

Improving Literacy through Intentionality, Focus, and Hard Work: A Look Back at Niles City Schools' Year of Progress

A little over a year ago, the Niles City Schools agreed to serve as the early literacy pilot district in State Support Team (SST) region 5. One of eight pilots, Niles and other districts across eight of Ohio's 16 SST regions participated in an extensive professional development experience designed to strengthen evidence-based early literacy (pre-kindergarten through third grade) instruction for all children.

Context. In 2016-17, as part of the Ohio Department of Education, Office for Exceptional Children's *State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP)*, the state selected 14 schools in eight districts, employed regional early literacy specialists (RELS) in each of the 16 SSTs, and provided in-person professional development (PD) and coaching in the use of *Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS)* for 350 K-3 educators, 51 preschool educators, 89 administrators, and the 16 RELS.



A second cohort of eight districts have begun participating in the pilot training during the 2017-18 school year. In addition to PD in the use of LETRS, ODE supports the continued use of the state's improvement framework – the Ohio Improvement Process (OIP) and *Ohio's Leadership Development Framework* – in concert with LETRS to support consistent implementation of practices learned, monitoring of the degree of implementation, and fostering shared learning and improved collective instructional capacity across schools and districts. As noted in ODE's Phase III report to the US Department of Education on progress under Ohio's SSIP:

“ODE continued to leverage the existing Ohio Improvement Process (OIP) framework and infrastructure as the foundations needed to implement evidence-based early literacy instruction, including the addition of early literacy goals, strategies, adult implementation indicators, and student outcomes into existing district plans. Using the OIP framework allows districts to utilize their existing OIP structures of the district leadership team, building leadership teams, teacher-based teams, and the five-step process (a variation of a Plan, Do, Study, Act cycle) to plan for, implement, and evaluate evidence-based practices to improve

early language and literacy outcomes for students in preschool through grade three. Districts can also access support for implementing the OIP from the State Support Teams.” *Ohio Department of Education, 2017, p. 3.*



Then and Now: *What a Difference a Year Makes*

Niles began participating in face-to-face LETRS PD in October 2016. “A year ago we were trying to figure out what it was. Now, we’re almost a year into it and we’ve moved from focusing on theory to focusing on good practices,” explained Joanna Lukz-Gatta, Principal of Niles Primary School.

Niles Primary serves children in kindergarten through second grade – the target group for the state’s work in early literacy. Niles Intermediate School, which encompasses grades three through five, participated along with the Primary School as part of the pilot.



“It’s difficult to be a pilot,” said Ann Marie Thigpen, Superintendent of Niles City Schools. “You sign up for something and you’re not entirely sure what it entails. But, we’ve plowed through and have seen positive results. It has taken a whole year to accomplish buy-in. It’s good to be where we’re at today as compared to where we were even six months ago,” she added.

Niles’ mission is to instruct a defined curriculum in a safe, educational environment, ensuring opportunities for all students to become responsible learners, critical thinkers, and problem solvers as productive members of a democratic society. Maintaining a positive, cohesive school community and unifying instruction through continuous development of educators at all levels of the system are key strategies in Niles’ ongoing work to improve results for every learner.

WHAT IS LETRS?

Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) is comprehensive professional development that focuses on essential literacy concepts and instructional practice and prepares educators to increase literacy achievement for all learners in grades K-12.

Louisa Moats, Ed.D.

Lead Author and Developer of LETRS

Source: www.letrs.com

Participation as an early literacy pilot supported Niles in taking steps to unify curricular and instructional practices, as well as instructional personnel around a common approach to meeting student needs.

“There was a longstanding belief, reinforced by state policy, that only Title I teachers could work with students eligible for Title I services, and that only special education teachers should work with students receiving special education services. We’ve had to break down this mentality and reinforce our expectation that we’re all here to support all children. Through school-wide approaches and flexible grouping, all children, even the ‘straight A’ learner, who might be weak in one skill area and need support gets that support,” explained Thigpen.

“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 get rid of, and reevaluate the use of pull-out vs push-in for Title services. It gave us the springboard to change our instructional practices,” stated Thigpen.

SST 5 consultant and RELS Michelle Elia noted, “LETRS taught teachers the changes that needed to be implemented in the CORE curriculum, which was the biggest issue in Niles. 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.”

Antoinette (Toni) D’Urso, formerly the Niles Intermediate School Assistant Principal, is the district’s Early Literacy Facilitator and is working closely with Elia to improve literacy across the district. “We’ve had positive feedback from teachers who said they thought they knew how to teach reading, but because of participating in the LETRS training, now really understand,” explained D’Urso. Lukz-Gatta agreed: “The PD provided to teachers eliminated holes in their knowledge base and helped to pull it all together.”



Niles transitioned from using Reading Recovery to designing their own interventions aligned with data based on what they learned through LETRS training, which also involved rethinking service delivery structures and schedules, and supporting teachers (i.e., classroom teachers, intervention specialists, Title I teachers) to co-plan and co-serve to meet a wider range of student needs. “The first step is getting that mind shift and changing expectations,” affirmed Lukz-Gatta.

