

CASE STUDY

# From Vision to Reality: Elevating Secondary Literacy Instruction With Lexia Aspire and PowerUp





Renee Hesson has a vision for improving literacy at the secondary level in her district—and she’s been on a career-long search for a solution.

As supervisor of instruction for all secondary ELA and reading interventions (6–12) for Caroline County Public Schools in Maryland, Hesson coordinates all tiers of instruction and oversees curriculum, assessment, and instruction for her district. Her office serves more than 5,500 students in a rural district that includes a growing population of multilingual learners.

In recent years, her district has been challenged by:

- Hitting reading intervention goals for students in Tier 2 who were reading below grade level and needed additional support.
- Misunderstandings and misconceptions among educators around a multi-tiered approach to literacy instruction.
- Low awareness about how the science of reading can be applied at the secondary level to help address literacy-related gaps connected to core content.
- Finding literacy programs that are 1) aligned to the science of reading, 2) accessible to students, both in knowledge and from a technology standpoint, with resources at the fingertips of staff and students, and 3) engaging, interesting, and age-appropriate.

Students entering middle school and high school with gaps in their literacy skills were having a hard time catching up without targeted skill instruction and alignment across teaching approaches.

Now, the district is combining Lexia Aspire® Professional Learning and Lexia® PowerUp Literacy®—and taking steps toward achieving Hesson’s ultimate vision of helping every child become a proficient reader.

## A Gateway Opened With LETRS

Hesson's first exposure to Lexia® was through Lexia® LETRS® for Administrators, a professional learning course offered through the Maryland Department of Education, available to her team thanks to the Maryland Leads grant. LETRS presented the how, what, and why of literacy acquisition to teachers and administrators—and showed how it's backed by the science of reading.

She decided this type of training was so valuable it needed to be made available to all teachers, not just a few. Hesson knew when teachers are given adequate professional learning opportunities, they tend to be more satisfied, engaged, and contribute to a stable and productive learning environment. But while LETRS is widely available for elementary educators, there was a notable professional learning gap for secondary school teachers, especially in foundational literacy skills.

## Enter Lexia Aspire Professional Learning

Starting in summer 2023, Caroline County leaders launched a cohort of middle school ELA and special education teachers in Aspire, a flexible, self-paced professional learning program aligned with the International Dyslexia Association's (IDA) Knowledge and Practice Standards for Teachers of Reading. In addition, Aspire's "Bridge to Application" resources are aligned with the Common Core State Standards.

The program includes courses about how to best support students with specific needs (like dyslexia and DLD), Emergent Bilingual students, and those who need skill-specific support in the domains of word recognition, language comprehension, or reading comprehension and writing. "English content teachers need more information about how to address reading skill needs, because that's not part of their teacher-preparation program. They need resources to do so, and Lexia Aspire gives them a lot of resources," Hesson said.

In particular, Hesson appreciated Aspire's grammar-focused courses that gave teachers an understanding of the foundational parts of speech, and how to apply that at the middle school level.

With her educators' ongoing professional learning in place, Hesson looked for high-quality instructional materials that would provide additional support. After learning more about Lexia's product offerings, Hesson selected PowerUp, a supplemental program proven to accelerate literacy gains for students in grades 6–12 who are reading below grade level.

"Lexia PowerUp was the perfect fit for what we needed for our reading intervention goals at Tier 2 for students who were reading below grade level and needed additional support with word study, grammar, and reading comprehension," Hesson said.

PowerUp is now being piloted at all four secondary schools in advance of a full rollout.



It is my charge for every child to learn to read proficiently. I believe that Lexia PowerUp will get us there."

– Renee Hesson, Supervisor of Instruction for Secondary English & Fine Arts, Caroline County Public Schools, Maryland



## Getting Teacher Buy-In

Of course, making districtwide shifts isn't always easy, and Hesson knew getting teacher buy-in would be crucial for sustainable success.

The most important aspect is teachers understand WHY they are doing it, Hesson said. Educators across Caroline County had a common concern that students weren't proficient in reading at grade level, and reading independently had become a struggle since COVID-19. They tried many activities but students weren't showing a readiness for complex texts. "Our teachers understood the why. They wanted students to be stronger readers and more literate when it came to their written expression," Hesson said.

As Caroline County leaders considered new products, Hesson involved teachers in the selection process and gave them the opportunity to be trained and try the materials in a low-stakes setting. She checked in regularly, doing "integrity checks," and she worked with Lexia to ensure her expectations of teachers were accurate and in alignment with the goals of the intervention. The goal was for teachers to receive adequate instruction and support.

"I met regularly with school teams, including the principal, the literacy coach, and the teachers of the interventions, so that we could review student progress. It's been a learning experience for all of us," Hesson said.

