

Kentucky Reading Academies: A Case Study of Taylor Mill Elementary School



Site Overview

Taylor Mill Elementary, one of ten elementary schools in Kenton County School District, is in the northernmost region of the state in Covington, Kentucky. The school serves just under 500 preK-5 students and maintains a student-to-teacher ratio of 16:1. Taylor Mill Elementary's demographic composition reflects a predominantly White student body (86%), with smaller proportions of students who identify as Hispanic/Latino (4%), African American (3%), Asian (1%) or two or more races (6%). Nearly half of the student population benefit from free or reduced lunch (KDE, n.d.-b).

Kentucky Summative Assessment (KSA) data from the 2023-2024 school year (SY) show that 65% of Taylor Mill students were proficient (38%) or distinguished (27%) in reading. Over the past 3 school years, Taylor Mill increased the percentage of students scoring in the proficient/distinguished range of the KSA and decreased the percentage of students in the novice range (see page 2 with graphical representation of results), a trend that was even more pronounced for economically disadvantaged students. Between SYs 2022–2023 and 2023–2024, Taylor Mill increased its state-assigned overall performance rating from green to blue, with blue indicating the highest performance.

Background

About the Kentucky Reading Academies. The Kentucky Reading Academies (established through Senate Bill 9, 2022) provides a no-cost opportunity for educators to opt into the Lexia Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS®) Professional Learning. In addition, the Kentucky Department of Education is providing school-based literacy instructional coaching to identified schools to support evidence-based literacy practices. The reading academies aim to develop K–5 educators' knowledge and beliefs on early literacy and provide them with the tools to deliver targeted and responsive literacy instruction.

Evaluation of the Reading Academies. KDE contracted with ICF to conduct an external evaluation of the program and its various initiatives, including conducting case studies of selected elementary schools to learn more about potential promising practices for implementing evidence-based literacy instruction.

Guiding Questions. The case studies explore contextual factors affecting participation in the reading academies and implementation of evidence-based literacy instructional strategies.

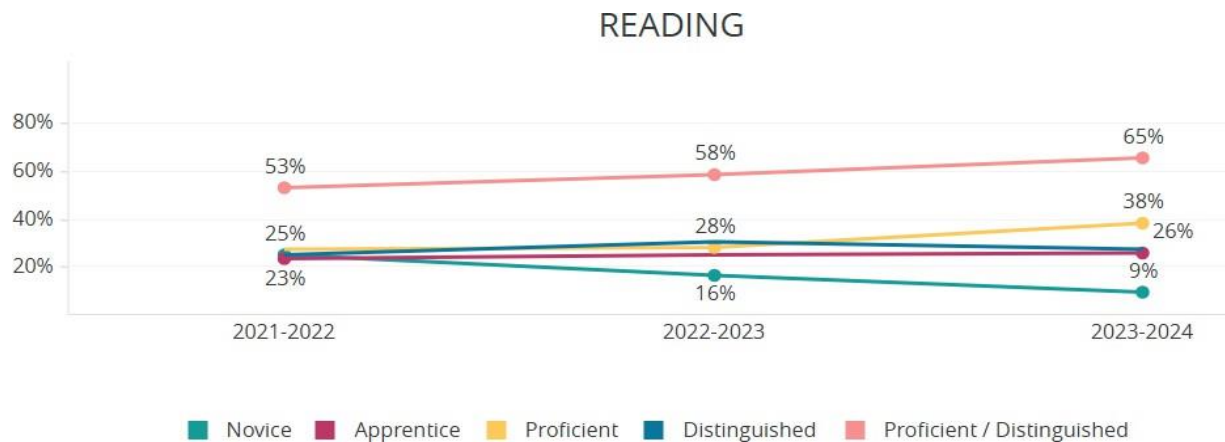
Data Collection. Data were collected in February 2025 and included:

- Three focus groups with school administrators (4), educators (4), and district staff (2)
- Two 30-minute classroom observations and observational field notes
- Extant survey and assessment data
- Document review

Analytic Approach. Data were analyzed and triangulated across data sources for each site using case study methodology.

