

Hemet Unified School District Success Story

- Hemet, CA
- 26 schools
- Grades TK-12
- 22,000 students

Challenge

Just 16% of the district's 22,000 students were reading at or above grade level.

Solution

The LETRS® (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling) Suite.

Results

While Hemet USD made the program optional, more than 500 teachers – over a third of the district's 1,300 teachers – signed up for the first learning cohort. The district is now signing up staffers for the second cohort, which begins in August.

California District Uses LETRS to Create an Equitable Professional Development Platform

Hemet Unified School District in Hemet, Calif., knew it had a literacy issue. In reviewing district data, the literacy and intervention team saw that just 16% of its 22,000 students were reading at or above grade level across the district.

“Every site was a bit different, but districtwide it was pretty clear that we were dealing with major access and equity issues,” said Kristen Anderson, director of literacy and intervention for the Riverside County district, which encompasses 26 schools and grades TK-12.

Hemet USD had previously added Anderson's new role across grades TK-12, and with the understanding that the reading intervention was needed across most grades.

Working together, they began to dig in and dive deeper into the root causes of the problem.

“As we were starting to broaden our understanding of the science of reading and doing a book study on *Shifting the Balance*, we really started hearing about LETRS®,” said Anderson. “It just kept coming up over and over again as this theme. So, we decided to take a closer look at the program so we could learn more.”

A Great Fit

The Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) Suite is professional learning that helps educators and administrators become literacy and language experts in the science of reading. Developed by renowned literacy experts Dr. Louisa Moats, Dr. Carol Tolman, and Dr. Lucy Hart Paulson, it's a flexible literacy professional learning solution for educators and administrators.

A former user of the Open Court reading curriculum, Hemet USD holds both Open Court and Dr. Moats in high regard. They both carry a lot of weight with the district's elementary teachers, who understand Dr. Moats' focus and reputation. This made LETRS a perfect fit for what the district was trying to accomplish.

“The other part that made LETRS a great fit is the flexibility of the professional learning,” said Anderson, whose team narrowed its professional development options down to three choices before selecting LETRS. “We reached out to the companies, read their syllabuses, got our hands on the materials and asked a lot of questions.”

In the end, Hemet USD chose LETRS for its longevity in the marketplace and level of rigor. “Some of the other options felt a little ‘flavor of the week’ to us,” said Anderson.

“LETRS checked all the boxes of what we were looking for in terms of giving our teachers flexibility to learn on their own time,” she added, “in their own space and from the comfort of their own home, but then also coming together and working collaboratively.”

Right Out of the Gate

Beginning January 1, 2022, Hemet USD began offering the LETRS curriculum to those teachers who requested it. It laid out a plan for the first full year of use and put together a scope and sequence of professional development that would kick off for the 2022-23 school year, with the first unit starting in March 2022.

The district set up two different cohorts, including a group of 500 “first adopters” from 1,300 educators from grades TK-12 that started in March and a second cohort that will start in August. Response has been very positive so far. “We already have a huge list of people for the second cohort,” said Anderson, whose team hosted numerous Q&A sessions for teachers, explaining what LETRS is, how it works, how to obtain credits and how to move up on the pay scale.

“I did a lot of PR with our teachers and made different graphics and visuals to grab them. It was really successful in terms of people signing up,” said Anderson, who adds that teachers are paid hourly for the time spent completing the professional development units and attending the workshops.

Hemet USD is also offering LETRS to its administrators, all of whom are participating in the program (and, also being compensated for that participation). “We’re also bringing our executive cabinet, special education program specialists and other stakeholders into the system,” said Anderson, who wants everyone to understand that they are all teachers of literacy—whether they are teaching kindergarten, science class or auto shop.

“Literacy might look a little bit different to each of them, but when we’re going through and talking about some of our learnings in LETRS,” said Anderson, “there are a lot of really great connections that our teachers can make to enhance their individual practices.”

Keeping it at the Forefront

As it continues to plan out its teacher professional development, Hemet USD will make LETRS a primary reference and professional development source for teachers and administrators.

“We want to keep LETRS at the forefront, so even if every teacher can’t take this on right now, it’s okay,” said Anderson. “This is going to be a foundation that we continue to return to and grow from and dive into as a district. It’s how we’re supporting our principals, our coaches, our teachers and everyone.”

Reflecting on the district’s usage of LETRS so far, Anderson said she really likes the rigor of the curriculum and how it helps literacy specialists become facilitators. She also likes that instructors need 88% or higher mastery to pass a course, and that they each get eight or more days of training.

“The fact that we’re investing 18-24 months of study to LETRS shows this is not another flavor of the week; this is a real paradigm shift in how we’re approaching not only professional development, but also literacy instruction,” said Anderson. “That’s what’s really attractive about the curriculum.”

Equity for Teachers

Finally, Anderson likes how LETRS takes teachers into account when addressing the issue of equity, and doesn’t just expect that instructors will naturally know how to address, teach and engage every child that’s in his or her classroom.

“We talk a lot about equity among students, but where is the equity for our teachers? And, how are we providing equitable access to the Science of Reading and really helping to prepare them and not leaving it to chance?” Anderson asked.

“We don’t want to leave it to chance that some teachers may come in with more knowledge or skill than the next,” she continued. “We want to have a clear expectation and understanding of what that means and what it looks like in practice. That’s exactly what LETRS gives us.”