

## 1

# Fail-Safe Literacy Coaching

*Most successful people can identify a coach, mentor, or other influential person who challenged them to accomplish more than they had thought possible. The standing joke in administrator meetings is how common the first name Coach is, but the fact is that an effective coach who inspires extraordinary performance from ordinary people is a model of strategic leadership. A successful coach does not offer universal praise or condemnation but instead specific feedback. He is unequivocally clear about the mission and objectives and is, above all, a great teacher who identifies each step that takes the team from vision through execution to success.*

(Reeves, 2002, p. 170)

**W**e have found that the literacy coach is the key to positive change in a school or district that has determined that literacy learning is the priority. We worked together—the authors; elementary, middle, and high school faculty; staff; and administration in Lake County Public Schools—from inception of the literacy coach concept, to implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of literacy coaches' impact. The district's literacy plan includes the recommendation of the literacy coach position in each school and is called *Just Read, Lake!* (Lake County Schools, 2003).

Literacy coaches may be school based or district based. They support elementary teachers in day-to-day core reading instruction, teachers who provide literacy intervention, and those who teach other areas. At the middle and high school levels, the literacy coach supports the reading teacher, intervention teachers, and those who teach content curriculum with literacy infusion. Our research and practical application of effectively

## 2 ● Literacy Coaching

implementing the literacy coach position to improve student achievement is captured in the chapters that follow.

### DEFINING LITERACY

Before we can discuss the concept of literacy coach, we must explain what we mean by literacy. Rose has facilitated the process of defining literacy with many groups of professionals throughout the country representing all grade levels. The definition is always similar and generally incorporates the processes of literacy (reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, thinking), but literacy is typically measured as reading and writing. The fail-safe definition of literacy is used for the purpose of this text. *Fail-safe literacy* is defined as listening, viewing, thinking, speaking, reading, writing, and expressing through multiple symbol systems at a developmentally appropriate level.

Most of the literacy processes develop together. Oral language (speaking) develops before print language through viewing, listening, thinking, and multiple symbol systems. Once oral language develops, children begin to make sense of the language patterns and ideally associate oral language with print or make sound-symbol relationships. They begin to understand that words are made of segments or phonemes that when put together have meaning. This is how reading begins. Those who experience improvements in reading and writing know that they develop together, not separately. The term *multiple symbol systems* refers to nonalphabetic communication such as music, art, movement, charts, maps, graphs, mathematical and scientific symbols, and all other communication methods. Multiple symbol systems are included in the fail-safe definition of literacy because we believe that literacy is developed through various experiences; and reading comprehension is measured with charts, maps, and graphs as well as in paragraphs. When the fail-safe literacy definition is used to drive instruction, teachers in elementary, middle, and high schools observe improvements in reading, writing, and content learning.

### FAIL-SAFE LITERACY POINT OF VIEW

Although literacy-related instruction has a continually developing research base, we are not going to address the research in detail. We will only provide a brief fail-safe literacy point of view so the reader will have a context for scenarios and examples that appear in the text. As the definition suggests, literacy learning is a synergistic experience that occurs with print. In other words, literacy is thinking with print. To provide students

**Table 1.1** Nonnegotiable Expectations of Daily Practice

- 
- Teachers provide phonological awareness instruction for grades K-1 and any other students without mastery.
  - Teachers create print and literacy rich K-12 classrooms.
  - Teachers read grade-level texts to and with students K-12, both fiction and nonfiction.
  - Teachers teach, model, and practice strategies of expert K-12 readers before, during, and after reading.
  - Students should have accountable independent reading for a minimum of 20 minutes per day for Grades 1-5 and Grades 6-12, at least for those reading below grade level.
- 

optimal experiences to develop literacy achievement, measured predominately through reading and writing, we support daily instructional expectations on the part of every teacher in a school. It is understood that the nonnegotiable expectations of daily practice are applied in developmentally appropriate ways for students in different grade levels. When present in every classroom every day, the expectations identified in Table 1.1 result in positive changes in student achievement measured as reading, writing, and content learning.

The first four nonnegotiable expectations of daily practice are where teachers provide direct instruction on reading skills; or an environment that supports phonological awareness, fluency, vocabulary development, and comprehension of text; or direct instruction and modeling of strategies. The last nonnegotiable expectation of daily practice, accountable independent reading, is when the students apply what the teachers have taught them by reading a book of their choice on their independent reading level, being held accountable for doing so, and having their growth monitored. It is worth noting that we believe all students should have accountable independent reading for at least 20 minutes per day but acknowledge that it is more difficult to schedule in Grades 7-12, and most students who read on grade level at that point are continuing to read if their school has a culture of literacy.

