

## IMPROVING INSTRUCTIONAL CAPACITY THROUGH A FOCUS ON EARLY LITERACY: SST Region 5 Supports Niles City Schools' Use of LETRS in Concert with the OIP

When State Support Team (SST) Region 5 invited Niles City Schools to pilot the use of a professional development (PD) approach to strengthening early literacy, Superintendent Ann Marie Thigpen viewed the invitation as a real opportunity to develop instructional capacity across the district. The 2016-17 school year will be Thigpen's second year as superintendent of Niles City Schools, a district she returned to after having worked there as a principal eight years ago. "We needed something to help us improve K-3 literacy in our district. This was an easy decision given SST 5's history in working with Niles, as well as my own personal relationship in working with them in different positions; of course we were going to partner with them!" she said.



Niles was selected based on a review of multiple sources of data documenting a need by the district for support in early literacy, plus the superintendent's track record in following through on district commitments. "We wanted to make sure the district we selected for

participation in the pilot would support teachers and principals in implementing what they learned through PD and also make this learning a part of their ongoing practice," explained Michele DiMuzio, SST Region 5 Director.

### Maximizing Instructional Focus: Planned Synergy

The district's use of the Ohio Improvement Process (OIP) positions Niles to capitalize on the LETRS training in ways that have the potential to change collective instructional practice. Thigpen explains: "The knowledge gained through the LETRS training will contribute to TBT member effectiveness, especially at step 3 of the process. At the same time, having OIP collaborative team structures, like TBTs, allows us to use the training to affect teacher practice on a broader scale."

Niles transitioned from operating multiple schools across grade levels to now operating four buildings: one K-2 primary school, one grades 3-5 intermediate school, one grades 6-8 middle school, and one 9-12 high school. Pre-K students are served through a Head Start program based in the district. Beginning with the 2016-17 school year, Niles also invested in teacher collaboration and learning by increasing instructional time by 30 minutes per day at the primary and intermediate levels, and by 25 minutes at the middle and high school levels.

#### WHAT IS LETRS?

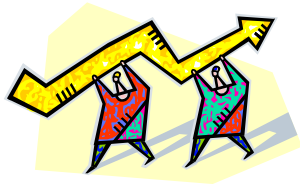
**Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS)** is comprehensive professional development that focuses on essential literacy concepts and instructional practice and prepares educators to increase literacy achievement for all learners in grades K-12.

Louisa Moats, Ed.D.

Lead Author and Developer of LETRS

Source: [www.lets.com](http://www.lets.com)

Niles uses the OIP to support district-wide improvement in instructional practice and student learning. Accordingly, Niles has a district leadership team (DLT) with representation from all district-level administrators (e.g., the Director of School Improvement and Federal/state Programs, the Supervisor for the Education of Exceptional Children, etc.); all building principals, middle and high school guidance counselors; and teachers, including intervention specialists, from each level across the district. Each school in the district has a functional building leadership team (BLT) and teacher-based teams (TBTs) are in various stages of development and use in all schools within the district.



Work is ongoing to strengthen alignment across collaborative teams at each level (i.e., district, school, classroom) through the use of common formative assessment data and the development of shared instructional know-how. “We have a strong emphasis on using the OIP to support effective implementation at the building level. It’s integrated with our use of response to intervention. My goal is for all TBTs to ‘talk this talk’ at the teacher team level so that we have a coherent and focused approach to improving instructional practice,” explained Thigpen.

SST 5 supports Niles by providing external facilitation as well as professional development and coaching. In addition to the support provided by Michelle Elia, SST 5’s Early Literacy Specialist and Educational Consultant, an external facilitator with extensive knowledge and experience in supporting district-wide use of OIP is also assigned to the district. Both regional experts are trained in LETRS to ensure that the district can best use what they’re learning to improve literacy instruction through OIP collaborative team structures and processes.



## Talking the Same Language: Improving Adult Implementation

Antoinette (Toni) D’Urso, the district’s Early Literacy and Curriculum Facilitator (and formerly the Niles Intermediate School Assistant Principal), is leading the district’s efforts to improve literacy. According to D’Urso, participation in the LETRS training will position teachers to improve their collective capacity to hone in on specific areas of basic early literacy skills that need to be developed and intervene *before* students fail. Niles is providing teachers with mobile devices with *Amplify* software to help streamline the data collection process so that all decisions regarding instruction are data driven, reducing the opportunity for error in data retrieval and in the assessment process.

