

Senate Education Committee Academic Efforts Testimony

Strongsville City Schools - Cuyahoga County Dr. Cameron M. Ryba, Superintendent

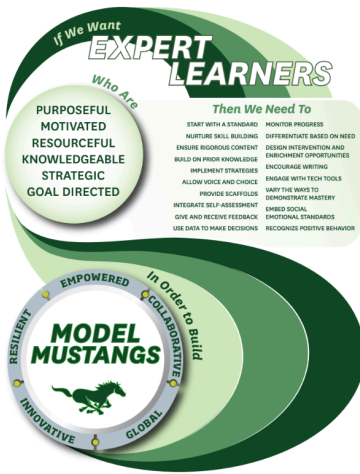
April 23, 2024

Chair Brenner, Vice Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on the academic efforts of the Strongsville City School District during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

My name is Dr. Cameron Ryba and I have been honored to serve as the Superintendent for the Strongsville City Schools for the past nine years. Strongsville City Schools is a suburban school district in Northeast Ohio, serving over 5,700 students across eight buildings. Our student population continues to evolve and grow in diversity each year. Strongsville City Schools supports nearly 300 English Learners speaking 36 different languages. We have over 980 students identified as Gifted, more than 600 students who are provided Special Education services and support, and over 800 students in the Free and Reduced Lunch program. We are a high performing district, developing future pathways for our graduates in college, career, and military.

Our organizational purpose at Strongsville City Schools is to *Inspire and empower today's learners to build tomorrow's leaders*. Over my 25 year career in education, as a district and building principal at every level, I have seen programs come and go. What I have learned is that when you invest in people, you create opportunities for systemic and strategic improvements that become a part of the fabric of an organization and lead to meaningful and sustainable change for the betterment of our students. Investing in teachers through available resources and support within a culture of innovation, provides the conditions to support the realization of our Purpose and creating measurable impact on student growth.

As we worked through and out of the pandemic, there was a noticeable need to engage students in a different way in order to close student achievement gaps by enhancing our staff's capacity to provide high quality Tier I instruction.



INNOVATIVE

"Innovation is the ability to see change as an opportunity - not a threat."
- Steve Jobs

Identifies and Evaluates Authentic Problems Students actively identify authentic problems that they want to solve through active learning and experimentation.	1) I am curious about problems and want to generate ideas that may be unique to solve them.
Learns from Experimentation Students move past relying on experience or what they have always done to create new ways of going about something to reach their end goals.	2) I can listen to and consider ideas and opinions expressed by group members that are different from my own.
	3) I effectively use organizational strategies to evaluate problems. (e.g., categorization, prioritization, classification, etc.)
Thinks Flexibly Students apply strategies to think differently based on the information in front of them and possibly go toward what piques their interest.	4) I look beyond what has always been done.
	5) I ask thought provoking questions to encourage others to think beyond what is in front of them.
Sees Uncertainty as Opportunities Students see uncertainty and ambiguity as opportunities to explore and a cause for excitement resulting in increased engagement.	6) I utilize a variety of resources and technology as I work through the creative process.
	7) I can identify points of agreement and disagreement and look at ideas from multiple perspectives.
Pursues Imaginative and Creative Solutions Students implement a variety of methods and tools to go creative and original products that apply to solving an authentic issue.	8) I review and process feedback to create logical next steps, and make revisions that improve the quality of the idea.
	9) I connect and build upon others' ideas to generate new and unique insights.
Persues Imaginative and Creative Solutions Students implement a variety of methods and tools to go creative and original products that apply to solving an authentic issue.	10) I view failure as an opportunity to learn - understanding that creativity and innovation is a long term cyclical process of small success and frequent mistakes.
	11) I pause to reflect on current progress and consider other options needed to achieve the goal.
Persues Imaginative and Creative Solutions Students implement a variety of methods and tools to go creative and original products that apply to solving an authentic issue.	12) I am an active learner that is not afraid to continually revise and rework the plan as needed to get to the best possible outcome.
	13) I work beyond the classroom and textbook to seek out solutions.
Persues Imaginative and Creative Solutions Students implement a variety of methods and tools to go creative and original products that apply to solving an authentic issue.	14) I persevere through multiple attempts and revisions to create and offer possible solutions.
	15) I use evidence that supports my product(s) and point out strengths and limitations that may be present.

