



RESEARCH for *ACTION*

# Making a Difference:

Year Two Report of the  
Pennsylvania High School  
Coaching Initiative

## **Executive Summary**



O C T O B E R 2 0 0 7

## About the Study

This is the second year of a three-year evaluation by Research for Action of the Pennsylvania High School Coaching Initiative (PAHSCI). In Year Two, RFA's mixed-methods research continued to examine PAHSCI's implementation and its impact on intermediate outcomes including: professional community, leadership development, literacy-rich student-centered classroom practices, student engagement, and reform ownership.

In reporting our findings, we draw primarily from three data sources:

- Qualitative data collected in 52 classroom observations and follow-up interviews with teachers in seven PAHSCI schools;
- Survey data collected from teachers, coaches, and administrators across all PAHSCI Schools; and
- Questionnaire data collected from coaches, mentors, and school and district administrators at PAHSCI 2006-2007 Networking Sessions.



RESEARCH for *ACTION*

Research for Action (RFA) is a Philadelphia-based, non-profit organization engaged in education research and evaluation. Founded in 1992, RFA works with public school districts, educational institutions, and community organizations to improve the educational opportunities for those traditionally disadvantaged by race/ethnicity, class, gender, language/cultural difference, and ability/disability.

# Making a Difference:

## Year Two Report of the Pennsylvania High School Coaching Initiative

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### Introduction

In 2004, the Annenberg Foundation partnered with the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) to address the literacy needs of adolescents in high-need secondary schools in Pennsylvania through instructional coaching. They established the Pennsylvania High School Coaching Initiative (PAHSCI), designed to support teachers from across the subject areas to create literacy-rich classrooms in which students actively engage in learning tasks that deepen their content knowledge and strengthen their abilities to think critically and communicate well. While most high school reforms have worked to change school structures, PAHSCI has directly focused on changing classroom instruction by infusing research-based literacy practices across the curriculum, with the support of PAHSCI literacy and math coaches.

In this second year report, we demonstrate that PAHSCI is “making a difference”—that measurable progress is occurring. Coaching, when combined with the research-based instructional practices of the Penn Literacy Network’s framework, is improving classroom practice and increasing student engagement.

## What is PAHSCI's Design?

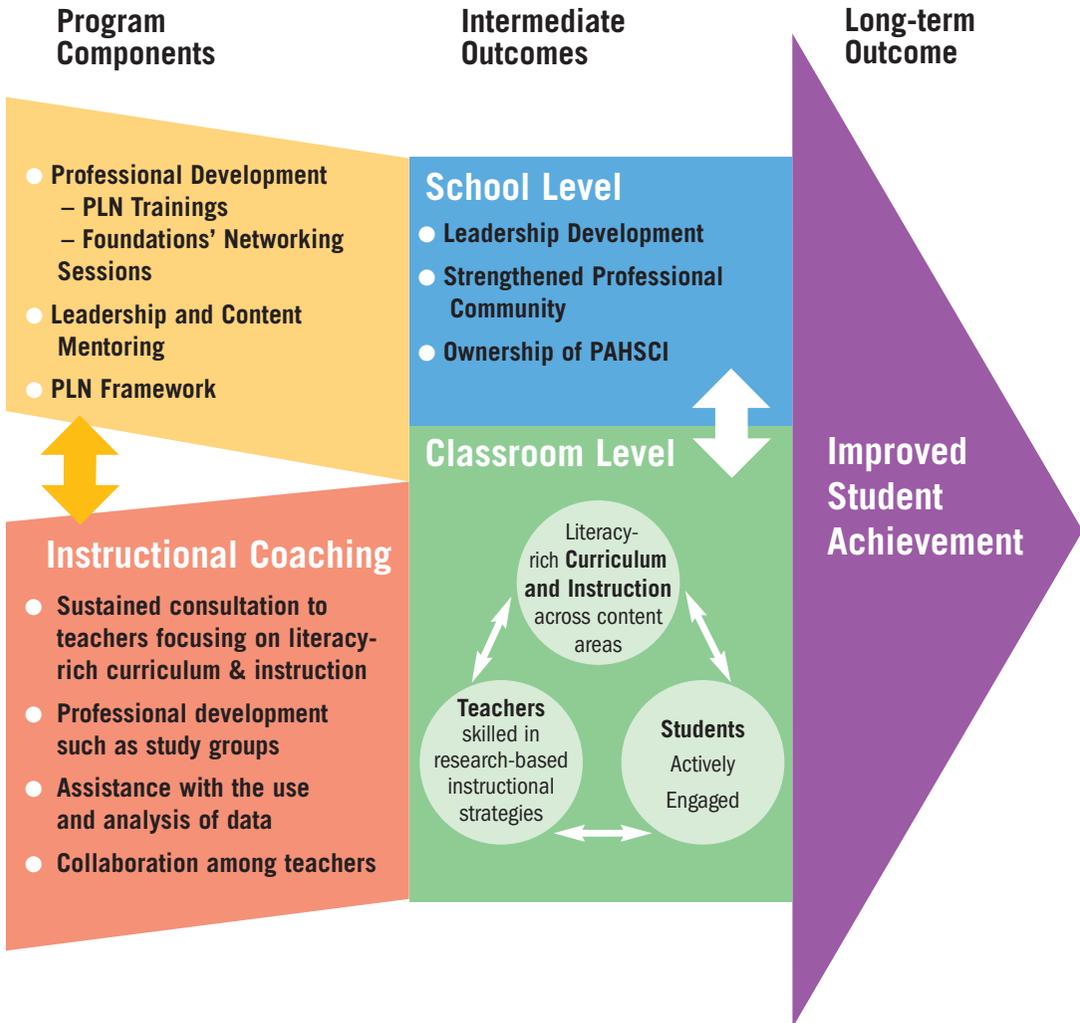
PAHSCI established partnerships with: 1) the Penn Literacy Network (PLN), a professional development program at the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania, which provides a research-based framework for creating literacy-rich classrooms and training in its strategies to coaches, administrators, and teachers and 2) Foundations, Inc., which provides leadership mentors who work with school and district leaders and coaches to provide guidance and oversight and content mentors who work with coaches and other school leaders to implement the PLN framework. Research for Action (RFA) is evaluating the program's implementation and success.

