



Watson Chapel School District, Arkansas

Proactive Intervention over Retention: How Watson Chapel Is Transforming Early Literacy

Watson Chapel School District in Arkansas serves approximately 1,550 students districtwide, including about 400 K-3 students. Situated along the Arkansas River, Pine Bluff is a historic city known for its rich timber and agricultural roots, deep civil rights history, and as the home of the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff.

Student Population:

Black / African American: 87%

White: 8%

Hispanic / Latino: 2%

Two or More Races: 2%

Asian / Pacific Islander: 1%

Free or Reduced Lunch: 69%





The Challenge

The Need to Close Entry Gaps

When Dr. Keith McGee took over as superintendent heading into the 2024-2025 school year, he knew they needed to build strong foundational reading and math skills from day one. Watson Chapel School District saw a clear opportunity to strengthen early literacy skills by meeting incoming kindergarten students right where they were. The district's goal was simple: give students the momentum they need to stay on track for third grade and beyond.

This focus matched up directly with Arkansas's third-grade reading legislation. Instead of treating state standards like a high-stakes hurdle, Watson Chapel used the moment to invest in early intervention. They looked for a proven solution that would support teachers, build student confidence, and ensure every child hit reading benchmarks before third grade.



The Solution

A Proactive K-3 Blended Literacy Framework

To turn their goals into action, Watson Chapel embedded Waterford Early Learning alongside core Tier 1 instruction. The program serves dual purposes in the classroom: accelerating learning for on-track scholars while providing targeted re-teaching and practice during small-group rotations.



Dr. Keith McGee

"I didn't want just another platform. I wanted one with proven impact. I've known about Waterford for a long time and knew if we implemented it with integrity, it would work for our community."

Consistent daily use of Waterford helped create a data-informed instructional environment. By providing easy-to-access insights into student progress, the program enabled teachers to identify learning needs early and deliver targeted support that kept students moving forward.



By leveraging this continuous data, the district built an early identification system that monitors learning progress over time. This ongoing visibility ensures that scholars at risk of not meeting standards receive immediate, targeted support long before reaching third grade, replacing third-grade remediation with proactive growth.

Building family support was another critical component of the implementation. While families initially expressed concerns about introducing a new digital program, transparent communication and early student success quickly built strong school-to-home trust, resolving parent apprehensions.

The success of the initiative relies heavily on a true partnership. Rather than simply deploying software, Waterford's professional learning consultants worked directly alongside teachers to provide on-site and virtual coaching that built sustainable, high-impact instructional habits.

Measurable Outcomes & Impact

The results were both immediate and significant. During the program's first year, **the percentage of kindergarten students meeting grade-level expectations climbed from 48% at the beginning of the year to 80% by year-end**, demonstrating substantial growth in foundational skills.

This initial success created momentum across grade levels. Building on their early progress in kindergarten, 78% of incoming first-grade scholars entered the following school year already performing on grade level—a direct result of the early, targeted intervention.

By intervening early, Watson Chapel dramatically improved the state reading legislation's goal of being on grade level by third grade. Identifying skill gaps in kindergarten and first grade allowed the district to reduce the number of students at risk of retention under Arkansas law before third grade.



Advice for Education Leaders

For district and school leaders navigating early literacy challenges and high-stakes reading benchmarks, Dr. McGee offers the following advice:

- 1. Keep Students the Central Focus:** Center every instructional decision and technology investment around the individual learning needs and growth of your scholars, ensuring tools directly advance the broader strategic direction of the district.
- 2. Educate All Stakeholders on the “Why” for Waterford:** Clearly communicate the purpose, evidence base, and value of Waterford to school board members, administrators, teachers, and families to build a shared commitment that powers collaborative data discussions and classroom practices.
- 3. Plan Professional Development Days in the District Calendar:** Design a comprehensive professional learning strategy that builds teacher confidence by protecting time for continuous educator growth by building training days directly into the official school calendar.

- 4. Outline Expectations:** Establish explicit guidelines for daily usage and classroom integration across all sites, keeping lines of dialogue open with staff and families so everyone remains informed on student goals and growth.
- 5. Implement with Integrity by Practicing “Trust, but Verify”:** Execute the program as designed so every student receives targeted, research-aligned instruction, pairing strong trust in educators with regular classroom walkthroughs and data monitoring to maintain high fidelity.
- 6. Expect Positive Outcomes:** Approach the implementation with an unwavering belief in scholar achievement, actively recognizing growth at every stage—from daily skill mastery to year-end benchmarks—to build momentum and foster a culture of success.



**Discover what's possible
in your district.**

Request a demo and talk to our team.
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