Innovation is the ability to generate and execute new ideas

Whether these ideas be incremental, evolutionary, or revolutionary - it all starts with creativity. Our students will be more successful when they create new and worthwhile ideas, evaluate them, as understand the limitations presented when adopting a new way path. It is essential that students are provided time to develop capacity to be creative, experiment, synthesize information, as implement data informed decision-making utilizing authentic challenges.

So what does INNOVATION look like in our school's environment?

- Students actively identify authentic problems that they solve through active learning and experimentation.
- Students move past relying on experience or what they have always done to create new ways of going about something, reach the end result.
- Students apply strategies to think differently based on all the information in front of them and possibly go toward what piques their interest.
- Students see uncertainty and ambiguity as opportunities explore and a cause for excitement resulting in increased engagement.
- Students implement a variety of methods and tools to go creative and original products that apply to solving an authentic issue.

As a district we recognize that our students need the skills necessary to be innovative as they explore their future endeavors. Having a creative mind to tackle authentic problems is essential to moving ideas forward and devising solutions that result in forward progress.

Students who are able to look at something from a different perspective and use various tools to solve a problem will undoubtedly be prepared to compete in a global market.

Elementary Literacy Focus / LETRS Training

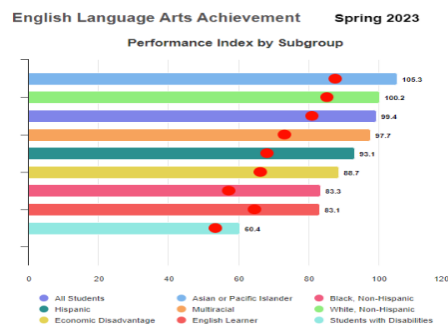
Based on our Tier I focus, Strongsville City Schools has been on a multi-year strategic and intentional path to address literacy at our elementary level. While Ohio was in its infancy with the science of reading pedagogy and looking for ways to provide and scale effective reading instruction in districts, we applied for and were awarded a \$1.2 million Striving Readers grant from the State Department in 2018. From 2018 through 2021, using the funds from the grant for training and the addition of four (4) literacy coaches, our District created and implemented a 3-year local literacy plan to bolster the reading skills of our elementary students.

With implementation beginning pre-pandemic, we began to see incremental progress at the elementary level, but any positive gains we had started to make with students and staff were essentially negated during the early stages of the pandemic. The negative effects were most prominent in our youngest learners, who were trying to learn literacy essentials and phonics basics during this timeframe of online learning. This unexpected challenge escalated our urgency as a District to utilize evidence-based instructional practices that support the science of reading methodology with all students, while also implementing targeted systematic supports for individual students based on specific reading deficits seen from their diagnostic assessments.

For the past three years we have utilized one of our elementary literacy coaches who is a trained facilitator in LETRS (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling) to begin training all of our kindergarten through third grade teachers in the eight modules. We utilized ESSER dollars to help offset the costs of LETRS materials, as well as to hire permanent substitute teachers to proactively address the substitute shortage and allow for this ongoing training to occur during the school day. By the end of this school year, our K-3 staff, as well as elementary specialists (e.g., Speech Language Pathologists, English Learner, Title I, Psychologists, Intervention Specialists and Administrators) will have received 70 hours of comprehensive professional learning designed to provide our elementary educators with deep knowledge to be literacy and language experts in the science of reading, surpassing the mandated training requirements. This professional development will be replicated with all new applicable hires in future years to ensure we maintain this structured approach across all elementary classrooms and buildings. The impact of the grant dollars that allowed us to scale this model of professional training cannot be overstated.

