

Cedar Rapids Community School District, IA

Our LETRS Journey

The LETRS professional learning has transformed literacy instruction in the Cedar Rapids Community School District. Our journey began when, in 2013, eight Special Education Instructional Strategists (SEIS) received the opportunity to attend LETRS modules 1-12. The SEIS coached around using many different materials and programs to improve reading instruction, but soon realized that a teacher-focused solution was needed. After that initial training, five CRCSD staff members became certified trainers and began the process of training all elementary special education teachers. As administrators and general education teachers heard about the training, they too could see the value and wanted it available for all staff. In 2018, a district leadership team met to develop a comprehensive plan to offer this training to all teachers in our 21 elementary buildings and committed to bring the 3rd Edition of LETRS to our district.

As a part of the district initiative, the leadership team mandated LETRS training for all K-2 teachers within a multiyear initiative. They committed to funding the training and offering teachers a stipend or course credit for successful completion. Additionally, all 21 elementary principals attended the LETRS for Administrators training. In order to offer LETRS training to all K-2 teachers, 45 elementary staff members, many of whom are Instructional Coaches, were trained in LETRS Units 1-4, and 25 of them became certified facilitators. During the 2019-2020 school year, we offered Units 1-4 to elementary teachers. To date, approximately 300 of elementary teachers have completed Units 1-4 and with the successful completion of the Units 5-8 certification this summer, CRCSD will continue to offer both volumes for next school year.

Prior to the training, CRCSD used a balanced literacy approach which utilized guided reading groups and leveled readers. The initial learning from LETRS came just in time to impact our curriculum adoption. Committee members, who had taken LETRS, shared research which led to a split adoption with a systematic and explicit phonics-based program for K-2. Leveled readers were also replaced with decodable books. This was difficult for many K-2 teachers who had not yet attended the LETRS training and were asked to change instructional practices from what they had been taught and always used. Additionally, during this time, we adjusted our reading interventions across the district. We moved away from using set programs and began implementing an explicit phonics lesson plan based on Kilpatrick's research and the LETRS phonics lesson plan. Teachers were provided with a lesson plan template, training, and the resources to implement the plan. They were also provided with professional learning on administering and analyzing diagnostic assessments for instructional decision making. These changes occurred before many teachers took LETRS, but the district level staff knew that immediate changes were needed for the sake of our students. As teachers have engaged in the LETRS learning, they have expressed gratitude and understanding of why these changes were

made and frequently question why they were never taught this is their teacher preparation programs. The LETRS training is providing our staff with a common understanding and language. PLC conversations and professional learning opportunities are richer and provide opportunities to deepen learning.

With many of our Instructional Coaches as certified LETRS facilitators and approximately 300 of our elementary staff having completed Units 1-4, we are seeing changes towards evidence-based instruction (e.g., using data for decision making has become the way we do business). Teachers hold each other accountable and support each other through collaboration. Core instruction now includes explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, syllabication, morphology, and language structures. Students are organized into cross grade-level intervention groups based on diagnostic data and specific skill deficits. Teachers share students for intervention groups, and the groups are fluid. As students master skills, teachers adjust instruction to provide students with the skills they need. In Fall 2019, teachers in twelve elementary buildings completed a teacher knowledge survey including questions in eight categories based on the science of reading and explicit instruction. Teachers who had completed LETRS training (Modules 1-3) scored higher in every category with the range difference being 8-18 percent. In phonics and phonological awareness, the differences were 17 percent and 15 percent respectively. Our intention was to repeat the survey at the end of the school year and compare it to student data. With the interruptions this past year, that was not possible. We hope to move forward with that project in the 2021-2022 school year.

CRCSD is still progressing in our journey. We know we must do better at providing students effective core instruction, so that they can become the readers they deserve to be. We know that this will happen as we continue to align our instruction with the science of reading and incorporate evidence-based practices with fidelity. We also know that we must use data to inform our decisions and continually adjust instruction. We are confident that all of this will happen as our teachers and staff not only increase their knowledge but also continue to refine their instructional practices. As we look at our student data, we have begun to see the changes. In the 2018-19 school year, 56% of students met benchmark in the Fall compared to 65% in the Spring. In the 2019-20 school year, we started at 60% in the Fall with 63% meeting benchmark in the Winter. We did not complete the Spring assessments because of school shutdown. This school year, we began with 51% of students meeting benchmark in the Fall and 54% in the Winter. With the loss of learning from March – August of 2020, we have experienced a setback. With teacher knowledge increasing, we feel we can bounce back from that setback quicker than before our LETRS journey, and many teachers have indicated that their LETRS learning will facilitate this process for their students. CRCSD is a large district with many moving parts. We are committed to continuing our LETRS journey. We are confident that this is the difference we need for our students.