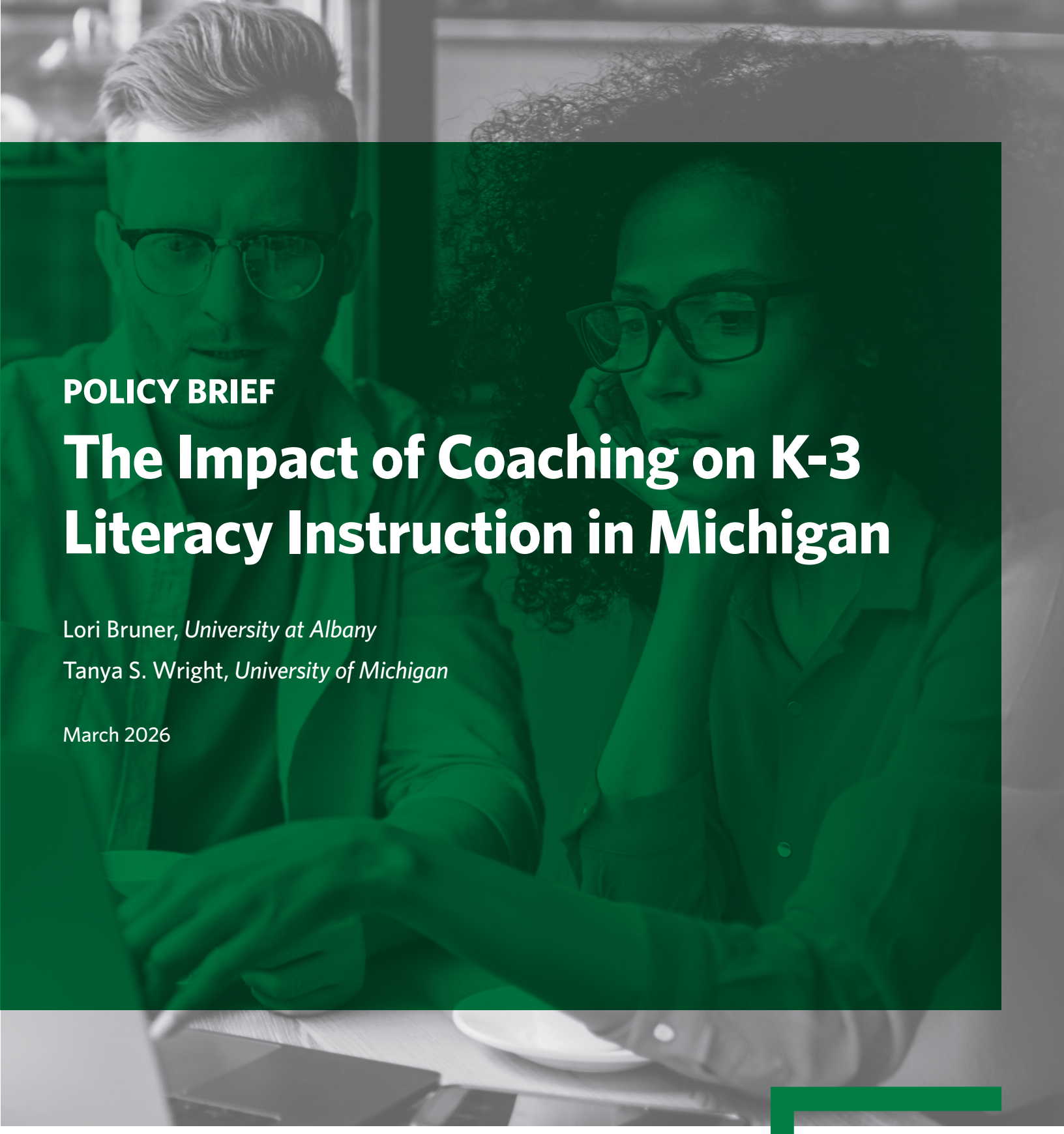

POLICY BRIEF

The Impact of Coaching on K-3 Literacy Instruction in Michigan

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March 2026

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This five-year project represents a shared commitment to strengthening early literacy across Michigan, made possible through the dedication and partnership of so many educators and colleagues. We are deeply grateful to be part of this collective effort to support Michigan's youngest readers.

