

Spotlight Michigan:

A literacy ecosystem for sustainable reading growth

Overview

Located in the capital city, in south central Michigan, Lansing School District has a diverse school population with unique and urgent needs. With strong leadership, they made a commitment to meaningful implementation and an intentional focus on coaching. They aligned their literacy ecosystem and set a high bar—and it's making a real difference. In four years, the district moved from the lowest performing statewide to the highest growth in ELA proficiency in Michigan, all while building sustainable systems for teachers and students. Not only that, their attendance is up, and their rates of chronic absenteeism are down.

Kids want to be there because they are learning—and they know it.

“

What we have is a lot of students who are benefiting from the resources and a lot of teachers who have stepped out of their comfort zone to try something new because they're seeing success. They're hearing us say that we are the district in the state with the highest growth in proficiency rates. We attribute that impact to the curricular tools we're using, the intentionality with coaching and training we are providing our teachers, and the use of a targeted intervention program district-wide.”

HEATHER GUERRA

Director of instruction K-8

FEATURED PRODUCTS

- 95 Phonemic Awareness Intervention Resource™
- 95 Phonics Lesson Library™ 2.0 + 95 Literacy Intervention System™
- 95 Phonics Chip Kit™
- 95 Multisyllable Routine Cards™
- 95 Vocabulary Surge™: Unleashing the Power of Word Parts
- 95 Comprehension, Grades 3-6™
- 95 RAP™

SNAPSHOT

Lansing, Michigan

- 10,000 students; 23 schools
- 80% free/reduced lunch
- 20% English learners
- 20% Special education
- 50% of teachers are in their first to third year of teaching
- Half of that subgroup are uncertified or alternative-certification pathway

In 2022, Lansing School District was labeled the lowest performing district in Michigan on the M-STEP (Michigan Student Test of Educational Progress). Not only were students falling behind on their grade level learning, teachers and school leaders knew that there was a significant deficit that needed to be addressed.

When Heather Guerra, director of instruction for K-8 arrived in the district that year, Kathleen Decoster, the district literacy coach, had been leading a steering committee—and had started working with small pockets of teachers on training in the science of reading and structured literacy approach.

“We knew we needed to get this initiative moving district-wide,” Guerra said. “That’s when we started this learning journey together.”

“

The growth has kept the fire going with us. We can see that there is progress. We can see that our teachers are striving to help our students achieve more. And one of the things they kept asking for was resources.”

HEATHER GUERRA

Director of instruction K-8

Well resourced: Balancing student rigor *AND* teacher usability

With a large percentage of Lansing’s teachers district-wide in their first, second, and third years teaching—and around 50 percent of that group either uncertified or on an alternative certification path—the need for resources and professional learning was high. “The challenge,” Guerra explained, “isn’t just giving teachers resources—it’s building their pedagogical knowledge so they can use those resources well. We’re looking for materials that support teacher growth while still delivering meaningful impact for students.”



From discovery to decision

Lansing’s journey with 95 Percent Group began when Guerra discovered the resources while attending *The Reading League* conference. What started as initial curiosity quickly developed into a comprehensive partnership after a consultant spent two hours walking her through the possibilities and potential impact. While the original plan was to pilot the program in just a few buildings, the momentum and early results were so promising that this year, they successfully scaled implementation across the entire district.

