Kentucky Reading Academies: A Case Study of Viper Elementary School

Site Overview

Viper Elementary, one of five elementary schools in Perry County School District, is located in the southeast corner of Kentucky. The school serves just under 300 preK–8 students and maintains a student-to-teacher ratio of 12:1. Viper Elementary's demographic composition reflects a predominantly White student body (99%), with 82% of students eligible for free or reduced lunch (Kentucky Department of Education, n.d.-b).

Kentucky Summative Assessment (KSA) data from the 2023–24 school year (SY) show that 71% of Viper students are proficient (40%) or distinguished (30%) in reading.[1] Over the past 3 school years, Viper increased the percentage of students scoring in the proficient/distinguished range of the KSA (see page 2 with graphical representation of results).[2]

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. The Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) 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 literacy instruction.

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

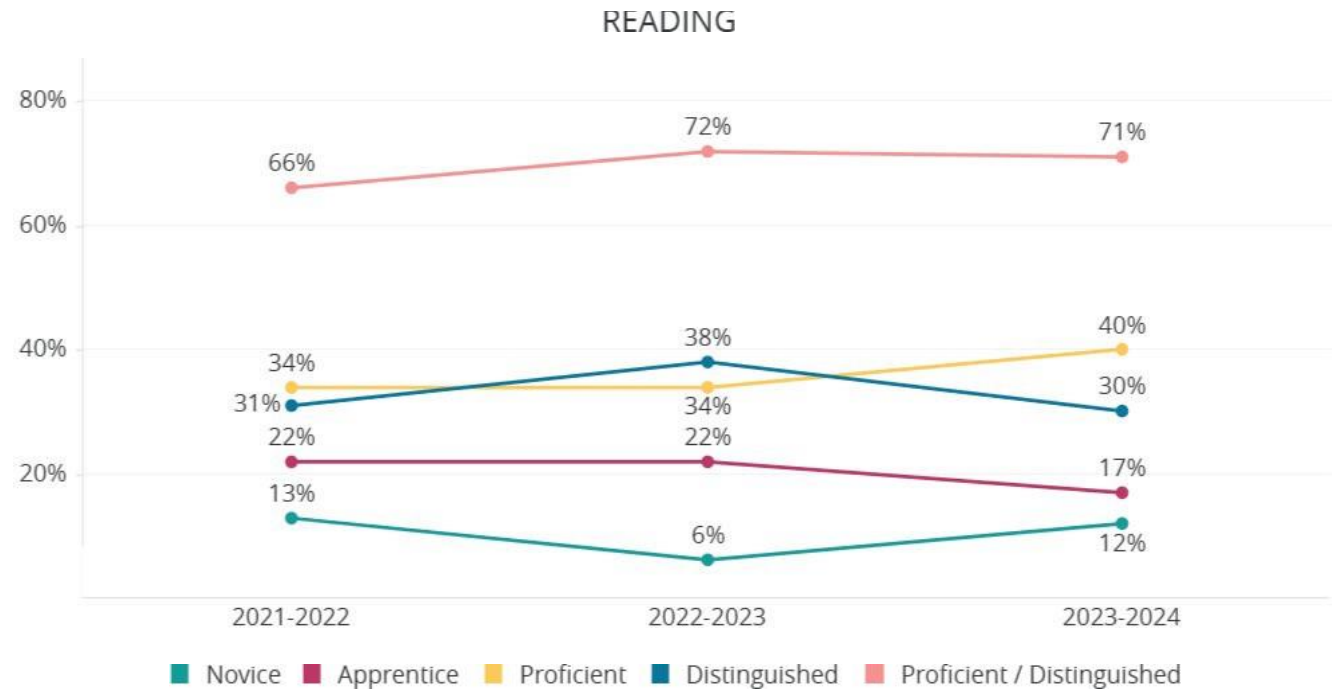
Data Collection. Data were collected in February 2025 and included:

- Two focus groups with district administrators (2) and educators (4)
- One individual interview with Viper administration
- One 30-minute classroom observation
- Extant survey and assessment data
- Document review
- Observational field notes

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

[1] The percentage of students who are proficient/distinguished (71%) does not appear as the exact sum of the percentage of students who are proficient (40%) and distinguished (30%) due to rounding.
[2] As explained on page 2, some of the trends in assessment scores may be related to the changes in school population from school consolidation.



