

Implementing K-3 Literacy Coaching in SDP: Teacher Identified Practices of Effective Coaching

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About the ELS Coaching Initiative

In 2015, the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) launched a large-scale initiative to support early literacy as part of a district-wide goal that all students will read on grade level by age eight.¹ As part of this initiative, all elementary schools serving kindergarten through third-grade students have a full-time Early Literacy Specialist coach (ELS) or Literacy Lead (LL).² Since the first cohort of coaches began in the 2015-16 school year ELSs have been recruited, trained, and managed by the Children’s Literacy Initiative (CLI).³

Typically, there is one ELS or LL (also called literacy coaches) at each school who works with K-3 teachers on a daily basis to promote research-based literacy teaching practices, strengthen the implementation of the 120-minute literacy block, and support teachers in improving classroom culture and the literacy environment.

The initiative was rolled out over three years in a cohort model beginning in SY 2015-16 and continues today. As of Spring 2019, all 149 schools serving nearly 43,000 K-3 students are receiving coaching. Because of the cohort model, the number of years of support each school received differs by cohort. Like most large-scale initiatives that span many sites, implementation has been more successful in some places than others.

The goal of this brief is to summarize some “best practices of ELS coaching” as identified by teachers and coaches at schools where teachers gave their ELS high effectiveness ratings on the annual survey.

Teacher Identified Practices of Effective Coaching:

1. **Establish a trusting relationship and partnership.**
2. **Know the district, school, and classroom context.**
3. **Be proactive in and out of the classroom.**
4. **Allow teachers to identify where and how they need support.**
5. **Model lessons and employ gradual release.**

Early Literacy Specialist Cohorts:

- 40 schools in **cohort 1** (began 2015-16)
- 53 schools in **cohort 2** (began 2016-17)
- 56 schools in **cohort 3** (began 2017-18)

¹ Anchor Goal 2, Action Plan 3.0

² Literacy Leads are appointed, fully-released teachers selected by their principals to provide literacy coaching. They receive additional training and support from the District for their role.

³ CLI conducts work on this project under contract to SDP. CLI was the successful offeror that responded to a request for proposals in 2015 and 2018.

Sample and Method

Each year, teachers complete an annual survey about their experiences working with the ELS in their school. In spring 2017, results from this survey were used to select ten schools to participate in teacher focus groups (Table 1). The three questions asked about teachers' perceptions of how supportive their principal was of their ELS coach; to what extent the initiative and coaching was aligned to the District's literacy framework; and how effective their ELS was in regards various coaching activities. Five of the ten schools had lower average ratings of ELS efficacy (average of 2.9/5.0) and the other five schools had higher average ratings of ELS efficacy (average 4.6/5.0). Within each grouping of schools, each school represented a different neighborhood network, and schools from both cohorts 1 and 2 were represented.

Table 1. Sample of schools for teacher focus groups

Sample	Number of Schools	Number of Teachers	ELS Effectiveness Score Range	ELS Effectiveness Average Rating
Lower-Rated ELS Sample	5	21	2.5-3.7	2.9/5.0
Higher-Rated ELS Sample	5	23	4.3-5.0	4.6/5.0

Staff from the Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE) conducted the focus groups at ten schools with 44 teachers in the spring of 2017. The questions asked during the focus groups aimed to deepen our understanding of differences in teachers' coaching experiences and the practices that may have affected the teachers' perception of his/her coach (see Appendix A for focus group protocol). All focus groups were transcribed, coded, and analyzed to identify differences between the practices of coaches with higher and lower effectiveness ratings.

Summary of Teacher Identified Practices of Effective Coaching

Teachers identified five common practices of effective coaching:

Practice 1: Establish a trusting relationship and positive partnership.

Teachers from the schools with higher-rated ELSs emphasized that their ELS took the time to build relationships with the teachers they coached. One teacher explained,

Our coach took the time to build relationships, which is something that is just so important. They [our coach and other professional development staff] just got to know us. It takes time, but they weren't just coming in to watch us and coach us. They were also coming in to learn about us.

The teacher-coach initial relationships were described as the foundation of a professional partnership, rather than a more punitive supervisory relationship. One teacher explained,

There was never any pressure, like we're getting in trouble... it definitely doesn't feel punitive. It's more like what can I do? I know things have gone wrong when she's there and I never feel like she's going to go run and tell [the principal]...

Another teacher added to the previous statement, “...That goes back to the trust they had built in the beginning. The sense of trust that it developed with everyone was paramount to their success.”

