

# Literacy Levels Soar at Louisiana Elementary Schools

Two years ago, administrators at Rapides Parish School Board, the ninth-largest school district in Louisiana, arrived at the same conclusion other educators around the country have reached: Many of their elementary teachers had not been equipped with the skills to effectively teach early foundational reading. Poor literacy scores illustrated the depth of the problem. In a district-wide effort to boost teachers' foundational reading instructional skills, administrators at Rapides Parish launched a concerted effort to find a solution.

## THE CHALLENGE

As a first step, Rapides Parish assembled a selection committee and after research and exploration, they overwhelmingly selected Voyager Sopris Learning's *LETRS (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling)* professional development solution.

Kimberly Bennett, executive assistant superintendent at Rapides Parish, said one of her district's primary goals has been to improve the reading level and skills of the K-3 students at the district's 32 elementary schools.

"Going through the process, the one question we had to answer was 'Do our teachers really understand the reading process?'" Bennett said. "For us, *LETRS* was the missing piece, especially with the shift in education where so many teachers are coming from non-traditional backgrounds to teach. It is imperative to us that teachers know how students learn to read in order to effectively teach reading."



“For us, *LETRS* was the missing piece.”

—Kimberly Bennett

# THE SOLUTION

Rapides Parish teachers began using *LETRS* in the 2016–17 school year, and already, progress for both teachers and students has been impressive. According to Alana Cohen, district curriculum specialist, Rapides Parish has witnessed gains of

*“Our fourth-grade teachers are telling us how kids are coming out of third grade knowing so much more now than before we had LETRS.”*

—Alana Cohen, District Curriculum Specialist

33 percent from K–3 students on their STAR Early Literacy tests. “That’s a huge jump in literacy,” Cohen said. “*LETRS* training is definitely changing the way our teachers work with early readers. Those test results don’t lie.” In this diverse district that serves

more than 25,000 K–12 students, Rapides Parish is making great strides in improving reading and literacy before students fall too far behind.

To date, more than 250 of the 488 teachers from Rapides Parish’s lowest-performing elementary schools have received *LETRS* training. Cohen noted another 225 instructors are scheduled to soon receive *LETRS* training, which offers more than a decade of demonstrated success in improving teacher effectiveness and focuses on raising PreK–12 literacy achievement for all learners. *LETRS* gives teachers the background and depth of knowledge to teach language and literacy skills to every student and helps teachers recognize why some students struggle ensuring that all students can become proficient readers.

“We are so excited to be a part of this,” Cohen said. “On a professional development level, things are clicking, and the results have been incredible.”



*Administrators at Rapides Parish School Board*

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*“The knowledge LETRS provides simply makes us more educated and effective teachers of literacy. I am thrilled with the gains my kids are making with both reading and writing, and what a difference we’re seeing with them—and it’s all because of LETRS. I’ve been teaching for more than 20 years and I’m just continually amazed at the consistent growth we’re seeing in the students. Their parents are proud, and the kids are so much more passionate. I love LETRS ... I only wish I was introduced to it several years ago!”*

—Vicky Newman, first-grade teacher,  
Martin Park Elementary School

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## THE RESULTS

In just one year, student reading success at Rapides Parish Schools has improved dramatically—to the extent that one district administrator refers to the results as “incredible.”

Mary Moore, an educator in the Rapides Parish district for 25 years, is in her second year of *LETRS* professional development.

“I’ve had a lot of training over the years in phonics and phonemic awareness,” said Moore, who teaches first grade. “But the *LETRS* training modules remind me about the importance of doing these drills. Student engagement is more important today than

ever before, and the research we’ve learned as part of *LETRS* about how the brain works helps us know how to keep the kids engaged.”

Cohen echoed Moore’s assessment and said *LETRS* has not only helped buoy the confidence of the teachers who have gone through the training, but also dramatically helped the Rapides Parish students improve their reading proficiency.

“For our teachers, true learning is occurring, and they are finding the light bulb is being turned on,” Cohen said. “So many of the teachers have said, ‘How were we not taught these skills in college?’”



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