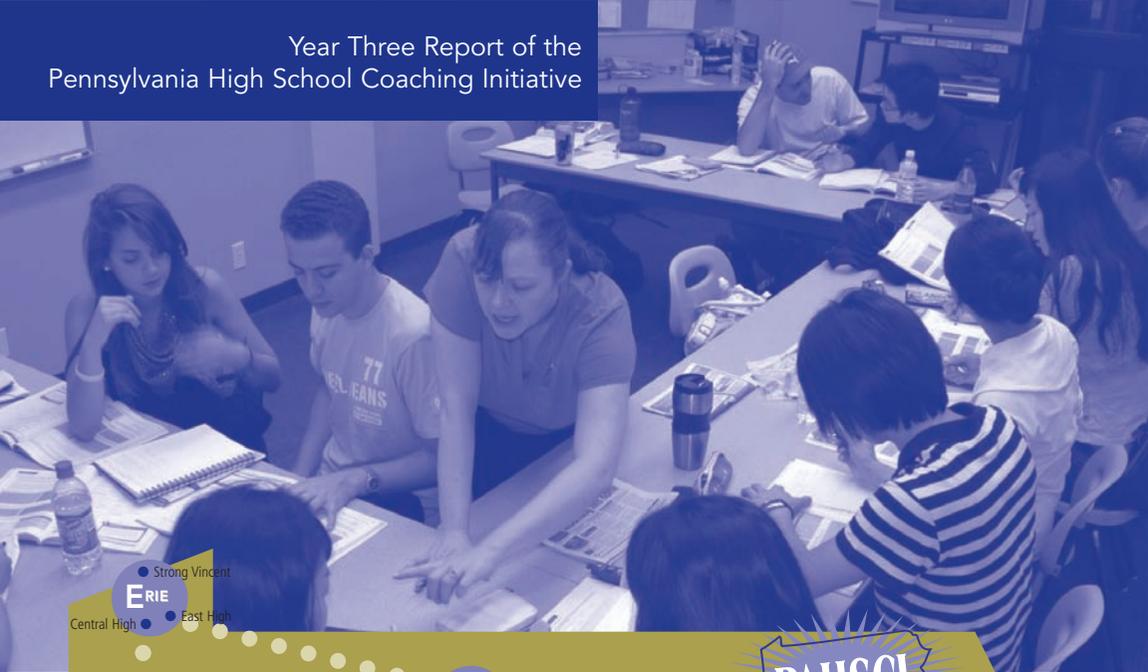


# Links to Learning and Sustainability

Year Three Report of the Pennsylvania High School Coaching Initiative



● Strong Vincent  
**ERIE**  
Central High ● East High

Central Mountain High ● **KEYSTONE CENTRAL**

**PAHSCI**

PENNSYLVANIA HIGH SCHOOL COACHING INITIATIVE

Hazleton Area Career Center ● **HAZLETON**  
● Hazleton Area High

Bellwood Antis High ● **BELLWOOD ANTIS**

**BURGETTSTOWN**  
● Burgettstown High

SciTech ● William Penn  
Harrisburg High ● **HARRISBURG**  
Career and Technical Academy ●

**READING**  
Reading High ●

**CHARLEROI**  
● Charleroi High

**MCGUFFEY**  
● McGuffey High

**GALLATIN**  
● Albert Gallatin Senior High

McCaskey East ● **LANCASTER**  
● J.P. McCaskey High

Simon Gratz ● **PHILADELPHIA**  
Germantown ● William Penn ● Abraham Lincoln ●

Jefferson Morgan High ● **JEFFERSON MORGAN**

Mapletown High ● **S.E. GREENE**

● Uniontown Area High  
**UNIONTOWN**



Research for Action (RFA) is a Philadelphia-based, non-profit organization engaged in education research and evaluation. Founded in 1992, RFA works with public school districts, educational institutions, and community organizations to improve the educational opportunities for those traditionally disadvantaged by race/ethnicity, class, gender, language/cultural difference, and ability/disability. For more information about RFA please go to our website, [www.researchforaction.org](http://www.researchforaction.org).