For more details on the program and evaluation, visit:

https://www.education.ky.gov/curriculum/EarlyLiteracy/Pages/ky_reading_Academies.aspx



[Pictured above]: A screenshot of KSA reading score levels from the Taylor Mill Elementary School Report Card; see <https://reportcard.kyschools.us/> for more information.

As of the 2024–25 school year, all Kentucky school districts were required to adopt a core comprehensive High Quality Instructional Resource (HQIR), defined by KDE as materials that align with academic standards, are research-based, comprehensive, culturally relevant, and accessible for all students. These resources aim to foster vibrant and inclusive learning experiences (KDE, n.d.). Taylor Mill Elementary uses Amplify’s Core Knowledge Language Arts (CKLA) as its HQIR, which is a green-rated Tier I instructional resource for reading according to EdReports.org. Additionally, all Taylor Mill staff were trained in Orton-Gillingham using funds from the KDE-sponsored Read to Achieve (RTA) grant.

This case study included on-site and virtual focus groups and interviews with 10 school district personnel (see the Background box on page 1 for more details). Collectively, these case study participants had 203 years of experience in education with a range of 10-32 years. The two teachers who were observed had been teaching for an average of 21 years.

Findings

Findings from this case study highlight the experiences of Taylor Mill staff who participated in LETRS® professional learning, insights from classroom observations into the implementation of LETRS, contextual factors that influenced implementation, and promising practices identified that may inform future implementation of evidence-based practices in literacy.

LETRS Professional Learning Participation

Educators’ Perceptions and Experiences

Taylor Mill Elementary has had 12 teachers and administrators who have either completed LETRS or were in the process of completing LETRS at the time of the site visit. Teachers who

participated in LETRS noted \$1,000 district paid stipends as an incentive for participation and completion. During a focus group, four early elementary educators from Taylor Mill who had participated in either Cohort 1 or Cohort 2 of the reading academies shared their experiences with LETRS as part of this case study. All four found LETRS to be useful, however, they reported different experiences in terms of which portions of the professional learning were most useful. A kindergarten teacher from Cohort 1 found the first half of the professional learning informative, but the second half less useful, perhaps reflective of the structure of the LETRS program, which includes content more applicable to older grades

in the second half of the learning modules. One first-grade teacher from Cohort 2 found the initial part of the professional learning reaffirming and the latter part particularly enlightening, “I’m learning a lot of things with sentence structures and vocabulary and how to implement, and it’s an area that I think is lacking in the classroom.” A reading interventionist from Cohort 1 found that the first part of LETRS reaffirmed existing knowledge on early literacy, while the second part offered valuable insights into comprehension and morphology. Finally, a second-grade teacher from Cohort 2 appreciated LETRS’ content emphasis on phonics. Although overall this teacher was satisfied with the structure of the program, this educator expressed a preference for having LETRS start at the end of summer rather than the beginning of the school year, to better prepare for the required benchmark data collection.

“I feel like the first part [of LETRS professional learning], it was reaffirming to me that this is what I have been researching, college for me did not prepare me in any way for teaching literacy to struggling readers. So I have completely taken ahold of the science of reading research, and I am glad that the state of Kentucky is going more towards that.”

– Reading interventionist

Administrators’ and Teacher Leads’ Participation and Perceptions

Two Taylor Mill administrators—including the building principal and assistant principal—and two literacy leads shared their experiences with LETRS professional learning during a focus group. The principal was an early-adopter of LETRS, participating in LETRS for Administrators before Cohort 1 of the reading academies began by utilizing funds from the KDE-sponsored Read to Achieve (RTA) grant. The principal underscored how meaningful the LETRS professional learning was to her own literacy knowledge, the importance of acquiring early literacy resources grounded in research—including their HQIR, Amplify CKLA—and making sure the teachers in her building had access to both HQIRs *and* evidence-based professional learning like LETRS.