That learning experience is already showing results.





## Setting Up Secondary School Teachers for Success

Hesson called Aspire, “training that every secondary English teacher needs to better understand foundational reading skills and navigate a tiered approach.”

Educators across the country have been overcoming a common challenge—when certain grammar concepts are part of the core content and writing standards, but were not emphasized in their teacher-preparation programs, it leaves many with gaps in their knowledge. This is especially true for secondary school teachers, who often never expected they’d need to teach students how to read. Helping educators not only understand the foundational literacy skills, but how to teach them, is the goal of professional learning courses like Aspire.

“The way Aspire is arranged topically and by domain made for a much more powerful professional learning experience, in real time.” Hesson said. Aspire’s modular approach allowed her teachers to independently augment their knowledge on the topics they needed to know most, when they needed it.

While Hesson wishes they could have done Aspire as an intensive summer training before diving into their PowerUp pilot, she thinks they have still been successful running concurrently.

One of Hesson’s goals was to empower teachers to work on student reading skills themselves, before escalating the intervention required. “With Aspire and PowerUp, teachers have the knowledge and the resources they need to teach kids not only to learn to read, but read to learn, and then apply it directly to their English content.” Hesson said.

## No Longer ‘In Intervention for Life’

Another step in Hesson’s vision was to move away from the concept that a student is in intervention for life. From her perspective, PowerUp is providing the truly scaffolded support they need to engage, progress, and accelerate their learning.

“With PowerUp, students are moving through the levels, and monitoring their streaks, and they’re more engaged,” Hesson said.

Not only does PowerUp help students with targeted skill intervention to fill the gaps—it meets every student where they are, regardless of their learning needs. These shifts will do wonders to reach individual students who have been left behind by previous approaches—promoting equal educational opportunities with targeted interventions. “Aspire gives teachers the resources they need and PowerUp brings the resources to the student level, using their progress data,” Hesson said.

It also gives teachers the requisite resources to “backward-map” in a learning progression to the standard. In the past, scaffolding to the standard meant sometimes accidentally leapfrogging over the skills.

“PowerUp does a very strong job of using what we know about the science of reading to provide students multiple touches with the standard or the skill associated with the standard in a particular domain, so we can make progress toward those standards,” Hesson said.

The format of PowerUp has also really engaged students in a deeper way. “Lexia does an outstanding job of being age-appropriate for secondary students who, if something’s too gamified or it looks elementary, disengage almost immediately,” Hesson said. “It also assesses while they’re learning, so there’s no stopping to take a test. For students who have test anxiety, the embedded assessment better meets their needs.”

“

Lexia Aspire is the training that every secondary English teacher or special education English co-teacher needs to better understand foundational reading skills and navigate a tiered approach.”

— Renee Hesson, Supervisor of Instruction for Secondary English & Fine Arts, Caroline County Public Schools, Maryland

## Looking Ahead to the Future

The timing of Caroline County's shift to Lexia products is in line with sweeping changes in literacy education around the nation. Like many states, Maryland has enacted legislation, like the Maryland Blueprint, to improve literacy outcomes by shifting to evidence-based reading programs that promote long-term, sustainable, and transformational change.

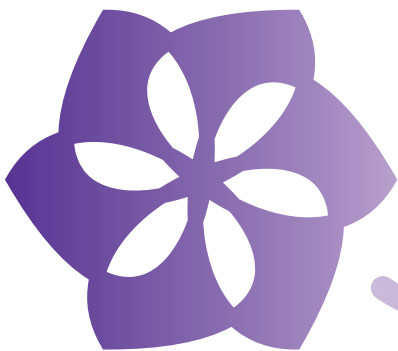
In 2024, The Maryland State Board of Education passed a resolution requiring all literacy instruction in Maryland Public Schools to be aligned to the science of reading, including Structured Literacy, effective school year 2024–2025. The goal is to score in the top 10 best-performing states for reading in 2027.

Hesson is confident her district is on the right track. "When teachers and students started transferring knowledge and skill, which you don't often see in a professional learning or program, I knew Lexia was the right solution for our district. With Lexia, teachers and students are able to articulate and understand the why," Hesson said.

With pilots running this year, Hesson plans to implement PowerUp across all schools next year, and expand Aspire professional learning to interventionists at the high school level. With the district's middle schools set up for success, Hesson is expanding her vision to help high school students with their foundational reading goals. She believes Aspire and PowerUp will help educators meet students' needs at Tier 2, instead of needing additional intensive support at Tier 3.

