randomized trial that would assign coaching to schools at random, then follow the outcome measures over multiple years. Obviously, this could not be done retrospectively in this case. While a comparative trend analysis was also considered, because coaching was in place in most district schools, there were not enough schools without coaches to use as a comparison group. The strategy chosen was therefore to make use of variation in the quality of program implementation in schools using Literacy Coaches and relate this to variation in school-level value-added student achievement. The rationale for this approach was that if literacy coaching improves instruction which in turn improves student achievement, then those schools which implemented coaching more intensively would have higher levels of value-added. It should be recognized that this strategy is inherently weaker than the others, so that the study's conclusions are not as strong as they might have been had the others been usable.

The measures of coaching program implementation did not, in general, have the positive and significant relationships with the value added outcomes that would be expected if better implementation was producing increased student achievement. One interpretation of these results is that better implementation does not increase student achievement. This would imply that the literacy coaching model is not effective in improving reading achievement in the short run.

It is important to recognize some qualifying factors that make this implication less certain. First, the implementation measures themselves are not perfect reflections of implementation at a school. On the teacher side, some of the teachers who got the most out of coaching may not have responded to the survey. On the principal side, it may be that many principals did not really know what coaches were doing, and so their responses may not have been good indicators of implementation. The items on the survey may also not have captured all the important aspects of implementation. Second, it is important to recognize that an intervention like literacy coaching has an indirect effect on student achievement. It works by helping teachers improve instruction, which is the primary school-based influence on student achievement. Even in schools where coaching was well implemented, teachers still have to change instruction. It may be that some teachers lack the ability or motivation to use the assistance provided by the coach to change practice. Third, and perhaps most importantly, coaching may take several years to have an impact. Teachers may require more than several months to perfect changes in instructional practice, and the coach in each school can only work intensively with a minority of teachers over a year. As the Phase 1 study found, many coaches had other duties during this period that further reduced the number of teachers they could work with on deep instructional change. This suggests that the impact of one year's coaching is not likely to show up strongly in the next year's value added. It may also be that a more intensive level of coaching may be needed to change reading instruction enough to measurably improve student achievement, more intensive even than in schools where the coaching role was implemented more closely to the intended model in 2005-06.

There are also some limitations in the value added measures we used for assessing coaching effectiveness. Value added estimates are not perfectly reliable or consistent from year to year. 'Noise' in the value-added measures may be greater than a single year's effect of coaching. Further, we had only reading value added to work with. Some schools may have implemented coaching well, but may have concentrated on other aspects of literacy which are not measured by the reading tests.

Year Two Study and Results

Based on the initial report provided in the spring of 2006 and follow up meetings within MPS, the district initiated several changes in the focus and structure of the Literacy Coach program for the 2006-2007 school year. Researchers at WCER were asked to carry out a second study to examine the implementation and impact of the changes starting in the fall of 2006. In the second year, the following research questions were examined:

1. How are the changes the district made to the program being implemented?
2. How are coaches carrying out their role in schools? Do coaching practices differ from those observed during the Phase 1 report?
3. What is the quality of Literacy Coaches' own learning opportunities?

4. What is the impact of the changes to the program on coaching activities and on literacy instruction?

Based on interviews with coaches, teachers, and principals in a sample of 14 schools and district-wide surveys administered to teachers, literacy coaches, and other school leaders, the following main findings were made:

How were the changes in the Literacy Coach program implemented?

Implementation of changes occurred through tightening role definitions, management reorganization, and refocused training for literacy coaches. District efforts to send a strong signal to principals and literacy coaches about the expected roles of the Literacy Coach appeared successful. Almost all principals and coaches interviewed articulated that the district wanted the position focused on classroom support of teachers and not unrelated administrative functions farther removed from literacy instructional assistance (e.g., test coordination or student supervision).

How are coaches carrying out their role in schools? Do coaching practices differ from those observed during the Phase 1 report?

Literacy coaches' activities described during interviews were more consistent with the intended position description. One-on-one classroom interactions between coaches and teachers were more common in several schools than found in the first year. In some cases, this finding was a result of coaches being relieved of test administration duties and being encouraged by literacy specialists and principals to get into the classroom more frequently. However, as evident in both interview and survey responses, there was substantial variation in the amount, nature of support, and perceived impact of interactions between coaches and teachers. Further, survey results again indicate that coaches generally spend less time coaching than specified by their official time appointment.