### **About this Report**

Research for Action's third and final report completes a three-year evaluation study of the Pennsylvania High School Coaching Initiative (PAHSCI). This report presents lessons from the PAHSCI model of school-based instructional coaching and mentoring as a vehicle for job-embedded professional learning. Reporting from an analysis using qualitative methods including interviews of teachers and coaches and observations of classroom lessons, the report examines the influence of coaching on the implementation of research-based literacy practices applicable across the content areas. It explores student engagement and coaching's contribution to teachers' ability to reflect on and change classroom practice. Finally, this report discusses the strengths and challenges of PAHSCI's influence on the individual, the school, the district and the state to link learning and build sustainability.



## Introduction

The Pennsylvania High School Coaching Initiative (PAHSCI) is a high school reform model that links 15 districts and 24 high-need schools, serving more than 30,000 students across the state, to improve teaching and learning at the secondary level. The PAHSCI model centers around school-based literacy and math instructional coaches who support teachers in infusing research-based literacy practices across the curriculum to help improve students' literacy and achievement. Three-person teams of seasoned educators provide direct site-based monthly mentoring of coaches and administrators. Further deepening the scope of its influence, PAHSCI seeks to link and sustain learning for individuals, schools, districts, and the state.

Partnering with the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) in 2005, the Annenberg Foundation provided a \$31 million, three-year investment in high school reform. PDE contracted Foundations, Inc., and the Penn Literacy Network (PLN) at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education to co-design an intensive professional development system to provide research-based training and support to participating schools and districts. Central to the effort was the use of school-based instructional coaching and mentoring, and linking these efforts under a state-sponsored initiative.

Research for Action (RFA) was asked to investigate and describe the lessons from PAHSCI, drawing on research methods of participant observation, interviewing, surveying, and document analysis. During the third year of the Initiative, RFA shifted the data collection from broad-based surveys and questionnaires to focus on a sample of schools to gain an in-depth understanding of the relationship of instructional coaching to changing teachers' classroom practices. In fall and winter 2007-08, RFA staff visited 102 classrooms in 9 schools, and interviewed 109 teachers and the 31 coaches with whom they worked.

This Year Three Report, *Links to Learning and Sustainability*, describes PAHSCI partner organizations' efficacy in creating well-established communications and building collaborative learning among individuals, schools, districts, and the state. We look at the role of PAHSCI coaches, and share evidence that teachers who actively employed the PLN teaching strategies were successful in creating more engaged, student-centered learning. In addition to the overwhelmingly positive data showing strengthened links to learning among the PAHSCI participants, we also present some of the issues and challenges which require continued research and evaluation.

Following the format of the full report, this executive summary is organized into six sections and highlights selected main points from each section.

## Section 1 PAHSCI's Vision, Goals, and Design

The vision for PAHSCI underscores the importance of highly qualified teachers and highly qualified district and school leaders working, learning, and translating that learning to help teach all students.

