

Transcript of Video Podcast Interview
Ohio SRCL and CLSD Team – “Partnerships for Literacy” Program

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Interviewer: Jobi Lawrence, SRCL and CLSD TA Liaison

Participants:

Melissa Weber-Mayrer: Ohio Department of Education

Barbara Boone: The Ohio State University

Missy Marsh: Student Support Team Region 15

Heather Thompson: Western Local School District

Jobi: Welcome and thank you for being with us today. I'm Jobi Lawrence with the Circle CLSD TA team. And in this podcast today, I'll be joined by Melissa Weber-Mayrer, Heather Thompson, Barbara Boone, and Missy Marsh. We're going to be discussing family engagement. But before we get started, I want to just remind everyone that this presentation contains examples and resources or materials that are provided for the user's convenience. The inclusion of any material is not intended to reflect its importance, nor is it intended to endorse any views expressed or products or services. These materials may contain the views and recommendations of the presenter, as well as hypertext links, contact addresses, and websites, information created and maintained by other public or private organizations. And these opinions expressed in any of the materials do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education. The U.S. Department of Education does not control or guarantee the accuracy, relevance, timeliness, or completeness of any outside information included in these materials. And mentions of specific programs or products in these examples are designed to provide clearer understanding, and they're not meant as endorsements.

So before we get started, let's just go ahead and dive right in. We will introduce ourselves and I will turn the mic over to you, Melissa, to get us started by introducing yourself and explaining your role.

Melissa: Thanks for having us. I'm Melissa Weber-Mayrer. I'm the director of the Office of Approaches to Teaching and Professional Learning at the Ohio Department of Education. My role is to oversee the literacy work and serve as a project director for both the striving readers and the Comprehensive Literacy State Development grant and all of which fell under the umbrella of Ohio's plan to raise literacy achievement and the department's strategic plan, Each Child, Our Future, which actually calls out improving language and literacy as one of the chief priority strategies.

Jobi: Thank you, thanks for being here. And Barbara?

Barbara: Hi, my name is Barbara Boone and I am the director of Ohio's statewide Family Engagement Center, which is a federally-funded center at the Ohio State University in the Center on Education and Training for Employment there.

Jobi: Thanks so much. And welcome, Missy.

Missy: Hi, my name is Missy Marsh. I am an early learning and school readiness consultant and family engagement consultant for State Support Team 15. We serve Ross, Pike, Scioto, and Lawrence counties. And I am currently working with Western on partnerships for literacy.

Jobi: And Heather, from Western Local School District.

Heather: Hi, I'm Heather Thompson from Western Local School District and I am the primary principal. And I work closely with Missy from the SST Region 15 and I work on our partnerships for literacy plan.

Jobi: Excellent, welcome everyone and thank you so much for being here today. Melissa, would you please give us a brief overview of your SRCL and CLSD projects?

Melissa: Sure. We were awarded a \$35 million Striving Readers grant, and we had two in-state grantees who implemented evidence-based strategies based on Ohio's plan to raise literacy achievement. And what we had outlined in there, as far as Ohio's vision, which was implementing the simple view of reading and the components within there from birth through grade 12. And those grantees are in full implementation right now and actually in sustainability as they finished up that life cycle of that grant. We were also awarded a \$42 million Comprehensive Literacy State Development grant. We just awarded 35 grantees last week. And our kickoff meeting for that is actually this Friday, on August the seventh. And within that grant, we aim to build now, based on what we've learned through our Striving Readers grantees, comprehensive model literacy sites within each of our state support team regions. Missy is from one of our state support teams and we aim to have one of each grade band within each one of those state support team regions so that other districts can learn from them. And then within that each state support team will also have a literacy network, and those model sites will be key players within those literacy networks.

Jobi: Excellent, thanks so much. I understand that you're here today to talk to us about family engagement and more specifically about your Partnerships for Literacy program. Could you please describe this Partnerships for Literacy approach that's proven effective in your SRCL/CLSD implementation from the state perspective, Melissa?

Melissa: Sure. Ohio has been strategic in our focus to align initiatives. Our Striving Readers and our Comprehensive Literacy State Development grant, are extensions of our prior work. And the prior work included our State Systemic Improvement Plan, which was a focus on literacy, as well as our State Personnel Development Grant, which focused on leadership. And family engagement was a large piece of both of those. It's actually part of our theory of action. So the work is all built on this theory of action that includes increasing the capacity of shared leadership, increasing our effectiveness of our multi-tiered system of supports, increasing teacher knowledge and practice, family engagement, and community collaboration. And one important strategy that we focused on was to build partnerships across our state to improve

literacy supports, and then thus impacting our teacher and student outcomes. And our family engagement partners for literacy work is a collaborative effort between the department, between the Ohio State University and Dr. Barbara Boone, who you'll hear from a little bit and our regional supports who are our state support team colleagues and our districts. What we learned from implementation not only builds the knowledge of and capacity of our districts, but we're also using data and anecdotes to build across the educational cascade. And so that means building our capacity and our knowledge at the state level and to inform policy at our regional level to inform those regional supports directly to districts. The district, to help support the buildings, the building leadership, to help support the teachers in the classrooms. And then the classroom, the whole unit, to support our family engagement and engage our community.

