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November 2017

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### Recommended Citation

LeBlanc, Joanne and Wing, Melissa (2017) "Ramping Up Literacy in Genesee County," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 49 : Iss. 3 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol49/iss3/7>

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# Ramping Up Literacy in Genesee County

by Joanne LeBlanc and Melissa Wing

## Introduction

Genesee County is comprised of 21 school districts and 13 charter schools. Close to twenty-nine percent of the residents within Genesee County live in poverty and approximately half of our students receive supplemental nutritional assistance. In our urban schools, these percentages are significantly higher. These factors, along with the Flint water crisis, have increased the sense of urgency among superintendents, principals, teachers, parents, and the Genesee Intermediate School District (Genesee ISD) to improve literacy in Genesee County. Genesee ISD has been proactive in expanding services to meet the increasing literacy needs of our students. Efforts to increase literacy capacity in our county have included the hiring of early literacy coaches and expansion of professional learning offerings around the Essential Instructional Practices. These efforts are critical to increasing teacher knowledge of best practice and strategies to improve student achievement in a diverse community.

## Early Literacy Coaches

The Genesee ISD recently received an Early Literacy Coach grant from the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) to assist teachers in developing and implementing instructional strategies for students in kindergarten through third grade. This grant was awarded to help assure that all students are reading at grade level by the end of third grade. The Genesee ISD received \$112,500 to assist in the cost of hiring three full time equivalent (FTE), highly effective literacy coaches. Additional funding was provided by the Genesee ISD through in-kind funds and the general fund. This grant allowed the Genesee ISD to hire two part-time coaches and one full-time coach. Two on-staff literacy experts are coaching teachers, as well as providing support to the literacy coaches. All early literacy coaches working



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at the Genesee ISD through this grant are Reading Recovery trained.

## Services Provided

The Genesee ISD elected to focus services around first grade teachers throughout the duration of this grant cycle. School selection was based on third grade M-Step scores and only a school falling below the state average was considered. Final selection was based on serving our most at-risk schools. First grade teachers involved are receiving the following support:

- *Embedded professional development*
- *Training and support for early literacy practices using a core set of coaching activities: Conferencing, modeling, observing, co-planning, and using assessment/data*
- *Support to implement the Essential Instructional Practices in Early Literacy<sup>1</sup>*
- *Networking opportunities with colleagues throughout the county*
- *Professional articles, technology resources, and related research*

The literacy coaches have been working with teachers and are observing shifts in classroom instruction. Examples of these shifts include changing classroom environments, creating routines, establishing/enhancing

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.gomaisa.org/sites/default/files/K-3%20Literacy%20Essentials%203.2016.pdf>

classroom management, increased student engagement, and more intentional teaching.

Teachers are beginning to ask more questions and are initiating conversations about ways to improve their instruction. For example, a teacher from one of the districts attended the Michigan Reading Association conference in Grand Rapids this year. She had never attended before but was excited to have the opportunity. She and one of the coaches discussed which sessions would be the most helpful to her learning. The teacher texted the coach the entire weekend about the sessions she was attending, the connections she was making, and how she was going to use her new knowledge in her classroom.

## Professional Learning

The Genesee ISD understands the importance of providing professional learning to support teachers as they implement the Essential Instructional Practices in Early Literacy. The Genesee ISD was fortunate to be able to secure Dr. Nell Duke, from University of Michigan, to address the essentials from the prekindergarten document with HeadStart, Early-on, and Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP) staff and administration. Dr. Tanya Wright, from Michigan State University, spoke about the essentials to kindergarten through third grade teachers and administrators. During the professional learning, Dr. Duke and Dr. Wright explained the research behind the essentials, unpacked each essential in detail, and gave examples showing how the essentials might look in a classroom. They also utilized videos and demonstration to enhance the learning of the participants.

These professional learning opportunities are critical to support efforts throughout the county to improve student achievement. Both were well received and serve as a starting point for continued learning and conversations.

The Genesee ISD continues to offer professional learning opportunities that are aligned to and supportive of the Essential Instructional Practices. One such opportunity

was the Genesee Literacy Conference<sup>2</sup> hosted on January 21, 2017. The keynote and breakout sessions focused on essential practices such as, interactive writing, writing workshop, close and critical reading, phonological awareness, student engagement, vocabulary, parent involvement, small group instruction, and read aloud. All essential practices were highlighted throughout the day with the essential document being the foundation of the conference. Moving forward, the professional learning offered will continue to support the implementation of the essentials practices.

## Building Literacy Capacity

The Genesee ISD is fortunate to be involved in the Early Literacy Task Force through the General Education Leadership Network (GELN). The task force developed the essential instructional practices and continues to develop supporting documents and videos that model these essential practices. These supporting documents and videos will be used during professional learning and to support teachers' continued implementation of the essentials.

Additionally, the Genesee ISD is represented at the MDE Early Literacy Assessment Stakeholders group. The charge of this group is to inform MDE about professional development needs to support the implementation of developmentally appropriate practices, discuss and recommend to MDE a state-level reporting system, and support a plan for implementation of observation-based assessments.

The Genesee ISD offers many other opportunities to its stakeholder to build literacy capacity. Some examples of these opportunities are:

- Reading Recovery<sup>®</sup> teacher training
- Literacy Lessons<sup>™</sup> training for Special Education teachers or English Language Learner teachers
- Literacy Support training for the classroom teachers or Title I/reading specialists
- Reading Recovery continuing certification for teachers currently working with students

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<sup>2</sup> <https://site.geneseeisd.org/earlylit/>

- English Language Arts (ELA) leadership meeting for literacy leaders
- Curriculum directors' meetings
- Elementary principals' meetings
- Professional Learning

The Essential Instructional Practices in Early Literacy are always a topic of discussion during these professional learning opportunities. Teachers, literacy leaders, and administrators are provided time to delve deeper into the essentials, which helps to extend understanding and to support literacy development. Currently county curriculum directors participate in mini- professional learning sessions around the essentials during their meeting. It has been our commitment to embed conversation around the essential practices into all monthly agendas to build capacity, clarity, and a common understanding among school leaders.

## Conclusion

The Genesee ISD is committed to ramping up literacy in the county and will continue efforts to provide literacy coaching to teachers, provide professional learning opportunities to expand literacy knowledge and practices, and will continue to build literacy capacity to increase student achievement. The Essential Instructional Practices in Early Literacy document will continue to be the heart of these efforts.

## Author Biographies

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