DISCLAIMER

The Education Policy Innovation Collaborative (EPIC) at Michigan State University is an independent, non-partisan research center that operates as the strategic research partner to the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) and the Center for Educational Performance and Information (CEPI). EPIC conducts original research using a variety of methods that include advanced statistical modeling, representative surveys, interviews, and case study approaches.

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The Impact of Coaching on K-3 Literacy Instruction in Michigan

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OVERVIEW

Literacy coaching is an interactive, relationship-based form of professional development (PD) in which instructional coaches work directly with teachers in their school contexts to strengthen Tier 1 literacy instruction (i.e., core reading and writing instruction in the general education classroom).[1] Although many studies show that literacy coaching can improve teaching,[2] large-scale initiatives have produced mixed results.[3] Despite this variability, 26 states have adopted literacy coaching initiatives since 2019 as part of their statewide reading reforms.[4]

Michigan passed the Read by Grade Three Law in 2016 in response to growing concerns over students' performance on state and national reading assessments. To date, it is one of the most comprehensive literacy reform efforts in the United States, focusing on two pathways to improve outcomes: (1) monitoring, remediation, and retention, and (2) promoting research-aligned instruction in K-3 classrooms. To support this second pathway, Michigan began funding early literacy coaches at the Intermediate School District (ISD) level in 2016-2017 with an initial $3 million investment.[5] Since then, funding has expanded steadily, reaching $42 million annually by 2023-2024 and supporting 362 coaching positions statewide.[6] A distinctive feature of the policy is its funding structure, which gives each ISD flexibility to determine how ISD coaches are hired, assigned to districts and schools, and the responsibilities coaches assumed, allowing implementation to be tailored to local needs.

To support consistency, the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators (MAISA) Early Literacy Task Force (ELTF) created several 'best practice' guides, including the *Essential Instructional Practices in Early Literacy*[7] and *the Essential Coaching Practices for Elementary Literacy*.[8]

The *Essential Instructional Practices* identifies ten Tier 1 research-based instructional practices that anchor the content of Michigan's literacy coaching, including a focus on: (1) literacy motivation and engagement, (2) read-alouds, (3) small group and individual instruction, (4) phonological awareness, (5) letter-sound relationships, (6) writing instruction, (7) vocabulary and knowledge development, (8) reading materials and opportunities, (9) observation and assessment, and (10) collaboration with families. The *Essential Coaching Practices* outlines the process of coaching, emphasizing high-intensity activities such as observing in teachers' classrooms, modeling instructional practices, co-planning lessons, and one-on-one conferences. While these documents provided a shared statewide framework for coaching content and process, decisions about dosage (i.e., the amount of time coaches spend with teachers) were left to individual ISDs.

Our study examined how literacy coaching was implemented under the Read by Grade Three Law and the extent to which it supported improvements in teachers' instruction. In this brief, we focus on findings from five research questions:

1. To what extent did coaching enhance teachers' use of research-aligned literacy instructional practices compared to a waitlist comparison group?
2. What do coaches report regarding the content, processes, and dosage in their work with teachers?
3. How do coaching content, process, and dosage each contribute uniquely to teachers' instructional growth?
4. What distinct coaching implementation profiles emerge based on these factors, and how are they shaped by contextual factors?
5. What opportunities and challenges did coaches encounter under the law?

DATA AND METHODS

While Michigan's coaching infrastructure includes multiple forms of support such as school-based coaches, district-based coaches, and literacy specialists/interventionists,[9] our analysis focused specifically on **ISD early literacy coaches who received funding through Section 35a(4) of the State School Aid Act,** the provision that allocates funding for literacy coaching under the Read by Grade Three Law. We conducted the study during the 2020-21, 2021-22, and 2022-23 school years.

Study Participants

Our study included 16 ISD early literacy coaches and 89 K-3 teachers drawn from 18 public school districts representing urban, suburban, and rural contexts across the state. All coaches held Michigan teaching certifications and had an average of nine years of classroom teaching experience and 7.8 years of coaching experience. Teachers had an average of 12.5 years of classroom experience; most held Michigan teaching certifications, and nearly half (43.2%) held graduate-level degrees. Teachers were matched in pairs by grade level and teaching experience, with one teacher in each pair randomly assigned to receive coaching and the other assigned to a waitlist-comparison group.

