

Reach for the Stars: Visions for Literacy Coaching Programs

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This brief by the Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse is about reaching for the stars—stories of vision and commitment from educators in small and large schools. Everyone knows of people who are held up as ‘visionaries’ throughout history: Leonardo Da Vinci, Mahatma Gandhi, Jules Verne, Thomas Edison, Susan Anthony, or John Dewey, to name a few. We hope the stories told here are just as useful to you as the accounts of any of these world-renowned visionaries. Those who reach for the stars give us hope, inspire us, and teach us what is possible if we but dream.

Ideals, Visions, and Realities of the South Carolina Reading Initiative (Diane Stephens, Professor, University of South Carolina, co-principal investigator SCRI and Diane DeFord, Professor, University of South Carolina, member SCRI team)

December 1999 marked the beginning of a monumental educational change effort in South Carolina. Jim Hodges, governor at the time, called for stakeholders from across the state (educators, legislators, business leaders) to join him in a reading summit, where a discussion began about how to create a dynamic professional development program for K-5 teachers in South Carolina. This endeavor would be funded for three years by the state legislature. Each of those who decided to participate in what became the South Carolina Reading Initiative (SCRI) dedicated themselves to Governor Hodge’s call “to make a difference” for children in South Carolina. These efforts began as all visions do: as an image or concept in the imagination that has the potential to change the world, one person, one classroom, one school, and one community at a time.

The South Carolina Reading Initiative began, then, as a systematic commitment on the part of the SC State Legislature to improve literacy education for K-5 children. It was a collaborative effort involving not only the state legislature but also the State Department of Education, the National Council of Teachers of English, K-5 and university faculties. Now, eight years later, SCRI has expanded to include middle and high schools across the state. SCRI K-5 is now funded by schools districts, using a combination of federal and state (lottery) monies. SCRI Middle Level and SCRI High School are funded by the state legislature. South Carolina Reading First is funded with federal (NCLB) monies.

The overarching goals of SCRI are:

- To enhance teacher and administrator knowledge about reading research, theory, and practice.
- To encourage reflective practice through continuous examination of beliefs in relation to practice.
- To explore with teachers and administrators the knowledge and the tools to assess students, to create appropriate contexts for them, and to instruct them in ways that nurture them as fluent, flexible, and engaged readers.
- To engage teachers and administrators in personal and collaborative inquiry into reading so that they may consider reading as a complex and strategic problem solving process.
- To assist in the development of strategies that can be used for continuous inquiry and the improvement of teaching practices.
- To create a network of teachers, principals, and consultants who have a shared knowledge base about the teaching and

- learning of reading.
- To develop structures within individual schools so that educators can engage in an independent and ongoing process of change.

Professional development (see Figure 1) is offered to cohort groups of literacy coaches two days a month during the academic year for 4 years. These cohorts also meet for 2 weeks every summer. Coaches receive graduate credit for this professional study; since an M.Ed. is a pre-requisite to becoming a coach, most earn an EdS through SCRI. The professional development team for each cohort is made up of a university faculty member, a state department liaison, and three to four regional coaches. Each coach is supported in the field by the regional coaches. Within their districts, the coaches facilitate a bi-monthly study group for 10-12 classroom teachers and their principals. They are in classrooms at least four days a week helping teachers put into practice what they are learning about in study groups.

SCRI professional development is guided by several research-based beliefs:

- States, districts, and schools need to invest in teacher knowledge and improve decision-making power in order to make a difference for children. (Allington, 2002)
- Principals must be part of the endeavor to ensure adequate support and follow-through. (Richardson & Placier, 2001)

- Effective professional development is context specific, long term, addresses the needs of the participants in a school-wide setting; it is collegial in nature and based upon researched best practices. It must be well funded. (Richardson and Placier, 2001; Anders, Hoffman & Duffy, 2000)

This year, 2007-2008, SCRI is providing professional development to more than 180 school based literacy coaches. They, in turn, provide professional development for almost 4000 teachers. Over the 8 years of SCRI, literacy coaches have supported approximately 8500 teachers. Assuming an average per year of 20 students per K-5 teacher and 80 for the middle level and high school level teachers, SCRI teachers have helped almost 200,000 SC K-12 students.

