



“Coach” can mean many things: five categories of literacy coaches in Reading First



Institute of Education Sciences  
U.S. Department of Education



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Summary

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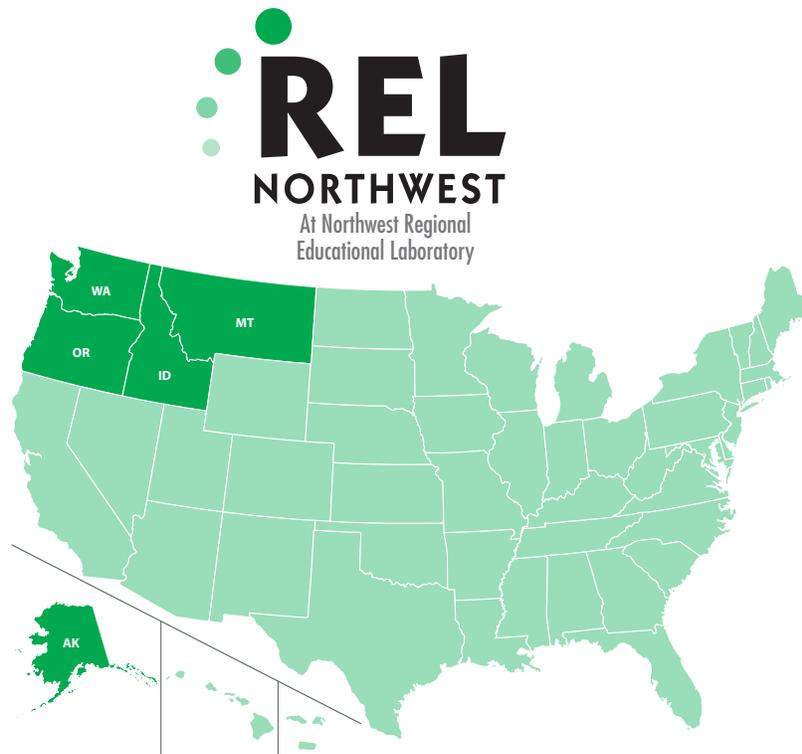
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## Summary

# “Coach” can mean many things: five categories of literacy coaches in Reading First

**Simply knowing that literacy coaches are in schools does not imply anything about how those individuals spend their time—there is a difference between being a coach and *doing coaching*.**

Coaching has been heralded as an opportunity to provide professional development that is job-embedded, ongoing, directly related to the challenges teachers face in the classroom each day, and provided by people familiar with the context of the teachers’ work. Coaches—used in a variety of content areas but most commonly in literacy instruction—are often skilled teachers who step out of their classrooms to help other teachers become more thoughtful and more effective in their instruction. They work side-by-side with teachers in the classroom, observing, modeling, providing feedback, and planning lessons according to the needs and goals of individual teachers. At least in theory, this approach should address all the criteria of high-quality teacher professional development.

So tantalizing is the promise of coaching that in recent years states, districts, and schools across the nation, eager for a means to

strengthen instruction and student learning, have rushed to implement literacy coaching (Russo, 2004).

Because the expansion of coaching has occurred so quickly, federal, state, and local policymakers and practitioners who have little data about the effectiveness and impact of coaching must decide whether to use literacy coaches. Before the impact of coaching on student achievement can be demonstrated, however, educators need a clear picture of the qualifications and backgrounds of the people who become coaches and a description of what coaches actually do once they are in a coaching position.

This report begins to develop this picture with data from and about coaches in Reading First—a federal project to improve reading outcomes for K-3 students in 5,200 low-performing elementary schools across the nation. In the five western states for which data were available (Alaska, Arizona, Montana, Washington, and Wyoming), we found that coaches were mostly experienced teachers who were relatively inexperienced in the coaching role. We also found that the reality of how coaches

perform their jobs was more complex and varied than anticipated. In three of the five states, Reading First coaches were explicitly asked to spend 60 to 80 percent of their time in the classroom with teachers or working with teachers directly on their instruction. While coaches dedicated long hours to their jobs, they spent on average only 28 percent of their time working with teachers. This difference between the expectation of how coaches spend their time and the reality of their work has also appeared in other studies of coaching and is not unique to Reading First (Rollers, 2006; Bean and Zigmond, 2006; Knight, 2006).

Although all coaches juggled multiple responsibilities and for the most part performed the same tasks, how they allocated their time across tasks and how they understood and described the focus of their work varied widely across individuals and settings. Utilizing both a cluster analysis of survey data and a qualitative analysis of interviews, we distinguished five categories of coaches: data-oriented, student-oriented, managerial, and two teacher-oriented categories—one that

works largely with individual teachers and another that works with groups. It may be that other types of coaches also exist in other projects and settings. What we consider most important is that people who held the same job defined and performed their work in very different ways.

Contrary to expectations, the prior education and experience of coaches did not predict which coach category they belonged to. Nor did school size predict how coaches performed their jobs. What our analyses did reveal, however, was the significant relationship between the state in which a coach worked and the prevalence of particular coach categories. This relationship suggests that state guidance to Reading First schools and coaches contributed significantly to how coaches worked. Thus states, or any agency implementing educational initiatives using coaches, have both a great deal of responsibility and a great opportunity to influence what type of coach they employ to work in their schools and districts.

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