

# K–3 Literacy-Success Levels Soar in Ohio District After Educators Turn to *LETRS*

## THE CHALLENGE

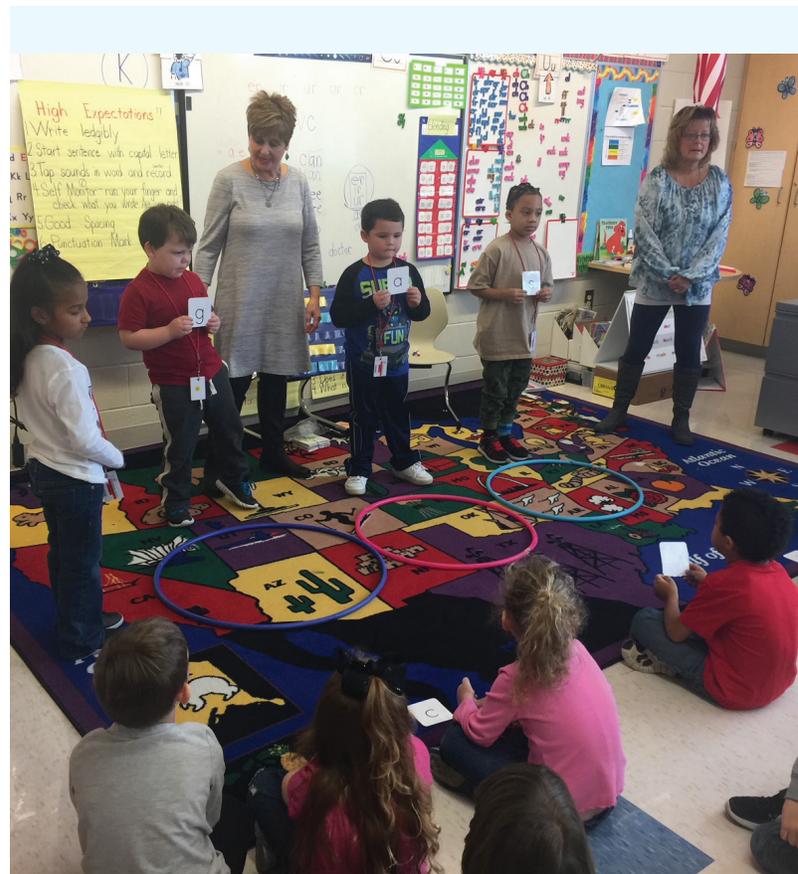
When Niles City Schools (NCS) educators saw K–3 literacy scores for the 2015–2016 school year graded as “D” on the State of Ohio report card, district leaders considered it a catalyst for change. They agreed to serve as one of eight early literacy pilot districts in the Ohio Department of Education’s State Systemic Improvement Plan, designed to strengthen evidence-based early literacy (preK–third grade) instruction for students.

Committed to systemic change while improving learning for every student, administrators recognized the key to raising literacy success was ensuring teachers had the knowledge and confidence to teach reading. The state’s literacy solution of choice was Voyager Sopris Learning’s *LETRS*® (*Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling*).

Antoinette (Toni) D’Urso, formerly the Niles Intermediate School assistant principal and currently the district’s early literacy facilitator, recalled the challenges of transitioning to using interventions in foundational skills, such as phonemic awareness and systematic phonics to improve early literacy. “Initially, the teachers had questions, but they understood that the way we were teaching reading needed to change to focus on building strong decoding skills in our young readers,” she said.

At NCS, four administrators, 13 kindergarten teachers, 11 first grade teachers, 12 second grade teachers,

18 third grade teachers, and one speech pathologist received professional development and coaching in *LETRS*. For nine months, the training included more than 60 hours of face-to-face training, print and online instruction, as well as classroom application projects.



# THE SOLUTION

Michelle Elia, an early literacy specialist and special education consultant in Ohio's region 5, said *LETRS* helped educators modify their approach in the classroom.