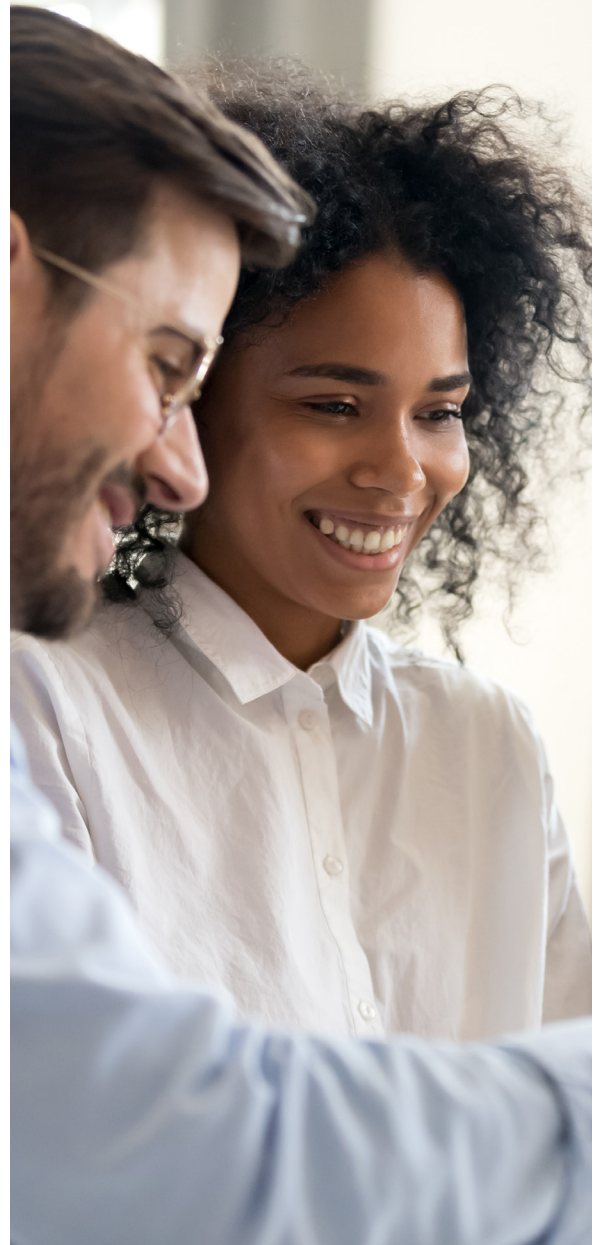
Addressing learning gaps with intervention

The district's primary goal was to focus on closing gaps in learning by adopting a systematic approach to teaching literacy through explicit, direct instruction. Even after implementing a strong Tier 1 curricular tool, educators recognized that some students still had significant skill gaps that needed targeted intervention. The challenge became finding ways to address these foundational gaps while simultaneously keeping students engaged with grade-appropriate content, ensuring they didn't fall further behind their peers.

From piecemeal resources to a district-wide learning approach

The implementation extends far beyond classroom teachers, engaging administrators at all levels and representing a comprehensive district-wide approach to understanding the science of reading. Rather than limiting professional development to teachers alone, the district recognized that creating lasting change required engaging all invested parties in the learning process. This inclusive approach ensures that everyone from classroom practitioners to principals develops a shared understanding of structured, science-of-reading based literacy practices.

The district partnered with 95 Percent Group's Professional Learning team not only for teacher training, but also for intensive two-day training sessions for principals, going beyond basic program onboarding. These sessions covered the foundations of the science of reading while connecting the concepts directly to the district's learning model. Principals participated in walkthroughs and received comprehensive training on implementation strategies, ensuring they could effectively lead and support their building-level teams. This collaborative, all-hands-on-deck approach included principals in on-going collaborative planning conversations rather than simply mandating top-down directives.



Knowledge transfer and supported implementation

The beauty of an all-hands-on-deck approach? The training's effectiveness became evident through the natural knowledge transfers that began to happen throughout the organization. Central office staff, despite not receiving formal training, began asking detailed questions about specific intervention products and progress monitoring after hearing about the programs from the principals they worked with. This “incidental” spread of understanding demonstrates the success of the systematic approach and reinforces the district’s comprehensive literacy plan implementation.

Guerra laughed as she recalled one such conversation. “They have heard enough about it from the principals that they work with that they will say to me, Heather, tell me again about the PAIR and the PLL. And I saw this group working on skill 6.1 and it seems like the kids all had it.” And I was like, “Well, that’s the intention, right?”

Supporting multilingual learners and special education students

Teachers in EL and special education programs have specifically requested access to structured literacy tools like 95 Phonics Chips Kit and 95 RAP, seeking better alignment and systematic approaches to support their students’ reading development.

