Kentucky Reading Academies: A Case Study of Wingo Elementary School

Site Overview

Wingo Elementary School, one of six elementary schools in the Graves County School District, is located in Western Kentucky. The school serves approximately 400 preK–6 students and maintains a student-to-teacher ratio of 13:1. Wingo Elementary's demographic composition reflects a majority White student body (86%), with smaller proportions of students who identify as Hispanic/Latino (5%), African American (2%), Asian (<1%), or two or more races (5%). Nearly three-quarters of students benefit from free or reduced lunch (73%) (Kentucky Department of Education, n.d.-b).

Kentucky Summative Assessment (KSA) data from the 2023–24 school year show that 60% of students are proficient (38%) or distinguished (22%) in reading. Over the past 3 school years, Wingo increased the number of students scoring in the proficient/distinguished range of the KSA and substantially decreased the percentage of students scoring in the novice range (see page 2 with graphical representation of results).

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.

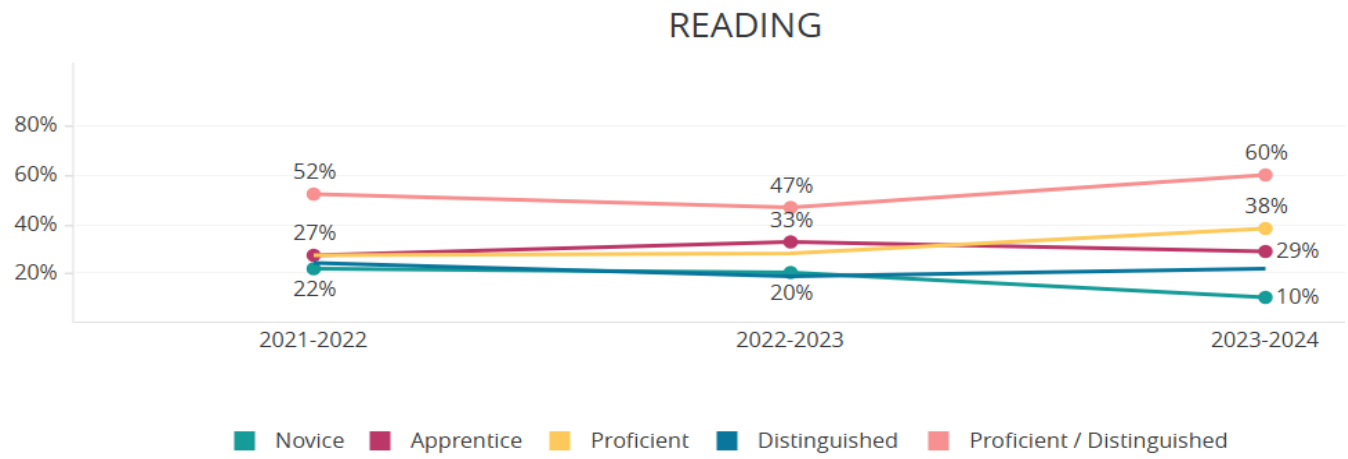
Guiding Questions. The case studies explore contextual factors affecting participation in the reading academies and implementation of evidence-based instructional strategies.

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

- Two focus groups with teachers (2), the school reading interventionist (1), principal (1), assistant principal (1), school reading interventionist (same individual as previous focus group), and district elementary instructional supervisor (1)
- One individual interview with the district elementary instructional supervisor
- 30-minute classroom observation

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.



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

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 the 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). Wingo Elementary uses Amplify's Core Knowledge Language Arts (CKLA) for its HQIR, which is a green-rated Tier I instructional resource for reading, according to EdReports.org. The district additionally chose to use Orton-Gillingham for foundational reading skills, such as vocabulary and morphology. The district continues to use Heggerty Bridge to Reading for topics related to phonemic awareness and phonics. According to the district elementary instructional supervisor, the use of a primary HQIR and the two supplemental instructional resources has enabled the district to best meet their students' literacy learning needs.

This case study included focus groups and interviews with six school and district personnel (see the Background box on page 1 for more details). Collectively, these case study participants had 127 years of experience in education with a range of 12–25 years. The two teachers and the school reading interventionist (referred to as educators in this case study) had been teaching literacy for an average of 18 years.

Findings

The Wingo Elementary case study findings are organized around four areas: LETRS participation, classroom implementation, contextual and community factors, and promising practices.

LETRS Professional Learning Participation

Wingo Elementary School has had 13 educators participate in LETRS for Educators across Cohorts 1 and 2, including eight K–2 educators, three Grades 3–5 educators, a school counselor, and a school reading interventionist. Nine K–6 educators are participating in Cohort 3. All three educators in this case study were part of Cohort 1. The principal, assistant principal, and district elementary instructional supervisor have or are currently participating in LETRS for Administrators. Graves County School District used a phased and strategic approach to getting its teachers and administrators trained in LETRS, as discussed further in this case study.

