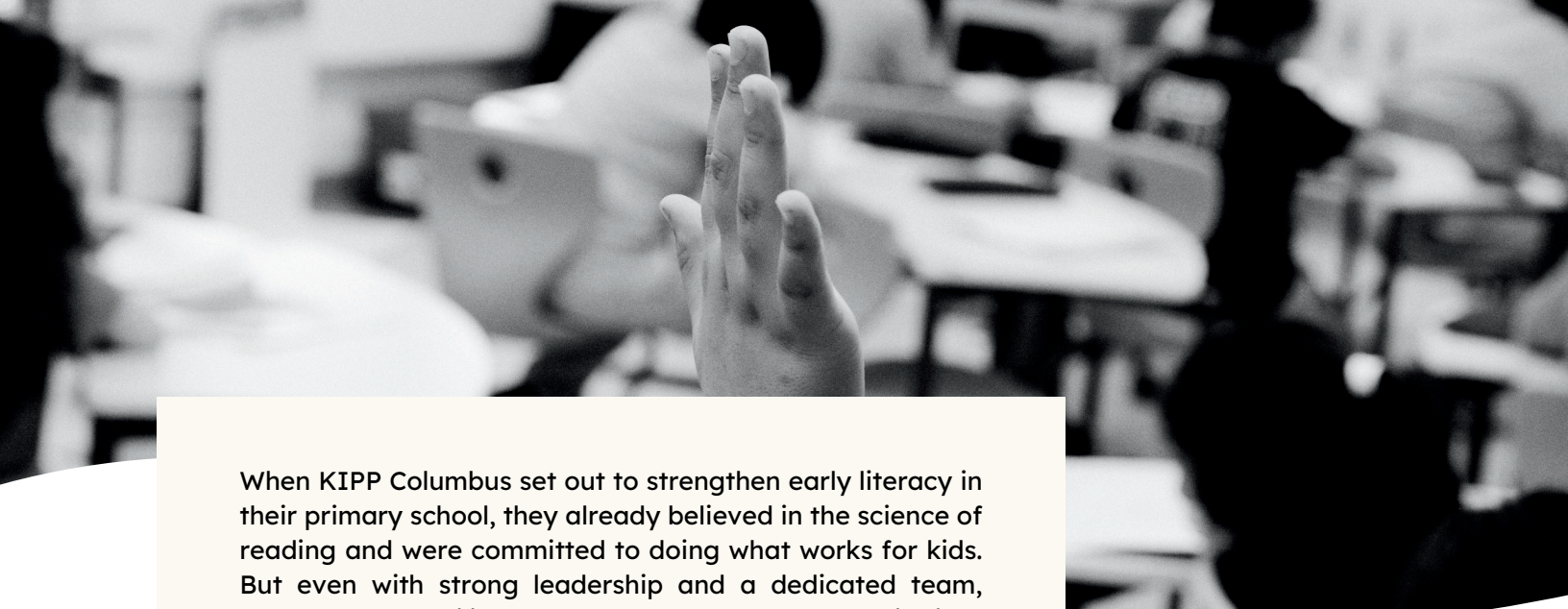




How Change Takes Root

How KIPP Columbus Primary School used research, data, and teacher voice to lead a curriculum adoption that stuck.





When KIPP Columbus set out to strengthen early literacy in their primary school, they already believed in the science of reading and were committed to doing what works for kids. But even with strong leadership and a dedicated team, they faced a familiar challenge: how to turn that belief into day-to-day instruction that reaches every student.

At the heart of their effort was a clear goal: ensure every teacher had access to High-Quality Instructional Materials (HQIMs) and the conviction, systems, and tools to use them with fidelity. That meant more than just selecting the right curriculum. It meant equipping teachers to deeply understand the curriculum and use daily classroom data to guide instruction and respond to student needs.

In the midst of doubling their school size and onboarding new teachers, KIPP Columbus partnered with Lit to lead a teacher-centered curriculum adoption process that grew into a transformation of their reading ecosystem.

The result: a stronger instructional foundation, a culture of teacher ownership, and sustained outcomes for kids.

In 2024–25, 81% of Kindergarteners and 86% of first graders ended the year at or above benchmark on DIBELS, a screener of early reading skills—evidence that excellent reading instruction is reaching more students, in more classrooms, every day.

This is the story of how KIPP Columbus made a bold shift in a time of growth, and how Lit helped turn it into lasting change through research, results, and teacher voice.

