

District Spotlight: Dallastown Area School District, on Shifting Teacher Practice to Provide Explicit and Systematic Decoding Instruction

By Katy Cortelyou | Categories: Educator Spotlight, Reading Intervention and Acceleration



In this spotlight, we're delighted to feature Dr. Stephanie Ferree, K-12 Supervisor of Curriculum and Instruction for the Dallastown Area School District in Pennsylvania. Dr. Ferree shares how the district has used the SIPPS (Systematic Instruction in Phonological Awareness, Phonics, and Sight Words) program to shift its teaching practices with the goal of enacting more explicit and systematic decoding instruction.

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

The Dallastown Area School District is located in south central Pennsylvania, about 30 miles south of Harrisburg in a suburban area with a growing and changing culture.

The district has eight buildings with an enrollment of 6,500 students. We offer full special education services, ELL services, intervention at all levels, very robust honors and AP offerings at the high school level, and a well known career pathway program with many opportunities for students.

We have five K-3 buildings, of which three receive funding for Title I Services. We are fortunate that we are able to offer similar support services in the other two elementary buildings. I have served as an elementary principal in two of our district buildings and now am the K-12 Supervisor of Curriculum and Instruction.

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

The most rewarding part of being an educator is to watch students grow and learn. While challenging, it is rewarding to be able to work with teachers and students to problem solve, find solutions, and see the growth. Our district is dedicated to creating lifelong learners who become successful and independent readers, no matter their selected pathway.

“Our district is dedicated to creating lifelong learners who become successful and independent readers, no matter their selected [career] pathway.”

How did your district become interested in SIPP?

We run a grassroots Balanced Literacy Program steeped in the work of Linda Dorn and Fountas and Pinnell. Over the past 10 years, we have been watching a growing hole in the area of phonemic awareness and phonics. We have revised the curriculum to help to meet

these holes, but we were still seeing the gaps— especially in our struggling readers.

In the spring of 2018, our local Intermediate Unit was offering a session on *SIPPS*, so I sent two reading teachers to the session to learn more. We were looking for phonics/phonemic awareness interventions to boost specific deficits in this area at the elementary level. The two teachers came back from the conference with a lot of questions and were pretty skeptical of the program, but they also thought it would benefit our students. So our journey began.

How long has your district been implementing SIPPS? Tell us a little about the implementation.

Our implementation began in September 2018. The teachers watched the training videos and helped to support each other through the process. There was a learning curve for the two teachers as the program is very defined and scripted and we needed to identify who would most benefit from the direct instruction of *SIPPS*.

The teachers decided to focus the *SIPPS* program during the first semester with second grade small groups. They used the Placement Assessment to form the groups according to need/deficit and focused on the Extension Level of *SIPPS*. One teacher found that students immediately responded and the other teacher struggled with getting some students to respond to the program. She tried a different group and found success.

Later in the year and during ongoing years, we also piloted *SIPPS* with first graders and kindergarteners who needed phonics/phonemic awareness skills as the focus of instruction. In the second year, we added two more teachers to implement *SIPPS*.

During the 2020–21 school year, we extended *SIPPS* to every building and all teachers received the materials and training to be able to run *SIPPS* groups. The reading teachers and classroom teachers are seeing significant change in the students, particularly in their ability to decode.

“During the 2020–21 school year, we extended *SIPPS* to every building ... The reading teachers and classroom teachers are seeing significant change in the students, particularly in their ability to decode.”

This past year, we used *SIPPS* exclusively with our remote students. It had a true impact on student growth and was able to be adapted and used to its full capacity in a remote setting.

During this last year we have also utilized the Challenge Level of *SIPPS* with third graders whose weakness was decoding skills. The needs were based on teacher input and assessment data. The program has been very successful for many third-grade students. We now have *SIPPS* up and running in all five K–3 buildings. We are hoping to be able to share the program with our intervention teachers at our Intermediate School in the coming year.

What do you appreciate about *SIPPS*? What do teachers appreciate about it?

I appreciate that *SIPPS* is very focused and organized and provides a scope and sequence. So often our reading staff has put interventions in place that they think students need to improve general reading skills such as decoding, vocabulary or comprehension. While I truly support teachers’ professional decision making, I am thrilled with the accuracy of the *SIPPS* Placement Assessment in identifying students’ exact entry point along the phonics continuum and the direct approach to teaching identified skills at students’ point of need.

“I am thrilled with the accuracy of the *SIPPS* Placement Assessment in identifying students’ exact entry point along the phonics continuum and the direct approach to teaching identified skills at students’ point of need.”

Amie Jacobs, one of our reading specialists, has been using *SIPPS* since 2018 and indicates the following about the program: “The Placement Assessment gives a clear starting point for each student; lessons have flexibility of reteaching upon student

outcome/teacher judgement; Mastery Tests for each level are great progress monitoring tools; lessons are explicit and systematic with a clear purpose and scope and sequence; constant spiraling of skills aid entrance to long-term memory; the program includes encoding, not just decoding; Challenge level is like a road map of how to navigate/break down polysyllabic words and incorporates word/prefix/suffix meaning; teachers usually notice a carry-over into the students' classroom writing/reading."

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

We are noticing that students are engaging in the lessons. They like the pace and the instruction that occurs daily. Teachers are reporting to the reading specialists that they are seeing the carry-over into the classroom.

One of our teachers using *SIPPS* indicated the following: "most students have made some progress with reading skills because of the direct, explicit instruction tailored to their needs; the routine assists their engagement because they know what to expect; teachers have noticed a carry-over into the students' writing and reading; teachers have noticed *SIPPS* kids being more knowledgeable about letter sounds in their small groups."

How has *SIPPS* shifted teaching practices and/or professional learning in your district?

The shift in teaching practice has been the awareness of the need for explicit, systematic instruction for those students who are lacking decoding skills. The *SIPPS* program has allowed our staff to learn the program through videos and the online materials.

Years ago, we would have brought someone into the district to train the teachers. We can now allow teachers to learn in the format in which they need and have continued access to materials to support their questions. Jonette Marcus of Collaborative Classroom has been our contact; she has a wealth of knowledge and has been a great support both to our implementation and to our on-going use of the program.

What thoughts or insights would you share with a district that is considering *SIPPS*?

This program is excellent and we are seeing growth in our students. The Collaborative Classroom materials are research-based and the supports are phenomenal.

Prior to the school shutdowns and the pandemic, we had several visitors from the Collaborative Classroom, including Katy Cortelyou and Jonette Marcus. They observed our teachers and we had an opportunity to debrief with them for feedback, and our teachers had an opportunity to seek advice and ask for clarification. This was so hands-on and so very beneficial to helping our teachers grow and learn through the process. Most anyone can read the manual, follow the directions and watch training videos, but the support we receive makes the difference in the success of our program.