

Improving Literacy Skills and Test Scores at Urban School in Rochester, NY

Two years ago, administrators at Dr. Louis A. Cerulli School No. 34—preK–sixth grade school that has annually lagged behind in literacy skills and reading test scores—sought new solutions to improve students’ reading abilities. When administrators learned about *LANGUAGE! Live*[®], they decided to try the program with the school’s sixth grade students.

“Over half to three-quarters of our students enter sixth grade reading below grade level,” said Principal Dr. Carmine Peluso, “and our teachers were having difficulty closing the huge gaps that already existed in their reading and literacy skills. We knew we needed help and *LANGUAGE! Live* showed promise.”

THE CHALLENGE

Overcoming Years of Reading and Literacy Failure

The Rochester City School District is located on the eastern edge of the Rust Belt—America’s former industrial heartland—an area that has been devastated by the flight of manufacturing jobs to lower-wage, non-unionized states and countries. This upheaval has had a profound impact on Rochester’s schools and neighborhoods.

One media outlet¹ reported, “The fleeing middle class, who take their tax dollars with them, have left districts largely reliant on fickle state funding. According to New York State Department of Education data, New York City is able to spend

¹ The Hechinger Report, Aug. 3, 2016, “New York’s upstate cities have some of the worst schools in the country”



about \$2,000 more per pupil per year on instruction than the upstate urban districts.” Rochester is one of the districts impacted, which has led to severe challenges for the schools and students. Students struggle to demonstrate proficiency on the New York State English Language Arts Exam and, ultimately, to graduate.

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THE SOLUTION

Immediate Engagement, Long-Term Results

Dr. Peluso knew it was vital to make significant improvements in instruction if teachers were to give their struggling sixth grade learners a better chance of success at graduation and beyond. He became convinced that *LANGUAGE! Live*, the comprehensive literacy solution that combines foundational and advanced learning skills with digital and teacher-led intervention, could make a real difference for struggling learners at his school to help close the learning gap and reverse a decade-long trend of decreasing literacy levels and poor test scores.

LANGUAGE! Live is designed for students like the sixth graders at Dr. Louis A. Cerulli School No. 34—those who had never experienced reading success—with the goal of improving their decoding, spelling, grammar, comprehension, vocabulary, and writing skills. Although most struggling students are eager to learn, they are often uncomfortable when asked to read aloud or sound out words in learning groups.



"*LANGUAGE! Live* combines face-to-face, teacher-led instruction with technology-based, independent learning that students can do at their own pace," Dr. Peluso said. "That appealed to us."



"One student went from a Fountas and Pinnell reading level 'M' (end of second grade) to an 'X' reading level (sixth grade) during our 2015–2016 school year. She was extremely focused and internally motivated to succeed during our *LANGUAGE! Live* instructional time. *LANGUAGE! Live* provided an exciting avenue for success for this child."

—Dr. Carmine Peluso, Principal



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THE RESULTS

LANGUAGE! Live was first implemented during the 2015–2016 school year, and progress for both teachers and students has been impressive if not unprecedented. “This program has empowered our teachers to fill in the gaps as they continue to deliver the Common Core-aligned curriculum,” Dr. Peluso said. “*LANGUAGE! Live* is engaging and offers teachers explicit and rigorous instruction and meets kids where they are.”

Teachers and Reading Specialists Agree

“*LANGUAGE! Live* gave us a powerful tool so our students now have improved opportunities for literacy success—not only for our ESL students and students with disabilities, but also for general education students who are struggling readers,” said Jody Durick, special education school improvement specialist, Rochester City School District. “Plus, the kids are motivated by it!”

Skills, Confidence Soar

Kesha James, who worked as a sixth grade teacher at Dr. Louis A. Cerulli School No. 34 when *LANGUAGE! Live* was introduced, agreed. “After we implemented *LANGUAGE! Live*, the kids were immediately excited about working with the avatars and the different sight word games on their computers,” James said. “One girl in my classroom, who had scored a ‘1’ on the state reading test the previous year, went from second grade level to seventh grade level in just one school year! By June, she was on fire. After a year with *LANGUAGE! Live*, her skills and confidence soared and she earned a ‘3,’ an inspiring achievement.”



“I’ve seen a lot during my 10 years of teaching sixth grade, and I knew right away this was a resource that could help my kids.”
—Kesha James, Teacher

In addition to individual successes, the sixth-grade students using *LANGUAGE! Live* as a group showed unprecedented gains in the New York State English Language Arts assessment tests. “In 2016, our sixth grade students helped our school place in the top three of the more than 30 schools in the district,” Peluso said. “That is in stark contrast to the year before when those students, as fifth graders, had scores that were collectively in the bottom five of district schools. We were thrilled to see the vast improvement.”

Students Continue to Succeed

After such impressive results in the first year of implementation, Dr. Peluso would not have been surprised to see a leveling out of results in the second year. But that was not the case, and he was pleasantly surprised with ongoing success. “In 2017, our sixth grade students performed in the top two of the Rochester City School District,” he said. “The year before, those same students in fifth grade had performed in the bottom eight among all district schools.”

Peluso enthusiastically recommends *LANGUAGE! Live* to other school districts looking for a way to dramatically improve students’ literacy and reading achievement. “The ability for our students to work at their own pace and at their own level has helped them remain focused and on task, has built their confidence, and reignited their love for learning. The results over the last two years speak for themselves.”



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