As the Ohio State Test (OST) data below and the AIMSweb data in the following section demonstrates, these efforts have supported a return to pre-pandemic levels of achievement, as well as exceeding performance index benchmarks for all subgroups for Spring 2023. However, due to the expiration of the grant, the elimination of the ESSER funds, and two failed renewal levies, the strain on our general fund to continue to provide this level of support, in addition to a \$1 million cost to provide state approved instructional materials in the Science of Reading creates a significant strain on local funds that could result once again in stalling the progress that has been made with our youngest learners.

Grade/ Course	Spring 2019	Spring 2020	Spring 2021	Spring 2022	Spring 2023
Grade 3	87.5%		74.9%	79.0%	86.0%
Grade 4	78.3%		83.6%	77.0%	78.0%
Grade 5	84.7%		84.3%	87.0%	84.0%



Targeted Intervention for Literacy

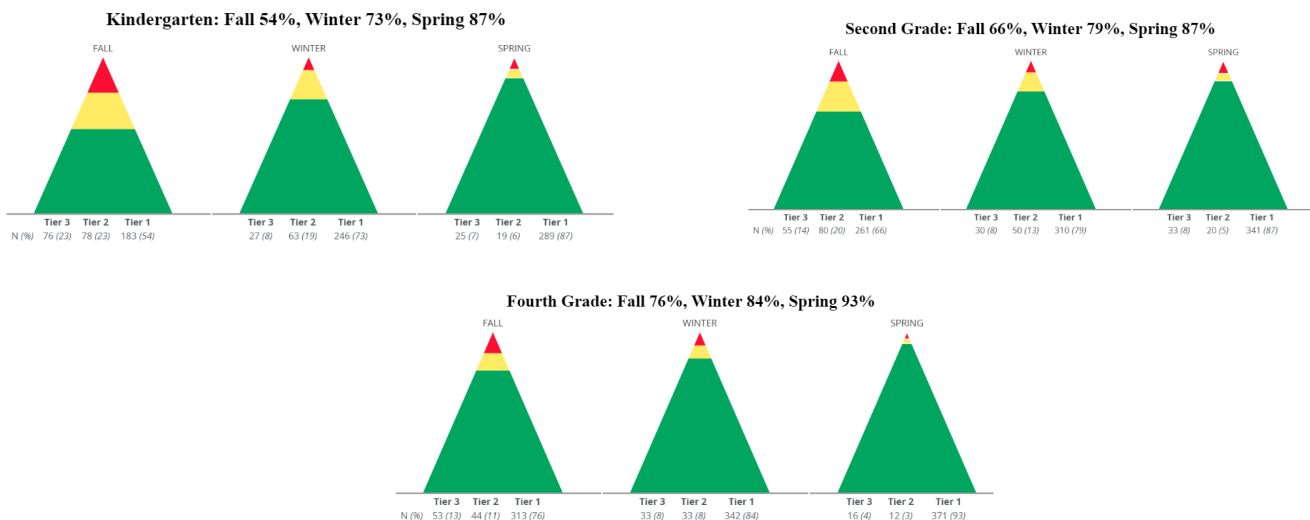
Over the past three years, in addition to staff receiving LETRS training, we have also provided support and training to develop our teachers' skills to drill further down into a student's reading deficits to determine which skill is the most urgent need, as well as which interventions will address this gap through targeted interventions and supports. Through our developed intervention system, we have been able to be targeted and strategic across all five of our elementary buildings using a solid Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework.

To bring this process to life, we used our ESSER funds to create an MTSS Coordinator position. Both the MTSS Coordinator and Principals meet five times a year with every grade-level teacher team at each elementary building to review all grade level reading (and mathematics) data from the most recent Aimsweb Plus diagnostic.

The professional growth of elementary staff and administrators with LETRS training, which began in 2021 and concludes this school year, has helped us transition to research-based Tier I instruction that is founded on high quality explicit teaching. The application into the classroom provides teachers the knowledge of how students learn to read, what literacy skills need to be taught, why, and how to plan to teach them. When we have a struggling reader, we are much more equipped as an MTSS team to isolate the deficit and employ evidence-based interventions.

