

The New Drill

Grace Rubenstein

On-site coaches focus on teachers, not students, in the battle to boost literacy.

Janet Fortier had her educational epiphany two years ago, when she started bumping into teachers with their arms full of easy reading assignments. "I'm running off articles because my kids can't read the textbook," they told her.

Fortier, who became a literacy specialist in the Beaverton School District, in Beaverton, Oregon, and coordinator of the district's coaching program, suddenly realized, "We can't move forward with anything, because literacy is the key to success in all their classes."

To halt the tide of students proceeding through secondary school with meager reading skills, Fortier encouraged district administrators to place a full-time literacy coach in each of the sprawling suburb's fifteen middle schools and high schools last fall. More than a dozen new paychecks might seem like a hefty investment, but Beaverton felt it was essential. Says Fortier, "We just can't lose any more kids."

Fortier and her colleagues in Beaverton's secondary schools are on the leading edge of a phenomenon that's gaining steam in secondary schools across the country: They are hiring reading specialists who coach teachers, not students. The coach's role varies from place to place, but the basic challenge is the same—students get little, if any, reading instruction from fourth grade on, though the texts and other content they're expected to absorb become more and more complex. Teachers who specialize in science, social studies, math, or literature are neither trained nor inclined to teach reading skills, so students hack their way through dense, conceptual texts alone. Learning suffers, and teens graduate from high school without the sophisticated literacy skills that are necessary to make a living in our high-tech, postindustrial world.

Rather than shunt hundreds or thousands of adolescents into reading classes, a growing number of schools fill the gap in instruction more systemically. They're hiring literacy coaches to help content-area teachers—science and math wonks included—weave literacy instruction into everyday lessons.

At Beaverton's Sunset High School, coaches Robin Kobrowski and Tricia Hasbrook work one-on-

one with a set of teachers for three weeks before rotating to the next group. They model strategies for teaching literacy skills, help create lesson plans, and visit classrooms to watch those plans in action and assess how well they work. They also organize staff-development workshops for the entire faculty.

Science teacher Greg Pillette's coaching session led him to try a new approach to reading assignments last fall. Before giving text to his freshman Science Inquiry students, he went over definitions of key terms they would encounter, such as "chemical reaction" and "the law of conservation of mass." As students paired up and tried to put the definitions in their own terms, Pillette circulated the room, encouraging them to use words that made sense to them and would help them remember the meaning. The "atoms, elements, or molecules" in a chemical reaction became "parts" or "stuff." Chemical "interaction" became "mix." To reinforce the lesson, Pillette asked the students to draw an image of each vocabulary word while they read at home.

It was a science course, not a literacy class, but the kids were practicing skills for successful reading.

With other teachers, the Sunset coaches have worked on note-taking techniques to pinpoint essential themes, self-questioning strategies to analyze the text, and a favorite weapon in the literacy coach's arsenal: "read aloud/think aloud." In the latter strategy—which Hasbrook admits has been difficult for some teachers to model—the instructor reads a passage aloud and comments on it. She might say, "I'm not sure what this word means, but maybe the definition is in the next sentence," or "This description of exothermic reactions reminds me of the time when I accidentally blew up my stove." The idea, Hasbrook says, is to "convince teachers that every kid in this building is a struggling reader."

Beaverton began its literacy coaching in elementary schools but expanded to upper grades partly because teachers for several years had seen their students reading less and struggling with comprehension, Fortier says. Facing comparable problems, other schools made the same choice. The State of Alabama, confronted with data showing that only one in three students could read at grade level,

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launched a massive reading initiative in 1998 with literacy coaches as a key component.

In 2004, Florida earmarked \$16.7 million to provide coaches for more than two-thirds of the state's middle schools. Just last year, the Annenberg Foundation granted \$31 million over three years to train new literacy and math coaches in Pennsylvania. And Market Data Retrieval, a Connecticut-based company that maintains educator registries, saw the number of people on its "literacy/reading coach" list shoot up to 2,237 in the first year after the category debuted in 2004. Of the coaches listed, 341 are at secondary schools.

The concept isn't as new as this flurry of investment would indicate. As early as the 1920s, literacy educators were recommending that middle school and high school teachers help their students with reading and study skills, says Elizabeth G. Sturtevant, associate professor and coordinator of the literacy program at George Mason University's graduate school of education.

Sturtevant wrote a 2003 report for the Alliance for Excellent Education advocating literacy coaches in secondary schools. Some reading specialists in decades past did help teachers, though many worked solely with students, she says; what's different about modern coaching is its primary focus on teaching teachers, not students.