Data Sources

- **Classroom videos** (318 hours total) collected in the fall and spring each year to capture teachers' literacy instruction in both English Language Arts and content area lessons (science or social studies)
- **Weekly coaching logs** (1,330 total) completed by ISD early literacy coaches documenting coaching content (e.g., read-alouds, small group instruction), processes used (e.g., modeling, conferencing), and time dedicated to teachers (i.e., dosage). Coaches completed one log each week for each teacher they coached.
- **Semi-structured interviews** (15 hours total) conducted by our research team each spring to explore how coaches organized their work, balanced multiple professional responsibilities, made instructional decisions, and navigated local contexts.

Data Analysis

We coded classroom videos blind to condition using two observational tools to document what teachers taught and how closely their instruction aligned with research-based practices: (1) the **Literacy Essentials Coding Protocol**, developed by our research team[10] to measure teachers' enactment of the *Essential Instructional Practices*, and (2) the **Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation** (ELLCO) tool,[11] an existing measure of overall classroom quality and literacy instruction. We compared teachers' instructional quality from fall to spring to examine growth across the school year and then compared differences between coached and waitlist-comparison teachers.

Teachers who received literacy coaching demonstrated greater instructional growth from fall to spring than those in the waitlist-comparison group.

We summarized coaching logs to describe **coaching content** (instructional areas addressed), **coaching processes** (how coaching occurred), and **coaching dosage** (total coaching time). We calculated the percentage of time coaches spent on the *Essential Instructional Practices* to assess content alignment, the proportion of time spent on high-intensity coaching activities (e.g., modeling, co-teaching) to assess process alignment, and total minutes logged to capture dosage. Using statistical modeling, we examined how these components predicted growth in teachers' instructional quality and identified distinct implementation profiles showing how content, process, and dosage combined in practice.

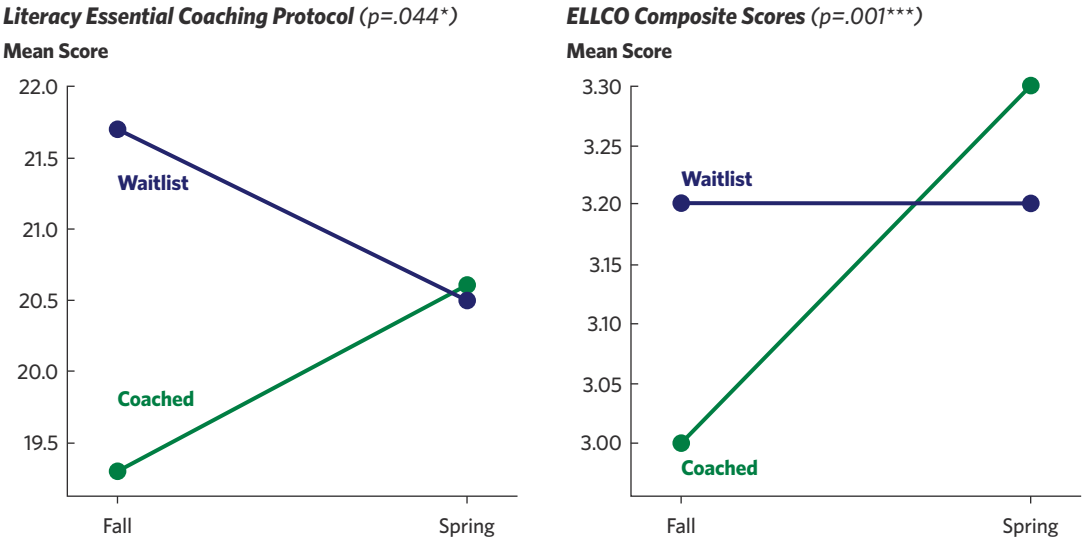
Finally, we analyzed interview data to identify conditions that shaped coaching implementation across contexts. Our analysis focused on **what enabled or constrained effective coaching**, such as role clarity, scheduling demands, and/or professional learning support, and how these factors related to content, processes, and dosage. We also examined **how contextual factors** aligned with different implementation profiles.