Source: Viper Elementary School Report Card from https://reportcard.kyschools.us/.

As seen in other rural schools across the country, Viper Elementary is in the midst of considerable structural change (Lieberman, 2024). Like all elementary schools in Perry County, Viper Elementary combines preK, elementary, and middle school students in a single building, but still struggles with low enrollment numbers. In spring 2023, the county school board decided to consolidate Leatherwood Elementary School into Viper Elementary School, bringing the total enrolled students at Viper from 208 students in SY 2022–23 to 273 students in SY 2023–24 (Perkins & Johnson, 2023). However, this was ultimately only a stopgap measure, as plans are underway for the construction of a new regional county elementary school that will further consolidate R.W. Combs Elementary and Viper Elementary into a new South Perry Elementary School building (Wilcox & Johnson, 2024).

[Pictured above]: A hallway in Viper Elementary with posters that praise student effort on the KSA.

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 (Kentucky Department of Education, n.d.-a). Viper Elementary uses the Savvas myView Literacy elementary reading curriculum as its HQIR, which is a green-rated Tier I instructional resource for reading, according to EdReports.org. Staff at Viper Elementary began widely implementing the Savvas myView Literacy curriculum in SY 2023–24. In addition to aligned curricula, learning is supported by a unique staffing model with just four English Language Arts (ELA) teachers supporting kindergarten, Grades 1–2, Grades 3–5, and Grades 6–8.

This case study included on-site and virtual focus groups and interviews with seven school district personnel (see the box on page 1 for more details). Collectively, these case study participants had 98 years of experience in education with a range of 3–25 years.

Findings

Findings from this case study are organized into four thematic areas related to early literacy: LETRS participation, classroom implementation of early literacy content, contextual and community factors, and promising practices.

LETRS Professional Learning Participation

Perry County school district employed an organic, teacher-led approach to participation in the statewide LETRS for Educators program. At schools across the district, administrators work closely with two-person teams of *teacher leaders* who apply for this competitive leadership role to help shape both the curricular decision-making and instructional delivery related to their subject matter of expertise at both the school and district levels. These teacher leaders are recognized at the school and district levels as content area experts and are celebrated for their innovative thinking, model classrooms, and continuous pursuit of learning opportunities that support academic excellence in all students. In an effort to grow her own evidence-based literacy instructional knowledge, the teacher leader at Viper Elementary initiated the request to participate in the first cohort of the LETRS program. Per district processes, this request was first brought to the Viper Elementary principal, who immediately recognized the potential for positive impact that this learning opportunity could have on students and thus coordinated the approval of this request with district instructional leadership.

As the Viper Elementary ELA teacher leader progressed through LETRS learning, she encouraged her counterpart to enroll in Cohort 2 and also promoted LETRS learning knowledge and instructional strategies during the district professional learning communities (PLCs). These LETRS-focused PLC sessions inspired other Perry County staff to enroll in subsequent LETRS cohort offerings, with a notable increase seen in Cohort 3 participation. Upon seeing the increased academic performance by students in classrooms where LETRS learning was applied, district instructional leaders felt strongly about supporting teachers' participation in LETRS, particularly when it came to helping struggling readers. The assistant superintendent reported:

> *[Our teachers sometimes] inherit [Grades] 3 through 5 students, and even up, that struggle with reading. And you may not know how to help them. I mean, if they've got a third-grade text but they don't have a solid reading foundation, they may still be at a first-grade level. How do you get them there? And so we feel really strongly in [LETRS professional learning].*

The assistant superintendent further noted that LETRS learning provided the "missing piece" when it came to filling in gaps in the foundational literacy skills of their district-selected HQIR.

Reflecting on her experience going through LETRS, the Viper Elementary participant reported that she felt "pretty prepared" to implement the techniques that she was learning and that she was able to start some implementation of those strategies after the first year of the LETRS program. The school principal echoed this reflection, noting that she particularly appreciated that LETRS "teaches the teachers why, and they learn why they're having to teach this. That part–why–is important."

