

Boston's After School
**Literacy
Coaching
Initiative**

FOSTERING THE NEXT GENERATION OF READERS

A collaboration of

Read Boston

The Boston Public Schools

Massachusetts 2020

The City of Boston

with appreciation to our funders

The Verizon Foundation

The Bank of America Foundation

The L. G. Balfour Foundation, *a Bank of
America Company*

The Nellie Mae Education Foundation

The Massachusetts 2020 Foundation

The Boston Community Learning Centers



"In terms of achieving its intended effects, the After-School Literacy Coaching Initiative is one of the most successful initiatives I've ever seen."

— Beth Miller, Ph.D., Miller Midzik Research Associates

BACKGROUND

In 2001, responding to recommendations from Mayor Thomas M. Menino's 1999 Task Force on After-School Time, thirteen prominent business and civic institutions launched Boston's After-School for All Partnership, the largest public-private partnership dedicated to serving children in Boston's history. Over its five years, the Partnership committed over \$26 million to serve Boston's elementary, middle, and high school children by helping to expand, improve, and sustain a broad array of out-of-school time programming through a series of strategic, research-based initiatives.

To determine how best to meet its goal to enhance learning in after-school programs, the Partnership commissioned a series of research papers to describe and analyze promising practices geared to promoting learning in out-of-school time. This research revealed that one of the most effective methods of creating high-impact learning activities is by engaging program staff in ongoing, onsite training and technical assistance from education experts. Taking its cue from these findings, the Partnership then developed an initiative to furnish this training and technical assistance with a particular focus on literacy.

The Partnership chose to concentrate on literacy because research shows that unless and until students are confident, competent readers, the door to future academic achievement remains closed. Thus was born Boston's After-School Literacy Coaching Initiative (LCI), a collaborative effort of five funders, three technical assistance providers, and, now in its third year, over 40 programs (and counting).

In addition to enhancing the work of individual programs, the LCI is also structured specifically to address a fundamental challenge facing the out-of-school time sector, at large. While funders and educators have increasingly come to expect that after-school programs should reinforce and enhance a child's formal education in measurable ways, the capacity of programs to provide such enhancement is often limited by a number of factors, including the educational background of staff and high staff turnover. As much as programs seek to prove their viability as promoters of learning, most find that they simply cannot elevate student learning as much as they would like. The LCI was launched to bridge the gap between expectations and reality by directly building the skills of after-school staff through intensive coaching and by structuring program practices around proven learning activities.

INITIATIVE DESCRIPTION

All program sites participating in the LCI are chosen through a competitive RFP process. To be selected, programs must: (a) feature a consistent program component focused on learning in which all students participate; (b) demonstrate the staff capacity and interest to participate in a year-long, intensive professional development cycle and (c) be willing to problem-solve and modify or alter certain aspects of the after-school program (e.g., program schedule) to meet the demands of the coaching.

The resulting cohort of LCI sites is not only high-quality, it is also fairly diverse. Some programs are run by multi-service agencies at neighborhood sites, while others are operated by independent community-based organizations (like the YMCA) at schools, churches and higher education facilities.

The coaching to programs is provided by the expert literacy coaches of either ReadBoston or Boston Public Schools, who work closely with the staff and directors to promote and strengthen literacy programming. Though each provider operates with a different staffing model, both ReadBoston and Boston Public Schools coaches employ a similar model of professional development, including leading in-depth, on-site workshops, modeling effective reading strategies and working closely with selected staff through an interactive feedback method. This coaching cycle lasts one academic year, where coaches visit sites approximately twice per week. (In some sites, coaching has been continued beyond one year in order to include additional staff.) In addition, sites receive book collections and training materials, as well as training on how to maintain the library and integrate it into the program. The LCI also provides stipends to facilitate programs' capacity to reserve time for coached staff to meet with coaches outside of direct service responsibilities. All literacy coaches are committed to working with programs in a manner that is responsive to programs' needs, resources and current capacity, yet rigorous and focused on achieving clear literacy outcomes.

