

The changing role of the reading specialist in school reform

The role of the reading specialist in schools where many students struggle with reading is changing. This article discusses the evolution of the reading specialist's role to that of reading coach and research on how reading coaches meet an important need in teachers' professional development.

Recently, a new role for the reading specialist has been suggested for schools with large numbers of struggling readers. This role conceptualizes the reading specialist not as someone who works directly with students (Quatroche, Bean, & Hamilton, 2001) but as someone who works directly with teachers as a coach and mentor. In this new role the reading specialist supports teachers in their daily work—planning, modeling, team-teaching, and providing feedback on completed lessons in collaboration with classroom teachers in a school. In addition, the reading specialist assists teachers by helping them understand the assessment and instructional cycle and how that cycle can help them as they develop lessons and organize their classes for instruction. In the No Child Left Behind legislation, the Reading First Initiative views reading coaches as a viable and important professional development component for Reading First schools in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

The purpose of this article is to discuss the changing role of reading specialists and their potential new role as reading coaches. The article begins with a discussion of the traditional role of the reading specialist as Title I teacher as it evolved under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act

(ESEA) of 1965 and the new role of the reading specialist as coach under Title I of the new ESEA of 2000. I also discuss research on the benefits of coaches in the professional development of teachers. In the second half of the article I discuss what reading coaches can do in schools. I end with some rules of thumb for effectiveness based on the experiences of reading coaches.

Reading specialists under Title I of the ESEA of 1965 and 2000

In order to understand the changes that are taking place in federal funding for reading specialists in the United States today, it is helpful to begin with a look at the original Title I funding initiated through the ESEA of 1965. A comparison between this original funding and the new ESEA passed in 2000 sets up the context for understanding a new role for reading specialists today in schools with large numbers of struggling readers.

ESEA of 1965

Title I of the 1965 ESEA was the first federal initiative specifically designed to establish funding for compensatory reading education in U.S. schools. The goal of Title I funding was the improvement of reading achievement in schools with many students living in poverty. While Title I was established as a funding source for these schools rather than as a specific program, over time Title I became a special program for at-risk students. In this program a “Title I teacher,” often a reading specialist, worked with struggling readers in what became known as a pullout program. Struggling readers would be pulled out of their regular classroom to receive compensatory small-group

instruction implemented by the Title I teacher or the reading specialist.

Under Title I, the instructional focus was on supplementary intervention for students who struggled with reading. Classroom teachers continued to teach most of the students, and those students who were failing were sent to the Title I teacher for supplementary instruction. In this model little attention was paid to the instruction provided by the classroom teacher. Further, there was often not much interaction between the regular classroom teacher and the Title I teacher in terms of the kind of instruction students received and their progress.

Despite the large amount of time and effort as well as the literally billions of dollars funneled into pullout programs under Title I, researchers found very limited success in these programs. This finding has been replicated in study after study (for a review, see Allington & Walmsley, 1995). Of particular importance was the finding that help through these programs did not lead to students' continued success once they were mainstreamed back into regular classrooms (Puma et al., 1997). Thus, what gains students did make as a result of pullout programs were lost once they reentered regular classrooms.

Of course, this is not to say that all Title I programs have been ineffective or that reading specialists have made no differences in the lives of students. Certainly, lives have been positively changed and affected. These types of programs are still used in schools throughout the United States today (Bean, Cassidy, Grumet, Shelton, & Wallis, 2002). However, this model of intervention and the billions of dollars that went into it have not delivered the anticipated significant improvement in academic learning of at-risk students.

The new ESEA of 2000

In the year 2000, Congress authorized the revision of the ESEA of 1965 and the reissue of Title I as part of that act. Like the old Title I, the new Title I provides supplementary resources to districts and schools with large numbers of low-income students to ensure that all of them obtain a high-quality education. The goal of the new ESEA remains the same as that of the old—improved reading and academic achievement for all students.

However, under the new ESEA of 2000, the process of ensuring this achievement has changed quite substantially. There are three critical features of this new process.

