



Horizon Science Academy Springfield Toledo, Ohio

Challenges

- Meet the learning needs of a diverse student population
- Provide more immediate performance feedback
- Enable more frequent and robust assessments
- Improve classroom efficiencies

Solutions

- Renaissance Star Early Literacy®
- Renaissance Accelerated Reader®

Benefits

- Five grade levels of improvement on K–3 literacy report cards
- 50 percent more kindergartners above benchmark in just one month
- 20 students assessed in 40 minutes (versus 10 hours for in-class assessments)
- Comprehensive progress data for performance accountability
- Student and teacher confidence

Improved K–2 assessments help charter schools achieve fast gains in early literacy

Teachers say it's the look that can make them teary-eyed—that "I've got it!" expression when a very young student first recognizes rhyming sounds or suddenly makes the connection between letters and sounds. But getting to those moments can be challenging, particularly in classrooms of 20 or more incoming K–2 students with widely varying skill levels, experiences, and preparation.

Loren Heimrich, a kindergarten teacher at Horizon Science Academy (HSA) Springfield in Toledo, Ohio, explains, "Individual classroom assessments are extremely time-consuming. Common state testing tools can be complex to use and often lack feedback immediacy and specificity.

The key to our success has been the implementation of Renaissance Star Early Literacy®. It lets us quickly and accurately evaluate student abilities to the sub-skill level—skills that may seem inconsequential, but whose mastery can mean the difference between a sense of frustration and that eureka moment. After just one month-long cycle of using Star Early Literacy data for assessments and progress monitoring, we achieved across-the-board growth and reduced by half the number of students performing below benchmark."

Jennifer Sajovec is the director of elementary education for Concept Schools, a management company that



oversees more than 30 charter public schools, including HSA-Springfield. She adds, “Star Early Literacy helps our teachers give students an encouraging start and also enhances our ability to achieve the stringent performance outcomes that states require of charter schools. Over the past year, we’ve piloted Star Early Literacy at two of our Ohio schools. We believe those implementations directly contributed to a combined five grade levels of improvement on the K–3 literacy component of their state report cards.”

The challenge: faster, simpler, and more refined K–2 skills assessments

Headquartered in Chicago, the nonprofit Concept Schools organization serves some 14,000 students in seven states. The company operates charter public schools in largely urban, high-poverty areas. Sajovec estimates that 90 percent of Concept students qualify for free/reduced-cost lunch programs. “Our teachers face unique challenges addressing the achievement gaps of incoming students. Most of our kindergartners, for example, never attended preschool. Older students may have transferred into our system after being placed on academic probation or even expelled from a neighborhood school. Teachers routinely face classes representing a broad range of grade-level abilities, from at-risk students to gifted learners.”

Sajovec says that to reach each of those students, Concept educators needed a better assessment and progress-monitoring solution. As director of K–2

education, Sajovec led the search that resulted in the selection of Star Early Literacy. “The Renaissance solution is easy to use, provides detailed learning data with guidance for personalizing instruction, integrates professional development tools, allows us to track state-specific learning requirements, and delivers the depth of data we require to demonstrate contractual performance accountability.”

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Loren Heimrich
Teacher – HSA-Springfield

The results: rapid adoption, fast insight, and measurable progress

Sajovec’s evaluation process included a Star Early Literacy webinar with a small group of educators, a side-by-side comparison of a popular Ohio state-standard assessment solution and Star Early Literacy, and a full pilot at two Concept schools. “We were already familiar with Renaissance solutions—a number of our K–8 schools

use Renaissance Star Assessments® to place students in programs built on Renaissance Accelerated Reader®—but we wanted to exercise due diligence and to test the solution in live K–2 classroom environments.”

You had me at hello

Heimrich participated in the webinar. “Once we saw Star Early Literacy’s reporting capabilities, we knew this was the functionality missing in other tools. For example, rather than forcing teachers to spend hours ciphering through a confusing learning continuum to pinpoint teachable concepts and create learning groups, Star Early Literacy does all of that work for us.”

For the side-by-side test, teachers administered both assessment solutions to the same five kindergarten students. Sajovec noted, “Taking the Star Early Literacy assessment, children were more attentive and engaged. In contrast, their frustration was evident with the other assessment solution. More concerning, the format and questions seemed to have been developed without sufficient consideration given to basic principles of testing that any teacher understands. You could hear the collective ‘oh, no’ as teachers watched students tripped up by issues related to motor acuity or distracting sound effects, rather than lack of knowledge. Our consensus was that Star Early Literacy reflected an education-centric design, while the other product bespoke a software developer’s interpretation.”

Sajovec conducted one pilot with a group of first-grade teachers at a Concept school outside Cleveland. Teachers used Star Early Literacy for progress monitoring on a three-week cycle, sharing results and plans with other teachers. Expecting to set up regular meetings for implementation and best practices assistance, Sajovec was surprised to learn that teachers had already set up the solution for the full school year. By year end, they had achieved a three-grade-level literacy improvement.

Reaching more students, faster

Heimrich helped lead the successful pilot at HSA-Springfield and now routinely uses Star Early Literacy for assessment and progress monitoring. “After conducting our first assessment and printing Star Early Literacy screening and instructional planning reports, I sat down and changed my lesson plan for the next day. Star Early

Literacy makes it very easy to personalize instruction, set up small-group sessions, adjust whole-group lessons, plan for tutoring, and even partner with parents.

“The solution has made me so much more efficient in the classroom. Previously the only way to derive accurate, up-to-date information was to do individual assessments. That process takes half an hour per student—time that I’m not teaching other students. Today, in 20 minutes, we can run assessments with half the class while our librarian does guided reading with the other. Star Early Literacy results are immediate, and I’ve found them to be as accurate as my own in-class assessments.

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“Most importantly, we’re meeting the needs of learners at every skill level and moving more students up the spectrum in less time. It’s the most amazing experience to see kindergartners who came into class unable to write their own names excel and become confident readers by the end of the school year.”

Meaningful and measurable progress

“Our teachers love to teach, and Star Early Literacy encourages them by providing immediate feedback about how their efforts are making a difference,” concludes Sajovec. “We now recommend that all Concept schools use Accelerated Reader in grades K–8 and Star Early Literacy for K–2 students. Using Star Early Literacy, we’re able to better meet the schools’ objective of one year’s growth in one year’s time and prepare all K–2 students to meet third-grade proficiency requirements, as well as the progress measures of Ohio’s Third Grade Reading Guarantee and other states’ standards. For other educators considering piloting Star Early Literacy, I’d simply say, ‘Do it.’”

Head over to www.renaissance.com/resources/success-stories/ to learn more about Horizon Science Academy Springfield and check out other success stories.