

CASE STUDY

Wyoming District's Journey to Improve Literacy Drives Student Outcomes; Ignites Passion for Staff, Teachers

Weston County School District
Newcastle, WY

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Introduction

Newcastle is a small Wyoming coal-mining town where the elevation (4,327 feet) is considerably higher than the population (3,500 people).

Understandably, it's a tight-knit community where all the residents know each other. Traditions run strong and perhaps no tradition is as resolute as the community's commitment to educate its young people. Newcastle's Weston County School District 1 (WCSD 1) is home to about 800 students in elementary, middle, and high schools. Of those 800 students, approximately 30% come from low-income households.

At Newcastle Elementary School, the mission is to help build confident, lifelong learners. Over the past decade, a particular emphasis has been placed on the importance of teaching all students to proficiently read and keeping them on track as they prepare to enter middle school.

Challenge

As many school districts across the country recognize, it remains a daunting task to keep students reading at their recommended level. Nearly 60% of Wyoming's fourth grade students are below proficient in reading, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, also known as the Nation's Report Card.

This trend dates back several years, and Weston County School District's numbers were unfortunately no different. With low reading proficiency scores, the district was not moving its students forward, a fact supported by both standardized and benchmark assessments. Students were not achieving to their capabilities and district leaders realized something needed to change.



Newcastle Elementary School

The Solution

New to Newcastle Elementary School in 2021, Erin Pzinski brought with her some background knowledge of Lexia® Learning's LETRS evidence-based literacy professional learning, which was co-authored by nationally recognized literacy experts Dr. Carol Tolman and Dr. Louisa Moats.

"During the time I went through LETRS training, I was a new teacher and astonished that I did not learn the material provided in LETRS while I was in college," said Pzinski, reading instructional facilitator. "When I moved to WCSD 1, it was looking for professional development for our teachers around reading. It was then that I suggested getting in contact with Dr. Tolman."

Training in the Science of Reading Is Essential

Educators concluded the first step was to educate staff in the "science of reading"—the basic tenet of LETRS (Language Essentials for

Teachers of Reading and Spelling). The district hired Dr. Tolman, who began by making a presentation to district staff that leveraged her and Dr. Moats' two decades of research, including the latest neuroscience revealing not only how young students learn to read, but also how educators should effectively teach reading.

At this same time, the district hired Mary Myers as a literacy instructional facilitator with the understanding that the initial focus would be at the elementary level.

"I had been a reading coach at a Reading First school, so the idea of the science of reading was not new to me," Myers said. "As I started to go through LETRS, however, I was impressed by the depth of the learning and the way it made instructional decision accessible to all teachers. We quickly made the decision to provide the training for all teachers, which pushed our entire elementary staff to look at the science."



New Concept Shows Results

Phonology beyond the basic letter sounds was a new concept to the entire staff, Myers noted. “While we had some pushback in the initial rollout, as our data improved and teachers had methods that were working with students they had not been able to reach before, LETRS became accepted and many of our teachers couldn’t wait for the next round of information.”

“With LETRS, we were at the inception of our journey of investing time and money for deepening the knowledge of staff (administrators, leaders/coaches, teachers, and support staff) in the science of reading,” said WCSD Curriculum Director Sonya Tysdal. “This has been eye-opening for many teachers. We all were blown away by how much we did not know. Overwhelmingly, teachers wondered why they had not learned this in college.”

Dr. Tolman was instrumental in helping the district with its LETRS rollout at the student level. Combined with Pzinski’s experience in LETRS and experience with Reading First, the school was on its way to helping drive significant change. That success, Myers related, soon began to spread to other grade levels.

Seeing the Change in Teachers and Students

“As some of the teachers and paras who became teachers later moved to other grade levels, we started to see good changes across the school,” Myers recalled. “We started to become much more reliant on the data and became more flexible at intervening with students.”

Tysdal said the ability to use screening tools to pinpoint areas where students need support and explicit instruction has been crucial.

