



Essential Coaching Practices for Elementary Literacy

This document was developed by the **Early Literacy Task Force**, a subcommittee of the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators (MAISA) General Education Leadership Network (GELN), which represents Michigan's 56 Intermediate School Districts. For a full list of representatives, please see the back page.



COACHING PRACTICES

This document is intended to be partnered with *Essential Instructional Practices in Early Literacy: Prekindergarten* and *Essential Instructional Practices in Early Literacy: K to 3* as well as *Essential School-Wide and Center-Wide Practices in Literacy*.

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to increase Michigan's capacity to improve children's literacy by identifying a small set of research-supported literacy coaching practices that should be a focus of professional development throughout the state. Literacy coaching can provide powerful job-embedded, ongoing professional development with a primary goal of enhancing classroom literacy instruction through improving teacher expertise.¹ Effective literacy coaching supports teachers to successfully navigate the daily challenges they face in their classrooms. As a result, instructional capacity and sustainability within the schools increases.² In addition, through improving teacher expertise and the quality of core instruction, student achievement increases.³

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The focus of this document is to identify the critical qualifications, dispositions, activities, and roles of effective elementary literacy coaches. Research suggests that each of the seven essentials is an important contributor to literacy coaching that results in increased student literacy learning. They should be viewed, as in practice guides in medicine, as presenting minimum expectations for Michigan’s literacy coaches.

1. Effective literacy coaches have specialized literacy knowledge and skills beyond that of initial teacher preparation.⁴

Literacy coaches, due to the complexity of literacy instruction, must:

- have an in-depth knowledge of reading and writing processes and acquisition⁵
- recognize the varied purposes for assessment (e.g., screening, diagnostic, monitoring progress, achievement), select specific assessments that meet those purposes, administer and score assessments, and use assessment results to inform instruction⁶
- know and appropriately use research-informed instructional practices to help all students develop literacy knowledge, skills, and abilities including concepts of print, phonemic awareness, letter-sound knowledge, word reading, comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, writing, critical thinking, and motivation⁷
- be able to create a literate learning environment that considers how the physical arrangement, materials, group work, routines, and motivational factors such as choice and purpose contribute to learning in today’s diverse classrooms⁸

Literacy coaches develop in-depth literacy knowledge and skills⁹ by:

- completing advanced course work in literacy that results in a reading teacher or reading or literacy specialist endorsement
- having successful classroom teaching experience as evidenced by positive student learning
- continually updating their knowledge through professional reading, active participation in professional development workshops, and attendance at local, state, and national professional conferences

Teachers report that literacy coaches need advanced

literacy knowledge and skills in order to carry out their responsibilities such as modeling research-informed literacy practices, helping teachers analyze assessment data and solve instructional problems, and recommending appropriate materials and resources.¹⁰

When literacy coaches have completed advanced course work in literacy and been successful classroom teachers, students of teachers they coached exhibited more literacy growth than students of teachers coached by literacy coaches who had not completed advanced course work in literacy.¹¹

2. Effective literacy coaches apply adult learning principles in their work.^{1, 2, 13, 14}

Effective literacy coaches also have specialized knowledge about adult learning principles, and they apply those principles when working with teachers.

- Adults are most interested in learning when it has immediate relevance to their job. Thus, the focus of literacy coaching should be on classroom instructional practices that foster literacy development.
- Adults want to be actively involved in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of their learning. Thus, effective literacy coaches work with teachers to develop goals and methods for addressing and assessing those goals.
- Adults learn from reflecting on the problems that arise during the implementation of new knowledge/skills. Thus, effective literacy coaches guide teachers to reflect deeply on their practice and on the results of implementing new strategies with their learners.
- Adults learn best when they can integrate new knowledge and skills with previous experiences. Thus, effective literacy coaches help teachers understand how new concepts and strategies are similar and different from concepts they know and strategies they are currently learning.

3. Whether working with large groups, small groups, or individual teachers, effective literacy coaches demonstrate specific skills and dispositions in order to engage teachers and build collaborative relationships.¹⁵

Effective literacy coaches:

- use a variety of strategies to establish rapport and trust as the initial steps in building collaborative relationships (e.g., one-on-one conversations about teaching or student learning in general, attending grade level/team meetings as an interested listener/learner, finding specific resources/materials for a teacher)¹⁶
- strive to determine the underlying beliefs about literacy of the teachers with whom they are working in order to develop collaborative relationships¹⁷
- use language when engaging in conversations with teachers that is encouraging and supportive, not evaluative¹⁸
- position themselves as co-learners¹⁹ and/or facilitators of teacher learning²⁰
- are intentional, collaborating with teachers to set specific goals for their work with a respect for teachers' time and expertise. However, literacy coaches also demonstrate flexibility by being open to conversations and questions as they arise—conversations and questions that may lead to more intentional coaching.²¹
- are reflective—regarding their demonstration teaching, their observations of teacher's instruction, and the conversations they have with teachers²²

4. Literacy coaching is most effective when it is done within a multi-year school-wide or district-wide initiative focused on student learning and is supported by building and district administrators.

Research results indicate that initiatives, including those that involve a literacy coaching component²³, may require three to five years to show impact on student learning.²⁴

Support from building and district administrators is evidenced in various ways.