This year, the district was awarded a [section 35m early literacy grant](#) specifically targeting third-through fifth-grade students, with a particular focus on English learners and special education students. Through data analysis, they discovered it was very possible that many students labeled with specific learning disabilities (or who had been identified as special education students) just needed additional structured literacy instruction rather than special education services. The grant will fund 95 RAP implementation for their [Tier 3 intervention](#) efforts, with eventual data evaluation helping to determine future adoption decisions for broader district use.



A district-wide walk-to—and out of—intervention model

Lansing’s approach to intervention emphasizes collective efficiency and acceleration rather than long-term placement. Kathleen Decoster, K-8 district literacy coach, discussed how they are making their intervention block a more collective effort in order to have as many people available as possible to help.

“We have noticed increased motivation and excitement, and also intentionality with which administrators are planning their intervention times,” Decoster explains. “They’re looking at their buildings as a whole system and working to put all the pieces together to expand Tier 2 intervention implementation—from individual classrooms all the way up to building-wide, walk-to intervention models.”

Not only are they working on a more seamless walk-to-intervention model building-wide, they are making sure students are walking out as soon as they are ready—providing students with exactly what they need as rapidly as possible to return them to full focus on grade-level, Tier 1 instruction.

This philosophy addresses the concern that intervention shouldn’t become a permanent placement but rather a temporary boost to close skill gaps.

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Literacy is an equity issue. Equitable access to literacy doesn’t mean everyone gets ‘the same thing.’ Equitable access means that we’re providing students what they need when they need it and not holding them in intervention. The goal is to move students through intervention so they can focus on grade level instruction without skill deficit. Intervention shouldn’t be a life sentence.”

HEATHER GUERRA

Director of instruction K-8

The differentiator: implementation and coaching at scale

Lansing's leaders are quick to say the progress isn't about materials alone. It's about *how* the district implemented them and the support they have received at every turn.

Before 95 Percent Group entered the picture, a steering committee and LETRS training had already started building science-of-reading knowledge within pockets of the district. Guerra and Decoster's goal was to scale that learning until it became systemwide. "This is a district-wide approach to learning," Guerra said. "We're not just making decisions and saying, 'This is how we're going to do it.' We're bringing everyone into the conversation."

Principals participated in a two-day science-of-reading training with a 95 Percent Group presenter, then connected it directly to Lansing's district model and implementation expectations. Even central office teams began speaking the same literacy language.

Heavy coaching investment

Lansing also invested significantly in professional learning and coaching. Every teacher received at least three full coaching days with consultants from the 95 Percent Group professional learning team. Substitutes were covered so grade-level teams could observe model lessons, ask questions, examine data, and build confidence.

"Implementation was so critical," Guerra explained. "We invested—not just money, but time—into developing and growing it as well."

Sustainability by design

Because Lansing's staffing is constantly evolving, Heather and Kathleen are designing sustainability into the ecosystem from day one. In the past month alone, Guerra onboarded around 75 new staff members—new teachers and instructional assistants—so they could step into intervention confidently.



And in year two, Lansing is building a “train-the-trainer model,” identifying champion teachers so the work doesn’t rely on any single leader. “I want 95 to live outside of me,” Guerra said. “Outside of Kathleen and I. If we were to leave the district, I wouldn’t want them to go backwards because we’re leaving with all the knowledge.”

The impact: Student confidence, teacher belief, and measurable growth

The shift is visible both in data and in daily classroom moments.

Academically, Lansing has made a meaningful climb in reading proficiency—including the district moving from roughly 13% of students proficient in reading to more than 18%. And this past year, Lansing posted the highest growth in ELA and math proficiency in Michigan.

But Guerra and Decoster emphasized how much the mindset shift matters too.

