

CASE STUDY

# Recognition Matters: Virginia Middle School Empowers Adolescent Readers With Data-Driven Instruction and Celebrations of Success





## Room for Improvement

When Nancy Sindle arrived at Shirley Heim Middle School in Virginia’s Stafford County Public Schools as a reading specialist in 2015, the district was already using Lexia® Core5® Reading in elementary schools and Lexia Strategies for Older Students® at the middle school level.

While her predecessor left everything organized and prepped, Sindle noted her adolescent students weren’t engaging with the program. Lexia Strategies was designed to cover fundamental literacy skills for secondary school students, but because the students didn’t enjoy it, making progress in the program was a struggle.

When Lexia® PowerUp Literacy® was launched, Sindle jumped on the opportunity to bring it to Shirley Heim Middle School. PowerUp was everything Strategies had hoped to be—age-appropriate, engaging, and research-proven to make a difference in adolescent student’s reading abilities. At Sindle’s request, Stafford County leaders purchased PowerUp for her middle school.

## ‘Wait Until You See It’

“We’re going to do Lexia® as part of our English curriculum,” Sindle recalled telling her teachers the following year. With the student struggles in Strategies fresh in their minds, their hesitation was clear. “PowerUp is so much better,” she reassured them. “Wait until you see it.”

Sindle asked all of her teachers to take the “Implementing PowerUp” training through Lexia® Academy—a professional learning program that empowered teachers to use Lexia programs and enhanced their knowledge of science-based reading instruction.

When the teachers saw the real-time student progress data provided by the program, along with the many resources for differentiated instruction, they quickly got onboard. Sindle explained, “Teachers saw the resource hub, the lessons, the ability to see who’s working, who’s not working, and they really saw the value PowerUp brought.”

With her teachers prepared, it was time to introduce the program to the true critics: The students. “When the kids came into sixth grade, we switched them from Core5 to PowerUp, and it felt like a different program for them,” Sindle said. “They liked being in middle school and using a more grown-up literacy program. It was much more age-appropriate and engaging for middle school students.”

PowerUp was designed to immerse students in grades 6 and above in an age-appropriate learning experience that is tailored to their individual strengths and weaknesses. The program maximizes student learning and provides motivational tools so middle school students can master the skills they need to be successful readers while enabling students to make multiple years of growth in a single academic year.

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“What’s so great about Lexia PowerUp is the teachers can see where the kids are working. They can see the progress. They can see the lack of progress. They can see where students are struggling. The ability for a teacher to click on a name, and drill into the data, and then address where a student needs help with specific resources, no other program is like it.”

– Nancy Sindle, Reading Specialist

## Setting the Right Goals to Recognize Wins

Initially, Sindle and her teachers set usage goals. But through collaboration and with support from a Lexia Success Partnership, they discovered the importance of not just “minutes of usage” but completion of units, to truly move the needle on literacy scores. “It was so helpful to have the full staff meetings with our Lexia Success Manager, where we talked about goal setting for both teachers and for students,” Sindle said.

Sindle and her teachers came up with the idea of highlighting student progress, based on unit completion in PowerUp. Each week in the morning announcements, Sindle celebrated the top-10 “winners” in each grade level. “That really helped,” Sindle said. “Kids wanted to see their names up there.”

To further encourage program use, some of Sindle’s teachers implemented grade-level competitions, which got students excited and involved in moving through PowerUp. “The recognition piece has been so valuable here at Shirley Heim,” Sindle explained. “When kids get recognized, when they know you’re watching, know that you’ll keep them accountable and celebrate their success, they want to do more.”



Even during COVID, Sindle said, students were logging in to PowerUp and working through the program, because teachers stayed engaged with them virtually, making encouraging comments.

In person, this recognition helped to encourage their peers as well. Sindle shared, "When a student completes a strand, like the Word Study Strand, I go into the classroom with a team cheering, 'Keep reading, keep reading!'" She also sees them supporting each other and works to maintain that positive school culture around literacy.