The University of South Carolina received federal funding to study the impact of the original SCRI K-5 cohort. Reports from coaches, interviews and observations of teachers, student data, and surveys helped us understand some of the outcomes of this professional development effort. SCRI leaders wanted to know, "Did we make a difference?" Here is a bit of what we found:

- Changes occurred in the beliefs and practices of the teachers. Self report surveys collected by the State Department of Education at the end of the project, teacher responses to research tools (Theoretical Orientation to Reading

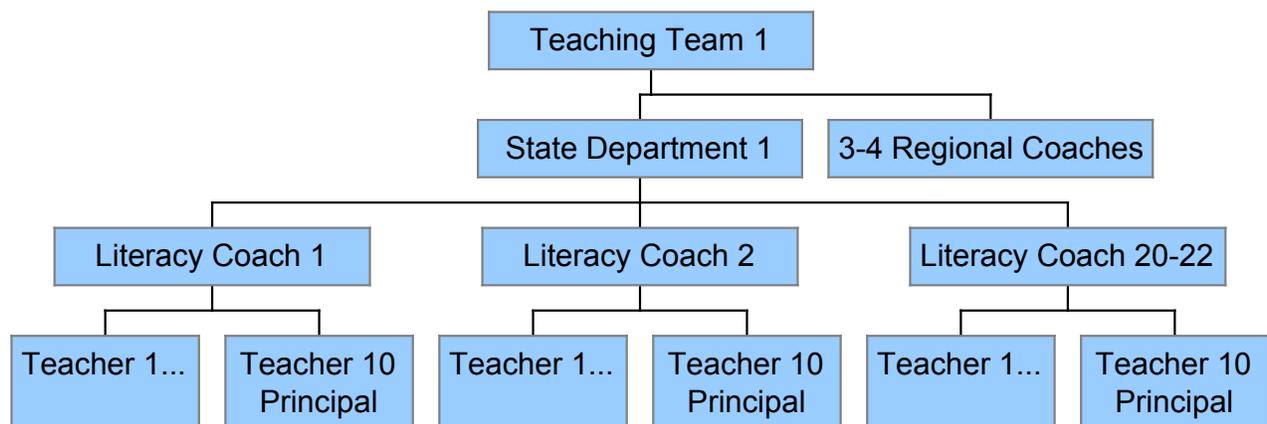


Figure 1. Professional Development Model for the South Carolina Reading Initiative

Profile (TORP) and the South Carolina Reading Profile), and observations of 39 case studies of teachers showed that SCRI impacted the beliefs and practices of participating teachers. From their perspective and ours, their beliefs and practices shifted toward increased consistency with stated SCRI tenets drawn from research-based state and national standards.

