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## Improving Reading Skills for Early Elementary Students

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**Improving Reading Skills for Early Elementary Students**

Kayla Bucheit

Capstone Project: A School Improvement Plan

Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa

### Abstract

Research findings have indicated areas for improvement in early literacy programs in schools, and schools have been slow to respond, leaving students and teachers unsupported in the methods and knowledge needed for students to become fluent readers. Past studies have pointed to the need for teachers to have content knowledge of explicit instructional practices that focus on phonological and phonemic awareness. When students can manipulate sounds and letters, they are better able to decode and segment words, resulting in reading fluency. Using research findings, this school improvement plan was created to outline how to transition to explicit instructional methods while supporting the needs of teachers and students. This plan aims to increase oral reading fluency to improve literacy scores.

*Keywords:* phonological awareness, phonics instruction, professional development, response to intervention, blended learning models, mentoring and coaching

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**Improving Reading Skills for Early Elementary Students**

As children progress through their school years, the literacy skills they need to master become increasingly more complicated. By the time these students graduate from high school, the expectation is that they will be able to independently comprehend, evaluate, and analyze complex texts from a wide range of topics, purposes, and genres, all while conveying their thoughts and connections to diverse perspectives fluently through multiple mediums (Iowa Department of Education, n.d.). The skills needed to accomplish these tasks start at an early age with the ability to name letters and provide their sounds (Ehri & Flugman, 2018), leading to phonological awareness and the ability to transform sounds into words consisting of onsets, rimes, and syllables (Sargiani et al., 2022). The problem is that many students struggle to develop these skills, becoming struggling readers in later grades.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) noted in their most recent 2022 report a drop in fourth- and eighth-grade reading scores from 2019 (NAEP, 2022). With no significant increase since 1992, combined with 43% of fourth-grade teachers reporting being only somewhat confident in their ability to fill and address learning gaps (NAEP, 2022), this report is indicative of the need to increase teacher knowledge of phonological awareness to increase student ability to identify and manipulate letter sounds.

This school improvement plan outlines steps needed to create an early literacy program focusing on high-quality instructional practices based on current research that increases proficiency levels for oral reading fluency and phonological awareness skills in early elementary grades. With relevant and timely professional development focusing on explicit teaching in phonemic awareness, the intention is that this plan will increase teacher knowledge about how students learn to read. The author's goal is that coaching and mentoring with experienced,

trained teachers in the science of reading will improve teaching practices, positively impacting FastBridge aReading, Early Reading, and CBM-Reading scores in the early elementary grades.

This literature review was researched using Google Scholar and the resources available through DeWitt Library through Northwestern College. All scholarly articles used in this literature review were published within the last ten years and are peer-reviewed. The author's primary focus of the search was centered around the impact of various interventions to increase early childhood reading skills, as this is the intent of this school improvement plan. The scope of research included phonological awareness, phonemic awareness, blended learning, and professional development, including mentoring and coaching.

The author believes that three interventions have been indicated in the research to improve the reading skills of early elementary students. These areas include explicit teaching, professional development, mentoring and coaching, and a blended learning model. The belief is that through timely and relevant professional development and training in the science of reading, combined with collaboration between teachers and mentors, instruction will shift to include explicit and structured evidence-based practices that reflect current research. With this concentrated effort by teachers and staff, student ability to decode words into segments and syllables will increase, resulting in increased proficiency levels in oral fluency scores on FastBridge.

The literature review is organized according to key themes that emerged when conducting research. The literature review will begin with professional development, highlighting the importance of increasing teacher content knowledge on phonological awareness and best practices regarding beginning reading skills. This section will include the importance and impact of experienced teachers acting as mentors. Next, the literature review will investigate

what instruction works to teach early readers how to read, including what current research states about the science of reading. Finally, the literature review will focus on blended learning models, including the impact of specific programs and how to best implement computer-based interventions to supplement the core curriculum.

### **Review of the Literature**

#### **Professional Development through Teacher Mentors and Coaching**

Many schools rely on professional development to help teachers best teach their students. Research has been conducted on the best format to best support teachers. Piasta et al. (2020) studied the effects of large-scale professional development on early literacy skills. This study took place over five years and followed participants who were preschool and kindergarten teachers in the Midwest. Participants were split into three groups, with one receiving thirty hours of professional development centered around literacy skills and teaching practices in a workshop format with ongoing individualized coaching sessions, a second group receiving the same workshop professional development sessions but without the coaching sessions, and a control group who received professional development in all subject areas. Researchers found that the quality of phonological awareness instruction was higher in those classrooms of the teachers who received the professional development in the workshop model. However, student data did not indicate a significant difference in student scores, which could be tied to the fact that less than 20% of teachers received the recommended forty-eight hours of coaching. The findings of Piasta et al. (2020) suggest that instructional practices increase with professional development presented in a workshop model that focuses directly on early literacy skills.

The impact of mentoring and coaching on instructional skills and phonological awareness was also studied by Cunningham et al. (2015). The researchers followed nineteen preschool



teachers who participated in a teacher's study group over three years. Teachers who were members of these groups met twice a month for two-hour sessions. These sessions focused on presenting, practicing, and reviewing content related to phonological awareness. The study groups focused on professional development in phonological awareness and the shifting of instructional practices to reflect the knowledge gained regarding student development in phonological skills.

Cunningham et al. (2015) found that teacher content knowledge in phonological awareness rose from 37% to 68% with teachers being able to answer more than half of questions correctly on an assessment of their knowledge of PA (phonological awareness) skills. Most growth was seen in teachers' understanding and ability to identify onsets and rimes, growing from 15% to 73% of successful teachers in this skill. Teachers recognized that explicit instruction is needed in these skill areas, which follows the current research on the science of reading. One hundred and one preschool students were assessed with a pre-test and a post-test on PA. Before the intervention, 50% of students performed below the expected mean. Only 31.7% of students performed below the expected mean on the post-assessment. Like the findings of Piasta et al. (2020), work by Cunningham et al. (2015) suggests that mentoring and coaching with other more experienced teachers increases teachers' content knowledge and their ability to teach explicitly, increasing student performance in areas of early literacy.

Ehri and Flugman (2018) also explored the effects of mentoring on teachers' ability to teach phonics and the impact on student achievement data. Like Piasta et al. (2020), the participants of this study received mentoring along with professional development in phonics, specifically in the area of Orton-Gillingham's methods of teaching early literacy skills.

Background questionnaires discovered that teachers had limited knowledge about what methods

work best for students to increase their phonemic awareness and ended the study with more extensive knowledge and comfort level teaching these methods. The researchers also looked at student assessment data. Whereas gains were present in all grade levels, kindergarten through third, the most significant gains were indicated in kindergarten and first grade. Ehri and Flugman (2018) repeated this study and found similar results. Like Piasta et al. (2020), these findings suggest that professional development with explicit teaching methods and mentoring increases teacher competency. Where Piasta et al. (2020) showed inconclusive results with mentoring, Ehri and Flugman (2018) are in agreement with Cunningham et al. (2015) that mentoring along with professional development also increases early literacy skills in early elementary students.