KIPP Columbus Primary



COLUMBUS, OHIO



GRADES K-1
500 STUDENTS



98% OF STUDENTS
IDENTIFY AS
STUDENTS OF
COLOR



“I love that we seek to hire and retain teachers who intentionally want to work and serve in our community and believe deeply that all children can succeed when given the correct supports.”

- Maggie Callender, School Leader



KIPP Columbus Primary School (KCP) educates 500 students in Kindergarten and first grade. Located in one of the most historically underserved neighborhoods in Columbus, Ohio, KIPP Columbus serves a student body that is predominantly African American and reflects the resilience and aspirations of its community.

“I love that we seek to hire and retain teachers who intentionally want to work and serve in our community and believe deeply that all children can succeed when given the correct supports,” says Maggie Callender, KCP’s school leader since 2018. “We’re all working hard every day to figure it out and truly unlock their potential.”

KIPP Columbus is part of the national KIPP Public Schools network, a system of public charter schools that serves more than 180,000 students across the nation. In 2020, the entire network committed to a sustained focus on improving literacy outcomes through ongoing training and a focus on evidence-based materials, assessments, and instructional practices. At the same time, KIPP Columbus committed to doubling its size, building new facilities, and expanding its kindergarten and first grade classes from six to twelve sections each. Historically, just 50 - 60% of first graders were ending the year proficient in reading.

Leaders knew that a unified focus on literacy would be key to serving more students while continuing to raise the bar for the families already enrolled.

The Challenge

When KIPP Columbus entered an early literacy cohort with Lit and other KIPP regions in the 2021-22 school year, they weren’t starting from scratch. The team had participated in training about the science of reading and were seeing early results in some classrooms with their curriculum.

Data, however, remained a challenge.

While data from literacy assessments was being tracked, Callender says it felt like they were entering information into a void that didn’t lead to actionable next steps. Additionally, school leaders did not have the student-level data they needed to help teachers make strong plans and address gaps for kids.

“Before Lit, we were often not satisfied with our results for kids, but we didn’t always know what steps to take next,” says Callender.



Leaders knew something needed to change, and that making shifts—especially if they were related to a curriculum teachers liked and felt comfortable with—needed to be approached with care and inclusivity.

YEAR ONE: BUILDING A SHARED FOUNDATION

KIPP Columbus began working with Lit as part of a KIPP-wide early literacy cohort. At the time, they needed a partner to help them build the systems, tools, and confidence to lead meaningful change.

To determine the right first steps, Lit conducted a Lit Quality Review (LQR) to assess what KIPP Columbus was already doing.

They were doing a lot of things right, like prioritizing daily phonics instruction and cultivating a shared belief in using instructional practices aligned to the science of reading.

At the same time, the review surfaced key opportunities to strengthen coherence and execution. The vision for foundational skills instruction was still taking shape, and there wasn't yet a coordinated effort to ensure all the pieces of the instructional "puzzle" fit together and played out consistently across classrooms.

The work started with learning.

Through targeted PD on the science of reading and high-quality instructional practices, the Lit team opened educators' eyes to what was possible and necessary. For Assistant School Leader Katie Davis, this phase was transformational.

"What we were doing wasn't working. Lit helped us see that and showed us how to change. Lit was opening my eyes to doing what's right for kids."

- Katie Davis, Assistant School Leader

"I hated when the PDs ended," Davis says. "I'd run out of my office and say, 'Can I tell you what I've learned?'"

Callender says from the beginning, the Lit team worked to develop trust and focused on bringing the KIPP Columbus team alongside them.

"From day one, it was clear Lit wasn't just there to tell us what to do," says Callender. "They were there to build our team's capacity to make smart, research-aligned decisions."

During the first year, Lit helped KIPP Columbus review their literacy curriculum to identify gaps and think deeply about what it would take to strengthen those areas.

Callender says the Lit team provided strong, irrefutable research along the way that spurred KIPP Columbus to research alternate curriculum. At the same time, the nationwide KIPP network was also making a shift toward CKLA Skills.

Armed with the information they needed to make an informed decision, Callender says, "It seemed like CKLA had what we were looking for, specifically decodable text, lots of practice, and stories our students would enjoy reading. We didn't have a good reason not to pilot it. I think we knew the potential of it."

From there, Lit helped the KIPP Columbus team move into action through a series of purposeful, bite-sized steps.



YEAR TWO: CREATING COALITION

With CKLA now in hand, the KIPP Columbus team needed a plan to successfully run a pilot that would engage skeptical teachers and provide an opportunity for multiple voices to weigh in.

Callender did what any great school leader would do: she recruited the skeptics to pilot the curriculum in their classrooms during the 2022-2023 school year. The new curriculum was tested in one kindergarten classroom and two first grade classrooms.