During the instructional experiences using the nonnegotiable expectations of daily practice, teachers are addressing the elements of reading: phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). By ensuring the nonnegotiable expectations of daily practice, teachers will address the elements of reading; each day they strive to improve phonological awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension of text across all grade levels and in all content areas. These nonnegotiable expectations of daily practice are supported by Wilson and Protheroe

## 4 ● Literacy Coaching

(2004), Protheroe, Shellard, and Turner (2004), and Biancarosa and Snow (2004). These nonnegotiable expectations of daily practice not only are for all teachers, who provide assurance that elementary students learn to read; but they are also for middle and high school students, who have equal access to their content curriculum while learning vocabulary and developing fluency and comprehension of their content texts. These nonnegotiable expectations of daily practice accomplish two important objectives:

1. They improve literacy by addressing the five elements of reading. (See Table 1.2.)
2. They provide access to and comprehension of on-grade-level content texts—thus improving content learning.

If you would like to know more about the fail-safe point of view of literacy, you may want to read *The K–12 Literacy Leadership Fieldbook* (Taylor & Gunter, 2005) and *Literacy Leadership for Grades 5–12* (Taylor & Collins, 2003).

## LITERACY COACH

Teachers helping teachers is an informal collaborative approach that has probably been around since the first schools. Recent legislation at the state and national levels, designed to increase student achievement, has brought the *literacy coaching* model to the forefront as a method to assist teachers in improving literacy and learning in all content areas. Coaching support ranges from assisting primary teachers who teach the most basic phonemic awareness to supporting high school teachers with implementation of literacy strategies in all content areas for both struggling and excelling readers. There are questions to be answered before the literacy coach concept can be implemented:

- What is a literacy coach?
- What is literacy coaching?
- How does literacy coaching differ for elementary, middle, and high schools?
- Who is coached and how?
- What are the literacy coach's roles and responsibilities?
- What does the literacy coach need to do before coaching?
- How does the literacy coach ensure effective professional development?
- How can the literacy coach develop relationships with faculty, administrators, staff, and families?
- How will the literacy coach's impact be evaluated?

**Table 1.2** Five Reading Elements

<i>Element</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Example</i>
Phonemic Awareness	The ability to hear, identify, and manipulate the individual sounds in spoken words. It is part of phonological awareness.	A child can speak, repeat, and use different words and sounds. He or she learns patterns in speech and repeat those, although sometimes grammatically incorrect, like think, thunk.
Phonics	Understanding the relationship between the letters and the spoken sounds.	A child understands that letters and combinations of letters make specific sounds.
Fluency	Orally reading with appropriate rate, expression, and phrasing.	A child picks up a book and reads it as if in a conversation, with automaticity.
Vocabulary	Words for effective communication when listening, speaking, reading, and writing.	A child knows the words in a passage and the words' meanings without having to struggle.
Comprehension	Understanding the meaning of print.	A child is a fluent reader, knows the vocabulary, and can put in his or her own words what the passage is about.

Based on Taylor, R. T., & Gunter, G. A., p. 18. Used with permission.

Taylor, R. T., & Gunter, G. A. (2005). *The K-12 Literacy Leadership Fieldbook*, p. 18.

We offer time-tested, practical answers to these and other literacy coaching questions to help the reader successfully implement literacy coaching to improve literacy achievement.

## REFLECTION

In this chapter, we have provided background knowledge on the fail-safe literacy point of view and an introduction to our literacy coaching perspective. The remaining chapters provide guidance for prospective literacy coaches and those working with literacy coaches on what they need to know and how to acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that will ensure their success. Chapter 2 details the roles and responsibilities of literacy coaches; Chapters 3 and 4 encourage the literacy coach to

## 6 ● Literacy Coaching

prepare well before beginning coaching. Building the literacy team and capacity for success is discussed in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 focuses on data study, using data to inform instruction and monitor growth. Because of the critical nature of intensive reading intervention for the neediest students, Chapter 7 is devoted to the literacy coach's role with the associated teachers and students. Professional development is typically the initial focus of literacy coaches, so Chapter 8 provides practical guidance in getting started successfully. Finally, Chapter 9 provides tips for continued success in the role of literacy coach.

**TERMS TO REMEMBER**

*Fail-safe literacy:* Systematic literacy learning that ensures success in reading, writing, and content learning; includes the processes of reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and communicating with multiple symbol systems.

*Elements of reading:* Phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension.

*Nonnegotiable expectations of daily practice:* Daily expectations of all classrooms Grades K–12, core reading, intervention, and content curriculum classes.