Thoma (2021) studied the impact of professional development on response to intervention (RTI) and instructional practices that support this framework. This study followed elementary teachers in a Midwest school district over three years. Intervention materials presented in professional development were gradually introduced, starting with kindergarten and first grade in the first year, followed by grades two and three, and finally with grades four through six in the last year of the study. FAST screening data and diagnostic screeners that assessed phonological and phonemic awareness were used to assess student ability. Like Piasta et al. (2020), low fidelity scores were present in implementing interventions. Only half the teachers provided thirty or more minutes of weekly intervention time. Student scores did increase, with most classrooms being above the desired proficiency levels. However, it has yet to be decided if this result was due to the professional development regarding response to interventions. The findings of Thoma (2021) suggest that teachers have low fidelity with implementing practices presented in professional development alone and that student assessment data may not improve. When combined with mentoring with fidelity, professional development has the potential to raise

student reading skills (Cunningham et al., 2015; Ehri & Flugman, 2018; Piasta et al., 2020; Thoma, 2021).

### **Phonological and Phonemic Awareness**

The National Reading Panel (2000) concluded that there is a need for explicit instruction in phonological awareness for students to become proficient, fluent readers. Many researchers have studied how to best teach phonological and phonemic awareness. Becker and Sylvan (2021) researched the effect of combining explicit phonemic awareness instruction with the collaboration of speech-language pathologists. Participants of this study included preschool settings within a private school setting. Instruction by a speech-language pathologist using letter cards and mouth pictures was embedded into the regular curriculum by the classroom teacher. Becker and Sylvan (2021) found that seeing the letter, hearing its sound, and seeing how the mouth should look while saying the given letter positively affected early reading skills. Mean student scores rose significantly in segmentation, reading phonemically spelled words, and nonsense words. The findings of Becker and Sylvan (2021) suggest that work with a speech-language pathologist should be explored in a whole-group instructional practice rather than used as a small-group intervention.

Sargiani et al. (2022) studied the importance of segmenting words. Participants, consisting of thirty boys and girls between the ages of five and seven years, made up three groups: the first group was taught to decode with whole sounds; the second group focused on grapheme-phoneme subunits when decoding; the third group was taught individual grapheme-phonemes but were not taught to use them to segment into syllables. Based on posttests on numerous early literacy skills and progress monitoring throughout instruction, Sargiani et al. (2022) discovered that the group taught grapheme-phoneme subunits to decode showed more

significant gains across all assessments than the other groups. Like Becker and Sylvan (2021), the findings of Sargiani et al. (2022) indicate the importance of combining graphemes and phonemes along with explicit instruction when segmenting and decoding words.

Researchers Bradley and Noelle (2018) were also interested in the best ways to have students gain phonemic awareness. The study involved four students who received one-to-one sessions and were monitored on their ability to read nonsense words accurately. Constant-time delay and what kind and amount of feedback was needed to motivate early readers were the foci of this study. Baseline data showed a range of zero to two words read correctly at the beginning of the study, raising to a max of twelve words on post-assessment data. It was found that the students who received accuracy feedback combined with praise were the most effective, resulting in the most nonsense words read correctly. The findings of Bradley and Noelle (2018) suggest that feedback as part of explicit instruction is a highly effective motivating factor to increase early reading skills.

Paige et al. (2018) investigated increasing phonological awareness in reading and spelling. The study looked at the relationship between letter identification, phonological awareness, and spelling while looking at the data from 2,100 kindergarten students. Assessments focused on student ability to provide letter names, give letter sounds, and decode and segment to spell words correctly. These assessments were given in the second half of the school year, from December to May. The Kindergarten Inventory of Developmental Spelling assessment was given where teachers modeled how to segment words, expecting students to use this strategy when spelling words. Data showed that while letter naming increased throughout the year, faster growth was present by December, slowing down as the year progressed. Phonological awareness increased slowly at the beginning of the year and emerged quickly by May. Spelling knowledge

started increasing mid-winter, February, and continued through May. These findings of Paige et al. (2018) suggest that phonological awareness builds from letter naming and leads to higher spelling knowledge. Modeling of segmentation with phonemes and graphemes was provided during one of the assessments, with positive results that support the findings of Sargiani et al. (2022). Explicit teaching consisting of both auditory and visual cues, paired with accuracy feedback and praise, can increase student phonological and phonemic awareness, increasing the ability to read and spell words (Becker & Sylvan, 2021; Bradley & Noelle, 2018; Paige et al., 2018; Sargiani et al., 2022).

### **Response to Interventions and the Science of Reading**

Researcher Van Norman (2021) investigated the impact of adjusting goal lines in CBM-Reading, a widely used progress monitoring tool for oral fluency. This study followed 391 third graders who were at risk according to the CBM-R screener for FastBridge. Along with being progress monitored, participants received twenty-minute one-to-one sessions consisting of strategies to work on oral fluency and comprehension. The data collected showed that many of these students' growth was non-linear, showing more growth in the fall-to-winter timeframe and then slowing down from winter to spring. The findings of Van Norman (2021) suggest that when using CBM-R progress monitoring as an RTI tool, nonlinear goal lines in the form of shorter goal lines from fall to winter would better allow for matching appropriate strategies to allow for more student growth.

In connection to Van Norman (2021), Van Norman et al. (2018) was interested in comparing growth in nonsense word fluency versus CBM-Reading fluency progress monitoring. These progress monitoring tools are available through FastBridge and are widely used in early elementary classrooms. Participants of this study were three thousand first-grade students who

scored below the proficiency benchmark on Fast testing collected in the winter testing window. These students received twenty-minute one-to-one sessions to work on oral fluency. Van Norman et al. (2018) discovered that although the two progress monitoring tools assess different things, both are acceptable tools for progress monitoring first graders. Nonsense word fluency should be used when students need to work on phonological skills, and CBM-R is best used when working on reading proficiency, allowing students to be on track for later grades. The findings of Van Norman et al. (2018) and Van Norman (2021) suggest that student data needs to be analyzed deeply to best match the intervention and progress monitoring tool to the student needs in an RTI framework.

Like Van Norman et al. (2018) and Van Norman (2021), Wanzek et al. (2018) also studied the effects of interventions in the RTI framework, studying the effects of group size, grade level, small group, or individualized on student early reading ability. The study analyzed the findings of twenty-five studies published between 2006 and 2015 and focused on students in grades kindergarten through third. After the meta-analysis, researchers found that one-to-one interventions were more effective than small groups of two to eight students. Frequency was determined to be more important than length in time, with more sessions showing more impact than fewer but longer sessions. Standardizing materials that allowed for explicit instruction were the most effective of all other factors. The findings of Wanzek et al. (2018) suggest that explicit instruction needs to be present within the RTI framework at all levels, agreeing with the research of Becker and Sylvan (2021), Bradley and Noelle (2018), Paige et al. (2018), and Sargiani et al. (2022).

Like Wanzek et al. (2018), Stevens et al. (2017) were also interested in the conditions of interventions that proved to be the most effective. In the meta-analysis of nineteen studies

published between 2001 and 2014, repeated reading intervention was studied with various conditions: repeated reading with no model, repeated reading with a model, and repeated reading with error corrections. While it was found that repeated reading with an adult reader to model was the preferable method, it was found that repeated reading with a more proficient peer or a technology-based reader was effective as well. Regardless of the model reader used, students were more accurate with error correction and when they were unaware of being timed. The findings of Stevens et al. (2017) suggest that repeated reading can be used as an acceptable intervention method when progress monitoring students are identified as at risk. These findings align with Waznek et al. (2018) and identify the need for standardized interventions.