Teachers from schools with higher-rated ELSs also said that their ELSs used a strengths-based approach to coaching and regarded their teachers as partners. One teacher explained, “Try to make it a positive experience... People aren’t out to get you. Everybody’s working together as a team. I think that’s the most important part.” Another explained that her ELS “would always celebrate a win” which “made it easier to celebrate a success instead of always being so hard on yourself.” Similarly, a teacher from another school commented, “They’re very positive about everything. They make you feel like, ‘Listen this is the best you’re doing, you’re trying your best, you’re giving your all, we appreciate that,’ they never make you feel like – less than.”

Higher-rated ELSs were also attributed with providing “very constructive criticism” to help teachers identify areas of focus while “never putting teachers down.” One teacher stated, “She is never negative, and I like that. Because I’d be like, ‘I can’t do that.’ She’s like, ‘You can... Just try it.’” A teacher from another school explained a similar approach: “She’s good at pointing out strengths and just setting goals for like ‘OK here’s where we are. Let’s work on this next or something’. Like based on what the students are producing or what we see them doing.”

Unlike the partnerships described by teachers from schools with higher-rated ELSs, teachers at schools that rated their ELS as less effective described their ELS taking a more deficient-based approach when attempting to build an initial relationship. One teacher who reported having a less productive relationship with her first ELS described their ELS’s initial approach:

The attitude that [the ELS] went in with at the launch was the [teachers are] all failing. They’re in need of help. Go save them with your swimmies... it wasn’t presented this is the great things [the teachers] are doing let’s build on it.

Teachers from another school with a lower-rated ELS explained that the initial feedback she received from her ELS, which focused on the deficits of the teacher’s lesson rather than the strengths, set a less productive tone for the year:

My very first encounter with [my ELS] was very different than it was the rest of the year and I’m afraid it may have set the tone for the rest of the year. The first time she came into my room she was observing a vocabulary lesson that I did. I finished the vocabulary lesson...and she came back to talk about what she had seen and she told me she thought my definitions were too long and they were too far above my kids and I needed to shorten them.

Practice 2: Know the district, school, and classroom context.

Multiple teachers from schools with higher-rated ELSs noted the importance of the ELS having contextual knowledge of the district, schools, and student populations with whom they were working. Teachers at one school contrasted the experience with their current ELS with other less effective coaches they’ve had in the past, saying, “Having had knowledge of the district has been most

helpful. I was in a building where we had a coach who had no knowledge of the district, so that was a detriment.”

Another teacher added,

The big thing I think is understanding the culture of the buildings they're coming into. Because I definitely have had coaches that I just know that their experiences were very different than what we're experiencing now. And so, some of their ideas don't translate necessarily.

Similarly, teachers noted that ELSS' classroom experience was helpful in creating empathy between teachers and coaches. One teacher explained, “She was a classroom teacher so she's felt what we feel.”

Teachers also noted that it's helpful when the ELS has a realistic sense of the amount of a teacher's workload:

I think that [our ELS] realizes that they are only worried about literacy, but the teacher that they are coming to work with has other things besides just that literacy block that she's worried about. She also has to teach math and phonics and – so, it can't just be about that all the time. And [our ELS] is really good about that, realizing that...it can't be my whole world. It might be hers, but it's not mine.

Teachers also spoke to the importance of their ELS understanding their school's student population and the instructional strategies that were most appropriate for that population. A teacher from a school with a higher-rated ELS explained, “I think she was very prepared. I mean, personally, I know that her teaching experience is also in a school with a high level of ESOL, so she definitely had the background knowledge, she definitely had the strategies...”

While teachers from schools that had both higher- and lower-rated ELSS agreed that their ELS coaches were prepared for their roles, some teachers felt strongly that their ELS could have benefited from additional context knowledge. A teacher from a school with a lower-rated ELS stated, “I think she had no idea, no clue about what our children need...I would say that's definitely a weakness, not knowing our kids.” A teacher from another school with a high population of English Learners also commented, “I think [our ELS] did not know the district and especially ELs at all and had a lot of trouble understanding that her suggestions didn't work for ELs...so it made working with [our ELS] very hard.”

Practice 3: Be proactive in and out of the classroom.

