

Response to

Exploring School-Based Learning Coaches in Alberta

Alberta Education, November 2010



Introduction

The Alberta Teachers' Association would like to respond to the learning coaches strategy within the Action on Inclusion initiative. The Association represents approximately 36,000 certificated administrators and teachers who work directly with students, including those with special needs. The Association supports the principle of inclusion of students with special needs and believes that several key elements must be addressed in order for an inclusive education system to function well for teachers, students, parents and other stakeholders.

The Association could support the concept of learning coaches, provided that the Ministry of Education addresses several key points for implementation as outlined in this submission and further detailed in the enclosed Association documents, *Discussion Paper on Learning Coaches—Support for the Inclusive Classroom* (2011) and *Success for All—The Teaching Profession's Views on the Future of Special Education in Alberta* (2009), and related Association policy (attached as Appendix A).

Discussion

Classroom learning conditions must be optimal in order for student learning to occur effectively in highly diverse classrooms. There are a number of factors, extraneous to the teacher's knowledge, skills and experience, that may determine the quality of teaching and learning in a classroom, and these factors must also be taken into account in a systemic approach to building capacity for inclusive education. According to Association policy and research, the following conditions need to be in place: (1) class sizes should be small and inversely related to the number of students with special needs; (2) teachers and students should have uninterrupted time for instruction; (3) school boards should have the latitude to exclude from regular classes students who are highly disruptive and/or who pose a physical risk to other students; (4) teachers should have adequate time to prepare and collaborate and have support to participate in related professional development; (5) teachers should have reduced instructional time to allow for effective development, implementation and monitoring of individualized program plans; (6) teachers should have access to the services of well-trained education/teaching assistants; (7) teachers should have access to materials and resources, including assistive technology; (8) teachers should have access to professional support services, such as special education consulting services and health support services; and (9) teachers should receive coordinated support from principals, school systems, Alberta Education and other agencies that provide

services to students. A wide range of program and placement options should be available to meet the special needs and circumstances of each child.

There must be a shared vision for a learning coach initiative. It is important that there is a strong, clearly articulated vision for a learning coach program that reflects current research, as well as stakeholder priorities, needs and contexts. It should be linked to a philosophy that provides for educational and support services to students with special needs. This will ensure that there is ownership of the initiative by all. The vision needs to inform decision making and planning, which must also include consultation with teachers and advice from parents.

The role of a learning coach must be clearly defined and understood by all. Since the term *coach* has been used by the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) and other initiatives, it will be important to distinguish among specific roles within schools if there is more than one coach. It would not be appropriate, for example, to shift an AISI instructional coach into a learning coach position without providing a great deal of professional development, materials and support, as well as revising the role description.

The primary purpose of a learning coach is to support the development of teacher practice and, subsequently, the success of students with diverse learning needs. The coach's role is one of coaching and must not be evaluative. In cases where there may be a possible conflict of roles and/or responsibilities, it would be imperative that certificated teachers act in accordance with the Alberta Teachers' Association's Code of Professional Conduct. There is no agreed-upon description of the role and responsibilities of a learning coach in the literature or in practical application within school districts. It will be important to define the parameters and primary responsibilities as well as the expected outcomes.

Developing a learning coach program for supporting inclusive education is an ambitious undertaking and should involve Alberta universities, Alberta Education and other partners. Effective coaches require knowledge of a range of curriculum and instructional responses and must also be current in educational thought and research. It will be necessary for them to network with other coaches and receive ongoing professional development.

A learning coach program requires effective leadership. District and school administrators must provide clear and effective leadership for a learning coach program. They must have an understanding of inclusive education and effective coaching strategies and an understanding of the supports required to create an effective program. Substantial, ongoing funding and

professional development are critical to developing the expertise required to prepare teachers as coaches prior to the expectation that there will be full implementation of the coaching model.

Success of a learning coach initiative will rely on the characteristics and qualities of the learning coach. The learning coach must have expertise and experience in working with students with special learning needs and knowledge of a range of inclusive education programs and services. They also need to have expertise in the areas of pedagogies and effective teaching strategies to support students. Finally, they will also need to have professional and personal qualities that would support a coaching role, such as the capacity (1) to adhere to high professional and ethical standards, (2) to build trust, (3) to collaborate with others, (4) to commit to participating in and supporting ongoing professional development, (5) to communicate effectively orally and in writing, (6) to create and support teams, (7) to nurture positive relationships and (8) to know how to engage in practical problem solving.

Learning coaches and teachers must have dedicated time to coach and debrief. The process of coaching is a reflective exercise that enables teachers to engage in inquiry and collaborate and experiment with innovative practices with support and encouragement. This requires ongoing conversations between teachers and coaches that cannot take place during instructional time or in a hurried fashion before or after the school day. Teachers and learning coaches require this time to plan for coaching, conduct the coaching and debrief the experience in order for it to be meaningful and effective. This will ensure that appropriate instructional and assessment strategies for students with diverse learning needs can be developed.

There are many inclusive education initiatives converging on schools, such as those involving wraparound services and Success in Schools plans for children and youth in care. In addition, learning coaches should not be responsible for developing and writing individualized program plans for all of the students in a school. Were the learning coach to be responsible for all of the administrative aspects of these initiatives, it is possible that the time actually available for coaching would be minimal. Learning coaches should spend the bulk of their time with teachers during the school day in the debriefing and planning process.

Sufficient funding from the ministry must be provided to create effective learning coaches programs. As with any new initiative, a detailed, yet flexible implementation plan is essential, with a long-term commitment to funding and resources so the program can respond to the ever-changing nature of school and classroom contexts. Providing learning coaches will not eliminate

the need for appropriate and ongoing supports available in classrooms, schools and school districts.

Conclusion

The Association is willing to continue to collaborate with the Ministry of Education to further examine the role of learning coaches as one support in an inclusive education system where classroom conditions are optimal, so that teaching and learning can occur in a safe and caring environment. The success of a learning coach program will require extensive planning, flexibility and a long-term commitment to funding and resources.