



# Observation Post

**APs PLAY A CRITICAL ROLE IN LITERACY INSTRUCTION:  
OBSERVING, COACHING, AND MODELING BEST PRACTICES**

**BY IAN P. MURPHY**

**A**s noted in the last installment of APs Rising, there isn't a lot of daylight between a principal's responsibilities and those of his or her assistant principals when a pipeline program is in place. And there shouldn't be—while principals are the ultimate authorities in their buildings and set most of the school's goals, APs support broad segments of that same work while gaining the expertise needed to run a school.

Every leadership team is different, of course, depending on the backgrounds and goals of those involved. But when principals serve as instructional leaders, APs are often assigned hands-on intermediary roles in directing classroom literacy instruction and measuring its success. In schools with strong leadership development programs, this means observing classes, coaching teachers, and modeling instruction.

The Long Beach (California) Unified School District launched its Exploring District Leadership Program in 2005. Since joining a Wallace Foundation initiative to develop district-level leaders in 2015, the 72,000-student district has expanded the program to include 14 different pipelines for everyone from teachers up to superintendents, "growing its own" administrative talent in the name of continuous improvement.

Long Beach APs typically have proven experience in the classroom as teachers or teacher leaders. "We hire almost exclusively from within to nurture teacher leadership," says Jill Baker, who assumed the superintendent role in August. "Even in their first year, APs are able to use their own teaching and learning background to support and coach teachers in classrooms and provide feedback.

"We look for someone who has been highly effective as a teacher in their own classroom and has really strong relationships with students—someone who embraces an equity mindset and thinks of their own learning as part of that mindset," Baker adds. "Someone who has a really strong work ethic and not only loves teaching students, but also loves the idea of nurturing the work of adults."



## Instructional Influence and Support

APs must be able to coach teachers in literacy instruction even if their own experience emphasizes math, science, or the arts. Ann Marie Swift, an assistant principal at William C. Lewis Dual Language Elementary School in Wilmington, Delaware, specializes in literacy, but all APs in the larger Red Clay Consolidated School District have some involvement with its reading curriculum.

"It's important to understand the curriculum, the benefits of the curriculum, and the resources within the curriculum to support the teachers," she says. "[We help] teachers transfer that instruction in more of a coaching role."

People in other positions can assist when APs are busy with administrative tasks, Swift notes. Literacy coaches are a great resource for APs who are busy "running around the building handling other things," she says. "Ideally, I like to be very involved with the teachers—with their planning and their professional learning. We do a lot of work in professional learning communities to support the teachers."

Red Clay recently switched to a new, more rigorous curriculum, ReadyGen, in order to help satisfy Common Core standards, and APs were pivotal in selecting the curriculum alongside the district's principals, teachers, and literacy specialists. "We were very involved," Swift says. "[APs looked at] the pros and the cons of each one. There is no 'ideal' curriculum, but we looked at which one would be the best for us."

Interestingly, William C. Lewis is a dual-language immersion school, so it pursues three sets of instructional goals—English-language, Spanish-

language, and social-emotional—simultaneously. To set goals, leadership uses data to assess what areas of instruction might need improvement.

## One-on-One With Teachers

Swift performs a lot of classroom walk-throughs at William C. Lewis herself, observing literacy instruction to ensure that teachers and students are on pace with program benchmarks and expectations. She also works with teachers in one-on-one coaching sessions monthly, first to set goals for the year, then to assess their progress toward them.

Coaching strategies vary among buildings, she notes; when a principal takes a more active role in coaching teachers, APs might be assigned other tasks. "I'm fortunate that my principal absolutely supports me in going to the teachers in one-on-one meetings," she says. "I have gone in and modeled lessons, and I've modeled things for the whole team."

In the Long Beach schools, APs don't have as much influence over course content, but they still have a substantial role in coaching teachers. "Assistant principals typically come in with experience [in] building the capacity of other adults," Baker says. "Once they are in administrative roles, we build in formalized coaching and training. It feels like coaching to a teacher, not just a checklist or an evaluative experience."

"Coaching is really part of our district culture, and evaluation is part of the improvement process," Baker adds. "Our assistant principals have often been coached as teachers, and many have had experiences as peer



coaches. We try to build a lot of collective efficacy among teams of people.”

Sometimes, the guidance offered to APs and principals on supporting teachers is the same, she says, and multilevel teams train toward the same goals. For example, if APs are directed to emphasize social-emotional learning, they might train collaboratively with principal supervisors, principals, and instructional leaders.

### Coaching Under COVID

Like everyone in education, APs have had to scramble to satisfy their job responsibilities in a drastically altered school environment. Long Beach was lucky to have a few young, tech-savvy APs who could lead the transition to distance learning. “We have assistant principals and principals who go into Google classrooms informally to support teachers and model practices though staff meetings,” Baker says.

Toward the end of the 2019–2020 academic year, Swift notes, there wasn’t a lot of new learning or teaching going on, and state testing was suspended. William C. Lewis’ staff concentrated on making sure teachers and other staff members stayed connected with children in lockdown and on reviewing literacy skills that had already been taught in person.

This year, the “meat” of literacy instruction will likely occur in small groups, she says, but assessment is still an unanswered question. “Literacy instruction is going to look different going forward,” she says. “We’re stepping it up, but it is not going to be what we’re used to. Certainly, I would love to see student engagement; I would love to see participation.

“Staying connected to the classroom really helps,” Swift says. “I never forget what it’s like as the teacher—all of the different things you have to deal with and juggle at the same time. Stay organized and stay connected to your teachers by setting goals that are attainable, working hard to support them, understanding what they need, and getting it for them.” ●



## Extra! Extra!

Readers of the debut edition of NAESP’s *APs Rising* newsletter accessed exclusive content about what it’s like to transition from teacher to leader, the power of collaboration in career development, and growing one’s own capacity as a new administrator. Want to read more? Be on the lookout for the next *APs Rising*, hitting your email inbox in December!

## About The Wallace Foundation

This article is funded by The Wallace Foundation, which works to support and share effective ideas and practices to foster improvements in learning and enrichment for children and the vitality of the arts for everyone. Its objectives are to improve the quality of schools, primarily by developing and placing effective principals in high-need schools, promoting social and emotional learning in elementary school and out-of-school-time settings, expanding opportunities for high-quality summer learning, reimagining and expanding access to arts learning, and building audiences for the arts. The foundation seeks to generate knowledge and insights from these efforts to enhance policy and practice nationwide. For more information and research on these and related topics, please visit The Wallace Foundation’s knowledge center at [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org).