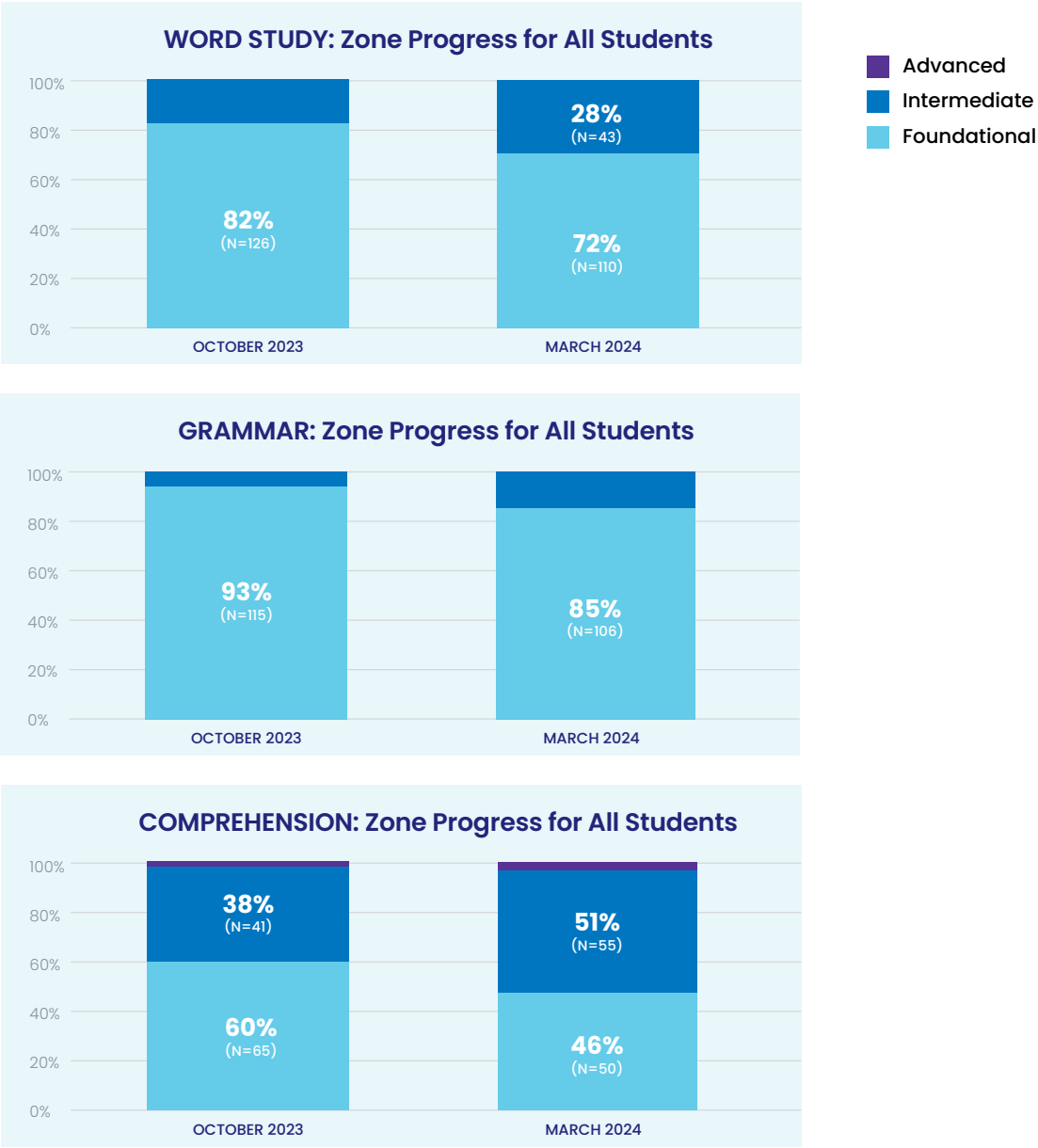
Having "meandered" their way into using Lexia products, Hesson said embracing the science of reading doesn't have to take years. "Try it yourself. Involve teachers. Talk to students about their experience," she said.

"Lexia PowerUp speaks for itself. The time, effort, and energy is well spent, and it will result in students moving among tiers of instruction, instead of remaining stuck."



# Success by the Numbers


With less than six months of use, Caroline County leaders are already seeing progress in adolescent student literacy skills, and the school year isn't over yet.







Lexia®, a Cambium Learning Group company, is a leader in science of reading-based solutions. For 40 years, the company has focused on pre-K–12 literacy and today provides solutions for every student and educator. With a complete offering of professional learning, curriculum, and embedded assessment, Lexia helps more learners read, write, and speak with confidence. For more information, visit [lexialearning.com](https://lexialearning.com).

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