Stevens et al. (2021) investigated the effects of the Orton-Gillingham approach of interventions for students who were identified to be at risk. This study analyzed twenty-four studies published before March 2019 that collected data on kindergarten through twelfth-grade students who had been identified with reading disabilities or dyslexia. With the data collected in foundation skills and vocabulary and comprehension, there was no real significant growth for those students who received Orton-Gillingham style interventions. The findings of Stevens et al. (2021) suggest a need for more evidence that Orton-Gillingham and the science of reading interventions have a long-term effect on students' reading abilities. These findings oppose the findings of previous researchers who have found that explicit, structured instruction does allow for student gains in reading abilities (Becker & Sylvan, 2021; Bradley & Noelle, 2018; Paige et al., 2018; Sargiani et al., 2022; Waznek et al., 2018).

Brown et al. (2021) also studied the effects of the Orton-Gillingham instruction approach. The study focused on the science of reading and the extent to which this method is evident in commonly used curriculums in the state of Utah. This case study collected and analyzed core

curriculum and supplemental materials. It was found that 85% of Utah kindergarteners used one or two programs, and both curriculums strongly focused on phonological awareness tasks. However, both programs exposed students to skills too early in the school year. Advanced tasks were introduced too quickly in the year before students were developmentally ready. Also, the curriculums averaged on asking students to complete nine different styles of tasks at one time, tasks used as segmenting, deletion, or substitution. Research of Orton-Gillingham's approach states that instruction should focus on one or two skills at a time. The findings of Brown et al. (2021) suggest that while curriculum and supplemental materials have worked to incorporate the latest research on the science of reading, these programs do not consistently match early readers' phonological awareness development.

### **Blending Learning and Computer-Based Interventions**

With the increase of technology integration into society, blended learning and computer-based interventions is an option in the classroom. Metsala and Kalindi (2022) studied the effects of Ooka Island, a computer-based program used along with a balanced literacy approach instruction. Participants were kindergarten students who were split into two groups: a control group that was taught solely using core curriculum materials and a group that used the computer-based program. Students were given pre- and post-tests that looked at word identification, passage comprehension, and reading fluency. The data showed that the groups of students who used the computer program showed more significant gains in all areas than the control group. Students who used the Ooka Island computer program had higher reading levels at the end of the study, as well as higher reading comprehension levels. The findings of Metsala and Kalindi (2022) suggest that Ooka Island adds the support that students need to achieve higher reading abilities when used along with the core curriculum. It is important to note that this computer-



based program was used alongside a balanced literacy approach rather than a structured literacy approach promoted by the science of reading and current research.

A popular blended-learning program widely used is Lexia Core5, which has been researched heavily. Macaruso et al. (2019) first studied this program in a study that investigated the benefits of this program on elementary students with low socio-economic backgrounds. The study initially followed eighty-three kindergarten students and then followed up with sixty-eight students who had moved into first and second grades the following years. Participants used Core5 as an intervention tool for twenty to sixty minutes a week for at least twenty weeks. At the beginning of every year for this three-year study, no students were above grade level according to assessments done in the fall testing window. By spring, the percentage of students above grade level ranged from 93% in the first year, 82% above in the second year, and 79% above grade level in the third year. Significant gains were evident after the integration of Core5 into the reading block. The findings of Macaruso et al. (2019) indicate that Core5 is an effective computer-based program for intervention but may be less effective as students age.

Researchers Macaruso et al. (2020) continued their study of Lexia Core5, expanding their interest to students in grades kindergarten through five as part of regular instruction. Participants were of all demographical backgrounds. As in the previous study (Macaruso et al., 2019), Core5 was used as a supplemental program along with the core curriculum. The treatment group included 2,217 students, while 1,504 students were placed into a control group that received core instruction only. Each student received Wonders as their core instruction. Teachers received training on how to best implement Core5 and received ongoing coaching. Data showed that all grade levels showed an increase in post-test scores for those students in the treatment group.

However, unlike Macaruso et al.'s (2019) findings, Macaruso et al. (2020) found that the highest score increase was for grades second and third.

Wilkes et al. (2020) were also interested in the impact of Lexia Core5 as a blended-learning intervention tool. Of the 593 kindergarten and first-grade students, 276 were placed in a control group and 317 in a treatment group that used Core5 to supplement core instruction for twenty to sixty minutes per week. Student data was collected using DIBELS fall and spring scores. While all mean scores in the treatment group rose from fall to spring, the highest gains were present in kindergarten rather than in first grade. While the findings of Wilkes et al. (2020) were consistent in how students showed gains after using Core5 as a supplemental program, the conclusion of gains being the most effective in kindergarten agrees with Macaruso et al. (2019) but disagrees with the findings of Macaruso et al. (2020) that Core5 was most effective in older grades.

Kazakoff et al. (2018) also investigated the effects of Lexia Core5 on student reading gains but focused on English language learners (ELL). The two-year study followed 442 ELL students and 442 non-ELL students in year one and continued to assess 71 ELL students and 59 non-ELL students in year two. All students were in grades kindergarten through five. Students were matched by starting ability levels. At the beginning of year one, 70% of all students worked below grade level. By the end of the year, 63% of ELL and non-ELL students were at the benchmark. In the first year, kindergarteners grew significantly, with both ELL and non-ELL students growing similarly. However, ELL students performed better in first grade than non-ELL students, and this growth continued in grades two through five. All ELL and non-ELL students grew at similar paces during the second year of the study. At the beginning of year two, 31% of ELL students and 25% of non-ELL students were in Tier 1 instruction. These percentages grew

to almost 50% and over 50%, respectively. It is important to note that the findings of Kazakoff et al. (2018) suggest that first-grade students showed the best gains, agreeing with the findings of Macaruso et al. (2019) and Wilkes et al. (2020) that Lexia Core5 is most effective in younger grades. There is evidence that a blended learning approach of interventions using computer-based tools can be used to supplement the core curriculum with a high rate of success for elementary students (Kazakoff et al., 2018; Macaruso et al., 2019; Macaruso et al., 2020; Metsala & Kalindi, 2022; Wilkes et al., 2020).

### **School Profile**

#### **Community Characteristics**

St. Teresa of Calcutta Catholic School is located in Northeast Iowa. The school is located in Winneshiek County. St. Teresa of Calcutta School serves students in four rural communities in Winneshiek County, with the largest community being Calmar. According to the United States Census Bureau (n.d.), the population of Calmar is 1,125, with 91.9% being Caucasian, 3.8% Hispanic, .6% Black, .3% Asian, and 1.86% recognized as Other. The median household income is \$70,724, with 13.8% living in poverty. The U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.) states that 22.1% of Calmar citizens hold a bachelor's degree or higher, with the most significant percentage of citizens, 26.7%, working in the education or healthcare fields. St. Teresa of Calcutta is strongly supported by members of the communities it serves. Local businesses and churches work with the school to serve the community through service projects and events in which the students and staff of St. Teresa of Calcutta are actively involved.

#### **School District Characteristics**

St. Teresa of Calcutta is a parochial Catholic school within South Winneshiek Community Schools district. St. Teresa of Calcutta is part of the Archdiocese of Dubuque grouping of schools. School buildings are located in Ossian, Calmar, and Spillville, all within a

twenty-mile radius of each other. Preschools of three- and four-year-old students are located in the Calmar and Ossian buildings. In addition to preschool, the Ossian building houses kindergarten, first grade, and grades five through eight. The Spillville building houses grades two through four. These locations provide a unique opportunity for students to attend and participate in many communities. All schools follow the same mission: the desire to “educate all students to their highest level of achievement in an educational environment permeated by faith and Gospel values” (“About K-8 School,” 2023). St. Teresa of Calcutta envisions being a school that focuses on faith, learning, and service (St. Teresa of Calcutta Catholic School, 2023).

