



POLICY BRIEF

Michigan's Literacy Coaching Landscape

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Introduction

Literacy coaching has become a popular policy lever to improve teachers' literacy instruction and student achievement. As of 2022, Michigan is one of 24 states that provides funding and support for literacy coaching.¹

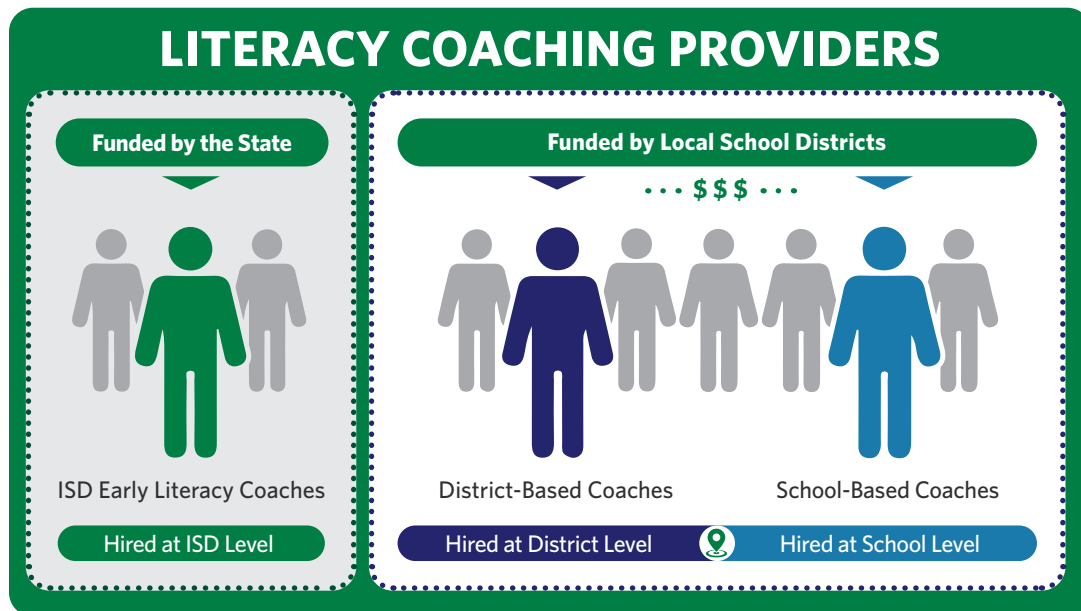
Coaching is distinct from other forms of professional development, such as large-group workshops, because it is job-embedded (i.e., it occurs within the context of teachers' classrooms) and targeted to individual teachers' needs. While there is little evidence to support the effectiveness of traditional forms of professional development, coaching has been found to improve both teachers' instruction and student achievement.²

In Michigan, funding for literacy coaches is tied to the Read by Grade Three Law, which was passed in 2016 to improve K-3 literacy achievement.³ Currently, the state allocates \$31.5 million annually to fund literacy coaches at the Intermediate School District (ISD) level, and each ISD is eligible to receive up to \$112,500 to fund one literacy coach.⁴ Governor Gretchen Whitmer proposed expanding funding for literacy coaching to \$42 million annually in her Fiscal Year 2024 budget.⁵ Under this increase, each ISD would be eligible to receive up to \$125,000 to fund two literacy coaches.

EPIC's recent report, [Michigan's Literacy Coaching Landscape](#), explores how literacy coaching is currently being implemented.⁶ This companion brief highlights major findings from the longer report related to the key challenges literacy coaches faced during the 2021-22 school year. In particular, we show that Michigan's literacy coaches work with a large number of teachers and across many districts and schools, and face substantial constraints on the amount of time they

have to work with teachers to improve their literacy practice. Moreover, while ISD Early Literacy Coaches funded under the Read by Grade Three Law receive multiple forms of assistance to support their work, school and district literacy coaches receive far fewer resources. In short, for coaching to be as effective as possible at improving teacher practice and, ultimately, student achievement, Michigan must invest more in ensuring that coaches have the time and resources necessary to do their jobs well.

Our intention with this brief is to provide evidence from the coaches themselves to inform how Michigan allocates funds to coaching and early literacy in future state budgets. We report findings from a statewide survey of 631 literacy coaches in 2021-22 (a 54% response rate), including 164 ISD Early Literacy Coaches, who are funded under the Read by Grade Three Law, and 467 district- and school-based literacy coaches who are funded by their local school districts. We refer to district-based literacy coaches as those districts hire to support educators within that district (i.e., they may work in multiple schools across the district), and school-based literacy coaches as those hired to work with educators in a particular school.



