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SIDE by SIDE

The Idaho Reading First program finds success by offering targeted professional development to its literacy coaches.

Story by BRACKEN REED • Photos by ROSE RETTIG

BOISE, Idaho—"You've got coach in your title now, so you've got instant credibility, right?" That's the question Frances Bessellieu asks a group of literacy coaches gathered in a Holiday Inn conference room. The sarcasm in her voice is as thick as her North Carolina drawl, and the coaches are right with her.

It's the first morning of a two-day summer Reading First Leadership Summit—a gathering of the literacy coaches from each of the 30 Reading First schools in the state of Idaho—and Bessellieu and her training partner, Marisa Russo, have already earned the coaches' trust. Bessellieu and Russo get it. They've been there. They're not going to waste the coaches' time with vague advice and generalities. They're here to train the coaches in a very specific coaching strategy that can be implemented as soon as school starts in the fall. It's going to be hands-on and it's going to be candid about the challenges of literacy coaching. "You all are like middle management," Bessellieu says to the coaches, "you get it going up and you get it coming down."

In Idaho, literacy coaches may get the usual allotment of grief, but they also get practical, real-world professional development. It's been a hallmark of the state's Reading First program from the beginning, and it's had a measurable effect on the state's reading scores. Since 2002, student scores on the Idaho Reading Indicator have risen at a steady pace. The percentage of kindergartners reading at grade level has risen nearly 20 points, for instance, from 64 percent in 2002 to 82 percent in 2006. Third-graders, historically a lower scoring group, have also shown hard-won improvement, rising from 62 percent in 2002 to 67 percent in 2006. During the same time, the scores of the Title I subgroup have gone up: 77 percent of Title I kindergarten students scored at grade level in 2006, for example, compared to 56 percent in 2002. While linking these results to individual factors is still a work in progress, top-quality professional development has been an undeniable factor in Idaho's improvement.

Refining the Process

A targeted approach to professional development has been there from the beginning, says Rose Rettig, the current director of Idaho's Reading First program. A former teacher, Rettig also held a Reading First–funded position as a literacy coach and assessment coordinator for two schools before taking her current position.

"One of the directions we went in as a state was to provide the coaches with specific strategies," says Rettig. "Part of that was because coaching was so new for everybody—not just the coaches, but teachers and principals, also. Nobody knew what they were getting into. We felt like we could get up to speed on the curriculum, but we needed some really practical training in coaching and in how to support that position."

The training began with the Consortium of Reading Excellence, a consulting firm that conducted two separate sessions, one for coaches and one for principals. "That was a great way

to begin," says Rettig. "It helped define our roles right from the start. It articulated what we were there to do—and not do—and it gave us some strategies for doing it."

From there, the state provided training in Cognitive Coaching℠—an overall approach to coaching that emphasizes metacognition and reflective practice, and that helped provide a context for much of the training that followed.

Now heading into the fourth year of the program, those trainings have become progressively tighter in focus. A key to that refinement, says Rettig, is listening to the coaches. "We have monthly meetings that bring all the coaches together," she says, "and that gives us a chance to stay in touch with where they are—what they're dealing with and what their needs are. That really helps drive our decisions about what kind of professional development to provide."

And that's where Bessellieu and Russo come into the picture. Of Idaho's 30 Reading First schools, 24 chose the SRA/McGraw-Hill Open Court Reading program as their core reading curriculum. While teachers, coaches, and administrators have consistently given Open Court Reading glowing reviews, the explicit nature of the program has raised some issues for coaches.

Ensuring that a teacher implements the curriculum with fidelity sometimes requires a coach to provide direct guidance and feedback "in the moment." And sometimes, coaches are finding, that creates a tense situation. How do you deal with resistance? How do you deal with teachers who aren't receptive to what you're there to do? How do you avoid making it personal? Those are real-world questions and the coaches wanted real-world training. Rettig listened and made it happen.

Bessellieu and Russo are national consultants for SRA/McGraw-Hill. Bessellieu, a former Reading Excellence Act coordinator and director of reading at Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in North Carolina, also served on the federal Reading First review panel, reviewing state grant applications. Russo, meanwhile, is a veteran elementary teacher in southern California who has mastered Open Court teaching strategies. Together they are a dynamic training team, capable of covering both specific Open Court strategies and the finer points of coaching, complete with sidekick comedy.

Model, Practice, Apply

Side-by-side is an SRA-developed coaching model that, like Open Court Reading, has clear guidelines that are fully supported. "It's extreme scaffolding for teachers who need it," Bessellieu tells the coaches. "Not everyone is going to need it, but if you do, you'll have it."

The heart of side-by-side coaching is a seven-step routine. During the next two days, the coaches will have multiple opportunities to practice that routine using specific Open Court lessons as examples. For the six schools that did not adopt Open Court, those examples are less applicable, but the training no less useful. Bessellieu tells the group, "Our goal as trainers is that you will master each step of the coaching routine regardless of which curriculum you are using."

Trainer Marisa Russo guides teachers through a step in the side-by-side coaching routine.