- *All teachers need to be highly qualified to teach reading.* Under the new ESEA, a major focus is now on high-quality first instruction. In other words, what happens in regular classrooms is considered of foremost importance. High-quality reading instruction is needed in every primary-grade classroom in schools with many struggling readers. This high-quality first instruction is expected to minimize the number of students who will need intervention or supplementary instruction and also minimize the number of students recommended for special education services.
- *The reading instructional strategies and programs used to teach reading should be scientifically based.* Scientifically based reading instructional strategies and programs are those that have been shown to be effective through (a) the use of rigorous, systematic and empirical methods; (b) adequate data analyses; (c) reliance on measurements that provide valid data across evaluators and observers and across multiple measurements and observations; and (d) acceptance in peer-refereed journals (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Many of these strategies and programs, but not all, are discussed in reports such as *Put Reading First: The Research Building Blocks for Teaching Students to Read* (Armbruster, Lehrer, & Osborn, 2001) and *Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction* (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).
- *Effective and efficient informal assessment techniques should inform instruction and assist teachers in monitoring the progress of each child.* Beginning in kindergarten and continuing through the primary grades, teachers will need to frequently check the progress of each child, identify when a child needs extra help, specify what kind of extra help that

child needs, and ensure that the child receives that help.

The changes in the new ESEA were made after careful consideration of a significant body of research pointing out what it takes to help all students achieve. For example, the need for high-quality reading instruction is supported by research indicating that the lowest performing students need the highest quality teachers. One of the most important findings in the research on teaching is that highly trained and qualified teachers make a significant difference in student achievement (Ferguson, 1991; Ferguson & Ladd, 1996). For example, in a recent study completed at Harvard, researchers found that four commonly used models of reading reform did not result in significant differences in first graders' reading achievement (Tivnan, Hemphill, & Ivins, 2002). Instead, there was a strong teacher effect. The best teachers produced students who progressed the most. In other words, the teacher was more important than the reading models or programs. Other documents, committees, and reports reiterate the importance of the teacher based on reviews of research on what matters most in classrooms (see, for example, Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

A second feature of the new ESEA legislation is that instructional strategies and programs used in federally funded schools in the United States must be scientifically based. Panel studies such as *Report of the National Reading Panel* (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) and *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow et al., 1998) have looked at several areas where there was a significant body of research from which to draw instructional implications and recommendations. Their findings provide some (but not complete) guidelines for instructional strategies and programs. For example, phonemic awareness activities have not been a regular part of the K-1 curriculum up until quite recently. But these activities need to be taught. There is enough research to tell us that comprehension strategies should be taught to assist students in their understanding of texts. The National Reading Panel report recommended several comprehension strategies that should be taught because they improve comprehension. While primary-grade teach-

ers have always taught their students new vocabulary words, they have not typically taught their students the meanings of new words and concepts as a regular part of the curriculum. But, especially for at-risk students, learning the meanings of new words and concepts is critically important. Teachers should be teaching them.

Finally, a third feature for ensuring reading achievement, especially in the early grades, is the use of classroom-based assessment to inform instruction and to monitor reading progress. A body of research suggests that frequent monitoring of student progress increases student achievement and decreases the number of students reading below grade level (Good, Simmons, & Kame'enui, 2001). Torgeson (1998) summed up nicely this new way of looking at beginning readers with his title—"Catch Them Before They Fall." Students benefit when their teachers monitor their progress carefully beginning in kindergarten, catch students when they begin to fall behind in reading, and provide intervention to get them back on track as soon as possible. If teachers do catch students before they fall behind, fewer students will be identified and targeted for supplementary instructional intervention.

Regardless of the quality of any program or teacher, there will always be students who need supplementary instructional intervention. For these students, even high-quality first instruction is not enough. There are a variety of effective ways to provide that supplementary instruction, but they will look different from the traditional pullout program. Reading specialists certainly may play a role in this supplementary instruction.

How will this new instructional model for federally funded schools with low-performing students be realized? How can educators assist teachers in these and other schools in providing high-quality first instruction and monitoring carefully each student's progress in reading? Here reading specialists have an opportunity to play a unique role.

Coaches in the professional development of teachers

Many reading specialists working in schools today are in an excellent position to assume the role of reading coach and mentor in schools with many struggling readers. These specialists have the

knowledge base to provide classroom teachers with the support they need to learn new content and research-based instruction and to assist teachers as they practice new strategies and programs in their classrooms until they become a part of teachers' daily work lives (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 1999; Fullan, 1991; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992).

Research on the role of coaches in professional development

Research on the role of coaches and mentors is small, although their value in the overall professional development of teachers is consistently advocated in the professional development literature (see, for example, Elmore & Burney, 1999; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992; Guskey, 1995; Hawley & Valli, 1999). I have found the work of Joyce and Showers (1995) to be most helpful in understanding more precisely the role of coaches in the professional development of teachers.

