

2024 Ellison Foundation Grant  
Final Reflection  
Debora Ortner  
Ridgefield School District

### **Project: LETRS**

During the 2023-2024 school year, the Ridgefield School District adopted an instructional philosophy of literacy instruction that aligns with the Science of Reading. In order to provide more information about science-based instructional practices for teachers in RSD, I established a learning opportunity with the LETRS (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling) program. The LETRS program uses a foundational text coupled with online learning videos to train teachers in the science of how students learn to read and write. The LETRS program is used throughout the country to train teachers and school staff on the Science of Reading and the teaching practices that align with this body of research. In the 23-24 school year, 13 teachers and 2 administrators opted into the program that I facilitated. There was so much interest in the LETRS cohort in 23-24, that I decided to extend the program in 24-25. Those teachers who participated in Volume 1 of the LETRS program in 23-24 wanted to work through Volume 2 in 24-25. There was also a new group of teachers who wanted to begin their LETRS journey with Volume 1 during the 24-25 school year. In order to support the work of the teachers and to grow my own skills as a LETRS Facilitator, we applied for the Ellison Foundation Grant for the 24-25 school year. The Ellison Foundation grant has covered the cost of twelve teachers' LETRS Volume 2 course fees, one instructional coach course fees for LETRS Volume 1, and my continued training through the Public Debriefs for Volume 2. This allowed me to continue our twice monthly cohort debrief sessions that deepened our understanding of the course content throughout the year. Building on the success of our first cohort, fifteen teachers joined LETRS Volume 1 (not a part of the grant) for the 24-25 school year, spreading the knowledge of how students learn to read into even more Ridgefield classrooms.

### **Teachers' Reflections on their LETRS full-course learning:**

- While I knew before of the importance of reading comprehension, I have learned about the importance of how oral language development, vocabulary, and background knowledge affect reading comprehension.
- I now understand that I need to focus on comprehension of text at the sentence level to help my students build mental models of the text.
- I have a deeper understanding as I've read, watched and applied all that I've learned through the LETRS training. I notice how comprehension-rich our curriculum (Wit and Wisdom) is. By reading a text multiple times and teaching something different each time.
- I am now a lot more aware of the importance of proper letter formation. I gained some ideas that will help me with students who are left handed as well.
- My biggest change is in working more with letter reversals. Before LETRS, I didn't worry about letter reversals because it's developmentally appropriate. Now I see that students who are not forming their letters correctly still haven't mastered that letter.

- I have a better sense now of how to administer formative assessments in addition to the summative ones I was doing. I also understand better what level of support to give during the writing process because of how many executive functioning skills it requires. I need to over prepare my students for their first draft.
- I have added some of the vocabulary strategies into my teaching routine. I've also worked a lot more than previous years on complete sentences and letter formation.
- My participation has helped me evaluate the new ELA curriculum I've been teaching from and appreciate all that is in alignment with SOR (ie: Deep Dives), so I can appreciate those parts and give them their due attention.
- It has really made me evaluate my teaching. I feel more intuned to students' needs and strengths. I'm excited to take what I've learned from LETRS 1/2 and start fresh next year.
- My SOR practice has been strengthened by LETRS and I am excited to continue my learning and putting all the pieces together with W&W!
- I have been using so much of what I have learned through LETRS. I love having the manual at hand for a reference. The way these lessons were spread over two years was super helpful so that I could implement strategies as I went, without being too overwhelmed. LETRS has been by far the most impactful learning I have participated in as a kindergarten teacher.
- LETRS learning helped me contribute to the understanding of the science of reading best practices when my team was determining priority standards from our new state standards. It's also given me more confidence as a writing teacher by helping me norm my evaluation skills of student work and filling in some gaps I had on how to instruct.
- This training helped me identify disabilities in students that were previously unknown, I have been able to implement a new SOR curriculum with understanding around the knowledge building importance and the intentional design behind other pieces of the curriculum, and I have focused more heavily on fluency and vocabulary in my classroom because of what I have learned in LETRS!

### **Student Impact:**

#### Phonological Awareness Growth

Teacher	Number of Students at Benchmark: Fall	Number of Students at Benchmark: Spring
Kindergarten A	11 *winter	14
1st Grade A	7	18
1st Grade B	10	14
1st Grade C	11	16
1st Grade D	4	10
3rd Grade A	N/A	N/A
3rd Grade B	N/A	N/A

### Phonics Growth

Teacher	Number of Students at Benchmark: Fall	Number of Students at Benchmark: Spring
Kindergarten A	11 *winter	14
1st Grade A	4	14
1st Grade B	6	14
1st Grade C	10	14
1st Grade D	5	11
3rd Grade A	13	18
3rd Grade B	11	20

### Vocabulary Growth

Teacher	Number of Students at Benchmark: Fall	Number of Students at Benchmark: Spring
Kindergarten A	9 *winter	10
1st Grade A	6	9
1st Grade B	4	11
1st Grade C	8	15
1st Grade D	2	8
3rd Grade A	13	15
3rd Grade B	7	13

### Overall Comprehension Growth

Teacher	Number of Students at Benchmark: Fall	Number of Students at Benchmark: Spring
Kindergarten A	9* winter	12

First Grade A	3	10
1st Grade B	4	10
1st Grade C	9	16
1st Grade D	3	6
3rd Grade A	9	15
3rd Grade B	10	12

**Next Steps:**

I plan to continue to facilitate LETRS program cohorts for both Volume 1 and Volume 2 in the 25-26 school year. RSD Superintendent, Dr. Jenny Rodriguez, has shared her hope of all K-3 teachers participating in the LETRS program training. I also plan to open the learning from LETRS to all teachers by hosting Thirty-Minute Thursday professional learning sessions next school year. For 30 minutes before and after school each Thursday, I will share an instructional strategy or routine from the LETRS program that supports learning for all students.