The overall experience with the LETRS professional learning varied among participants. Two of the educators who participated in LETRS for Educators found the professional learning challenging due to their busy school and personal schedules. They appreciated the valuable information but wanted more time to explore it in depth, especially the first unit. One educator found the pacing fine and was able to manage the professional learning alongside other activities.

One school administrator described LETRS for Administrators as eye-opening, especially since they didn't have a literacy background. Both school administrators said LETRS for Administrators helped them understand the systematic approach to teaching reading, which improved their ability to recognize good instruction and why certain teaching practices were used and how to improve them.

> *"LETRS has really helped me … recognize good primary instruction, whereas before I knew good teaching, but I didn't know if they were teaching the right things."*
>
> – School administrator

At the district level, staff described a culture of learning, which served as the foundation for their LETRS professional learning. The district administrator reported that the professional learning resulted in teachers' changes in mindset within the district. They realized that they could let go of some previous literacy practices that were not evidence-based, while continuing with those that were. They perceived that LETRS was not an additional stand-alone professional learning that needed to be implemented; rather, they came to realize that it could be layered on what they were already doing.

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.

Changes occurring in educators' knowledge and instruction

The overall preparedness of participants to implement LETRS varied amongst the three educators included in this study. One educator reported feeling very prepared to implement LETRS strategies into their classroom practice and noted that the professional learning made them more intentional in their teaching, helping them anticipate and address potential obstacles for their students. Another educator who was teaching Grade 6 initially struggled to implement the foundational aspects of the professional learning, which are more targeted to lower grades, but found it easier to apply the reading comprehension components in the classroom. She is currently teaching Grades 3 and 4 and has found more success in implementing those foundational elements that are more relevant to the lower grades.

One educator who had been teaching for more than 20 years reflected on her experience in LETRS, saying, "I think I can speak for all of us. We were taught balanced literacy in college, and we weren't taught how the brain learns to read, and we weren't taught these strategies and skill bases that we've learned in LETRS. It was like a whole new experience. I wished I had learned this 23 years ago." A second educator who taught first grade also expressed a desire to have more time spent on Unit 1, which explores the challenges of learning to read and how the brain processes spoken and written language, and echoed the desire to have had similar professional learning while still in college.

Educators participating in LETRS Cohort 1 reported several changes in their literacy knowledge and instruction. The educators reported using graphic organizers and focusing on morphology and vocabulary, particularly Tier 3 words (low-frequency words that are often technical or specialized), to provide direct instruction. Additionally, building background knowledge and schema received an increased instructional emphasis because of LETRS, with activities designed to help students recognize and utilize their existing knowledge. Educators reported that the LETRS professional learning emphasized the importance of terminology and the mechanics of speech in literacy instruction, which they found valuable. One educator found it fascinating to learn about the specific ways the mouth needs to be positioned for certain sounds, as their previous focus was on comprehension. A second educator who previously taught upper elementary, noted that understanding the speech part of reading instruction was a revelation for them, especially when dealing with students who had trouble with certain sounds.

> *"At the beginning of the year we talk about schema and we talk about all the things that might already be there that they [students] don't realize. And we continue to talk about that throughout the year, just making sure they have that background."*
>
> – Educator

Case study participants also highlighted the ways in which their district HQIR and supplemental curriculum align with concepts they learned through LETRS. For example, administrators and educators both noted that their district HQIR, Amplify CKLA, supports direct instruction in phonemic awareness and phonological awareness and also includes the use of consistent hand motions in this instruction, which mirrors strategies taught in LETRS. Additionally, phonics instruction through Orton-Gillingham was reported to be fine-tuned to further address specific foundational skills where students are weak.

Administrators perceive a quick implementation

According to the school administrators, the educators at Wingo Elementary School were able to begin implementing what they learned from LETRS almost immediately. The district administrator noted that this was possible because they had already been doing many things correctly, which allowed for easy implementation with only minor shifts. For example, teachers were already familiar with concepts such as phonemic awareness and phonics, which helped them implement quickly. One administrator provided a specific example, "I think in third through sixth grade, it [LETRS professional learning] solidified [that] we needed to work on vocabulary. I think we always knew we needed to work on vocabulary, I think our kids needed more vocabulary. But I think seeing the importance and why we need to do it and breaking words apart to help us learn other words and larger words, I think our [Grades] 3 through 6 teachers really bought in with that." Of note, after identifying vocabulary as a specific area of need, administrators launched a districtwide focus on systematic morphology instruction for Grades 3–6. The district is supporting morphology training beyond that included in LETRS.