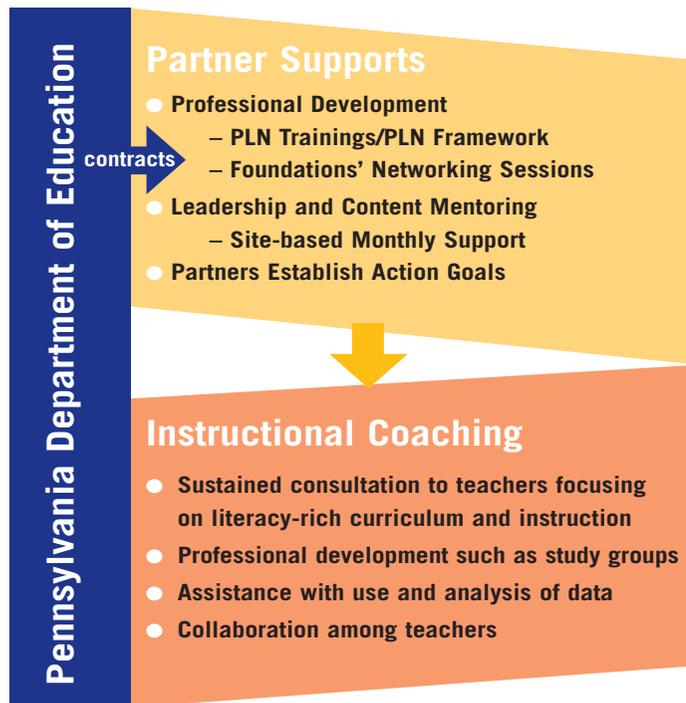
In its proposal to the Annenberg Foundation, PDE set the following ambitious, long-term goals:

- Improve student performance at the participating high schools.
- Build capacity throughout the Commonwealth for the expansion of this model.
- Additionally, as the Initiative took hold, the following goal emerged:
- Generate a research base that will inform the development of the coaching model and support its refinement and expansion.

Highlighting the foundational areas of learning — literacy and mathematics — the PAHSCI design places one literacy and one math coach for every 600 students in 24 participating high schools. Coaches are trained to provide in-class coaching and modeling, facilitate peer collaboration, lead data-driven assessments, and promote teacher leadership. To create a common language of instructional practice, coaches and teachers are introduced to a series of research-based literacy-rich strategies, “the PLN framework,” developed by the Penn Literacy Network and designed to be used across all content area subjects.

Key steps in the design and implementation of PAHSCI are outlined in the following box.

