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Coaching Initiatives

- > [Summary](#)
- > [Target student group](#)
- > [Method](#)
- > [Results](#)
- > [Lessons learned](#)
- > [Next steps](#)
- > [Research base](#)
- > [Further reading and links](#)
- > [Contacts](#)





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Summary

This report shows how the provision of school-based professional learning for teachers conducted by selected coaches led not only to improved student outcomes but also to sustainable school-based reform.

Coaches were trained and provided with ongoing professional learning provided by academics and experts to build their discipline and pedagogical knowledge, expertise in coaching approaches, and familiarity with Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Victoria (DEECD) resources.

Coaches worked in identified schools with teachers through one-on-one, in-class coaching, designed to build teachers' capacity to improve student outcomes. Some teams were led by a lead coach and all worked together at a cluster level with opportunities for professional networking. The project included 270 coaches over a five-year period (four years plus the EAL pilot).

Coaching Initiatives was implemented over four years in a range of primary and secondary government school settings across all regions in Victoria. The high number and variety of coaches, schools, teachers and students involved in this project indicates that the initiative could be successfully replicated in a variety of settings. The project included literacy, Koorie literacy, and teaching and learning focused on mathematics and science.

Target student group

The project targeted primary and secondary students (Foundation to Year 10) across metropolitan and regional areas. It affected a yearly average of 16,750 students and 1250 teachers in 326 schools. The number of schools, teachers and students decreased from the first year of the initiative. This decision was based on evidence that coaches were more effective when they worked intensively with fewer teachers.

A pilot project of English as an Additional Language (EAL) using coaches was conducted in 2011 and 2012 in schools where there were significant numbers of EAL students including new arrival and refugee students. This ran alongside the initial project.



Table 1: Approximate numbers of teachers, schools and students affected by the initiative

Year	Number of teachers	Number of schools	Number of students
2008	1,536	382	20,500
2009	1,124	299	15,000
2010	1,260	346	17,000
2011	1,089	277	14,500

Method

The aim of Coaching Initiatives was to develop teacher capacity and therefore improve student learning outcomes in literacy and numeracy through evidence-based approaches aligned with other DEECD initiatives, including:

- the School Improvement agenda
- the Literacy and Numeracy strategy
- the Energising Science and Wannik strategy

(<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/aboriginal/pages/wannik.aspx> .

Coaches engaged in focused observations of teaching and learning interactions, and worked with teachers to improve classroom practice through evaluation and feedback, promoting a culture of collaborative practice and problem solving. Coaches took into account the school, community and classroom context in which teachers were working and provided evidenced-based, point-of-need support, guiding and assisting teachers and leaders to progress their professional practice. Coaches focused on developing teachers as effective independent practitioners who could continue to contribute to high performing communities (Coaching Teachers in Effective Instruction, DEECD 2010).

Coaches and teachers worked towards whole-school curriculum planning that was targeted at student learning needs and was used as the reference point for monitoring improved student learning outcomes.



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The project was based on an understanding that coaching is most effective when it is implemented as a whole-school approach. This required the provision of effective school-wide strategies implemented by school leaders, including:

- strategic alignment of coaching within school improvement planning and accountability
- organising structures to facilitate coaching
- positioning coaches as respected teacher leaders
- fostering a team ethos
- demonstrating a deep interest in the work of the coach
- teachers and leaders showing their professional trust in and respect for the work of the coach
- being open to learning with and from coaches.

Professional learning for teachers is most effective if it is school-based, connected to the day-to-day work of teachers and has elements of collaborative problem solving.

www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/teachlearn/student/coachteacheffectiveinstruction.pdf 

The selection of coaches was integral to the enabling factors listed above and the success of the project. Coaches selected were considered:

- credible as classroom teachers with strong discipline and pedagogical content knowledge
- strong communicators with interpersonal skills
- deeply knowledgeable about literacy and numeracy teaching and learning
- flexible and responsive when implementing a variety of approaches to coaching informed by judgements about the readiness of teachers and the contexts of the school community.