“We have strong Title I teachers, but if all their combined knowledge is affecting only six children a day for each teacher, just look at what we could do if we ‘pushed in’ instead of pulled kids out,” said Thigpen. D’Urso also recalled the challenges in moving to the use of interventions in foundational skills, such as phonemic awareness and systematic phonics to improve early literacy, but said “initially the teachers had questions, but they understood that what they were doing wasn’t working.”

“Rather than each teacher working with a child for 30 minutes a day, they’re now going into classrooms during a daily 150-minute literacy block and also providing additional differentiated instruction for those children needing tier III (i.e., intensive) supports. Intervention specialists are also working in the classroom so that some rooms have three teachers supporting student learning,” added Thigpen.

Using OIP Structures to Support Evidence-based Literacy Instruction

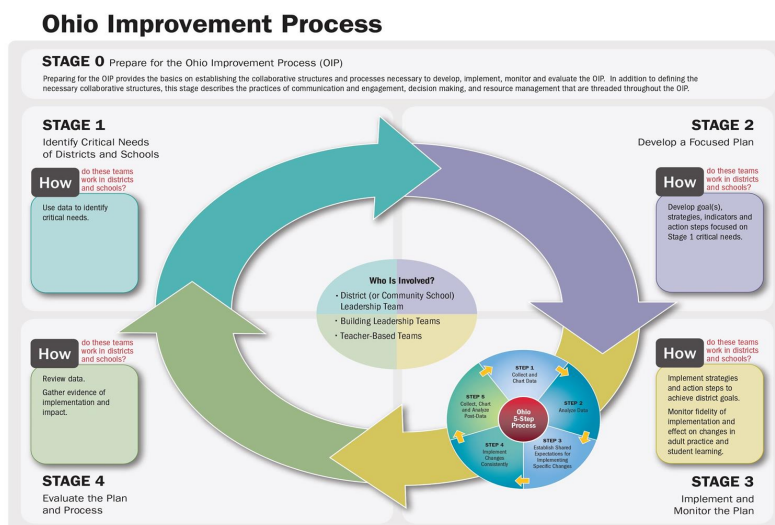
Niles continues to use the OIP to support the implementation of evidence-based practices in literacy and other content areas. SST consultants Michelle Elia and Lorie Lubman work collaboratively to ensure that the support provided to the district is aligned and directed toward building collective instructional practice and improved student learning.

While Lubman supported Niles in the effective use of the OIP, Elia provided assistance and PD in helping Niles educators adjust their Tier 1 curriculum, provided resources, and modeled how to deliver literacy instruction.

Lukz-Gatta believes that LETRS has allowed teachers to learn what good reading instruction entails. However, like just as teachers thought they knew how to teach reading well prior to LETRS, the building thought they knew how to use the Ohio 5-step process. “Even though we knew the process, the SST’s support in modeling the use of the OIP process and guiding us it helped us realize that we were not really doing it as intended,” she explained.

“If we didn’t have the process OIP to support us in the review of data, we would have looked at data individually rather than in relationship to the strategies we were using. We would not be at the point we’re now at in recognizing the value of data in making better informed instructional decisions,” said Thigpen.

Niles has a district leadership team (DLT) with representation from all district-level administrators (e.g., the Director of School Improvement and Federal/state Programs, the Supervisor for the Education of Exceptional Children, etc.); all building principals, middle and high school guidance counselors; and teachers, including



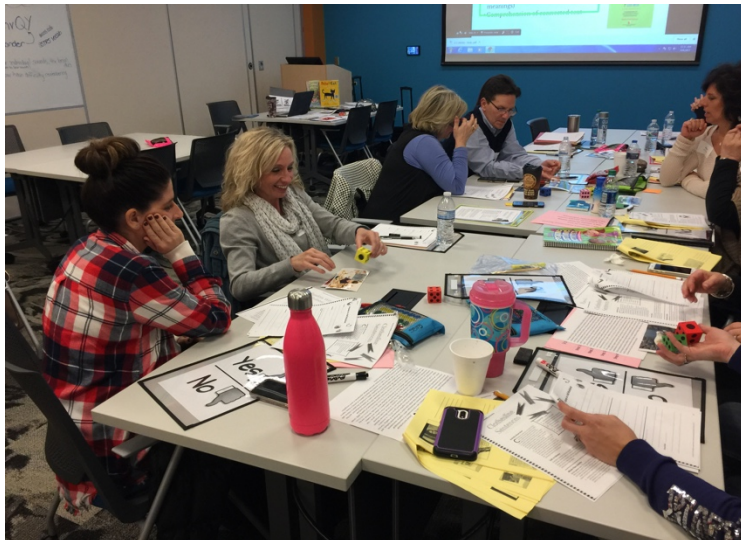
intervention specialists, from each level across the district. Each school in the district has a functional building leadership team (BLT) and teacher-based teams (TBTs) are in various stages of development and use in all schools within the district. For example, at the kindergarten-grade 2 level, each grade level has a TBT that meets two times per month for 45 minute meetings. The Primary School BLT meets once per month for two hours.