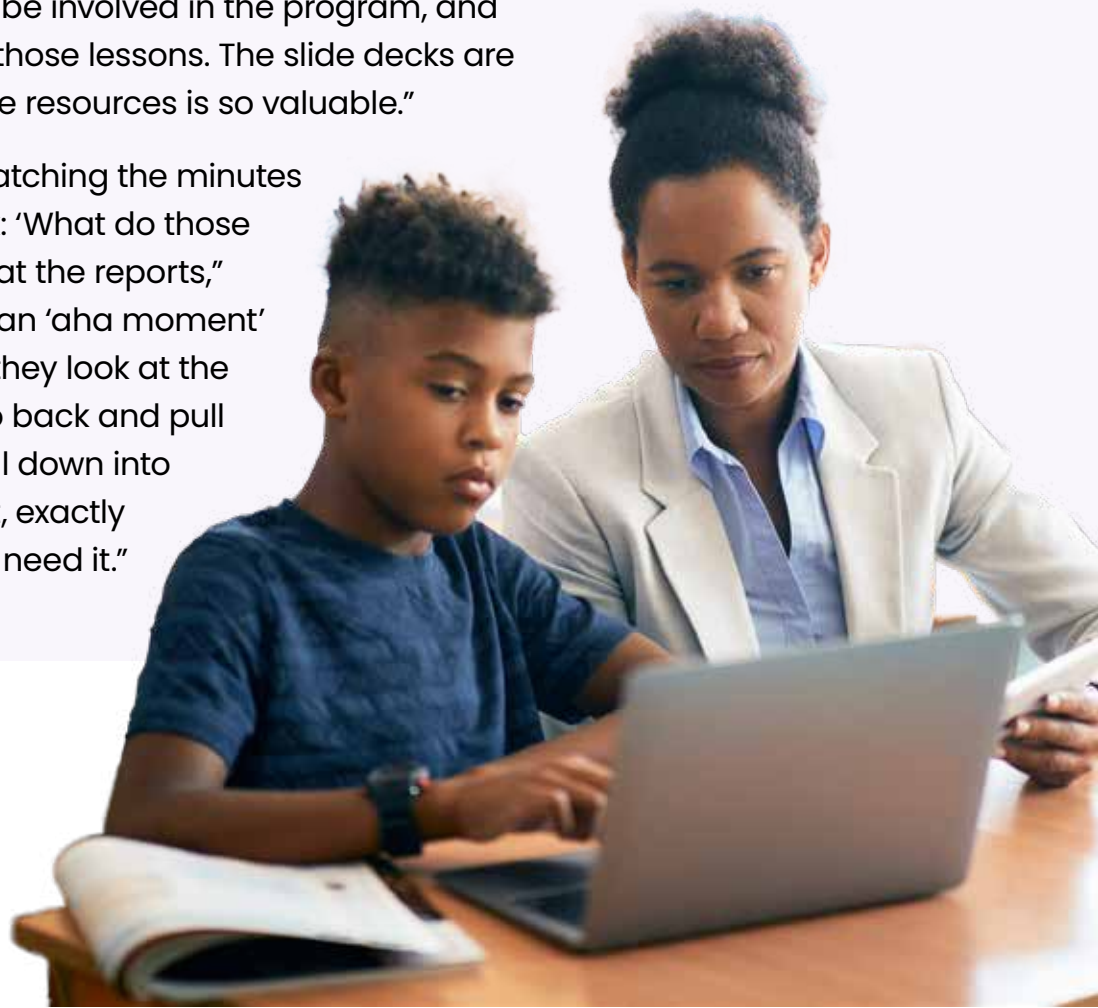
That culture of recognition has only grown. Now Shirley Heim educators offer personalized certificates, badges, and prizes like sunglasses, and induction into "The Lightning Club" upon completion of PowerUp.

Her efforts are seeing results. "Our students who are really using PowerUp are also scoring better on their NWEA® MAP assessments," Sindle said. "When we first started, over a third of our school was in the foundational levels. Now, we're starting to see more kids reading at those advanced levels. I can see the difference, the teachers see it, and more importantly, the kids see it."

