

DO YOU READ ME? THE VITAL SKILL OF LITERACY IS GETTING POWERFUL ATTENTION AT THESE INNOVATIVE SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Brownsville Area, Burrell, and Deer Lakes



Many school subjects can be described as essential. But one discipline has an outsized impact on everything else children learn, and it's vital for navigating daily life long after schooling ends.

That discipline is, of course, reading.

From the first few days of preschool, reading proficiency opens doors to all kinds of learning. In recent years, a growing number of districts have begun prioritizing literacy skills and rethinking the ways that reading has traditionally been approached.

"Literacy is foundational. It transcends content areas," says Autumn Turk, director of curriculum and development at Burrell School District. "Even though we may not all be English teachers or reading teachers, we're all teachers of reading. We all incorporate some level of reading and literacy into our content."

In western Pennsylvania, three school districts — Burrell, Brownsville Area, and Deer Lakes — have been putting deliberate emphasis on comprehensive literacy instruction. They are finding innovative ways to ensure that all teachers can help students develop strong reading skills and the capacity to love to read.

Each of these districts is part of Future-Driven Schools, a regional alliance of school districts working to prepare every learner for tomorrow. Together, these districts help teachers, administrators, and board members do what they do best: innovate and

collaborate in ways that benefit their students and communities.

For districts like Deer Lakes, Brownsville Area, and Burrell, Future-Driven Schools is a perfect community for brainstorming about elevating reading instruction and supporting teachers throughout every young reader's K-12 journey.

CENTERING THIS CORE SKILL

Chantel Little taught first grade for eight years before becoming Brownsville Area School District's literacy coach this year. When she looks back, she remembers a time when the district was inconsistent with literacy instruction and was, as a result, "producing non-readers."

That's actually not uncommon, she says.

"Historically, teacher education has not really prepared teachers to teach reading. So a lot of what we're doing now is aligning our instruction with what the science of reading tells us. We're going back to the basics."

The biggest step, she adds, "is that we need to retrain the teachers, so they know what practices work and what practices don't. That's probably the hardest part: having to tell someone that what they've been doing for the last 15 or 20 years was not the best practice."

How is Brownsville Area doing it? By involving the teachers in their training and gathering clear data about their

work with students. Little says this new approach is starting to take hold.

"This isn't going to change overnight," she says. But Brownsville Area is giving its teachers a voice. "The administration is asking: 'What are you seeing in the room? What's working?' Because when you just tell teachers something without letting them have a voice or letting them hear the reasoning behind it, it just feels like another thing that's being thrown at them."

School leaders at Burrell share that sentiment. They, too, are bringing the science of reading to all of their teachers, and have even trained some administrators using a program called Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling, or LETRS.

"There's a need for all educators to be teachers of reading, regardless of content area," Turk says. "Each content area has natural connections to how children learn to read and can foster a love of literacy."

That's why at Burrell, LETRS training is now given to "anyone who would have an impact on a child's growth as a reader."

One key: This training is just as thorough for teachers in the upper grades — where reading was traditionally assumed to already be automatic — as it is for teachers in the lower grades.

"We wanted [everyone] to understand the building blocks of reading that happened prior to the kids coming to them," Turk says.

This helps teachers to support these older learners, including current middle schoolers and ninth-graders who experienced pandemic-related school disruption just as they were beginning to get their early training in reading.

PERSONALIZATION FROM THE GET-GO

Lost in the mists of history are the days of generic “Dick and Jane” primers that every child was expected to learn from at a uniform pace. Today’s instruction is personalized and student-centered.

“Literacy is going to directly impact their success and progress in all of their other content areas,” says Jennifer Cavalancia, an early literacy expert and K-2 principal at Deer Lakes School District.

Because of that, she says, each child deserves individualized support.

If you walk into a kindergarten classroom in Deer Lakes, you may see multiple things happening at once — perhaps some whole-class instruction, followed by a mix of small-group instruction and one-on-one sessions. This blend has helped push students forward as they ascend the academic ladder.

One important choice that the district made: Cavalancia says Deer Lakes has developed a home-grown reading curriculum, rather than relying on a single, out-of-the-box solution. Their approach, she says, “doesn’t rely solely on one company’s routine or set of texts.”

Here’s why: “Most programs don’t have all of the pieces that each child needs,” Cavalancia says. “You may have to dig a bit deeper for grammar, or you might be looking for more nonfiction texts or overarching themes,” she says. “So, we’re using many resources to help deliver and meet that curricular goal.”

That extra effort has been proving effective. As Deer Lakes gathers data on their progress, Cavalancia notes the ways they’ve seen kindergartners move forward bit by bit, and the palpable joy that can accompany that progress.

“A lot of times, your goal is for kindergarten students to start understanding that ‘I can name these letters. These letters have sounds, and eventually, these sounds build words,’” she says.

“They come to us still learning that A is A, and A says ‘ah.’ But then the spring of the kindergarten year arrives, and it’s March, and they’re reading small

“You can feel it in the classroom: ‘Yes! This is exactly where we need to be!’”

passages. You get to the point where they’re reading phrases and sentences, and then eventually those decodable texts. You can feel it in the classroom: ‘Yes! This is exactly where we need to be!’”

These small joys for both teachers and students matter along a child’s road to literacy. Because reading is not only foundational. It is the golden key to everything else. Reading truly is — as those 1970s public service announcements drilled into so many heads — fundamental.