KEY FINDINGS

Coaching Improved Teachers' Literacy Instruction

Teachers who received literacy coaching demonstrated greater instructional growth from fall to spring than those in the waitlist-comparison group, based on both the Literacy Essentials Coding Protocol and the Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO) tool. Coached teachers showed better alignment with the *Essential Instructional Practices* (as measured by the Literacy Essentials Coding Protocol), and higher-quality language and literacy environments (as measured by the ELLCO), including more research-aligned practices related to letter-sound relationships, vocabulary, comprehension, and writing. The magnitude of these differences ranged from small to moderate (η^2p = .02 for the Literacy Essentials Coding Protocol; η^2p = .08 for the ELLCO), indicating measurable improvements in classroom instruction.

Fall-to-Spring Instructional Growth: Coached vs. Waitlist-Comparison Teachers

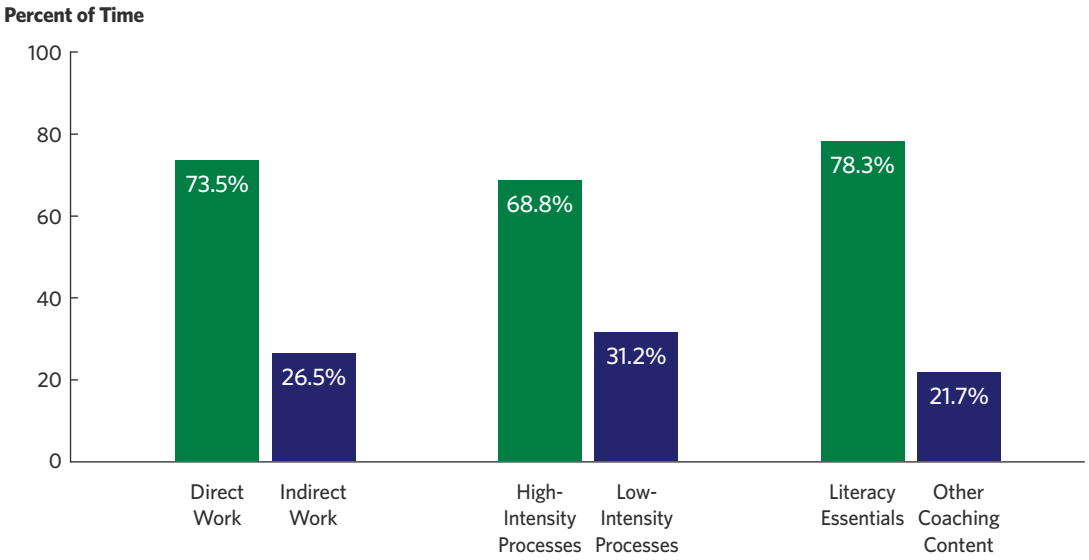


Notes. Literacy Essential Coding Protocol scores range from 0–40, and ELLCO scores range from 1–5. For both measures, higher scores indicate stronger instructional quality.

Coaches Implemented Statewide Practice Frameworks with High Fidelity, but Coaching Time Varied Considerably

Across ISDs, coaches consistently aligned their work with the *Essential Instructional Practices* and *Essential Coaching Practices*, dedicating most of their time to high-intensity coaching processes such as modeling, observation, and one-on-one conferencing rather than lower-intensity activities like relationship building. Nearly three-quarters of all reported coaching time involved direct work with teachers, as opposed to administrative or indirect tasks, and nearly 78% of coaching content focused on research-aligned literacy practices. Yet, despite consistent alignment in content and processes, coaching dosage varied widely by teacher: from fewer than four hours to nearly 60 hours per year.

Coaching Time Concentrated on Direct, High-Intensity, and Research-Aligned Practices



Note: Percentages represent the proportion of total reported coaching time across all coaches.