The principal also praised the passion and dedication of staff participating in the reading academies, emphasizing the importance of a culture of continuous learning:

They're [staff] learners and they want to do the right thing. And I think that passion that's within them is that every single one of them wants to do the right thing for kids. And I think that culture of being learners comes first for us.

The assistant principal participated in Cohort 2 LETRS for Administrators and appreciated the rich discussions with administrators from across the state during virtual sessions. She noted that Unit 2 of the LETRS professional learning which detailed how students learn to read, was particularly impactful, especially as a former math educator who was eager to boost her knowledge of best practices in early literacy. This new learning was both enriched and affirmed by the strong support from the building principal and knowledgeable staff who had already participated in the professional learning. Overall, the assistant principal noted that learning from LETRS equipped her to not only identify skillful literacy teaching but also with how to provide support for teachers on evidence-based early literacy strategies when it was needed.

Each literacy lead spoke highly of their experience with LETRS for Educators (Cohorts 1 and 3). Like the assistant principal, they enjoyed the virtual discussions, which fostered collaborative learning and sharing with other educators engaged in similar literacy work in their schools. One literacy lead described the professional learning as transformative, stating, "Just knowing how much goes into kids learning to read was a huge eye-opener." Another literacy lead discussed the difficulty of watching students struggle to read and emphasized the need for better solutions, which she believed LETRS provided. She appreciated LETRS for detailing all aspects of how students learn to read and progress.

While the overall experience was very positive for administrators and literacy leads, one literacy lead noted logistical challenges with participation, such as trying to schedule LETRS learning sessions around various school events.

More generally, the ability to learn using various learning formats, including virtual meetings and physical reading materials, was seen as a beneficial aspect of LETRS. Administrators and literacy leads alike also noted the advantages of discussing practices with other teachers working to ensure vertical alignment and differentiation of instruction to be responsive to students' needs.

"You need to know where they're going... where am I trying to get them, and where have they come from, and what maybe have they missed? Because if you don't know what becomes before you or what comes after you, you're teaching in this little [bubble] with your blinders up... That's the biggest thing for me."

— Literacy Lead

Finally, a literacy lead initially felt uncomfortable evaluating their own practices during the LETRS for Educators professional learning. However, they acknowledged the importance of reassessing instructional methods, even for veteran educators:

I needed the uncomfortable parts where I was evaluating myself. Am I doing this? Am I doing it to its entirety or am I picking and choosing the parts? So, as me where I am in my journey of education, I've been doing this a long time, but you need those reminders.

Reflecting on past practices that did not align with evidence-based literacy was essential for making strategic changes. These changes not only fostered the educator's growth as a practitioner, but also positively impacted student outcomes.

Classroom Implementation

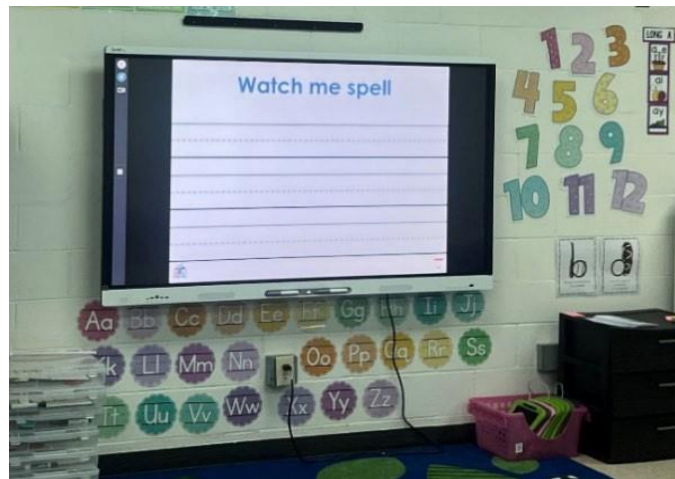
Implementation of LETRS at Taylor Mill was widely characterized as being tailored to the school's unique needs and facilitated by a strong collaboration between administrators and educators.