- Our case studies of teachers showed us the complexity of the change process—teachers changed in different ways as a result of different factors that interacted with their particular strengths and interests. As our research team discussed these observations, we informally noted some factors that seemed to impact different teachers:
 - The support teachers had within the contexts in which they worked
 - The knowledge, ability, and availability of literacy coaches
 - What was occurring in teachers' lives (inside and outside school)
 - The amount of reading the teachers did
 - The degree to which teachers reflected on practice
 - The teachers' stances--how teachers viewed their roles in the classroom (for example: to give information vs. to provide opportunities; self as learner, for example: do it for me or show me, help me reflect or think about this, tell me what to do)
 - The learner stance—how teachers took on new information (from reading, from demonstrations, etc.)
 - The teachers' willingness to try something new
 - Conversations teachers had with coaches, other teachers, and administrators
 - Materials and resources (e. g., professional books and materials for classroom libraries, opportunities to attend conferences or observe other teachers)
- The students who benefited most from SCRI were the struggling first and third graders who remained in classrooms of teachers in the initiative for the duration of the professional development. The children identified as low readers in year one who remained in SCRI classrooms (in SCRI schools) for three years read at higher text levels than did their low peers who had not been in SCRI classrooms (in SCRI schools). The struggling readers in SCRI had 5.14 years of reading growth across three years as compared to 2.18 years of growth for struggling readers who were in non-SCRI classrooms for three years.
- In order to control for cross-classroom spread of ideas in SCRI schools, we studied children's progress in matched schools without SCRI. We identified 55 fifth grade students who had been in SCRI classrooms in SCRI schools for three years and matched them (using initial English Language Arts scores on the state proficiency test at the end of the first year of SCRI in 2001, along with ethnicity, gender, and SES) with 55 fifth grade students who had been in non-SCRI classrooms in non-SCRI schools for three years. Fifth graders in SCRI classrooms who had been labeled as struggling readers in third grade (N=30) scored higher on the English Language Arts portion of the state proficiency test than did matched children (N=30) from non-SCRI schools. Pre and post demographic data showed that the percentage of students needing an IEP in third grade was cut in half for the same children in SCRI classrooms as fifth graders (from 11 to 6, or 20% to 10.9%). The percentage of non-SCRI students needing an IEP in third grade remained the same for the same students as fifth graders in non-SCRI classrooms (from 11 to 11, or 20% to 20%) (Stephens, et. al, in press).

SCRI has been enthusiastically received by teachers, principals and superintendents across the state. The following vignettes highlight some

of the stories that have come from the newest group of coaches to join our ranks—the High School SCRI. In their first two years, these 28 literacy coaches from 24 districts are coaching over 400 high school teachers. Together, the coaches, teachers, and administrators have reached nearly 30,000 high school students. The commitment they have made to improve literacy for high school students in our state, and their enthusiasm, is clearly evident in these vignettes.

Vignette #1. To the summit: Lessons in survival (Deborah A. Greene, SCRI Literacy Coach, Union County High School, South Carolina)

I must be honest and state that in the beginning I was truly clueless about the literacy coach position that I had been asked to assume. I had attended the grant meeting with the Assistant Superintendent of Secondary Instruction, and I was exuberant about the possibilities provided by such a position. When I began the journey in August 2005, I was still a full-time classroom teacher who was ‘receiving invaluable professional development.’ In other words, the district had not yet committed to my becoming a full-time literacy coach, so Year I (2005-2006) my training was spent learning Best Practice engagements at what we called ‘State Study’ and experimenting with my own students. At the time, I had no idea that I was merely an experiment myself. Fortunately for me, there was a change at the administration level in March, 2006. Suddenly, the district administration was fully committed to creating a literacy coach position for me. Whether my enthusiasm for the role had anything to do with the creation of the position, I do not know. All I am certain of is that my own students were flourishing. Struggling readers were reading and writing. Parents were amazed at the changes in their children. One parent whose child had never read at home because of comprehension difficulties noted: “What have you done for Kristie? I cannot talk to her anymore because her head is always in a book!”

Today, that same parent drives thirty miles to Barnes and Noble to buy her daughter books! Kristie comes by my room regularly to show me

what she is reading. The word has gotten around: “Miss Greene has some good books!” Not only have my former students come to me for books, but also students I have never taught. They have come to me to complain because they either cannot find a good book or their teachers will not give them time to read! To say the least, to respond to their requests, the media specialist helps me provide “good books,” and the principal has instituted Sustained Silent Reading time, not just in English classes, but for all ninth and tenth grade core classes. Today, students are given time to read in math, science, history, and English classes! This reading time is followed by writing or oral response to the reading. In seven months, library circulation has more than doubled the amount of books checked out during the 2005-2006 school year. The number of patrons has more than quadrupled!

