Wilkes-Barre, a KTO district, Overcomes District-wide Poverty to Achieve Reading Success

Wilkes-Barre Area School District is in Luzerne County, Pennsylvania, and includes five elementary schools that support 24 Kindergarten classrooms and 24 first grade classrooms with around 500 students in each grade level. Four of the five elementary schools in the district are among the most in the state for their economically disadvantaged populations. There is also an unusually high transient rate in this school district, which poses unique challenges across the board.

Dodson Elementary School is the most impoverished elementary school in the district with 91% economically disadvantaged and has consistently been designated as a Tier III chronically low achieving school by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. Research indicates that if Tier II and Tier III intervention programs are implemented with fidelity, over 90% of students can achieve core/ benchmark status in grades KS 2. This is exactly what WilkesS Barre school district has accomplished.

Prior to Step By Step Learning's intervention in Wilkes-Barre three years ago, the classroom teachers taught reading in isolation and were solely responsible for

- progress monitoring,
- calculating and inputting data into the computer system,
- establishing intensive and strategic groups,
- small group and individualized instruction, and other activities

while the Title I teacher was solely responsible for benchmark testing.

Now, all teachers and building Principals work together and support each other to provide a cohesive system to ensure student literacy achievement. By working smarter and together, the entire teaching team – classroom teachers, Title I teachers, aides, tutors, the Step By Step Learning® in-classroom facilitator and mentor, and the building Principal – is responsible for progress monitoring, professional development, benchmark assessment, and small group and individualized student instruction so no child gets left behind. The Wilkes-Barre elementary teaching team uses explicit modeled lessons and benefits from in-classroom, personal mentoring and coaching from the Step By Step Learning® consultant. Targeted small group intervention logs are used to keep track of students' progress and differentiated small group instruction materials and manipulatives are provided as part of the complete

program so teachers no longer have to create their own materials and can instead use that time to interact with the children.

"Over the past three years Step By Step Learning® has given me the resources to substantially improve my student's academic achievement. The small group intervention kits and side-by-side coaching support helped me to work smarter and not harder. This program has given me the gift of time by teaching me the importance of explicit teaching throughout the core and small group enrichment time.

My students know what is expected of them and are mastering important reading skills earlier in the year. " – Maria Unice, Kindergarten Teacher, Leo E. Solomon-Plains Elementary School

Since embarking on the journey to ultimately achieve a 100% benchmark through Step By Step Learning's comprehensive early childhood and oral language program, the Wilkes-Barre Kindergarten benchmark has increased from 49% in fall 2014 to 81% in winter 2015, a 65% improvement rate – and the benchmark goal for Kindergarten at the end of this school year is to reach 88%. Looks like a piece of cake for this team!

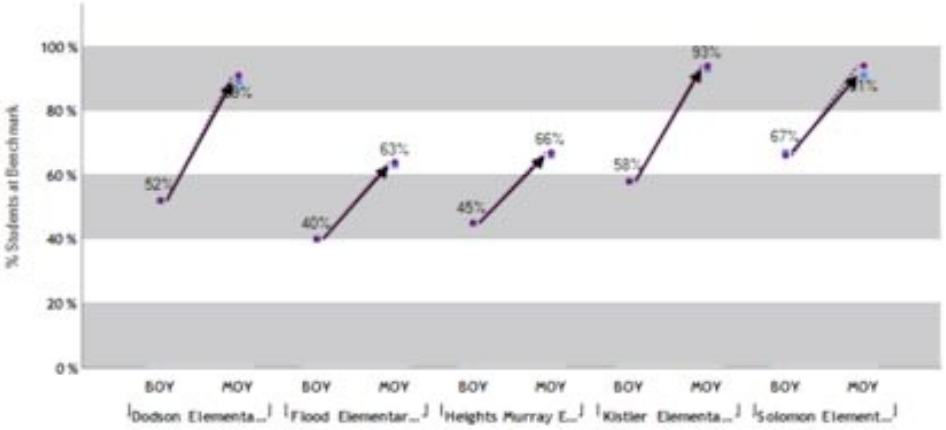
The program was developed specifically for the five elementary schools in the Wilkes-Barre school district. Step By Step Learning® delivered a full strand of programming and intervention methodologies, including instructional modeling and coaching, student intervention response meetings, progress monitoring, performance monitoring, and middle-of-year and end-of-year meetings with building leadership teams to create a comprehensive literacy plan. The National Reading Panel's assessment states that the best approach to reading instruction is one that incorporates explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, systematic phonics instruction, methods to improve fluency, and ways to improve comprehension. The teachers are embracing the process and "working smarter, not harder". Changes in instructional techniques and implementation of a comprehensive plan have enabled the dramatic improvement in literacy for the Kindergarteners at Wilkes-Barre.