> *"Because we did so many things correct before, we were able to implement it so fast. While it was a mind shift of, 'We don't need to do this, we need to do this.' "*
>
> – District administrator

Both school and district administrators spoke about their deliberate phased implementation approach in which they selected specific educators to participate in sequential LETRS® cohorts

and how that supported implementation. The principal noted that picking strong teachers to start the professional learning facilitated natural conversations and eagerness among other teachers to learn and implement the professional learning. The assistant principal highlighted the importance of sharing practices by grade level during district half-day meetings, which made the professional learning more effective.

Contextual and Community Factors

This section provides an in-depth look at the various supports and collaboration efforts in place to enhance teachers' implementation of LETRS in the classroom at both the district and school levels. Also included is a description of how data are used to make instructional decisions and the adoption of HQIRs and how the selected HQIRs align to LETRS.

District and School Provided Implementation Supports for Successful Implementation. At the **district level**, there are several supports in place for teachers participating in LETRS. The district provides stipends for teachers to compensate for the time commitment involved in the LETRS professional learning; covers the costs of substitutes for the half-day sessions; and has provided classroom materials, such as the sound walls; and additional training on morphology, identified as a need through LETR professional learning. Following each unit of LETRS, participating teachers across the district are brought together for half a day to discuss their learning and its alignment with current practices. During these sessions, teachers share their challenges, and notes from these sessions are later discussed with administrators who then determine how to support and alleviate these struggles both at the building level and districtwide. This is in alignment with the broader district emphasis of listening to teachers and those directly implementing new programs or strategies when making decisions about those programs.

At the **school level**, supports include reading interventionists or reading coaches who provide coaching and encouragement to all teachers. The district also has coaches they have hired to assist teachers and provide additional literacy instructional support at the school level.

Collaboration and Sharing Practices Enables Continuous Improvement. LETRS participants have several ongoing opportunities within the school to share their learnings and collaborate with others in both structured and informal ways. Wingo Elementary School has formal weekly professional learning communities (PLCs) where all teachers discuss classroom activities, what is working and what is not, and examine data. The administrators mentioned how important the school-level PLCs and district half-day sessions for LETRS participants are for developing a common language amongst the teachers and developing consistencies in implementation of LETRS strategies across classrooms.

All Wingo Elementary teachers also participate in monthly meetings after school where they share ideas and discuss classroom activities. Because the teachers follow a standards pacing guide, they are at similar points of instruction, which enables collaboration opportunities for enhancing literacy instruction. Although these monthly meetings are not specific to LETRS implementation, they have held targeted sessions this year that focus on the district's emphasis on morphology. One educator explained, "This year we've included the morphology piece too, just because that is new to us and so we've been able to share how we do the three-part drill or all the things that we are doing with our kids." Additionally, there are building-level reading meetings for reading teachers, where best practices are shared among teachers, allowing those who have received LETRS professional learning to highlight new strategies or techniques that they have learned or

implemented. There are also monthly reading intervention meetings, where reading interventionists from across schools in the district come together to share ideas and bring them back to their respective schools, again allowing approaches and strategies from LETRS to circulate more broadly across educators.

Data are Used to Monitor Progress. Wingo Elementary School places a strong emphasis on data, regularly monitoring and discussing data from curriculum-based measures, and monitoring progress weekly during school PLCs. The school is currently in a pilot with Orton-Gillingham, where their data are being audited to ensure proper implementation and to identify areas for improvement.

A school administrator shared that they have used formative literacy data to make informed decisions about specific areas of need. The principal explained, "I think the biggest thing that has changed [since going through LETRS] is our ability to identify a student and say, 'Okay, this is why this student's struggling. This is the component that they're missing.' It's not that they just can't read, it's because they can't do this or they're missing this piece of it. That has really helped the component breakdown of the process of reading."

HQIR Selected that Aligns with LETRS. Graves County School District selected their HQIR following Cohort 1's completion of the program. Both administrators and educators shared that they were seeking an HQIR that was aligned to LETRS and also wanted to address needs related to vocabulary and morphology. A literacy HQIR team was formed at the district-level that included administrators as well as experienced LETRS-trained teachers to review and make recommendations about the adoption of literacy instructional resources. LETRS provided the teachers who served on the team with the background knowledge needed to identify HQIRs that supported evidence-based reading instruction. District staff said that having experienced literacy teachers on the HQIR team who were "doing it all day, every day" ensured that the selected HQIR was well-supported and aligned with the district's educational goals. The team chose Amplify CKLA as their core HQIR and Orton-Gillingham as a supplemental resource for foundational skills across all tiers. They also use Heggerty's Bridge to Reading to supplement their lessons. The district elementary instructional supervisor shared that having three literacy instructional resources has enabled them to have a "systematic approach to attack all of our primary reading instruction."