This approach has dramatically shifted our professionals' thinking to be able to target specific student needs in reading, using data to drive interventions. No longer are we providing a one-size fits all approach for at-risk readers, but rather individualized evidence-based interventions with monitoring for effectiveness. The dramatic closing of gaps from fall to spring, as first seen in the 2022-23 school year, was promising and validated this data-driven, science of reading based approach to instruction over previous practices we had been using. Aimsweb reading data from this current school year is closely mirroring or exceeding the 2022-23 data shown below.

SAMPLE AIMSWEB PLUS READING TIER 1 DATA: FALL 2022 - SPRING 2023



Additional ESSER positions to support early literacy intervention include a Literacy Specialist for the two elementary buildings in our District who do not receive Title I reading supports or staffing, as well as an additional English Learner (EL) teacher at the elementary level to help mitigate both COVID learning loss and the amplified needs of students for whom English is not their primary language. These three positions have critical roles in the MTSS / intervention process and will have to be supported by the general fund after the ESSER dollars are gone, which adds an additional strain on finite resources.

Extending Learning Beyond the School Year

Based on the challenges brought about by COVID and through the use of our ESSER funds, we also designed a more comprehensive Summer Learning experience tailored to meet the diverse needs of our students. We provided explicit instruction and targeted support for elementary students requiring remediation (about 420 students) in ELA and Math to bridge learning gaps. Simultaneously, we created enrichment opportunities to support our gifted population, including a Makerspace class and a book club for literary exploration. Additionally, our school counselors provided emotional support and guidance to help students navigate the complexities of the past year. We also supported middle school students who were failing courses and not performing well on OST's and high school students in need of credits for graduation. We continue to offer Summer Learning for remediation, as the needs still exist, by using our Educational Service Center ESSER funds (in its final year of funding) along with the general fund. Moving forward, we will need to scale the program down even further as we have to consider this addition to our general fund along with all of the other additions due to the elimination of the ESSER funds.

Enhancing Instruction and Supports at the Elementary Level

In addition to our LETRS training, intervention systems and summer learning programming, starting in August of 2021, we began providing extensive Professional Development on deconstructing standards so that our teachers could gain a comprehensive understanding of the rigor required. This year-long process allowed us to grasp the Depth of Knowledge (DOK) required for each standard, guiding us in crafting learning experiences that not only aligned with content, but also challenged our students to engage in this higher-order thinking.

We also supported high quality Tier I instruction by integrating and implementing high-yield instructional strategies. Instead of students being a passive learner focused on rote memorization, our teachers implement metacognitive strategies, which achieve a deeper learning experience for our students through empowering them to think about their own thinking and include the “why” in addition to the “what” in their learning experiences. These strategies align to state standards, have enriched our teaching practices, and yielded tangible results. This work may not be flashy, but it is a systemic approach that is showing signs of meaningful and sustainable change.

Since the 2022-23 school year, our elementary level also focused on integrating writing across all content areas and creating K-5 writing rubrics aligned with state rubrics, to not only assess our students' response to instruction, but to also gauge their comprehension level across all content areas. By incorporating these rubrics across all elementary grade levels and subject areas, teachers in our teacher-based teams (TBTs) were able to focus their collaborative conversations on this writing data in order to plan for future instruction.

3rd Grade Opinion Writing

	State Standard	Goal	Feedback
Intro	Introduce the topic/ text they are writing about & states opinion.	<input type="checkbox"/> Introduces a topic/text <input type="checkbox"/> States an opinion	
Elaboration	Writing includes thorough, relevant evidence (facts, details, definitions, quotes, examples) from all sources directly related to the prompt.	<input type="checkbox"/> Includes thorough, evidence directly related to the prompt/ topic (3 pts) <input type="checkbox"/> Evidence cited from all sources	
	Elaboration of evidence is focused, original writing and is clearly connected to the writer's opinion.	<input type="checkbox"/> Elaboration is focused on the evidence provided <input type="checkbox"/> Written in original student writing (3 pts) <input type="checkbox"/> Clearly connected to the writer's opinion	
Con	Provide a concluding statement or section.	<input type="checkbox"/> Provides a concluding statement, sentence or section	
Stretch	Writing contains academic vocabulary; Organized in multi-paragraph response.	<input type="checkbox"/> Contains academic words <input type="checkbox"/> Organized in more than 2 paragraphs <i>(not penalized if not included)</i>	
Conventions	C capitalization U understanding P punctuation S spelling	Errors: C _____ U _____ P _____ S _____	
			3 points = strong evidence/elaboration 2 points = adequate evidence/elaboration 1 point = weak evidence/elaboration ____ /12 points