Parents are involved in the life of St. Teresa of Calcutta. Back to School Conferences are held before the school year begins, allowing parents and students to meet teachers and explore the classrooms and buildings. During these conferences, expectations and routines are also communicated, providing a solid foundation for the school year. Parent-teacher conferences are held twice a year, once in the fall and another in late winter. Conversations about student assessment data, success, and needs are communicated at these gatherings. Throughout the year, newsletters are sent weekly from the administration, as well as weekly or bi-weekly updates from teachers, keeping parents informed of the activities and academics of their children. Parent surveys are sent at minimum twice a year to gather feedback. Many family and staff gatherings are planned throughout the year to further create a sense of community. Fundraising events, musical concerts and performances, and a spring carnival allow families to gather with school staff.

### **Current Student Learning Goals**

St. Teresa of Calcutta currently has the following goals for the 2023-2024 academic year:

- Strength Benchmark: to have all grade levels reach 85% of students achieving proficiency levels in comprehension assessments (FastBridge aReading)
- Growth Benchmark: to have all grade levels reach 80% proficiency levels in early reading and fluency assessments (FastBridge CBM-Reading and Early Reading)
- Strength Benchmark: to have 100% of students report that they feel safe in school buildings. This includes having a trusted adult within the school building.
- Growth Benchmark: to increase communication between students, parents, and staff members

These goals align with district goals of the Archdiocese of Dubuque. The goals highlight the importance of all aspects of education, not just academics. The safety of students and the satisfaction of families is vital to the St. Teresa of Calcutta staff.

### **School Building Characteristics**

For the 2023- 2024 academic year, 230 students are enrolled in preschool through eighth grades at St. Teresa of Calcutta. Most grade levels are single sections, with the exception of three- and four-year-old preschools, first-grade, and eighth-grade, which currently have two sections each. Of these 230 students, 211 are Caucasian, 91.7%, seventeen are Hispanic, 7.4%, and two are Black, .86%. These percentages closely match the demographics of the communities the school serves. Of all the students, 50.8% are female and 49.1% are male, with 22% qualifying for free and reduced lunch. Students with an Individualized Education Program for a recognized learning disability comprise 6.1% of the school's population. An additional 3% are English language learners and receive associated services.

St. Teresa of Calcutta Catholic School provides many opportunities for students to learn and succeed. Title 1, special education, and ELL services are provided to support students'

academics. Talented and gifted services, LEGO League, and MATHCOUNTS provide opportunities to advance learning beyond the classroom. Every student has access to art, music, physical education, technology, guidance, and health classes. On top of these academic opportunities, St. Teresa of Calcutta Catholic School supports faith and spiritual growth by participating in weekly mass, daily religion classes, altar serving opportunities, and service projects.

### **Student Performance**

At the end of the 2022-2023 school year, 72% of all students were proficient in reading screeners assessed through FastBridge. In the Early Reading screener, 49% of kindergarten and first-grade students were proficient. In the CMB-Reading screener, 60% of students in grades first through eighth grade were proficient. In the aReading screener, 83% of students in grades kindergarten through eighth were proficient. In math screeners, also assessed through FastBridge, 78% of all students were proficient.

### **Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment**

St. Teresa of Calcutta uses purchased curriculums for math and literacy. The science curriculum is rented through the local education agency. iReady Math is used in grades kindergarten through eight. In this curriculum, a diagnostic is used to collect data three times a year. This data guides classroom instruction, interventions, and an individualized path for students to close gaps (MyPath). Wonders is the literacy program used in grades kindergarten through six. Within this curriculum are writing and phonics programs. Grades seven and eight use a teacher-created curriculum based on the Iowa Core Standards for literacy. Haggerty is a phonics program used in kindergarten. FOSS kits are the basis of the science curriculum accessed through the local education agency.

Report cards are distributed twice yearly, at the end of the first and second semesters. Preschool reports are based on Gold Standards as outlined by the state of Iowa. Grades kindergarten through fifth use standards-based grading, as outlined by the Archdiocese. Traditional percentage-based grades are used in grades six through eight, matching the public schools in the area. Student performance on state and district assessments is included in reports sent home.

Most classrooms use a mix of whole and small-group instruction. Intervention staff is available to meet with students in small groups or individually throughout the day. These staff members include special education teachers, ELL specialists, and reading interventionists, including Title 1. Currently, kindergarten, first, sixth, seventh, and eighth-grade math and/or reading classes are co-taught by the classroom teacher and the special education teacher or school interventionist, allowing for a high level of differentiation and small-group instruction. All teachers are responsible for differentiating instruction and material, including students receiving above-grade level material. Consistency varies by classroom, as some teachers are more comfortable in this area than others.

Technology is widely available to students. In recent years, there has been an emphasis on providing 1:1 devices. Students in grades kindergarten through third grade are 1:1 with iPads. 1:1 Chromebooks are utilized in fourth through eighth grades. In addition to 1:1 technology, a technology class is taught in the upper grades, and all classes have focused on computer science.

Assessments are widely used in all grade levels. At the individual grade levels, formative and summative assessments assess student learning and guide instruction. District assessments are used in the areas of math and reading. All grade levels take math and reading screeners through FastBridge in the fall, winter, and spring. Early reading screeners are used for grades

kindergarten through first. This screener assesses students' ability to identify print concepts, letter names and sounds, and segmentation of actual and nonsense words. CBM-Reading is used for grades first through eighth and assesses student oral reading fluency by reading three grade-level passages and finding a median of correct words read per minute. Student reading comprehension is assessed through the aReading screener in grades kindergarten through eighth. Math proficiency levels are determined by aMath, used in all grades.

A math diagnostic available through the math curriculum is also used for all grade levels three times a year. Iowa Statewide Assessment of Student Progress (ISASP) is given once a year in the springtime, assessing math, literacy, and science. In addition, grades three, five, and seven participate in a Cognitive Abilities Test (cogAT). Students and teachers also complete a social-emotional screener (SAEBRS) three times a year to track student social-emotional health. Grades four through eight also currently complete a daily check-in through Close Gap. Kindergarten through third grade will administer this survey by the end of the first semester.

St. Teresa of Calcutta Catholic School is a PBIS school focusing on student behavior. The local education agency supports this system of student consequences and rewards. Teachers track behavior using a system of office referral forms and reward incentives. The system revolves around five expectation areas: safe, helpful, inclusive, neat, and empathetic. These expectations are taught schoolwide twice a year, using explicit teaching methods. Classroom teachers review them throughout the year as needed.

### **Professional Development Practices**

St. Teresa of Calcutta Catholic School's staff participates in ongoing professional development opportunities. Professional development days are designated once a month for all teachers and staff. In recent years, all staff members participated in professional development led



by math consultants through the local education agency (Keystone). This professional development consisted of training on mathematical practices as outlined by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) and math standards provided by the state of Iowa. During this time, a new math curriculum was piloted and implemented. A company representative provided professional development in three sessions on best implementing the curriculum to determine and match student needs. Recent professional development has been provided in the area of literacy. Reading and writing professional development has been led by the literacy consultants at Keystone. A focus on phonics has recently been considered and is in the plan for professional development for all staff.