Tailored Implementation of LETRS Content

Positive feedback was provided by educators, administrators, and district staff with regards to the implementation of LETRS learning in instruction.

Educators generally felt well-prepared to implement and tailor the program to meet the unique needs of their

classrooms and students. One first-grade teacher immediately integrated sentence structure activities and vocabulary lessons, allowing them to pivot and explain concepts effortlessly due to foundational skills gained through LETRS. Another kindergarten teacher explained how they were applying their newfound understanding of how a child's brain develops to inform phonics lessons. A second-grade teacher noted that she applied strategies progressively, adapting them to support struggling students and valued the LETRS framework for its responsive teaching approach. This educator highlighted how helping a student understand the "rules" had helped that student move out of intervention and improve his fluency: "He was like, 'I know these rules, I can do this. I just have to practice'." A math and reading interventionist for Grades K–5 emphasized how it was "eye-opening" for them to learn more about comprehension and how "it is not simply being able to answer questions about main topics." LETRS helped them recognize how morphology can significantly enhance vocabulary development and comprehension, particularly for elementary school students in older grades.



[Pictured above]: A literacy lead instructor's classroom at Taylor Mill Elementary.

Classroom Implementation in Practice

Two 30-minute observations were conducted at Taylor Mill. The first observation was of a Tier I/whole group lesson in a second-grade classroom featuring the HQIR. Findings are embedded throughout this case study report.

The following vignette describes a Tier II/small group targeted lesson with 4 first-grade students who were pulled out of their main classrooms to receive intervention services from a literacy lead specialist. Working together as a group, all 4 students were engaged and working on the carpet throughout the observed time. The group, comprised of 2 boys and 2 girls, participated in various activities designed to enhance their phonemic awareness and literacy skills. One activity involved the students saying and repeating sounds aloud, guided by their teacher. The teacher presented four sounds that the group repeated, then demonstrated how to pull apart and blend these sounds to form words. The lesson progressed to practicing beginning, middle, and end sounds. Students used mirrors to observe their mouths while making sounds and learned about the tongue's position during pronunciation. Students were observed using whiteboards to write and spell the word, receiving immediate formative feedback from the teacher. Students then individually practiced writing sentences on whiteboards, starting with a capital letter and ending with a period. Then they read their sentences aloud, such as, "The rat is on the rug," while helping each other spell and tap out the sounds.

The teacher provided differentiated assistance to students, including emphasizing the importance of capitalization and punctuation when students needed additional guidance and support. This differentiation was also observed when students read their sentences aloud to the teacher and she immediately addressed any mistakes and offered supplemental instructional support. Students were also observed using magnet boards to break apart and spell words like *rap*. They changed the word to *rip* by touching and saying each sound on their board, deciding which letter needed to be altered. The teacher provided individual assistance and positive feedback, repeating the process with other words such as *rid* to *red* and *bet* to *bat*.

Throughout the session, the teacher routinely offered directions and positive feedback, even awarding a small prize to a *secret student* who had been deemed by the teacher as one who worked particularly hard during the lesson. The student's name was also placed on an award chart, and they received new stickers.

During SY 2023–2024, leaders at Taylor Mill began conducting *fidelity walks*, which involve the principal, assistant principal, and both literacy leads observing classroom implementation of the Amplify CKLA curriculum. Prior participation in LETRS professional learning helped administrators identify instructional strategies to support educators based on the observed needs during these fidelity walks.

“What we saw in those classrooms on those fidelity walks and then what were the next steps? What are the trends? What are the patterns and we're sharing any broad next steps or trends or patterns with the principals.”