The coaching revolves around the “interactive read aloud,” a technique of reading aloud to children in a group setting and encouraging them to interact with the text and each other in order to advance and deepen their thinking about what they are reading.

Coaches train after-school staff to deliver these read alouds effectively through a three-phase process of gradual release. At first, coaches model good practices for staff, then staff and coach implement read alouds together and, finally, the staff carry them out independently.

The essential goal of the read aloud is to foster a love of reading in children. Both research and experience strongly suggest that, as they begin to derive more enjoyment from and understanding out of books read to them by an adult, children tend to generalize this feeling to develop a positive attitude towards reading in any setting. Thus, coaches train program staff how to channel children's excitement for being read to into the practice of their reading independently. As the literacy coaches explain, if children can be led to associate reading with pleasure, rather than a burden or punishment, they are much more likely to become avid readers for life. So, even though the LCI represents only a small piece of a child's educational experience, it has the potential to exert a lasting influence on their lives.

Beyond the impact of the coaching on the particular children it touches, the LCI is intentionally designed to endure beyond the year (or more) when the coaches are on site. Because the coaching model focuses on improving the capacity of the after-school staff, alongside the program as a whole, it builds in the potential for program staff to continue leading effective read alouds and developing independent reading skills, regardless of the particular children enrolled in the program for the year. Moreover, in an acknowledgement that the after-school field suffers from high staff turnover, the coaches also try to train the program director alongside line staff to impart skills and effective practices to the personnel more likely to be at the program long-term.

INITIATIVE MANAGEMENT AND FUNDING

Daily operations of the LCI, including oversight of the two coaching organizations and of the evaluation, are managed by Massachusetts 2020. The president of Massachusetts 2020 serves as chair of the steering committee, which is composed of the private and public funders who support the initiative, as well as the coaching providers. This committee works together to develop the strategic direction of the initiative, raise resources, select sites, support the participating coaches and programs, and review evaluation results and apply “lessons learned” to improve the initiative. Funders of the LCI are: the Verizon Foundation; the Bank of America Foundation; the L.G. Balfour Foundation, a Bank of America Company; the Nellie Mae Education Foundation; the Massachusetts 2020 Foundation and the 21st Century Community Learning Center grant program managed locally by Boston Centers for Youth & Families.

EVALUATION

To gauge the impact of this professional development effort, the Literacy Coaching Initiative is conducting a comprehensive evaluation to assess change in:

- (a) Program culture, environment and program matics that reflect a greater focus on literacy skill development of students;
- (b) Staff skill development as a direct result of the professional development/coaching; and
- (c) Students’ level of interest in reading as a result of greater exposure to a more intentionally-oriented literacy environment in their after-school program.

The evaluation employs a mixed method approach (surveys, observations, focus groups and interviews) to track change over time. Dr. Beth M. Miller of Miller Midzik Research Associates has partnered with Brigham Nahas Research Associates to conduct the evaluation. The evaluators provided preliminary results to the internal team for the 2004-2005 year, which will be incorporated into their final report to be released in the Fall of 2006. Massachusetts 2020 has highlighted some of the key findings below.

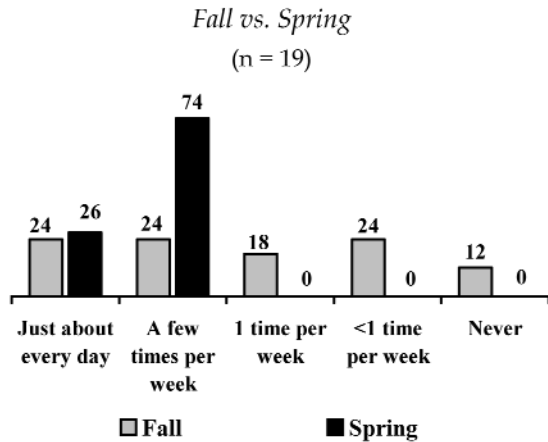
Program Change

Data show evidence of change in the program environment so that, over the course of the year, it became more supportive of literacy:

