

CASE STUDY

# Life-Changing Professional Learning

District Switches from Balanced  
Literacy to Proven Science of  
Reading Instruction

Grand Island Public Schools,  
Grand Island, Nebraska



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ALL FOR LITERACY

## When the Balanced Literacy Approach Doesn't Work

In fall 2018, Dr. Brittney Bills began her tenure as curriculum coordinator at Grand Island Public Schools (GIPS) in Nebraska. As she onboarded and engaged in conversations with the teachers at GIPS, Dr. Bills discovered three critical things about the district: Students had gaps in their foundational reading skills, teachers were struggling to address a wide range of literacy skills, and the district was using a balanced literacy approach to reading instruction. Something had to change.

“When I came to Grand Island, our instructional program at the time was a balanced literacy program and it was not particularly strong in teaching foundational literacy skills. It

was evident our teachers simply didn't know what they didn't know. They were using the instructional materials we had at the time to the best of their professional abilities to deliver reading instruction but it wasn't enough.”

Thankfully, Dr. Bills came aboard equipped with a solution. While at Green Hills Area Education Agency in Council Bluffs, Iowa, Dr. Bills was trained with LETRS® (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling) professional learning, and she immediately recognized how LETRS would be invaluable to teachers and students at Grand Island Public Schools to improve reading instruction.



### Profile: Grand Island Public Schools (GIPS)

- Located in south central Nebraska
- Population: 50,000
- Agricultural area
- Grades pre-K–12
- 65% of students on free or reduced lunch
- 17% English Learners

## LETRS: The Best-Laid Plans for Literacy

Dr. Bills convinced GIPS administrators to introduce LETRS professional learning to its literacy coaches and solicit their feedback about whether it would be valuable to the district's educators.

"A few months into training, our coaches overwhelmingly expressed their desire that we offer LETRS to our teachers," she said. "That led to us developing a four-year professional learning implementation plan that we proposed to our Board of Education in the spring 2019."

"What makes me the proudest is that our administrators see the value in the professional learning after having their teachers participate," Dr. Bills said. "At the end of this school year, 93% of our elementary building principals will be trained in LETRS. We also have six district administrators who are completing the LETRS professional learning

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**LETRS has dramatically changed everything we do as it relates to early literacy.**

– Dr. Brittney Bills,  
Curriculum Coordinator



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this school year! I think it speaks volumes that our leaders want to have the same professional knowledge and development as our teachers, so they can serve as strong instructional leaders in reading for our district. Our district really values the feedback of our educators."

## A Catalyst for Change

LETRS has become the catalyst for the extensive work around improving early literacy at GIPS and the district is seeing rewarding early results.

"What we're seeing has led to a collective belief about the impact we can have on our students in reading as well as a desire to continually improve in our practice, so that we can achieve the best outcomes possible for them," Dr. Bills said. "I credit LETRS with equipping our teachers, coaches, and principals with the knowledge that they needed to identify, support, and implement necessary changes around curriculum, instruction, and assessment for early literacy at Grand Island Public Schools."

Teachers at GIPS laud LETRS for completely changing their approach to literacy. Breanna McDonald, former kindergarten teacher who is now an academic support coach with GIPS, is equally effusive.

"I am passionate about creating an environment where students love to read, but I struggled to identify how to help students who were unable to decode and blend sounds," McDonald said. "I felt I was constantly stabbing in the dark hoping that I would hit the right mark

for intervention. I remember being midway through my LETRS training and listening to students in my class read one of our decodable readers. It was my ah-ha moment.”

Newly armed with the knowledge of how the reading brain works and having been trained to teach to many examples of various reading difficulties, McDonald is now able to pinpoint what students truly need and intervene at critical moments.

“I saw huge growth in my students’ abilities to decode and read grade-level text, just from January to May. My greatest motivation and why I advocate for all teachers, coaches, and administrators to take this course, is the joy it brought to my students. The pride they had on their faces and the excitement they showed while they read, will be something I will never forget,” McDonald said.

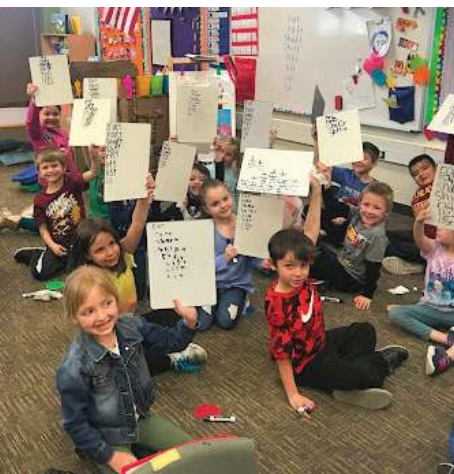
## Taking Steps Toward a Successful Future

Dr. Bills asserted there is a big movement in the nation around high-quality instructional

materials. And while she agreed they are important, she argued “you will never go as far as you possibly can in the implementation of high-quality instructional materials without knowledgeable teachers.”

“Our strong implementation of high-quality instructional materials is a direct result of our LETRS professional learning. Overwhelmingly, our teachers see how aligned our high-quality instructional materials are with the knowledge they gained from LETRS,” Dr. Bills said. “They have a deeper understanding around why those materials were developed the way they were and how they can extend and enrich the understanding of their students in ways that they wouldn’t have been able to without LETRS.”

“LETRS has dramatically changed everything we do in our district as it relates to early literacy,” Dr. Bills said. “It has not only had a significant impact on our teachers’ knowledge of reading, but it has changed the way we view and select instructional materials. It is one of the best investments a district could ever make.”



**“My greatest motivation...  
joy it brought to my students.”**

—Breanna McDonald



## The Proof Is in the Performance

In fall 2020, GIPS added a universal screener for all K-1 students. In 2020, the district also adopted a structured foundational literacy skills program that incorporates many of the instructional strategies that its teachers learned about in their LETRS training.

“I would argue that because of the LETRS professional development, [with] our high-quality instruction materials and our strong assessment and intervention system, we have witnessed a tremendous amount of growth early on for our students,” Dr. Bills said. In fall 2021, our first-grade students performed overwhelmingly better than our first-grade students did in the fall of last year on critical early-literacy skills.”

“What is most exciting about this data is that last year our district experienced a 25%



increase in students who were at or above benchmark from the fall to the spring,” Dr. Bills added. “If we experience that type of increase again this school year, we will have around 90% of our students at or above benchmark on these critical early-literacy skills by the spring.”

GIPS First-Grade Comparison Data		
	Fall 2020	Fall 2021
Phonemic Segmentation Fluency (PSF)	35% of students at or above benchmark	66% of students at or above benchmark
Nonsense Word Fluency (CLS)	49% of students at or above benchmark	64% of students at or above benchmark
Nonsense Word Fluency (WRC)	52% of students at or above benchmark	64% of students at or above benchmark

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