

Turning Pages: Literacy Intervention in New Mexico

In Las Cruces, New Mexico, a team of school district leaders have initiated a literacy intervention program that quickly demonstrated results. Their focus on early childhood education led them to search for and choose the program that could best support their youngest students in learning how to read.



Literacy, a fundamental human right, is key to cognitive development, social-emotional growth, learning opportunities, and lifelong success. Without intervention, the far-reaching ramifications of an early struggle with literacy can start with academic difficulties and lowered confidence and can potentially worsen from there. The urgent necessity for effective early literacy education is supported by the Science of Reading, a large body of scientific research emphasizing the crucial role of phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and reading comprehension.

Changing Lives with Literacy

For Las Cruces Public Schools, a district of almost 25,000 students across 40 schools, learning to read and building literacy skills has dramatically enhanced outcomes for many struggling students. As we look at their story, we'll be highlighting the potential of science-based reading instruction to transform lives and improve society; a literate community supports economic growth, intellectual development, and social stability, so the provision of robust early education directly affects the growth of our collective societal capabilities.

In Las Cruces, the Science of Reading, Structured Literacy, and the Orton-Gillingham approach (all of which promote systematic, cumulative, explicit instruction in foundational reading skills) informed an

intervention program addressing the community's profound literacy needs. This success story shares some of the tangible positive outcomes of one district's commitment to a well-structured early literacy intervention program.

Paving the Path Forward

We spoke with Esther Peterson, Associate Director of Teaching and Learning ELA and SS K–12 for Las Cruces Public Schools. Peterson informed us that in 2017, interim superintendent Dr. Stephen Sanchez was working with state senators in Santa Fe, writing the bill that would lead to requiring first grade students to be screened for dyslexia, accompanying a general shift toward a Structured Literacy approach to instruction. New Mexico then passed legislation requiring dyslexia screening in 2018. Dr. Sanchez wanted the district to initiate the program with their own students right away. Educators and district leaders were asking questions like: "Who will the screeners be? How will they be trained? What kinds of tests will be used by the screeners with students?" Sophisticated systems needed to be put in place to support students, so the deputy superintendent, Dr. Wendy Miller Tomlinson, asked leaders to put together a task force to evaluate options and report on the best paths forward.

The task force examined a wide variety of different programs. Many strict criteria focused on implementing Science of Reading principles through a Structured Literacy approach. Educators needed something cumulative and explicit, but also very easy for teachers to use without a lot of planning or preparation. "With S.P.I.R.E., students go through steps that cover every aspect of learning, from decoding to encoding, and very few programs actually complete the learning circle in such a comprehensive way," said Peterson. "We loved the organized routine and the sense of safety in learning, something we were definitely looking for. A couple of weeks before we eventually made our final decision, we put our entire team through a full day of training in S.P.I.R.E. and we all discovered that we absolutely loved the program. It's so explicit, connecting phonological awareness to phonics, and so closely aligned to exactly what we had been searching so hard for. We were thrilled and gratified to have found a solution that could work so effectively to support our students with dyslexia."

Funding the Program and Training the Teachers

The district used grant funding to support their purchase and their teacher training. "I obtained a Coordinated Early Intervening Services (CEIS) grant designated for early intervention," Peterson said, "and we purchased S.P.I.R.E. for all our first-grade teachers. Then we immediately launched professional development courses, coaching, and modeling by skilled trainers who supported the implementation. The teachers who were early implementers quickly started reporting that their kids had never learned so fast. We heard a lot of that kind of feedback, very early on, with many reports about students who had always struggled with you-name-it but were suddenly learning it, understanding it, and remembering it. The teachers loved the soft script and all the components of the program and kept talking about how easy it was to use. Acting as a flexible scaffold for teachers, the program continually enabled them to make important decisions, helping the teachers feel valued because they could deliver teaching points the way they wanted to."



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Laser-focused on supporting students in first grade and helping them build literacy skills, the district hadn't investigated other levels yet in their implementation. The following year, however, they applied for a Comprehensive Literacy State Development (CLSD) discretionary grant from the U.S. Department of Education, listing S.P.I.R.E. as the intervention they would be implementing for Grades K–7, expanding the program to all those levels. The grant, which was approved in December 2019, required the hiring of additional intervention coaches, which the district kicked off in January 2020. However, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, educators were all teaching remotely by March. S.P.I.R.E. provided access to digital materials, so the district's teachers could use S.P.I.R.E. with students remotely throughout the next year. The teachers who used S.P.I.R.E. materials with fidelity every day (not all teachers chose to do so) found that their students continued to successfully learn and make measurable progress.

Returning to the Classroom

When educators and students returned fully to the classroom in 2022, more training was available to implement in person, and they continued coaching and modeling by trainers. Leaders tracked implementation and assessment completion with a shared internal spreadsheet, very pleased with the results they saw. In 2023, to date, they've focused the bulk of their work on training and materials for special education teachers, on making sure trained teachers have everything they need, and on progress monitoring within the program.

Looking Toward a Bright Future

Some of the district's schools put the whole school through intervention at the same time, so in 2023 the district also gave all students new placement tests for S.P.I.R.E. and added more levels to teacher's kits so they could be equipped with all the levels they could potentially need for their students. "Testing was actually quite eye-opening for us, in terms of what the students needed," Peterson said. "We were surprised to find that even students in higher grade levels tested significantly lower than their current grade level. That round of tests gave us a lot of important data. Our teachers are now grouping their students according to the S.P.I.R.E. level indicated by this round of placement tests. In the middle of the year, they'll do the placement tests again and regroup students as needed. Students are growing so fast, they can often move to a new level to get the instruction they need."

They're excited about the future, Peterson adds. "Our plan for the future is to help schools across our district maintain the incredible growth we've witnessed, and to continue providing support throughout the ongoing implementation while working toward sustainability. We're hoping for even higher implementation rates next year, as well. We're currently in meetings with district leadership to share the amazing results we've seen with S.P.I.R.E. We're so glad it's not a guessing game anymore. I can't say enough about how glad we are that we chose S.P.I.R.E. for our students."

Going Above and Beyond

At EPS School Specialty, we love the Las Cruces Public Schools motto and agree with it so whole-heartedly we could almost make it our own: "Going Above and Beyond for Every Student, Every Day." We were deeply gratified to learn about the progress and growth the LCPS students have shown throughout these early stages of the district's successful S.P.I.R.E. implementation and we're so grateful to Esther Peterson and her team for sharing their experience with us and with you! We're looking forward to hearing more about this district's progress in the future. We hope their success inspires others to take similar steps to support student literacy and early childhood education.

[**Find out how S.P.I.R.E. can help your students!**](#)