Professional development through teacher collaboration occurs twice a month using professional learning communities (PLCs). Within these team meetings, student data is analyzed to guide instructional practices. Individual PLCs have designated a goal based on an area of need and collaborate to adjust instruction, curriculum, and pacing to better meet student needs.

Many teachers also take part in individualized professional development practices. Several teachers are currently taking classes to obtain advanced educational degrees. All teachers take part in writing and implementing an Individual Teacher Professional Development Plan as outlined by the state of Iowa and the Archdiocese of Dubuque. These plans are aligned with district goals. Other individualized professional development opportunities take place through the attendance of conferences, book studies, and the reading of educational articles.

### **Needs Assessment**

Analysis of school assessment data has shown the need to improve early literacy reading skills. A trend of decreasing early reading fluency has emerged at St. Teresa, and this need must be addressed. At the beginning of the 2022-2023 school year, 87% of kindergarten students were

proficient in the oral reading fluency screener. By the end of the school year, 43% of kindergarten-aged students reached proficiency levels in the same screener. Despite the best intentions of the teachers and staff at St. Teresa of Calcutta, students are not leaving their first school year with a high ability to decode and segment words, leading to struggling readers in later grades.

Early reading fluency indicates later student success in future schooling and life (Fiester, 2013). For students to be successful readers later in life, they must develop a strong foundation of phonemic and phonological awareness at an early age, as it is challenging to close gaps between strong and struggling readers later in life. In fact, these gaps increase as students age (Fiester, 2013).

Reading instruction has changed over time. Current research has indicated a need for explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). As foundational reading skills develop, higher-level reading skills develop. Once students can identify and manipulate sounds, other conventions of reading will follow, such as comprehension and spelling (Paige et al., 2018). This improvement plan focuses on providing the teachers and staff of St. Teresa of Calcutta with the content knowledge needed to provide this explicit instruction in reading fluency. For students to be competent in phonemic and phonological awareness, their teachers must also be fluent in this area.

A mentoring and coaching program with teachers knowledgeable in phonemic and phonological awareness is crucial to the success of the teachers and the students at St. Teresa of Calcutta. Providing teachers with coaches improves teacher content knowledge and instructional practices (Ehri & Flugman, 2018). Currently, no formal coaching and mentoring program

provides ongoing support for teachers beyond their first years of teaching at St. Teresa of Calcutta. Many teachers teach in isolation with little collaboration and observation of other teachers, contrary to best practices. Some teachers have expanded their phonemic and phonological awareness knowledge, and others have yet to. This improvement plan allows for knowledge transfer through shared professional development and coaching and mentoring opportunities.

### **Data Analysis**

#### **Data Summary**

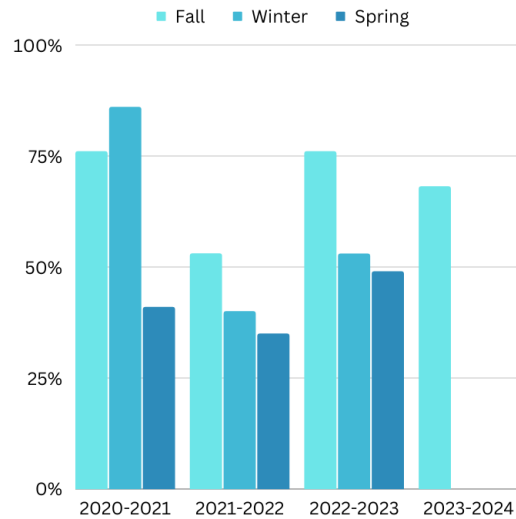
Data was collected using FastBridge literacy screeners and analyzed starting with the 2020-2021 school year. The data used for this analysis focuses on FAST early reading scores for kindergarten and first grades, CMB-Reading scores for grades kindergarten through six, and aReading scores for kindergarten through sixth grade. Data was also collected on the percentage of students being screened, progress monitored, and number receiving interventions.

The FAST data has indicated literacy as an area of need, particularly in the lower elementary grades. The number of students reaching the benchmark has decreased since the 2020-2021 school year, as shown in Figure 1. In the fall of 2020, 76% of students in grades kindergarten and first had reached the benchmark of the early reading FAST screener. By the end of that school year, in the spring of 2021, this percentage had dropped to 41%. In the fall of the next school year, 2021-2022, 53% of students had reached the benchmark, falling to 35% by spring 2022. For the consecutive year, more students had reached proficiency levels at the beginning of the school year than at the end. This trend continued into the 2022-2023 school year. The number of students at the benchmark reached 76% in Fall 2022, dropping steadily

throughout the year to 49%. The most recent data for the fall of the 2023-2024 school year shows 68% of students reaching the benchmark.

**Figure 1**

*Student Proficiency on Early Reading FAST Screener*



Kindergarten data for the Early Reading FAST screener show this downward trend even more significantly (see Figure 2). In the fall of 2020, 95% of kindergarten students had reached proficiency in the early reading FAST screener. Spring of that school year showed similar numbers, with 90% reaching the benchmark. The following year's fall showed similar data, with 89% reaching proficiency. However, by that spring, only 44% of students were at the benchmark. The fall of 2022 showed high proficiency levels, with 87% at benchmark, but dropping to 43% by spring.

**Figure 2**

*Kindergarten Proficiency on Early Reading FAST Screener*

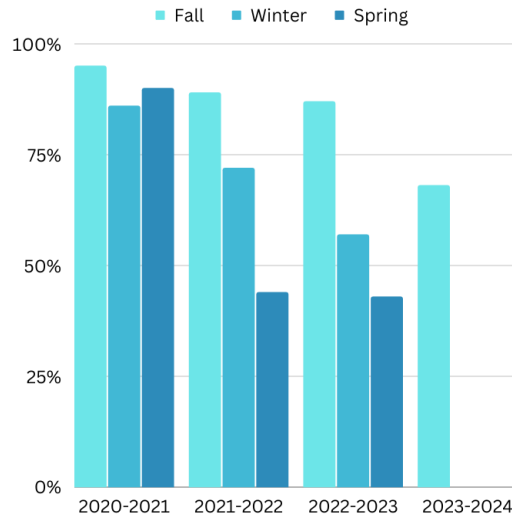
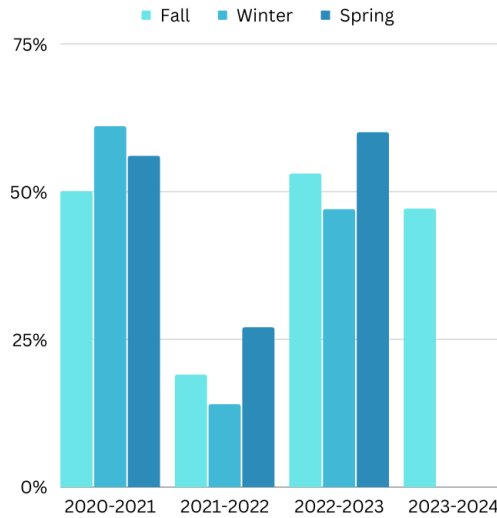


Figure 3 shows data from the first-grade Early Reading FAST screener. This data shows less consistency than the kindergarten data, with no overwhelming trend present. In the fall of 2020, half of all first-grade students were proficient, rising slightly to 56% by spring 2021. The following fall, 19% of first-grade students were proficient, falling to 14% in the winter before rising to 27% in the spring of 2022. In the fall of 2022, 53% of first-grade students were proficient, rising slightly to 60% by spring 2023.

