

CORBIN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT, KENTUCKY

# The Science of Reading in Action



## Pandemic-Hit, High-Poverty, and Struggling to Read

With a population of around 7,800, Corbin lies along the Cumberland Plateau in the rugged foothills of the Appalachians of southeastern Kentucky. Corbin Independent School District (see table) operates within a city where the average per capita income sits around \$14,200, with more than one in five people below the poverty line, including one in four of those under age 18.

### Corbin Independent School District

- Corbin Preschool Center
- Corbin Primary: about 700 students in Grades K–3
- Corbin Elementary: about 400 students in Grades 4–5
- Corbin Middle: about 630 students in Grades 6–8
- Corbin High: about 900 students in Grades 9–12
- Corbin Area Technology Center
- Corbin School of Innovation

Educators at Corbin Primary and Corbin Elementary, both high-poverty schools, have long struggled to maintain grade-level reading skills among the student population, due in part to the use of a balanced literacy approach to reading education. The pandemic years exacerbated this issue considerably, with reading scores plummeting during and after COVID-interrupted instruction.

**490**  
students

**24%**  
below poverty line

**63.5%**  
Title 1

**7 months**  
of using S.P.I.R.E.

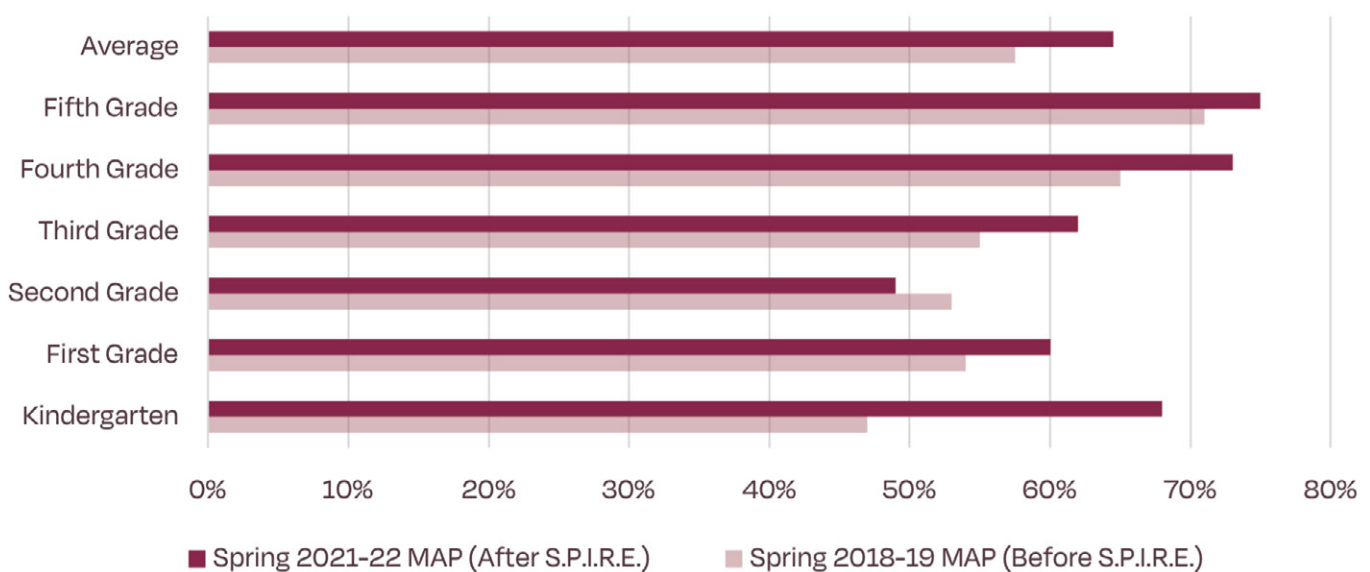
**up to 21%**  
reading improvement  
with S.P.I.R.E.

**7% overall**  
improvement for  
K–5 students

## A Plan for Improvement

In the fall of 2021, Corbin ISD leaders utilized ESSER funding to employ reading interventionists and to start using curriculum support programs like S.P.I.R.E. and Sounds Sensible (S.P.I.R.E. pre-Level 1), both multisensory Orton-Gillingham-based reading intervention programs, with 490 students across K–5 (377 in Grades K–2, 113 in Grades 3–5). Upon implementing these programs and analyzing initial assessments, educators found many students weren’t even ready for S.P.I.R.E. Level 1; these students started with Sounds Sensible.

Comparison of Reading MAP Assessments  
 Before and After Using S.P.I.R.E.  
**Starting in September 2021**



This graph compares MAP Spring Reading scores from 2018–19 against those from 2021–22, after implementing the reading programs. The time range begins with pre-pandemic conditions, moves through the pandemic with an extended period of interrupted and remote learning, and ends with seven months of reading intervention using S.P.I.R.E. and Sounds Sensible.

