

# SPOTLIGHTING SCHOOLS' LITERACY JOURNEYS

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## Executive Summary

Addressing decades of low, stagnant literacy achievement is one of the top educational priorities in the state of Illinois. Since the Illinois Board of Education (ISBE) created its Comprehensive Literacy Plan in 2024, various tools and training have been introduced to support schools. As ISBE works to assist districts with the implementation of the state literacy plan, the Illinois Early Literacy Coalition is concurrently sharing insights from those who are already doing the hard work of trying to change literacy and therefore life trajectories of their students.

## Research & Methodology

The Illinois Early Literacy Coalition conducted research with six diverse Illinois school districts that demonstrated literacy improvements over the past two years. These districts deserve attention because they are moving the needle on student growth, even though, as several of them acknowledge, they are still not satisfied with their results. The research involved administrator interviews and teacher surveys to identify key initiatives and practices that led to improved literacy outcomes. Districts interviewed include:

- Cicero SD 99
- Morton Grove SD 70
- Peoria SD 150
- Rockford SD 205
- Sesser-Valier CUSD 196
- CUSD 200 (Wheaton)

## Key Findings: The 5 C's of Literacy Success

From the research, five management strategies that school and district administrators can use emerged as critical factors for improving literacy outcomes:

- **Collaboration** – Strong teamwork among educators through professional learning communities (PLCs), shared data analysis, and trust-building.
- **Coaching** – Dedicated literacy coaches providing targeted professional development and instructional support.
- **Coherence** – Clear scope and sequence in literacy instruction, structured intervention systems, and consistent data-driven decision-making.
- **Continuous Improvement** – Ongoing evaluation of teaching strategies, adaptation to new research, and explicit administrative commitment to literacy reform.

- **Calendar (Scheduling)** – Optimized instructional time, intervention scheduling, and professional development opportunities to maximize literacy support.

## Challenges & Recommendations

Despite progress, districts faced challenges such as limited capacity (e.g., coaching shortages), funding constraints, and inadequately prepared novice teachers.

Recommendations include increased state funding, enhanced teacher preparation programs, and expanded professional development opportunities.

## Conclusion

The research underscores why effective literacy reform requires strategic investment, strong district leadership, and long-term commitment. While challenges persist, the success stories of these districts offer valuable insights for driving literacy improvements across Illinois.

## **Introduction**

Addressing decades of low, stagnant literacy achievement by reforming classroom literacy instruction is one of the top educational priorities in the state of Illinois. The Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) has embarked on a journey to improve literacy outcomes over the last few years, with a significant state-level accomplishment being ISBE's Comprehensive Literacy Plan (required by SB 2243 (Lightford/Mayfield)). Since the Plan's adoption in 2024, ISBE has continued developing tools to support schools to make the most of the plan, including a curriculum rubric, coaching guidance, a district literacy plan template, and most recently, a series of trainings for teachers. But despite this work, schools ultimately have the right to decide whether and how to adjust their literacy programs. There's no top-down approach that will circumvent the need for high-quality local implementation to improve literacy outcomes for Illinois students.

As ISBE works to assist districts with the implementation of the state literacy plan, the Illinois Early Literacy Coalition is concurrently sharing insights from those who are already doing the hard work of trying to change literacy, and therefore life, trajectories of their students. We conducted in-depth research with districts in Illinois who are top performers, as measured by scores on state standardized tests. We asked administrators how they're thinking about foundational literacy instruction, how they're supporting their teachers, and what they've identified as their greatest triumphs and challenges in an ongoing pursuit of literacy justice. This paper is our attempt to capture and share their stories.

## Methodology

The Illinois Early Literacy Coalition's Policy Committee interviewed six diverse school districts across Illinois to identify what key initiatives they were undertaking to improve their literacy outcomes. We asked each district a standard set of questions, including what they consider to be their most impactful changes to literacy instruction, barriers to accomplishing those changes, and what they would like to continue working on. Usually answers organically touched on curriculum, teacher professional development, and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS); if not, we asked specifically about those areas. After conducting interviews with each districts' leadership, we asked them to share a survey with their teachers to round out the district's story. See the Appendix for more information on the interviews.

### Why We Chose These Districts

We used three main sources of data as we decided which districts to reach out to: the January 2024 Harvard/Stanford "Education Recovery Scorecard" [report](#) and [interactive website](#) demonstrating that Illinois was one of three states to fully recover its learning loss in English Language Arts (ELA), The 74 Million's project that maps ELA scores by district poverty and designates a small number of "exceptional districts," and Illinois report card data. While some districts stood out on all of these analyses, others were quite different. One reason for this is that just because a district "recovers" its pandemic learning loss, that does not necessarily equate to the district achieving a particularly impressive overall ELA score.