**Figure 3**

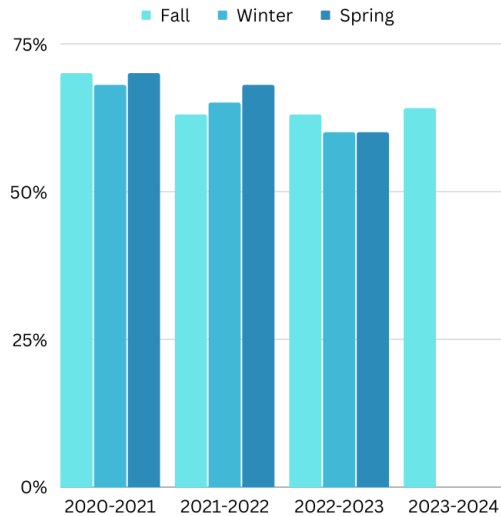
*First Grade Proficiency on Early Reading FAST Screener*



Overall, CBM-Reading scores that assess students’ oral reading fluency are slightly better, as shown in Figure 4. This data is comprised of student data up to sixth grade. The data shows more consistency than the early reading screening data. Proficiency levels reached 70% during the fall and spring screening windows of the 2020-2021 school year. Since then, the proficiency levels have hovered around the 60% range. The latest data shows evidence of summer learning loss, with the start of the 2023-2024 school year showing 64% of students being proficient.

**Figure 4**

*Student Proficiency on CBM-Reading FAST Screener*



**Strengths**

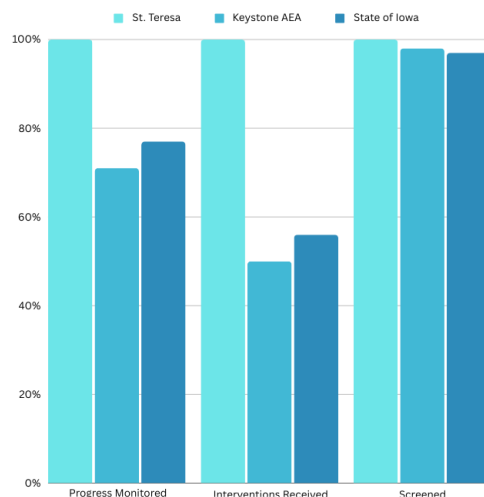
The data indicates several areas of strength. Students are entering kindergarten with the knowledge needed to become proficient readers. This data suggests that the curriculum and instructional practices implemented at St. Teresa of Calcutta’s preschool centers are effective. There is a high level of collaboration among the two preschool teachers of St. Teresa of Calcutta. Monthly meetings occur to ensure curriculum alignment and documentation of how students are progressing on Iowa Early Learning Standards. The preschool teachers of St. Teresa of Calcutta also partake in monthly professional development with their public-school counterparts, ensuring that this work is leading to high levels of success.

Another healthy indicator is the number of students being screened, progress monitored, and receiving interventions. The goal set by the staff and administrators of St. Teresa of Calcutta is for proficiency levels to reach 80% in reading fluency (CBM-Reading and Early Reading). This goal aligns with the Archdiocese of Dubuque's goals. Strong interventions and frequent

progress monitoring need to occur to reach this number. This is an area of success for St. Teresa of Calcutta. Figure 5 shows that 100% of students are screened (including those in grades seven and eight, screenings not required by the state), 100% of students who need interventions receive one, and 100% of students who require progress monitoring receive it weekly. These numbers are higher than the percentages in the local AEA (Keystone) and the State of Iowa. This data indicates that the teachers and staff of St. Teresa of Calcutta are dedicated to reaching this goal of promoting fluent readers.

**Figure 5**

*Comparison of St. Teresa of Calcutta to AEA and State of Iowa in Screening and Interventions*



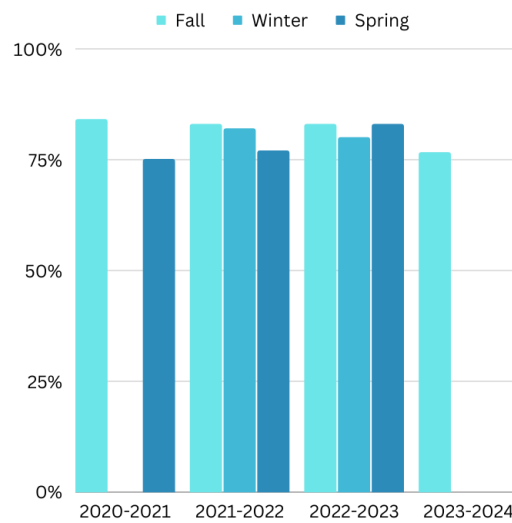
In the fall of 2019, St. Teresa of Calcutta purchased and implemented a new reading curriculum, Wonders. This curriculum replaced outdated curriculum and allowed teachers to meet the standards set by the state of Iowa. This curriculum consists of rigorous tasks that require students to read at a deeper level, analyzing various elements of literature. It has ensured that students are identifying and using text evidence. Figure 6 shows the impact of this curriculum on student proficiency levels for comprehension as determined by the aReading



FAST screener. Schoolwide student proficiency levels have remained in the 80% range for most of the last three years. In the fall of 2020, 84% of students had met the benchmark, which remained consistent through the spring of 2023, with 83% being proficient. This achievement is above the district and school goal of 80%. This data suggests that student fluency is not negatively impacting student reading comprehension.

**Figure 6**

*Student Proficiency in aReading FAST Screener*



**Challenges**

The data shows weaknesses in the early reading instruction at the kindergarten and first-grade levels. Within the curriculum of Wonders, a phonics component is present but may not be best suited to fit the needs of the students at St. Teresa of Calcutta. Teachers in kindergarten and first-grade levels use Heggerty to build phonemic awareness but need a robust phonological awareness component to bring students to the level of proficiency required.

**Additional Assessment**

Additional data would be beneficial to best meet the needs of St. Teresa of Calcutta students. Within the FastBridge site are high-quality, evidence-based intervention plans that align with different areas of early reading. To use this tool, students must complete the AutoReading FAST screener. The results of this screener come with a comprehensive plan that outlines specific skills that students are lacking and creates an individualized intervention plan to better fill student ability gaps.

**Action Plan****Strategies**

After reviewing the literature and research on early reading skills, multiple strategies have emerged to help St. Teresa of Calcutta improve oral reading proficiency. One of the core aspects of this improvement plan is to increase student ability to read fluently at all grade levels. This plan recognizes that student learning needs must be supported through quality teaching and best-suited interventions. Supporting teachers and staff by providing the necessary training, resources, and time is also essential in seeing the high student success desired at St. Teresa of Calcutta.

Critical to this school improvement plan is increasing teacher knowledge and comfort level in teaching phonological awareness. Increasing high-quality instruction is needed to support students beginning to learn to read. Explicit teaching is essential when teaching emergent readers. Explicit instruction develops as teachers gain more phonological and phonemic awareness knowledge, which involves teachers knowing how students learn to read (Cunningham et al., 2015). Training is needed to support teachers in this process, as new research outlines what students need to learn to read. This training should include professional

development and ongoing coaching and mentoring sessions (Piasta et al., 2020). Mentoring and coaching with more experienced professionals provide the necessary support and resources to make an impactful change in teaching practices (Ehri & Flugman, 2018). Supporting teachers through high-quality professional development is vital to changing instructional practices that allow students to learn the skills needed for emergent reading. When teachers are supported and have positive views about reading instruction, high-quality instruction follows, allowing for higher student gains (Ehri & Flugman, 2018).