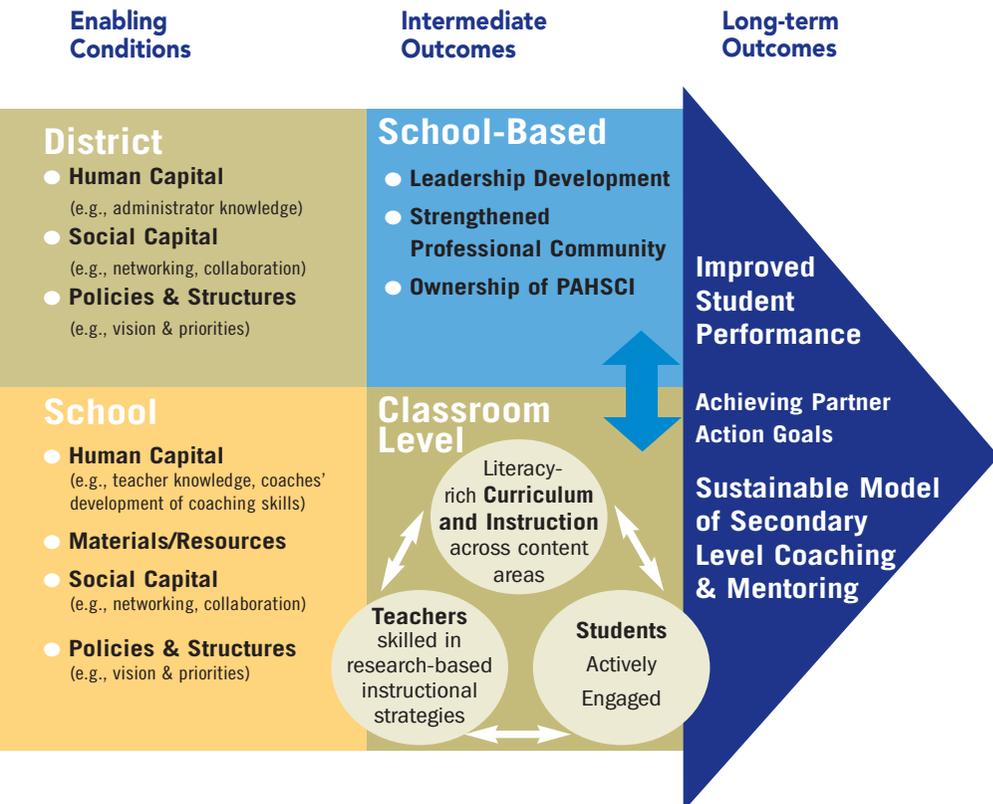
**Figure 1**  
Theory  
of Change



## PAHSCI Design Steps

Define the program components so that all participants and stakeholders are aware of program goals, expectations, services, and anticipated outcomes;

- Recruit and hire highly trained individuals to become coaches and mentors;
- Train the coaches and mentors in content areas and interpersonal skill sets that are aligned with school and district improvement plans as well as the goals of PAHSCI;
- Integrate coaching and mentoring with existing school and district initiatives;
- Include school and district leaders as participants in the training to empower them to be informed supporters and nurturers of coaches and teachers;
- Create district- and school-based leadership teams to design, implement, and monitor PAHSCI action plans aligned with state standards and district goals;
- Provide ongoing opportunities for data-driven decision making, reflection, and reviewing the outcomes from PAHSCI implementation across participating schools and districts;
- Create a pipeline of school, district, and state educational leaders well-equipped to move up a career ladder; and finally,
- Contribute to shaping a statewide model of coaching.



## Section 2 Coaches: The Vital Link to Improved Teaching and Learning

Coaches are at the center of the PAHSCI model, serving as catalysts for change at the district, school, and classroom level. Research has indicated that effective, high quality teachers are one of the most important factors in student success. PAHSCI coaches provide context-specific, job-embedded professional development to help teachers improve their practice. RFA's evaluation showed that:

- PAHSCI coaches evolved in their understanding of, and confidence in, enacting their coaching role. Coaches learned how to focus their work to facilitate learning and change for teachers. Coaches developed shared understanding of good instruction and how to support teachers in moving towards that goal.
- Mentors played a key role in helping coaches develop their coaching skills and negotiate challenges. Mentors modeled behaviors and practices, helping coaches refine their work. With mentors and in courses, coaches were positioned as learners, which complemented and supported their development as teacher-facilitators supporting learning for other staff.
- In Year Three, teachers and coaches in many districts reported stronger professional communities with a shared focus on instruction and a common language to talk about it. PAHSCI participants indicated that the Initiative was successfully minimizing teacher isolation and supporting collaboration. In particular, development of a shared instructional language facilitated collaboration across content areas.
- Coaches assumed increasing leadership roles. Over the course of the Initiative, coaches took on a range of leadership roles in their schools and districts, and within PAHSCI itself. These included providing instructional leadership on school leadership teams and committees, facilitating workshops at PAHSCI networking sessions, and leading informational sessions for school boards and district staff.
- Coaches were able to create learning linkages in service of the big picture goals of school improvement. The PAHSCI coaches' role and training uniquely positioned them to connect work at the classroom level to larger school goals and to use classroom and school level data to support this effort.
- Challenges for coaches included initial confusion about the coaching role, gaps in skill sets and training, teacher resistance, lack of administrative support, and inadequate time for teachers and coaches to collaborate. These challenges evolved and changed during the course of the Initiative as coaches, mentors, partners, and the Initiative as a whole developed.

The ability of PAHSCI partners to respond flexibly to coaches' concerns and to make mid-course adjustments was an important strength of the Initiative. These adjustments were key to supporting the development of coaches and of their role within PAHSCI and their schools.

## Section 3 Linking Teacher Practice to Student Engagement and Learning

Over the course of three years, RFA staff visited more than 200 classrooms in 21 of the PAHSCI schools. The sampling of schools covered the range in each of the following indicators: size, location, student demographics, and status in making AYP. We interviewed students, teachers, coaches, administrators and mentors. We observed professional learning events and observed school openings, traveled the hallways, and followed an observation protocol that helped us to describe the overall context and climate at the school and in the surrounding community.