> *"It was a really good experience. I do think it generally is beneficial. I know when I was in college, I just had two classes on how to teach reading for the whole bachelor's, so I really did not know, especially how to help kids who came to third grade struggling with reading. So, I feel like it has given me knowledge of what to do for those kids."*
>
> – LETRS participant

Although overall initial participation in LETRS at Viper Elementary was low compared to other schools across the commonwealth, Viper's staffing model of just three elementary ELA teachers means that one-third of their early literacy teachers were trained in LETRS, which outpaced the rate of many elementary schools in the state.

Classroom Implementation

This section explores classroom implementation of LETRS learnings from both educators' and administrators' perspectives, documenting perceived changes in literacy knowledge and instruction. It also includes an observational snapshot of literacy instruction in a single classroom.

Teachers at Viper Elementary currently implement a series of interrelated early literacy programs and research-based instructional approaches. In addition to LETRS, this includes the HQIR from Savvas; supplemental, evidence-based foundational literacy intervention materials from the University of Florida Literacy Institute (UFLI); brain-based, multi-sensory literacy approaches such as Secret Stories; and cooperative engagement techniques known as Kagan Strategies. Each of these comes together to shape students' understanding of early literacy concepts and foundations that they can build upon as they progress academically.

Implemented Strategies

Teachers began implementing the Savvas myView Literacy curriculum during SY 2023–24, but both district and building administrators noticed during their observational walkthroughs that "phonics instruction, phonemic awareness, some of the foundational reading skills were still lacking in our primaries even after we implemented [the HQIR]." After teacher leaders across the district recommended supplementing the Savvas myView Literacy curriculum with UFLI (foundational lessons in phonics and early reading skills developed by the University of Florida Literacy Institute), teachers across the district were trained in delivering those lessons plans and began incorporating UFLI into K–2 classrooms during SY 2024–25. This additional resource was generally well-received, as a first and second grade ELA teacher reported that the addition of UFLI had "really helped with phonics and being able to connect the letters to the sounds." Along with some gaps in foundational literacy, teachers also reported that the Savvas myView Literacy curriculum does not include a recommended scope and sequence for Grade 3–8 students who are ready for more advanced literacy instruction. To remedy this issue, the Viper Elementary ELA teacher leader pulled in materials from LETRS to create sequenced lesson plans that build on each other to better support those advanced learners. In addition, the teacher leader who completed LETRS

professional learning has implemented a variety of strategies from LETRS into the Grades 3–5 curriculum, including techniques related to syllable division, morphology, decodable words, vocabulary, and reading comprehension.

Benefits of a Focus on Early Literacy

Teachers and administrators reported numerous benefits of this focus on early literacy. For example, the LETRS-trained teacher felt prepared with more strategies to support struggling readers:

> *I am able to give them more strategies of what to do when they come to a word that they don't know. Because I do hear that my struggling graders just think, 'Oh, I'm either just good at reading [or bad at] reading, and there's just nothing I can do about it either way.' So I feel like with the syllable division, it does at least give them a strategy where they can see, 'Oh, there is a reason for this. It's not just crazy.'*

The school principal also found that LETRS provided helpful strategies to enable students first to decode and then to build fluency:

> *[The LETRS strategies] help [students] decode words so they could decode and then build on that fluency, too … . If you can't read it or it's taking so long to decode it, you're not focused on the meaning until you get that piece.*

Viper Elementary is also seeing these benefits translate into improvements on districtwide literacy assessments. The assistant superintendent, along with the district instructional coach, shared, "We've had great improvement, especially in those grades … . We started close to 80—maybe close to 90 reading improvement plans–and then they took the winter i-Ready assessment, and it went to 50 [reading improvement plans]."