To guide the coaches to that mastery, Bessellieu and Russo will use a "model, practice, apply" process, or what they also refer to as "I do, we do, we do, you do." They'll model the coaching process, they'll guide the coaches through it as a whole group, and practice it in small groups. Finally, a pair of coaches will demonstrate it.

After a thorough explanation of the coaching routine, Russo and Bessellieu jump right into the "I do" phase, using a lesson in the phonemic awareness strategy called oral blending. Oral blending helps students hear distinct sounds and understand how those sounds are put together to form words. In the K–1 Open Court classroom it also typically involves a puppet.

Russo, the Open Court Reading expert, challenges Bessellieu to model the oral blending technique. "You don't even have to use the puppet," she coaxes.

"I don't care for puppets," Bessellieu admits, giving it a doubtful look. The specific techniques of Open Court are not her forte, she confesses—the coaching model is her expertise—but she'll try it because they've spent some time this morning talking about the change process and the need to get both themselves and teachers out of a comfort zone.

Bessellieu puts the puppet on her right hand and begins to model the lesson. "Puh," she has the puppet say with her right hand. "Ig" she says as she opens the fingers of her left. "Pig."

There's a split-second pause between the two syllables, but as Bessellieu runs through more words the pause is occasionally less distinct, the syllables more blurred together.

"Let's stop here for a moment," Russo says, as she steps in. "That was really great," she says looking at her training part-

ner. "You totally had their attention. I loved the way you used the puppet."

Bessellieu shoots her partner a withering look, and as the coaches laugh it also becomes clear that Bessellieu has intentionally made a "mistake" and that Russo is starting to model the seven-step, side-by-side coaching routine. First step: Ask the teacher to pause. Second step: Point out something the teacher was doing right and give the students a quick assignment. "You guys are being great listeners," says Russo, turning to the coaches and using her kindergarten teacher's voice. "Can you do me a favor? Can you take a minute to think of three things in your backyard that begin with 'p'?"

Russo turns back to Bessellieu and continues to the next step, defining the problem. "It's important that students clearly hear the two separate word parts," she explains. "If the pause between the two syllables isn't distinct, students won't get the concept."

After Russo also describes the finer points of "p" versus the incorrect "puh"—another deliberate mistake on Bessellieu's part—she moves to the next, delicate step in the process. "Would you like me to model it for you?"

"Please!" Bessellieu responds, shaking the puppet from her hand. And so the modeling continues.

Hitting the Target

"The purpose of the coaching routine is that it helps you focus on the teacher—and ultimately on student performance—instead of the lesson itself," says Bessellieu. "What you're there to do is to provide correct modeling, at the point of use, with immediate feedback and practice for the teacher. Your concern is how to get the teacher to independence and to fidelity to the reading program as soon as possible."

Before repeating the modeling process, Russo asks the teachers to pay attention to the kind of language she uses while coaching her partner. "Anytime you can say things in a nonevaluative way it improves your chances of really getting through to a teacher," she says. "As a coach, you need to totally shift your thinking and language away from I/me to you/us. You don't want to say things like, 'Well, this part was good, but ... I would do it this way.'"

After modeling the routine, Frances Bessellieu leads teachers in small group practice.

After they have modeled the coaching process and oral blending again, the trainers get the coaches working in small groups, with one teacher taking the role of the teacher and one being the coach. "Remember, in the teacher role, you need to make a mistake on purpose," says Russo. "You can't just do the blending perfectly, as much as you would like to."

After the small-group practice, Russo calls for volunteers, and a willing pair of teachers comes to the front. As they act out the coaching process, the trainers stay out of the way, but are ready to interrupt if the coaching goes off course.

"That was great," Bessellieu says, as they finish. "You didn't follow the model necessarily, but you hit all the steps. It flowed. It's fine to put your own words and thoughts into it."

Before breaking for lunch, the trainers recap the morning session. "You see how this went from very directed to all on you?" asks Bessellieu. "That's where you want to take the teachers. As a coach, you don't want to claim ownership—you want to empower the teachers to own it. You model it for them. You guide them through it, several times if needed, and then you have them do it. By the end, they own it."

By the end of the two-day conference, the coaches will own the side-by-side coaching routine, and will have another tool in their belt to address specific classroom situations. According to Rettig, this training is one of eight formal training sessions the coaches will receive during the year, most of which are also available to non–Reading First coaches in the state. These trainings are becoming even more targeted, says Rettig. "As things have progressed we've really gotten our foundation under us," she says. "And now we can start to refine the coaching process. That's what this training is all about."

As they head to lunch, several of the coaches reflect on the morning's session and the ongoing quality of professional development they receive as Reading First coaches. "The best training we get is provided by the state or the people they bring in," says one.

"We went to the national Reading First conference in New Orleans and it wasn't nearly as good as what we get here in Idaho," agrees a coach from the same district. "No knock on those presenters, but most of the sessions just didn't apply to us. They weren't specific to our needs."

Meeting those specific needs is what it's all about in Idaho, and for Bessellieu, it's what makes Idaho a state to emulate. "The relationship between SRA and the state of Idaho is a model for that kind of interaction," she says. "If I could replicate it across the country, I would. What works about it is that they're very specific about letting us know what they need, and then we can directly address those needs. The trainings are targeted, and that's how it should be. ■