



**Pennsylvania High School
Coaching Initiative**

Promising InRoads:

Year One of the Pennsylvania High School
Coaching Initiative

Executive Summary

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Introduction

“Students unable to handle the demands they face in high school will certainly struggle in technical school and college.”¹

American high schools are facing a challenge that we must address as a nation if we are to offer promising futures for our youth whether they choose to enter college or enter the workforce. Over 5,000,000 high school students in America do not read well enough to understand their textbooks or other material written for their grade level. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2002),... twenty-six percent of these students cannot even read material that many of us would deem essential for daily living, such as road signs, newspapers or bus schedules. In short, if the reading challenges experienced by these students are unmet in high school, they face the real possibility of being undereducated, underemployed, and under prepared to participate successfully in the twenty-first century.²

School districts around the nation are searching for ways to improve student achievement as they strive to meet the ambitious goals of No Child Left Behind and help all students reach high standards. Nowhere is this task more daunting than in high schools where significant numbers of students live in poverty, come to school with special learning needs and are disaffected and disengaged. Many of these adolescents lack the basic literacy skills that are necessary for them to learn history, science and mathematics. In addition, many high school teachers feel ill-equipped to help these students recoup the ground they have lost in reading, writing and oral communication.

¹ Hock, Michael F. and Deshler, Donald D. (2003, November). Adolescent Literacy: Ensuring that No Child is Left Behind. (p.2) Principal Leadership, 1-13.

² Ibid.



The Pennsylvania High School Coaching Initiative (PAHSCI)

A Partnership

The Annenberg Foundation partnered with the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) to establish an initiative called the Pennsylvania High School Coaching Initiative (PAHSCI) that was designed to address the literacy and math needs of adolescents in high schools in Pennsylvania. During its first year of implementation, PAHSCI placed 90 literacy and math coaches in 26 high-need schools in nine school districts and one Intermediate Unit (IU). This includes seven districts. Recognizing that creating an effective coaching model is complicated and demands multiple areas of expertise, Initiative designers recruited a group of partners to support schools and districts. These partners include:

- Foundations, Inc. which brings deep knowledge of school improvement processes, the role of school leadership in promoting professional development through coaching and mentoring.
- The Penn Literacy Network (PLN) which offers a research-based framework and practical strategies for establishing literacy-rich classrooms across all subject areas.
- The Philadelphia Foundation which brings capacity in managing large grant amounts, and in statewide monitoring and reporting of the grant money.
- Research for Action (RFA) which brings extensive experience in connecting evaluation research to the refinement of reform initiatives.

District Leadership Teams

Participating districts established district leadership teams to lead the coaching initiative at their sites. The District Leadership Team includes the superintendent or assistant superintendent; district curriculum office staff; school principals; coach and teacher representatives and where applicable, IU representatives. The District Leadership team creates a local partnership which is responsible for creating the district and school conditions necessary to ensure the coaching model's success.

The PAHSCI Design: Instructional Coaching

PAHSCI uses instructional coaching as a central strategy to improve the knowledge, skills and practice of high school teachers and subsequently the achievement of the students they teach. A relatively young reform, instructional coaching has been identified by researchers as a very promising professional development strategy because it embeds professional learning in the daily work that teachers do in their classrooms and with their colleagues.



Enabling Conditions and Supports

PAHSCI was explicitly designed to include interventions and supports that would create the necessary enabling conditions to increase coaching's potential to improve teaching and student achievement. The supports offered by PAHSCI partners include:

- **the work of the leadership and content (literacy and math) mentors.** These mentors provide on-site, embedded professional development and support for coaches and administrators implementing the Initiative.
- **professional development.** Partners offer a centralized summer course for coaches, as well as school-year networking sessions for coaches and administrators from all PAHSCI districts and school-year regional courses at multiple sites to serve coaches and teachers from local districts.
- **responsive problem-solving by partners.** In a complex, multi-site initiative like PAHSCI, issues and questions that need attention constantly arise. Partners respond to issues and make necessary mid-course adjustments.

Instructional Coaching: The Heart of PAHSCI

PAHSCI coaches were, by and large, veteran teachers with an average of 17.5 years of teaching experience. Notably, two-thirds of the coaches came to their new role directly from classroom teaching. Coaches understood that their work was very much about building relationships and that establishing rapport is a precursor to facilitating instructional change. Not surprisingly, in the first year of implementation, PAHSCI coaches struggled to define and internalize their role and to articulate that role to others. As a result, numerous coaches reported that their administrators and consequently, the entire staff did not understand their role. Throughout the initial stages, however, as coaches shaped their roles, responsibilities became clearer and coach/teacher interactions increased in frequency as did coaches' facilitation of study groups and professional development sessions. The kinds of activities in which coaches engaged were more directly connected to instructional change later in the year.

Early Lessons

Several early lessons from PAHSCI are worthy of note by others interested in adopting instructional coaching as a reform intervention:

- Take into consideration the enabling conditions – supportive leadership, time, etc. – that are necessary for coaching to work, and design infrastructures (e.g., District Leadership Teams) and interventions aimed at creating those conditions.
- Systematically learn from your experience and apply that learning quickly in modifications to your efforts.
- Provide instructional coaches with a content focus and offer high-quality professional development on that focus to school and district leaders and teachers.
- Think hard about the role of coaches and consistently apply that thinking to the position description and job qualifications. Articulate the role and responsibilities clearly and consistently to administrators and teachers.
- Assign more than one coach to a school and consciously build coaching teams.