*"LETRS* taught teachers the changes that needed to be implemented in the CORE curriculum, which was the biggest issue in Niles," she said. "We needed to create a fabulous Tier 1, focusing on the right skills at each grade level. *LETRS* is not what they taught, but how they learned what to teach."

Authored by renowned literacy expert Dr. Louisa C. Moats, *LETRS* draws on more than a decade of demonstrated success in improving teacher effectiveness and focuses on raising preK–12 literacy achievement for all learners. It provides teachers the background and depth of knowledge to teach language and literacy skills to every student, and helps teachers ensure all students can become proficient readers. Moreover, *LETRS* is designed to eliminate holes in teachers' knowledge base while increasing confidence and encouraging best practices.

*"LETRS allowed us to use a common curriculum and that allowed for the use of common practices. We were able to see gaps in teaching and resources, evaluate what to keep and what to eliminate, and re-evaluate the use of pull-out vs. push-in for Title I services. It gave us the springboard to change our instructional practices."*



—Ann Marie Thigpen  
Superintendent  
Niles City Schools, Niles, OH



# THE RESULTS

Classroom literacy instruction looks very different today at NCS. Rather than each Title I teacher working with a single child for 30 minutes a day, they are now going into classrooms during a daily 150-minute literacy block and providing additional differentiated instruction for those students needing intensive support. Intervention specialists also are working within the same classroom so some rooms have three teachers supporting student learning.

"We've had positive feedback from teachers who said they thought they understood the science of how to teach reading, but because of participating in the LETRS training, they now really understand what is necessary to build strong readers who understand what has been read," D'Urso said in an interview with Dr. Deborah Telfer, director & research associate for the University of Cincinnati.<sup>1</sup>

Ann Marie Thigpen, NCS superintendent, also is pleased with the results.

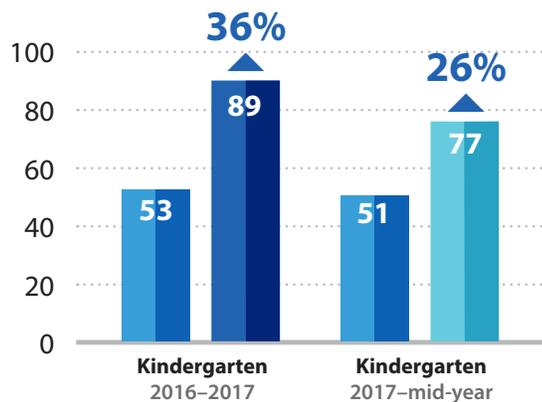
"LETRS allowed us to use a common curriculum, providing for the use of common practices," Thigpen said. "We were able to see gaps in teaching and resources,

evaluate what to keep and what to eliminate, and re-evaluate the use of pull-out vs. push-in for Title I services. It gave us the springboard to change our instructional practices."

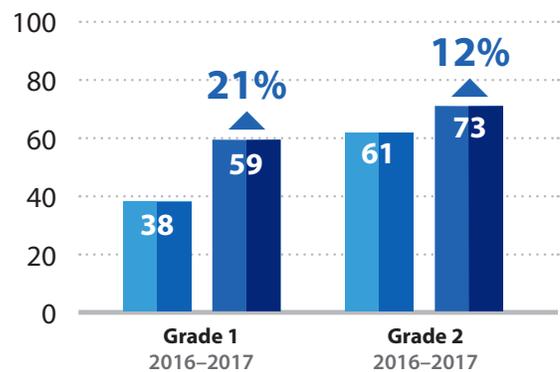
In just one year, student literacy success at NCS improved dramatically, according to the district's universal screening measure, *DIBELS® Next (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills Next)*, also a Voyager Sopris Learning® product. While 53 percent of kindergarten students were at or above benchmark reading levels when LETRS training began in fall 2016, that figure soared to 89 percent by the end of the school year.