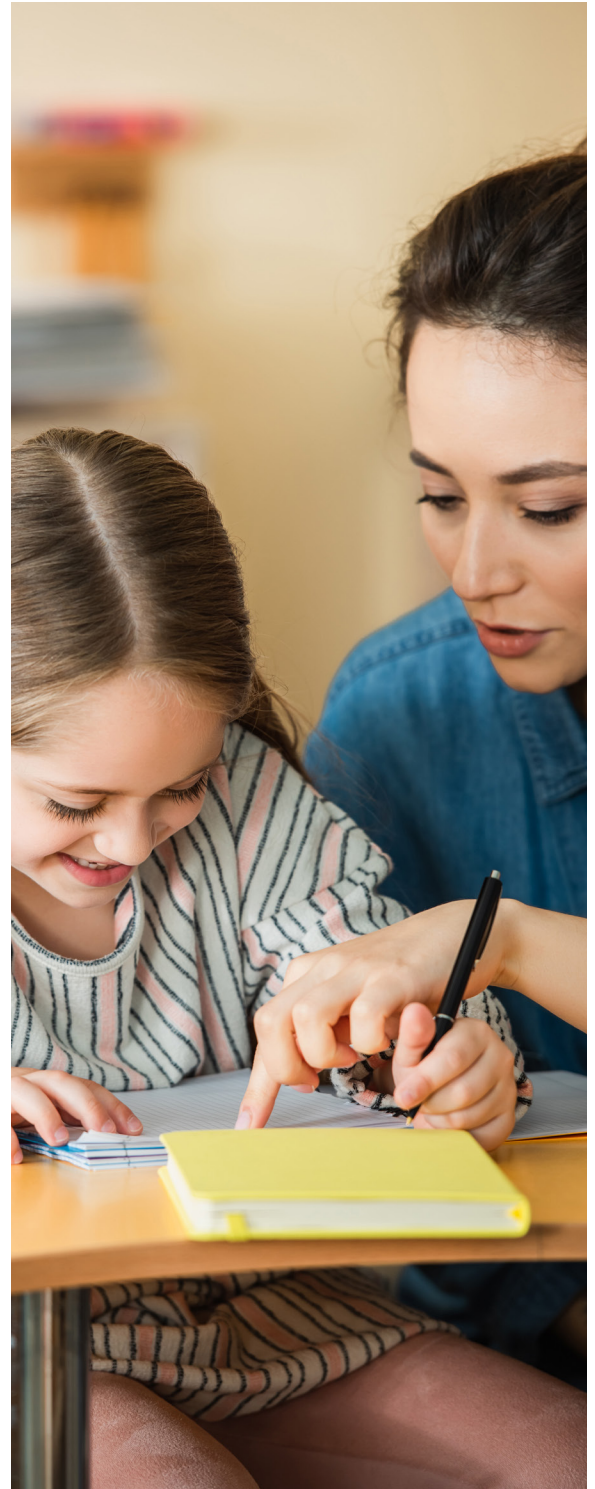
Guerra described noticing students taking more “risks” and supporting one another while decoding. “They’re not saying ‘I can’t read this’ anymore. They’re saying, ‘Remember this rule here,’ and pointing things out to each other.”

Even broader student indicators are showing growth. For example, Lansing’s attendance rates are the best they’ve been in years, with chronic absenteeism decreasing. District leaders see this as another sign that students are feeling more successful and motivated. They want to be at school.

And sometimes the proof is in a single sentence from a child.

After about a week of instruction, one fifth-grade student looked up and said:

“Nobody’s ever taught me this before!”



Looking ahead: Expanding the ecosystem with 95 RAP

This year, Lansing is using its 35m literacy grant to expand support for multilingual learners and special education students in grades 3–5 through **95 RAP™** (95 Reading Achievement Program™). The district is especially excited to study how systematic intervention can close gaps faster and prevent students from being stuck in long-term services that don't reflect or ultimately continue to meet their true needs.

Guerra and Decoster are both excited about the partnership itself—the way 95 Percent Group continues to show up as a thought partner in planning, data, and refinement.

"It's consistent communication," they shared. "Not just 'good luck with the products.' It's 'What's your vision? Have you thought about this?'" The partnership has had such a positive impact on students and our community."

Lansing's progress didn't happen because they purchased a program. It happened because leaders built an aligned system, invested in their people (and themselves!), **and tied every instructional move back to accessibility, equity, and sustainability.**

Reading is power, as Guerra told her second graders for years. And in Lansing, more and more students are unlocking that power—because the adults around them are working together to help make it happen.



Ready to unlock the power of reading for your district?
Contact a literacy specialist!

Trusted, proven literacy solutions

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