

CASE STUDY

Administrators Who Listen: Expanding Literacy Professional Learning Brings Student Success



Educators at Bettendorf Community School District (CSD) in Iowa have embarked on a transformative literacy journey grounded in the science of reading. What started as educators at a single school exploring evidence-based literacy practices has become a districtwide initiative that prioritizes educator knowledge, access to high-quality instruction, and measurable outcomes for all students.

Following the disruptions of the pandemic, teachers at Bettendorf CSD recognized a critical need to reassess their approach to early literacy. District leaders and teachers shared a growing sense their existing professional preparation had not fully equipped them to address persistent reading gaps. Rather than implementing quick fixes, Bettendorf's leadership prioritized a systems-level investment in teacher learning instructional capacity.

As part of the district's strategic planning process, Bettendorf leaders identified a need to strengthen Tier I instruction within a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework. Professional learning grounded in the science of reading was identified as a key lever for change. The district leaders turned to Lexia® LETRS® (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling) to provide educators with the foundational knowledge needed to deliver high-impact literacy instruction from preschool to grade five.

"We knew that improving core instruction across classrooms would have the greatest impact," said Dr. Michelle Morse, superintendent of Bettendorf CSD. "Our goal was to make sure every educator understood how students learn to read, and how to respond when they demonstrate signs of difficulties."

About the District*



In 2024, Bettendorf Community School District had 4,270 students and 306 teachers for grades preschool through 12. The district has five elementaries, including three that are Title I schools, as well as a middle school and a high school.

Student Demographics

- **32.3%** ethnicity or race other than white
- **33.7%** free or reduced-price lunch

*District data from the **Iowa Department of Education**.



LETRS Leads to Results

Even before bringing LETRS onboard, an impressive 77.31% of Bettendorf students were reading proficiently*. But district teams were driven by the belief that improvement for all means leaving no student behind. Ensuring every educator, regardless of role, had access to the same high-quality learning experience became central to the district's approach.

Elementary educators at Bettendorf were already familiar with Lexia® through using Lexia® Core5® Reading with students who needed extra practice. Because of Lexia's expertise in science of reading-based instruction, they were comfortable turning to Lexia again for professional learning.

"We chose Lexia because the research included is peer-reviewed, empirical, and trustworthy," said Rhonda Nelson, curriculum, instruction, and assessment coordinator for Bettendorf. "It's not pie-in-the-sky philosophy—it's grounded in evidence. Lexia makes an impact on improving teacher knowledge to benefit students."

The initiative began with a pilot LETRS cohort at Mark Twain Elementary School. Sixteen educators, including classroom teachers, special education staff, interventionists, and coaches, voluntarily participated in LETRS training. Early data told a compelling story:

- Kindergarten students' performance on universal screening measures improved by 31%, compared with 14% for the district*
- First grade students' performance improved by 18%, compared with 8% for the district*
- Second grade students' performance improved by 22%, compared with 11% for the district*

The results were quite compelling which made it easy to make the case to move this forward. With these clear outcomes in hand, the next step was to offer LETRS districtwide. Nelson asked Dr. Morse to offer LETRS training to more of the district's teachers and those who support their literacy instruction efforts, demonstrating how teachers trained in the science of reading were making a difference.

**student proficiency and performance data provided by Bettendorf CSD.*

“

Before completing LETRS training, I did not truly understand reading science and how it can be applied to make a difference for students—with LETRS, I could apply research in practice.”

—**Rhonda Nelson**

Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment Coordinator
Bettendorf Community School District

A Broader Rollout

With support from Dr. Morse and school leaders, educators at Bettendorf implemented a rolling cohort model to expand LETRS access across all elementary schools. Participation remained voluntary to respect teacher autonomy and honor the investment of time and effort required. Educators could earn professional development credit or additional compensation for their time, further reinforcing the value of the training.

To ensure broad support for reading and writing instruction, district leaders also implemented Lexia® LETRS® for Early Childhood Educators for their preschool teachers. Building leaders completed Lexia® LETRS® for Administrators, ensuring aligned understanding across the instructional system. Cross-role collaboration and districtwide Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) supported implementation and sustainability. As teachers started taking LETRS, they could speak to how it changed their practice and the way it impacted student outcomes positively. More and more teachers started signing up.

Early adopters shared their positive experiences with those who hadn't started yet—urging more teachers to join. They talked about how useful and helpful the material was—and how it was changing their practice and impacting their students. The vision is to have everyone trained in both volumes. Today, more than 85% of K–5 staff have completed LETRS.





Inspiring Secondary Educators

Administrators at Bettendorf continued to seek new ways to close opportunity gaps for those learning to read and write. So, when middle school teachers began requesting training in the science of reading, members of the curriculum team turned their attention to adolescent literacy.

Like many districts nationwide, Bettendorf faced a post-pandemic challenge—secondary educators were encountering more students with significant literacy gaps. Teachers were looking for solutions, but as secondary school educators, they were often not taught how to teach reading in their preparatory classes.

“As students started having those bigger gaps, our middle school started noticing Tier 1 instruction wasn’t as effective as it needed to be,” Jayme Olson, Bettendorf’s executive director of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, explained. “They asked for professional learning similar to what the elementary schools were doing, which was exciting.”

Because LETRS is primarily intended for pre-K–5 educators, Bettendorf leaders were looking for a more appropriate solution: Enter Lexia Aspire® Professional Learning. Also based on the science of reading, Aspire helps all educators working with students in grades 4–8 to weave evidence-aligned literacy skills and strategies in their instruction.

