

CASE STUDY

'80% Moved Up:' How Uncommon Schools Is Transforming English Language Learner Outcomes





When Dr. Jiel Joseph arrived at Uncommon Schools as the senior regional manager of special education and English Language Learners, she was offered the opportunity to build the ELL program from the ground up.

It was 2020, and she'd just arrived following a decade spent in management and administrative roles at the New York City Department of Education—and she was ready to take on a new challenge. She chose to bring her policy expertise into an environment where she could create the change she wanted to see.

Too Much Teacher Prep, Not Enough Progress Data

Uncommon Schools operates 52 charter public schools across three states—23 of which are based in Brooklyn, under the purview of Dr. Joseph. The majority of students are Black and Brown and bused in from underserved neighborhoods. Uncommon Schools also serves a growing population of immigrant families, with the number of newcomer students continuing to rise.

The ELL curriculum that had been in place for five years until Dr. Joseph's arrival wasn't favored by teachers. "It required teachers to do a lot of heavy lifting in creating their lesson plans and piecing together text from different sources," she said. "It wasn't packaged for teachers to be ready to go from start to finish."

It also wasn't working well for newcomer students. At Uncommon Schools, ELL teachers are also content specialists, which means it wouldn't be practical to create a newcomer-specific class, given the extra preparation that would require.

Dr. Joseph also wanted real-time data for students. "We didn't see data until interim assessments, so we didn't know how students were progressing," she said.

She began her search on Google.

Finding a Solution in Lexia English

When Dr. Joseph landed on the Lexia® website and found Lexia English Language Development™, she noticed the lively colors and thought about how her kindergarten and upper-elementary students alike would enjoy engaging with the colorful content. “Now,” she thought to herself, “Let’s see if this product does what they say it will do.”

Even before meeting with her Lexia representative, Dr. Joseph said she had a strong sense of the program because the information was packaged in a way that was easy to understand. She understood how student results would be measured, how students would be placed, and the different languages and accents included. The program has 17 characters who encourage learners along the way, gradually revealing their backgrounds and personal histories—a great way to celebrate cultural diversity.

That representation was important to Dr. Joseph. “The characters in Lexia English look like my kids—I know they would like this,” she said.

Next, she met with her Lexia representative and learned more about the components of Lexia English. She was pleasantly surprised to discover how much support her teachers would have from the WIDA-aligned program. “There’s lesson plans. There’s progress monitoring. There’s a dashboard with real-time information for my teachers, and for me as a district leader,” she said. “It was easy for me to understand. Lexia English is turnkey for the teachers, I didn’t see anything else like it.”

Dr. Joseph had two key marks she hoped to hit with a new ELL program: 1) a lower lift for teachers and 2) actionable data about student language acquisition. “Lexia English hit those marks,” she said.

After a year of searching through potential systems, she knew Lexia had the best solution for her schools.

“Last year, I said yes. Press go on Lexia,” Dr. Joseph said. “And the progress was just amazing.”



Commitment and Clarity in Implementation

The 2023–2024 academic year was the first year of full implementation of Lexia English at Uncommon Schools.

From the beginning, everyone understood the importance of data to track how students were progressing, with a minimum number of minutes per week. Teachers and administrators particularly loved the transparency that Lexia English data provided.

Dr. Joseph highlights what a difference this has made over the previous curriculum, where administrators weren't even sure what the curriculum was, or what the expectations of the students were. Now? "You can ask any principal, and they'll tell you, 'Oh, they're using Lexia,'" she said. "With Lexia English, all of the principals are able to tell you exactly what they expect to see when they walk into the classroom. They're having conversations with their ELL teachers differently. They engage me differently, because they understand what the expectations are, and what should be happening."

With this clarity and real-time student progress data, teachers are able to get the support they need, in the program and out of it. "Everyone's on the same page, they love it," she said. "Because everyone understands and Lexia is so easy."

Students of all ages also love the program. "The kids don't push back," Dr. Joseph said. "They want to come, they want to get on the computer and use Lexia English." Many students love the progress they are making in Lexia English so much that they continue working on the program at home.



An 'Uncommon' Implementation: Expanding Lexia English from K–6 to K–12

Educators at Uncommon Schools primarily use Lexia English for K–6 English Language Learners. But Dr. Joseph explained that even at the secondary level, newcomer students can benefit from the program.

"We have high school seniors on Lexia English because for us, the language proficiency is the thing that makes the program appropriate," Dr. Joseph explained. In the upper grades, ELL teachers rely more on the teacher-led instructional resources, as well as the pen and paper Lexia Lessons® and Lexia Skill Builders®. But they still needed students to use the computer side of the program to gather progress-monitoring data.

"Uncommon is so data-heavy, and our students understand that," Dr. Joseph said. "For high school students, Lexia English is a data-gathering tool to understand how they are learning. They've been taking computer assessments. They get it."