- Teacher participation in activities with the coach is higher when principals:²⁵
 - present the coaches as sources of literacy expertise
 - actively participate in the professional development sessions designed for coaches and administrators as well as in activities facilitated by

the coaches (e.g., modeling instruction, conferring with teachers)²⁶

- exhibit respect for the coaches as valued professionals
 - give coaches autonomy over their schedules
- Principals support coaches by:²⁷
 - presenting them as sources of literacy expertise to the teachers
 - clearly describing and endorsing the coaching foci to the teachers
 - explicitly encouraging teachers to work with their coach
 - observing their work with teachers
 - explicitly communicating to them personally how much their work is valued²⁸

5. Effective literacy coaches spend most of their time working with teachers to enhance teacher practice and improve student learning. They make effective use of their time by using a multi-faceted approach to coaching.

Effective literacy coaches:

- Spend time working directly with teachers, helping teachers to align their beliefs with research-informed instructional practices and enhance their:
 - classroom literacy environments²⁹
 - use of research-informed literacy strategies³⁰
 - implementation of new literacy programs and strategies³¹
 - use of practices aligned with state standards or curricular initiatives³²
- Schedule their time so that they are spending as much time as possible working directly with teachers because more coaching with teachers has been associated with higher student achievement at both the school³³ and coach³⁴ level.
- Spend more time interacting with teachers by using a multi-faceted approach to coaching, carefully determining what types of coaching can be done effectively with large groups, small groups, and individual teachers.³⁵
- Consistently monitor the amount of time they spend working with teachers. Time spent on managerial tasks (e.g., maintaining an assessment database, ordering materials) or attending meetings not directly related to their coaching work reduces the time spent addressing literacy initiatives and lowers teachers' perceptions about how helpful coaches are.³⁶

6. When coaching individual teachers, effective literacy coaches employ a core set of coaching activities that are predictors of student literacy growth at one or more grade levels.³⁷

Conferencing. Coaches and teachers hold one-on-one conferences for numerous purposes³⁸, including the following:

- to determine specific purposes for collaborations between the literacy coach and the teacher
- to analyze the critical instructional elements and benefits of a lesson taught by the coach to demonstrate a specific strategy or scaffolding technique
- to analyze the critical instructional elements and benefits of a lesson taught by the teacher
- to examine and select appropriate texts and materials for specific lessons and/or students
- to evaluate and make changes to the literacy environment of the classroom
- to discuss assessment results to determine instructional needs and plan instruction for the whole class, small groups of students, and individual students, particularly when the teacher is concerned about the progress of one or more students³⁹

Modeling. Coaches engage in modeling for numerous purposes, including the following⁴⁰:

- to enable teachers to learn how instructional practices work with their own students, giving them confidence to implement these practices
- to demonstrate how appropriate pacing, scaffolding, and materials contribute to students' engagement and learning
- to provide teachers with opportunities to observe and document students' literacy behaviors and response to instruction
- to demonstrate how to administer assessments and use data to inform instruction

Observing. Coaches engage in observation for numerous purposes, determined in collaboration with teachers⁴¹, including the following:

- to observe and document specific literacy behaviors of students whose progress is of concern to the teacher
- to observe how literacy instructional practices are

being implemented across the school to inform future professional development efforts at the school, grade, or individual teacher level

- to observe a teacher's instruction in order to provide support related to various aspects of instruction (e.g., planning, scaffolding, pacing, selecting materials, grouping, assessing progress toward instructional objectives)

Co-planning. Coaches and teachers co-plan⁴² instruction in order to:

- help build collaborative relationships as both coach and teacher are seen as important contributors to the process
- ensure that instructional planning includes delineating learner outcomes, selecting appropriate practices, determining grouping options, and developing outcome-based assessment
- inform additional support from the coach which may include modeling, co-teaching, and/or observation of the co-planned instruction
- use assessment data to meet the instructional needs of students

7. Effective literacy coaches are integral members of literacy leadership teams at the school and/or district level.⁴³

Literacy coaches serve as literacy leaders within their schools⁴⁴ by:

- providing grade/team-level professional development
- collaborating with special educators about literacy instruction for students who have special needs⁴⁵
- serving on school committees that focus on literacy-related and student achievement issues, including being a member of the intervention and student support teams⁴⁶
- working with administrators and other teachers to establish a school-wide literacy vision and to develop/refine and manage the school's literacy program
- analyzing data and helping teachers use the data to make decisions⁴⁷
- serving as a liaison between the district and their schools by attending district-level meetings/workshops and sharing the information with the appropriate stakeholders (e.g., administrators, teachers, support personnel)

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Process for Development and Review

This document was developed by the Early Literacy Task Force, a subcommittee of the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators (MAISA) General Education Leadership Network (GELN), which represents Michigan's 56 Intermediate School Districts. The Task Force included representatives from the following organizations, although their participation does not necessarily indicate endorsement by the organization they represent:

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| Early Childhood Administrators' Network, MAISA | Michigan Reading Association |
| English Language Arts Leadership Network, MAISA | Michigan State University |
| General Education Leadership Network, MAISA | Michigan Virtual University |
| Kalamazoo Public Schools | Reading NOW Network |
| Michigan Association for Computer Users in Learning | REMC Association of Michigan |
| Michigan Association of Supervisors of Special Education | Southwest Michigan Reading Council |
| Michigan Department of Education | Technology Readiness Infrastructure Grant |
| Michigan Elementary and Middle School Principals Association | University of Michigan |
| Michigan's Integrated Behavior and Learning Support Initiative | |

Feedback on drafts of the document was elicited from other stakeholders, resulting in a number of revisions to the document.

Essential Coaching Practices for Elementary Literacy