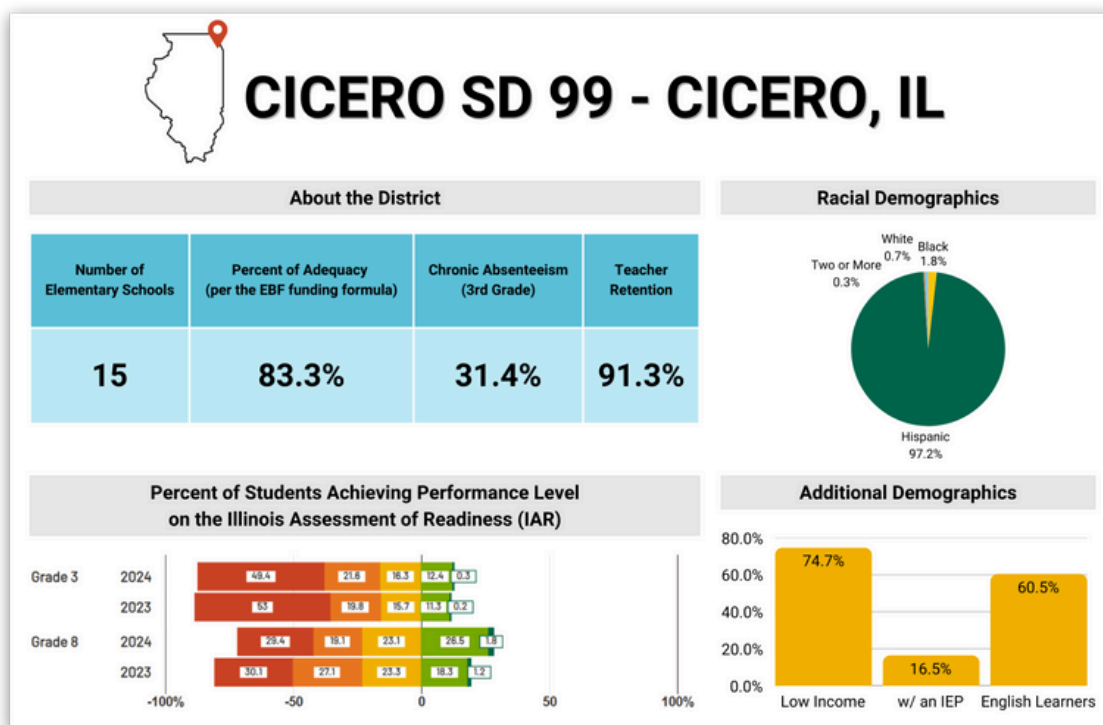
We intentionally selected districts varying by size and regions of Illinois, and we prioritized those who have either higher overall rates of poverty or impressive achievements among their cohort of low-income students. We also reached out to quite a few additional districts that we did not end up talking to (and we will note a couple of especially impressive ones in the chart below, though we regret we don't have their stories to highlight). Thus, we chose these districts because there was something compelling about their data and we wanted to capture their story. These are not necessarily the highest performers, but they are places that have been actively engaged in improving their students' reading skills. We are especially grateful they took the time to speak with us and share these insights.

District	Why we chose it
<b>Cicero SD 99</b>	Cicero made a lot of recovery growth in the 22 - 23 school year. It is also a high-poverty, heavily multilingual district that has made dramatic changes to literacy instruction recently.
<b>Peoria SD 150</b>	Peoria made considerable recovery growth overall and among their Black student group in the 22 - 23 school year. It is a high-poverty district that is undergoing literacy instruction changes.
<b>Rockford SD 205</b>	Rockford was one of the only districts that made growth during the pandemic. They demonstrated growth overall between 2019 - 2023.
<b>CUSD 200</b>	CUSD 200, in Wheaton, had the highest recovery growth in the state among its Black student group and high recovery growth overall.
<b>Morton Grove SD 70</b>	Morton Grove had the highest recovery growth in the state <sup>1</sup> among its low-income student group and high recovery growth overall.
<b>Sesser-Valier</b>	Sesser-Valier was identified as an exceptional district on The 74 Million analysis and showed outstanding recovery growth.
<b>North Palos SD 117<sup>2</sup></b>	North Palos, with 62% low-income students, earned an "exceptional district" designation and was among the top ten districts in the state for recovery growth. The 2024 Illinois Report Card shows it as the second highest elementary district in the state for ELA achievement among its low-income cohort, just slightly higher than its 2023 third highest rating.
<b>Ramsey CUSD 2042<sup>2</sup></b>	Not included in the Stanford/Harvard analysis, Ramsey is among the most exceptional of the "exceptional districts," achieving more than three times the expected ELA proficiency rate. Both 2023 and 2024 Illinois Report Card data show strong rates of proficiency for this 65% low-income, small school district.

<sup>1</sup> Note that the Stanford/Harvard study omitted a large number of districts from the scatterplot measuring growth among cohorts of students, possibly because of small numbers of students in many districts.

<sup>2</sup> We were unable to connect with these districts for interviews, but as examples that ranked highly in all three data sources we looked at, we wanted to acknowledge their achievement in this list.

## District Profiles



### Cicero Elementary School District 99

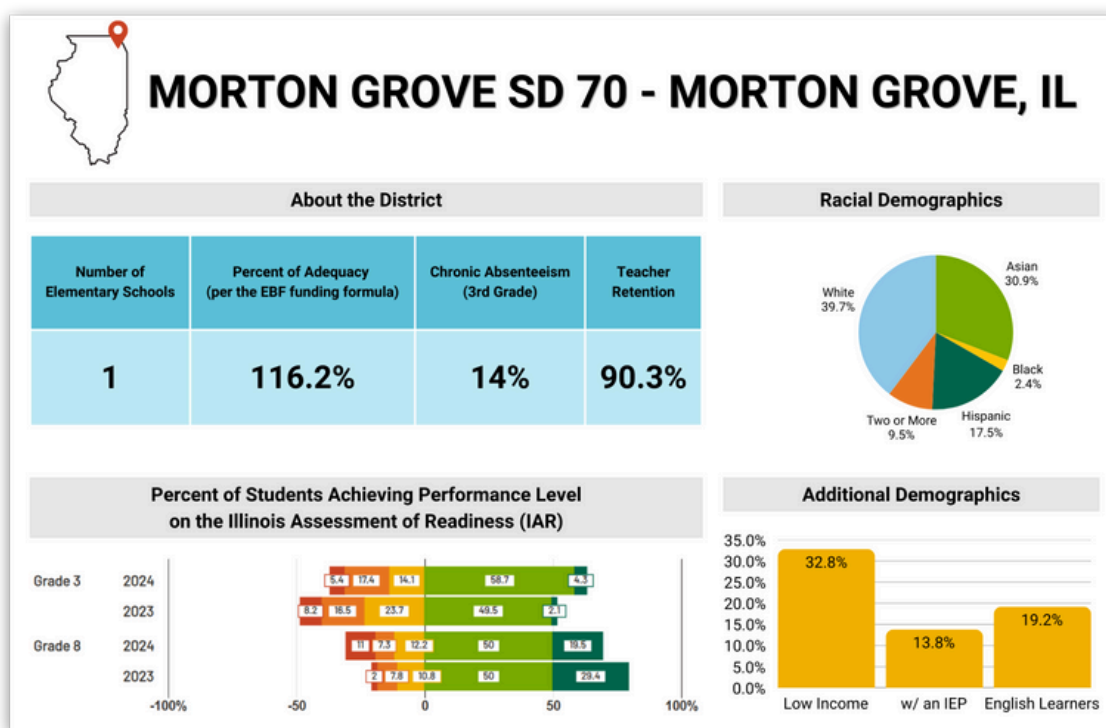
With nearly 1,000 teachers spread across 15 PreK - grade 8 schools, Cicero School District 99 started their literacy transformation in 2022, investing in LETRS<sup>3</sup> training for a small group of teachers. That sparked more teacher interest and the journey to align literacy instruction to research took hold. Cicero has made a multi-year investment in teacher and administrator professional learning. The district paid teachers to attend summer Professional Development (PD), which included 38 hours of LETRS training volume 1 and up to 32 hours for LETRS volume 2. They also have organized podcast discussions, an asynchronous message board, and a summer literacy symposium that hosts top researchers in the literacy field. As a district with a strong commitment to building Spanish and English biliteracy for their student populations, integrating this work between their literacy and multilingual departments was paramount.

