

Enhancing Classroom Instruction: Arkansas's Literacy Coaching Initiative

Moving Learning Forward

From Policy to Progress:
The LEARNS Act



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Embedding Literacy Coaching Where It Counts

In schools across the state, literacy coaches are stepping in to expand teachers' capacity. The result is a win for both educators and students.

Today, only 35% of Arkansas students read at grade level. That's why strengthening early literacy instruction—from phonics to decoding and fluency—is one of the state's highest priorities. Through the LEARNS Act, Arkansas has made a bold commitment to building the foundational literacy skills of the state's youngest learners. The goal: ensuring that every student becomes a skilled reader by the end of third grade.

Under the law, elementary schools receiving a D or F letter grade from the state must provide literacy coaching to all K-3 teachers. The Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) has since hired and trained experienced literacy specialists in the Science of Reading and the use of high-quality instructional materials, deploying them to provide targeted training to early-grade teachers.

Principals help determine which teachers will receive intensive one-on-one support. Once selected, literacy coaches spend significant time observing the teachers in their classrooms, offering feedback, and modeling instructional strategies. Together with principals, the coaches review student performance data, set goals, and design action plans and observation cycles for individual teachers or teacher cohorts. Literacy coaches also attend and contribute to grade-level team meetings.

"We know that sustained coaching, as opposed to isolated professional learning, leads to responsive, high-impact instruction," says Dr. Kiffany Pride, the Assistant Commissioner of Learning Services for the ADE.



At first, you might be seen as someone from the state coming into their school. But over time, you want them to feel you're part of the team."

- Amber Harwell

The Key to Coaching Teachers? Start with Building Trust

Jackie Bailey and Amber Harwell are two veteran teachers who transitioned to literacy coaching after long careers in Arkansas classrooms.

With more than three decades of experience in English language arts, Bailey has taught nearly every grade level and served as an instructional coach for seven years before being hired by ADE. Harwell taught K-2 for 13 years. She has also served as a reading specialist for four years and as a state literacy coach for the past three years. For 2025-2026, both educators guide and support literacy coaches across central Arkansas.

For Bailey and Harwell, joining ADE's coaching initiative was a way to amplify their impact beyond a single classroom. "I wanted to move from an instructional role to a leadership role," says Bailey, who mentored multiple cohorts of teachers during the 2024-2025 school year. "It was a way for me to broaden my impact on student achievement."

Of the four Jacksonville North Pulaski School District elementary schools where Bailey and Harwell served as literacy coaches, three made student growth gains large enough to exit support status.

Despite such progress, teachers don't always welcome state-mandated coaching. That's why establishing trust is critical. "A lot of veteran teachers are hesitant to engage in coaching because they think we're there to evaluate them," Bailey says. "It's our job to help them understand that we're here strictly to support them in getting more students reading."



Bailey makes sure to lead with praise to forge a positive rapport with educators. “I always leave an encouraging note, a ‘glow,’ when I observe a teacher. That way, when I need to go in with data, it’s easier to have the challenging discussions about what needs work.”

Coaching cycles include classroom observations, joint debriefs, and student data analyses. Coaches individualize support based on each teacher’s needs. “Sometimes I’ll give written feedback or co-teach a lesson and come back with the teacher and reflect,” Bailey says. “The next steps are always actionable, and we both know where we want to go.”

Harwell believes investing in strong relationships with school administrators is equally important. Literacy coaches provide instructional expertise, but building leaders must reinforce expectations with faculty and hold them accountable for improving their practice. “For a coach to be effective, principals have to see them as an asset and know this is a partnership,” Harwell says. “You want them to feel you’re part of the team.”

Ultimately, the aspiration of ADE’s literacy coaching initiative goes beyond boosting student test scores for a year or two. “My goal is to walk away and be out of a job,” Harwell says. “We want to grow teachers’ capacity. We want teachers to understand that looking at student data helps them know how their kids are learning and what they need to work on. It’s what every teacher should be doing.”

The work is paying off. In partnership with Jacksonville North Pulaski School District’s administration, state literacy coaches have supported significant academic growth across participating schools through a focused, research-based coaching model designed to strengthen literacy instruction and student achievement.

Through this collaborative effort, Murrell Taylor Elementary—supported by Harwell—improved from an F rating to a C and has continued its upward trajectory, most recently earning a B. This steady progress reflects strengthened instructional practices, aligned literacy strategies, and a schoolwide commitment to high expectations for all learners.

Additionally, Bobby G. Lester Elementary, also supported by Harwell, advanced from a D rating to a C. Bayou Meto Elementary, supported by two other state literacy coaches, likewise improved from a D rating to a C. These gains demonstrate measurable improvements in student achievement, instructional effectiveness, and data-driven literacy practices.

Recommendations

1. Slowly and steadily build trust.

Teachers often feel anxious about being observed. Set a tone of positivity and optimism to show them you're there to support them, not judge. Laying an early foundation of trust makes tough conversations easier and more productive.

2. Use data as a spotlight, not a hammer.

Student data can illuminate important trends and gaps in understanding, but it may also spur defensiveness. The best coaches use data to drive conversations about what students need and how teachers can respond to help.

3. Principals: Have your coaches' backs.

"State coaches are here to guide and support, but building principals are crucial for long-term accountability," Harwell says. Principals have the power to create urgency and accelerate student learning by supporting educators in actively championing strong instruction and following through on expectations for change.



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