– District staff

Collaboration around LETRS Materials

Taylor Mill Elementary School has fostered a culture of collaboration among its educators by having teachers regularly engage in data-driven discussions, ensuring that the principles of LETRS are seamlessly integrated into their classroom activities. Several district staff, including the Taylor Mill principal, also participate and exchange information as members of the Kentucky Early Literacy Leadership Network. This collaborative approach within the school and district not only enhances the learning experience for students but also provides teachers with a support network to refine their instructional techniques. Taylor Mill's assistant principal also praised the effectiveness of professional learning communities (PLCs) paired with the data-driven discussions held during weekly multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) meetings:

I would also say our PLCs are very powerful. They meet twice a week just looking at the data...once we have some data, then we can look and often at our PLCs, we'll be like, 'kay, how's it going? ...Is there anyone that stands out in your WIN [What I Need] room that you think, wow, they're really doing great, they need to move up or oh, this isn't working for so-and-so?

PLCs create space for intentional discussions about student reading progress in real time. Supports for students flagged as needing additional reading help based on literacy assessment data are discussed in MTSS meetings and then during PLCs. This approach enables collaborative, data-based conversations that facilitate the fluid movement of students to reading placements that directly address individual needs.

Contextual and Community Factors

Implementation of LETRS at Taylor Mill Elementary School has been influenced by a variety of contextual factors at the school, district, and state level. These factors have reportedly facilitated a culture of collaboration, commitment to student success, and the provision of evidence-based literacy resources and professional learning.

School Support. At the school level, the principal is a strong advocate for literacy and has positioned literacy leads to provide support for primary classrooms and older classrooms. The Amplify CKLA HQIR has also been used for the past 2 years and both educators and administrators reported that it is very complementary to concepts learned in LETRS.



[Pictured above]: A literacy lead instructor's classroom at Taylor Mill Elementary.

District and State Support. District support is evident in the \$1,000 stipends paid to teachers who participate in and complete LETRS. The district also promotes the use of fidelity walks and has a student data dashboard to monitor student learning. District staff hold monthly principal meetings, offer job-embedded coaching, and created a literacy committee with consultants who run monthly meetings with literacy leaders selected by building principals. State-level support is provided through participation in the Kentucky Early Literacy Leadership Network. This network facilitates the exchange of information among its members and is designed to empower district teams to develop and implement sustainable K–5 literacy strategies grounded in HQIRs.

Facilitators to Implementation. Several factors were cited as facilitators to evidence-based literacy instruction at Taylor Mill. Strong buy-in and support from the principal was mentioned by numerous focus group participants, and there appears to be a strong commitment to using data to drive instruction and interventions as part of MTSS. Creativity, collaboration amongst staff, and personalized instruction were emphasized as crucial for student success. Administrators noted an emphasis on innovation—referred to as "sparkle"—as well as the dedication of the school's literacy interventionist as key factors that supported strong literacy instruction. Staff also pointed out the dedication of administrators in providing necessary training, a shift towards explicit vocabulary training, and widespread staff training in Orton-Gillingham. The large number of teachers (n=10 or nearly one-third of the 34 teachers reported to be on staff) and administrators (n=2) who enrolled and completed LETRS at Taylor Mill was attributed to factors such as staff passion for “doing the right thing for students” and “a culture of being learners first.” Other staff highlighted the camaraderie among teachers who participated in the program and who encouraged others to participate. Administrators, literacy leads, and teachers all noted how they leaned on each other when going through the professional learning process, which helped facilitate their successful completion.



[Pictured above]: A book vending machine was paid for by the Parent Teacher Association at Taylor Mill and is used to reward students and promote a reading culture.

Barriers to Implementation. Barriers to implementation included a struggle reported by some teachers in breaking down writing skills for students. According to one literacy lead,

I am a huge lover of writing, and I feel like writing is a struggle. I think teachers...we get lost into the old way of teaching writing where you have this huge piece that you have to sit down and you got to basically make your kids do this and they're supposed to produce this when they're not ready to produce that... we don't know how to break down the skills sometimes... this

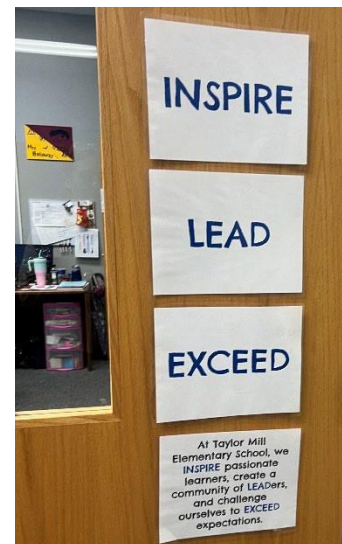
isn't just in our school but it's all around that writing is a struggle for teachers and students.