Joyce and Showers (1995) have a model of professional development that lays out the different kinds of support and assistance that can be provided to teachers. This model clearly supports the importance of reading coaches in professional development (Bennett, 1987; Showers, Joyce, & Bennett, 1987). The Joyce and Showers model identifies five potential kinds of support for teachers.

- **Theory**—discussions, readings, and lectures where teachers learn the rationale or underlying reasoning behind particular teaching strategies or techniques. This knowledge provides teachers with an answer to the question “Why am I doing these activities?”
- **Demonstration**—opportunities for teachers to directly see the activities taught to students either through modeling of lessons or videotaping. This knowledge provides teachers with an answer to the question “What do these activities look like in a classroom?”
- **Practice**—opportunities in the session and in the workplace to practice the newly learned skills in front of other teachers or small groups of students. These opportunities provide teachers with an answer to the question “When I try these activities, what happens?”

- **Feedback**—assistance and support about teachers' practice from peers or more knowledgeable others. This assistance provides teachers with answers to questions like “What worked well in these activities?” “What could I have done differently?”
- **In-class coaching**—collaboration with more knowledgeable others and peers on newly learned activities and strategies taught and practiced in classrooms to solve problems and seek solutions to problems that arise during implementation. This collaboration provides teachers with answers to questions like “What do I do next?” and “Where do I go from here?”

What does research show about the role of coaching in this professional development model? The important part of the model is its increasing strength when more of the components of the model are included. For example, Joyce and Showers (1995) found that when feedback and in-class coaching were added to theory, demonstration, and practice, significant increases were found in teacher knowledge and skills. Further, the most significant increases occurred in the transfer of training to teachers' daily instructional practice. In other words, it was when feedback and in-class coaching were included that researchers saw actual transfer of the newly learned activities and skills directly into teachers' classrooms. Lest we become too complacent about the ease with which this can happen, Joyce and Showers (1995) pointed out that it took approximately 20 to 25 trials in the classroom before new activities became a part of a teacher's repertoire of instructional activities and strategies. Thus, it is no insignificant feat for teachers to learn about a new teaching skill or strategy and then have it become a routine in their teaching.

Joyce and Showers (1995) argued that teachers need to have opportunities to learn about new strategies and techniques, to observe demonstrations of the strategies, and to practice and receive feedback on the strategies in their own classrooms. It is apparent that theory or demonstration, do not provide teachers with sufficient support and guidance to apply new instructional strategies and programs in their own classrooms. Research suggests that teachers need consistent practice in their own work settings (Fullan, 1991; Hodges, 1996; Smylie, 1995).

Reading specialists as reading coaches

The importance of coaching and mentoring of teachers is becoming increasingly clear in the professional development literature (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 1999; Guskey, 1995). In addition, professional development texts and programs now stress the need for the guidance of coaches in the classroom working side by side with teachers (see, e.g., Lyons & Pinnell, 2001).

However, other than the work of Joyce and Showers, there is little research on reading coaches to help administrators and specialists make important decisions about how to use reading coaches. For example, what makes an effective reading coach? How should reading coaches spend their time? Should they do any professional development with groups of teachers, or should they only work with individual teachers in classrooms? How much demonstration should they do, versus how much team teaching and direct observation and feedback? What education and experience should they have? All these questions await further research.

In Utah, we have worked with a coach and mentor model for reading specialists during the past seven years in over a dozen schools designated for Title I funds. The role of the reading specialist as coach has evolved over the period of the last several years in these schools. What follows is drawn from my colleagues' and my own experiences working with reading specialists as coaches and mentors to teachers. We believe our experiences may be useful to other professionals embarking on the use of reading coaches in their schools.

Coaching examples

Our experiences in Utah indicate that among the most important kinds of reading coaches' activities are teaching demonstrations and modeling of lessons. What follows is a compilation of the types of thinking and reasoning that our reading coaches go through as they plan for supporting teachers. Based on my work with reading coaches, here is a typical scenario that a reading coach might experience and a description of the coach's thinking through the issues involved in coaching and teaching.

During the summer professional development workshop in the district, my teachers learned about the importance of reading aloud as a way to develop the meanings of new vocabulary words. We had an outside consultant visit our district, and she told my teachers that reading aloud was an important way to help students acquire new vocabulary. My teachers were intrigued by this idea. Many of them had not thought of their reading aloud as a way to build vocabulary.