But, Year II (2006-2007) school year did not begin as promising as I had envisioned because I began with rosy-tinted glasses and unrealistic goals in three key areas—support, providing evidence, and buy-in. In terms of support, I believed that having a new principal, one who had been involved with SCRI at the middle-school level, would be a plus. Unfortunately, his experience had been negative, so I found I had to overcome the misgivings brought on by those negative experiences. Consequently, I have learned how to build trust and to make myself useful and supportive. I volunteered whenever I could and I attempted to be proactive. In terms of providing evidence, I learned that successes need to be documented, and becoming a researcher was a new role for me! Because test scores are of ultimate importance at the district level, in January 2007, I found myself answering questions about what I had done first semester to improve End of Course (EOC) results. Luckily, I had provided sample EOC tests, High School Assessment Program (HSAP) materials, professional articles, integrated lesson plans, and weekly tips to improve reading and writing skills to the three area high school faculties. In response to district inquiries, I created a survey to evaluate the effectiveness of the information that I provided for teacher use during the first semester. This survey showed that few of the teachers had

read, much less incorporated, the strategies we had talked about into their instruction! However, I found that the younger teachers were more open-minded and they had experimented more than the seasoned teachers. Overall though, only my study group members seemed to be making a paradigm shift. This became the third area in which I needed to rethink goals within: Buy-in! I realized I had underestimated the amount of buy-in I would achieve with my fellow colleagues. However, I am beginning to see the pay-off of my dogmatic determination to succeed!

Today, not only are students coming to me, but teachers are also beginning to ask for my advice and for assistance. My principal and the three assistant principals now rely on my advice, from curriculum design to hiring/rehiring to sometimes venting frustrations. The Summer Reading program has been given to the district's literacy coaches to develop. I am a member of the district's instructional development team. We are finally entering the 21st century, and I am proud to serve in such an integral position. The district is still willing to fund my position, we have a newly beginning study group as well as a second-year study group for the 2007-2008 school year! I have reached a summit, but there is still much to do.

I have never truly considered myself a trailblazer, but in reflection, I realize that I always have been and that is probably the reason that I was chosen for this journey. The only regret that I have is that the training and experiences of SCRI-HS were not available to me when I began teaching thirty-one years ago, for these have been the most rewarding two years and the best professional development opportunity of my career. With much of the rocky road behind me and a powerhouse of inspiration from my cohort colleagues, I eagerly await Year III. With the impending consolidation of the three area high schools from which members of my study group were selected, I have already created a bridge of professional collegiality. Year III will present its own challenges, but my vision has been honed. I have removed the rosy-tinted glasses. I have broken down the barriers and laid the foundation. Year III will be a time to build, and to cement the

road to the ultimate summit.

Vignette #2. A vision of new teachers reading with special learners (Paula G. Miller, SCRI-HS Literacy Coach, Lexington School District Two, South Carolina)

Our vision was born out of a basic need and one new opportunity. We needed to increase the reading ability, reading comprehension, reading fluency, vocabulary and overall English language fluency for two of our lowest performing (and socially isolated) groups on our school's report card—our Special Education students and our English Language Learners. We felt that if we could create appropriate peer interactions, these students would have positive educational experiences in an academic area where they have a history of limited success. Then an opportunity presented itself that was a perfect way to support these students. Our teacher cadet teacher approached me at the end of last school year and said, "I need your help and I know with your new role you can help me pull this together. I would like for my teacher cadet students to work with high school students on reading. Currently they only get to intern in elementary and middle schools, and I want them to work with high school students, too. Could they do book clubs?" Our school's need and this new opportunity fueled our new vision to provide the teacher cadets with realistic teacher interactions by pairing them with high school special needs students and English language learners (ELLs) to promote increased reading and positive peer interactions.