Literacy coaches do focus their efforts on literacy support, but their work extends well beyond literacy instruction, including mentoring beginning teachers, curriculum planning, grant administration, and professional development on general pedagogical strategies. In some instances, coaches appear to carry out activities more akin to Implementors or Learning Coordinators. This finding is not limited to those coaches that split time with these other formal positions.

What is the quality of Literacy Coaches' own learning opportunities?

Most coaches perceived formal district literacy coach training to be improved over prior years, helpful to their practice, and more coherent with the primary district instructional strategies. Principal training also emphasized these instructional strategies and discussion of conducting walkthroughs and designing school professional development around the strategies was commonly described by coaches and principals.

Literacy Coach training appears to have focused more on certain literacy coach responsibilities than others. Specifically, training helped coaches to focus their efforts on professional development related to literacy, curriculum alignment, and the Bloom's and Marzano strategies. However, evidence of training impact on how coaches observe, model and provide feedback on literacy instruction is less apparent. Establishing trust and gaining access to classrooms remains a persistent challenge for coaches.

Coaches' primary interactions with specialists occur during training, or via electronic communication. One communication vehicle, the literacy logs, was seen as improved from the format last year, but still not particularly useful to most coaches interviewed. School visits by specialists typically occurred about 3-4 times per year and in some cases, coaches reported not seeing their specialist at the school.

What is the impact of the changes to the program on coaching activities and on literacy instruction?

Teachers' answers to survey questions on the impact of their literacy coach on their instruction suggest that a great deal of variation exists in teachers' experiences working with coaches. Substantial percentages say

they have not been impacted at all, while similar percentages say they have been impacted. Findings from school visits were consistent with the survey results. We heard a number of examples of how coaches positively affected instructional practice by working directly with teachers or through professional development provided. However, some teachers reported rarely interacting with coaches and minimal impact. Teachers reporting minimal impact indicated that it was due to limited interaction, the subject matter they taught, the extent of their teaching experience, receptivity to classroom visits and feedback, or because they didn't think the coach had experience at their particular grade level or in bilingual education.

Other Findings

There was some uncertainty among literacy specialists about the viability of their roles. The organizational change in leadership and oversight of the program from the Division of Teaching and Learning to Leadership Support occurred after the start of the school year. This change led to some confusion as the training agenda had been set and resources available for specialist training and for photocopying of literacy coach training materials was no longer available. The organizational change occurred at a time when specialists believed they were well focused and tightly coordinated with the prior program manager.

Concerns continue to exist about the potential elimination of the Literacy Coach program. Teachers, principals, coaches, and some district leaders believed that the program could be terminated, despite their view that the program is having an impact. This impression appears to be influenced by perceptions of continual budget reductions and past experiences when other programs were unexpectedly eliminated even when some perceived that they were successful.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations were made:

- Coaches could benefit from more training on effective coaching practices. In particular, these could include training and support on gaining entry to teachers' classes, establishing trust, and observation and feedback techniques.
- Literacy specialists could also follow up with coaches to reinforce the training through more frequent observation and feedback. In order to free specialists to spend more time with coaches in schools, consideration might be given to reducing the number of schools assigned to each specialist by hiring additional specialists, or conducting some training during summer months, as was initially intended.
- Consideration could be given to establishing more concrete ways to support and hold schools accountable for effective coaching practices, including providing principals with training on effective uses of coaches during their professional development sessions, and making more explicit in the principal evaluation process the use of Literacy Coaches in schools.
- The aligning of human resource practices in support for the coaching role could be strengthened, particularly relating to performance evaluation, feedback and compensation. Literacy coaches are evaluated based on the teacher evaluation instrument, which is of limited relevance to their role and potential contributions. Similarly, performance evaluation and feedback provided to Literacy Specialists does not appear to strategically align to their roles and potential contribution. Although specialists receive a slight pay adjustment for their duties, literacy coaches remain on the same pay schedule as classroom teachers, despite reporting long hours and expanded work responsibilities. As suggested last year, the district could work to develop a differentiated pay plan commensurate with the role coaches play and assess whether the pay add-on provided to specialists is adequate for their role.