### ***What Would You Say to Another School Looking to Implement PowerUp?***

To be successful, Sindle said, "You have to look at the program. You have to be involved in the program, and teachers have to use those lessons. The slide decks are amazing! Having those resources is so valuable."

"It's fine to start out watching the minutes of usage. But then ask: 'What do those minutes mean?' Look at the reports," Sindle continued. "It's an 'aha moment' for the teacher when they look at the units, and they can go back and pull the resources, and drill down into a skill with the student, exactly where and when they need it."





## District Expansion

Seeing the impressive results at Shirley Heim, Stafford County leaders invested in PowerUp across the district. In 2022–2023, the district implemented the program across all eight middle schools through an MTSS “Reading Skills and Strategies II” class. While all students were expected to use PowerUp, the Tier II semester class provided focused time for literacy learning. Students who made enough progress could move out of it for the second semester, and likewise students could move into it in the second semester if needed.

From the start, teachers and administrators saw a difference in the results at Shirley Heim. Principals from other middle schools came by to study Sindle’s implementation of PowerUp and her response was simple—Are the teachers doing station work? Her teachers knew the importance of using PowerUp as a blended learning model—they used the real-time data and resources provided by PowerUp to structure their differentiated instruction, including offline time, teacher-led lessons, reading practice, and writing practice.

“Proper implementation matters,” Sindle explained. “The technology aspect of PowerUp is designed to support teacher instruction. PowerUp has Lexia Lessons® and [Lexia] Skill Builders®—all of that is so valuable.”

Designed to be teacher-centric, this is where PowerUp shines. With real-time, actionable data, and differentiated instructional resources, PowerUp makes it easy for teachers to intervene and help students overcome areas of struggle.

“Teachers need to be involved,” Sindle said. “Students need to know this is part of their instruction, and that they will be held accountable, that the teachers will be there to help them when they struggle and acknowledge and praise them when they succeed.”

## ‘Every Year Gets a Little Bit Better’

Like many districts, Stafford County is struggling with retaining quality teachers and has to rely on long-term substitutes for many classes. The 2023–2024 school year also saw some changes with a turnover in district administration and a new curriculum.

With PowerUp only used every other day in Pack Class (homeroom), Sindle saw student progress is slower than it was the year before. To get students back on track, she is currently running a competition encouraging students to maximize the time they have with PowerUp.

She’s hoping this will bring results up by the end of the year and is already seeing a difference. With every Pack teacher involved and weekly leaderboards, Sindle has noticed the return of student engagement and desire to work in the program.

The plus side of this year’s implementation is that more teachers are involved. Sindle worked with all homeroom teachers to get them comfortable with PowerUp, its resources, and its student progress data. They also have regular PLCs for grade-level teachers to meet and discuss student progress. Next year, Sindle hopes to train more thoroughly all of her middle school teachers in teaching literacy again, due to staff turnover during the years.

“Every year, our implementation gets a little bit better,” Sindle said. “This year has been a little rough, with a lot of changes, but we hope to return to our semester-based implementation next year.”

Even with the limited PowerUp implementation, Sindle and her teachers are making a difference in student literacy scores, and beyond. For the students, becoming a stronger reader is a source of empowerment, and PowerUp has been an essential ingredient for the success. “It helps with their self-esteem, and their independence, knowing that they have the power to make those changes, to fill in those holes that are impeding their reading comprehension,” Sindle said. “And the more they can fill some of those holes they have in reading comprehension, the better they will do in civics and science or concluding and inferencing.”



