



CASE STUDY

# Six Weeks to Kindergarten Ready

Peoria Public School District



# How Peoria Public School District 150

## Used a Summer Program to Close the Kindergarten Readiness Gap

Located in the heart of central Illinois, Peoria Public Schools District 150 serves just over 13,000 students across a midsize urban community. With 15 primary schools and one public early childhood center, the district is committed to meeting every learner where they are. All District 150 schools are Title I, reflecting a community where educators work each day to ensure that economic circumstances don't determine a child's learning trajectory.

**“What is unique about Waterford is that it’s specifically designed for early childhood. The way it’s set up is very user-friendly for our youngest learners.”**

**Dr. Nicole Couri-Malson**  
Executive Director of Schools,  
Peoria Public School District 150

### The district consists of:

**13,126**

PreK-12th grade students

**15**

Primary Schools

**100%**

Of schools are Title I schools

### Student Population

55% Black/African American

16% Hispanic

18% White

11% Two or More Races



## The Challenge

### The Readiness Gap is the Starting Line

When Peoria's kindergartners walk through the door, only 21%\* are ready across all three developmental areas measured by Illinois' KIDS assessment, compared to 32% statewide. For the other 79% of Peoria's youngest incoming learners, the gap starts before school ever does.

#### **Dr. Couri-Malson, sees it every Fall:**

"Typically, over 80% of our students come in at Pre-Reading Level 1. We have students who come in with zero learning experience. Many do not know any letters, and many cannot write their name."

Pre-Reading 1 (PR1) is the entry point of Waterford's adaptive learning program, where students begin building the foundational skills that most children develop through preschool: letter recognition, phonemic awareness, and early print concepts. Dr. Couri-Malson and her team decided to stop waiting for kindergarten to make up for that readiness gap.

\*Illinois Report Card





## The Opportunity

### A Creative Solution Using Existing Resources

Inspired by Franklin Township Community School Corporation (Indianapolis, IN) and its successful summer readiness model, Peoria saw an opportunity hiding in plain sight: students who recently graduated from PreK at Valeska Hinton Early Childhood Center were about to spend the summer at home with no structured learning. What if that summer looked different?

Because these children were already enrolled, the district could reach families directly. Sign-up was simple, trust was already established, and the program could get to the children who stood to benefit most from additional early learning support. There was another advantage: Peoria already uses Waterford Early Learning with its K-1st grade students.

That meant incoming kindergartners who participated in the summer program would arrive on the first day of school already familiar with the routines and learning experience they'd encounter in the classroom, a built-in head start from the beginning.

### The model was straightforward:

- Assign a Kindergarten teacher to be the family liaison, track engagement, and support families throughout the summer
- Provide families with devices and hands-on orientation on-site
- Reallocate existing Waterford licenses from students who had completed the program
- Leverage devices that the district already owns
- **Goal:** Use 4-5 days per week at home for 6 weeks
- **Incentive:** Complete the program, keep the device

### Program Participation:

**150**

Families signed up for the program

**80**

Students completed the 6-week program

**66**

Students with complete Fall and Winter assessment data



## The Results

### Ready from Day One

When September arrived, and teachers pulled the first Waterford level reports, the difference was immediately visible:

“ We saw it right away.  
This didn't reflect past years.  
We never have students at  
fluent reading at the beginning  
of kindergarten.

—Dr. Nicole Couri-Malson



From the summer learning group, only 27% started at the [lowest Waterford level \(PR1\)](#), compared to the typical 80%+ of students who received no summer support. Nearly 1 in 5 students had progressed beyond the pre-reading level entirely.

## Fall NWEA Assessment: At the National Average

When these students took their first NWEA MAP Growth assessment in Fall 2025, the results were markedly different from those of typical learners who enter kindergarten at the 20th percentile or below. Instead, they entered at grade level.

**91%**

of students scored at the **Average Range or better**  
(at or above the 41st percentile)

**50<sup>th</sup>**

Mean NWEA Percentile (right at the national average)

## Winter NWEA Assessment: Sustained Growth and Acceleration

By Winter 2025-2026, the success had not only sustained, but it had accelerated. Learners continued to use Waterford Early Learning throughout the fall semester.

**61<sup>st</sup>**

Mean NWEA Percentile (now in the **High Average Range**)

**+11**

Average percentile point growth from Fall to Winter

**+32.5**

Average WACS ([Waterford Assessment of Core Skills](#))  
score growth

“ I’m blown away by these results. Out of 80 students, I have seven students in the red [below grade level]. Look at all the students in the blue and green. This is something.

—Dr. Nicole Couri-Malson



## Conclusion

### Close the Gap Early

Dr. Couri-Malson has seen the math play out too many times. A child arrives at kindergarten without foundational literacy skills. Teachers intervene. Progress is slow. By second grade, the curriculum accelerates, and a student still missing foundational pieces starts falling further behind. By third grade, the window that research says matters most has mostly closed.

*“The research is showing us that if students are not reading by the end of first grade, they probably won’t catch up. It’s really hard to intervene at the second- and third-grade levels. Everything starts to pick up, and if they’re still struggling and missing some foundational pieces, they’re just falling further and further behind. We know we can do it faster if we intervene early. That’s our goal.”*

**The summer program was built on that conviction. Target the right students at exactly the right moment. Give them six weeks of intentional, adaptive early literacy instruction. Then watch them grow.**

*“There’s no reason students should be failing reading in third grade. At that point, we’ve been trying to fill a gap that’s too big, and we cannot intervene our way out of this.”*

**The summer program is Peoria’s answer to that problem.**

Not a last-minute rescue, but an early investment in the children who need it most, at the moment when that investment goes furthest.

## Key Takeaways for Other Districts

Peoria's success offers a replicable model for districts looking to close the kindergarten readiness gap:

- **Target your highest-risk students first:**  
Maximum impact for students who need it most
- **Make it manageable for families:**  
6 weeks, family orientation, ongoing support
- **Incentivize participation:**  
devices, prizes, certificates, and celebrations
- **Track the data:**  
Assessments, Waterford Assessment of Core Skills (WACS), and Waterford level reports help tell the story
- **Start early:**  
Registration in April/May, program in June/July, ready for August kindergarten

### The Bottom Line:

**6 weeks can change kindergarten.**

**And kindergarten can change everything.**

### Bring These Results to Your District

Visit [Waterford.org](https://www.waterford.org) to learn how to bring Waterford early learning solutions to your community.