School	BOY	EOY	Growth
Flood	44%	88%	100%
Kistler	52%	82%	58%
Solomon	66%	95%	44%
Heights	40%	72%	83%
Dodson	53%	85%	60%

2013-2014 DIBELS® Next Data by Elementary School

The results at Wilkes-Barre are even more impressive when one realizes that the teachers have only 45 minutes of intervention time each day with a 120-minute literacy block. During the first year of program implementation, they averaged five, six, or seven intervention groups and could not see every child every day, even though at least 30-minutes of intervention every day is recommended. Throughout the District, there is limited parent involvement coupled with an urban, transient population that makes literacy improvements difficult to achieve and sustain. Some of the children may not be in the district long enough for sustained improvements to be achieved; and other children enter the school mid-year and do not benefit from full exposure to an intervention program. That was, however, before Step By Step Learning® was engaged by Wilkes-Barre Area School District.

The teachers embraced the program and overcame the transiency issue, bringing the new mid-year students up to the same levels as their classmates, as depicted in the following table:



+71% +58% +47% +60% +36%

With the transient population reflected by the black arrow and the fulltime students represented by the purple dotted line, it is apparent that, due to the diligence of the teachers and the robustness of the Step By Step Learning® program, the literacy challenge is being met in Wilkes-Barre Area School District.

The impressive and sustainable reading success in Wilkes-Barre's elementary schools is proof that even in the most challenging of environments there are no excuses. Step By Step Learning® brings a sharp focus to what needs to be taught in the early grade levels and, not just what needs to be taught, but also

why and when it needs to be taught. The process provides a laser focus to really pinpoint where a child is having difficulties and to isolate that issue and address it explicitly before moving on. The elementary teachers in Wilkes-Barre have combined both the art and the science of teaching reading and the Step By Step Learning® methodologies have become a permanent part of each teacher's day.

"Step By Step Learning has provided me the opportunity through professional development to implement effective reading strategies during systematic modeling and coaching. After incorporating these explicit teaching approaches it has allowed me to clearly address all of my student needs during small group interventions and core whole group instruction which has led to a positive impact on my student's overall learning. Demonstrating this growth in my student's achievement has been proof that 'Working Smarter Not Harder is the Secret!' The last three years have been the most gratifying experience in my career and has revived my love of teaching. Thank you Step By Step Learning!" – Kathleen Szafran, Kindergarten Teacher, Wilkes-Barre Area School District.

Something to think about…

A student who finishes second grade without being able to read has only a 1 in 4 chance of reading at grade level by the end of elementary school. [1]

If identified early and given research-based intervention, 90%-95% of children at risk for reading failure will become fluent readers. [2]

Prevention of reading failure can reduce the need for special education services later in a student's educational life. Special education costs are, on average, double those of general education.[3]

Competent readers developed through early detection and prevention assistance will go on to succeed in both academics and life, reducing the need for expensive and expansive government sponsored social programs.[4]

Children who do not learn to read constitute approximately 17% of the population and comprise more than 50% of the special education population.[5]

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[1] National Center for Learning Disabilities
[2] National Center for Learning Disabilities
[3] National Center for Learning Disabilities
[4] National Center for Learning Disabilities
[5] National Center for Learning Disabilities