Some of the teachers became very excited about using read-aloud time to build vocabulary. But they didn't know how that time should be structured. They were unsure of which words to select for discussion, when and how to talk about the words, or what to do with them afterward. So I decided to do a demonstration lesson for several teachers.

I spoke with my principal, who helped me find substitutes and aides for teachers who would be observing me. I used a first-grade teacher's classroom. Before the lesson began, with several teachers at the back of the room taking notes, I explained what I had planned in the lesson. I told them what my purpose was and how I wanted it to proceed. That way, if I made changes, I could ask the teachers if they noticed those changes and discuss with them why I made them.

The book I had selected to read to the students was *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* (Viorst, 1972). I like this book because of the splendid vocabulary and relevant theme to which all students can relate. I began modeling the lesson with the first graders with a discussion in which I helped students activate their prior knowledge about bad days in their lives. Then I told students that we would be coming across some very interesting grown-up words in the story. I had written the four words on sentence strips, and as I showed students each word, we pronounced them together. I briefly explained what each word meant, using my own words rather than a difficult dictionary definition. I explained to students that I wanted them to raise their hands when they heard these words in the story.

My goal here was not to provide explicit instruction in vocabulary, but instead to make students aware of these unfamiliar words and to provide them with a beginning understanding of the words for later use. As we proceeded students became very engaged with the story and with listening for the words I had introduced. As each word was encountered, students' hands went up. I praised them for their good listening and repeated the sentence in which each word was used. At the end of the story, we discussed again what each word meant and how the word was used in the story. As a group, we generated other sentences using the same words. We decided that these were good words to listen for and to place on chart paper on the wall.

After the lesson, students were dismissed to recess while the principal supervised them. I had a vigorous

discussion with the teachers about the lesson. We discussed the value of the activity, how to select specific stories for the activity, how to select the words for students to learn, and how to encourage students to be curious about words and to notice them.

After this demonstration lesson, second- and third-grade teachers created vocabulary lessons together with read-aloud books. Over the next several weeks, I observed four teachers during a read-aloud using the vocabulary lessons they had developed. So I saw the same lessons taught several times. But that was OK. Teachers were not yet ready to devise their own lessons without assistance and support. Their lessons went well, and I was able to support their instruction and their taking risks to try something quite new for many of them.

This example demonstrates a typical activity for reading coaches. They work with a group of teachers modeling a lesson that has been discussed in a recent workshop. In the workshop an outside consultant may have presented information about the importance of read-alouds in building vocabulary knowledge. But the information presented is often insufficient for teachers to take the ideas and implement them in their classrooms. Big questions remain for teachers including, “How do I go about teaching vocabulary while I read aloud to my students?” “What does this look like in a classroom?” “Where and when do I do the vocabulary part of the lesson?” “Which words do I select?” “Which stories do I read?” “What do I say?” “How do I incorporate the vocabulary into the other activities I already do?”

Here is where reading coaches can be most helpful. A coach may explain as follows:

By modeling how to conduct the lesson, I began to help teachers paint a mental picture of what the lesson might look like in their classrooms. By discussing the lesson with teachers and having them write lessons in their grade-level groups, I provided teachers with support as they tried to think through the how-to of the lesson. I wanted to help teachers become “reflective practitioners” (Schon, 1983) who think about their own learning, reflect and adjust their teaching based on that learning, and develop understandings about what they do and why they do it.

This reading coach also may have observed teachers in their classrooms and provided them with feedback about their lessons. Once this coach had built a positive rapport with teachers, the teach-

ers would be comfortable inviting the coach into their classrooms for feedback and coaching. At this point in time, the teachers would see their coach as their support and view him or her as someone guiding them rather than evaluating them.

Another critical job for reading coaches is to provide feedback to teachers on their teaching. Here is a composite example of a teacher working with a reading coach after completing a lesson. The coach would have observed a read-aloud lesson and then “debriefed” the teacher as follows.

Coach: So, Margaret, tell me about the lesson.

Margaret: The other third-grade teachers and I developed this lesson together last week. I have to say that I was nervous about doing it, in part because you were here but also because this is not the way I do read-alouds with my students. My belief has always been that you should just read the story to the kids without all that teacher talk that takes away from the story. But I was encouraged when I saw that the kids listened to you when you demonstrated the lesson to us the other day.