Focused Coaching (Not Coaching Quantity) Predicted Teachers' Instructional Growth

Teachers made greater instructional gains when coaching was focused on research-aligned literacy practices (content), with high-intensity coaching processes such as modeling, co-teaching, observation, and one-on-one conferencing providing additional benefits. By contrast, the total amount of coaching time (dosage) did not independently predict teachers' improvement. Collectively, these findings suggest that high-intensity and focused coaching matter more than the amount of coaching time alone for improving literacy instruction.

Coaching Implementation Varied Across Contexts Despite Shared Frameworks

Although all coaches worked within the same statewide policy and PD frameworks, we identified four implementation profiles that captured variation in how they balanced content, processes, and dosage across ISDs. Together, these profiles demonstrate that implementation varied not only in dosage, but also in how coaches adapted their work to local needs.

High-intensity and focused coaching matter more than the amount of coaching time alone for improving literacy instruction.

- **Profile 1: High Dosage, Moderate Fidelity:** Coaches spent the most time with teachers, addressing a broad range of needs from classroom organization to instructional planning, though not all time was focused on the *Literacy Essentials*.
- **Profile 2**: **Moderate Dosage, High Fidelity:** Coaches spent less time with teachers but used this time strategically, concentrating almost exclusively on the *Literacy Essentials* and high-intensity processes such as modeling practices and co-teaching.

- **Profile 3: Moderate Dosage, Low Fidelity:** Coaches devoted substantial time to teachers but prioritized building relationships and addressing immediate needs (e.g., classroom management) before turning to the *Literacy Essentials.*
- **Profile 4: Low Dosage, Moderate Fidelity:** Coaches had very little time to spend with teachers but used this time purposefully, focusing on the *Literacy Essentials* and high-intensity coaching processes wherever possible.

These four implementation patterns illustrate that not all coaches emphasized content, process, and dosage in the same way. Given that focused, high-intensity coaching predicted instructional growth, differences in how coaches structured their time may have important implications for improving teachers' practice. Identifying these distinct profiles help clarify which configurations are most aligned with instructional improvement and where additional guidance or supports may be needed.

Comparing Implementation Profiles Across Coaching Time, Focus, and Intensity

Profile	Avg. Coaching Time (in minutes)	% Alignment with the Literacy Essentials	% High-Intensity Coaching Processes
Profile 1: High Dosage, Moderate Fidelity	2,886	80.4%	71.0%
Profile 2: Moderate Dosage, High Fidelity	1,534	96.4%	87.3%
Profile 3: Moderate Dosage, Low Fidelity	1,396	61.7%	37.0%
Profile 4: Low Dosage, Moderate Fidelity	488	70.8%	68.9%

Note. We identified profiles using hierarchical cluster analysis, a statistical method that groups cases based on similar patterns of coaching time, alignment with the Literacy Essentials, and use of high-intensity coaching processes

Coaching Was Most Effective When Local Systems Enabled Sustained, Focused Work

Interviews with literacy coaches revealed that effective coaching depended on systems that enabled and supported their work. Coaching thrived when local conditions allowed for sustained engagement with teachers, such as smaller caseloads, clearly defined roles, access to research-aligned curriculum materials, supportive administrators, and professional learning for coaches. In these contexts, coaches were able to build strong relationships, maintain a clear instructional focus, and align their work with the *Literacy Essentials*. Conversely, when coaches encountered large caseloads, insufficient time and/or instructional materials, or minimal administrative support, their efforts became fragmented. These patterns highlight that while statewide policy can provide direction, sustained and focused coaching depends on local systems to secure the time and resources needed to prioritize instruction improvement.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Collectively, these findings provide compelling evidence that Michigan's investment in early literacy coaching is producing measurable gains in classroom instruction for the teachers who receive it and that instructional change at scale is possible when coaching support is well aligned with research and clearly defined. However, increasing funding, identifying core components, establishing infrastructure that facilitates effective coaching, and monitoring equitable access could help ensure that all teachers benefit from high-quality literacy coaching.

Increase or Strategically Allocate Funding to Expand Statewide Access to ISD Early Literacy Coaches

Michigan's investment in early literacy coaching is yielding measurable improvements in classroom instruction, but the impact is limited by the initiative's current reach. With only 363 ISD-level coaches serving nearly 32,330 K-3 teachers statewide,[12] many teachers are receiving minimal or no coaching through this initiative.

