



READY FOR READING

TENNESSEE NETWORK OF SCHOOLS TACKLES THE LITERACY CRISIS

BY SHARON ROBERTS

Across the U.S., educators face a common challenge: How can we help all students become strong readers and writers?

The 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also called the Nation's Report Card, showed that there is no state where the majority of 4th grade students are proficient in reading, and only eight jurisdictions have at least 40%

of students reaching proficiency (The Nation's Report Card, 2019a).

In my state of Tennessee, many educators believe we have a reading crisis. Two-thirds of 3rd graders do not read and write on grade level as measured by our statewide assessment (Tennessee Department of Education, 2019a). That figure is in line with the NAEP results showing that only 35% of our 4th graders are proficient in reading, a figure that has barely budged since 2013 (The Nation's Report Card, 2019b).

The disappointing data on reading led district leaders in the Leading Innovation for Tennessee Education (LIFT) network to address the persistent literacy challenge. LIFT is a group of committed superintendents from across Tennessee working together to explore innovative approaches and share best practices that will benefit their students, as well as students across the state and nation. The leaders in LIFT represent a wide range of school settings, from large urban schools to small rural ones.

Four years ago, LIFT began focusing collectively on improving literacy outcomes for students through implementation of high-quality instructional materials grounded in the science of reading and designed to build student knowledge. These materials, supported by aligned professional learning, enable quality implementation.

My organization, the State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE), convenes the LIFT network and coordinates technical assistance and professional learning. This collaborative effort has illuminated the early literacy challenges that nearly all schools face in boosting reading and writing, but it has also shown that working on a common problem of practice with high-quality materials and support works, and it has provided a model for other districts.

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

When LIFT began its work in literacy, SCORE arranged for TNTP, a national nonprofit focused on supporting states and districts to end educational inequities, to provide technical assistance to the districts. Early on, TNTP conducted knowledge-building sessions about early literacy for staff in the LIFT districts and visited more than 200 K-2 English language arts classrooms. A common theme emerged: English language arts instruction did not consistently provide students with opportunities to engage with grade-level texts or master grade-level standards.

Guided by the results of the

TNTP review, the LIFT network set a coherent vision for the work: Use strong instructional materials aligned to Tennessee’s academic standards to drive significant improvements in classroom instruction and student performance. The districts that participated chose curriculum that earned top scores in reviews by EdReports.org — most of which was available open source.

LIFT leaders made a critical decision early in their literacy work. They recognized the need for professional learning and capacity building and determined that there had to be distributed leadership to form a vertical spine of support for implementing rigorous instructional materials throughout the districts. The spine extended from district leadership through strategy leads, often elementary or curriculum supervisors, instructional coaches, and school leaders who engaged in the network to build their own understanding and share implementation strategies.

These educators then passed on their learning to teacher leaders in their districts. The teacher leaders completed the vertical spine by working closely with their peers to share their learning and provide mentorship as needed. The result of this aligned approach was to ensure a consistent focus on using high-quality curriculum as the foundation for improving student outcomes in literacy and consistent messages to all early grades literacy teachers.

LIFT leaders recognized that a “one-and-done” approach to professional learning would be

RESOURCES FROM LIFT

The LIFT Network website (lifteducationtn.com) includes materials to help educators further early literacy work in their schools and districts.

REPORTS

- *The Science of Reading*: This report lays out misconceptions about reading instruction, shares critical research headlines to inform decisions, and offers suggestions to end the reading crisis.
- Annual reports: Three reports summarize the results and lessons learned from the LIFT literacy projects.

TOOLS AND RESOURCES

- *Instructional Materials Implementation Guidebook*.
- *Instructional Practice Guide: K-5 Literacy*.
- *Text Quality Criteria and Text Complexity Qualitative Measures Rubrics* for fiction and nonfiction texts.

insufficient for supporting teachers to make the shift to building foundational skills in a systematic way and using high-quality instructional materials well. At all levels — from the strategy leads to current teachers to local teacher candidates — an ongoing and comprehensive approach was needed because the science of reading was unfinished learning.

For example, teachers needed more knowledge about using the curriculum because their educator preparation programs had primarily emphasized how to create their own lessons and offered minimal instruction in how to do the deep intellectual preparation needed to deliver a high-quality lesson from an existing curriculum.

To address these situations, the LIFT network ensured that professional learning was embedded and ongoing, both within schools and across the districts. TNTP supported each district's comprehensive literacy strategy by working with the district team, school leaders, and teachers as appropriate for the district's plan.

TNTP also collected ongoing implementation data by district and across the network. Three times a year, the network came together to examine the data, identify areas of focus and refinement, and learn together. Between on-site visits and network meetings, principals and district leaders engaged in systematic instructional reviews that emphasized the academic standards and used the instructional materials to help students meet grade-level expectations.