Coach: So, how do you think your lesson went?

Margaret: Well, actually, I was surprised that the kids stayed as interested in the story as they did. I would have thought that they would become bored, but they didn't.

Coach: What did the kids do to show their interest?

Margaret: I couldn't believe how Mark, who hardly ever pays attention, was interested in the word *anxious*. The others, too, many of whom I would have thought would tune out with all the teacher talk—well, they really didn't.

Coach: (laughs) I agree with you.... I thought the kids were quite engaged. What was it that you did specifically to keep them engaged?

Margaret: Hmmm, I'm not sure I know. I did connect the words to the story and the characters. I think they liked that. I always read with expression, so I know they like that. I was surprised that they were actually interested in the words when we finished the story.

Coach: You may have tapped into something here that you can use in your teaching of reading in general, not just read-aloud time. What do you think you can do now with these words, Margaret?

Margaret: I don't really know. This is where I get stuck.

Coach: Well, OK, let me give you a couple of ideas. First, you could take the words the kids

talked about today and put them on chart paper on the wall. An activity I like to give students is to have them look in magazines or newspapers and find sentences in which the words are used. They cut out the sentences and put them up on the chart paper. That way they see and hear the words used in different contexts. You also could ask kids to listen for the words as they watch TV and listen to adults speaking. Students can write down the words and the sentences in which they heard the words. Each morning for a week, you could spend a few minutes talking about the words, who heard them, and in what context.

The thing about these ideas, though, is this. If you want your students to really learn the words, you have to keep coming back to them and repeating them over and over. You have to ask each child to do more than just look at the words. You have to ensure that each student practices the words repeatedly.

In this debriefing example, the reading coach is just that, a coach to the teacher who is teaching reading. The coach provides feedback to the teacher about her teaching. In addition, the coach assists the teacher in becoming a reflective practitioner—thinking about the lesson, what went well and why, what to do next, and so forth. Here is what the coach might have been thinking:

I wanted to help Margaret to think about her lesson and what went well. I also realized that she needed to be able to pinpoint what she did that kept her kids engaged. Then, though, I realized that Margaret didn't know where to go with the lesson—what to do afterward with the vocabulary words. So, I gave her several suggestions from my own experiences. At this point, I felt I needed to be very explicit.

Reading coaches on reading coaches

As districts and schools with large numbers of struggling readers restructure and reorganize their reading programs, they should consider the use of reading coaches in their buildings. Research on professional development suggests that teachers need more than workshops to learn new instructional strategies and techniques (for a review, see Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 1999). Teachers benefit from support and assistance embedded within their


schools and their own classrooms. Reading specialists who are coaches can provide that support.

What makes an effective reading coach? A research-based answer to this question is at least five years away. Right now, little research exists on the use of reading coaches in schools. This will change as more educators and researchers begin to understand their potentially critical role in the professional development of teachers. Within a few years, I believe research on professional development will include and begin to study in depth how reading coaches can assist and support teachers in their learning.

However, those of us who are involved in school reform efforts need to make critical decisions now. We cannot wait five years for the research. To assist educators now, I asked a group of experienced and successful reading coaches what makes an effective reading coach. Here are their thoughts.

Effective reading coaches have to have a greater level of reading expertise than the teachers they are coaching. There is no substitute for a knowledgeable and skillful reading specialist in a school building. This knowledge is based on what students need to know and be able to do. Effective coaches can identify critically important skills and strategies that students need to learn, and they know different methods of instruction to teach those skills and strategies.

Current knowledge of research and practice is particularly critical when classroom teachers enter the middle stages of knowledge about the reading process and high-quality reading instruction. For example, effective reading coaches know how to help teachers determine whether students have mastered the concept of the lesson and whether they need to move on or not. We have seen several teachers in one school continue to teach one phonemic awareness skill long after students had mastered it. The reading coach in this school did not know enough about the content and curriculum of phonemic awareness to know what to do once students have mastered one stage. As a result, the students and teachers stagnated. We have also seen teachers build inappropriate prior knowledge before reading a story. The teachers followed the teacher's manual of their basal program, and the reading coach was not able to show teachers how to



evaluate that instruction and choose a more appropriate prior knowledge activity. The reading coach in the school did not know enough about comprehension instruction to assist teachers at this intermediate stage of professional knowledge. Reading coaches whose reading knowledge is not deep enough are often not able to move teachers on to more advanced stages of reading instruction.