PAHSCI is ambitious in its scope as a statewide initiative and distinctive in its direct focus on classroom practices through instructional coaching as the pathway to improving secondary education.

The PAHSCI design is comprised of three central components working within a theory of change to improve the academic programs and student achievement in participating high schools.

The three central components are: 1) instructional coaching with leadership and content mentoring; 2) the PLN framework, a research-based curriculum framework; and 3) professional development. According to the design, these three components work together to affect three school level intermediate outcomes: leadership development, stronger professional communities, and deep ownership of PAHSCI by external and internal actors. At the classroom level, three additional intermediate outcomes occur: literacy-rich student-centered instruction, actively engaged students, and teachers skilled in research-based instructional strategies. The long term outcome of improved student achievement occurs when the program components create the intermediate outcomes needed to accomplish this ultimate goal.

## PAHSCI Theory of Change



## Testing PAHSCI's Theory of Change

**Finding 1:** Higher levels of participation in PAHSCI predicted higher levels in all of the intermediate outcomes. All of the correlations between participation level and outcome variables are highly significant,  $p < .001$ . This analysis indicates an overall robustness of the PAHSCI model and supports the argument that PAHSCI is having the intended impacts in participating schools and classrooms. In other words, the program's theory of change is working in practice.

While positive associations between high participation and the intermediate outcomes might be supposed, they cannot be assumed. This analysis is an important test of whether PAHSCI is working in the ways intended by its designers.

RFA's three year evaluation of PAHSCI includes survey research as well as in-depth qualitative research in participating schools and districts.

In the remainder of this executive summary, we provide a discussion of the impact of PAHSCI and the factors that are contributing to its progress, as well as challenges, for PAHSCI stakeholders as they refine the program and for other education reformers as they consider the benefits of instructional coaching as a strategy for improving high schools and student achievement.

### A teacher's participation level was determined by affirmative responses to any three of the following four questions:

- 1 Attendance at a Year One or Year Two PLN Regional Course;
- 2 Attendance at school-based professional development about PAHSCI at least twice a semester;
- 3 Attendance at study groups at least twice a semester; and
- 4 One-on-one work with a coach at least twice a semester.

# PAHSCI's Impact on Teaching and Student Engagement

*At first, I was very resistant. I thought, what are they [coaches] going to teach me? I've been around for a long time. And then, I listened. When I do use PLN strategies, I think I'm a better instructor. I thought I was wonderful but I was doing most of the talking. That's one of the hardest things, getting the students to participate. So now I do a lot of group work. I'm willing to try new things.*

– 10th Grade English Teacher

In order for education reforms to take hold they must have reach; they must be taken up by teachers. The reach must be both *broad*—increasing numbers of people embrace the reform—and *deep*—people have sufficient understanding of the reform to implement new practices in an authentic way. Through analysis of teacher survey results, teacher interviews, and classroom visits, RFA was able to conclude the findings below.