After building the capacity of over 100 teachers, the district purchased Amplify's CKLA dual language curriculum for reading. To support implementation, all schools have an instructional coach, plus the district has four coaches that further support their schools. Instructional coaches work with teachers to preview and plan for the next instructional units and participate in walkthroughs alongside district-level personnel. The walkthroughs have

<sup>3</sup> LETRS, or Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling, is a professional development series developed by Dr. Louisa Moats and which several states have mandated across school districts.

built trust because they are consistent, and teachers are given feedback in a non-evaluative way. Along with professional learning, curriculum, and walkthroughs, Cicero has adopted DIBELS as a universal screener and Burst for intervention. They also administer RAN (Rapid Automatized Naming) to screen for dyslexia.

One barrier Cicero still faces is supporting new graduates from education preparation programs where they were not taught how to teach reading in ways that aligned with the district's new approach. But district administrators remain steadfast in their efforts, achieving their highest single-year gain on the annual state standardized assessments and increased numbers of students meeting or exceeding expectations for the past 3 years. They have seen proficiency on their universal screeners for Kindergarten, both English and Spanish, nearly double within one year. While they acknowledge they still have a long way to go, Cicero SD 99 notes the growth they have seen. Their test scores validate the decision to switch to a structured literacy approach and then implement a new curriculum aligned with that approach.



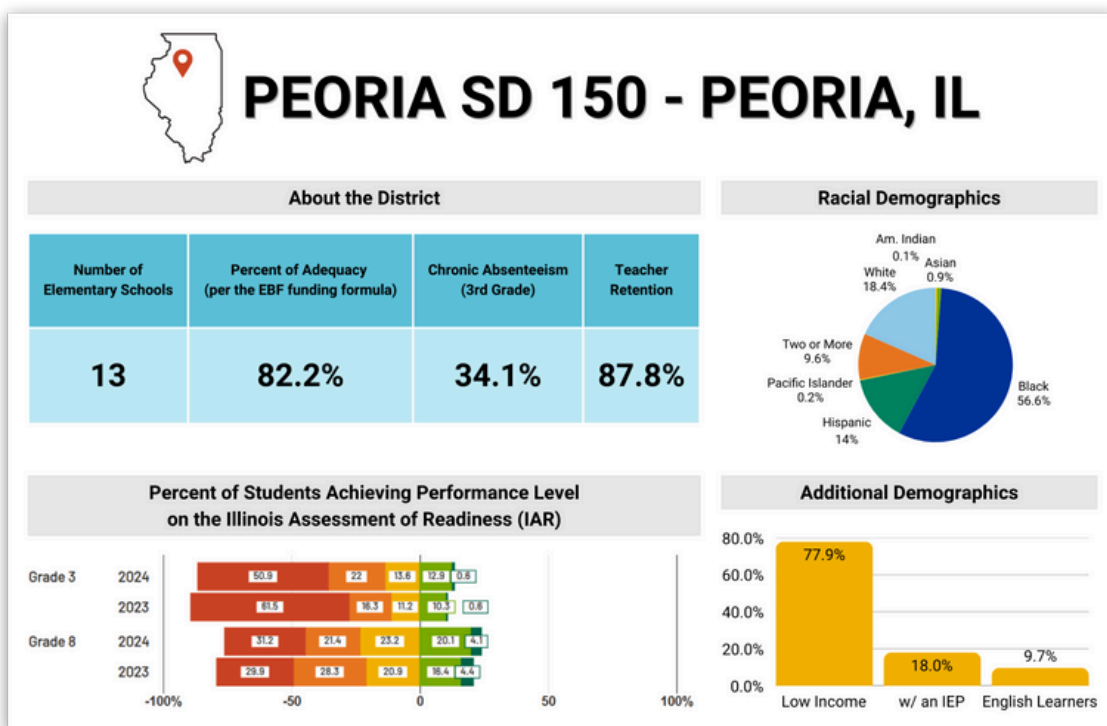
## Morton Grove Elementary School District 70

This one-school district began to transform its approach to pedagogy in 2017-18. Morton Grove threw itself into the PLC (Professional Learning Community) model of teacher collaboration with an enthusiasm and thoughtfulness that we rarely see. As the current superintendent explained, "We had a crew team rowing in different directions, so we needed to row together." The staff committed to a PLC built on learning and inquiry, focused on a

consistent set of four questions: What do students know? What should they demonstrate? What if they don't get it? And how do we extend learning for kids who do get it? Grade-level teachers and administrators meet together for an hour each week in a planning room that includes a constantly-updated data wall. Every three weeks the focus shifts to a different learning standard from the Common Core State Standards; each of these units begins with a pretest and continues with formative assessments. Teachers compare outcomes and identify strategies that seem to be most effective. One critical and oft-repeated comment made by the team is that their discussions of compared outcomes are never intended to foster competition or to elevate some teachers above others. Teachers understand, "my data is not a reflection of who I am as a person. Students benefit when we open up and share our data."

Unlike most districts, Morton Grove eschews a boxed curriculum. Depending on the standard being taught, teachers that see strong results share their expertise and resources. The district also notes that they begin the year with a universal screener, but MTSS groups are flexible and always based on information from the data wall.

