

Amplifying Your District Award finalist



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Q: What does the Science of Reading mean to you?

I believe the Science of Reading is about hope. Knowing 95% of students are cognitively able to read at grade level with the right explicit instruction was empowering for me and the teachers I support. Every child should know the joy and success of reading.

Q: Tell us more about your journey with the Science of Reading. How did you get started?

In 2013, I took a school psychologist position at Heartland Area Education Agency in Iowa. Through the agency's initial professional learning, I began to understand all the things I was assessing and measuring students on, such as phonemic awareness. From then on, my passion for reading development and the research surrounding it was ignited to better support teachers with intervention and students with reading disabilities. I took every opportunity available to learn more about reading through AEA and master's and doctorate programs. In my next role at Greenhills, I continued LETRS training, book studies, and learning more about reading. I assessed how their materials aligned with state standards and reading research and wrote multiple grants to fill in their instruction gaps. When I left, over 80% of students were reading at or above the benchmark level.

At Grand Island Public Schools, I am in charge of the K–5 ELA curriculum and academic MTSS. We have worked to develop a vision and commitments for literacy. We offer letters, training, third edition training to all of our teachers, K through fifth grade. We've adopted high-quality instructional materials and universal screeners in reading that reliably predicted or measured potential risk for reading difficulties. We've done a lot of work to improve our practices so that we can get better outcomes for our students. There is this collective belief around the work that we're doing from our academic coaches, teachers, and administrators. They're investing a lot of time and energy into developing their knowledge. Our success as a district is far greater than mine.

Q: What tools/curriculum do you use to implement the Science of Reading? How did Amplify help?

We are an Amplify district and super proud to be an Amplify district. Last year, we started with Amplify CKLA Skills adoption because that's where we had the biggest gap in terms of our instructional resources and supporting our students. Then we added on knowledge for K–2 this year, integrated transfer for grades 3–5, and Amplify Reading.

We started using mCLASS DIBELS with all of our K–3 students. After last year, fourth- and fifth-grade teachers caught wind of these awesome things that the lower elementary teachers had access to that they didn't, so we expanded mCLASS DIBELS to K–5 this year. We love the high-quality resources and programs that Amplify has to offer and we have seen some tremendous results early on and had some wonderful success. They're supporting us in our vision, which is wonderful.

Q: How did you see the Science of Reading change your class dynamics and student outcomes? How long did it take?

We've done the most work around CKLA and mCLASS DIBELS; those have played the most pivotal role in our success so far, combined with our district's commitment to professional development with the LETRS professional development for our staff and the science of teaching reading.

This is the first time our teachers had extensive professional development that directly aligns with the materials and assessment tools they are using. Together those things have been instrumental in moving the needle for our students, and building that buy-in among our teachers.

Q: How do you track your student's progress?

One thing I love about our partnership with Amplify is the data review meetings. We have the beginning of the year, middle of the year, and end of the year data review meetings. I'm always interested in how we're doing in comparison to Amplify's national data set, comparing how we did at the beginning of the year this year in comparison to last year. We are just in our second year of using mCLASS DIBELS, yet we have seen awesome things with our first-grade students this year. Those students who had CKLA in kindergarten last year led to more first-grade students at or above benchmark compared to the national sample, and last year we started below the national sample for first-grade students. This year we had an 8% increase in comparison to last year and the national sample only had a 2% increase.

I have to say, our kindergarten teachers last year rocked it. We are a majority-minority school district with fairly significant free and reduced lunch populations, and a decent English language learner population. We had significantly fewer kindergarten students at or above benchmark compared to the national sample. By the end of the year, our kindergarten students outperformed the national sample. The most exciting thing about our kindergarten students from last year, our current first-grade students, came in this year and the improvements that we have seen, specifically in phonemic segmentation fluency, correct letter sounds, and decoding have been huge. We saw a 20–30% increase this year compared to last year. It's amazing to see our kids' incredible growth last year, but over the summer, they held onto their skills and came in at the beginning of this year, strong with those foundational pieces.

Q: What major obstacles did you overcome to implement the Science of Reading?

I feel fortunate that we haven't experienced major obstacles in the changes that we've made. A lot of that has to do with the way that we've approached the shifts and the changes that we've made. We were intentional about bringing training to our teachers and helping them understand teaching reading. Our teachers weren't prepared to teach reading and writing. Once they got materials that were of exceptional quality, they were sold and bought in. Then we started seeing results with our students. The teachers tell us just how confident and motivated their kids are to acquire new skills and work hard at reading. We can't go back to teaching reading any other way. This is working for our kids.

I wasn't sure how our third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade teachers were going to respond to CKLA because, before my time, they used guided reading. They were still doing a lot of small-group instruction and it was going to be a big shift for them. I used some of Natalie Wexler's reports to set the stage and shared our longitudinal data with teachers and they had no idea how their students were performing. In the end, they love teaching CKLA, their students love it, they're engaged, they're motivated, they're happy.

Q: What news, materials, or information do you consume to help you teach?

I'm a member of many Science of Reading Facebook groups, including the national group which now has state branches. I am the founder and manager of the Nebraska group. That has been a wonderful opportunity to bring Nebraska educators together and collaborate with other teachers and other professionals across the state. We've done some statewide book studies. I just love connecting with people because they share great books and articles recently published.

Some of my favorite books are Equipped, Speech to Print, The Writing Revolution, Language at the Speed of Sight, The Knowledge Gap, and Why Knowledge Matters. I am a fan of Tim Shanahan's blog and Natalie Wexler's pieces. We use Jan Hasbrouck's Reading Fluency: Understand, Assess, Teach to frame us adding mCLASS DIBELS as an assessment tool for our fourth- and fifth-grade teachers. Then Twitter is a great platform, especially for research. People are constantly tweeting research articles that are open-source, which is huge because teachers don't have access to research.

Q: What advice do you have for teachers starting with the Science of Reading?

Just get started. Don't feel overwhelmed by what you don't know. We have seen tremendous success and tremendous results, but there's still a lot of work left for us to do. I would say decide the thing that you want to focus on, pick something that you want to understand better, that you want to learn more about, and commit yourself. In the education world, we are almost paralyzed by the sheer amount of things that need to be done. There's this sense of immediacy and urgency, that you have to balance with your reality.

Make sure that teachers feel supported because teachers go through a grieving process once they learn more. They feel guilt and sadness about some of the students they have taught in the past. Stay committed to growing and developing because science is going to change and you have to evolve and move with the science.