From the 38 percent of first-grade students and 61 percent of second-grade students who were performing above benchmark during at the start of the 2016–17 school year, those numbers climbed to 59 percent and 73 percent, respectively. Early data for the 2017–18 school year is reflecting continued improvement as well, especially in kindergarten where a total of 51 percent of kindergarten students were above benchmark at the start of the school year. That figure escalated to 77 percent by the mid-year point.

## % of Students Whose Benchmark Performance Improved with LETRS



Fifty-three percent of the NCS kindergarten students were at or above benchmark at the start of the 2016–2017 school year. That figure improved to 89 percent by the end of the school year. Early data for the 2017–2018 school year is showing significant improvement as well. Fifty-one percent were at or above benchmark at the start, while 77 percent were at or above benchmark at the mid-year point.



At NCS, 38 percent of first grade students and 61 percent of second grade students were performing above benchmark during the same period. Once LETRS was implemented, the number of students performing above benchmark levels increased considerably by year end.

Beginning of Year      Mid-year      End of Year

<sup>1</sup> Telfer, D. M. (2017, Oct. 31). Improving literacy through intentionality, focus, and hard work: A look back at Niles City Schools' year of progress. Columbus, Ohio: Ohio Leadership Advisory Council. Retrieval from [http://www.ohioleadership.org/up\\_doc/cms/Cornerstone\\_SST5\\_Oct2017\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.ohioleadership.org/up_doc/cms/Cornerstone_SST5_Oct2017_FINAL.pdf)

Additionally, the district received a “C” grade for student literacy for 2016–2017, a full grade better than the previous year’s result, further validating the efforts of district and school personnel.

“I believe teachers are encouraged and more confident in their instructional delivery through deeper background knowledge in the reading process,” D’Urso said. “This confidence has promoted teacher collaboration at all levels, along with the support staff, to increase student outcomes. It has become a shared responsibility for student growth.”

D’Urso added the training has reconfirmed what she calls a simple equation for reading success: “Word Recognition x Language Comprehension = Reading Comprehension.”

She said she also believes participation as an early literacy pilot district made dramatic differences in how teachers relate personally to their students.



“If we had not been afforded this opportunity through the pilot, we wouldn’t know the students as well as we do, and we are now able to identify deficits and target the areas with a systematic approach” she said. “The conversations during teacher-based team meetings are now much more meaningful. When we analyze and interpret data, we discuss strategies/activities to use with our various vulnerable populations. The Title I teachers assigned to specific grade levels are working with teachers and understanding how to support the bridge to practice activities they’re learning in *LETRS*. Prior to the pilot, the district had no universal screening measure. Now, with the implementation of *DIBELS Next*, both benchmark and progress monitoring data, are supporting a structured process change and it’s making a difference.”

Gina Coates is thrilled with the differences she and her fellow teachers at NCS are seeing in their students.

“As reading instructors, we are finally moving in the right direction,” said Coates, a Title I instructor with NCS. “The instructional routines we have learned in our *LETRS* training have helped our students progress in a way that I have never seen in more than 20 years of teaching. We are embracing the strategies we were taught, and it is so rewarding to see the difference in our students. Phonological awareness and explicit, systematic phonics instruction are the keys to reading success in the early grades. There are still two months of school left and I feel my job is essentially done. The students in second grade know what they need to know to move onto third grade. They are ready! They have got this. Every day I look at my kids and say, “Oh my goodness, they can decode ANY word I give them! *LETRS* was the missing link. It’s exciting!”

*“The training has brought an awareness, from kindergarten through third grade, that phonemic awareness has to be a priority in K–1, while those skills are still incorporated in grades 2–3. Teachers here are now focusing on phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension to assist struggling students depending on where student deficiencies may be”*

—Antoinette (Toni) D’Urso  
Early Literacy Facilitator  
Niles City Schools, Niles, OH



**Contact Us to Schedule a Consultation:**  
**800.956.2860 • [voyagersopris.com/LETRS](https://www.voyagersopris.com/LETRS)**