After that initial conversation, I met with the special education department and the ELL teachers. They agreed that it would be a positive thing for their students, so I approached my principal, district ELL, and English Language Arts (ELA) (write out?) coordinators with a tentative plan. All of them were enthusiastic about the idea, and felt that it would be a good way to improve our students' reading abilities and social skills.

So in the fall, prior to beginning the book clubs, we planned a big breakfast, so the special education & ELL students and teacher cadets could meet one another. Lynn Summer, the

Teacher Cadet instructor, helped her students select their book buddies so when they came to the mixer they could focus on getting to know each other. That meeting was exciting, with 27 Teacher Cadets, 54 Special Education students, and 15 English Language Learners attending.

The Cadets in Action book clubs met every Wednesday during first block. The groups consisted of one Teacher Cadet student working with one or two special education or ELL students. The students selected any books they wanted to read. We had all different levels of books available. The teacher cadets, supported by Lynn, guided the students in ways that took into account their special needs. The special education department chair, Roger Smith, and I received a \$1,000 Mid-Carolina Electric Company "Bright Ideas Grant" which we used to purchase audio books, book sets, and compact disk (CD) players. The CD players had audio splitters so the book buddies could listen to a book together. The district also provided leveled books for us to use. The groups kept reading logs. These students loved being involved in the book clubs and they independently read, read with support, or listened to and discussed over 100 books!

Although we do not have standardized test data yet to see if this improved our reading scores, we believe the benefits of these book clubs were numerous. The Special Education and ELL students have increased language fluency, improved reading comprehension, and gained positive educational experiences, while also increasing socialization skills. The Teacher Cadets certainly gained valuable knowledge regarding special needs students with varying abilities and academic needs.

Vignette #3. Dreams, plans, and elbow grease! (Ricky Millwood, SCRI-HS Literacy Coach, Spartanburg High School, South Carolina.)

Spartanburg High is the 8th largest school in South Carolina with 60% minority enrollment. When the new South Carolina Reading Initiative for High Schools (SCRI-HS) started, as a history teacher, I wanted to be involved and wanted our school to participate. So, in the fall of 2005, using

state education lottery money to fund my position as a literacy coach, our school began this new journey. I knew that if we had success in our school, it would go a long way toward promoting SCRI across the state of South Carolina.

Our first school-wide effort was to increase book circulation by encouraging students to read more. It was a simple idea that began in one school and it grew into a real movement in our state. We have about 1,600 students at Spartanburg High, but in 2005, before the Literacy Initiative began, we had only 7,999 books in circulation. Half of our students ride buses and don't have time to come to the library. My idea began with wanting to see more books in the classrooms and to get more books into the hands of our students.

Our solution was to create a rolling library and theme carts. By creating these rolling carts, teachers could have these books in their classrooms and make books readily available for students to check out. Teachers now request a cart of books on a topic, and the books are delivered to them. We have seven theme carts into service. For example, we had haunted theme carts for Halloween and in February we had Black History theme carts. In the first year, 16% of our total circulation came from these carts, and our total circulation jumped from 7,999 to 9,428. Interestingly, we found that we lost no more books using the rolling library than we did through regular check out circulation.

With our rolling library a real success and based on feedback from our students, we decided to have a summer reading program in the summer of 2006. We had students telling us that they had never been given a book to keep! So, our summer reading program had a goal of getting books into students' homes. With summer reading, every student received a free book. We invited selected authors and one entire school day was devoted to literacy. One company donated their billboards to promote summer reading. The mayor and celebrities from the local news assisted us, too. We had over 90% of our summer students reporting that they read books. We had so many folks thanking us in the community for bringing this vision to the school,

too. People have donated money now to help us fund another summer reading program in 2007. Four schools in my region met with us in the fall to plan summer reading programs for their high schools for the next summer.