Supporting students in their educational process is vital to the success of this improvement plan and the success of the students at St. Teresa of Calcutta. A critical component is responding to the intervention plan and using a multi-tiered level of support. Matching student needs to the best-suited intervention is necessary, requiring the use of proper assessments based on the needed skill (Van Norman et al., 2018). While data is already being gathered at St. Teresa of Calcutta, several components make up early reading skills that must be assessed. Collecting more specific data on which early reading skills are lacking can lead to the appropriate intervention, allowing for a better-suited progress monitoring track and more student growth (Van Norman et al., 2018).

Research has found that students grow their skills more rapidly at specific times of the year, having more growth from fall to winter (Van Norman, 2021). Phonological awareness emerges slowly and grows quickly by the end of the school year, while letter naming, while continually increasing, slows by the end of the year (Paige et al., 2018). This knowledge points to a need to switch interventions and progress monitoring to better suit the skills that are lacking. Ensuring curriculum and instruction align with the intervention at these times is essential.

Using computer-based interventions is another way to support student needs, allowing teachers to differentiate instruction while targeting specific skills (Macaruso et al., 2019). Research has pointed to students' success using Lexia Core5 as a supplementary tool to high-quality instruction. This computer program has been shown to increase student proficiency levels of both English language learners and non-English language learners (Kazakoff et al., 2018). Whereas there is a small population of English language learners at St. Teresa of Calcutta, there is a need to support these learners in vocabulary acquisition and oral reading fluency. Lexia Core5 can also help deter the effects of summer learning loss, evident at St. Teresa of Calcutta (see Figure 4). Lexia Core5 can help students who start the year working on below-grade-level tasks to be at or above grade level by the end of the year (Macaruso et al., 2019). This acceleration of skills is needed, as currently, students are ending the year working at below grade level in their early reading skills (see Figures 1 through 3). It is important to note that the success of this blended learning tool relies on high-quality implementation, having training, and support for teachers in place that allow for the effective use of Lexia Core5 to supplement core instruction (Macaruso et al., 2020).

**Steps to Solve the Problem**

The success of this school improvement plan relies on the support of all staff and faculty at St. Teresa of Calcutta. Administrators and intervention staff must work closely with lower elementary classroom teachers to ensure that necessary components are being used with fidelity. Upper elementary and secondary teachers need to be involved as gaps have been identified with older students that need to be bridged to increase oral reading fluency in the upper grades. The work of increasing early literacy skills at St. Teresa of Calcutta has already started. In August of 2023, a committee comprised of classroom teachers and reading interventionists to collect data

and pinpoint areas of weakness. The following action plan outlines additional steps needed to continue the work done by this committee.

1. A committee is formed and meets monthly to create and revisit action steps.
2. Administration considers the idea of hiring instructional coaches to provide ongoing, on-site training and modeling for all teachers.
3. Phonological awareness professional development is researched and scheduled.
  - a. Administrators, intervention staff, and lower elementary classroom teachers are trained in phonological awareness that supports current research (LETRS).
  - b. Upper elementary and secondary teachers are trained to fill phonological awareness gaps in older students (Making Reading Heavenly).
4. Modeling and coaching sessions are scheduled for all grade-level teachers.
  - a. Modeling of what explicit phonics instruction looks like and how to best implement it in individual classrooms.
    - i. Lower elementary is scheduled for monthly and as needed throughout the year.
    - ii. Upper elementary and secondary are scheduled quarterly and as needed throughout the year.
5. All students are screened three times a year using FastBridge as outlined by the Iowa Department of Education (2023) (see Figure 7).
6. Classroom teachers and intervention staff meet to discuss intervention groups and times.
  - a. Data is analyzed to pinpoint specific areas of need for students.
  - b. Intervention is chosen that aligns with the area of need.
  - c. A progress monitoring tool is chosen that aligns with the intervention.

- i. Goal lines are created that show non-linear growth.
  - ii. Interventions and progress monitoring are revisited and reassessed after every testing window.
7. Lexia Core5 is purchased, and professional development is scheduled for teachers of grades K-3.
  - a. Student accounts are created for all students.
  - b. Student intervention and pathway is created after students are screened.
  - c. Interventions and pathways are assessed after every testing window.
8. PLC groups meet bi-monthly to revisit action plan steps, including:
  - a. Fidelity of implementation
  - b. Analysis of data
  - c. Presence of high-quality core instruction that aligns with academic standards.
9. All teachers are surveyed regarding knowledge levels, implementation fidelity, and additional resources needed (see Figure 8).
10. Data will be shared with building and district leaders and community stakeholders (e.g. the school board). The committee will continue to meet to analyze further action steps needed to ensure the continuance of increasing early reading skills.

Figure 7

Iowa Department of Education Approved FastBridge Screeners for 2023-2024

**FastBridge Renaissance Learning**

	Universal Screening						Progress Monitoring							
	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	K	1	2	3	4	5	6
aReading		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y							
CBMR			Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
earlyReading Composite	Y	Y												
Onset Sounds								Y						
Letter Names								Y						
Letter Sounds								Y						
Sight Words-50								Y						
Word Segmenting								Y	Y					
Decodable Words								Y	Y					
Nonsense Words								Y	Y					
Word Blending									Y					
Sight Words-150									Y					
AUTOread: Composite			Y	Y		Y								
AUTOread Letter Names								Y						
AUTOread Letter Sounds								Y						
AUTOread Word Identification									Y	Y	Y	Y		
AUTOread Encoding									Y	Y	Y	Y		
AUTOread Vocabulary														

Figure 8

Example of Staff Survey Using Google Forms

Questions	Answers
In the last month, how often have you utilized the lessons outlined by LETRS or Making Reading Heavenly?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> Daily</li> <li><input type="radio"/> 3-4 times a week</li> <li><input type="radio"/> 1-2 times a week</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Never</li> </ul>
What is your comfort level regarding phonological awareness at your grade level?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> I do not feel comfortable teaching phonological awareness at my level and need a lot more information.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ My comfort level allows me to teach the basics but I need more information to increase my comfort level.</li> <li>○ I am confident with my ability to teach phonological awareness but could benefit from more information.</li> <li>○ I am very confident with my ability to teach phonological awareness and do not need additional information.</li> </ul>
<p>What additional support do you need?</p>	<p>[Teachers type in their individual needs]</p>

### Implementation of School Improvement Plan

#### Timeline and Staff Responsibilities

Before the 2023-2024 school year, a committee was formed to collect data and identify areas of strength and need. This committee meets monthly and will continue to meet at this same frequency through the end of the current school year and will continue into the next (see Figure 9 for a summary of the timeline). This school improvement plan will take a couple of years to complete and to see results. Starting in January 2024, administrators must meet with school board members to allocate funds for training and additional personnel, including instructional coaches and additional money for teacher mentors. This work will continue throughout this plan, occurring during monthly school board meetings. The hiring of additional staff will happen in the spring and summer of 2024 and will be in place for the beginning of the 2024-2025 school year.