Each group shows tremendous growth, especially the most important group for reading acquisition: kindergarteners, who showed an enormous 21% rate of improvement. First, third, fourth, and fifth grades also show robust growth, with an average of 7% improvement across all K–5 grades. Second graders, the hardest hit by pandemic learning loss combined with a teacher shortage and a choppy schedule, were the only group who didn’t show improvement, and the district is working directly to address those issues.

Corbin ISD showed significant improvement across all other grades, not just for MAP scores but also for intangible benefits like greater confidence, better behavior, a new mindset toward reading, and the vision of a more promising future for students, the school, and community. Everyone—from teachers to administrators to students—feels strongly that they’re significantly better off now with S.P.I.R.E. than they were even before the pandemic.

“We have children whose entire life trajectory has been changed because now they can read. Every aspect of a person’s life is altered when they unlock the power of reading. We love S.P.I.R.E.!”

–Ashley Hill, Corbin ISD Chief Academic Officer

## Unlock the Power of Reading

Corbin ISD leaders worked to correct interrupted learning from the pandemic through reading intervention small groups using a mix of print, digital, and blended S.P.I.R.E. materials, including the Sounds Sensible program. They were pleasantly surprised by how quickly and effectively they saw improvement, even in students who were on track for special education, and they noticed that students benefitted in social-emotional ways, as well. These improvements were observed across the board, leading to improvements in best practices for educators at Corbin Primary, and not only preventing reading failure but helping students progress to grade-level reading skills and beyond, preparing them for increased success in their future studies, careers, and lives.

“It has been an amazing experience,” said Ashley Hill, Corbin ISD Chief Academic Officer, “seeing the incredible improvement that has taken place in such a short time at Corbin Primary.” When Ashley came on board in 2019, teachers had been using balanced literacy (sometimes called cueing), which was preventing the students from acquiring literacy skills. “As soon as the teachers figured out that the balanced literacy approach was causing serious problems for students,” said Hill, “and instead started using a Structured Literacy approach with S.P.I.R.E., everything improved.”

Corbin ISD chose S.P.I.R.E. because it’s based on Science of Reading, and because they appreciated the emphasis on direct explicit instruction. They also found that S.P.I.R.E. saved teachers hours of prep work each week and delivered the ideal scope and sequence for instruction. The digital version of S.P.I.R.E. allows teachers to score print assessments and track students’ progress online, and the STAR progress monitoring feature in S.P.I.R.E. continues to be one of their favorite features, as it enabled them to collect key data points and analyze school-wide data.

Hill credits S.P.I.R.E. with helping instructors deliver on-time intervention to fill specific gaps for each student. After the S.P.I.R.E. implementation, Hill said, fewer students needed special education referrals, while many previously struggling readers stopped struggling at all in the tier one classroom. “We found that kids who had been failing for years became successful by using S.P.I.R.E. for even a few months,” said Hill.

One of the big surprises that followed the implementation involved widespread improvements in behavior. "We hoped for improvement with reading," said Hill, "but we were stunned by all the other improvements we saw, including behavioral ones." No longer frustrated, students felt successful, supported, and confident, using their newfound skills to decode words and comprehend texts, which led to a wide range of behavioral improvements. "We started seeing students who had major behavior issues, or who were on track for special ed, clearly demonstrate to us through their dramatic improvement that they simply needed to be taught differently," said Hill. "And when we taught them differently, they began succeeding immediately!"

"S.P.I.R.E. has been instrumental in changing our school!" said Angela H. Disney, Learning Loss

Interventionist, Corbin Primary School. "We're very thankful for how much it has helped our students." Disney said educators were excited about the remarkable progress they saw, the improved ability to diagnose where students need help, the direction and support for teachers throughout implementation, and the convenience and power of data tracking.

Using ESSER funds, Corbin ISD hired new interventionists like Disney from within the ranks of their own established educators, asking them to implement S.P.I.R.E. and track the data. The interventionists quickly observed major improvements across the board; for example, a number of struggling third-grade students, who had been affected by interrupted learning during the pandemic and were held back from fourth grade, progressed quickly to tier one level after using Sounds Sensible. "It totally changed the course for them," said Disney. "By taking these students through the Sounds Sensible curriculum, teachers were able to fix big issues before they became much bigger problems, helping these struggling students become successful readers."

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K-5 students

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"S.P.I.R.E. has been instrumental  
in changing our school!"

—Angela H. Disney, Learning Loss Interventionist, Corbin Primary School.

Disney noted other positive changes since implementing S.P.I.R.E., including better cohesion between the district's primary school and elementary school. "We're able to sit down and discuss each student and their transitional needs," said Disney.

## Solid Post-Pandemic Results

After implementing S.P.I.R.E., educators and school leaders in Corbin observed substantial improvement in reading skills, scores, and confidence among hundreds of K–5 students, many of whom were Title 1 and/or struggling readers. By closely monitoring student aptitudes and growth, teachers and administrators were able to track tremendous gains in reading ability, demonstrating that the program was closing gaps and changing the course of these students' trajectories. Together with S.P.I.R.E., these educators made a profound difference in these children's lives and futures.

Students Win With Structured Literacy. [Teachers Win With S.P.I.R.E.](#)