Through Lit's partnership, KIPP Columbus built a pilot process that was inclusive, transparent, and grounded in evidence. KIPP Columbus wanted to test CKLA in a way that gave everyone a stake in the outcome and invited real conversations around what was working and what wasn't. With Lit's support, they formed a pilot committee and created a structure for decision-making designed to cultivate shared ownership and clarity around how decisions would be made.

"They consistently prioritized getting feedback from teachers and rooting things in student outcomes, which built trust," says Callender. "Where sometimes it can feel like a pilot, but actually it's already happening, they were helpful in modeling how to be very transparent and provide the right info to the right people. That's a framework we've continued to use."

By the end of the year, classrooms piloting CKLA significantly outperformed those still using the old curriculum.

Perhaps more important, the teachers who had been the most skeptical became the program's most vocal advocates. They saw firsthand that when kids had better materials, they enjoyed learning and made real progress in learning to read.

"Those two pilot teachers had completely different teaching styles," Davis explained. "But they both saw success. That made it easier for everyone else to see the value and the possibility."

Throughout the year, results of the students getting the old and the new curriculum were publicly shared, adding to the team's overall investment in making the change schoolwide.

"I think the fact that Lit allowed us to do a true pilot helped us set up a framework that brought everybody to the table, from students, to teachers, to leaders, even to the superintendent," says Callender. "That helped us speak the same language and made the decision easier."

YEAR THREE: BUILDING THE SYSTEM

In 2023-2024, the team expanded CKLA schoolwide. To ensure a successful transition, Lit supported KIPP Columbus with a comprehensive implementation plan, built around strong systems and hands-on practice.

"[Lit] consistently prioritized getting feedback from teachers and rooting things in student outcomes, which built trust."

- Maggie Callender



Key implementation moves included:



Deepening Investment through Learning: Every teacher completed LETRS training, anchoring their instruction in the science of reading. But it was the professional learning with Lit that helped connect the dots. Teachers didn't just learn what to do; they understand the "why" behind every lesson routine.

"We started to talk about the 'throughline' of a lesson," says Davis. "That shifted everything. Teachers weren't just teaching—they were investing."



Clarifying Expectations for Internalization & Instruction: Lit introduced lesson internalization protocols and helped leaders set clear "look-fors" that focused everyone on specific instructional goals, like accurate implementation of phonics routines. Observations became purposeful with leaders and teachers using a shared language.



Building Skill Through Intentional Practice: Lit didn't just give leaders tools, they practiced with them. From rehearsing PD rollouts to modeling data meetings, Lit supported leaders in preparing for their roles with the same care and planning expected in the classroom.

Coaching focused on the "how" as much as the "what." Davis says her Lit coach was an indispensable lifeline throughout the implementation year, helping her build new skills and providing real-time feedback that allowed her to grow as a leader.



Driving Decisions with Real-Time Data: Lit provided custom-built data trackers for curriculum-embedded assessments, allowing teachers to input data and immediately see trends and patterns by student, skill, and classroom. Teachers could quickly identify which vowel sounds students were missing or which phonics skills needed reteaching. Leaders used the data to inform coaching conversations, group students strategically, and plan targeted interventions. The result was a feedback loop that was fast, specific, and actionable. Teachers felt empowered by the data, not overwhelmed by it and leaders had the insight they needed to drive instructional quality forward.

"Before, we had no idea what to do with our data," says Callender. "With their support, we've built a system where we're never surprised by our data, and we know how to respond. Now, everything's more intentional. We're focused and efficient."



Leading Change Through Trust and Transparency: In every stage of the work, Callender says Lit emphasized clarity, transparency, and respect for teacher voice. They helped the team identify key messages, root conversations in student data, and manage fears with facts.

"Sometimes you have outside partners and you dread those meetings," Davis says. "But every time a meeting with Lit was on my calendar, I looked forward to it. I felt supported, not judged."



THE IMPACT

The result was not just stronger outcomes but a shift in school culture. Reading success became the norm, not the exception. Teachers trusted the curriculum, trusted their data, and trusted each other.

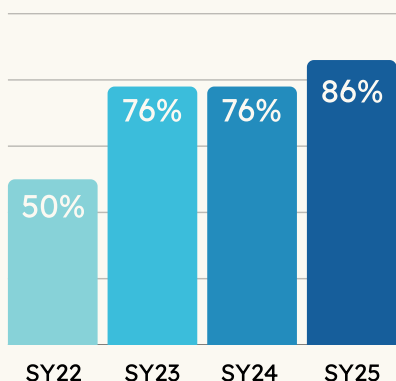
“It used to feel like everything was important, so nothing was,” Davis says. “Lit helped us focus on what truly moves the needle for kids.”