In response to our questions about further goals and challenges, Morton Grove's team identified a need for greater consistency across classrooms in terms of grading, defining proficiency, and maintaining rigorous but appropriate standards. Unlike some of our other interview subjects, Morton Grove had no qualms about preparation of teacher candidates,, but they also stressed that they prize soft skills, such as a willingness to collaborate and learn from more experienced teachers.



## Peoria School District 150

Peoria is a unit district with 13,000 students spread across 13 elementary schools. Trying to shift a district this large presents a number of challenges, even before trying to implement a literacy plan. Principals have different agendas; teachers who have been in the district, probably in the same school, for many years are confident in their professional judgment and may be resistant to change; schools have different demographics with disparate student populations. Peoria, by its own admission, is “a work in progress.” Though we congratulated the district on their recovery growth, district leadership was clear that they have much more work to do and hold a strong commitment to improving.

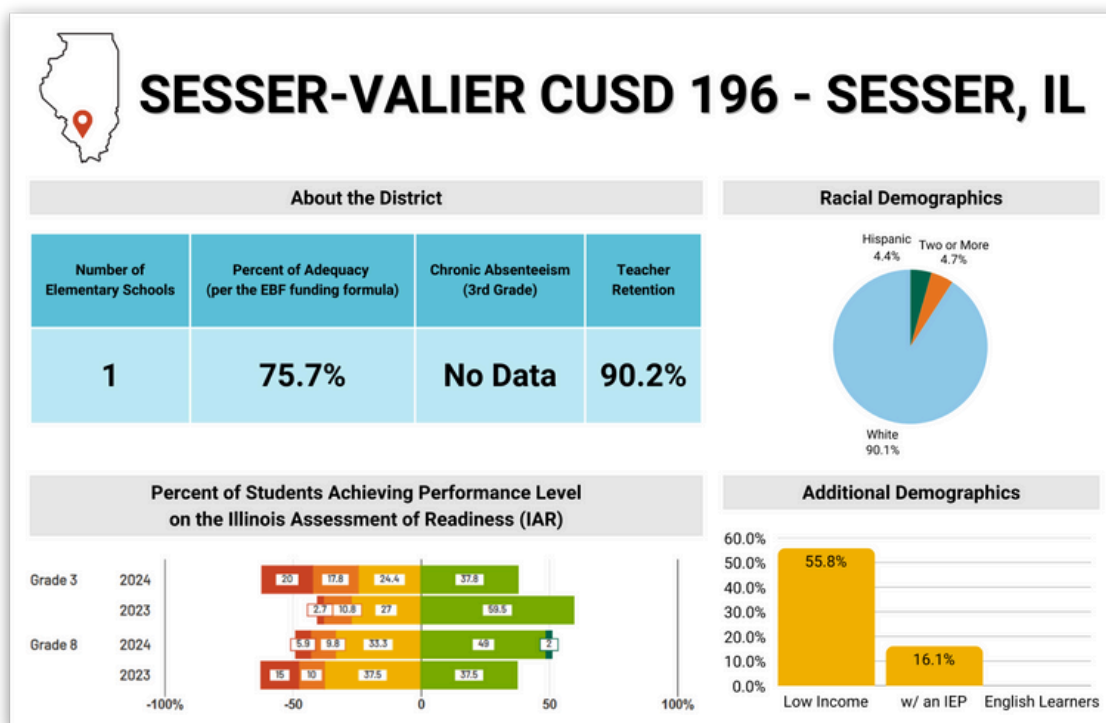
One of the first steps taken by the Peoria team in the fall of 2022 was purchasing 40 licenses for LETRS training. Any staff member who wanted to learn an alternative pedagogy to the current, unsuccessful “balanced literacy” approach they had used were invited to participate in this PD program. Only twelve teachers signed up that year. The next year, an additional thirteen teachers registered. Still, this represented a small fraction of the total teaching staff in Peoria and demonstrates the obstacles with optional, unpaid PD. So this year, Grades 1-2 teachers are all receiving LETRS training during their PLC time, and the reception has been enthusiastic. A related goal is to have building administrators also participate in the LETRS training in order to learn about the importance of sequential, explicit phonics instruction combined with a knowledge-building curriculum.

COVID money was used to pay for literacy tutors and the district believes that decision was correct. Teachers are paid to tutor during their planning time, and retired teachers have

returned as tutors. But in a district with limited resources, the choice to provide tutoring represented a trade-off against coaches, stipends or subs for professional development, or new curriculum. The district lacks funding for a new curriculum but has aspired to pull together various resources more coherently.

One of the brightest spots in Peoria's literacy landscape is the achievement of English Learners (ELs). While the reasons for this success are not entirely clear, a few contributing factors include lower absenteeism rates in the bilingual program and a focus on project-based learning that closely resembles a knowledge-building curriculum—even if the pedagogic intent was different.

"A work in progress" also means addressing some other big challenges. Many teachers were committed to a now-discredited intervention called "Reading Recovery." Each school has a literacy advisory group to help all teachers think about how to use data for more meaningful skill-based interventions in contrast to the discontinued leveled reading. Even so, convincing these teachers to try a different approach is slow work, often involving conversations one teacher at a time. High teacher turnover is also a challenge. Thirty percent of teachers who were trained in LETRS have since left the district.