Jobi: Excellent, thank you. I'm excited to dig in and hear more about how this looks on the ground. So, Missy, could you tell us a little bit about what this looks like in practice?

Missy: Yeah, so we started out in the fall of 2019 with four focus discussions, completed with Western Primary's BLT members. As we worked on these four focus discussions, we started to have conversations about what type of events we were holding. Are they accessible? Are they district-wide? Are they involving community partners? And then from that, we decided to just get creative and redesign thinking about access and equity and how can we serve parents best and be able to get parents in as partners and give them the tools to help support the learning in the home. From our last discussion, it was time for us to come up with a Partnership for Literacy team. We took a few people from the BLT team, and then we also wanted to make sure that we had good representation on our team from parents, grandparents, potentially aunts and uncles, early learning community partners. And we wanted to make sure that we were seeking feedback and input from a variety of people so that way we could represent our school community. And then our team started meeting. And we completed a literacy inventory, which reviewed certain communication questions, learning in the home, and then a few questions about strategic partnerships. And from that we rated ourselves. Are we doing this school-wide? Is this happening just in certain classrooms? Is it not yet happening? And so we went through all of these pieces and we rated ourselves, and then we decided to pick out a few that we felt that were the most impactful for us at this time. And we developed an action plan. So that whole process happened from August to May of 2019. And by the end of May, we had an action plan that we were going to be implementing starting August of 2019. The process was August of 2018 to May of 2019. And then we started this past August implementing our plan. And then, after a year of implementation, we came back to the table and we completed the literacy inventory again in May of 2020. And we picked new items that we felt that we needed to improve on. We now have a new action plan that we'll be implementing starting school of this year.

Jobi: Super, thank you so much. So, Heather, what would you like to add about how this looks in practice at the school level?

Heather: I would say at the school level, there's definitely a lot of discussion and changes, or as Melissa said, anecdotal notes of what we need to keep in place and what we need to change.

So as we have implemented our plan for 2019, and we've noticed, I guess, items that we need to get to get better at, or we need to have more of a common understanding of, and what those expectations are, what does it really mean that we're trying to implement? So at the building level, I think it looks good. We're working hard and we will continue to work in the fall.

Jobi: Excellent.

Melissa: Jobi, I think it's important to recognize the contribution of our higher ed partner, because we don't have a family engagement unit at the department. And so we're relying the Ohio State University and Dr. Boone's center, I think it's a center, or unit group, to really help lead this. They are the content people in between the department and the regional and local levels.

Jobi: Super. So Barbara, do you want to tell me a little bit about how the strategy was selected for implementation?

Barbara: Absolutely. We have, like Melissa said, at the university, we partner with the Department of Education very closely to provide content expertise and support and training and creation of new resources for the department. And in my work and the work of my team, particularly in the area of family engagement in education, preschool through graduation. We've been a part of their asset planning teams and that strategic planning, working with parents and all of those folks who came together to really advise and develop that plan. And family engagement is a critical component of it. So we knew that family engagement should not be a standalone, should not be separate from, but really should be integrated with the professional development and the instructional approaches around the simple view of reading, but also with leadership and planning and a multi-tiered systems of supports, that family engagement should be aligned and coordinated with and woven into those practices. And partnerships for literacy came out of that. And so what it is really is a process for systemically addressing family engagement for early literacy. And because we have many programs and practices, but oftentimes they're not aligned or connected, really, to those other practices I was just talking about. When we systematically sort of integrate family engagement, we're building it into the system of leadership. We are organizing our practices. It gives us space to sort of reflect on and build those connections between our instructional practices in the school and the supports that we're providing at home. But also, that those relationship building and the work that we do with families to create those connections. We developed those four focus discussions to get schools pre-thinking and working towards evaluating and considering their practices in their school. And then some guidance for them and developing a representative team from their community. So it's community folks, as they were mentioning, like early childhood, but also representative family members of our families of our students. And bringing those representative members together with our teachers and other support staff to really critically look at, to use an inventory based on evidence-based practices of family engagement for early literacy at home, what we know works at home. Those family engagement practices we know from schools and to bring those together in this inventory. And schools then reflect on them, and we've just heard over and over again the rich discussions that they have. Because we

really believe there's a lot of family engagement work happening. There's a lot of effort, a lot of care, a lot of investment there, but really some guidance into how do we push towards those more evidence-based practices. The inventory really guides schools in reflecting on that and those teams. And then together they look at their student data, they look at their instructional practices, they look at their family engagement inventory outcomes, and they put that together into their local plan with their local partners and implement that plan. And we'll hear more about how they've done that.