“One area that has been most impacted is the instruction around phonology,” Tysdal observed. “A few years ago, we were struggling with why some students were not showing growth from intervention instruction because they could not hold onto the skills. We have come to understand the importance of mastering the advanced phonology skills in order to learn and apply phonics and spelling skills.”

She added the district has changed its practice to incorporate appropriate phonology instruction and exercises with every applicable intervention where student data drives instructional decisions.

Applying the Theory in the Classroom

“Within the LETRS professional learning series,” Tysdal said, “there are many activities and routines that can be immediately implemented into the classroom. The videos provide excellent examples of how the activities and routines may look in the classroom. This makes the experience very practical and applicable for staff.”

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—Mary Myers, literary instructional facilitator



The Results

WCSD 1 has had nearly 80 certified staff members—as well as many paraprofessionals—go through some form of the LETRS training.

“As it was new information to many staff, it was similar to a college-level and/or graduate-level experience,” Tysdal said. “As time progressed, so did our collective body of knowledge as a staff. We could look at our students and needs with a different lens. With a common baseline of knowledge to work from, the professional training, support, and ongoing collaborative conversations have empowered us to be very systematic and explicit when making instructional decisions.”

Closing the Gap

According to Tysdal, the gap between standardized and benchmark testing data (combined with local assessment data) is shrinking. There are fewer questions about the data results and more time spent on finding the root of knowledge and skill gaps and how to intervene.

“This is both motivating and encouraging because it gives us the affirmation that what we are doing is working,” Tysdal noted. “Following the

science of reading is how we now do business throughout the district.”

Pzinski believes Weston County teachers have completely changed the way they approach “walk-to-learn” interventions and decisions about kids. In her role, Pzinski says she provides the data, and the teachers make the decisions based on student needs. “Over time, we have continued to move away from the ‘wait-and-see’ model. Our teachers are proactive and move to intervene before letting a student begin to fail,” Pzinski said.

Weston County educators are convinced the LETRS professional learning training has dramatically helped everyone understand how the brain learns to read, spell, and write.

Helping Students Improve Literacy—and Life Skills

“The end goal is for all students to be productive citizens, better human beings, life-long learners, and able to think critically in any situation,” Tysdal said. “A large factor in attaining that goal is providing experiences and opportunities for all students to become proficient with reading comprehension using rigorous levels of texts.

I believe LETRS has been instrumental in our journey to intentionally impact student learning. It provides the foundation for educators to be smarter than adopted programs.”

Moreover, Tysdal is thrilled to report that beginning-of-year assessment for the 2020–21 school year showed remarkable progress for sixth grade students.

“It is cause for a huge celebration! The scores for sixth grade showed 86% of students were proficient overall—at or above benchmark,” she said. “Students who have been with us in the school system for several years are able to retain skills and make growth. We won’t be satisfied, however, until we can get above 95%!”



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—Sonya Tysdal, WCSD curriculum director

Summary

Myers, who is now retired but remains a certified LETRS trainer, is confident Dr. Tolman and LETRS changed WCSD 1 and its approach to reading for the better.

“Dr. Tolman really empowered our staff and improved our level of professional knowledge. As an instructional facilitator, she taught me an incredible amount,” Myers related. “I happen to be of the whole-language era and had fairly poor teacher preparation. I also happen to have a daughter who struggled to learn to read. If I had known then what I learned in LETRS, her school

journey and my journey as a parent would have been much different. It would have saved a lot of tears, on her part and on mine! I believe LETRS provides hope for the struggling reader.”

Pzinski says that because of LETRS, she was able to find her passion for reading instruction. “Without this knowledge, the frustration of not being able to help struggling students would have probably prompted me to leave the field of education. Instead, I now spend my time helping teachers learn what I am so grateful Dr. Tolman taught me years ago.”



The story of WCSD 1’s journey to improve literacy is depicted in a short video: [youtube.com/watch?v=kDdPB2twFhQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kDdPB2twFhQ)

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