

Comprehensive Literacy at Southeast Primary School

Improvement is in the air and on the walls at Southeast Elementary. The school's state rating for K-3 literacy has gone from an "F" to a "B" in just two years. Students are excited about reading and writing and the proof can be seen all around the building. Parents talk about how much their kids love reading. Students who weren't on track to meet the 3rd grade reading guarantee are back on track, with 25 first graders and 15 second graders reaching grade level reading expectations after eleven weeks of targeted intervention (Leveled Literacy Intervention). Within one year, the number of students reading two or more levels below grade level was reduced by 35% and number of students reading at or above grade level increased by 14%. What made these changes possible?

Developing a vision for change

When Principal David Fesemyer took over at Southeast Primary School in 2012, he could see right away that the school's educators were talented and hard-working. Despite this, more than 40% of students were reading below grade level and they tended to stay that way. He notes that it was clear "kids needed more than what we were giving them."

Making sustainable changes at Southeast took passion, respect, and planning. Principal Fesemyer spent his time building relationships among educators. With the goal of facilitating a culture of trust and mutual respect, Principal Fesemyer honored what educators had done in the past, and then motivated teachers to think together about improvement.

Partnering with Literacy Collaborative®

Recognizing the need to improve literacy teaching and learning, principal Fesemyer reached out to Kim Davis, Director of Teaching and Learning at the Mahoning County Educational Service Center, who recommended joining Literacy Collaborative, a nationally recognized, comprehensive literacy model implemented across the country in partnership with The Ohio State University and Lesley University.

Literacy Collaborative provides a coherent, consistent approach to literacy instruction across grade levels. The lynchpin of the model is in-depth professional development and coaching designed to support the delivery of high quality instruction. This support is delivered by school-based literacy coaches who receive extensive training and ongoing support from their university partner.

Once the decision was made to move forward with Literacy Collaborative, the school arranged site visits to Harding Elementary in Youngtown City Schools, allowing teachers to see Literacy Collaborative in action. The site visits were critical to building a vision for literacy

Southeast Primary School



Located in Portage County Ohio, about 50 miles southeast of Cleveland, Southeast Primary School serves more than 300 students in grades K-2.

If you would like more information, please contact Southeast Primary School at (330) 654-5841.



at Southeast because they made the instructional model tangible and provided an opportunity for collaboration.

Investing in people rather than programs



Getting the resources to implement a comprehensive literacy approach required the cooperation and investment of the school board. In 2015, the board approved a four-year budget which represented their commitment to invest in the teachers at Southeast Primary. Funds that may have been used to buy another core literacy program were put toward hiring a literacy coach, Michelle Rentsch, and purchasing materials for Leveled Literacy Intervention.

The Parent Teacher Organization and the Board provided critical supports for comprehensive literacy at Southeast Primary. When the time came to build a bookroom, a teacher's father built the shelving and a local supplier gave them a discount on the wood. The school's educators worked together to pull books out of closets and cabinets, level them, and put them in the bookroom.

Building a culture of learning

Although there are many key ingredients to making comprehensive literacy a reality, the hands-on participation of leadership is among the most important at Southeast Primary. Principal Fesemyer attends every professional development session. "He lets the staff know that he's aware change is hard," says coach Michelle Rentsch. This helps educators overcome fear of change so they can do their best work.

The school started a building-based literacy leadership team that meets once a month. The team, including the coach, principal, and representatives from each grade level, shares responsibility for supporting change at the school and helps develop collective ownership of implementation.

The team is currently working on developing a written vision for literacy at Southeast Primary School.



Maintaining momentum

The journey of implementing high quality comprehensive literacy is not easy. The team at Southeast Primary School is quick to note that change involves a lot of hard work and investment from the principal, the literacy coach, all the teachers, and the community. Although improvements are celebrated, the educators at Southeast Primary know that the work doesn't end, but it evolves into new opportunities to reach even higher than before.