D’Urso believes that participation as an early literacy pilot district and the

continued use of OIP structures, has made a difference in student performance. “If we had not gone through the pilot, we wouldn’t know the students like we do. The conversations during teacher-based team (TBT) meetings are now much more meaningful. When we analyze data we can talk about the strategies we’re using with specific students. The Title 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, we had no universal screener. Now, those data are supporting a structured process change and it’s making a difference.”

“Of the 46 kindergarten students who were not on track when LETRS training began in Fall 2016, only five were still working below grade level at the end of the 2016-17 school year,” reported D’Urso. Similarly, “of 81 first-grade students and 48 second-grade students not on track last fall, 45 and 27, respectively, were still below grade level at the end of last school year. The instructional strategies teachers were using impacted student learning and the students that need additional support are spread out across classrooms this year to allow us to provide services more equally,” she explained.

Improved practice at one level of the system is beginning to impact other levels of the system and, at the same time, is contributing to shared learning and ownership for student success. For example, Principal Lukz-Gatta reported that the coaching and use of reading tiered fidelity inventory (RTFI)¹ as part of



participation in the pilot “has guided us in developing a building plan; we worked on Tier I last year and are moving into Tier 2 this year.” Similarly, D’Urso notes, “as teachers improve their instructional practice and decision-making capability at the Primary School and at grade three of the Intermediate School, those improvements will spill over into teacher practice at the fourth and fifth-grade levels. We’re designing an intervention grid to document specific interventions used to address specific needs, which will allow us to develop a guide that can be used by all teachers.”

Speaking with One Voice

“Even though it was difficult to be a part of the first-year pilot, we didn’t have time to wait. Despite delays in LETRS module release and related scheduling issues, the support we’ve received from SST 5 and ODE were invaluable,” observed Thigpen.

Niles leadership agrees that changing practice through LETRS participation required the commitment and full participation of district and school leaders with decision-making authority. “Implementation is always the most difficult part and there were hard decisions that needed



to be made,” said Thigpen. For example, the pilot allowed for participating teachers to complete a portion of the LETRS modules individually, reducing the time out of buildings for teachers and the need for substitute teachers. However, despite evident challenges, Niles was committed to shared learning and opted for teachers to attend and participate in PD as a group. Throughout the course of the 2016-17 school year, district and teacher union leadership worked together to develop options for 2017-18. “We offered two options and the union chose a blended approach, allowing three sessions to be completed by teachers individually and three to be completed as a group,” explained Thigpen. “There were speed bumps along the way, but I wouldn’t have changed anything. We needed to grow together as a team,” she added.

Elia, D’Urso, and Lukz-Gatta work together to maximize instructional time and support the use and expansion of evidence-based literacy practices. Elia worked with Head Start programs to train teachers in LETRS to improve early literacy for children who will be entering Niles City Schools as kindergartners. “Michelle Elia

¹ For more information about the RTFI, see <https://miblsi.org/evaluation/fidelity-assessments/reading-tiered-fidelity-inventory-r-tfi>.

brings a wealth of knowledge and strategies and shares immediately what she's learning with us," remarked D'Urso. "We could not have done the work without Michelle; having her as our 'push' has been invaluable. This year, she'll pull back a little bit, but that's OK," added Thigpen.

Niles had K-3 literacy scores of "D" on the state report card prior to its work as a LETRS pilot district. This year, the district received a grade of "C" and the improvement validated the efforts of district and school personnel. "The administrative team at the district level has to be united in working with SST 5. It's imperative that we agree in front of teachers and speak with one voice," said Thigpen. Lukz-Gatta said, "the support from the district is essential; if you don't have administrative support from the top down, it doesn't follow through."

What advice does Niles have for other districts? Thigpen advised, "having the right personnel and accepting the resources whatever they are, working as a united front, and plowing through make the difference. You will face challenges and change is difficult. The bottom line is what's best for kids. If you keep that at the forefront, you can do it."

References

Early literacy in Ohio: Ohio's Part B state systemic improvement plan: Phase III report. April 2017. Columbus, OH: Ohio Department of Education.

Moats, L. C. (1999). *Teaching reading is rocket science: What expert teachers of reading should know and be able to do.* Washington, DC: American Federation of Teachers.

For More Information

For more information about **SST 5** and its work to improve literacy outcomes for all children, contact Michele DiMuzio, Director, SST Region 5, 7320 Palmyra Rd., Canfield, OH 44406, 330.533.8755; michele.dimuzio@sstr5.org.

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For more information about the **OLAC and OIP** resources, contact Dr. Jim Gay, OLAC Co-director, at jimgay@basa-ohio.org; or Karel Oxley, OLAC Co-director, at Oxley@basa-ohio.org.