Dr. Joseph believes a big factor in student buy-in in the upper grades is the demographic—most of the high school students using Lexia English are newcomers, with no English at all. They're brand new to the country, and are motivated to master English as quickly as possible. Using Lexia English gives teachers the progress data they need to adjust instruction to accelerate student learning, and the students are on board.

All of the schools under Dr. Joseph's purview are one-to-one schools, allowing students to practice their language skills with Lexia English both in and out of the classroom.

The students' desire to use the program contributed to one of the most impressive successes at Uncommon Schools—educators were able to achieve 71% fidelity of use in the program.

Steps to an Impeccable Implementation

How did educators achieve such a high fidelity of use?

The answer to that question includes not just the work in the classroom, but the accountability and support structures outside of it, Dr. Joseph said. Most of her work is behind the scenes, getting stakeholders at all levels on board. From teachers to school administrators to regional superintendents, Dr. Joseph built buy-in for her Lexia English implementation.

By ensuring teachers and principals are trained, and all stakeholders are informed, Dr. Joseph built a support structure to assure the program would be implemented with fidelity. While she still visits each school at least once each quarter, she relies on her team members to keep her informed as they monitor the myLexia® dashboard and manage the day-to-day operations. "All of this is happening way outside of teachers," she explained. "The people that have to really be held to implementation and fidelity of use are the people in the schools, and I am not in 23 schools. I am one person."

Dr. Joseph's recommendations based on her experience, include:

- **Reaching out to regional superintendents of instruction** to explain how Lexia English would work at Uncommon Schools—including details about Lexia English, the expectations of teachers and students, and how they could be supported. She worked to get each one "on her team."
- **Working with the regional superintendent of operations** to build the instructional block into teachers' schedules that would allow for the Lexia English practice minutes required of students, and to ensure teachers would be present and supported.



- **Sharing the instructional block with principals.** Dr. Joseph did onboarding training for principals and school leaders, showing them the scope and sequence of instruction for the year, what to look for in the classroom, and how often you should observe the class. She also created a rubric for observing Lexia English in the classroom.
- **Setting implementation standards for teachers across 23 schools.** Dr. Joseph visits each of the 23 schools once per quarter with a walkthrough and a visit with the principal and an instructional designer. She also meets with teachers once a month and reviews their progress.
- **Progress monitoring via the myLexia dashboard twice each week.** She watches practice groups, checking in with teachers, and providing feedback, even down to the student level.

“I want it to work. I need to be in it with them to help them understand all the ins and outs of monitoring the program,” Dr. Joseph said. “Consider a 360 view of what is necessary for that one child to show growth, including all of the planning and prep that goes into working with that student. A new curriculum like this requires so many people to understand—and our teachers have so many conflicting priorities. So, I have to keep my eye on the ball, so other priorities don’t take over.”

Fantastic Qualitative and Quantitative Results in the Second Year

Now in their second year of using Lexia English, evidence points to continued outstanding results:

- One teacher reported an ELL student came in far below benchmark STEP level and, after three to four months of using Lexia English, moved up two or three STEP levels.
- After just one year of using Lexia English, a newcomer student was able to conduct a final presentation entirely in English at the end of her first year.
- Based on an interim assessment Dr. Joseph created (focusing on what students should have learned in Lexia English during the last quarter), she is seeing students not only master fundamentals of grammar and sentence structure who had previously never even taken an assessment in English before.

This year, because of a high ELL population in one middle school, Dr. Joseph created an English Language Arts replacement class with only ELLs getting full-time instruction using Lexia English. “Two years ago, these kids were sitting in classes staring at their teacher,” Dr. Joseph said. “Now? They’re using Lexia English. I came in to do an observation last week. Hands are raised. Kids are answering questions. They’re practicing. I could talk all day about how exciting it is to see our kids really, really grow and thrive and want to come to school.”

The teachers have fully bought in as well. Because Lexia English requires less laborious prep time than the previous curriculum, teachers have more time to be creative. Dr. Joseph said, “The work of preparing to teach was lowered significantly—so now they can make class fun for kids.”

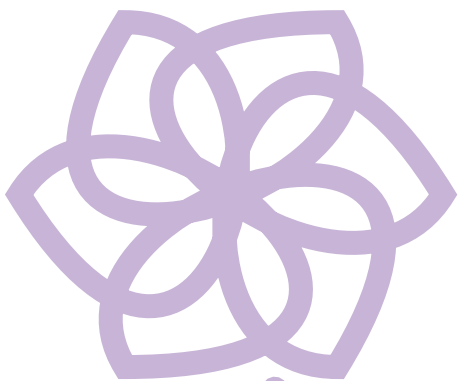
In comparing the New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test (NYSESLAT) results from the previous school year, before they used Lexia English, the actual data is astounding:

80% of ELLs moved up at least one proficiency level on the NYSESLAT compared to 37% the previous year.

“It’s the work our teachers are doing—they are doing incredible work with the kids. They have a clear idea of what the standards are now, and the lessons of Lexia English are aligned to the state exam,” Dr. Joseph said. “That’s a game changer.”