**Finding 1: Seventy-four percent of teachers responding to the Year Two Teacher Survey met at least one of the four criteria for our definition of high participation in PAHSCI-sponsored activities.**

Given that this is only the second year of the program, it is not surprising that only 18 percent met our rigorous criteria for high participation. Seventy-two percent worked one-on-one with an instructional coach (however, only 52 percent met with their coach frequently enough to meet the standard for high participation). These data suggest that PAHSCI has made strides in going broad, but depth of reach remains a challenge.

**Finding 2: According to teachers surveyed, coaches are working one-on-one with teachers from across subject areas, including those who work with special needs populations. Math teachers are more likely to work with coaches at least twice a month than teachers in other subject areas.**

PAHSCI coaches were trained to assist teachers across the content areas in applying literacy-rich instructional strategies to classrooms. Encouragingly, 74 percent of teachers reported that their work with coaches was applicable to their content area and 68 percent agreed that coaches addressed their needs as a teacher. Further, 52 percent responded that their coach played a significant role in improving classroom practice.

**Finding 3: Analysis of classroom visits shows that there were both English and math teachers implementing the PLN framework at a high level of rigor and success. However, overall, a greater percentage of English teachers showed facility with PLN strategies than math teachers.**

Both math and English teachers showed high quality use of PLN strategies, although English teachers were more likely to demonstrate competence. This evidence indicates that PAHSCI activities are shaping the kinds of lessons that teachers teach and, as some participants have put it, are “opening our minds” to conceiving new ways of teaching.

**Finding 4: In interviews, high participating English and math teachers reported a broader range of benefits from their participation in PAHSCI.**

In our interviews of teachers, both high participation and low participation teachers reported benefits from PAHSCI. PAHSCI aims to encourage all teachers to “try something new and improved” and though not without challenges and struggles, many of the teachers we visited and interviewed reported that what we observed represented a shift in their thinking and practice, attributable to PAHSCI. However, high participation teachers in English and math cited a broader range of positive outcomes from PAHSCI. The most frequently cited benefits were: increased knowledge and skill; increased levels of student engagement; and improved quality high school teaching. (The teacher survey data corroborate this overall finding.)

## **Conclusion**

RFA’s observations, interviews, document analysis of lessons and artifacts and quantitative analysis of the teacher survey data show that English and math teachers with high participation levels in PAHSCI activities are changing their classroom practices in positive, measurable ways. The support of an instructional coach to help refine their practice is making a difference and, as a result, teachers are changing classroom practice and their students are benefiting. Teachers’ enhanced knowledge and understanding has unique potential, because teachers mediate all relationships within instruction and the support of one-on-one coaching focuses and enhances the potential to change classroom practice.

# The Role of Coaching in Changing Instruction

*The coaching initiative has been amazing. Not just the training. Not just the new approaches to reading, and writing, which were great, but also the coaching—having a classroom teacher who we all know, who we all understand what qualifications they bring, having them...just the word itself, having them to coach you through this.*

—English Teacher

At the heart of PAHSCI are coaches providing ongoing instructional guidance to teachers. Based on coach survey data, coach interviews, and teacher survey data, our research identified three major factors that lead to a teacher’s use of PLN’s research-based strategies:

- 1 Attendance at a PLN course followed up by encouragement and guidance from an instructional coach;
- 2 One-on-one work with a coach;
- 3 Work with a coach whose professional identity was closely aligned with PAHSCI goals and who had a clear understanding of the coach role; and
- 4 Use of the Before-During-After (BDA) Consultation Cycle.

**Finding 1: Teachers’ attendance at a PLN course followed up by guidance from a school-based instructional coach increases the chances that teachers will use the research-based practices of the PLN framework.**

Our qualitative data—observations and interviews with 52 teachers—suggest that teachers are more likely to change their instructional practice when they attend a PLN course and receive support from an instructional coach. Further, they are more likely to have a greater understanding of the principles of the PLN framework and be able to implement its strategies.

**Finding 2: One-on-one work with a coach positively influenced teachers’ use of the PLN framework and its research-based strategies.**

According to teacher survey data, teachers who work one-on-one with a coach are more likely to use PLN strategies than teachers who do not work with a coach.