D’Urso explains: “This is a wonderful opportunity for our district, our students, and our teachers; we are so very fortunate. I am thinking long term, with data collection and tools to meet those individual student needs to enable vertical alignment and progress monitoring. In addition, we are starting with a strong preschool foundation by including our Head Start teachers.” “If everyone is on a completely different page in terms of their knowledge base, and there’s not consistent, common data to use, it’s difficult to improve practice. With LETRS and access to DIBELS data, teachers will know exactly what strategies they need to use,” added D’Urso.

Elia reflected on the breadth and depth of knowledge and skills involved in teaching reading, noting “I taught the reading endorsement coursework for four years and after going through LETRS training realized I had so much more to learn.”

In fact, a 1999 paper developed by LETRS lead developer Louisa Moats for the American Federation of Teachers illustrates the complexity and difficulty involved in teaching reading, how language is the foundation for reading instruction, and the research base that should be used in guiding teacher preparation and professional development in reading.

**State commitment and leadership to improve results.** The Ohio Department of Education’s commitment to improving teacher capacity to deliver instruction to PK-3 learners in early literacy is built on and aligned with the state’s improvement framework – the OIP. Niles is among the first group of districts to implement *Ohio’s Early Literacy Plan*, which involves participating in training and coaching in evidence-based early literacy practices using LETRS, making time for staff training and coaching, reviewing early literacy data to identify and implement instructional strategies and interventions using TBTs, and adopting a curriculum-based measure for early literacy that is evidence-based. While LETRS is a critical component of the plan, it is not the only component. “The state’s literacy plan is not only about LETRS; it’s about using data to improve instruction, collaborating with other staff members through TBTs, coaching, and more,” said Elia.

**Ohio’s Early Literacy Plan  
2016-2017 Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) Training Dates  
Region A: State Support Team Regions 2, 3, 5, 9**

2016	
Aug. 25-26	<b>Region A: Early Childhood Teachers</b> Teachers will attend training both days.
Oct. 3-7	<b>Region A: K-3 Teachers</b> K-3 teachers, intervention specialists, reading specialists, speech- language pathologists, and building literacy coaches will attend training on one of the five available days.
2017	
Jan. 9-10	<b>Region A: Principals</b> Principals will attend training both days.
Jan. 23-27	<b>Region A: K-3 Teachers</b> K-3 teachers, intervention specialists, reading specialists, speech- language pathologists, and building literacy coaches will attend training on one of the five available days.
May 15-19	<b>Region A: K-3 Teachers</b> K-3 teachers, intervention specialists, reading specialists, speech- language pathologists, and building literacy coaches will attend training on one of the five available days.
<b>Early Childhood Teachers</b>	
<b>K-3 Teachers</b>	
<b>Principals</b>	

To be eligible to participate, the district had to have:

- *A district improvement plan that included a focus on improving teacher capacity to deliver high-quality early literacy instruction to students in preschool-grade 3;*
- *A working relationship with feeder preschools;*
- *DLT with representative membership;*
- *BLTs in elementary schools and preschools that include intervention specialists;*
- *TBTs spanning preschool-grade 3 that include intervention specialists; and*
- *Verification that all elementary teachers belong to at least one TBT with dedicated time for meetings.*

Niles and other participating districts commit to including all early childhood teachers, K-3 teachers (including intervention specialists, reading specialists, speech-language pathologists, and literacy coaches),

and applicable principals in LETRS training beginning in August 2016 and extending through the 2016-2017 school year.<sup>1</sup>

SSTs are charged with supporting districts in this effort. Early conversations with Niles involved reviewing data (e.g., the district's 45.4% proficiency rating in early literacy), assessing the district's level of use of the OIP to support full implementation of effective instructional strategies, the leadership support available throughout the district, the curriculum and how teachers aligned instruction to it, and the degree of coaching support provided and available to Niles personnel.

"When Niles teachers learned that LETRS was not a new program and that it would help them use existing materials more effectively, they said 'if this is what LETRS is, I'm in!,'" recalled Elia. "Effective means that core instruction focuses on the essentials and understanding that phonemic awareness and phonological

awareness, for example, aren't things that happen in Pre-K only. LETRS provides a loose sequence of instruction that facilitates looking across grade bands and providing core instruction in critical areas where needed, rather than taking a more narrow view of teaching certain concepts only in certain grades" explained Elia. "LETRS stresses the relationship of all the little components that lead to reading success and how we have to teach all of them," she added.