The sample of literacy coaches who took our survey was broadly representative of the population of literacy coaches across the state in terms of their demographic characteristics and the educational credentials they possess (e.g., certifications, endorsements). For a more detailed description of data and methods, see the [full report](#).

KEY FINDINGS

Michigan Literacy Coaches Are Spread Too Thin

While the Read by Grade Three Law does not require ISD Early Literacy Coaches to work with a particular number of teachers, and there are no studies we know of that randomly assign coaches to different numbers of teachers, the best available research finds that literacy coaching

is effective in raising student achievement when coaches work with 14 teachers.⁷ However, Michigan literacy coaches, particularly ISD- and district-based literacy coaches, work with 18 educators on average, including 15 teachers and three other literacy coaches (see Table 1). The educators with whom they work are also spread across multiple buildings: four schools on average and, for ISD Early Literacy Coaches, across more than two districts. Thus, coaches may spend valuable time traveling between buildings that they could otherwise spend working with teachers, especially in remote locations where buildings are far apart.

TABLE 1. Number of Educators Literacy Coaches Work With			
	Type of Literacy Coach		
	ISD Early Literacy Coaches	District-Based Literacy Coaches	School-Based Literacy Coaches
Teachers	15.4 (13.0)	15.5 (13.5)	8.0*** (5.8)
Other Literacy Coaches	3.1 (8.5)	2.2 (6.1)	0.9** (5.8)
Schools	3.7 (3.0)	4.4 (4.0)	1.1*** (0.5)
Districts	2.4 (1.8)	1.0*** (0.7)	0.9*** (0.8)

*Note: Literacy coaches were asked how many teachers and other literacy coaches they had provided services to, and in how many schools and districts they had provided one-on-one literacy coaching for teachers since the beginning of the school year. Cells provide mean responses with standard deviations in parentheses. $p < 0.10$ +, $p < 0.05$ *, $p < 0.01$ **, $p < 0.001$ *** indicates statistically significant differences between ISD and district- or school-based literacy coaches. Source: 2021-22 EPIC Read by Grade Three Law survey of educators.*

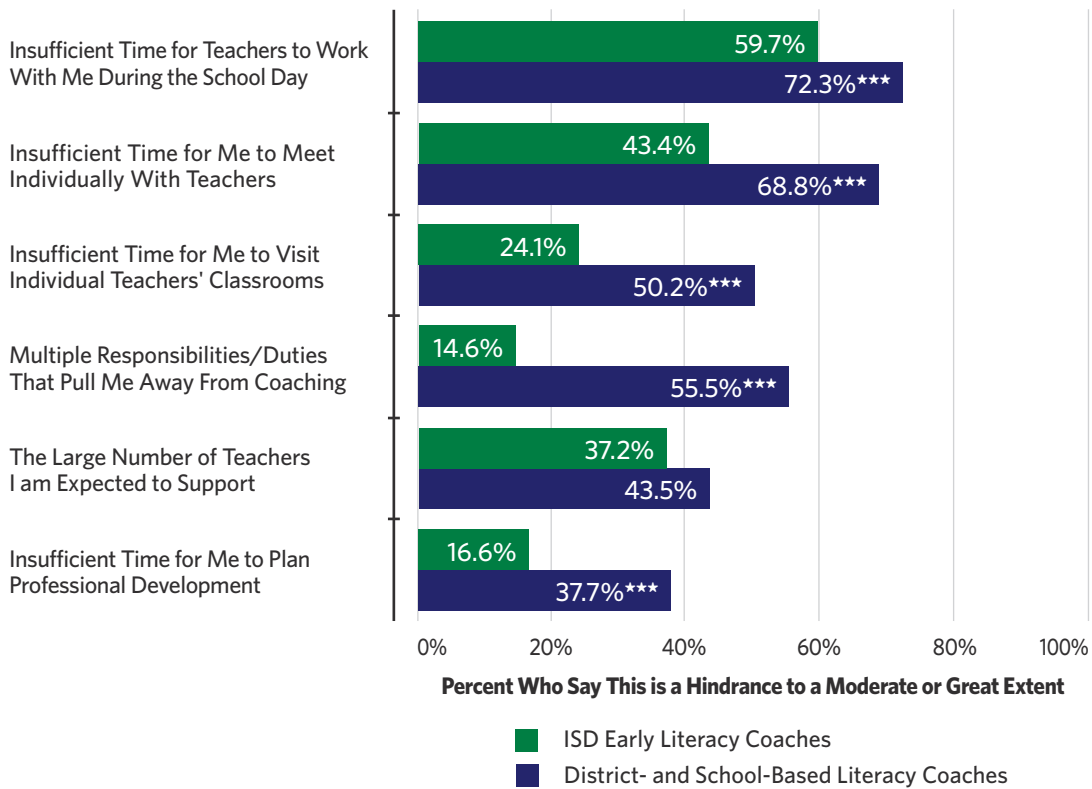
Although Michigan literacy coaches serve many educators and buildings, only about a third of K-3 teachers receive literacy coaching. Part of the challenge is that, as of 2021-22, there is only one literacy coach for every 16 K-3 teachers in the state, and they are not distributed evenly across regions. In other words, there are simply not enough literacy coaches—and certainly not enough in every region—to serve an “ideal” number of teachers.