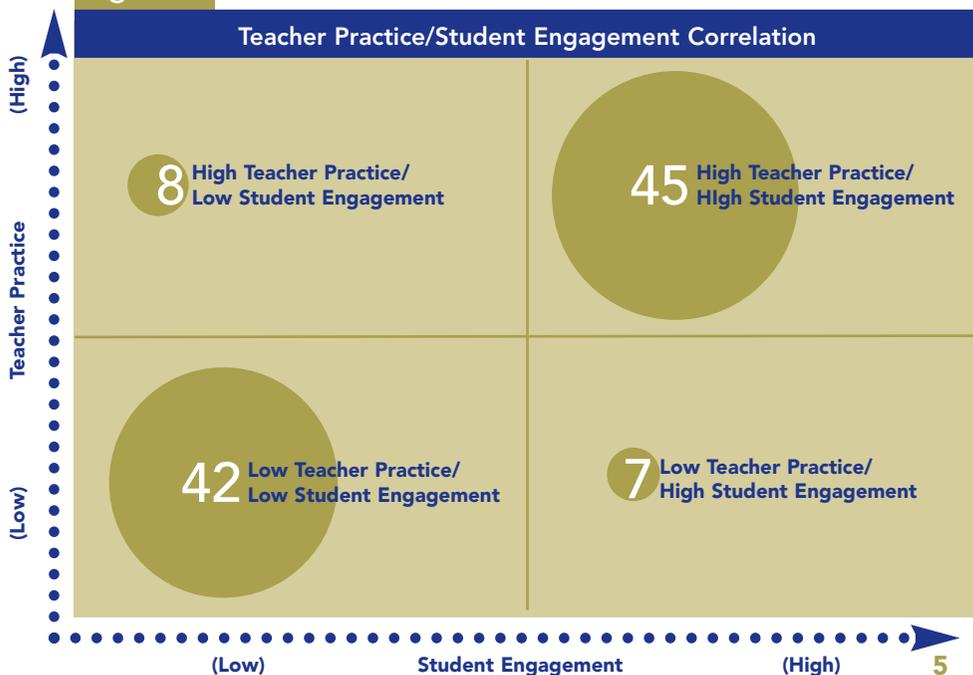
Sustainable instructional change involves a shift in teachers' classroom norms and routines. In PAHSCI, this is manifested as a change from a teacher-centered classroom to a student-centered classroom that places

a high priority on student engagement, a cornerstone of the PLN framework.

The link of teacher practice to students' actions and reactions was clearly in evidence in PAHSCI classrooms. What teachers did and how they communicated influenced what students did and how they responded.

During Year Three, RFA visited 102 English and math classrooms using a Classroom Visitation Rubric designed to assess indicators of both teacher practices and student engagement. These visits were followed by individual interviews with each of the teachers and, separately, with their coaches. The results show a strong correlation between teachers' use of PLN strategies and evidence of engaged student learning in their classrooms.

Figure 3 Year Three Classroom Observations



High Teacher Practice/High Student Engagement used a variety of methods to engage their students. A core common practice among this group was involving students in their own learning. They incorporated multiple PLN strategies to reinforce their content lesson goals.

In contrast, Low Teacher Practice/Low Student Engagement teachers we visited were often simply applying a few isolated PLN strategies that were unconnected to the remainder of the lesson.

Looking more closely at the interviews of teachers in the Low Teacher Practice/Low Student Engagement, it is clear that moving from surface-level to more in-depth change takes time.

Teacher resistance to change was another factor in Low Teacher Practice classrooms. Some teachers who were assessed low on our instrument had years of “exemplary ratings” from administrators and subscribed to the “If it’s not broken don’t fix it” theory regarding their own teaching.