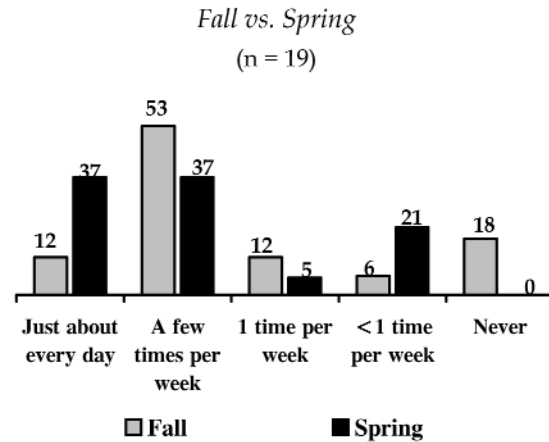
- The frequency of “read alouds” and informal reading rose sharply (Figures 1.1 and 1.2).
- Coaches report that the programs have more books in their library, and they contain a wider variety of books and reference materials.
- In the spring, coaches in 90 percent of the programs reported that there are “many appropriate books” available compared to only 35 percent in the fall. Coaches also report considerable improvement in the organization of the books in the library.
- Directors point to improvements in the library as a key gain, including: increased books in the library in all categories (e.g., storybooks, chapter books, non-fiction, poetry, etc.); increased organization of library; and increased “ownership” of library by staff and youth.
- Staff agreed that, from Fall 2004 to Spring 2005, the following were “a lot better”:
 - quality of library material (68%);
 - quantity of library resources (54%);
 - organization of library (56%);
 - attention to literacy in the program (61%);
 - and amount of time spent reading (58%).

Figure 1.1

Percent of Coaches Reporting that Programs Conduct Formal "Read Alouds" By Number of Times Per Week

**Figure 1.2**

Percent of Coaches Reporting that Programs Read Informally to Children By Number of Times Per Week



Staff Change

Both staff and their supervisors (site directors) perceived marked change in staff's capacity to lead effective read alouds. Coaches, too, observed that the staff they had coached made significant progress in upgrading their skills.

Of directors surveyed in Spring 2005:

- 100 percent believed the read-aloud skills of coached staff had improved;
- 85 percent agreed that coached staff were more excited about reading aloud; and
- 67 percent reported that the read-aloud skills of other staff (those not coached one-on-one) had also improved.

Of staff surveyed in Spring 2005:

- 81 percent believed that their skills in reading aloud had improved;
- 76 percent reported that they had a greater understanding of why literacy is important to their program; and
- 75 percent agreed that they were better able to manage behavior during read alouds.

Finally, coaches observed staff three times over the course of the year and recorded their observations along various criteria and specific skills. Staff demonstrated steady improvement in these skills. (Figure 2.)

Student Change

According to the adults involved in the LCI, change among children was evident, specifically as a result of the program's involvement with the LCI.

Of directors surveyed in Spring 2005:

- 75 percent agreed that children/youth were more likely to read on their own;
- 70 percent reported that the children in the program had become more interested in reading and literacy; and
- 65 percent judged that children's literacy skills had improved.