District staff noted that while there were no significant barriers to implementation at the administrative level, teachers faced a learning curve in adapting to new literacy practices. They reflected on the challenge of convincing more seasoned teachers to change and adapt to new teaching methods, “You know, we have teachers that have taught 20-some years, so they had to really undo some habits...nobody should feel bad about what we have done in the past. Now that we know what we know, we are just going to move forward.”

Promising Practices

The following includes examples of promising practices cited during case study data collection that can be adapted and applied by other schools and districts with similar contextual features that are seeking to implement evidence-based literacy initiatives.

District Wide Support for Professional Learning and Literacy Initiatives. District staff who participated in the case study data collection had significant teaching experience, particularly in literacy. They discussed their own personal participation in LETRS professional learning offered by the Kentucky Reading Academies and emphasized their systematic approach to literacy initiatives, highlighting the importance of having literacy consultants and coaches who have participated in LETRS professional learning. According to district staff, “There has been a district-wide literacy shift ... we're educating people on the differences between structured literacy and balanced literacy and just making sure they really understand that this [structured literacy] is our home base.” District staff have also been intentional about implementing professional learning throughout the school year and allowing teachers to come together in early fall after they have several weeks of LETRS instruction to reflect upon their progress to date.



[Pictured above]: A doorway with inspirational messaging in the school office at Taylor Mill Elementary.

Using Data Dashboards to Monitor Student Performance. The district has successfully implemented data dashboards to comprehensively monitor student performance. The district generates detailed student data, including proficiency levels across various standards from previous grade levels. This system allows the district to maintain a broad view of student achievement, helping identify trends and patterns over time. The data can be further broken down by student, standard, teacher, and school, and has empowered the district to make informed decisions and showcase student progress. Use of universal screeners and frequent progress monitoring ensures that when state assessment results are received, there are “no surprises.”



Emphasis on Foundational Skills. One of the key strategies at Taylor Mill is the strong focus on foundational literacy skills and the use of visual materials, such as sound walls, to help students both grasp and continually reinforce essential reading concepts. These tools make learning more engaging and provide a visual representation of sounds and words, aiding in the development of phonemic awareness and decoding skills.

Differentiation. Recognizing that each student has unique learning needs, Taylor Mill teachers have adapted the framework of the LETRS program to cater to students' unique needs. This differentiation ensures that all students receive tailored instruction that addresses their specific challenges and promotes their progress in literacy.

Fluidity of Student Tier Placement and Effective Use of the Kentucky Multi-Tiered System of Supports (KyMTSS). Taylor Mill educators address reading issues through the KyMTSS framework. Strategies such as "name and claim" are employed to support student progress and success. This strategy allows educators to identify students who require additional support and implement targeted interventions to meet their unique needs. The school's master schedule, established in close collaboration with the intervention and literacy team, allows for fluid student placement based on assessment data. Teachers at Taylor Mill also participate in frequent data review meetings, which have become integral to the school's approach to refining literacy instruction.

Collaboration Within and Outside of the School Building. Administrators and literacy leads emphasized the benefits of collaborating with teachers in and out of the school building, appreciating the virtual discussions offered through professional learning, such as LETRS, that fostered collaborative learning and sharing amongst educators engaged in similar literacy initiatives. District-level collaboration in PLCs was also seen as particularly helpful when discussing vertical alignment to ensure cohesive and intentionally sequenced literacy learning experiences throughout the elementary grades.