**Finding 3:** Teachers are more likely to use PLN strategies if they work with a coach who has a strong professional identity as a coach and a clear understanding of the coach role.

This is as *compared to* teachers of coaches who do not have a strong knowledge of their role as a coach, participate less in school-based meetings and PAHSCI trainings, and are less likely to believe that they have improved instruction and achievement. Because professional identity is tied to coaches' impacts on teacher practice, and coaches' understanding of their roles is a component of professional identity, this finding is a positive sign.

### Guiding Teachers to Deeper Levels of Implementation

Implementation of the PLN framework happens on different levels. Implementation ranges from “level one”—using strategies in isolation and without clear goals for how and why to use the strategies—to “level four”—having a clear and well-articulated rationale for which strategies to use and how to use them. Our interview and observation data indicate that coaches were effective in guiding teachers to deeper levels of implementation when they used the BDA Consultation Cycle in their work with teachers.

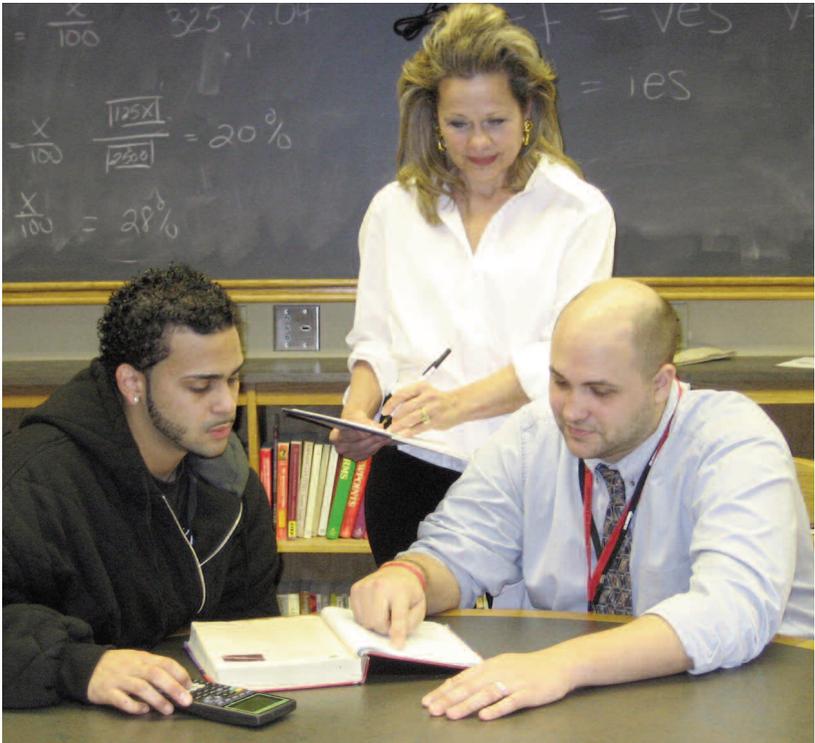
### Using the Before-During-After Consultation Cycle

**Finding 4:** Our data suggest that teachers are more likely to adopt PLN strategies when coaches use the BDA Consultation Cycle.

Coaches use the BDA Consultation Cycle as a way of structuring their work with teachers. In the teacher-coach BDA Consultation Cycle, the Before segment involves planning with a teacher; the During segment involves visiting the classroom and observing the lesson being taught and, in some cases, helping to teach the lesson; and the After piece is where coaches debrief with teachers and help them reflect on the lesson taught. According to our data, 73 percent of the teachers who were interviewed described going through some portion of the BDA structure with their coach and they reported that the support and guidance from a coach helped them to implement PLN strategies. However, fewer teachers reported completing the After segment of the BDA Consultation Cycle.

## Conclusion

Teachers are changing their instructional practices, and coaches are playing a large part in that change process. Strong momentum for instructional change was produced when coaches followed up with teachers who attended PLN courses. In this way, coaches helped teachers apply and make concrete what they learned in the course. In addition, other factors that contributed to a teacher's implementation of the PLN framework included the coach's professional identity being closely linked to PAHSCI, one-on-one work with a coach, and coaches' clear understanding of their role. The BDA Consultation Cycle was an effective framework for coaches' work with teachers. However, the After portion of the BDA Consultation Cycle is often sacrificed.