3rd Grade Opinion Writing

In my writing, I...	My writing goal is to:
<input type="checkbox"/> introduced the topic. <input type="checkbox"/> stated my opinion about the topic.	<input type="checkbox"/> introduce the topic better. <input type="checkbox"/> include my opinion about the topic.
<input type="checkbox"/> included multiple pieces of text evidence. <input type="checkbox"/> cited evidence from all sources.	<input type="checkbox"/> include more text evidence. <input type="checkbox"/> cite evidence from all sources.
<input type="checkbox"/> elaborated/explained my evidence in my own words. <input type="checkbox"/> connected my evidence to my opinion.	<input type="checkbox"/> elaborate/explain my text evidence better. <input type="checkbox"/> make sure my evidence matches my opinion.
<input type="checkbox"/> included a concluding statement/sentence.	<input type="checkbox"/> include a better conclusion statement/sentence.
Challenge: <input type="checkbox"/> included content words from the text. <input type="checkbox"/> organized it in more than 2 paragraphs.	<input type="checkbox"/> include content words from the text. <input type="checkbox"/> organize my writing in more than 2 paragraphs.
<input type="checkbox"/> checked my capitalization. <input type="checkbox"/> checked to be sure my writing made sense. <input type="checkbox"/> checked my punctuation. <input type="checkbox"/> checked my spelling.	

The ultimate measure of our efforts was reflected in the improvement in our 2022-23 Ohio State Test writing scores within just one year of implementing this approach. Through our understanding of DOK and standards breakdown across all content areas, leveraging enhanced teaching strategies, and implementing common assessments and rubrics, we witnessed a significant increase in student growth and proficiency. These results underscore the effectiveness of our approach and affirm our commitment to continuous improvement in educational practices.

	Total	Conventions			Elaboration				Purpose			
	10 pt	0 pt	1 pt	2 pt	1 pt	2 pt	3 pt	4 pt	1 pt	2 pt	3 pt	4 pt
2023	6.38	0%	15%	85%	11%	53%	33%	2%	8%	47%	43%	2%
2022	3.24	0%	24%	76%	27%	65%	8%	0%	26%	65%	9%	0%
375	2023	2-1 = 100%			4-3 - 35% = 131 students 2 - 53% = 198 students Total = 329				4-3 - 45% = 168 students 2 - 53% = 176 students Total = 344			
374	2022				4-3 - 8% = 30 students 2 - 65% = 243 students Total = 273				4-3 - 9% = 33 students 2 - 65% = 243 students Total = 276			

OST writing data from 2022-2023 (same cohort of students)

Enhancing Instruction and Supports at the High School

After the pandemic at the high school level, we provided the same targeted focus as we did at the elementary level in terms of supporting our teachers to better understand the complexity of their standards and the depth of knowledge that was needed for our students to thrive. We also provided extensive teacher-led professional development on the topics of deeper learning, project-based and experiential learning to provide authentic educational experiences that give students voice and choice in their learning pathway to engage them in a manner that drives critical thinking.

We expanded course offerings in core content areas at the high school by developing and implementing a co-teaching model to provide more opportunities for students to be in a co-teaching (i.e., two teachers per classroom) environment in Grades 9 and 10. Specifically, we doubled co-teaching opportunities in ELA 9, Algebra I, and 9th grade science. This allowed for more small group support for students, at a younger level, who needed remediation within the classroom. We also created an ELA 9 class that is co-taught by a teacher and instructional coach that supports students with intensive reading and writing intervention needs. Additionally, we developed an Algebra I class that has divided the curriculum into two parts over two years. This course is taught by two teachers and provides instruction that gives students more time, support, and is taught in multiple learning modalities in order to support improved retention of content. Through the expansion of these co-taught classes and co-teaching professional development sessions, teachers are working together to analyze their formative and summative data, discuss their work and their impact with students.