In the 2006-2007 school year, we created a school literacy flier, and I promoted the major ideas that were central to our study group in the flier within our school and our community. Our library circulation has topped 14,000 books, with the rolling carts representing 18% (3,000) of that total volume. There were only 11 books lost from these rolling carts. Our staff now realizes that it is our responsibility to increase literacy skills across the total high school curriculum. Our next goal is to increase our English Language Arts scores on our high school proficiency test (HSAP) by focusing on improved reading strategies across the curriculum. The last two months of the 2006-2007 school year, I have worked on high school Advance Placement test taking strategies with 10th grade teachers--our hope is that we will get a boost on scores. We are planning our second Summer Reading Program, too. I've begun meeting with companies who have started to donate support dollars for the 2008 program (we already have \$5,000!). We just had our Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) visit this week and the chair of the committee, a superintendent from Chester County, wrote that our school has a "strong emphasis and priority on literacy." I certainly agree with him! Recent Advanced Placement scores show that 82% of the students are now passing this end of year test, which is up from 70% in each of the past two years! There was also a 22 point increase in SAT scores this year, with Spartanburg High one of seven schools in South Carolina to exceed the national mean composite score in critical reading, mathematics and writing.

One of our math teachers, someone who was unable to attend our study group last year, has studied and tried all the strategies I sent out this fall. At Christmas she had a flier made for the whole faculty on literacy strategies that she is using in her math classes. I created and expanded a literacy team, and now have about fifteen people who will be on the team for next

year, including four administrators. We want to expand the SCRI program into more classes next year. My greatest challenge has been getting SCRI into such a large school. We have made tremendous progress.

I think vision is critical, but outreach may be even more important. This past summer, our regional literacy coaches' group made it a priority to get full state-level funding for our high school initiative. We organized ourselves, divided up the state, and wrote letters to every legislative member in South Carolina. Just last week, we found out that the SC State Legislature voted to fully fund this initiative, so we are guaranteed to have professional development support through the SC State Department of Education for two more years. If you dream big enough, plan well enough, and work hard enough, your dreams can come true!

Further Evidence

A recent doctoral dissertation looked at three high school literacy coaches across their first two years in this role (Clary, 2007). It echoed many of the findings of the first SCRI. There were several points that provide additional insights as to factors that facilitated success in carrying out the visions of coaches, administrators, and teachers.

- Teachers who felt supported in their learning and in implementing classroom practices reported a higher level of commitment. They felt empowered, and they were prepared to take risks to try new things. They reported sharing new knowledge more often with other teachers in their buildings.
- Professional learning communities (e.g., study groups) in high schools broke down barriers and feelings of isolation. Since teachers struggled with reflection, study groups offered opportunities for reflection and sharing to grow. The supportive climate of mutual respect and trust among members was key. It took time to build these learning communities, and it required particular facilitation skills on the part of the coach.
- High school teachers who were not trained

in reading were not resistant to new approaches, as the literature of change suggests. In fact, teachers were desperate for strategies and eager to experiment with the support of a coach acting as 'a guide on the side' or 'an extra set of hands.'

- Supportive leadership was a differentiating variable. Where administrative presence and support was felt, expanded professional commitment was noted among teachers.

Reaching for the Stars

To realize the dream that brought about the South Carolina Reading Initiative (SCRI), in all of its different phases since 1999, has taken amazing commitment and vision on the part of South Carolina educators and the State Legislature--but then, commitment and vision are both key ingredients of lasting change. Nanus (1992) maintains that a vision has five characteristics:

- attracts commitment and energizes people
- creates meaning in people's lives
- establishes a standard of excellence
- bridges the present to the future
- transcends the status quo

The vision to make a difference for the children and teachers in South Carolina and to hold high standards of excellence within all state agencies have made an impact. The national report card "Quality Counts," published by the respected magazine *Education Week*, ranked South Carolina No. 1 in the nation for improving teacher quality in both 2003 and 2004, and No. 2 in the nation for teacher quality improvement in 2005 and 2006. Collaboratively, we have sought to make these changes one person, one classroom, one school, and one community at a time.

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