Teachers at schools with both lower- and higher-rated ELSS frequently referred to their ELS as “resourceful” – that is, proactively locating the resources that teachers need to successfully implement the literacy block and support students. “Even when she did not know something, or does not, she finds it out...If there's an unexpected question or something she goes and researches and gets an answer,” commented one teacher. A teacher from another school echoed this sentiment by saying, “Anything that's needed she's right there...If there's something we don't understand, like what

is required or what administrators are asking us to do, she's the in between person. She gets to the bottom of it." Another teacher explained a specific instance where her ELS was particularly proactive in locating resources:

She helped me figure out [Saxon Phonics] as best as she could, but she also wasn't that familiar with Saxon, so she actually went to her kids' school, because they do Saxon there, and watched and learned from them and brought it back.

Although the role of the ELS is to provide instructional coaching to teachers, teachers at schools with higher-rated ELSs also described how their ELS would "jump right in" and directly support student learning. Teachers felt that this was beneficial because the ELS was able to provide tips for working with challenging students. Additionally, the ELS provided an "extra set of eyes and hands" so that the teacher was less burdened by classroom management and better able to focus on instruction.

One teacher described, "If she comes in a little early during guided reading, my students are doing one of the daily five, so she'll go and make sure they're all on task or ask, 'What are you reading?' or something like that." A teacher from another school further discussed the benefits of having their ELS work with students, "With my students she would come in ahead and she would sit with that one student, keep them on task, gave me some strategies and tips on what I can do to get them more focused and motivated."

Similarly, another teacher commented,

When we were doing Guided Reading, she would walk around with centers and aid the students that were struggling. To me that was the best part, her coming in during those types of lessons, as opposed to a Read Aloud, or something, where it was just her just sitting and watching, I liked it more when she was hands-on during like Centers or Writing Conferences.

Practice 4: Allow teachers to identify needs and be flexible in the approach to coaching.

Teachers from schools with higher-rated ELSs also noted that their ELSs allowed teachers to determine where they most needed support, rather than adhering strictly to a specific agenda, and were flexible in their approach to coaching. One teacher explained, "There's a very good relationship and understanding, like, I know my kids best, what can you do to help me with them the best, and they're very understanding and helpful of that." A teacher from another school described similar interactions with her ELS: "She does ask what we need. She doesn't input her own ideas. When she comes in for her weekly observations she'll just come in and do what we're doing. She doesn't like have her own agenda." Another teacher commented,

What I love about the way I interact with her is that she will first come to you see what she can help you with. So, it's not like she comes in and says, "This is what we're going to do." She follows our lead and if she finds that we're not strong in a certain area, then she makes a

suggestion to try and help us get there. So, it's kind of like you feel empowered, but you know you're getting support.

However, teachers from a school with a lower-rated ELS described their ELS as “rolling her eyes” when asked to support the teacher in a specific way and not “wanting to be bothered” with certain types of support or tasks.

There were also differences in the ways that teachers from schools with higher- and lower-rated ELSs described how flexible their ELSs were in supporting implementation of the 120-minute literacy block. A teacher from a school with a higher-rated ELS explained,

They don't push too much if something isn't working for you, it's not like you have to do it, it's just like another suggestion and I think that's helpful. It's not like it's a mandated and you have no choice, so everything they do does become helpful because you mold it for what you need.

Similarly, when the implementation of a suggested strategy does not work out, the ELS coach provides alternative ideas. One teacher reported,

She was like, you know what, this didn't work this time so maybe next time – you go to do the lesson next week or tomorrow we try this instead or if maybe we do it in small group...’ she gives you alternative ideas. Usually between what you experience and alternative ideas you do come up with a good way for that lesson to go.

Teachers from a school with a lower-rated ELSs describe adherence to a “cookie cutter” approach. One teacher stated,

She wanted us to literally write a script, and I cannot work like that. I cannot write out a script – and I cannot possibly do that for everything I teach, all day. She was coming and acted like, kind of do that, but I think that's unrealistic.

Her colleague added, “She was very cut and dry...She had to do it exactly the way CLI intended. Even if it didn't fit for what we were doing.”

Practice 5: Model lessons and employ gradual release.

Nearly half of the teachers who participated in focus groups mentioned modeling as a particularly effective coaching strategy at schools with both higher-rated and lower-rated ELSs. Teachers at schools with higher ELS effectiveness ratings said that modeling made implementing the recommended practices seem possible. “It's easy for anybody to tell you what to do but then if they actually do it, and it's successful, it's a lot easier,” commented one teacher. Allowing teachers to see what it looked like when a practice was implemented successfully and then gradually releasing responsibility increased teacher's confidence. One teacher explained,

I just like her modeling...especially with guided reading. She would do it, and I would sit there and take notes, and then she would have me read her my notes back, like what she did, and then I was able to see it, and then we did it together, and then she let me do it on my own... And

I feel like she made it like easier. When she does it, she makes it look so easy, and you're like, "Ah, I can do that." And then it's like, "Voila," and you do it.