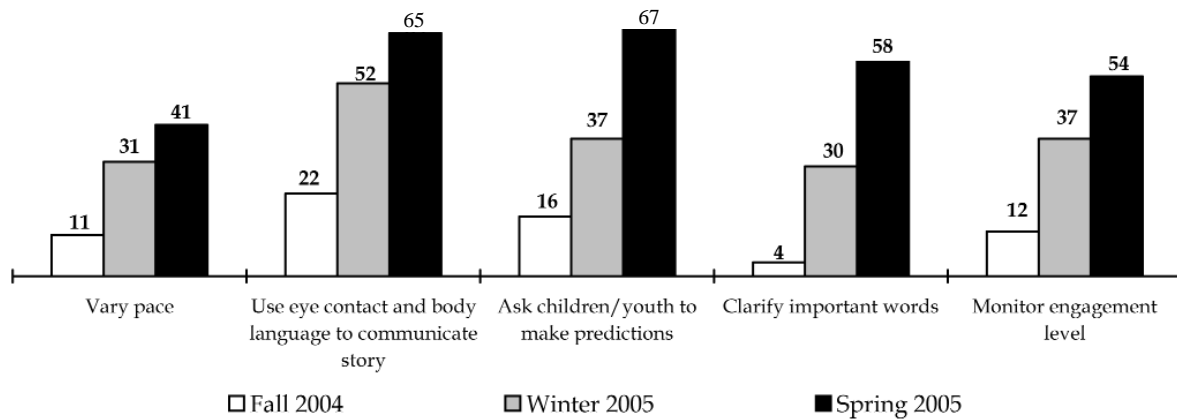
Of staff surveyed in Spring 2005:

- 96 percent believed children's interest in reading was "somewhat" or "a lot" better; and
- 90 percent perceived that children's reading skills were "somewhat" or "a lot" better.

Figure 2

Percent of Coaches Reporting Staff Practiced
Various "Read Aloud" Skills

By Observation Period
(N = 27)



BOTTOM LINE: In terms of achieving its stated goals of training staff in effective literacy practices and re-orienting programs around literacy-based activities, Boston's After-School Literacy Coaching Initiative is highly successful.

Phase Two of the Evaluation

The evaluators believe that the findings from the first year of the evaluation enable a rich and nuanced analysis of how the LCI brings about change in programs and where the strengths and weaknesses of the model lie. In addition to continuing to address the original research questions, the evaluators are focusing on two areas of particular importance in the second year of the evaluation. These questions are:

1. What specific changes do children make in their reading attitudes and engagement?
2. What changes do programs sustain over time and what factors support maintenance of LCI program change?

The first question will entail the introduction of the individual pre- and post-testing of students on a nationally-normed reading attitudes test, in addition to the continuation of other evaluation methods (i.e., staff and director surveys). The second question will require site visits to sites that no longer participate in the LCI to understand how a program's literacy practices may have continued without the presence of an on-site coach. Evaluators will also be examining a new type of LCI site, called "touchback," where coaches will visit sites with much less frequency (approximately once per month) in order to insure sites are continuing to implement practices learned through the coaching cycle of previous years.

The full evaluation report will be released in Fall 2006.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

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2005 – 2006 LCI SITES

PROVIDER	LOCATION/NAME OF PROGRAM
Boston Catholic Schools CONNECT	St. Columbkille After-School Program
Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center	Red Oak After School Program
Boys and Girls Clubs of Boston	Mattahunt Community Learning Center
East Boston Harborside School Council, Inc.	Harborside Community Center Choices Program
Federated Dorchester Neighborhood Houses, Inc.	Little House After School Program
Friends of the Hernandez	Hernandez Bilingual School
Greenwood Shalom After School Program	Greenwood Shalom After School Program
Hattie B. Cooper Community Center	Hattie B. Cooper Community Center
Hyde Square Task Force	Mary E. Curley Middle School
Inquilinos Boricuas en Accion, Inc.	Cacique Youth Learning Center After School Program
Jackson/Mann Community School and Council, Inc.	Faneuil After School Program
Mattapan Community Centers, Inc.	Mattahunt Elementary School
Ohrenberger Community Center	Ohrenberger Community Center After School Program
Roslindale Community Center	Roslindale After-School Program
Tenacity, Inc.	Harborside Community Center
The Salvation Army South End Corps	South End Afterschool Program
YWCA of Boston	GrandFamilies House
YMCA – East Boston	Umana/Barnes Middle School
YMCA – Hyde Park	Charles Sumner Elementary School
YMCA – Oak Square	Gardner Extended Services School
YMCA – Oak Square	The Rainbow Connection