GAINS FOR STUDENTS

The results from this work have been impressive for students. By the end of the first year of implementation, instructional reviews conducted by TNTP showed evidence that lessons aligned to grade-level expectations had increased quickly and significantly.

Whereas only 10% of literacy classrooms showed some or full alignment to Tennessee's English language arts standards in the diagnostic review, one year later was a different picture: A third of literacy classrooms were showing alignment, eight in 10 teachers were feeling more supported, and nine in 10 teachers thought the LIFT literacy approach was benefiting their students (LIFT Education, 2017). Two years after the initial review, 63% of assignments demonstrated strong or excellent alignment to standards (LIFT Education, 2018).

In 2019, improvements on Tennessee's statewide assessment demonstrated the impact of LIFT's literacy work on students at the critical 3rd grade juncture (LIFT Education, 2019):

- One-third of the original LIFT districts increased the number of 3rd graders who are proficient in English language arts by more than 10 percentage points.
- Seven out of nine original LIFT districts were designated as advancing or exemplary districts — the two highest categories in Tennessee's district accountability model.
- Twenty elementary schools from across the LIFT network were named by the state as reward schools, with four of those schools moving from the state's lowest value-added growth measure in 2017-18 to the state's top level in 2018-19.

We also saw a change in teachers' expectations for students. A TNTP teacher survey found that, at the beginning of the 2018-19 school year, half of teachers expected their students to meet the Tennessee literacy standards. At the end of that school year, almost two-thirds of teachers, 62%, expected their students to meet the literacy standards. Nationally, the figure is 44% (LIFT Education, 2019).

The literacy performance of some historically underserved students may have contributed to teachers raising their expectations. In one LIFT district with a largely rural and economically disadvantaged student population, students met or exceeded growth expectations at each of its 11 elementary schools.

Another district with the state's largest proportion of English learner students saw 3rd grade English learners post a 10-point proficiency gain over three years. Additionally, students of color in LIFT districts made greater gains than students of color in the rest of the state (SCORE, 2020c).

SHARING AND SCALING

With proof that building foundational skills with systematic instruction and building student knowledge with high-quality instructional materials is a winning formula for students, the network's leaders and SCORE are scaling up and spreading what we have learned.

It is an opportune time because Tennessee districts will be adopting new English language arts textbooks in spring 2020. LIFT members have been serving on statewide committees developing the state-approved curriculum list (Tennessee Department of Education, 2019b), and the selections available to school districts include some that are top-rated by EdReports.org.

The LIFT work is elevating the importance of selecting and implementing high-quality instructional materials as crucial to supporting all students to becoming strong readers and writers. Additionally, LIFT has demonstrated the critical role of professional learning in supporting teachers to make needed shifts in instructional practice.

LIFT district leaders, school leaders, and teachers have shared their experiences at statewide conferences and regional meetings, and they have met with state legislators and local policymakers to help build their understanding of the importance of the science of reading and high-quality instructional materials.

As of February 2020, LIFT districts have hosted more than 45 Tennessee districts, one-third of the non-LIFT districts in the state, for visits to view their literacy efforts. Leaders across the network have shared their implementation stories through blogs and articles, and the network was mentioned in the epilogue of Natalie Wexler's book, *The Knowledge Gap*.

They also have used social media to raise educator awareness of the LIFT work and the positive outcomes for their students.

SCORE has supported efforts to

share the learnings from the LIFT network. I visited with more than 50 district leaders from across the state to share what we've learned, such as the importance of high-quality instructional materials and aligned support for teachers and leaders. In those meetings, I shared reports and resources that have been generated through our work with LIFT, including one titled *The Science of Reading* (SCORE, 2020b).

In our annual State of Education report, SCORE prioritized addressing Tennessee's literacy crisis, calling for urgent action to improve early literacy with a focus on the state textbook adoption opportunity, educating future teachers, and supporting current teachers to learn about instructional practices grounded in the science of reading (SCORE, 2020a).

SCORE also is convening a spring Early Literacy Summit for more than 400 educators, advocates, and parents and issuing policy and practice recommendations called *Urgency for Literacy: How Tennessee Can Deliver Student Reading Success* (SCORE, 2020c).

One of the most powerful lessons from the LIFT literacy work has been the recognition that when we know better, we must do better. Our students need us to make changes that will improve their chances of learning to read well by the 3rd grade. In Tennessee, we are beginning to do just that.

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How do I know my students are learning?

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to experience what formative assessment looked, felt, and sounded like.

They concluded that it supported their learning. They experimented with it in their classrooms, and their students came to the same conclusion. Participants recognized this connection. As one said, "Learning-centered isn't just about the students learning. It's about us learning, too."

After only one year, this team of accomplished veteran teachers had come to understand what had evaded them for years of traditional, teacher-centered instruction: Teaching and assessing are not separate. They should constantly work as one.

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