The buzz began with the Reading Excellence Act of 1998 and grew in 2002 with Reading First, an offshoot of the *No Child Left Behind* Act, says Cathy Roller, director of research and policy at the International Reading Association and a contributor to the recently published IRA standards for secondary school literacy coaches. The two acts injected billions of dollars into primary literacy initiatives, and coaching became one of the most widely chosen uses for the federal money, Roller says. Now the idea is spreading into secondary schools.

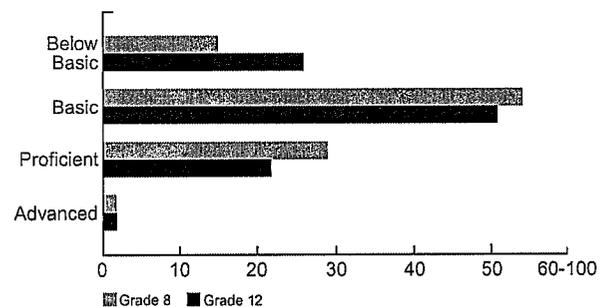
NCLB-era vigilance about test scores also spotlighted the needs of adolescent readers, Sturtevant says. The concern isn't about simply reading words off a page, which Roller says almost all middle school and high school kids can do; it's about students deeply understanding what they read, and using reading to access complex information. If they can't do that, she notes, it's hard for them to succeed in any class.

From school to school, the role and qualifications of the person called the literacy coach or the reading coach varies widely. The key elements, the IRA standards say, are that coaches be skilled in both literacy instruction and working collaboratively with other adults. A critical piece, adds James M. McPartland, director of Johns Hopkins University's Center for the Social Organization of Schools, is that the coach be seen not as a part of the teacher-evaluation process, but as a "confidential colleague" who can be trusted.

"You need someone who understands middle school and high school teachers and is accepted by them," Sturtevant says. "Usually, that's someone who has been a middle school and high school teacher." Since people with all those traits are in short supply, many administrators—such as those in Beaverton and Alabama—are hiring seasoned, respected teachers and training them in literacy.

In Beaverton, educators found that implementing a coaching program can be bumpy, but worthwhile.

2002 Writing-Achievement Levels in Grades 8 and 12 (percentage)



In other words:

- About 68 percent of grade 8 students and 64 percent of grade 12 students are reading below the proficient level.
- About 69 percent of grade 8 students and 77 percent of grade 12 students are writing below the proficient level.
- Less than 6 percent of students in Grades 8 and 12 performed at the advanced level in reading.
- About 2 percent of students in Grades 8 and 12 performed at the advanced level in writing.

Note: Categories indicate the degree of mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills fundamental for proficient work at each grade, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress: Below Basic—Less than partial mastery; Basic—partial mastery; Proficient—solid performance; Advanced—superior performance.

Source:

National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education

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“Suddenly, everybody understands what literacy is and what things need to be done to promote literacy,” Fortier says.

Kristi Miller, a Sunset chemistry teacher, says that her work with Kobrowski helps her focus students on key points in her lessons, though it does take precious time to plan. She suspected kids would find some of the strategies—such as drawing pictures of a vocabulary word such as “slathering”—too silly or hokey, but they’ve gone along with it.

A major challenge lies in convincing more skeptical teachers to change methods they may have used for decades, literacy coaches say. The other big hurdle in coaching is cost. Having a coach means paying an additional full-time salary, typically at the same level as a teacher.

How much bang do schools get for that buck? The effectiveness of literacy coaches is largely untested, but the coaching model and the reading techniques being used are backed up by extensive research, say Roller, Sturtevant, and others. They cite multiple studies showing that drop-in staff development doesn’t stick, while long-term training that’s embedded in a teacher’s everyday work does. “This is not just some sort of harebrained scheme,” Roller says. “It’s based on good, solid research, and there’s a lot of reason to believe that it will be effective.”

It’s still too early to see what broad effects the program may have at Sunset, where the coaches have worked with just a handful of the 120 or so teachers. But in Alabama, Melvina Phillips has a much longer perspective. The Walden University instructor was assistant principal and later principal at one of the first sixteen schools to join the state reading initiative. After a two-week summer training for the staff, Phillips recalls, “we came back to our school and we all had these huge notebooks filled with literacy strategies, and we all sort of looked at each other and said, ‘Okay, now what?’” A well-liked language arts teacher started coaching half time, and the school adopted a block schedule and instituted yearlong language and math blocks.