So we decided to go with a systems approach. So then as they're implementing other evidence-based programs, they know we're implementing this because it's connected with our other work. And even weaving in together our accountabilities for Title I and family engagement and our school improvement work. And all of this becomes one effort at the school level.

Jobi: Excellent, thank you. So you touched a little bit on how the strategy and approach has changed over time and how you're using the inventory to help you again identify where things are going well, and maybe where you have some gaps, but can you talk to me a little bit, Missy, about challenges that you encountered along the way and what you learned from them?

Missy: Yeah, I think going back to how the strategy changed over time, I think it's really important to note that when we first started this process, we had a bunch of events. And we were having all of these parent nights and we were doing really good things. And those are all very welcoming and parents like them. But what I saw in the team was a shift in event versus actual training and equipping of families. So that was pretty powerful when that idea clicked with our team. And we started getting to that mindset of, yes, we love this and we can still incorporate it, but we also have to embed all of these helpful practices that are going to promote learning in the home. So I think that's one thing that was really powerful. And that was a challenge at first, too, because we want to have our fun events, but we had to get creative and kind of tweak those events. And I think that's what the team discovered, is that we can still do these cool things, but we have to be able to embed some of these other things that we didn't originally think of but are really powerful and evidence-based and effective. And Heather can talk for other challenges that just happens in the everyday life of being a school administrator and having things come up in any given day.

Jobi: So Heather, do you want to add to the challenges that you've encountered?

Heather: Yes. I would say, definitely I would agree with Missy. And I think it goes back to, again, having those discussions around your inventory. And sometimes we would say, "Well, does it really mean this?" Or, "We do that." And then once we get into a discussion, maybe in another question, we'd realize, well, maybe we don't do that. We thought we did. So I think some of our biggest challenges were just have it coming up with common language, common expectations of what does it look like to align your early literacy work or activities to these events? We have these wonderful events, but they were standalone, almost standalone, because they didn't have those early literacy activities embedded. So what does it look like? So, we had to overcome that challenge just with change. We had to change what we were comfortable doing

and tweak it or add or revise. And that was challenging for some of us because we weren't used to doing it that way. But we've definitely learned, and I think now, our plan has changed, but it really hasn't, we're just building on what we've learned and what we know for the next year. So when we talk about challenges among our team, we always say, "How did that go" and what could we do different? "Or what is something we need to add?" And a challenge is definitely... And having everyone on the same page or rowing in the same direction on what that expectation is without... So almost having a list of, if we're going have a family night, these are the expectations of that family night. So those were our challenges.

Missy: I think, in addition, as a coach from the outside looking in, I think it was a challenge for the staff members to be vulnerable and to be open to receiving the feedback that they did from their parents that were part of this committee. So as part of developing your Partnerships for Literacy team, you wanna have more family members and community members than you do staff members, including your principal and other key people that were on that team. And yes, they do certain things and they have certain things that they're set on or maybe, "Hey, we already do this." But what we discovered sometimes is yes, we do it, but we're not actually doing it effectively because it's not getting to our families. And that's some real feedback that was given during those meetings in a very good way. And that's hard to take in sometimes, to know that, you know what, you're still doing awesome things, so don't let this get you down. So that was kind of, I think, a challenge that we also had to overcome, but I think they did very well with it, but that was hard. It was hard having those conversations and being vulnerable to have people give you feedback that you weren't expecting, or just something that just wasn't as positive as we thought we would get. And like I said, it wasn't terribly negative, but it wasn't what we were expecting. So that was definitely a challenge, but I think the team really went with it. And there were certain things that they just tweaked right away, and it was a quick fix. And then there were other things that just took us a little bit more time, but that is certainly something that the team had to come to the realization that we're still doing great things but we're going be hearing some things that we have to hear if we're going to get better.

Barbara: If I could add too, this past spring, I was able to watch one of your virtual team meetings. You shifted from your in-person meetings, your team kept meeting and you kept those team meetings, kept the system and processes going along. And you also changed some of your practices to really support families remotely, too.

Missy: Yeah, one of the struggles when we were implementing, because of the everyday life of education, you have things that come up that take a little bit more priority than what we were currently working on. And sometimes our action plan had to be placed on hold for a little bit, and we weren't able to meet as often as we wanted to in certain months. But at the end of the day, in the spring when everything turned virtual, one of the positive things that came out of that was that some of these action steps that we wanted to implement that were getting put on the back burner, they were at the forefront because, one of them being that we wanted to make sure that we use social media because that was a way to reach our families. And our families sometimes would prefer to answer a message or see a post on Facebook versus receiving a phone call or receiving a message from a teacher at school. So because of the virtual

learning that we had to do due to COVID, our team was able to do a page for each of the grade levels on Facebook and be able to reach our families. So that was a positive thing that came out of some of our challenges that we faced earlier in the process.

