

CASE STUDY

Embedding the Science of Reading on a Countywide Scale

Saginaw Intermediate School District
Saginaw, Michigan

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Lexia LETRS™

Literacy education is getting an upgrade in school districts across Saginaw County, Michigan, with support from a trio of administrators at Saginaw Intermediate School District (ISD), driven to bring the science of reading to as many schools as possible.

While the administrators don't make curriculum decisions on behalf of district leaders, they do work "alongside" them, providing information, resources, and other support to educators, administrators, and coaches across all county districts, including 12 LEAs, five public school academies, parochials, plus a few early childhood and exceptional population centers.

Vic Bugni, executive director of instructional services, arrived at Saginaw ISD in early 2022, and was soon joined by Chris Bolen, director of instructional services, and Kelly Kujala, program director for curriculum and instruction. Since their arrival, they've already made enormous progress. During the last two years, they have encouraged and supported educators from every district in the county in their professional development, including pursuing Lexia® LETRS® Professional Learning. Approximately 275 people across the county have already completed the training—and this number continues to grow as Michigan's Cohort No. 11 begins in summer 2025.

"We know we've got a long way to go, but given the supports and partnerships we've developed, it really has given us some high hopes," Bugni said.

Where It Began

Early in his tenure, Bugni discovered the influence of ISD coaching in the classroom was having a negative effect on student scores rather than a positive one, meaning that schools with ISD coaches were showing sinking scores on standardized tests. Something was wrong.

He knew it was time to push to implement the science of reading countywide. As a previous administrator and superintendent in Michigan districts, Bugni saw his share of students with low reading scores and teachers who didn't know how to change them. In taking on his new role in Saginaw, he was motivated to help district leaders make the shift to the science of reading with LETRS training—and to make a difference.

3 Tiers of Influence

Once Kujala and Bolen joined Saginaw ISD, they designed a three-tiered approach to supporting a shift to the science of reading:

1. As a former instructional coach, Kujala provides **support for coaches** who, in turn, positively influence teachers with evidence-based classroom practices. Six other literacy coaches at Saginaw are also trained in LETRS through the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) implementation, and they support LEAs across the county.
2. As a former assistant principal, Bolen **supports building leaders** and runs the monthly principals' meeting.
3. As a former superintendent, Bugni **partners with superintendents** and curriculum directors.

Unique Journeys to the Science of Reading

Every educator has their own path to the science of reading, and it's never too late to dive in.

Bolen was previously a high school science teacher and a middle school administrator.

"Even though we did a lot of reading and writing in my high school science classrooms, literacy and phonics were never really part of my world. So, this is new to me," she said. She's recently completed Lexia® LETRS® for Administrators.

While in her previous role in a different district, Kujala read a book, *The Logic of English*, and it blew her mind. In all her training and teaching experience, she'd never been taught anything about phonics, the reading brain, or code-based instruction. She started reading blog posts and articles, and when the leaders at the Department of Education offered LETRS training, she jumped on board.

"I knew enough to know that while I was really good at teaching kids to read, there was something missing," she said. "LETRS took my journey to a whole new level." She joined Saginaw ISD because she could see the district was moving in this direction, and she wanted to be a part of it.

By influencing key stakeholders at every level, they multiply the teaching and learning and create leaders and champions around this new approach.

The Saginaw ISD team joined with several outside partners to help facilitate the across-the-board professional development efforts, including the MDE, MiMTSS TA, and Lexia®. Through partnerships, the county gets funding, curricula, consortium planning, training, tech assistance, and additional support at every step.

“We’re getting great feedback from teachers who’ve taken LETRS or have done some of our programming,” Bugni said. “We’re very excited about our early work.”

Bringing the Science of Reading to Every District

Through Public Act 122 of 2022, state of Michigan leaders are providing LETRS to eligible educators and administrators at no cost. That means any Michigan pre-K–6 public school educator, pre-K–12 SPED-endorsed teachers, literacy coaches, elementary administrators, and district administrators all have the opportunity to take LETRS.

Saginaw ISD administrators take district literacy support even further. The district offers science of reading-based professional development, training sessions, and other support to teachers, coaches, and administrators across Saginaw County and the state.

Many district leaders didn’t realize LETRS was offered by the state for free, so simply getting the word out was a big part of the strategy.

The additional training and support come from two different state funding sources. Section 35J of the FY2024 State School Aid Act was signed in 2023. It provides \$140 million to local educational agencies (LEAs) and Intermediate School Districts (ISDs) to improve literacy instructional practices by investing in quality, research-based best practices and professional learning. Section 35A provides almost \$20 million in funding for districts needing additional help to get students reading at grade level by the end of third grade.

Bugni and Kujala are already planning how to further embed the science of reading in each district. “Our literacy coaches will go through LETRS and become LETRS facilitators for Saginaw County, which will expand that opportunity for all of our local districts,” Bugni said. “So, we’re very excited about that.”