Classroom Implementation in Practice

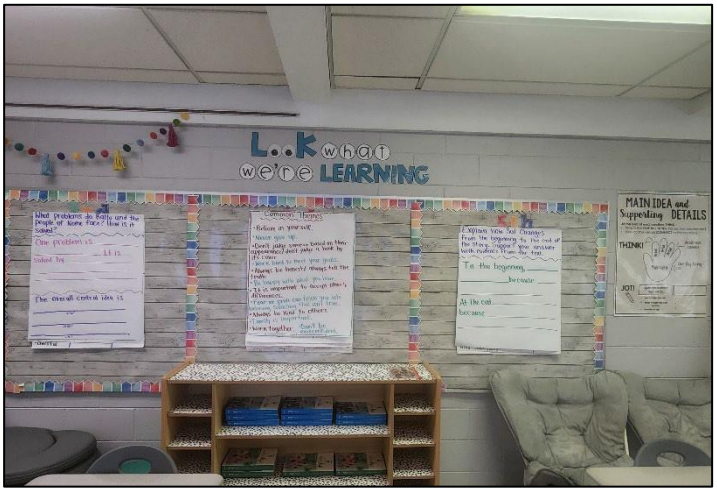
A 30-minute observation of Tier I literacy instruction in a Grade 4 classroom was conducted with 12 students in attendance. During this time, the students joined with a partner to read a nonfiction passage about the rock cycle and participated with the teacher in reading a folktale. Throughout these exercises, which were drawn from state standards and the district curriculum, many LETRS strategies and techniques were in place. For example, prior to reading the folktale, the teacher led the students in going through advanced vocabulary that would appear in the story, supporting retention and understanding by creating motions, known as Kagan Strategies, aligned to each word. During the reading, the teacher led the students in a fluency exercise to strengthen their oral reading skills by first reading a passage out loud as a whole group, then in partners using the same passage, and finally as a whole class again. Students also practiced reading comprehension using the think-pair-share approach where students contemplated their own response to a question, discussed it with a partner, and shared it back with the whole class. Throughout the observed literacy lesson, the teacher kept students engaged by moving them from large groups to partnered work to independent work, sometimes leading the whole class and other times working individually with students.

Contextual and Community Factors

A variety of distinctive factors helped to shape literacy instruction and district involvement at Viper Elementary. This section includes a description of three of those contextual factors as well as an examination of some of the challenges that Viper Elementary faced related to early literacy instruction.

At Viper Elementary and Across Perry County School District, Teacher Leaders Shape Literacy Instruction. Perry County School District carefully vets and selects teacher leaders at each school across each subject. Together with district instructional coaches, these teacher leaders drive the curriculum. The assistant superintendent explained, "We bring them in every summer and then quarterly, and we say, 'Here's the data, here's what it's saying, here's our needs.' And they help make those decisions for our instruction. We don't make them in isolation." The district supported the participation of these teacher leaders as they progressed through the rigorous LETRS professional learning program knowing that they had the platform and opportunity to further disseminate key learnings from LETRS to other teachers across the district. These teacher leaders were also instrumental in selecting Savvas myView Literacy as the district's HQIR and further advised the district to adopt UFLI as a supplement to the HQIR, when it was evident that the HQIR lacked coverage of key foundational literacy concepts and skills.

> *"If it's our leads' [idea], we trust what they say; go for it. Because we consider them the experts and all of our other teachers do as well."*
>
> – Assistant superintendent



[Pictured above]: A teacher leader's classroom at Viper Elementary School.

District Staff are Highly Involved in and Supportive of Strengthening Early Literacy Practices through Training and Collaboration. The district provided funding for teachers to have substitutes while they were going through LETRS professional learning and paid for K–2 teachers to go through UFLI training. The assistant superintendent explained this use of district funds by again underscoring the role of the teacher leaders, saying, "We will cover those costs from the district level because we know, in turn, we are going to use that. That's a lead [going through trainings], and she's going to share that. It's helping to grow others." This attitude was felt among teachers at Viper Elementary, with one teacher noting, "Whatever you want to get more knowledge on, they [the district] are open to it."