And the needle started moving immediately.

- In 2021–22, just before the pilot, 71% of Kindergarteners and only 50% of 1st graders were at or above the benchmark on DIBELS, a nationally normed universal screener of foundational skills.
- By the end of the 2022–23 pilot, 81% of Kindergarteners and 78% of 1st graders were at or above benchmark.

Since the pilot, the school has sustained their early progress. Just this year, 81% of Kindergarteners and 86% of first graders ended the year at or above benchmark on DIBELS.

KIPP COLUMBUS FIRST GRADERS AT OR ABOVE BENCHMARK ON DIBELS (EOY)



More importantly, the literacy foundation laid during the pilot year positioned KIPP Columbus to scale with fidelity. As they doubled the number of kindergarten and first grade classrooms, they didn't just add teachers; they added aligned training, clear systems, and a deep, shared understanding of what effective instruction looks like.

“We're in a better place than we would be if it wasn't for Lit's support,” says Callender. “They helped us get unstuck and stay on track.”

What once felt like isolated teacher efforts are now part of a school-wide literacy ecosystem. Across the building, there's a consistent look and feel to instruction. Teachers are more confident. Leaders are more strategic. And most importantly, students are reading—truly reading—the grade-level texts in front of them.

“What is undeniably true across our campus, especially with the kids who've been impacted by these shifts, is that our students are able to access whatever they're reading in class,” says Callender.

WHAT'S NEXT

The successful transition to a new curriculum wasn't just a win for literacy. It marked a turning point for how KIPP Columbus approaches teaching and learning as a whole. With aligned curriculum, embedded assessment practices, and a culture of data-informed instruction now well established in ELA, school leaders are looking to extend those same principles across other content areas.

“This work has changed the trajectory of our school,” says Callender. “We're growing fast. But we're growing with purpose, with alignment, and with a relentless focus on what's best for kids.”

The experience has given the team a blueprint for how to implement change: root decisions in



research, build trust through transparency, invest deeply in teacher learning, and always center the student experience.

Leaders are now turning their attention to refining math instruction with the same level of coherence and clarity. They're also committed to deepening their small-group instruction and ensuring Tier 1 lessons continue to challenge all students—especially those at or above grade level.

The next chapter will focus on maintaining momentum, scaling teacher expertise across grade levels, and codifying the practices that have helped them grow.

“Everything that’s working really well, Lit helped us build it,” says Davis. “They didn’t just set us up for success today. They helped us build the systems to sustain it for years.”

About This Case Study

This case study was developed by [Erin Holt](#) in partnership with the teams at Lit and KIPP Columbus Primary School.

You can learn more about KIPP Columbus at: kippcolumbus.org.

You can learn more about Lit’s work to transform reading systems and our impact at: wearelit.org. You can also read more case studies about literacy transformation inside [The Lit Library](#).



How Lit Can Help You Make the Most of High-Quality Instructional Materials (HQIMs)

Wherever you are on your journey, we help you evaluate, adopt, and implement High-Quality Instructional Materials (HQIMs), while building the systems, routines, and supports needed to ensure they take root in every classroom.



Lit Quality Review: We examine your current approach through document reviews, classroom observations, data analysis, and conversations with your school community. We identify what’s working, what needs attention, and how aligned your curriculum and instruction are to research-based practice. The result? Clear, actionable recommendations to strengthen instruction and increase coherence across curriculum and assessments.

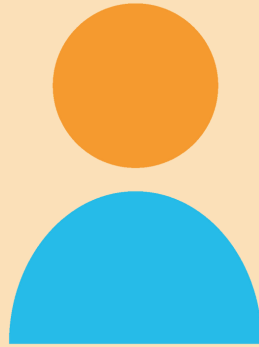


Learn & Design: This series blends research-based learning with hands-on design support. In our “Test & Decide” workshops, teams gain clarity on how the science of reading should shape HQIM selection and get the tools to explore, test, and confidently decide what to pilot. We also help teams (re)design key structures like curriculum, assessments, and professional learning systems.



Implementation Coaching & Support: We stay by your side as you bring plans to life. Through regular coaching, on-site visits, and curriculum PLCs, we help teams stay on track with weekly progress monitoring, targeted support, and fast-cycle problem-solving to build the habits and systems that lead to lasting change.





Every kid, everywhere, a reader.

You can learn more about the amazing team at KIPP Columbus Primary School [on their website here](#). You can [learn more about Lit here](#) or scan the QR code below to visit our website.



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