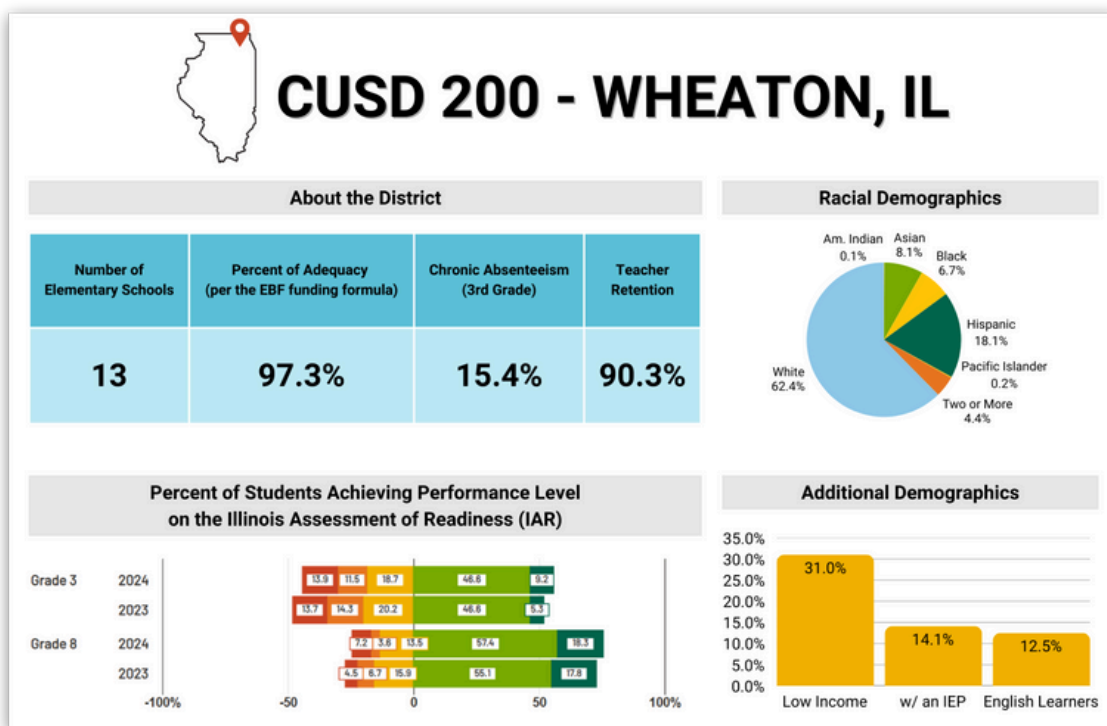
## Sesser-Valier Community Unit School District 196

Sesser-Valier is a small school district in Southern Illinois that borders Rend Lake. One of the major policy changes to which they attribute their huge FY24 reading growth is

implementation of the “Bridge Program” in K-2, where students who are struggling with foundational reading skills are pulled from their class to receive 90 minutes of focused literacy support. Bridge was one of five MTSS groups, and students are moved flexibly among groups as teachers monitor their progress and collaborate with each other. Third graders enter with far stronger reading skills since implementation of the program, and the district hopes to work more in the near future to strengthen instruction in grades 3 - 5 to include more focus on morphology, multisyllabic words, and literacy within content areas. District leaders said K - 2, where all teachers already think of themselves as reading teachers, is an easier starting place than older grades where reading may not have traditionally been the focus due to heavier anxiety about getting students prepared for assessments.

The district has pieced together its own curriculum, using decodable readers and Secret Stories. Their phonics scope and sequence and other core curriculum were selected from a Teachers Pay Teachers resource. They use iReady as their screener and progress monitoring tool.

Teacher support has been critical for the changes the district has made. With about 40 students (two classes) per grade, it is more practical here than other places for teachers to see each other and connect regularly in the building. They can talk about what they're seeing with the students and plan for shifting students among flexible groupings. Having new teachers has been good for the district as well, since the district pairs them with a coach and supports them to grow as professionals under the districts' literacy program with the mindset that all teachers are reading teachers. “Success creates buy-in,” they said, which makes a lot of sense given the district's extremely impressive jump in third grade proficiency scores in 2023-2024.



## Community Unit School District 200

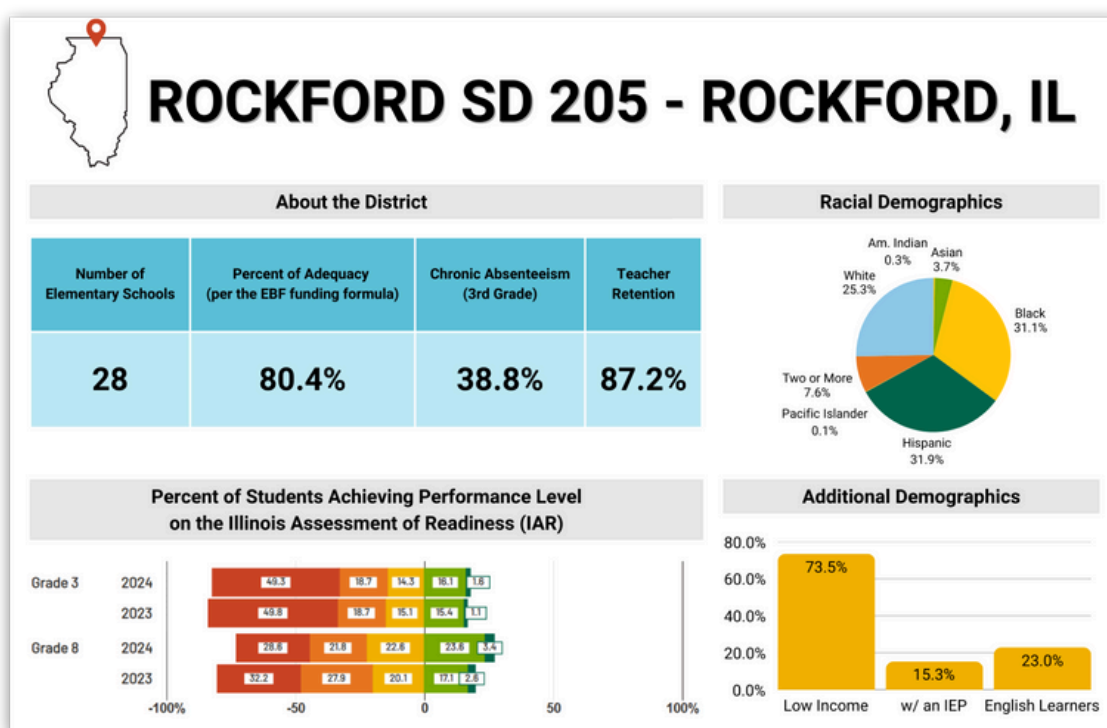
"Ensuring stakeholders have a voice" could be the motto for Wheaton CUSD 200. They describe their approach as deliberate, incremental, and informative every step of the way, beginning at the very "top" with presentations by reading coaches to the school board to ensure a long-term commitment of resources.