In 2023–2024, Bettendorf’s middle school English language arts teachers, special education strategists, academic interventionists, instructional coaches, and administrators for grades 6–8 engaged in a year of professional development with Aspire.

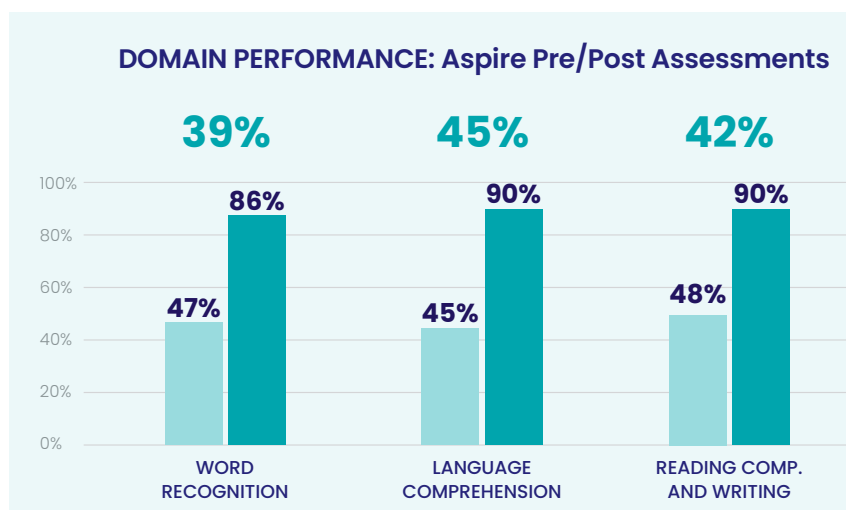
The Aspire courses were structured with learning pathways for the middle school teachers. The teachers with jobs that primarily included skill remediation started with word recognition, then moved into language comprehension, and finished with reading comprehension and writing. The ELA classroom teachers went in the opposite order.

With asynchronous and flexible courses, Bettendorf’s Aspire training took place only during protected contract hours to respect educators time and keep learning accessible.

Leaders at Bettendorf also incorporated PLC conversations to reinforce Aspire learning, ensuring educators were not just consuming content but had opportunities to discuss implementing and applying it in their classrooms. “With the support of building instructional coaches, we would facilitate PLC conversations about the topics that required extra support and collaboration,” Nelson said.

Again, the impact of Lexia training on teacher learning was apparent. After engaging with Aspire, middle school teacher knowledge showed huge gains across the three domains:

- Word recognition scores on Aspire assessments increased from 47% before Aspire training to 86% after*
- Language comprehension scores increased from 45% to 90%*
- Reading comprehension and writing scores increased from 48% to 90%*



*staff proficiency and performance data from Aspire platform.

Success and Leaning Forward

The key to Bettendorf's evolving success is centering and supporting teachers.

"What was missing was teacher confidence and their ability to really recognize what the gaps are and then to match the right kind of instruction and practice at the right time," Nelson said. "LETRS and Aspire provides teachers both the knowledge and understanding they need, but also includes direct application to practice."

Now that LETRS has been in use for several years in cohorts districtwide, Bettendorf educators are seeing promising results among the K-2 students:

- Kindergarten: Student growth averaged **22%** across all buildings*
- First Grade: Student growth averaged **13%** across all buildings*
- Second Grade: Student growth averaged **10%** across all buildings*

**2024-2025 fall to spring universal screening student proficiency growth data provided by Bettendorf CSD.*

“

I can't overstate the importance of a superintendent and leadership team willing to listen and respond to what teachers need. All of this progress, LETRS, Aspire, and our continued literacy improvements have transpired because of that.”

—**Rhonda Nelson**

Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment Coordinator
Bettendorf Community School District

With a curriculum adoption in middle school, Bettendorf administrators are sticking with the model that has proven to work for them. They led with the learning and the base knowledge, then sought a curricular resource that aligns.

Ongoing support from district leadership, including shared vision, funding priorities, and instructional coherence continues to position Bettendorf as a model for sustainable professional learning systems in literacy.

For other educators or administrators interested in bringing science of reading-based professional learning to their schools and districts, Olson offers additional encouragement. “You have to have a vision and know it’s possible,” she said. “Then to be tenacious so that when setbacks happen, which they will, your team keeps the work moving forward.”

District leaders plan to continue the partnership with Lexia to drive literacy growth. They are confident in the district’s united effort to improve literacy. Nelson concluded, “We know we can achieve our strategic plan’s priority of academic excellence for ALL students. Every child deserves to leave school fully literate and prepared for the future.”



Tips for Bringing in Lexia LETRS and Aspire

Based on Bettendorf leaders’ experience with advocating for—and facilitating—training through these programs, here are tips for success for educators and school leaders:

1. **Have a vision** for literacy gains based on science of reading fundamentals.
2. **Stay informed**, learning with or ahead of your team.
3. **Have a champion** who will advocate for science of reading-based instruction.
4. **Be tenacious**, with evidence to show the need for this support.
5. **Expect setbacks**, including resistance to change or funding challenges.
6. **Emphasize the system** (MTSS) and the value of improved Tier I instruction.
7. **Use the data** to demonstrate both need and growth.
8. **Be open to feedback** and make adjustments accordingly.

Want more? Nelson dives into the importance of teacher support on Lexia’s “All For Literacy” podcast discussing [Supporting Teachers Through Adolescent Literacy Efforts](#) in January 2024.



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