In addition to strengthening early literacy through training, the district instructional coach supports teachers at Viper Elementary at least once per week, particularly supporting newer teachers or those who need additional help. The three district instructional coaches also meet monthly with district leadership to discuss areas of strength and opportunities across the district. Districtwide collaboration is further supported at the teacher level, with quarterly PLCs centered on evidence-

based literacy instruction and practice. ELA teachers are grouped by grade in these PLCs, with kindergarten all together, Grades 1 and 2 together, and Grades 3–5 together. During this time, which is facilitated by the teacher leaders, the teachers go over assessment data, pacing guides, and any literacy strategies or techniques that teachers have implemented and found particularly effective, including approaches learned from LETRS.

> *"[In PLCs], they will have those conversations. They'll pull up their i-Ready data, they'll talk about an assessment that they've given based on the pacing guide. And it's kind of a living, breathing conversation. And [Viper's teacher leader] will bring in LETRS in what she's talking about, and once [another school's teacher leader] completes [LETRS], we'll actually put it in concrete in our pacing guides, some of the things that she's recommended."*
>
> - Assistant superintendent

Numerous School-Level Practices are Already in Place to Facilitate Collaboration and Peer Learning around Literacy Implementation. The unique teaching model at Viper Elementary means that each student will only have three ELA teachers throughout their elementary school experience. An advantage of this is that teachers have multiple years to work with a student and are especially able to provide constructive feedback about a student's strengths and needs when they move up to another teacher. The middle school ELA teacher in the building explained, "[The third- through fifth-grade ELA teacher] is really good about asking, 'Hey, what do I need to help them with [before sixth grade]?' And so, she knows what they need to do before they get to me. She's really good about making sure that they're there." These teachers also partner with the special education teachers in the building about strategies that are working well in Tier 1 instruction that may also translate well to students in a special education program, including strategies from LETRS.

Another distinctive school-based feature is the use of teacher leaders' classrooms as model classrooms. Throughout the year, new teachers at the school or across the district can schedule time to observe the teaching practices and classroom management that is in place by a teacher leader. This is one of the ways that early literacy techniques such as those learned through LETRS have made their way into classrooms across the school and district.

> *"And so, for example, we may have a teacher [who is] really strong in literacy. And so we will identify that and a new teacher will set a date, she'll go in and she'll spend the morning or the afternoon with that teacher … and we do that quite often."*
>
> – Assistant superintendent

A Variety of Localized Barriers Created Unique Challenges to Seamless Implementation. Although Viper Elementary School has many supportive practices in place to strengthen the use of evidence-based literacy practices, there are also factors that pose challenges to widespread implementation. As previously indicated, Viper Elementary is currently amid two waves of consolidation with other schools in Perry County. This has involved the merging of multiple school cultures and different experiences with literacy education, including variation in group test scores, at each school. As a result, teachers have adjusted literacy instruction to ensure that all students

are operating from the same foundational skills and understanding while also navigating new student dynamics.

At the district level, staff shared that participation in statewide initiatives is challenging. District staff shared a belief that they would have more buy-in and participation in programs like LETRS if they could be offered at the district or county level rather than the state level. In addition to these localized challenges, participants in this case study also echoed reports heard from across the commonwealth that new teachers are coming out of their degree programs less prepared to teach early literacy than previous generations of teachers. The principal reflected, "The new teachers are not as prepared. It's not their fault, I don't think. It's the universities, the college[s], they're not teaching them how to teach literacy."

> *"What we run into is the commitment. I wish there was an opportunity to bring [LETRS] in-house … I would get a lot more participation, I think."*
>
> – Assistant superintendent

Promising Practices

Viper Elementary School staff described several notable, promising practices related to professional learning and collaboration around early literacy instruction. This section highlights those practices.

Teacher Leaders Shape Instructional Practice through Three Key Mechanisms. Across Perry County School District, individual teachers apply for and are selected to serve as subject- and grade-specific teacher leaders. Working as a group, these teacher leaders help to shape curriculum adoption and instructional practice at the district and school levels. These staff are typically prioritized for training opportunities, such as LETRS, knowing that they will take their new skills and knowledge and filter those learnings throughout their home schools and during PLCs. This takes place when teacher leaders serve as model classrooms, opening up their doors to peers for observations, as well as through quarterly district PLCs, where teachers from grouped grades (e.g., Grades 3–5) are led through data-informed training and discussions by their teacher leaders. These teacher leaders also shape district-level instructional decisions during summer sessions and quarterly meetings among teacher leaders and district leadership. Together, this approach recognizes the expertise of teacher leaders, further equips them with knowledge of best and emerging evidence-based practices in their field, and leverages their knowledge as a resource, affecting not only curriculum and instruction but also culture.