While school-based literacy coaches work with significantly fewer educators and buildings, they also work with students more often than ISD- or district-based coaches. This makes it difficult to determine whether their workload is manageable.

Michigan Literacy Coaches Face Substantial Time Constraints

The greatest challenge for literacy coaches is insufficient time for teachers to work with them during the school day. Figure 1 shows the most common challenges reported by literacy coaches. Over 70% of district- and school-based literacy coaches and 60% of ISD Early Literacy Coaches said that this was a hindrance to a moderate or great extent. Other common challenges also reflect time constraints, such as insufficient time for coaches to meet individually with teachers and visit teachers' classrooms.

FIGURE 1. Challenges Michigan Literacy Coaches Face



*Note: Literacy coaches were asked, “To what extent is each of the following a hindrance to your work?” (Not at all, To a small extent, To a moderate extent, To a great extent). $p < 0.10$ +, $p < 0.05$ *, $p < 0.01$ **, $p < 0.001$ *** indicates statistically significant differences between ISD and district- or school-based literacy coaches. Source: 2021-22 EPIC Read by Grade Three Law survey of educators.*

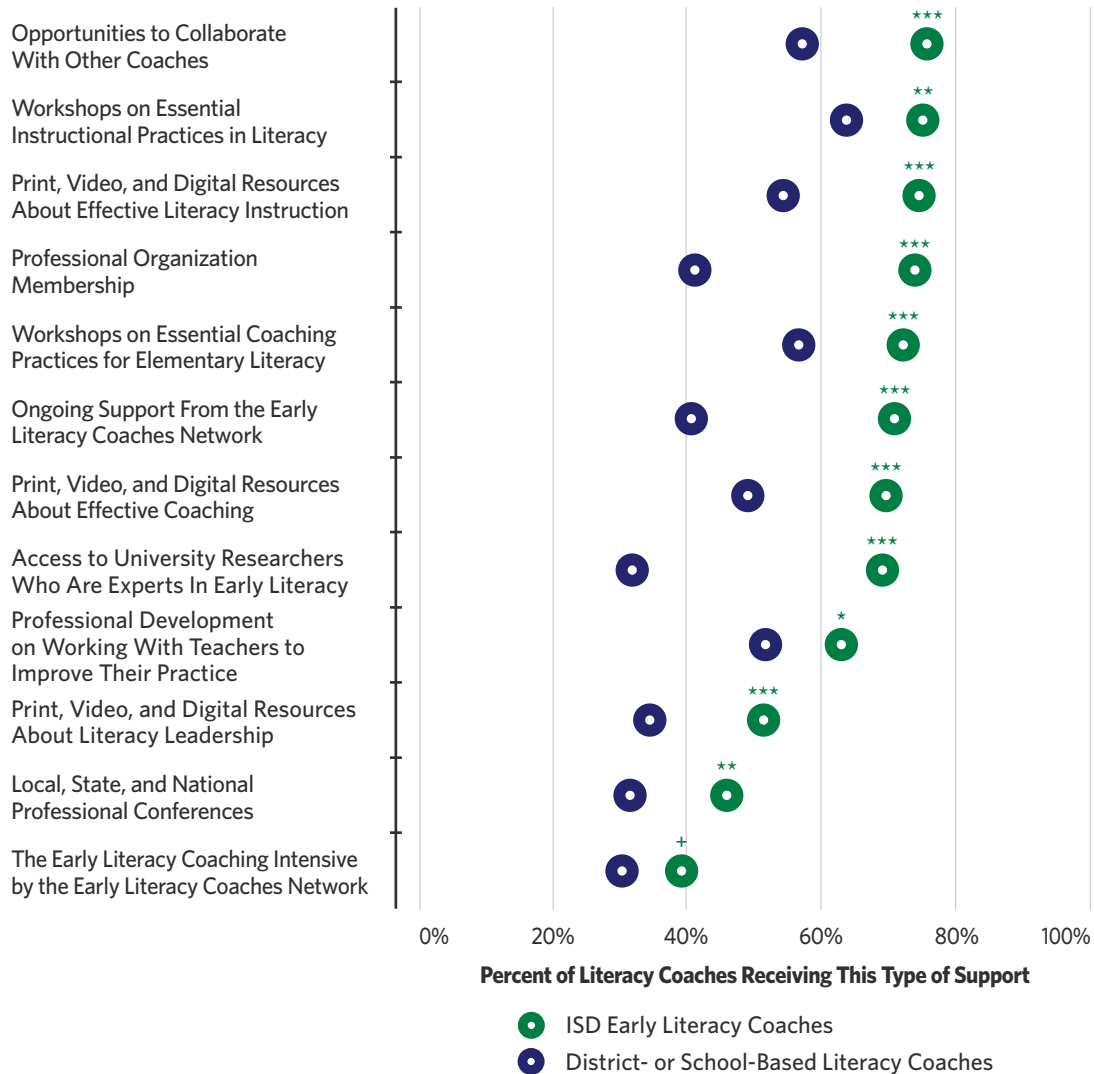
Notably, district- and school-based literacy coaches reported facing significantly more time-related challenges than ISD Early Literacy Coaches, including multiple responsibilities or duties that pull them away from coaching. This may be because ISD Early Literacy Coaches have more well-defined roles under the Read by Grade Three Law, while district- and school-based literacy coaches are not subject to the Law’s requirements. Instead, the district or school in which they work may have its own requirements, which may place less emphasis on working directly with teachers.