Jobi: Thank you. So how do you know the strategy or approach is working? What evidence do you have?

Missy: We have evidence that we've been collecting through our literacy inventory. So a lot of team discussion on practices and changes that have been made. A lot of discussion with teachers, as far as if they've been receiving more communication from parents, both... It's two way, two way communication. We did end up doing a survey to parents at the very beginning of this process, because we really felt that we wanted to just get a little bit more information on how they felt about what we were specifically sending home. So we did have our few parent partners, grandparents, foster parents that were part of our team, but we felt we just needed to take an additional step and send out a survey for families to be able to contribute to giving feedback. And from that, that helped us develop our action plan. And we had planned on doing that again, and then the spring happened. So that is something that we want to do again, and that is something we've been discussing as a team that we would like to streamline our data collection process. So we've discussed a sheet that teachers can use to collect everyday data on who they've heard from and what platform they use to communicate with that parents. And then of course, sending out another one of those surveys and then just follow-up surveys on the training opportunities that we provide families. Because that's one of our plans, we want to do more training; and small, simple trainings, not long trainings. So we just plan to continue to revamp that process.

Jobi: Excellent. Heather, anything else that you're collecting at the local level to help you know that this is working?

Heather: I would say, at the parent nights that we have, we always send home a survey. Or, not send it home. We have whoever attends for that child, they complete a survey before they leave. We look at that for different reasons. We have a teacher leader who compiles those results and will say... Maybe it's even something as simple as you have these all the time on Thursday nights or Wednesday nights. And then what they felt was the most beneficial. And then, what we could improve on. And at the planning meeting then they go over that survey. So we have some parents survey, maybe not necessarily... I mean, we do have the data as far as how many have completed the survey, but we also get some good information that they write, maybe, I want something more in how to help my student with spelling or reading fluency. Those type of things might be on that survey or feedback might be on that survey. So we do have that as well.

Jobi: Thank you. So, if you all could leave our listeners with one piece of advice about implementing this approach or strategy before you close, what would that be? So how would you give other folks guidance on doing something like this if they wanted to implement something similar? So Melissa, we'll start with you.

Melissa: Sure, so from a state-level perspective, my advice would be to take care to align your efforts. So collect all your dots that are out there. You heard the team talk about district leadership teams and BLTs, which is not the sandwich. It's the building leadership team, teacher-based teams, and then actually including a family team, a family engagement committee, that actually has parents on there to inform. And then, build on those partnerships, but not only at the regional and the district levels, but also include your institutions of higher ed to help you, at the state level, fill the gaps that you have and build on each other's expertise.

Jobi: Thanks, Melissa. Barbara, how about you? What advice would you give?

Barbara: I think, so critical, really critical, is a leader like Heather in the building, who makes this a priority and helps to lead that connection and coordination in the schools, school leadership team, and bringing the communication together. We know this systemic approach and that we really need to keep at it. We've heard sort of Heather and Missy talking about cycling through and adapting and changing. So really committing to this and really having a source of data that really helps to inform us about our family engagement practices. And that's really connected to our student data as well. Having a source of data like the inventory is another really critical component. And then, really checking our practices to know that they are really sort of those evidence-based high impact practices that are really going to provide the families that we've gotten to know, we've used these surveys, these relationship-building things, to really know our families well, to know what practices are really going to be the supports that they need and want to support their child's early literacy at home and at school.

Jobi: Thanks, Barbara. Missy, how about you, what advice would you give?

Missy: I would say I would want districts to focus on those inclusive practices, making sure that you have a variety of stakeholders that's representative of your community. In addition, I would say that you need to be flexible and be open because it's going to change, and you have to accept that and continue to grow from it. And I'd also say that there are plenty of resources on the Ohio Families Engage website, and that they are free for districts to use, and that the State Support Team Family Engagement leads are there to help you in whatever it is that you need.

Jobi: Thanks so much. And Heather, to round us out, what advice from the building level?

Heather: From the building level is, I would say, as a principal, to continue to support the change and the challenges that go into the work of engaging families in early literacy. Continue to build capacity with your staff and share leadership. They have great ideas, but to continue to be on the same page with them and align your expectations with, as a building principal, with the plan, or to be able to push their thinking or what you want them to accomplish. So just being part of the work, making an effort to support anything that they decide to do or plan to do. That would be my one piece of advice as a principal.

Jobi: Excellent view. Thank you so much for being with us today and giving us a look into your Partnerships for Literacy program. We really appreciate your time and energy, thank you.