Applying Research-Based Training Using Existing Curricula

In evaluating some of the curricula in use throughout the county, Kujala found that some didn't align with the science of reading.

"They weren't explicit or systematic, or they didn't have a phonics component," she said. "The scope and sequence was not what we'd want to see." The team was able to apply what they learned from LETRS and help educators modify their existing curricular resources. This naturally created more interest in LETRS.

"We took this new learning and applied it to a resource they already had that was not doing the job," Kujala said. "They'd ask, 'Where did you get this?' That was a nice segue to get into some classrooms because coaching could be kind of random in the past—with no clear purpose, vision, or goal. Using LETRS has changed our approach to giving support."

Even district leaders who seemed set in their ways have begun to show movement. "After three years of hearing about the science of reading, they see it's not a gimmick," Bugni said. "Everybody is on board and understands the need to make a shift, even if they do it cautiously."

Course Correcting: When We Know Better, We Do Better

When district leaders make a big investment in an approach to literacy that doesn't work, changing course can be tough to contemplate. Leaders who put their full endorsement behind a program that subsequently performs suboptimally might initially want to double down on their decision. It can take a lot of convincing to get them to admit it needs updating.

"Once you invest in curriculum and you told everyone it's the best and spend money on it, it's a tough spot when it doesn't work, and you have to turn it around," Bolen said.

Fortunately, most administrators eventually see that the data behind the science of reading is too compelling to ignore.

"There's no judgment, no criticism," Kujala added. "We're walking in their shoes. We try to drive that home: No blame, no shame."

Advice for District Leaders From District Leaders

This team has some recommendations for district leaders bringing in professional development training like LETRS for the first time:

Support, support, support.

“Coaches need to be in a position to support. With LETRS, it’s a lot to learn; your mind is exploding with new information, and you’re going to lose bits and pieces because so much is coming at you. You need a team of support from many levels.” —Kujala

Change starts from above.

“Leaders have to be well informed. You can’t just put it on the reading teachers.” —Bolen

Trust the science.

“The science of reading has been around for a long time. Listen to it, follow it, drive it. Just do it. Dive into it.” —Bugni

Why LETRS?

“**LETRS makes it easy.** Instead of me vetting the information, I can be 100% assured that it’s valid and the best of the best. It’s all done for us, and the assurance is huge.” —Kujala

“**The deeper learning for adults is going to allow for better and deeper learning for students**—grounding everyone in the science.” —Bolen

“**It’s important for people to know this is the current research.** I’m confident in it because of that.” —Bugni

The Saginaw team also had kind words to say about the support of Lexia representatives:

“There’s never a time I have to question something for more than a hot second. I always know who to turn to,” Kujala said. “Lexia has an incredible team and they’re very good to us.”

Looking ahead

As the Saginaw team forges ahead, holding the vision of improved student reading scores in mind, the administrators are optimistic.

They're also deepening their relationship with Lexia, integrating this additional learning content:

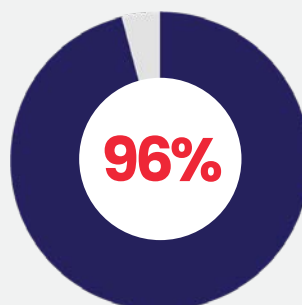
- Several districts in the county are using **Lexia® Core5® Reading, Lexia® PowerUp Literacy®,** and **Lexia English Language Development™**
- Saginaw ISD leaders purchased Lexia English in 2024 to support a small Emergent Bilingual population
- A Saginaw cohort is going through **Lexia® LETRS® for Early Childhood Educators**
- One district has adopted **Lexia Aspire® Professional Learning** for secondary professional development

Thanks to LETRS, administrators are appreciating their newfound understanding of how the brain learns to read—particularly when their background isn't in reading and writing. Kujala noticed more teachers are coming into training sessions with a good understanding of reading: "We used to spend a lot of time on Scarborough's Rope, but now they already know," she said.

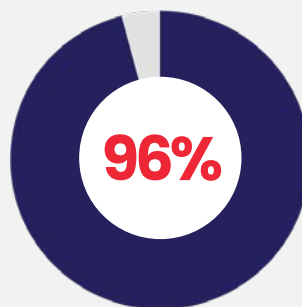
Bugni hears two responses most commonly from district leaders: "I never knew." Or, "I've never learned so much."

"The learning is immense, and educators like to learn," he said. "We're fortunate to have LETRS, arguably the best training in the nation, available to us."

Across Michigan, educators are feeling more confident in their knowledge and abilities, thanks to LETRS. According to survey responses* from 2022–2025:



of educators feel confident delivering instruction rooted in the science of reading.



of educators are able to identify and target the instructional literacy needs of students based on the science of reading.

(n=14,472, n=14,496)

*data from Lexia Analytics Hub, LETRS Professional Learning Session Feedback Report



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