

*Strategic Alliances to Improve Instruction and Learning:
A PreK – 20 Partnership in Jackson, Mississippi*

Presentation Three:
The Ecology of School-Based Coaching in the MLI Initiative

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Introduction

The Mississippi Learning Institute (MLI) involves an academy of five schools in one Jackson Public School (JPS) district feeder pattern. The initiative provided professional development (PD) and coaching to teachers who worked in the MLI Academy (MLA) schools. During year 5 of the evaluation the Academy for Educational Development (AED) focused on the coaches at the request of MLI. Since school-based literacy coaches were the main vehicle for professional development, AED studied coaches to understand the ecology of PD.

School-based coaching: A Learning Theory Framework

Research shows that school-based coaching that is aligned with a school district's professional development plan has the potential to influence teacher learning, promote the likelihood that teachers will use that learning to nurture collegiality among fellow teachers and principals around instruction and general school improvement, and to possibly lead to a highly functional professional learning community. In other words, with school-based coaching it is possible to build instructional capacity among school based staff and beyond (Neufeld and Roper, 2003).

School based coaching theory purports that "professional development must be ongoing, deeply embedded in teachers' classroom work with children, specific to grade levels or academic content, and focused on research-based approaches" (Russo, 2004). MLI supports this learning theory, and AED's research findings show the complex ecology within which this coaching operated.

Methods and Data Sources

AED conducted coach interviews and surveys and observed coaching practices during school site visits. During year 5 of the evaluation AED added coach-shadowing visits and on-line surveys of the literacy coaches in MLA elementary schools.

Key research questions included:

- What is the MLI coach learning theory?
- Who are the coaches?
- How do coaches implement MLI's coach learning theory to support teachers?
- What factors have challenged and facilitated coaches' work?
- What changes in teacher practices occurred as a result of school based coaching?

Results

The study findings show that MLA schools had an increased level of instructional capacity, and thus school improvement, when MLI school-based coaching was implemented.

MLI Coach Learning Theory

The MLI Coach Learning Theory maintains that school-based coaching ensures proper implementation of research-based professional development and encourages change in teachers' daily instructional practices. Under the direction of the school principal and

supported by data analysis and observations, the coaches' work is designed specifically to meet the needs of the individual school and is most effective in that regard.

MLI Coach Profiles

Coach One

Coach one described her main goal as helping teachers understand the new curriculum requirements. This included providing PD in K-2 phonemic and phonological awareness, comprehension and vocabulary strategies, and use of small-group instruction, while correlating these to the new Mississippi Curriculum Framework. This coach modeled these practices, provided feedback to teachers in debriefing sessions, and visited classrooms to ensure proper implementation.

Coach Two

Coach two focused on three areas: to have “consistency” (that is, the same content coverage) across classes; to improve the school’s assessment practices; and to find more instructional strategies for teachers to improve rigor in the classroom. She described her plan specifically as to “introduce new reading strategies to teachers in order to maximize quality literacy instruction.” Strategies were to be introduced “periodically in the planning, delivery, and follow-up phases, each time looking at the impact of the strategies on student performance.”

Coach Three

Coach three focused on student preparation. During the final evaluation year, coach three concentrated on teachers in grades 2 and 3. Her plan included assisting teachers in developing rigorous lesson plans, creating assessments, and recording and analyzing data about student learning. She observed classrooms, modeling instruction and providing feedback. She developed a Tutor-Teacher Prescription Plan, which allowed teachers to pinpoint specific areas where students needed to improve. In turn, tutors used the prescription plan to customize skill-building exercises

Implementing the MLI Coach Learning Theory

Coaches did not work in isolation; rather they co-existed in various learning spheres (informal and formal). AED survey and observation results revealed that the majority of their work consisted of supporting classroom pedagogy and content. Supporting pedagogy entailed making classroom visits, modeling instruction, co-teaching, and providing feedback to teachers. Supporting content entailed reinforcing instruction of the five components of literacy, providing resources and tools, and working with teachers to plan and implement lessons.

Supports and Challenges of Coaching Work

Three factors most supported the work of the literacy coaches: the principal; other MLI coaches; and teacher buy-in. This means that administrators and peers had an influential

role in the ecology of coaching. Challenges posed included: lack of time to complete tasks; lack of access to outside resources to supplement the new curriculum and assessment requirements; and, lack of opportunity to stay abreast of current research and obtain high-quality national professional development.

Since the evaluation ended in 2008, MLI and school leaders have continued to seek remedies to address coaches' challenges. Setting goals to clearly define coaches' work while also coordinating training and sharing resources with JPS district content specialists have aided in meeting some of the challenges; however, challenges still exist in securing funding to provide PD to coaches on cutting-edge best practices.

Changes in Teacher Practice

According to AED's survey, all three coaches described teachers as implementing three major practices to a "great extent." These included applying data-driven decision making in their classes, transferring MLI PD into classroom practice, and sharing practices with one another. Specifically, coaches reported that teachers had developed more high-quality lesson plans and various standard-based assessments to identify student needs and help in developing effective instruction, such as small-group instruction and enrichment exercises. The changes reported in the coaches' survey results were reconfirmed in the evaluator's observations.

Significance

There are promising possibilities for replicating MLI's success, especially the positive impact of literacy coaches. The study shows evidence that higher student achievement occurred during the time coaches were in the schools. The relationships among coaches, teachers, and school partners were a successful ecology that helped to improve education outcomes.

REFERENCES

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