Reading coaches have to know how to teach reading extremely well and to have actually done it successfully. Reading coaches need to be able to “talk the talk” and, more important, “walk the walk.” In order to be credible with teachers, reading coaches must have been successful with students themselves. They must have tried the strategies they are recommending and be able to pinpoint what problems might come up and how to resolve them. This knowledge gives coaches credibility with teachers.

Reading coaches must be reflective about their own instructional practice. Coaches will be asked to conduct model lessons and demonstrations for their teachers. However, not all of these lessons will proceed well. When they do not proceed as expected and when mistakes are made, coaches need to admit them and point out their own mistakes. This is what it means to be a reflective practitioner—someone who can think carefully and thoughtfully about their lessons and pinpoint what goes well and why, and what does not go well and why. In this way, reading coaches build trust with their teachers.

Reading coaches have to be able to articulate what they are seeing in a classroom. Reading coaches must be able to walk into a classroom and clearly articulate the teaching and learning that is going on in that classroom. For example, teachers may be thinking they are teaching one thing but really be teaching something else. They may invite a reading coach into a class and say, “I want you to watch how I teach this skill,” only to have the reading coach realize that the teacher is really teaching a quite different skill. Or, teachers may not be aware of why they are teaching a particular skill that is required in their core curriculum or their basal reading program. Reading coaches must be able to quickly determine what teachers are

teaching—intentionally or not—and what students are learning—intentionally or not. Coaches must be able to articulate that knowledge in a way that teachers can understand.

Often times, this feedback is the first important kind of help a reading coach can give a teacher. Such feedback can help teachers see teaching and learning from a different lens, sometimes the first step toward becoming a reflective practitioner. One teacher remarked that it was the coach’s pointing out to the teacher just what she was doing while she was teaching that helped the teacher begin to think about her teaching in a more reflective manner. The teacher remarked, “I was not even aware that I was doing those things.”

Reading coaches need to support and nudge—balancing on a fine line between supporting the status quo and placing too much stress on teachers. Teachers need to know that their reading coach accepts them where they are and will assist them in moving forward from there. Coaches need to identify and articulate to teachers all the valuable knowledge and positive skills that teachers bring to their classrooms and their students. They need to articulate the positive aspects of each teacher’s teaching. At the same time, coaches need to nudge teachers along, pushing them out of their comfort zone to more advanced stages of learning about teaching.

Coaches need to be able to plan and organize “on the run.” Teachers may ask their reading coaches what they can do for their next writing or phonics lesson. They may ask for help with a particular student who is having difficulty. Coaches must have flexibility in their thinking and must be able to automatically assess a teaching and learning situation and make suggestions quickly to keep pace with teachers’ fast-paced days.

Reading coaches need a sense of humor. Coaching, like teaching, can be stressful at times. A sense of humor is necessary for a reading coach in assisting teachers through the difficult task of learning new strategies, routines, and procedures. Coaches with a sense of humor can accept things that inevitably go wrong, appreciate and enjoy the teachers and students in their school, and marvel

at the growth and progress made by everyone—including themselves.

A critical role

The bar has been raised on student achievement in the United States and on teaching quality as well. High-quality instruction is a first requirement for all schools with large numbers of at-risk students. This instruction only comes as a result of intensive professional development for teachers. But such intensive professional development does not come easily. Improving teaching quality requires great energy, time, commitment, and fiscal and personnel resources.


Reading specialists can play a critical role in the professional development of teachers. Most reading specialists have deep knowledge about the reading process and about high-quality reading instruction. Reading specialists can serve as coaches and mentors to teachers to help them apply in their classrooms the new strategies and practices they learn about. Research has shown that feedback and in-class coaching make it more likely that teachers will take ownership of the new strategies and teaching techniques they have learned (Joyce & Showers, 1995). Reading coaches are in a good position to provide that feedback and in-class coaching to teachers.

I am not suggesting that all reading specialists become reading coaches. It is clear that reading specialists have an important role to play in school leadership and instructional intervention in many schools. However, in schools where many students are far behind in reading, a reading specialist in the traditional role of support and intervention will not be enough. Such a school cannot have a reading specialist work with all the students who are behind in reading. There are simply too many students requiring intervention. It is in these schools that reading specialists can play the critical role of a coach to help teachers provide high-quality reading instruction for all students.

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