## Section 4 Sustaining Instructional Change

In two important ways, the design of PAHSCI attempts to interrupt teachers’ inclination toward superficial change, and to move them toward transforming fundamental classroom norms and routines. First, the strategies and philosophy of the PLN framework confront teachers’ long-held beliefs about the role of students in the classroom. Second, acting as change agents, coaches work to convince teachers of the efficacy of the PLN framework and its underlying philosophy. In addition, coaches help teachers thoughtfully apply the framework to their ongoing daily routines, and offer constructive feedback, thus creating the conditions for sustainable instructional change. RFA observations include:

- Evidence of sustainable instructional change was seen in teachers visited in Year Three, both in their classroom practices and in the more sophisticated levels of understanding they had about the nature of student engagement.

- The combination of coaching and PLN training, whether in regional or school-based courses, appears to be central to PAHSCI’s role in sustainable change.
- When coaches and teachers attend PLN regional courses together, a key benefit is the shared teacher/learner experience, which helps reduce the “social distance” and build closer working relationships between coaches and teachers.
- Benefits of PLN school-based courses include a more formalized and ongoing commitment to the Before/During/After (BDA) Consulting Cycle and the opportunity to reach a wider network of teachers.

While a major challenge will be the availability of continued training and resources for PAHSCI coaches and teachers, the seeds of sustainability have been planted: changed perspectives and practices, a common vision and instructional language, and a growing professional community.

## Section 5 PAHSCI Learning, Leadership, and Sustainability

The PAHSCI model of networking to form a statewide chain of learning is complex. As one member of a partner organization commented during a retreat, *“The scope and magnitude of this project is daunting.”* The process of introducing a compelling, coherent, and efficient set of practices across the local contexts of participating districts and schools is both ambitious and important. Most public schools have little control over structural configurations, funding decisions, and other limiting conditions; the PAHSCI model sought to influence the instructional components that schools could control and improve.

- The concept of linking people, resources, and practices is at the heart of the PAHSCI model and a key element in its success. Linking will also be important in sustaining the initiative.
- For individuals — teachers, coaches, mentors, points of contact, administrators — PAHSCI participation offered new opportunities for collaboration, as well as new leadership roles. High school teachers often report that they work in isolation and, consequently, don't experience high levels of trust and collaboration. Coaches were able to establish trust and to open avenues for discussion among teachers across content areas. Many teachers began to develop expanding leadership skills and roles within their classroom, their department, and across the school.
- Significantly, nearly all of those individuals we categorize as the core PAHSCI front-line implementers — coaches, mentors, building and district level administrators, partner organization staff, and PAHSCI leadership — report on an anonymous May 2008 evaluation that PAHSCI was highly successful (97 percent strongly agree or agree) “in providing meaningful opportunities to learn from one another; grow and sustain the growth.”
- For organizations — partners, schools, leadership teams, districts, advisory boards, and the Pennsylvania Department of Education — PAHSCI in many ways represented a new paradigm of partnering.
- “Ownership” of the reform needs to shift from external to internal stakeholders, and there are signs that this is happening. During Year Three, for example, customized PLN courses brought coaches, teacher leaders, and administrators together to write and update their curriculum and interject the best practices of the PLN framework. Also in Year Three, an online coach reporting system was designed and introduced by the Foundations, Inc. mentor group to facilitate ongoing communication between coaches and mentors.
- Participants cite the greatest challenges to sustainability as funding and change in leadership or attrition of central implementers.

## Section 6 Lessons from PAHSCI

PAHSCI is a rich case study of a statewide high school reform initiative. In this final section we highlight key lessons that educators and policy makers contemplating investments in instructional coaching can take away from the PAHSCI model. We start by briefly reviewing the developmental stages of PAHSCI and key questions that the Initiative sought to ask and answer at each stage. (See Figure below.)