To realize the law's intent of promoting research-aligned literacy instruction in every classroom, policymakers should expand funding to (a) reduce coaching caseloads, (b) increase the number of full-time coaches across ISDs, and (c) enable districts to adopt more scalable models, such as small-group, virtual, or hybrid coaching with associated funding to evaluate whether these models improve instruction. This investment would allow Michigan to bring high-quality, research-aligned coaching to more teachers, support equitable access across ISDs, and strengthen strengthen literacy instruction in Michigan.

Instructional change is possible when coaching support is well aligned with research and clearly defined.

Distinguish Core Coaching Components From Locally Adaptable Components

Coaching was most effective when coaches focused on research-aligned literacy instructional practices and high-intensity coaching processes. However, coaches lacked clear guidance on how to adapt these practices when facing time constraints, competing responsibilities, or school-specific needs. To support consistent, research-aligned implementation, statewide initiatives should specify the **non-negotiable core components** (e.g., alignment with the *Literacy Essentials*) and provide concrete examples of **structured adaptations** (e.g., how to prioritize the *Literacy Essentials* when time is limited or while responding to immediate teacher needs).[13] Defining both core and adaptable components can help maintain coherence across ISDs and support coaches in making context-responsive decisions.

Pair Coaching Guidance With Infrastructure That Supports Effective Implementation

Even the best coaching frameworks can fall short when organizational conditions undermine implementation. In our study, coaching thrived when coaches had manageable caseloads, clearly defined roles, supportive administrators, access to research-aligned curriculum materials, and opportunities for sustained PD. Conversely, coaches juggling large caseloads or competing

responsibilities struggled to maintain consistent focus on teachers' instruction. To ensure high-quality implementation, statewide initiatives should pair clear guidance on coaching components with the infrastructure that enables coaches to enact them. This includes:

1. **Establishing reasonable caseload expectations:** Policymakers can specify recommended caseload ranges (i.e., number of teachers or schools per full-time coach) that allow for sustained coaching. Evidence from national studies[14] and qualitative research[15] indicates that intensive coaching practices such as observation, modeling, and individualized feedback are most feasible when coaches work with no more than 8-12 teachers at a time. ISDs with larger geographic regions or higher-need districts may require more coaches than smaller ISDs to maintain equitable support.
2. **Clarifying coaching roles and responsibilities:** State or ISD-level expectations can distinguish between instructional coaching tasks (e.g., modeling, observation, one-on-one feedback) and non-instructional duties (e.g., ordering materials, covering intervention groups). Clear expectations can help administrators protect coaches' instructional work with teachers and prevent ambiguity.
3. **Providing sustained, research-aligned PD for coaches and administrators:** Coaches in our study consistently credited PD with deepening their expertise and providing opportunities to collaborate with peers. Policymakers should continue investing in these structures by maintaining regular statewide or ISD-level PD for coaches that offers shared tools, video exemplars, and opportunities to analyze coaching logs. Sustaining this investment will help both coaches and administrators reinforce research-aligned coaching practices and maintain coherence across ISDs.

Establish Clear Guidance for Coaching Time to Ensure Equitable Distribution

Although coaches in our study consistently aligned their work with the *Essential Instructional Practices* and *Essential Coaching Practices*, the amount of coaching teachers received varied widely across ISDs. More than one-third of teachers received fewer than 14 hours of coaching, below the 14-20 hour thresholds identified in prior research as necessary to support instructional change.[16] At the same time, another one-third of teachers received more than 30 hours of coaching, a pattern shaped largely by contextual factors such as caseload size and competing responsibilities, rather than by intentional differentiation across teachers.

These findings suggest the need for clear, statewide guidance about what constitutes a reasonable and effective range of coaching dosage. Rather than leaving coaching time undefined, policymakers should articulate both minimum and maximum expectations for coaching support over the course of a school year. Establishing a minimum threshold can help ensure that all teachers receive sufficient support to influence instruction, while defining a reasonable upper range can prevent coaching from being concentrated on a small number of teachers at the expense of broader access.

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