Through this work, we have been able to realize systemic change in how our students experience learning in the classroom that has not only inspired and empowered our students in their educational endeavors, but is supported through student performance on state tests. At Strongsville High School, this targeted approach has led to high levels of growth over the past three years in every tested area. This past year, our high school ranked 5th in Ohio out of 3,088 buildings (top 0.2%) in their growth scores and our district ranked 25th (top 4%) out of 607 districts.

Subject	← Year	← Grade	Growth Index	Achievement Enter → Exit
OST EOC Algebra I - Tested	2021	N/A	7.61	701.7 → 709.3
	2022	N/A	9.74	706.0 → 716.5
	2023	N/A	11.06	709.7 → 720.3

Subject	← Year	← Grade	Growth Index	Achievement Enter → Exit
OST EOC English Language Arts II - Accountable	2021	N/A	5.35	720.0 → 724.2
	2022	N/A	3.71	721.2 → 724.1
	2023	N/A	5.00	719.9 → 723.8

Note: A growth index of 2.0 is required to receive 5 out of 5 stars.

Support for Meaningful And Sustainable Change

As a district, we are focused on meaningful and sustainable change for the betterment of our students. To support our efforts for systemic change, we have developed clarity on what is expected of all staff and have built their capacity to ensure the needs of all students are met based on how each unique student enters our classrooms. We have also developed a system of ongoing coaching at all levels. Each administrator benefits from the guidance of a dedicated administrative coach. This structure helps to realize overarching goals through ongoing actionable feedback that ensures steady progress leading to impactful results as they work with teachers and students. Additionally, instructional coaches that were implemented based on grant and ESSER funds specializing in literacy, math, special education, and overall instruction provide targeted support to teachers. Teacher-based team (TBT) coaches also regularly collaborate with building teams to analyze data and offer assistance with instructional strategies. This replicable system of coaching promotes coherence between all levels, mitigates confusion, and keeps us moving forward as we aim to improve learning practices and student experiences in the classroom.

In summary, we have seen success based on our efforts, yet there are challenges still ahead. Having in-house professional development like the LETRS training, holding intervention meetings, the administration of AimsWeb, and training teachers and teacher leaders has been met with challenges when it comes to having enough substitute coverage.

Currently, when we need a substitute due to a teacher or staff absence, there is no substitute available 25% of the time. This leaves classes and positions without coverage, requiring teachers and administrators present at work to regularly cover classes for absent colleagues, therefore forgoing their planning time. Over time, this causes fatigue and burnout and takes away opportunities to attend internal professional development or to collaborate with their colleagues. Additionally, for the past two years, we have had approximately 10 certified staff requiring FMLA leave due to mental health reasons whereas prior to COVID that number was 0.

Prior to COVID, we had upwards of 80 certificated subs and currently we have approximately 40 that work each day. Districts are continually in competition for substitutes and need to be creative in pay and incentives to keep substitutes working in their districts. This current state should be considered and I am hopeful to continue to have collaborative opportunities such as this where districts and legislators can have meaningful dialogue about our successes, as well as how to best support the challenges that we are facing in public education.

Our concerted efforts at Strongsville City Schools are anchored in a commitment to excellence and continuous improvement. Through strategic coaching, a culture of collaboration and feedback, as well as a steadfast focus on student-centered learning, we are laying the groundwork for academic recovery and learning acceleration, ensuring that every student has the opportunity to realize their full potential and we appreciate your support and leadership in ensuring these efforts can continue.

Chair Brenner and members of the committee, thank you for allowing me to share the story of our District with you today. I, as well as my team, are happy to answer any questions at this time and I am available to further discuss the great work that is occurring at Strongsville City Schools any time in the future. Thank you.