*"We wouldn't be able to benefit from LETRS as effectively without the OIP because there would be no opportunity for collaboration...The learning from each other – the collective learning – wouldn't be there."*

**Ann Marie Thigpen**  
Superintendent  
Niles City Schools

**Supporting implementation, inquiry, and learning.** "We have reading goals and we have a lot of people – 11 K-5 Title I teachers and many special education teachers – dedicated to providing support, so why do we have the scores we have? We know it's about how people work together and the need for consistent support to foster shared, focused work," said Thigpen.



LETRS training, as a component of *Ohio's Early Literacy Plan*, is as much about developing coaching capacity as it is about providing professional development (PD) to teachers and other school personnel. Internal and external coaches like D'Urso and Elia participate in training on nine modules. Elia, as the external coach and facilitator, has been trained in all modules and will participate in training again with the Niles team.

Participating in high-quality PD is important for coaches and school personnel. As important is what happens after training is provided. D'Urso and Elia will provide onsite support to foster classroom application of what was learned through PD. "Oftentimes we've said, 'here's what you should do' and then walked out the door. Adult implementation – what adults are doing to affect what happens with their kids – was the missing piece for us. Having teachers talk the same language and look at the same data – that's what's going to have an impact on our students," offered Thigpen.

Niles and SST leadership believe that participation in the LETRS training and as a pilot district under *Ohio's Early Literacy Plan* will result in a bigger pool of instructional practices for TBTs to draw from in planning

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<sup>1</sup> Ohio's early literacy plan district partnership agreement. (June 2016). Columbus, OH: Ohio Department of Education.

and delivering instruction to meet diverse learner needs. “We can go through the five-step process as part of the OIP and still get stuck when it comes to knowing what to do instructionally,” observed Thigpen.

SST 5 external coaches/facilitators, working in collaboration with D’Urso and Niles district leadership, will provide intensive coaching to support TBTs. The intensity of support will be intentionally faded as district and school personnel gain more understanding and confidence in leading and learning from their work. Thigpen cautions: “It will be important to develop team ownership for the work so that teams aren’t always looking to the principal or to the coach for ‘the answer’.”

## Looking Ahead

LETRS and the OIP work hand-in-hand in *Ohio’s Early Literacy Plan*. According to Thigpen, it will take improved instructional know-how and effective collaborative team structures to build collective instructional practice in Niles City Schools. “We wouldn’t be able to benefit from LETRS as effectively without the OIP because there would be no opportunity for collaboration. When would teachers discuss how they’re using the strategies based on the data? When would they talk about the fact that they’re teaching based on the data? The learning from each other – the collective learning – wouldn’t be there,” said Thigpen.

“We’ve struggled with adult implementation so participation in the literacy work tied to the OIP meets all of our needs. In five years, we want to be able to see a significantly improved K-3 literacy score. It’s not all about grades, but it is about learning. I want to know our kids are learning and that by the time they hit third grade they’re reading at grade level. In the end, it’s about students making the kind of progress they need to be successful learners,” said Thigpen.

*Readers are encouraged to check the **CORNERSTONE** section of the OLAC website toward the end of the 2016-17 school year for an update on the progress made by Niles City Schools through participation in Ohio’s Early Literacy Plan.*

## References

Moats, L. C. (1999). *Teaching reading is rocket science: What expert teachers of reading should know and be able to do*. Washington, DC: American Federation of Teachers.

### **For More Information**

For more information about **SST 5** and its work to improve literacy outcomes for all children, contact Michele DiMuzio, Director, SST Region 5, 7320 Palmyra Rd., Canfield, OH 44406, 330.533.8755; [michele.dimuzio@sstr5.org](mailto:michele.dimuzio@sstr5.org).

For more information about **Niles City Schools’** focused work to improve early literacy, contact Ann Marie Thigpen, Superintendent, Niles City Schools, 309 N. Rhodes Ave., Niles, OH 44446; 330.989.5095; [annmarie.thigpen@nilesmckinley.org](mailto:annmarie.thigpen@nilesmckinley.org).

For more information about the **OLAC and OIP** resources, contact Dr. Jim Gay, OLAC Co-director at [jimgay@basa-ohio.org](mailto:jimgay@basa-ohio.org).