### Revisiting the PAHSCI 2008 Theory of Change

RFA's analysis highlights the Initiative's progress in moving in a positive direction towards the Intermediate Outcomes, in particular: strengthened professional community, leadership development and changes in teachers' use of literacy-rich strategies for student engagement. However, flexible implementation, in other words, participating schools directed

#### Figure 4 The Four Development Stages of the Pennsylvania High School Coaching Initiative

##### A Research-Based, Statewide Coaching Model

#### 1 Start with coaching, a promising professional development strategy.

- What is known about coaching?
- What does it accomplish and how?

#### 2 Design a coaching model with strong supports to make coaching powerful and sustainable.

- What structures, interventions and supports are needed to build a statewide network of schools that can implement and sustain coaching and improve classroom practice?

#### 3 Test the theory; look for early lessons; make mid-course corrections.

- What is working well? Why?
- What needs modification or enhancement?

#### 4 Disseminate knowledge and tools for sustaining reform and scaling up.

- What tools and knowledge are needed to replicate the model, spread the good news and share what has been learned?
- How can these tools be disseminated?

coaching supports to particular groups, i.e., 9th grade academies, new or struggling teachers and not schoolwide to every teacher, makes it difficult to establish a solid evidence-based link from the implementation of coaching to improved student achievement. In addition, quantitative threads of the overall research conducted do not show a significant relationship between coached teachers and improved achievement as measured by state achievement tests.

### **Lesson One**

PAHSCI's plan — to take on large-scale change across diverse statewide sites with an eye to sustainability — was a huge and complex undertaking.

- The well-conceptualized design and ongoing reflection and adaptations of PAHSCI leadership and partners were crucial to its success. However, PAHSCI's ability to fully achieve the impact it sought was influenced by the enormity of the task.
- Establishing a shared vision and goals, and "branding" PAHSCI across its multiple partners and stakeholders, were important components of its implementation.
- Negotiating buy-in was an ongoing process, as participants changed but the principles and goals did not.
- It was important to continuously clarify that the focus of PAHSCI was classroom instruction.
- PAHSCI has significantly contributed to a statewide agenda to align coaching models. The Collaborative

Coaching Board, chaired by a representative from PDE, is actively shaping how instructional coaching is implemented and monitored across the Commonwealth.

### **Lesson Two**

Instructional coaching requires coaches to utilize a complex set of skills, talents, and abilities as they work within a specific school and district context.

- PAHSCI partners helped coaches keep learning how to be a coach, and as a result, both partners and coaches built their own capacity to adapt, adjust, and learn as challenges emerged. PAHSCI's use of the PLN framework, a concrete set of literacy-rich, student-centered strategies, contributed to a shared vision among coaches and the partners who supported them.
- Relationships are important and must be negotiated and renegotiated across the stages of implementation. Key relationships include those among coaches, administrators, teachers, and mentors, as well as within the coaching team.
- PAHSCI coaches evolved in their understanding of, and confidence in, enacting their coaching role in one-on-one and group settings as they supported teachers in moving towards the goal of improving instruction.
- Because they work across traditional high school boundaries (content area, administrator-teacher, grade level) coaches are well positioned to help catalyze schoolwide change.

### Lesson Three

The PLN framework as a set of strategies to address adolescent literacy and student performance was applicable across content areas.

- It was significant that instructional coaches worked with teachers across the content areas using a common instructional language and set of research-based best practices. More often than not, high school content area teachers do not agree on a set of best practices to increase student performance. The research-based literacy-rich strategies represented by the PLN framework were open ended and able to influence how teachers planned and delivered instruction across PAHSCI classrooms.
- Student needs and how to address them became the norm of professional work together. Staff and administrators' professional behaviors that focused on instructional practice increased as they learned and used the PLN framework to deliver, and monitor the delivery of instruction.
- Teachers working collaboratively with coaches and peers are connecting which practices increase students' engagement and involvement in their own learning. In a number of schools, teacher interaction and planning across content areas was enhanced by the common language and strategies they shared through the PLN framework.