Within two years, Phillips says, Stanford Achievement Test scores at Discovery Middle School, in Madison, Alabama, jumped 5 to 10 percentile points in reading, and more so in the content areas. The number of disciplinary actions dropped from 681 to 127

in the first year, and referrals to special education went down by more than 20 percent. When Phillips walked around the building, she saw students more engaged in class than before. Without coaching, she says, “we would have gone to that training that we attended over the summer and put those notebooks up on the shelf, and maybe used one or two of those strategies.”

More broadly, schools participating in the reading initiative have outperformed other Alabama schools on standardized tests since the project began, state officials say. “We’re seeing some eyes opened,” says Reeda Betts, the initiative’s reading specialist for secondary schools. “Our schools are slowly turning around and seeing that you can’t teach the old way. They’re also looking at their assessments more than they ever have. Teachers are beginning to get into each other’s classrooms and talk about strategies.”

Betts cautions, however, that the change is slow. “I have been in a school where you walk in a room, the projector light goes on, the overhead light goes off, students take notes for fifty minutes, and the bell rings,” she says—and those habits are hard to break, especially with teachers struggling to cover the reams of content students must know for state tests.

For now, skeptical teachers have to take the promise of coaching, to some degree, on faith. McPartland, of Johns Hopkins, has one study under way with the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. He’s comparing teachers who receive training through a workshop alone, a workshop and printed lessons, or both methods plus a coach. The study has three years to go, but he says early observation suggests the coach is key. Despite the need for more research, McPartland and other advocates agree that they’re sold on coaching.

McPartland’s Talent Development High School model, adopted by eighty-five schools, includes targeted math and literacy programs with peer coaches. He has seen early evidence that the program can boost many students’ reading by two grade levels a year and calls coaching “not just a nice add-on; it’s fundamental for many teachers.”

Phillips, now a consultant to the Alabama Reading Initiative, made coaching a key element in her report last October for the National Association of Secondary School Principals on creating a “culture of

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How-To: Reading-Comprehension Strategies for Adolescents

1. **Brainstorming prior knowledge:** The class collectively identifies what they already know about a topic before reading.
2. **Vocabulary frontloading:** The teacher goes over critical and difficult vocabulary before reading. Students may rephrase definitions in their own words.
3. **Visual representation:** Students draw images of key words or concepts.
4. **Read aloud/think aloud:** The teacher reads a passage aloud and pauses to explain her own thought processes while reading. Teacher modeling may be useful for other comprehension strategies as well.
5. **Paired reading:** Students read aloud, identify key points, and process the text together in pairs.
6. **Leveled questioning:** Students ask themselves questions about the text that require increasing levels of inference, from identifying basic facts to linking themes together to finding connections between the text and their real-world experiences.
7. **Structured note taking:** An example is Cornell Note-Taking, in which students divide a page into two columns, writing key words or questions in one column and the definitions or answers adjacently in another.
8. **Using text structure:** Students learn to take cues about themes or meaning from elements other than the text itself, such as chapter headings or illustrations.
9. **Predicting:** The class predicts what happens next in a story or what lesson comes next in an informational text.
10. **Assessing the author's purpose:** Students learn to identify fact versus opinion and identify what effect the author is trying to achieve.
11. **Summarizing text:** Students summarize the main points of what they've read.
12. **Group discussion:** This is most effective when framed around critical questions for comprehension, such as analyses of cause and effect or symbolism, rather than simply, "Did you like it?"
13. **Self-selected reading:** The teacher provides time for students to read text of their own choosing, selected from a library of material that is of high interest and appropriate to differing skill levels to avoid frustration. The purpose here is practice and fun.

Sources: Janet Fortier, Robin Kobrowski, and Tricia Hasbrook of the Beaverton School District; Melvina Phillips of the Alabama Reading Initiative; and James M. McPartland of Johns Hopkins University.

literacy." That's because in all the schools she's seen—and there are hundreds—those that have successfully targeted adolescent literacy used coaches as a crux of the program.

Phillips emphasizes, however, that coaching alone is no cure-all for secondary schools' woes. Successful schools must also modify their schedules and reserve more time for literacy instruction, she says. The Talent Development high schools beef up their English classes to ninety minutes a day. "That's why I talk about a culture of literacy, because it's not one thing, but many things, coming together," Phillips says. "Coaches are an important piece, but just because you hire a coach doesn't mean things are going to change."