Educator Reflection on Instructional Practice. The intentional reflection and evaluation of one's teaching practices was recognized as a necessary experience towards growth as a practitioner, especially as it relates to literacy. Albeit initially an uncomfortable experience for some, veteran educators reported that they saw the benefits of considering how they learned how to teach reading when they sought their teaching credentials and how they had adjusted or adapted their literacy instructional practice throughout their career. At times, evidence-based literacy professional learning was reported to have looked very different than what teachers had been taught in their educator preparation programs in college, with implementation of this new learning resulting in higher student success than previously used practices.

Fidelity Walks to Support Successful HQIR Implementation. School and district administrators recognize the importance of fidelity walks to ensure the proper implementation of the HQIR, Amplify CKLA. These fidelity walks provide district literacy consultants, principals, and school-based literacy leads with the opportunity to observe the



implementation of the Tier I literacy HQIR in classrooms. This process also helps school leaders identify additional support needed by staff to succeed. Participation in literacy professional learning, such as LETRS, was noted as beneficial for administrators in recognizing evidence-based literacy practices in action.

Success Stories

Educators and administrators at Taylor Mill shared examples of student progress attributed to their LETRS and HQIR implementation. Each literacy lead noted substantial improvements in students' confidence and literacy skills, especially among those previously identified as struggling readers:

We're seeing kids being able to read... that is the biggest success we can have. Kids are actually able to read. They're not so frustrated... you don't have them walking in fifth grade saying, 'I'm dumb.' – Literacy Lead

[Struggling readers] know the code. You've given them some tools to know what to do. – Literacy Lead

District and school-based staff attribute their literacy successes to the combination of LETRS, systematically teaching structured literacy, and implementing the HQIR (Amplify CKLA) with fidelity. District staff noted how literacy instruction has changed significantly within their district, particularly in primary classes with a renewed focus on phonics-based instruction, citing the importance of a “sounds-first” approach to literacy instruction. According to district staff, they are already seeing the positive impact of Taylor Mill on other schools in their district during collaborative discussions across schools, “Rich collaboration conversations are taking place in terms of, ‘what does all this mean?’ If Taylor Mill staff are seeing great success and maybe I'm teaching down two miles down the road and I'm not seeing that success, then what?’ ...so there's lots of opportunities for collaboration.” The assistant principal shared a personal account of the positive influence of LETRS and how phonics is making a comeback:

I was a struggling reader all my life and I would just constantly say, 'I'm just not a good reader' ...and now I understand the silent 'E' in home'...Personally, it has been a huge success story just for my family and my son who is also a struggling reader...getting this out there for the community during our literacy nights, it's huge because my generation, we learned it started off with phonics, but then it was like phonics went away and there was a bunch of struggling readers. And now, I see [phonics] making a comeback...I'm super pumped for them...the things that [principal] has done, the groundwork that she's done, it's just been a huge success.



Conclusions and Implications

Overall, this case study highlighted a shared commitment by Taylor Mill Elementary staff and Kenton County district staff to improve literacy instruction through PLCs, continuous literacy support, and data-driven decision making using the framework of MTSS. This commitment is apparent at the district and school level via strategic professional learning initiatives and systematic implementation of evidence-based literacy practices. The district's success in fostering rich collaboration among teachers and leveraging data dashboards to monitor student performance reflects a robust infrastructure aimed at continuous improvement. As such, the Kenton County School District has cultivated an environment where informed decisions and targeted, evidence-based strategies have led to measurable progress in student literacy outcomes, as evidenced by the remarkable improvements seen in KSA reading data and teachers' growth as literacy practitioners.



References

Kentucky Department of Education. (n.d.-a). *High Quality Instructional Resources*. https://www.education.ky.gov/curriculum/standards/kyacadstand/Documents/High-Quality_Instructional_Resources.pdf

Kentucky Department of Education. (n.d.-b). *Taylor Mill Elementary School report card*. <https://reportcard.kyschools.us/kysrc?organization=20232024:291:291100>