

Strengthening Early Literacy Outcomes in Preschool

Evidence From a 6-Month Implementation in Kentucky

A Head Start program in Graves County, Kentucky, used Comprehensive Literacy State Development (CLSD) funding to introduce a supplemental structured early literacy curriculum—*Kickstart Literacy™*—into preschool classrooms. Within 6 months, the program observed measurable improvements in children’s literacy and language outcomes, with gains exceeding those seen in prior years.



Program

Murray Head Start,
Graves County
School District

Location

Mayfield, Kentucky

Program at a Glance

8 preschool classrooms
serving children ages 3–5

- 42% of children identified with disabilities
- 8 lead teachers and 12 assistant teachers

Products

Kickstart Literacy™ (primary literacy supplement)

- *The Creative Curriculum® for Preschool*
- *GOLD®* and *GOLDFinch™* assessment tools
- Professional development supports and family engagement resources

Challenges

District leaders identified persistent gaps in kindergarten readiness, particularly in early literacy. With access to CLSD funding, the district sought to:

- 1 Introduce a dedicated, evidence-informed literacy approach in preschool classrooms
- 2 Improve early literacy outcomes prior to kindergarten entry
- 3 Select materials that could be implemented consistently across classrooms with varying levels of experience

Kickstart Literacy™



Solution

Following a multi-stakeholder review process involving district leaders, special education staff, instructional coaches, and classroom educators, Graves County selected *Kickstart Literacy™*, aligned with principles from the science of reading, as their structured literacy supplement. Early Education Consultant Courtney Hayden noted "everything *Kickstart Literacy™* offered is exactly what we were looking for."

Our dedicated literacy solution emphasizes

- phonological awareness (e.g., rhyming, blending, segmenting),
- phonemic awareness (attention to individual sounds in words),
- phonics (sound-symbol correspondence), and
- early writing development integrated with phoneme and letter learning.

Implementation began in fall 2025 across eight preschool classrooms serving 4-year-olds. Classrooms incorporated *Kickstart Literacy™* (Monday–Thursday) in their half-day program, typically during whole-group instruction or embedded within transitions, depending on classroom structure.



Results

Assessment data from *GOLDFinch™* indicate notable changes over a 6-month period from Fall 2025–Winter 2026:

Literacy Outcomes

- The proportion of children whose scores were meeting or exceeding literacy expectations increased by 26%.
- The proportion of children whose scores were below expectations decreased by 55%.

When compared to the same period in the prior school year, overall literacy growth was approximately 30% higher.

Language Outcomes

- Children whose scores were meeting or exceeding language expectations increased by 15%.
- Children whose scores were below expectations decreased by 45%.

Year-over-year comparisons show 28% greater growth in language outcomes relative to the previous cohort.



Independent Validation: PELI Assessment

As required by the CLSD grant, the district also administered the Preschool Early Literacy Indicators (PELI) assessment, a state-approved measure aligned to kindergarten readiness domains. From the beginning to the middle of the year the proportion of children at or above benchmark increased by 15%.

Notable gains included:

- Alphabet knowledge: +14%
- Comprehension: +46%
- Phonological awareness: +27%

Implementation Experience: Classroom Usability and Engagement

Sustained implementation across classrooms required materials that could be integrated into existing instructional routines without adding significant burden. District leadership emphasized ease of use as a key selection criterion, given the variability in teacher experience and the demands of preschool schedules.

"Teachers have only positive things to say about *Kickstart Literacy*™," Courtney told us. "It was an easy add-on for them."

Teacher feedback suggests that *Kickstart Literacy*™ was generally straightforward to implement. Educators reported that materials were accessible and required minimal additional preparation. Teacher Amy Poe noted, "it was easy to use right out of the box," and that the structure of the lessons made them "easy to follow," reducing uncertainty in delivery.

Program leadership similarly observed that the curriculum functioned as a manageable addition rather than a competing initiative. This was particularly relevant in classrooms already using multiple instructional resources.



In addition to usability, teachers described high levels of student engagement during literacy activities. Both newer and more experienced educators reported that children participated readily in lessons and appeared to take interest in language and early literacy tasks.

Informal classroom observations by program leadership reinforced these reports. Engagement was visible during instructional time, and this was seen as consistent with the gains observed in assessment data.

Courtney reflected that when she walks into the classrooms, "It makes my heart happy to see children having fun learning about literacy, and it's evident by the data that they are gaining new skills."

Looking ahead, district leadership expressed confidence in the program's current trajectory in early literacy, while continuing to consider how best to allocate attention to other areas of need.

When asked about future plans for Graves County, Courtney noted that she feels like they have "literacy in the bag," and she is deciding where to focus her attention next.