Consequently, coaches employed evidenced-based pedagogical approaches that identified points of need and entry levels before trying to change or extend the practice of their colleagues. They showed an understanding of where students were up to and how best to progress them and contributed to school-wide cultural shifts that embedded new ways of working and expanding understandings about literacy/numeracy, use of data and evidence, assessment, planning, documentation and professional learning. Further, coaches aimed to develop a shared professional language that built pedagogical practices and attended to sustainability by building the capacity of teachers to collaborate and learn together for 'gradual release of responsibility'.



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The Initiative has greatly strengthened my knowledge of why I do what I do. It has shown me the importance and relevance of explicit teaching. (Teacher)

Beyond the school, the support and the program of professional learning, opportunities for professional networking were provided for coaches. These were identified as key factors in enabling coaches to work effectively with teachers to improve student achievement.

Results

Five evaluations were undertaken that included analysis of qualitative and quantitative data as well as extensive case studies. These reports provided information that enabled learning to be shared with participants and data for ongoing planning.

In 2007 and 2008 the Literacy Coaches initiative was evaluated by the ACER, using both qualitative and quantitative data with the quantitative data being analysed against control schools. In 2009 RMIT did a similar evaluation.

In 2010 the Literacy Coaches initiative and the Teaching and Learning Coaches initiative were brought together to form the Coaching Initiatives. The 2010–11 evaluation of the Coaching Initiatives, undertaken by RMIT University, used only quantitative data and no control schools were used. This was due to many of the earlier control schools becoming involved in the Coaching Initiatives.

The Initiative has made me focus more on literacy in my subject area. I have become aware of different strategies to improve students' literacy skills. (Teacher)

The effect of the Koorie Literacy Coaches was incorporated into this and future evaluations through an analysis of Koorie student outcomes. Data showed that, while coaching was having a positive impact on student achievement outcomes, there was greater improvement in the primary years compared with secondary years. In response to this, EdPartnerships International was contracted to conduct a new research project into Effective Literacy Coaching in Secondary Schools. This evaluation used a case-study approach to identify successful approaches to secondary literacy coaching.



In addition, data were collected from various local assessments including:

- **Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) On Demand Adaptive Tests in Reading and Number**

The VCAA On Demand Adaptive Tests in Reading and Number provide online assessments for years 3 to 10 students that determine a student's VELS achievement standard in Reading and Number.

March 2009, September 2009, March 2010 and September 2010 student data were analysed to show overall trends in student achievement over the two years of the pilot. The data were analysed to determine changes in English reading proficiency of years 3 to 10 students, mathematics number proficiency of years 3 to 10 students, reading and number proficiency of each of the student cohorts of Koorie, low SES, English as a Second Language, new arrivals and refugees.

- **English Online Interview**

The English Online Interview is a one-to-one diagnostic interview used by classroom teachers to assess years Prep to 2 students in reading, writing, speaking and listening. In 2009, only pilot school students were assessed using this assessment in both March and October. Therefore, there is no state-wide comparative data available for the English Online Interview at this stage.

- **Mathematics Online Interview**

The Mathematics Online Interview is a one-to-one diagnostic interview used by classroom teachers to assess years Prep to 2 students. The domains assessed for the pilot included counting, place value, addition and subtraction, and multiplication and division.

March 2009, September 2009, March 2010 and September 2010 student data were analysed to show overall trends in student achievement over the two years of the pilot.

Teacher judgements against the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) collected at the end of the second semester of 2009 and 2010 were analysed to identify the students' English and Mathematics performance in years Prep to 10, and performance of student cohorts including Koorie, ESL and new arrivals, refugee and low SES, as well as students involved in student intervention programs.

The children in my class showed improvement in reading on all assessment tasks beyond what would be expected as normal growth. The children ... are more engaged and talk about how and why. They're not just readers, they are also decipherers, inferrers and inquirers. The children are asking questions. They are talking. They are demonstrating understanding. (Teacher)



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Lessons learned

The extensive evaluations of the project showed that successful implementation of the coaching strategy required certain elements including:

- strong principal and leadership support for the coach, and for positioning coaching as an integral aspect of multi-faceted and school-wide professional learning, connected to the school's broader strategic plan for improving student achievement in literacy and numeracy
- a culture of ongoing professional learning for school leaders and teachers
- mentoring by Professional Learning Teams to develop the capacity of teachers to lead professional learning, develop internal capacity and share approaches to literacy and numeracy improvement across the school
- continual professional learning opportunities for coaches
- collaborative approaches involving knowledge sharing and a focus on teachers' communities of practice rather than individual teachers
- coaches who work across whole year levels or subject areas to build capacity and sustainability.