> *"I think we selected our HQIR to intentionally align with what we're doing with LETRS … . When we looked at multiple HQIRs, we were very intentional on saying, 'Is this based on the science of reading or is this something else?' "*
>
> – School administrator

Promising Practices

Wingo Elementary School's approach to LETRS participation and implementation demonstrates several promising practices that could be copied or adapted by other schools across Kentucky to leverage the learnings from LETRS and strengthen teacher voice in shaping literacy instruction.

Graves County School District's Approach to Getting Teachers and Administrators Trained in LETRS Involved a Strategic and Phased Plan. Initially, Wingo Elementary School hand-selected strong teachers to participate in the first cohort of LETRS without fully knowing what to expect. When these teachers reported positive experiences, the district expanded the availability of LETRS professional learning to include all K–2 teachers, special education teachers, and English learner

teachers over a 3-year period. This approach has allowed Graves County School District to utilize the professional learning provided by KDE and gradually build internal capacity to continue professional learning for new teachers even after the state's offering of LETRS ends.

Graves County School District is Intentional When Selecting New Programs and Determining Professional Learning needs. Teachers were an integral part of reviewing and recommending the literacy HQIR. Furthermore, data were used to determine student learning gaps and additional professional learning needs in areas such as vocabulary and morphology. Data are continually monitored to assess implementation and student progress.

Graves County School District and Wingo Elementary School Leveraged Human and Monetary Resources to Support the Successful Implementation of LETRS. Each month, LETRS-trained teachers and school reading interventionists across the district are brought together for a half day to discuss instructional alignment with LETRS and the HQIR and share what's working and what's not. The district administrators then consolidate this feedback and ensure that everyone is on the same page by rolling out necessary changes in the schools. At the school level, supports include reading interventionists or reading coaches who provide coaching and encouragement to teachers.

Graves County School District and Wingo Elementary Actively Promote Collaboration and Teacher Learning. In addition to the monthly half-day districtwide debriefs, weekly school-level PLCs emphasize teacher-driven change and adjustments. These structures provide a forum for collaboration and educator growth. Central to the district and school are having a growth mindset and continually learning.

Success Stories

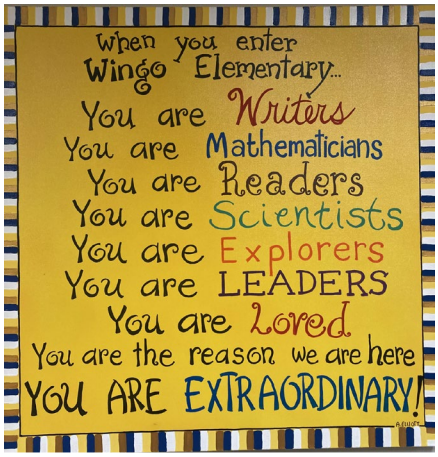
Wingo Elementary School shared notable successes, shared by educators and administrators, as a result of their participation in LETRS and implementation of their HQIR.

Wingo Elementary School has Observed Changes in New Teacher Confidence. School administration highlighted the impact of LETRS on new teacher confidence. One school administrator stated, “I think the confidence of new teachers would be a success story, now that we're in Cohort 3 where we're getting some of our less experienced teachers trained. I think that's a huge success because it is difficult to teach a kid how to read if you don't understand the approach that you're supposed to take.”

Individual Student Growth Contributes to Stronger Literacy Across Wingo Elementary School. Both educators and school administrators pointed to successes they have observed from LETRS implementation. A notable example of student progress was shared by a teacher who said, "I had a student at the beginning of the year, I was like, 'She's going to be in first grade *again* next year.' And [now] she's skyrocketing.”

A school administrator added, "My proficiency rate has gone up consistently since the LETRS training, that's a definite. I'm hesitant to use KSA as a litmus test, but our KSA data has increased.” They also emphasized the importance of ongoing professional development, saying, "Let's learn this, let's implement it, let's reflect on it, and let's learn something else. And I think that approach with LETRS is really smart.”

Conclusions and Implications



[Pictured above]: A poster with affirmations greeting students at Wingo Elementary

At Wingo Elementary School, the LETRS professional learning has proven to be beneficial for teachers and administrators. All participants agreed that the professional learning, while time-consuming, was in-depth and ultimately worth the effort, and they were grateful for the state's and district's support. They particularly highlighted benefits of state and district support in enabling all K–2 teachers, special education teachers, and English language teachers across the district to be LETRS trained as well as administrators and teachers at other grade levels. Wingo Elementary School's principal emphasized the importance of starting with teachers, whose enthusiasm and expertise naturally encouraged others to participate. The district's elementary instructional supervisor highlighted the significance of maintaining a growth mindset and always striving to improve and learn for the benefit of the students. This mindset is a core strength of Wingo Elementary School, driving its commitment to excellence. One administrator summed up their sentiments: "Our kids deserve that, and we're not going to stop learning for them."

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). *Wingo Elementary School report card*. https://reportcard.kyschools.us/kysrc?organization=20232024:205:205200