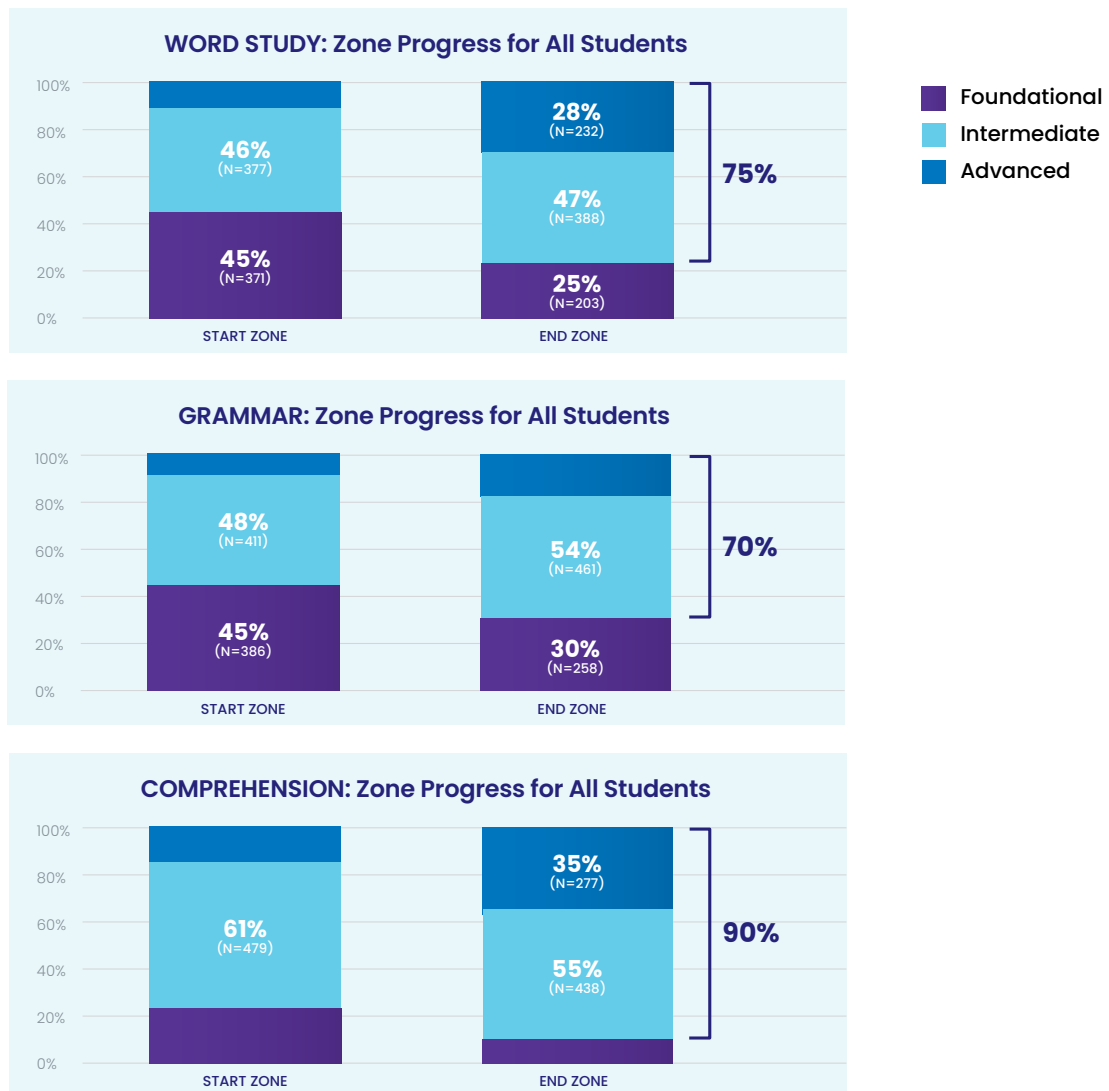
## Success by the Numbers

At Shirley Heim Middle School, more than 70% of students using PowerUp finished the 2022–2023 school year in intermediate or advanced zones in each of the three strands. Ninety percent of students using PowerUp finished the year in intermediate or advanced zones for Comprehension.

Other notable statistics:




- More than 80% of the students who met usage targets reached the advanced zone in each of the strands by the end of the year.
- Of all 926 middle school students, 55%, or 507 students, moved up at least one zone throughout the year and 269 students moved up 2+ zones.

### 2022–2023 Zone Progress by Strand for all students, regardless of usage (n=926)





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