ISD Early Literacy Coaches Receive More Support Than School- and District-Based Coaches

ISD Early Literacy Coaches also report receiving significantly more support than district- and school-based literacy coaches (see Figure 2). For instance, ISD Early Literacy Coaches are significantly more likely than district- and school-based literacy coaches to receive support in evidence-based literacy research in the form of workshops on the *Essential Instructional Practices in Literacy* and print, video, and digital resources about effective literacy instruction.⁸ They are also more likely to receive support in working with adults through workshops on the *Coaching Essentials*; print, video, and digital resources about effective coaching and literacy leadership; and professional development on working with teachers to improve their practice.⁹ These supports are designed to provide literacy

coaches with the knowledge and skills that the Read by Grade Three Law and existing research state high-quality literacy coaches should possess, raising concerns that the majority of Michigan's literacy coaches receive fewer of them than do ISD Early Literacy Coaches.¹⁰

FIGURE 2. Supports Michigan Literacy Coaches Receive



Note: Literacy coaches were asked, "Please indicate whether you have received each of the following types of support this school year, and whether you would like (more of) that type of support in the future." $p < 0.10$ +, $p < 0.05$ *, $p < 0.01$ **, $p < 0.001$ *** indicates statistically significant differences between ISD and district- or school-based literacy coaches. Source: 2021-22 EPIC Read by Grade Three Law survey of educators.

ISD Early Literacy Coaches are also more likely than district- or school-based literacy coaches to benefit from networks of support, partly due to their access to Michigan's ISD Early Literacy Coaching Network. As part of this Network, ISD Early Literacy Coaches participate in initial onboarding, ongoing professional development, and collaboration with other coaches.¹¹ On the other hand, district- and school-based coaches, who are not members of the Network, receive significantly less support on how to coach teachers on evidence-based literacy instructional practices.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Michigan literacy coaches face significant challenges that hinder their ability to provide high-quality instructional support. In particular, they are spread across a large number of educators and buildings and face significant time constraints. Supports for literacy coaches are also uneven, with ISD Early Literacy Coaches receiving significantly more support than district- and school-based coaches. To address these challenges, we recommend that policymakers take three steps.

1. **Provide additional funding to hire more literacy coaches, especially in districts with a high need for literacy support.** With additional coaches, more teachers could receive literacy coaching. Further, coaches would be able to work with fewer teachers across a more targeted number of schools and districts. This would enable deeper coach-teacher relationships, in which coaches are able to spend more time with teachers and provide more meaningful support and feedback.
2. **Ensure that literacy coaches are allocated to the districts and teachers that could benefit the most from support.** Of course, hiring more literacy coaches is not a simple solution, given the ongoing labor shortage affecting the teacher workforce and, accordingly, the supply of coaches. In the absence of hiring additional coaches, policymakers and practitioners should provide guidance to ISDs, districts, and schools regarding the allocation of coaching support. As discussed in the full report, teachers are most often identified for literacy coaching by volunteering for it. If the teachers who volunteer for coaching are not the teachers who could most benefit from it, allocating coaching support more intentionally could help to ensure that the limited number of coaches are directing their support where they will be most effective.
3. **Make statewide supports for literacy coaching, which are currently available to ISD Early Literacy Coaches, more accessible to district- and school-based coaches.** These supports include collaboration opportunities, professional development workshops, and resources on effective coaching and literacy leadership. Expanding access to these supports could improve the quality of literacy coaching throughout the state by helping coaches build knowledge and skills to support teachers' instruction and ultimately improve student achievement.

ENDNOTES

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