Even before the pandemic, the administration started digging into research and realized they needed to focus more on foundational skills. So post-pandemic, they implemented a screener and identified first and second graders most in need of intervention for decoding. They piloted two new curricula with regular feedback sessions and then chose one of these, Bookworms. In 2023-24, Wheaton adopted Bookworms for the entire K-2 and made it available to 3-5 as well. This year, all 3-5 classrooms are using the Bookworms writing program. To support use of the new curriculum, the district took a 3-pronged approach to professional development: each of the 13 schools was assigned a reading coach; professional learning was built into the school day once the district replenished its pool of substitute teachers; and schedules were adjusted so that all teachers have some cooperative planning time.

Building coaches are key to the district's success. The district never before implemented a common curriculum, and some teachers were resistant to the new mandate. The building coach works with individual teachers to ensure understanding and pedagogical fidelity. Principals support the coaches by having hard conversations when necessary and by

observing classrooms for fidelity to the Bookworms curriculum. Wheaton's structure intentionally gives teachers opportunities for feedback: they have regular conversations with coaches, coaches have weekly conversations with the Assistant Superintendent, and the Assistant Superintendent has scheduled conversations with the union about implementation issues. English Learner (EL) teachers also have a common curriculum now with Bookworms, and they have monthly collaboration time across all buildings.

Wheaton's team identified their next challenge as improving literacy proficiency for diverse learners. Now that they have Bookworms established for Tier 1 instruction, they are working to rethink aligned curriculum for Tiers 2 and 3. The district also wants to focus on special education with the same energy they devoted to EL instruction in the last couple of years.



## Rockford School District 205

Rockford began transforming its literacy work in the 2016-2017 school year when 25 elementary teachers came together and started digging into the Science of Reading before it became popular. That sparked Rockford's curricular change, from using Fountas & Pinnell, which used a cueing methodology, to Reading Horizons. However, it was not a popular change and, adding to the uphill battle, 2019 saw a ransomware attack on the district that made it a rough year. That experience taught Rockford leaders that in order to make major literacy changes, they needed to work with their educators to centralize the vision of what the district wanted for its students.

It was around this time that two things happened: the Emily Hanford podcasts swept the nation and the pandemic hit. Because literacy culture caught up with where the district had been heading, the infrastructure was in place for the transition. One of the most interesting things about Rockford's data is that student reading growth slightly increased during the pandemic, a rare feat among Illinois schools. During our interview, leaders talked about prioritizing in-person learning as much as possible during the pandemic. Rockford also extended learning time with their ESSER funds; rather than hiring new people, they increased instructional time with their current educators by adding 35 minutes to the day.

Rockford transitioned to site-based budgeting soon after the pandemic as well. Along with this, principals in their 41 schools became deliberate in setting their vision and using their discretionary funds to support that vision, particularly in staffing. All 21 elementary buildings have an instructional coach, and some buildings have invested additional discretionary resources in coaching. Two hundred teachers, coaches, and administrators are either fully LETRS trained or in the process of the 2-year LETRS training. RPS plans to offer the training to new cohorts every year. In addition to earning PD credits for this training, teachers also gain salary credits upon completion.

Rockford had high aspirations for integrating literacy within subject areas but found implementation difficult, because teachers lacked many of the tools they needed. Reading Horizons was not popular among the staff, and the district made the intentional decision to bring teachers together to select curriculum, deciding early on that they would only select something that was also available in Spanish. They chose CKLA, which was readily embraced because it reflected what the teachers had been asking for.

Another decision worth highlighting involves the structure of MTSS. The district discontinued its use of guided reading groups and now relies on skill-based small group instruction based on targeted literacy skills. As its screener, RPS adopted mCLASS/DIBELS 8th Edition and now has data integrated into its MTSS system where groupings are created and revisited frequently. The district had created MTSS plans over the years, but had a hard time with implementation until a district leader took ownership of the plan and brought it to life. Now, the district says their screener and entry and exit criteria are well defined. Schools have master schedules to outline how all teachers and support staff work together to support high-quality interventions throughout the day.

## Major Takeaways: The 5 C's

As we interviewed these districts, always beginning with the same open-ended query about what changes led to their success, several common themes emerged. We've organized these as a rubric called "The 5 C's: Collaboration, Coaching, Coherence, Continuous Improvement, and Calendar." None of the districts score a perfect ten on addressing all of these themes, but each of them attributes their success, and identifies their greatest challenges, by referencing themes within this rubric.

**Collaboration** — Successful districts all emphasized the importance of staff working together. They may be doing group professional development or informal discussion of a shared text; they may be visiting each other's classes; or they may be meeting regularly to review data and discuss how well strategies have worked. What seems to be common here is creating a shared foundation of knowledge and building trust among colleagues. No single teacher and no single grade band are expected to know all of the answers.

- Cicero has a number of structures that support collaboration. Each school has an instructional coach. All teachers have a common planning time daily, and PLTs meet weekly. In PLTs, coaches and teachers review upcoming units together and plan for instruction. There is also collaboration regarding a shared vision for improved literacy instruction and achievement from the school board to the superintendent, directors, coaches, administrators, and teachers. All educators are pulling towards the same goal.
- In Sesser-Valier, all K-2 teachers see themselves as reading teachers, and they work together closely. Even without a formal joint planning period, informal conversations about supporting students are always transpiring; students are moved in and out of MTSS groups as needed.
- In Morton Grove, teachers and administrators meet weekly in a PLC to analyze data for all students. Using this data, the staff focus on how well students are mastering the material in ways the team chose collectively: what do the students know? How should they demonstrate their knowledge? What interventions are appropriate for students who do not "get it," and how can the learning be extended? Notably, the Morton Grove team observed that their highest priority when hiring new teachers is whether they have the soft skills and temperament to be good collaborators.

**Coaching** — Almost all of the districts we interviewed prioritized coaching, though it is organized differently among the districts. There was not one "right" way of structuring these teacher supports, but a few considerations stood out: Stipends, mandatory v voluntary, summer v in-school, continuity of support, group v individual coaching.

- Every one of Wheaton's 13 buildings has a full-time reading coach. The coaches meet weekly with the Assistant Superintendent for Educational Services to discuss what has been happening in each of their buildings, plan professional learning, and share any

concerns that teachers have been raising. Through this process, district administrators are able to respond to common concerns. Coaches also coordinate to plan professional development.

