In this spotlight, we're honored to feature West Virginia educator Brittany Squires, who shares her experiences implementing our Being a Reader program.

In her own words, Brittany is “a first grade teacher looping into second grade with my current class of students. My husband of seven years, Will, is an elementary Physical Education teacher. We share our home with our two cats, Finn and Rey. In my spare time, I like to go on walks with my husband, read books, and spend time with my friends and family.”

Tell us a little about yourself, your school/district, and the students that you serve.

Hello! My name is Brittany Squires and I have been teaching for nine years. Eight of those years have been in first grade and this year I had the opportunity to loop with my students to second grade, so I am walking through quite an exciting and new adventure with them!

I teach in Upshur County, a small district in North Central West Virginia with a population of about 25,000 residents. Our district has seven elementary schools. My school is the largest in the district with around 500 students, ranging from Pre-K to fifth grade.

What is the most rewarding part of being an educator for you?

I had the most incredible first grade teacher who made me feel loved, accepted, and brilliant. I knew in first grade what I wanted to do for the rest of my life after being in her class.

The most rewarding part of being an educator has nothing to do with academics but is more about watching students grow into wonderful human beings. My entire classroom culture is centered around ensuring students feel valued, respected, and loved. When students own that feeling, I know I have done my job well.

How long have you been implementing Being a Reader?

Our district adopted Being a Reader this summer and we began implementation in August 2021. Being a Reader includes both whole-class and small-group instruction.

What do you appreciate about Being a Reader?

I appreciate so many things about this program and have enjoyed implementation so far. I am thrilled to use mentor texts written by authors who students love and recognize. I think the way that Collaborative Classroom has integrated reading with a social-emotional
lens is extremely beneficial. Students are able to see themselves and their families in these stories while also learning with their peers how to handle big feelings and solve big problems. My students have become better problem solvers because of the discussions we have during reading.

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I also found that the structure of the small-group lessons and how they follow the science of reading to be extremely beneficial. Foundational skills are not “one size fits all” and shouldn't be approached in that manner. I like how students are assessed and placed in small groups based on their needs with regards to foundational skills. Students are taught phonemic awareness, phonics, decodable books, and guided spelling all in one lesson, allowing for those concepts to become concrete.

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What have you noticed about your students' learning and engagement?

My students absolutely love reading. Using texts written by authors they know and recognize has been a game changer! Students are so excited to find more books written by that author and I have seen their love for reading grow. We essentially create little author or topic studies each week and the books fly off the shelves!

I have also seen a love for reading develop even more this year because students are given the time for independent reading every day. Independent reading is crucial for student growth; I am so glad that Collaborative Classroom also sees it as essential and has built independent reading time into the academic day.

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How has Being a Reader affected or changed your own teaching and learning?

Teaching reading in the morning has become my favorite part of my day. I have always loved teaching reading, but Being a Reader has only made that love grow.

Sitting with students in their independent reading spots and hearing them talk about the books they are reading gives me so much indescribable joy. In such a heavy world, my students have found joy. As a teacher, I couldn't be happier.

What advice or insights would you share with an educator who is new to Being a Reader?

I would advise teachers to read ahead and really understand where the units have you start and where they have you end.

Focus on the discussion questions and let those foster a classroom environment that allows students to openly discuss topics together. Students will learn so much more from their peers than they ever will by simply listening to a teacher drone on all day.

Read the stories and let your students fall in love with them. If you are enthusiastic about what you are reading and discussing, they will be too.