Dr. Joseph pointed out that the alignment is in the units the students are completing. She doesn’t think it’s a coincidence that 71% of students used the program with fidelity, and 80% moved up a proficiency band on the state exam.

“Lexia is harder than the test,” Dr. Joseph said. “It takes more time for them to move through a level in Lexia. The 19% of students who moved up a level in Lexia English translated to 80% moving up a band on the state exam, because Lexia is much more rigorous than our exam.”



“

The lessons in Lexia English are so aligned to our state exam. This year, 80% of our ELLs moved at least one proficiency level up on the NYSESLAT.”

– Dr. Jiel Joseph, Senior Regional Manager of Special Education and English Language Learners, Uncommon Schools NYC

Looking Ahead

Dr. Joseph's focus this year is on the listening component of language proficiency, so her team is ensuring students are working regularly with the listening passages of Lexia English. She points out that even with daily direct instruction in English, students still have math, science, and history classes they need to be able to understand. With Lexia English, students are getting listening (and speaking) practice in academic English across all of these content areas, and Dr. Joseph is eager to see how students perform on the next internal assessment. The mission of Uncommon Schools is to get every student to and through college—and Lexia English is helping them get much closer to this aspirational goal.

"Our ELL program is making a ton of noise in the community—families are bringing cousins and aunts because we have made such an effort," she said. Given all the progress with Lexia English, Dr. Joseph wants to create a separate English as a Second Language [ESL] program in every school, with ESL specialists teaching core classes.

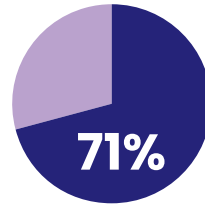
"I trust Lexia," she said with a smile, "because it works."




Success by the Numbers

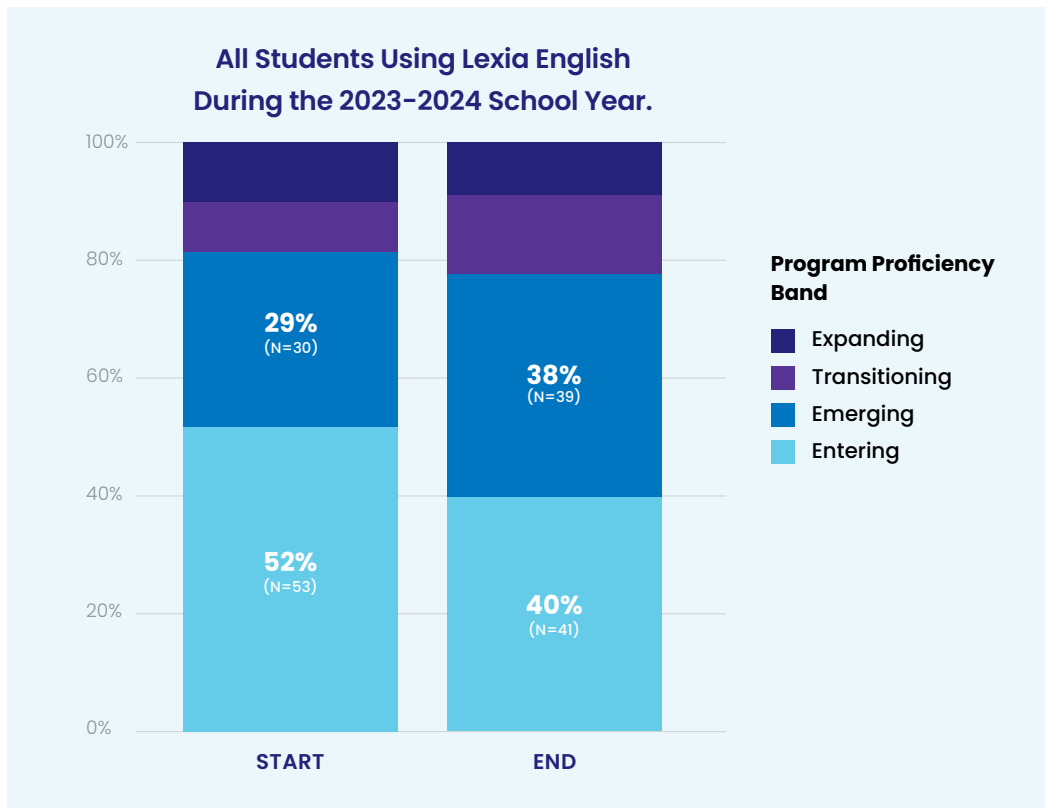
After the first year of implementing Lexia English:

- 71% of the students used Lexia English with fidelity
- K–6 students completed an average of eight units a week
- 19% of students using the program with fidelity moved up a proficiency band in the WIDA-aligned program
- Students averaged 20 minutes of speaking practice (in academic conversations) a week
- 80% of students moved up a proficiency band on the NYSESLAT vs. 37% the previous year



27% 

of newcomers moved up a proficiency band in the program when they used Lexia English with fidelity.





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