

Knox County Schools' Struggling Students Achieve New Levels of Literacy Success

Special education and other at-risk students in Knox County, Tennessee, had long struggled with achieving literacy benchmarks that would lead them to lifelong success. With administrators at Knox County Schools determined to change the status quo, a new reading intervention was implemented and literacy levels quickly began to improve. The story in Knox County is inspiring.

THE CHALLENGE

With 59,500 students, Knox County Schools (KCS) operates all public schools in Knox County, Tennessee, and is the third-largest district in the state. Headquartered in Knoxville, the district is home to 90 schools, 14 of which are middle schools, grades 6–8. A diverse district, KCS has almost 3,100 English learners from more than 92 different countries, speaking 80 different languages.

Nearly 12 percent of the district's students are at risk, or have special education needs. Therefore it placed a high priority on finding and implementing a new intervention curriculum. With the goal of transitioning these students from the brink of failure to becoming literate adult readers, educators knew they needed a proven intervention strategy students would enjoy. Moreover, KCS administrators were confident that by introducing the right intervention program, their teachers would be able to help transform struggling students into self-confident learners.

KCS set out to change the status quo, and used a team approach where teachers, principals, and curriculum directors worked collaboratively to research, review, and approve possible intervention options.



Judy Fugate, reading intervention teacher, implements LANGUAGE! Live with her middle school students.



Karen Irwin



Linda Perry

Karen Irwin and Linda Perry, Knox County Schools' two longtime literacy coaches, said the success of **LANGUAGE! Live®** goes beyond the product itself.

"The response and level of service we receive from our sales representative, Dr. Lory Heron, and the company, has been excellent," Irwin said. "Dr. Heron has brought in high-level support, the data team, and experts in the field to make our district more successful."

"Voyager Sopris Learning® has an excellent product and this is the foundation of the relationship that Knox County has with the company," Perry said. "In essence, it is a domino effect—the support is consistent from those who sell the product, to those who support teachers using the product, to those who are in the classroom implementing the product."

THE SOLUTION

After much research, Voyager Sopris Learning's blended ELA solution, *LANGUAGE! Live*, was selected to serve the district's struggling adolescent reader population. The district began implementing *LANGUAGE! Live* at the beginning of the 2012–2013 school year.

Since then, the district has witnessed remarkable changes in literacy achievement, and officials believe the research-based approach of *LANGUAGE! Live* is largely responsible.

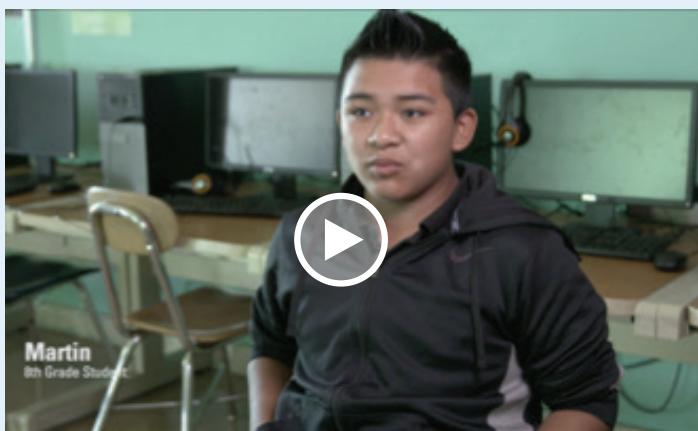
Backed by Research

"*LANGUAGE! Live* is based on the science of reading and the science of learning," said Irwin, who began her career at KCS more than 30 years ago. "Knox County strongly supports this research. The program has particular appeal to adolescents, as they find it respectful and engaging. In addition, our department's philosophy is 'Read about it, talk about it, and write about it.' *LANGUAGE! Live* supports this philosophy."

"This program aligns beautifully with our mantra to help students achieve success," said Perry, now in her 30th year with the district. "We have a great curriculum, and we knew if *LANGUAGE! Live* was implemented with fidelity, we would see student growth in literacy."



Overcoming Literacy Challenges: One Student's Story



See the story of Martin, and how *LANGUAGE! Live* helped ignite his yearn to learn.

Individualized Support for Every Student

To determine which students should be placed in the *LANGUAGE! Live* program, the district uses a universal screening-process, combined with an analysis of other key data points. Then, district leaders use *LANGUAGE! Live* benchmark data to secure a baseline measurement to determine the level of support needed for each student.

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THE RESULTS

KCS is reporting remarkable improvements with *LANGUAGE! Live* as a high percentage of its struggling readers have experienced gains.

"Students are growing and becoming responsible for their learning as many are taking ownership for personal goal setting that aligns with data generated from *LANGUAGE! Live*," Irwin said. "Data talks are now routine in the classroom. This has increased intrinsic motivation and has given students a reason to engage in their own learning and success."

Karen Loy, then principal at Northwest Middle School in KCS, said the tremendous improvements she saw at her school were "because we implemented *LANGUAGE! Live* with fidelity, there's no doubt in my mind." Her experience aligns with the research behind *LANGUAGE! Live*—when used at recommended levels, virtually every student improves.

Learning Becomes Visible and Measurable

Irwin and Perry agree the most important feature of *LANGUAGE! Live* is they are able to provide support to teachers and students due to the system's transparency. "Evidence of academic strengths and weaknesses may be seen through the Dashboard," Perry said. "This helps us target classrooms and students in need of district support, as well as to provide evidence of strong implementation which impacts student growth. This transparency and ability to track success empowers all stakeholders since learning becomes 'visible' and measurable."

Andrea Ensor, language arts teacher at Northwest Middle School, said she not only has seen a profound impact on her students but on her abilities in the classroom, as well.

"*LANGUAGE! Live* taught me how to teach reading," Ensor said. "I'm a better teacher because of it."

"We're continually having masses of students make significant progress," she added. "We have some amazing



"This program has been tremendous to bridge the gap of where they are and where they need to be."

—Judy Fugate
Reading Intervention Teacher
Halls Middle School, Knox County Schools

examples of how some of our individual students are responding. I always wonder what next year will bring."

As many as 1,400 students were once enrolled in the district's *LANGUAGE! Live* program. Because of the success and students moving into mainstream classes with their peers, today that number is down to 1,100. Not only are students showing dramatic improvement in reading, but their improved confidence is helping them enjoy success in all of their classes.

"*LANGUAGE! Live* is the pathway for struggling readers to succeed, and we always look forward to what another year will bring," Perry said.

V4.01.15.2021

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