

KUCRL's Striving Readers Grant Partnership Yields Virtual Coaching Model and Resources

By Suzanne Myers, Ed.D., Co-director of ALTEC and Associate Researcher, CRL

September 25th, 2017 began as a regular day for me – a harried rush out the door and through the drop-off loop at my kids' schools, grabbing 12 ounces of mild roast at the local Casey's, completing my hourlong commute, and riding the elevator up to the 6th floor of the state office building where I worked. At that time, I was the K-12 English Language Arts and Literacy Specialist at our state education agency, and that day, I was putting the finishing touches on our most recent edition of K-12 state ELA standards. Once the standards were adopted and released, we would need to think through how the agency would provide implementation support across our state. As a relatively small SEA, the ELA standards and assessment team consisted of myself and three supervisors. We knew we had to think creatively about how to provide the kind of support our teachers would want and need.

That day though, ELA/Literacy support in my state changed dramatically. When I pressed my voicemail button, I was informed by a U.S. Senator's aide that a grant KUCRL researchers and I had written was being funded – more than \$27 Million over three years for birth through grade 12 literacy. Although big dollar figures seem to lose meaning sometimes in the big picture of government spending, this was the largest competitive grant our state had ever received, and within a short amount of time, it became clear that I was living a quotation I had heard so many times in the past: To whom much is given, much is required.

The Federal Striving Readers Grant we had been awarded – recently re-named the Comprehensive Literacy State Development Grant – was focused on implementation of evidence-based literacy practices from birth through grade 12. Our state's plan emphasized the building of comprehensive birth-grade 12 systems for literacy instruction and support, and a major component of that support was coaching.

The KUCRL researchers and I had enough experience with large scale implementation and enough knowledge about research on professional development (PD) to know that putting high-quality resources into the hands of teachers – even if they receive PD on how to use those resources – is not likely to change classroom practice. We had eight funded projects through our Striving Readers grant – four large districts and four district consortia. In all, our Striving Readers project in Kansas served 32 districts and more than 88,000 students statewide – about 25% of our state's student population. While some of our funded districts had the infrastructure to support large-scale coaching programs; the majority did not. And because we required all subgrantees to submit a sustainability plan, smaller districts especially needed to think creatively about how to sustain coaching long-term after the grant period ended. Many of them had difficulty recruiting and retaining classroom teachers, so coaches were a luxury they typically could not afford personnel-wise or financially.

Armed with our knowledge of research on professional development and the work of KUCRL's own Dr. Jim Knight, the grant leadership team focused on providing a high-quality and sustainable virtual coaching program for districts worried about staffing and sustaining an on-site coaching program. The past two decades of research on PD have informed us that sustained engagement, attending to contextual factors, collaboration, modeling effective practices, providing feedback and time for reflection (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Penuel et al, 2007; Wei et al., 2009) are important features for high-quality PD. Likewise, recent research substantiates Joyce and Showers' (2002) findings that coaching is needed to help transfer new knowledge and skills to regular classroom practice.

For our project, Dr. Knight provided initial training to a small team of coaches, we secured subscriptions to the video-sharing platform GoReact, and we set coaches up with Zoom accounts that would record and save directly to our KU servers. After that, we jumped in to see what would happen with the 12 coachees (i.e., teachers or on-site coaches for teachers) who had signed up to work with us. As you might have guessed, we learned a great deal in that first year.

The VECTOR model was created in a context similar to those in which SIM professional developers work: Districts were working to support the implementation of research-based and evidence-based literacy instruction. While most districts were able to select practices to implement and secure dedicated time for an initial PD session for teachers, that did not guarantee implementation.

We also know the struggle of providing PD and coaching to all who request it is a challenge for SIM professional developers. Our state has pockets of populated regions, much like other states currently using SIM. However, there are districts in much less populated regions who could benefit greatly from learning SIM Content Enhancement Routines and Learning Strategies, but their geographic isolation keeps them from accessing the services of a SIM professional developer. There are also other ways schools can be isolated; some of our larger Striving Readers districts had one PD provider/coach who was expected to serve seven large high schools. We found that while we intended virtual coaching to serve educators who were geographically-isolated, we could also help to increase the capacity of on-site coaches trying to serve a large number of teachers.