# PAHSCI Sites for Learning, Leadership Development & Strong Professional Community

*The coach's office has become a hub for professional development. The setting encourages teacher participation and supports previous professional development with relevant resources.*

—Administrator

PAHSCI both benefits from, and contributes to, a collaborative learning environment that supports teachers' professional growth and movement into leadership roles—two important intermediate outcomes that PAHSCI is trying to positively affect.

Our findings indicate that professional communities focused on teaching and learning are growing stronger in many PAHSCI schools. In addition, these communities and networks of educators are extending across schools within districts and across districts, creating a context for supporting deep learning and sustainable change. These layers of learning opportunities, in concert with support from coaches, mentors and administrators, are supporting the leadership development of variously positioned participants. At the same time, there are continuing challenges to creating deep, meaningful professional communities within, and across, schools.

## Learning and Professional Community within the School

PAHSCI seeks to create multiple sites of learning within a school. This includes individual, small group, department-wide, and whole school settings for learning. Coaches and administrators, with the support of mentors, play important roles in making this work possible.

**Finding 1:** In many schools, PAHSCI is supporting development of professional communities by changing professional development, creating new school-based leaders, and creating and broadening networks of support and learning within participating schools.

Overall, in interviews, surveys, and questionnaires, teachers, coaches, mentors, and administrators described increased collaboration and deeper engagement in professional learning among educators in their context.

**Finding 2:** Coaches and teachers with higher participation in PAHSCI were more likely to report strong professional community at their schools. High participation teachers were also more likely to emphasize the importance of school-wide implementation of PLN.

*And then, with the PLN, it was really effective for me, because I see the consistency. The kids are seeing [PLN strategies], in ninth grade, tenth grade, now that it's in its second year, they're seeing it in math, in science, in social studies. They're getting a common language of assignments....*

*High Participation Teacher*

Both coach and teacher survey data support PAHSCI's positive impact on professional community.

**Finding 3:** While the data reveals much cause for hope about the development and strengthening of learning-focused professional communities at PAHSCI schools, it also underlines challenges to building and sustaining professional community.

Despite all of the positive data cited in this summary, only 55 percent of teachers responding to the survey agreed that, at their school, "The staff and administration have established a high level of professional collegiality and trust." Key challenges include: development of shared beliefs; teacher resistance and lack of administrative support; and inadequate time for planning and collaboration.

## **Learning and Professional Community outside of School**

**Finding 4:** PAHSCI-sponsored professional learning opportunities effectively and consistently met the learning needs of a broad range of participants.

PAHSCI provides multiple cross-district professional learning opportunities for a wide range of differently positioned participants including teachers, coaches, and building and district administrators.

At the 2006-2007 PAHSCI centralized trainings and networking sessions, an average of 95 percent and 94 percent respectively, of administrators and coaches agreed that the session was useful and would enhance their work with PAHSCI.

**Finding 5:** The variety of PAHSCI sites for cross-district learning strengthens both school-based professional community and facilitates the development of larger learning communities and networks across schools and districts.

Our data indicate regional and centralized trainings and networking sessions foster both school-based and cross-school professional community.

**Finding 6: Mentors play an important role in facilitating participant learning and leadership development, both within schools and across schools and districts.**

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform noted in a summary of research that effective coaching supports collective, interconnected leadership across a school system.<sup>1</sup> We would posit that PAHSCI's addition of mentors to the coaching model works to enhance coaches' efforts in fostering such leadership.

Coach and administrator survey and questionnaire data affirm the utility of the mentor role. Eighty-two percent of coaches said that the monthly visit from the Foundations' mentors had been important to their development as a coach. Ninety-three percent of administrators said training with PAHSCI leadership mentors was very or somewhat useful. Administrative personnel changes and other confounding factors have led to tensions between some coaches and administrators. In these incidences, coaches have looked to their mentor teams to help negotiate a better understanding of roles and responsibilities.

## Conclusion

Instructional change research indicates that internalization of an overall approach and accompanying changes in belief and skills are much harder to achieve than simply trying new strategies in isolation. Strong professional communities are important to PAHSCI's success because they provide the context for distributed leadership and the deeper learning that promotes sustainable changes in instructional practices and belief systems.

The varied sites for learning have been effective overall. The Initiative-wide learning opportunities supported participant learning and helped develop professional community across schools and districts. At the school level, it is clear that administrators' support makes a difference. Our research shows that professional community is strongest when administrators encourage coaches and teachers to assume leadership and create time for teacher-teacher and teacher-coach collaboration.