Teachers

The evaluation showed that teachers need highly developed assessment practices that support feedback for learning before, during and after teaching. Formative assessment, which identifies student progress and provides feedback to both teacher and learner, was considered one of the most powerful drivers of improved student outcomes. The report indicated teachers need access to a range of assessment tools that support the gathering and analysis of student achievement data and progress to inform their curriculum planning and teaching practice at regular intervals.

One of the key outcomes identified by principals, coaches and teachers was strengthening the relationship between collecting and analysing student data and using what has been learned to support collaborative planning for student-centred teaching.

Some considerations to successfully introducing coaching to a particular school were identified as:

- the school leadership and teachers taking time to prepare for coaching, and willingness to engage with the initiative when it occurs
- the provision of Departmental support and high quality professional learning
- the provision of opportunities for coaches to network and learn from each other.



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Overall, factors that led to the success of the project included the development of a culture of ongoing professional learning for school leaders and teachers. Also important was the creation of professional learning teams, meta-coaching and mentoring to develop the capacity of teacher leaders to lead professional learning associated with improvement across the school.

In addition, the selection of appropriate people as coaches, ongoing professional development opportunities for coaches, and sufficient time allocation for coaches to work with teachers were also found to be important.

Perceptions of the program are far more positive after seeing benefits that have been achieved in relation to student outcomes, improved teaching and learning practices and staff confidence. (Principal)

Next steps

Coaching Initiatives was a systemic approach to improving student learning outcomes in literacy and numeracy, through the use of coaches to improve teacher capacity. As a result of this systemic initiative a cultural shift occurred in relation to teacher professional learning, with a high acceptance of a basic premise of the Coaching Initiatives that professional learning for teachers is most effective if it is school-based, connected to the day-to-day work of teachers and has elements of collaborative problem solving. While this initiative is sustainable, it also continues to evolve as further evidence about effective teacher professional learning is evaluated and documented.

Longitudinal student outcomes data indicated that improved student outcomes in primary schools as a result of Coaching Initiatives are sustainable beyond the life of the initiative. Where schools have been discontinued from the project, many have chosen to fund coaches themselves, indicating that sustainability is likely. Schools have been able to access professional learning for implementation of Coaching Initiatives through the Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership.

This is one of the best initiatives we have had as it directly relates to the teaching and learning practices within the classroom. To have people who have no other focus than to build the capacities of teachers enables us to really focus on getting the job done. I cannot recommend this program highly enough. I look forward to continued involvement. Significant change has occurred in how many staff approach the classroom as a direct result of this program. (Principal)

Research base



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Coaching has been a recognised approach to teacher learning in a variety of settings for many years. There is considerable research around this approach to the professional learning of teachers. Many factors emerging from the research were important in the design phase of this particular initiative based on coaching.

A school-based approach was paramount. It is within the context of the school and the teacher's own classroom that the relevance of the development will be apparent to the teacher and in this situation that change is most likely to occur (Aschbacher 1994, Resnick 1996).

Based on the available research, it was believed that success would depend on a range of factors that would ensure the project brought school teams (teachers, leadership and coaches) together as they worked together as a whole school. The research (Boyd 2008, Fullan & Hargreaves 1996) says that collegial reflective practice provides support and challenge while facilitating change.

The project built on and developed existing projects and understandings within the Victorian Department of Education. It was considered that coaching was a model that reflected the Seven Principles of Highly Effective Professional Learning (2005), in that the professional learning is best when it is:

- focused on improving student outcomes
- research based
- embedded in teacher practice
- collaborative and reflective
- based on feedback and evidence to progress teacher learning
- an ongoing supported element within the school culture.

(www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/teachlearn/teacher/ProfLearningInEffectiveSchools.pdf)

All aspects of the project were based on research undertaken before and during the early implementation of the project resulting in the publication, *Coaching Teachers in Effective Instruction* (DEECD, 2010),

www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/teachlearn/student/coachteacheffectiveinstruction.pdf



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