Distinguishing Features of VECTOR

Prior to beginning our first year of virtual coaching implementation, our own experiences with coaching virtually and conducting virtual professional development sessions told us that implementing a virtual coaching program on a larger scale would be different from implementing on-site coaching to scale. What we weren't certain about was how it would be different and what support our team of virtual coaches would need to ensure their coachees (e.g., teachers) were getting the support they needed.

Following our initial years of implementation, some clear data emerged to show us what exactly was different and what we needed to do in order to better support our virtual coaches. Dr. Amber Rowland, Dr. Marti Elford, and I worked together to analyze data from recorded coaching

sessions, coaching logs, surveys, and interviews. Below are a few recommendations for virtual coaching, based on lessons we learned from our first years of implementation data.

Build a shared context.

When coaches are stationed on-site, they have a sense of a building's culture, the energy present in the building, and an idea of common practices and expectations for teachers and staff. Alongside the teachers they work with, they experience the stress of minor nuisances like a broken air conditioner, along with major traumas like the loss of a student or staff member.

It is important for virtual coaches to understand the impact of a range of factors on teachers' ability and desire to engage in high-intensity professional learning like coaching. Because virtual coaches are not stationed on-site with teachers, the VECTOR coaching process provides guidance to coaches on how they might build a deeper understanding of their coachees' contexts.

Set a strong goal and follow through.

Virtual coaches in our program kept logs about their sessions with coachees, and after a year or so, we noticed an interesting trend. Although we had discussed goal-setting and provided a couple of formulas for setting goals, we had let our attention to goal setting slip a bit. We noticed that some coachees were changing their goals every time they met with their coaches. The coaches' notes would say something about a changing school or district focus, or the coachee feeling obligated to change his/her goal based on a new initiative.

Less frequent but also concerning to us, we noticed some coachees never changed or set a new goal throughout the entire school year, and never completed their goal.

We decided to bring this observation to our group of virtual coaches and problem-solve together about what we might do. The solution was a coach-created formulaic goal. As unexciting as the word "formulaic" sounds, this ended up being a wonderful solution for our coaches and coachees. We noticed after that session that when our coaches began working with their coachees to build a goal in accordance with this new formula, and then revisited that goal as we asked them to do in our VECTOR guides, coachees made and completed their goals. We significantly reduced the number of coachees who were changing their goals at every session, as well as the coachees who never met their goals. This goal formula is provided in our VECTOR guides.

Systematically match virtual coaches with coachees.

This is one major advantage to managing a virtual coaching network. Since we were serving many teachers and had a cohort of qualified coaches to serve them, we could take time to match coachees with a coach well-suited to their expertise, content needs, and experience level. We had some coaches who were exceptional coaches for early service teachers, while some worked better with veterans. By the end of the project, most of the coachees we were serving were on-site coaches who had never coached before. Using a simple survey, we were able to pair those new coach-coachees with virtual coaches who could provide the kind of support they requested.

Be ready for a high level of trust and personalization.

We were expecting that our coaches would provide at least a comparable level of coaching for their coachees. What we found was that coaches and coachees both reported higher levels of trust than were present in their prior on-site coaching experiences. Likewise, in post-program survey and interview responses, coachees reported that flexibility was the most-appreciated quality of their virtual coaches, and that being able to have support personalized to their professional needs and schedules was paramount in their decision to continue to participate in virtual coaching.

Promising recent research seems to support our own initial findings of success with a virtual coaching program. A 2019 study indicates that not only can virtual coaching be just as effective as on-site coaching, but it could actually be more effective (Weiser et al., 2019).

Where to Find the VECTOR Guides

The [individual](#) and [small group](#) VECTOR process guides are available to you for free in SIMville. In the past, KUCRL has offered a VECTOR virtual coaching community of practice (CoP) for those wishing to learn how to use the VECTOR guides to provide SIM coaching for teachers. The CoP is five 1.5-hour online sessions for SIM professional developers. If there is sufficient interest in another CoP focused on virtual coaching, we are willing to offer it again. [Click here to express interest in participating a virtual CoP in 2022 to learn VECTOR.](#)