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<sup>1</sup> King, D., Neuman, M., Pelchat, J., Potochnik, T., Rao, S., & Thompson, J. (2004). *Instructional Coaching: Professional Development Strategies that Improve Instruction*. Providence, R.I.: Annenberg Institute for School Reform.

## Sustaining PAHSCI: Year Three and Beyond

### **Accomplishments**

Our research indicates that PAHSCI is making a difference. It is having a positive impact on all of the intermediate outcomes that we measured in both our qualitative and survey research. Participating teachers across the subject areas are working with coaches and using PLN strategies, offering more opportunities for students to read, write, and speak as a way of more deeply engaging them in the ideas and skills of the subject content. Not surprisingly, the more highly involved a teacher, the more competently s/he implements the strategies and incorporates the principles of the framework into practice. The PLN framework and the side-by-side support offered by instructional coaches are catalyzing teacher change in the very ways intended by program designers.

Perhaps, most importantly, when teachers adopt the PLN strategies, their students are taking more active roles in the classroom and assuming more responsibility for their own and their peers' learning—quite an accomplishment, given statistics on adolescents' disengagement especially the dismal data on high school drop out rates in schools with large numbers of low-income students. Increased student engagement is also promising as an early indicator that may lead to improved student achievement.

PAHSCI is also positively influencing schools' professional culture. In many schools, PAHSCI is supporting development of professional communities by influencing how teachers learn together, creating new school-based leaders, and broadening networks of support and learning within schools. Because of PAHSCI, many school leaders are re-thinking their conceptions of professional development. They value the job-embedded professional learning model provided by instructional coaching and they are offering increasing numbers of participating teachers the opportunity to lead professional development about PLN strategies. The PLN framework is providing a common language and set of principles for planning and reflecting on instruction. Advocates for instructional coaching and the PLN framework are increasing.

## Challenges

PAHSCI leadership, partners, and participants begin Year Three with accomplishments to celebrate as well as challenges to address. At the June 2007 centralized training, PAHSCI leadership, administrators, Foundations' mentors, PLN facilitators, and coaches were asked to brainstorm what they needed "to meet or exceed their expectations and goals for Year Three and beyond." Not surprisingly, perspectives differed on the challenges ahead and the supports needed to tackle those challenges.

However, there was strong agreement around a number of themes:

- inadequate time for coaching;
- the critical importance of strong administrative support for instructional coaching;
- the need for continued resources; and
- a statewide commitment to instructional coaching beyond Year Three.

In order for PAHSCI's program goals to be achieved, all stakeholders must work together to overcome the challenges named in this report that can impede progress towards sustainability:

- District and school leaders must encourage teachers, especially math teachers, to participate in PLN courses and one-on-one coaching, the surest pathway to improved instructional practices. They must find the time necessary for coaches to work with teachers in the meaningful ways described in the BDA Consultation Cycle. Administrators have committed to doing this and supports need to be in place for this to happen.
- Coaches must continue to hone their skills in order to address teachers' concerns about: 1) meeting the needs of all students especially those with special learning needs and 2) strategies for classroom management when using PLN learning activities. They must also make full implementation of the BDA Consultation Cycle a priority.

- Mentors must support coaches in their learning and work with school leaders (including coaches) to remove the persistent obstacles that undercut coaches' work and teachers' continued learning. Mentors should re-enforce PAHSCI's belief that all high school teachers are teachers of literacy. An important focus should be the BDA Consultation Cycle. Mentors are uniquely positioned to align the work of administrators and coaches with the goals of PAHSCI and to address the tensions that arise among key players and that can stymie momentum for change.

## Lessons

*Three years is a good start, but teachers and students need the kind of support that coaches provide on an ongoing basis. Comprehensive high schools are stressful places for teachers and students. The personal attention and appreciation that coaches provide for teachers is therapeutic for teachers and in turn for students. Teacher support and collaboration within a school are essential for the school's growth.*

– PAHSCI District Administrator

As in our Year One report, we offer some early lessons from PAHSCI that are worthy of note by others interested in adopting instructional coaching as a reform initiative:

- Tie the work of coaches to helping teachers adopt research-based instructional strategies.
- Make one-on-one work with teachers a high priority and use a consultative process that involves conferencing before and after a classroom visit.
- Make certain that there is a clear, shared understanding about the role and responsibilities of coaches.
- Assign more than one coach to a school and intentionally build a coaching team.

## About the Authors

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