Major Findings from Year One

One major accomplishment was supporting the districts as they hired coaches within a very short time period in nine districts and one IU across the state. Because some coaches were not hired until after the school year began, about half of all coaches did not attend the June and August central training sessions. Others began without significant professional development training about the Initiative. Thus, many aspects of the program needed to be developed while it was being implemented. It was up to the support of Foundations mentors, PLN/Foundations make-up trainings for late hires, and the resourcefulness of coaches themselves to fill in the skill and knowledge gaps they faced in beginning their work. Coaches, teachers, administrators and mentors engaged in collaborative conversations about the on-going development of this Initiative.

PAHSCI is already serving as a catalyst for organizational and cultural change in some schools and districts. School leaders revised their thinking about professional development. They saw the value of more intensive and focused professional development and, as a result, created more time for professional development and for coaches to meet with teachers.

Professional development around the PLN Framework with related instructional activities and follow-up conversations with an instructional coach were correlated with teachers' adoption of new instructional strategies that engaged students in rigorous literacy activities. Teachers who participated in professional development sessions or worked with a coach were three times more likely to use PLN strategies for integrating reading, writing and oral communication into the content areas and actively engaging students in their own learning.

Recommendations for Year Two

The challenge for Year Two is to both expand and deepen the work. It needs to be expanded so that larger numbers of teachers and administrators become involved. It needs to be deepened so that the work of mentors, administrators, coaches and teachers moves more deeply into instruction and into activities and practices that will change school culture to support new teaching practices, and increase student engagement and achievement.

Extend and deepen changes in classroom practice.

- Help teachers examine data (including student work) and reflect on their implications for changes in classroom practice.
- Implement study groups that bring teachers together to examine classroom practice by focusing on student work.
- Develop a comprehensive strategy for promoting writing in the content areas.
- Attend to the specific needs of math coaches and math teachers within the Initiative.



Build the enabling conditions that strengthen the Initiative.


- Provide professional development for administrators in order to strengthen leadership for change.
- Provide opportunities for district and school leaders to talk to network about their professional development learnings.
- Focus the work of the mentors to include assessing school wide alignment of classroom practices with the PLN Framework.
- Provide opportunities for administrative problem solving across districts about common challenges.

Upcoming Data Analysis

For Year Two, RFA is reviewing student achievement data to help Initiative stakeholders assess the impact of changes in teacher practice on student performance. This analysis will build on the Year One findings about early evidence of changes in teacher practice. RFA will examine the PSSA test score gains of the PAHSCI schools in terms of students' movement into the Proficient/Advanced level and out of the Below Basic level. RFA will compare the gains of the PAHSCI cohort of schools with gains of other high schools across the state. RFA will use the base-line implementation data collected to investigate whether fidelity of implementation is associated with gains in student achievement on the PSSA. RFA will analyze student attendance data, graduation rates and promotion rates. Additionally, Year Two's second phase of research will include RFA examining the nature and intensity of support offered by District Leadership Teams to determine the impact on consistent delivery of quality instruction within and across participating schools.

Finally

This Initiative is not unlike a line of dominos ready to be tilted – one to the next – to reach an ultimate end: remove one domino and the forward progress stops. So it is with PAHSCI. The enabling conditions of supportive leadership, a ready organizational infrastructure, school and district momentum for change and the necessary knowledge need to be in place. Likewise, support from the PAHSCI partners through strong professional development, mentoring and responsive problem-solving needs to be present to help any struggling school. With these enabling conditions and supports in place, the hard work of coaching can begin with the goal of helping teachers improve their practice to help their students learn. This year, much of the focus of PAHSCI was ensuring that the foundations (the conditions that support change) were rock solid and ready to go. In those schools where this was true, the coaching was most effective. In Year Two, there is every indication PAHSCI can make significant progress towards impacting school and district job-embedded professional development and supporting effective practice inside schools and classrooms for improved student literacy and achievement.



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.

Research for Action is funded through grants from foundations and contracts for services from a range of organizations, including the School District of Philadelphia. For more information about RFA please go to our website, www.researchforaction.org

RFA Mission Statement

Through research and action, Research for Action seeks to improve the education opportunities and outcomes of urban youth by strengthening public schools and enriching the civic and community dialogue about public education. We share our research with educators, parent and community leaders, students, and policy makers with the goals of building a shared critique of educational inequality and strategizing about school reform that is socially just.

ANALYTICA is a for-profit, minority-owned and operated company founded in 2004. It provides high-quality research analytics to organizations in the social, behavioral, educational, and health-care sectors. ANALYTICA's primary expertise is the systematic design, implementation, analysis, and reporting of randomized controlled trials (randomized experiments). ANALYTICA's secondary expertise is in the areas of research synthesis (or meta-analysis), survey research, internet mediated research, secondary data analysis, advanced methods for dealing with missing data, and writing technical reports and policy briefs. Through the application of its expertise to a variety of applied research genres, ANALYTICA is committed to the development of evidence-based interventions with the potential to improve the human condition across the globe.



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