Other teachers also described their ELSs' intentional use of gradual release. *"She did a lot of modeling, and then the next step was we co-taught, and then I taught, and I wanted her to give me feedback, so she gave me some constructive criticism that was really helpful,"* explained one teacher. Another noted a similar format, *"After she models it, then, when she has you do it, she'll still do half and let you do the other half...so that you're not really expected to put on the whole lesson until you get it down."* Lastly, another teacher described,

I don't feel like she's ever been like, 'You should do this,' and left it to us to do. It's always been like, 'We should try this and let me help you with it'. I guess it didn't feel like it was taking up as much of my time because at least she was there with me doing things too.

On the other hand, teachers at one of the schools with lower ELS efficacy ratings felt frustrated that their coach rarely, if ever, modeled practices. *"I think I got one lesson modeled all year on partner reading. I just wanted to see what she did, would do differently,"* stated one of these teachers. *"She never really modeled... A lot of times she just came in, she just came and wrote notes,"* noted another. Finally, a different teacher with a lower-rated ELS described a specific lack of modeling with guided readings:

[The ELS] was just like coming in, writing notes, "oh OK, what did you think was good, what did you think was bad?" and that's it. It wasn't just like, "well, next time I'll demonstrate how to," like the whole big issue was guided reading, guided reading, and we saw the video and things but she never sat there and said this is how you do guided reading. This is how you do what you're doing. It was never; it was just more like, let me watch you, and nothing ever happened from it.

Next Steps

This is part of a larger evaluation of the implementation and outcomes of SDP's early literacy initiative that concludes at the end of the 2018-19 school year. The data collected throughout the implementation of the ELS initiative, including the findings presented here, will become part of a four-year longitudinal evaluation of the ELS initiative that is scheduled to be completed in Fall 2019.

For more information on Anchor Goal 2 or the Early Literacy Specialist Initiative and to access additional, related research briefs, please visit:

<https://www.philasd.org/research/programs/services/projects/els-evaluation/>

Appendix A. Teacher Focus Group Protocol

1. To begin, how often have you worked with an ELS coach in previous years?
 - a. What was your experience like?
 - b. If cohort 1, has working with the ELS this year differed from this experience, and if so, how?
2. If cohort 2 and attended summer institute:
 - a. In what ways did attending summer institute prepare you to work with your ELS?
 - b. In what ways did attending summer institute prepare you to implement the 120 minute literacy block or other components of the district's literacy framework?
 - c. In retrospect, how might the district improve the institute experience to support the roll out of ELSs or the literacy block/framework?
3. I'm going to take you back to the beginning of the year. To what extent you feel like CLI and the District clearly communicated the role and responsibilities of the ELS working in your classroom?
 - a. What, if anything, was done do to introduce the ELS?
 - b. Were the expectations for, and role of, the ELS explained to you?
 - i. What about expectations for **you** when it came to working with the ELS?
 - c. What did **you** do to establish expectations for the ELS working in your classroom?
4. Please describe your relationship with your ELS.
5. How prepared is your ELS to work in your classroom and provide you with the support you need?
 - a. Do you feel the ELS is well informed about the District's literacy framework?
 - b. Is there any additional preparation or training that you feel would benefit the ELSs?
6. In what ways has the coaching provided by the ELS changed your literacy instruction?
 - a. Are there any types of coaching, support, or activities that you feel like are particularly effective for improving your instruction?
 - i. **Probe:** modeling, co-teaching, observations and feedback?
 - b. Do you feel any of the coaching or supports were ineffective or are there any you would like to see implemented differently or better?
 - i. What is less effective for improving your instruction?
7. How would you describe your ELS's role in helping address your students' needs?
8. How successful is your ELS is addressing your student's needs, and why?
 - a. ...your needs?
 - b. ...your school's needs?

9. How supportive was your principal of the ELS program?
 - a. What, if anything, has your principal done to support or facilitate you working with your ELS?
 - b. How would you describe the relationship between your principal and ELS?
 - c. How has the relationship between your ELS and principal helped or hindered the coaching that your ELS is able to provide?
10. Overall, how satisfied are you with the ELS program?
 - a. Is there anything you would do differently or change about the program's implementation?
 - b. Is there anything else you want to add? Any additional feedback or questions?