- Each school in Cicero has an instructional coach. The district also has four coaches who work with a few of the school buildings. Coaches help teachers implement the curriculum and deliver professional development.
- Rockford has shown its commitment to literacy improvement by increasing their teachers' access to instructional coaching. The school district reported that by changing their budgeting practices, specifically transitioning to site-based budgeting, they were able to free up enough funds to staff each building with a designated instructional coach. Furthermore, the district administrators reported that coaching efforts are supported by building-level administration.

**Coherence** — Establishing a scope and sequence across grades (where one had not previously existed) was a frequent point of pride. Establishing criteria for MTSS tiers and selecting a common intervention program also came up often. Science, education theory, and common sense all point to the power of systematically building skills and building knowledge. Strong districts address the two simultaneously. Research also concludes overwhelmingly that bias can exist in the ways students are identified for intervention when a standard protocol does not exist.

- Rockford selected and implemented a new evidence-aligned curriculum, Amplify's CKLA. By doing so, they now have an established scope and sequence for the elementary grades. Their MTSS process is also more uniform, data-driven, and designed to address specific skill deficits as students mature. Rockford has followed this implementation up with principal training and improved hiring practices.
- After the pandemic, Wheaton adopted Fastbridge as their universal screener. By utilizing this nationally-normed assessment three times per year, they are more consistently able to identify students in need of support. Access to this information has also allowed the district to closely examine subgroups and student growth.
- Sesser-Valier also manages a dynamic process of grouping students with fluidity among groups. Every K-2 student takes iReady as a diagnostic assessment at the beginning of the year and educators establish five groups, including a new "Bridge Program" to help the furthest behind catch up. When these groups meet, it is all hands on deck, from teachers to aides to librarian and secretary. Because of the small school setting, teachers frequently communicate about student progress and adjust groupings to meet the needs of each student. iReady's winter assessment enables teachers to measure progress and further adjust groups.
- Collaboration was utilized in Peoria to support teachers' understanding of how to interpret literacy data. When the district moved away from using reading levels, teachers struggled with how to group students. In response, the district established a literacy

advisory group of teachers composed of highly skilled teachers in each building. These teachers supported the changes in the way the district looked at data. Moreover, the district discovered the literacy advisory group of teachers was an effective way to bring more teachers onboard.

**Continuous Improvement** — Successful districts understand that improved outcomes are always a “work in progress.” These changes take time, and time requires the commitment of both energy and resources from a school board, a superintendent, principals, and teachers. Many of the teams talked about how long they’d worked in the district, when they started to make changes, what they’ve done year by year to develop capacity and buy-in. Most talked about ambitions for the future. Some talked about data sharing meetings where they compared notes on which classrooms had more success mastering a specific skill. The goal here was explicitly not to encourage competition; rather, it was designed to tweak pedagogy toward what was showing success. Trust among colleagues has played a key role in teachers’ willingness to adjust their pedagogy.

- The district leadership in Peoria realized that they were not able to make the gains they wanted using their previous curriculum. They turned to UFLI as an additional reading support in the district, as well as LETRS training for their teachers. They continued to have additional teachers trained in LETRS year by year. Grades 1-2 teachers now all receive LETRS training during their PLC time. Building administrators also participate in the LETRS training in order to learn about the importance of sequential, explicit phonics instruction combined with a knowledge-building curriculum. The district screened the film “Right to Read” to teachers in order to support teacher understanding and buy-in. Additionally, the district discontinued the program Reading Recovery. This was a difficult change as the role of the Reading Recovery teachers had to be reimaged, since these were highly trained teachers.
- Cicero’s Director of Reading and Language Arts sums up their literacy efforts this way, “we invest in people, not products.” Cicero’s multi-year investment in developing their teachers illustrates their belief and confidence that providing the necessary professional development for teachers will impact students’ literacy achievement—and they are right. Over the past 4 years, students have shown growth in literacy achievement on state and internal assessments. By staying the course, teachers still skeptical about aligning instruction to scientific reading research are nudged in the direction the district is heading. Sustained professional learning, coaching, and support for teachers and administrators is a financial investment that the Superintendent and the school board are willing to maintain.
- Both Wheaton and Cicero emphasized the importance of keeping the school board informed and engaged. Because literacy director and instructional coaching positions depend on the budget, school board members need to understand and appreciate the value of these positions to achieve the district’s goals.

- Rockford began with a small group of 25 teachers interested in learning about the science of reading. Although change was challenging and many teachers were initially committed to Fountas and Pinnell, the district gradually provided training for principals, coaches, and other leaders. Over time, as literacy culture gained momentum and educators engaged with resources such as the podcast *Sold and Story* and the movie *The Right to Read*, opinions began to shift. Now more than 200 staff members have completed or are in the process of completing two years of LETRS training. The district values the training so highly that completion is reflected in a teacher's salary.

**Calendar** — This should really be called “Schedule,” if only the first letter fit the bill. A number of districts talked about restructuring the day to create more flexibility for intervention time. Many talked about creating a time for the teachers to meet both within and across grades to ensure consistency.

- This should really be called “Schedule,” if only the first letter fit the bill. A number of districts talked about restructuring the day to create more flexibility for intervention time. Many talked about creating a time for the teachers to meet both within and across grades to ensure consistency.
- Rockford used ESSER funds to extend the school day by 35 minutes. Intervention time is intentionally scheduled into the school day.
- One creative way Peoria utilized a calendar effectively was paying teachers to tutor during their plan time. The mayor had previously been able to secure grant money and provided Peoria SD with \$2 million in literacy funds. The district used this money to hire tutors. Their recruitment efforts were successful, because the district paid more than what tutors typically made. Furthermore, teacher plan time was used for tutoring. Retired teachers also came back to tutor students during this time. The grant has now expired, but many of the individual buildings were so pleased they have continued this practice.
- Sesser-Valier has been highly intentional about assigning MTSS groups and carving out significant time for students who need the most literacy support. Those students get 90 minutes of literacy instruction, which requires engagement from all adults in the building.
- In Morton Grove, they restructured their schedule to give an hour a week for shared planning time. Administrators also attend these meetings.