Colleague Learning Opportunities Raise the Caliber of Instruction Across the School. Viper Elementary staff frequently open the doors of model classrooms to allow new teachers, or those identified as needing additional support, to observe classroom practices and teaching methods. At Viper Elementary, these observations are conducted in classrooms led by teacher leaders, but other schools or districts seeking to emulate this could adopt a model where observations take place with veteran teachers or others whom administrators have identified as exemplary. These observations allow teachers to observe similarly situated colleagues in real-world situations and strengthen their own instruction, content-specific knowledgebase, and management. Another replicable practice by Viper Elementary is providing opportunities for regular, built-in time for PLCs with grade-level colleagues. These meetings allow teachers to review assessment data, discuss curriculum pacing guides, share ideas for classroom activities or lesson plans, and work through challenges in a colleague-based environment.

Both the District and School have Demonstrated Support for Teacher-Driven Professional Learning. Staff at the district and school levels described selecting and opting in to professional learning opportunities that were identified by or recommended by teachers. Teachers described the administration as "very open" to finding ways to support teachers as they endeavored to advance their learning, even with limited resources. In one instance, a teacher learned about an opportunity to learn more about morphology, and after bringing it to her principal, she received support to participate in that professional learning. Likewise, administrators described bringing professional learning opportunities to their teachers upon the recommendation of teacher leaders or expanding professional learning opportunities after teacher leaders had completed a valuable training.

Success Stories

Teachers at Viper Elementary School shared examples of student success in literacy that they attributed to the incorporation of LETRS strategies as well as the implementation of their HQIR.

Teachers Report Gains in Word and Sentence Development. Early elementary teachers from Viper Elementary reported that students have a better understanding of letters, sounds, and how they come together to form words that build into sentences. Teachers attributed this to both the UFLI curriculum as well as to their own growth in understanding evidence-based literacy practices from LETRS participation or learning shared by a LETRS-trained teacher. One kindergarten teacher shared, "I have kids right now [who] are writing and reading sentences, and the first 2 years I taught, we couldn't even get past making out a CVC [consonant-vowel-consonant] word. So, actually teaching the science behind reading is making a difference."

Struggling Readers are Closing the Gap with their Peers. Some teachers at Viper Elementary highlighted progress that they have seen in their students who arrived in their classroom reading below grade level or struggling with new reading material. By going back to the basics of syllables and letter placement, students have caught up in their understanding of how words work, and in their ability to read more complex words and sentences. One Grade 4 teacher shared that she worked with struggling readers on syllable understanding and underlying vowels and witnessed her students' gains over the course of a semester. The teacher explained:

> *At first some of them were just like, 'What? How does this work?' But I really have seen over the semester it start to make a lot more sense and more so clicking for kids who really are struggling with reading. And they can do it on their own now.*

This has also been seen across the district, where administrators reported a steep decline in the number of students with Reading Improvement Plans throughout the year.

Conclusions and Implications

A widespread focus on strengthening early literacy instruction through interrelated and complementary curricula, district- and school-supported PLCs, and intentional development of the teacher leaders' literacy knowledge base through participation in LETRS has led to enhanced understanding of how students learn to read *and* allowed new and struggling readers to make substantial gains in their literacy. School and district level staff highlighted promising practices related to collaboration and peer learning as anchors that supported data-informed decision-

making around literacy instruction and championed the role of classroom teachers in shaping both instruction and ongoing professional learning. The ELA teacher leader at Viper Elementary aptly summarized the benefits that the school is seeing: “I think teacher knowledge is very empowering. If teachers know the science behind what they're doing and why they're doing it, then it's going to be more effective and it's going to help the kids more.”

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