

CASE STUDY

Alabama School Goes from 'Full Support' to 'Science of Reading Spotlight School'

Central Elementary School, Tuscaloosa, Alabama

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Case Study

Training Educators and Administrators in LETRS Professional Learning Improves Literacy Outcomes in Alabama

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Introduction

This year, Central Elementary School, part of Tuscaloosa City Schools, was named a “Science of Reading Spotlight School” by the Alabama Department of Education—a recognition bestowed on just 12 schools in Alabama each year. This is a major accomplishment for a district where just 15% of kindergarten students were proficient in reading during fall 2021. “We attribute this success to our teachers and the science of reading,” said Jerry Collins, Ph.D., principal at Central Elementary School.

“

With the science of reading as our guide, the sky is the limit for us.”

—**Jerry Collins**, Ph.D., Principal at Central Elementary School

The Challenge

In 2018, Central Elementary was deemed a “full support school” based on its students’ test scores. Collins took over as principal shortly after that and began looking for ways to get more of the school’s students reading successfully by third grade—a requirement of Alabama’s Literacy Act.

When Collins learned about the Lexia LETRS® (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling) Suite, he was immediately interested. Developed by a trio of literacy experts, LETRS is a flexible literacy professional learning solution for educators and administrators. It teaches the skills needed to master the fundamentals of reading instruction—phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, writing, and language.

“I initially heard about LETRS from my mentor principal at the state department, which establishes the specific benchmarks that Alabama schools have to reach,” Collins said.

“Lexia LETRS was one of the offerings to help teachers and to address some of our students’ learning difficulties.”

Taking the position that being a full support school “described us but did not define Central Elementary School,” Collins got all educators onboard with LETRS.

After completing the program’s administrative component, he jumped into the teacher’s portion along with his staff. “Now,” he added, “our entire staff of 22 is working through the program.”



The Solution

74%

of kindergarten students who are going into first grade are now proficient in reading.

Working with a representative from Lexia, Collins and his reading coach scheduled several professional training sessions. On the days specific teachers had training, they could either come to the school or do the virtual training from home. Once the initial four teachers completed the program, they served as a support team for other instructors.

“We have 100% buy-in here,” said Collins, who impresses upon all new teachers the fact that he and his team will “teach them how to teach,” with LETRS playing an important role in that process.

The approach is clearly working, based on the impressive reading gains Central Elementary’s kindergarten students have made during the last few semesters.

“Of the kindergarten students who are going into first grade now—and despite COVID and learning loss—more than 74% are proficient in reading,” Collins said. The remaining students attended summer school for remediation and additional support.

“Every grade level made gains for the last two years,” Collins said, “and we’re all excited about Year 3.”

“I did LETRS first myself because I would never expect our teachers to do something that I wouldn’t do. It also gave me the language I needed to be able to ‘talk the talk’ with them.”

—Jerry Collins, Ph.D., Principal at Central Elementary School

The Results



Collins sees LETRS as a good tool for combatting the learning loss many students experienced as a result of the COVID pandemic. It also helps to bring teachers “up to speed” and focus on Tier 1 readers.

“LETRS gives us the resources we need to get the kids ready to do the work,” said Collins, who especially likes the platform’s expansive video library and science of reading approach.

To other school leaders who want to help level the playing field for students on the reading front, Collins said to “jump in 100%” to LETRS and the science of reading.

“If you want your teachers to get on board and use it, it starts with the leaders,” Collins said. “From there, everything else will fall into place.”

Collins also tells other principals and leaders to experience LETRS for themselves first, before getting teachers and staff involved. “I did LETRS first myself because I would never expect our teachers to do something that I wouldn’t do,” Collins said. “It also gave me the language I needed to be able to ‘talk the talk’ with them.”



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