## Challenges

Our biggest takeaway from conducting these interviews and reading a mountain of articles about literacy and “implementation science” is that nothing in education comes easy. At least nothing that is meaningful, scaleable, and durable. The teachers and administrators in every one of these districts obviously work hard, want their students to succeed, and accept

responsibility for what happens in their schools. But they all run up against a reality: A factory foreman can increase productivity by changing the shape of a steel widget. Education's most important input is human beings, and human beings are infinitely more complex than widgets. Administrators, teachers, and students have unique skill sets, biases, families shaping their moods day to day, limits to their energy and flexibility, and the list goes on. In other words, educators do not operate in a vacuum with ideal conditions; they exist in a messy world and change takes time.

That said, our interviews do highlight three specific challenges that are remediable:

- **Capacity:** Currently Illinois does not have an adequate number of qualified personnel. Literacy coaches require training; districts all mentioned the difficulty of hiring enough coaches. Teachers require substitutes in order to attend professional development opportunities during work hours; districts all mentioned the difficulty of hiring enough substitute teachers.
- **Funding:** Districts need money or access to free resources to cover stipends for professional development during the summer, literacy coaches, new curricula, and professional development trainers.
- **Qualified novice teachers:** Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) need to do a better job of instructing their candidates in evidence-based literacy development and not instructing their candidates in discredited approaches. As things stand, school districts anticipate reteaching their new employees. They should not have to carry this burden.

## Recommendations

Some of these recommendations are targeted at school district leaders; some at legislators; and some at the Illinois State Board of Education.

### For District Leaders

- Plan for a long time horizon. Teachers need at least three years to learn a new methodology or curriculum and to implement it with fidelity and competence.
- Implement a progress-monitoring tool for staff as well as students. Every new program runs into problems and requires tweaks; give yourself and staff permission to evaluate your progress critically without being critical of yourselves.
- Ensure that the local board of education understands your strategic plan and the importance of continued investment in literacy.

### For Legislators

- Increase the appropriation for Evidence-Based Funding (EBF) so that all districts achieve adequacy.

- Approve legislation to require that every student be screened at least once each year during the earliest grades for reading difficulties.
- Fund literacy efforts through the literacy plan implementation budget line or through early literacy grants to be distributed by ISBE.

### For the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE).

- Fulfill your obligation to audit educator preparation programs for their adherence to teaching pedagogical principles consistent with the Illinois Comprehensive Literacy Plan.
- Require evidence from professional development providers of early literacy content that their materials include only pedagogical content consistent with the Illinois Comprehensive Literacy Plan.
- Increase capacity throughout the state to hire well-qualified coaches, PD providers, and teachers by offering training opportunities developed by ISBE.
- Create multi-year early literacy grants that include a requirement for self-evaluation and continuous improvement. These grants should be competitive, but technical assistance to districts below EBF adequacy should be made available.

We make these observations not to be pessimistic, but rather to say that the successes we observe are all cause for celebration. Each one of these districts offers some strategy worth adoption. Equally important, each one of these districts offers “lessons learned” and new efforts that they have willingly shared. If you are on your own journey to improve literacy at your school, we’d love to hear your story!

## Appendix: Interview Questions

Each structured interview consisted of three members of the IL Policy Committee and one to three members of the school or district-based team (e.g., teacher, principal, instructional coach or leader, superintendent, etc.). During each interview, one person served as the primary interviewer, ensuring each question was asked and that the school team had the opportunity to speak to each area; one person asked additional follow-up questions, based on the school teams' responses (these questions were more nuanced and individualized); and one person served as a notetaker to capture the responses. At a minimum, each of the bolded questions were asked during every interview. Depending on the school team's responses to those questions, the interviewers asked aligned questions to clarify or to provide the opportunity for the school team to elaborate. All interviews were conducted through a digital meeting platform.

Following the structured interviews, we developed and distributed an online survey that we asked district leaders to share with their teachers. We received numerous responses, mostly from two districts.

### School-Based Interview Questions

#### GENERAL QUESTIONS

- 1. Why do you think your district has shown improvement in your students' literacy outcomes?**
- 2. Of all the elements you've raised, what are the top five things that you believe have improved your district's literacy achievement?**
- 3. What are the barriers that your district overcame to produce your increased literacy achievement?**
- 4. If there were no barriers and obstacles, what are some additional changes that you would implement to further improve your literacy outcomes?**

#### CURRICULUM

- 5. Please tell us about your district's literacy instruction and the impact of this instruction on your district's/school's literacy achievement.**

*(Ask these questions if the first response doesn't address them)*

- What is your core reading curriculum and why did you select this curriculum?
- What are some barriers/challenges that your district faces regarding your core literacy curriculum?
- What changes would you implement to your district's current core reading curriculum?

**MULTI-TIERED SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT**

**6. Please describe your district's core MTSS practices (e.g., how students enter and exit interventions, interventions utilized in each tier, data collection tools and systems, teacher support, etc.)**

*(Ask these questions if the first response doesn't address them)*

- How have your MTSS practices impacted your district's/school's literacy outcomes?
- What are some barriers/challenges that your district faces with your MTSS practices?
- What changes would you implement to your district's current MTSS practices?

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

**7. Please tell us about your district's professional development around literacy instruction.**

*(Ask these questions if the first response doesn't address them)*

- What impact did your professional development efforts have on your district's literacy outcomes?
- What are some barriers/challenges that your district faces with your literacy professional development?
- What are some changes that you would implement to your district's current professional development?

**SPECIAL POPULATIONS**

**8. How did you strategically address [special population's] literacy achievement/performance?**

*(The population for this question is based on the district's/school's data)*

- You can lead with, "The growth (and/or achievement) with [insert special population] is something we want to learn from."

*(Ask these questions if the first response doesn't address them)*

**Follow up: Tell us about other student groups whose achievement or performance you are proud of. What can others learn about what you did?**

- What are some barriers/challenges that your district faces in supporting the learning of special populations?
- What changes would you implement to your district's current practices to support special populations?

**\*Bolded questions were asked in every interview. Non-bolded questions were asked as needed (i.e., when the interviewee's response to the bolded question did not address those elements).**