### Lesson Four

There are identifiable factors which support and impede sustainability.

- The PAHSCI model attempts to interrupt teachers' inclination toward superficial change, and to move them toward transforming fundamental classroom norms and routines. The effort to transform rather than simply improve requires deeper personal engagement of teachers, thereby generating the potential for more lasting change.
- The combination of coaching and PLN training appears to be central to PAHSCI's role in supporting sustainable change. Whether the PLN training takes place in a regional or site-based context (and optimally when teachers experience both), it is the combination of high-quality training with ongoing coaching that enables the changes in instructional practice to take hold at the classroom, department, and school level.
- Participants cite the greatest challenges to sustainability as funding and change in leadership or attrition of central implementers. Other ongoing challenges to sustainability include providing adequate time for training, coaching, and new instructional preparation; some teacher resistance to change; and district leadership that, for a complex set of causes, do not place PAHSCI high on their priority list.

## Lesson Five

PAHSCI front-line implementers (teachers, coaches, partner organizations, and mentors) adopted innovative strategies to cope with contextual difficulties and diverse needs.

- The high degree of interaction among participants, as well as ongoing observation and feedback mechanisms, helped identify issues early. Contextual difficulties such as time constraints, teachers' aversion to change, and the possibility of contrived collegiality and surface level implementation, were able to be acknowledged and addressed. Even when issues could not be fully resolved, their recognition and attention helped prevent them from becoming more significant impediments.
- When the issues were training-related (e.g., skills gaps in coach), PAHSCI partnering organizations were highly responsive. By making mid-course corrections to address challenges coaches experienced (such as literacy in math classrooms and special needs learners), the PLN facilitators and Foundations mentors continuously revamped the training to meet gaps in skills and support the school based coaches.
- Designing the Initiative to include players on the inside (teachers, coaches, administrators) and outside (mentors, PLN facilitators, RFA researchers) contributed to the possibility for homegrown contextual adjustments, while at the same time providing broader insights and greater accountability. Inside participants traveled to other sites, for example, and mentors shared stories that insiders were eager to hear about "how they handle these challenges at another PAHSCI site."

## Lesson Six

The development of a stronger professional community and new leadership opportunities were significant outcomes of PAHSCI — for individuals, organizations, and at the statewide level.

- PAHSCI has created a more cohesive professional community within and among participating individuals and organizations — and this, in turn, has helped create and sustain the successes of the Initiative. Shared vision and goals, a common language developed by the PLN framework, and the high degree of collaboration and communication built into the model all have contributed to building professional community.
- The emergence of new leaders and leadership roles, especially among coaches and teachers, has proven an added positive outcome. As a result of their engagement with PAHSCI, coaches, teachers, mentors, and others have developed new skills and discovered new opportunities to exercise personal leadership — in classrooms, departments, schools, and districts. For many, PAHSCI has renewed their enthusiasm for teaching and given new direction to their careers.
- Educators and policy makers can turn to PAHSCI as a model for regional and statewide efforts and to PAHSCI participants as experienced resources. The knowledge gained over the past three years can and should be harvested and shared, to the advantage of PAHSCI and other educational initiatives across the state — and to the ultimate benefit of current and future students.



## Concluding Notes

The PAHSCI model was designed to respect the enormously challenging role that teachers shoulder; to improve student learning by improving instructional practice through supportive teacher training and coaching; and to be responsive to differences in individuals and situations. We believe that it bodes well for the upcoming transitional year that such a large percent of the front-line implementers and teachers we met say that they “think that this PLN thing works!”

This executive summary of the Year Three Report highlights PAHSCI teachers and coaches building trust and collaboration, and demonstrating their ability to make substantive changes in their own instructional practices by placing student engagement and achievement at the center of the learning. The reflective practices built into PAHSCI — of reviewing and fortifying what has been learned — will now go far in helping them continue to dismantle the silos of isolation and engage adolescents across our public high schools in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.



## About the Authors

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