

# Explicit Phonics Instruction Moves the Needle

One District's Journey of Growth Toward Proficiency  
for English Learners



KENNETT SQUARE,  
PENNSYLVANIA

Kennett Consolidated School District's (KCSD) English Learners achieved substantial growth toward proficiency after one semester of implementing *Benchmark Phonics* and *Benchmark Phonics Intervention*.

## The Context

Kennett Consolidated School District (KCSD) is in suburban Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, which is the mushroom farming capital of the world. The district has six schools that serve approximately 4,000 K–12 students. Kennett Square is a multicultural community with third- and fourth-generation Mexican families and newcomer families from other countries such as Guatemala, Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela. Some KCSD students are unaccompanied youth and/or have limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE). Additionally, some students from Guatemala speak indigenous languages such as Mam or K'iche, which have no written code. Kennett Consolidated School District embraces its multicultural community and celebrates multilingualism.

### District Snapshot

16.5%

of students are active English Learners that qualify for English language services with a case manager.

45%

of students identify as Hispanic.

48.5%

of students identify as White.

23

English Language Development Teachers

# The Opportunity

In January 2021, Brenna Austin, KCSD’s English Language Development (ELD) Supervisor, was presented with WIDA ACCESS data that showed 93% of the district’s English Learners in Grades 1–5 who had gains were not on track to proficiency (as defined by the state). To change this trajectory, the district modified their ELD model so there was more push-in and co-teaching time. They also increased their staffing of teachers to limit high caseloads.

In response to these changes, 2022 data improved. Austin explained, “We got a little better. We brought [our percentage] down to 86%. We were growing kids, but not at the rate they are supposed to grow to achieve proficiency.”

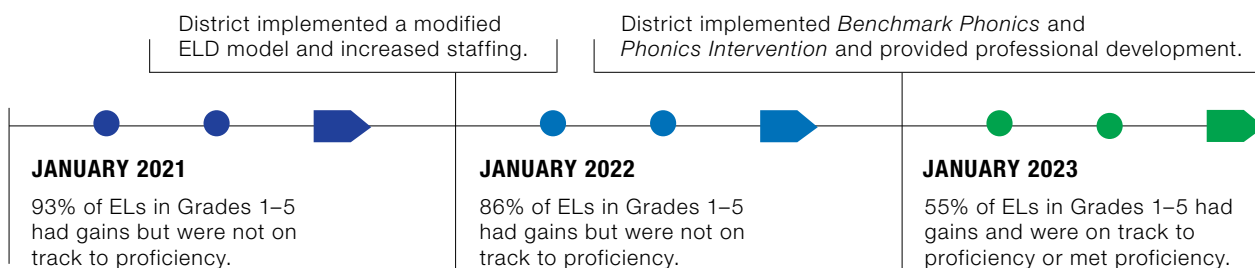
At that time, the district was using a popular balanced literacy program and had been without a structured phonics program for over ten years. Dr. Jennifer Miller, Supervisor

of Elementary Education, noted, “We knew this needed to change. We needed to start explicitly teaching phonics.”

To support this change, KCSD sought out a phonics program that supported English Learners with tactile opportunities, consistent visuals, and engaging multimedia. For teachers, KCSD wanted a program that was “laid out in an explicit way with a lot of resources,” Miller explained. Also critical was access to sustained and carefully designed professional development.

From their search, the district adopted and implemented *Benchmark Phonics* and *Benchmark Phonics Intervention* in the fall of 2022. They also supported all teachers with professional development in the Science of Reading. Miller noted, “After implementing *Benchmark Phonics* and *Benchmark Phonics Intervention*, we started to see some changes in our data pretty rapidly.”