Current intervention staff will assist administrators with researching and scheduling training and professional development. This scheduling will be the first task done after the allocation of funds. Lexia Core5, the blended learning tool recommended in this plan, is already used at St. Teresa of Calcutta. Teachers and staff have yet to be trained by company staff on using this tool and all available features. Professional development for kindergarten through



third-grade teachers would occur in the winter of 2023-2024. It is vital that this training occur as soon as possible as the program is already in use. Classroom teachers in lower elementary grades will be responsible for setting up student accounts and using the supplemental tool with fidelity, allocating a set time in their classroom of fifteen to twenty minutes daily.

Professional development to increase teacher knowledge of phonological and phonemic awareness will happen monthly throughout the end of the current school year and into the next. Administrative and training staff will determine the schedule, gather resources, and see to attendance. Elementary teachers, intervention staff, special education teachers, and administrators will be trained in LETRS, outlining current research on how students learn to read. This multi-year training requires work done outside of the school day. Middle school teachers would be trained in Making Reading Heavenly, a supplemental intervention program designed to bridge gaps in older students, outlining an overview of syllable types and letter sounds and incorporating spelling patterns. This training will occur during monthly professional development sessions throughout the winter and spring of 2023-2024. Classroom teachers will be responsible for attending all professional development sessions and allocating time in their schedules to use curriculums and intervention tools. Administrators will send out surveys every other month to assess teacher fidelity and check for additional resources needed.

Modeling and coaching sessions will be scheduled throughout the year. Members of the training staff of various professional development sessions will schedule opportunities to model and observe explicit lessons that incorporate phonemic and phonological awareness content. Teachers can visit schools where curriculum and interventions are used to observe experienced teachers with proficient readers. Teachers will be responsible for incorporating into their classrooms the best practices that were observed. With the hiring of instructional coaches at St.

Teresa of Calcutta, this additional staff will be responsible for helping schedule these visits and assisting teachers with implementing explicit teaching practices, observing, and coaching where needed.

Throughout the 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 school years, students will be screened three times a year using FastBridge. Reading fluency and comprehension screeners will occur during the screening windows in the fall, winter, and spring. Classroom teachers and intervention staff will meet right after the screening window to create intervention and progress monitoring groups. These groups will be revisited as needed throughout the year, as determined by FastBridge progress monitoring data. PLC groups of grade-level bands will meet bi-monthly to analyze data and discuss intervention changes. Data will be shared with stakeholders consisting of community members, parents, staff, and school board members. Administrators will be responsible for creating reports that share this data.

**Figure 9**

*Summary of Timeline*



**Resources Needed**

Resources needed include supplemental curriculum and intervention tools, including Lexia Core5, Making Reading Heavenly, and LETRS materials. Updated technology is required to best use Lexia Core5 and blended learning materials. Staff and personnel are needed to provide interventions, collect data, model lessons, and receive training. A committee is required to oversee this process. FastBridge screeners and data collected to analyze the plan's success are needed. Most importantly, money is required to fund the purchase of blended learning programs and provide the necessary professional development sessions.

**Monitoring for Success**

Proof of the plan will be the student data collected through FastBridge screeners. The desired outcome of this plan is to have students be fluent oral readers, reaching 85% proficiency in FastBridge screeners while supporting and maintaining reading comprehension proficiency levels simultaneously. After this plan, most students will be placed in Tier 1 level of support, with less than 15% of students needing additional support through interventions and progress monitoring. To see this level of success in student data, teacher fidelity in implementation is necessary. Data collected through teacher surveys and observations done by administrators to determine the implementation of best practices and the use of supplemental curriculum and tools will be an indicator of success, as teacher support is crucial to the plan's success.

**Challenges and Barriers**

One challenge to this plan is funding. St. Teresa of Calcutta operates on a limited budget, and there will be a need to shuffle funds to provide the professional development and resources needed to implement this plan. Funding hinges on the success of parent and staff fundraising efforts and legislation allowing tax dollars to be used in private schools. Another challenge is time. The professional development outlined in this plan is extensive and requires time to attend

and implement in classrooms. Teachers must be creative with classroom schedules to teach required elements and provide necessary interventions. Professional development days allocated through district calendars must be wisely scheduled to ensure that all training will occur throughout the school year while considering time for modeling, coaching, and observations. One last challenge is the mindset of teachers. While it is humbling to admit help is needed, teachers must set aside comfort levels to see change in instruction practices at St. Teresa of Calcutta. A mindset change is necessary to transition teaching practices that reflect current research in learning to read. Teachers must be willing to spend the time needed to realize improvement in oral reading proficiency levels start here.

### **Conclusion**

A National Reading Panel (2000) outlined the critical areas of teaching students to read: phonemic awareness, fluency, and comprehension. Despite the report on the need for explicit phonemic and phonological awareness instruction, schools have failed to change instructional methods that best support how students learn to read. Reading scores among the nation's fourth and eighth graders have not seen a significant increase since 1992 and have dropped in the year since 2019 (NAEP, 2022). This data points to a need to change how learning to read is taught. Compounding the issue is a lack of teacher confidence in phonological awareness (Ehri & Flugman, 2018) and the lack of high-quality materials that support the latest research (Brown et al., 2021).

Learning to read in the earliest school years affects students' success levels later in life. Those who struggle to read in lower elementary grades continue to struggle with academics in later academic years, leading to widening gaps in abilities (Fiester, 2013). It is critical that teachers have the content knowledge necessary to provide the explicit instruction needed to

create fluent readers (Cunningham et al., 2015). Professional development that offers ongoing support through coaching and mentoring is needed to support teachers (Piasta et al., 2020). Collaboration among intervention staff and classroom teachers can provide timely interventions that support struggling readers (Becker & Sylvan, 2021). Blended learning models of instruction and using available technology can help support learners and allow teachers to differentiate for a variety of needs in a classroom (Kazakoff et al., 2018; Macaruso et al., 2019; Macaruso et al., 2020; Metsala & Kalindi, 2022; Wilkes et al., 2020).

Current data collected at St. Teresa of Calcutta indicate that readers' needs are not currently being met. Only 64% of St. Teresa of Calcutta students read proficiently, as assessed through FastBridge reading screeners. While 100% of students who are at risk are receiving interventions and are being progress monitored, it is evident that changes to the core curriculum and instructional methods need to be assessed and revised to best meet student needs.

This school improvement plan aims to increase student oral reading proficiency levels. With this plan, teachers will be supported in transitioning instructional methods to those that support current research, explicitly teaching students to recognize phonological and phonemic patterns. This plan includes collaboration among teachers and experts in reading through high-quality professional development sessions. Professional development sessions, accompanied by coaching and mentoring sessions, will allow teachers to learn the nuances of the English language and how to best present spelling rules and patterns to students, starting in the earliest grades. Teachers will collect and analyze data that pinpoints specific areas of need for students, creating intervention plans that allow for progress monitoring to assess the effectiveness of instruction and interventions. Through the professional development and proposed curriculum

changes outlined in this plan, the needed changes will be investigated, determined, and implemented, ensuring that all student needs are met.

The mission of St. Teresa of Calcutta is to foster lifelong learners who are productive citizens, leading through faith and service while educating them to their highest abilities. Through high-quality instructional methods grounded in sound pedagogy supported by current research, students can read fluently, leading to greater comprehension and critical thinking skills. Professional development, accompanied by coaching and mentoring sessions, can provide the pathway for teachers to meet the needs of all students, resulting in students who are lifelong readers.

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