## KCSD’s Implementation Journey



# The Outcome

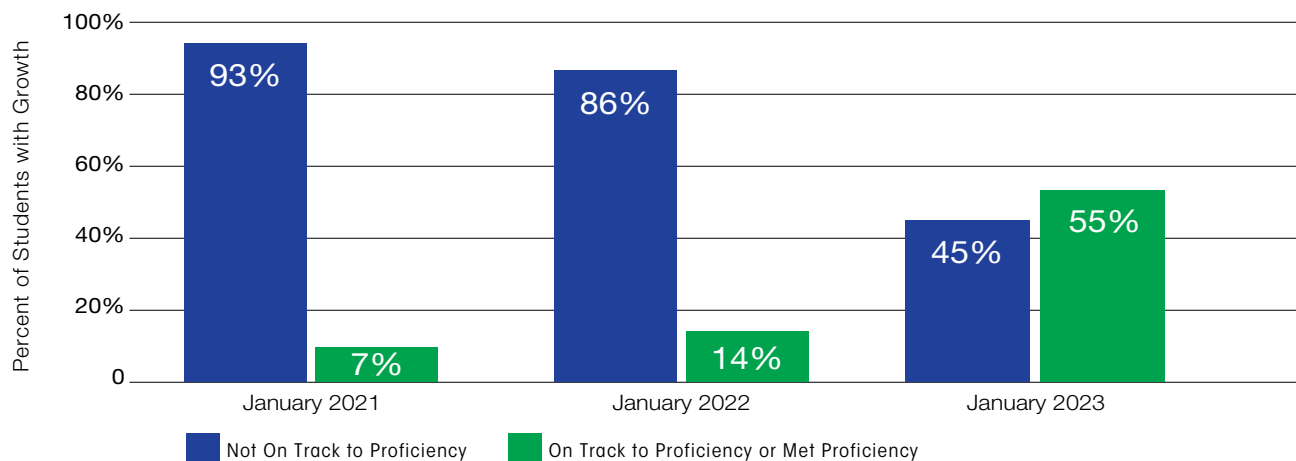
After one semester of implementing *Benchmark Phonics* and *Benchmark Phonics Intervention*, KCS D observed exceptional results for students in Grades 1–5. January 2023 WIDA ACCESS data showed 55% of students who had gains were on track to achieve proficiency. This is in comparison to two years earlier when only 7% of students were on track to achieve proficiency.

Miller explained, “Adding [*Benchmark Phonics* and *Benchmark Phonics Intervention*] is the one major change we made to our instruction. You can see that change in the primary grades and in our overall data.”

“It’s all about growth. You want to show [students] are making their annual growth targets each year.”

—Dr. Jennifer Miller,  
Supervisor of Elementary Education

## WIDA ACCESS Results for KCS D ELS Using *Benchmark Phonics* and *Phonics Intervention*: Students On Track to Proficiency Grew from 7% to 55%



The ACCESS for ELs On Track to Proficiency Report Shows Grades 1–5 Student Growth Toward Proficiency Before and After Receiving Explicit Phonics Instruction Using *Benchmark Phonics* and *Benchmark Phonics Intervention* Starting in the 2022–2023 School Year

“I have never seen our elementary teachers so confident about teaching a program so quickly.”

—Brenna Austin,  
ELD Supervisor

In addition to student growth, KCSD witnessed more confident teachers and attributed that confidence to the instructional design of *Benchmark Phonics* and *Benchmark Phonics Intervention*. Austin noted, “I have never seen our elementary teachers so confident about teaching a program so quickly. We had new teachers feeling confident within about two weeks because it’s plug and play. Teachers still make instructional decisions, but the program is laid out in an organized, user-friendly format. Planning times can be used more efficiently and not spent on teachers creating their own materials.”

Though Miller and Austin recognize there is a lot to celebrate, they also acknowledge they “are only beginning the journey toward change.” ■

## Programs at a Glance

*Benchmark Phonics* and *Benchmark Phonics Intervention* are designed by Wiley Blevins, Ed.D., to support every learner with explicit, systematic, cumulative, and multimodal phonics instruction.

Ideal for Tiers 1 and 2, *Benchmark Phonics* offers a structured approach to literacy and emphasizes a review and repetition cycle of skills, in addition to connected reading and writing opportunities for building vocabulary and content knowledge.

With a direct connection to the *Benchmark Phonics* scope and sequence, *Benchmark Phonics Intervention* is a Tier 3 intervention program that supports learners two or more years below grade level and those with dyslexia or other learning disabilities. Both programs offer a digital experience and are supported by differentiated professional development.

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