

# Building Knowledge for Success in Middle School

West Jefferson Hills School District accelerates reading growth in middle school with Amplify ELA.



● West Jefferson Hills

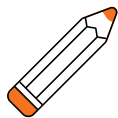
# Background

West Jefferson Hills School District in Pennsylvania serves 3,400 students across five campuses. Located about ten miles outside Pittsburgh, the suburban school district's students are 84% white, 7.6% Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander, 2.6% Black, 2.1% Hispanic/Latino, and 0.2% American Indian or Alaska Native. About 25% qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. The district's middle school building, Pleasant Hills Middle School, serves nearly 800 students.



5

campuses



3,400

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# Challenge

During the 2019–20 school year, West Jefferson Hills educators recognized the need for a change in approach to literacy instruction. At the middle school level, Assistant Superintendent Matthew Patterson said, students had relatively high levels of reading proficiency, but growth measures indicated regression.

Patterson described the previous middle school literacy instruction as “novel-based,” without a consistent

philosophy, method, or direction. West Jefferson Hills sought “an aligned, purposeful program that built on the work of elementary grade-level teachers.” Looking for a curriculum that would grow students’ reading abilities across all grade levels, the district ultimately found a solution in Amplify Core Knowledge Language Arts® (CKLA) for K–5 and Amplify ELA for 6–8.



## Solution

West Jefferson Hills conducted a rigorous review of literacy curricula. The review process included visiting schools in other districts to see curricular resources in action, as well as conducting pilots of Amplify ELA and other curricula.

Of the three middle school programs West Jefferson Hills evaluated, educators found Amplify ELA to be the most engaging for Grade 6–8 students.

“Students were interested in topics like the *Frankenstein* unit and the Holocaust unit,” Patterson recalled. “We got that glimmer of hope because we thought, ‘If we can actually engage kids in reading, and build that joy for reading, we might actually be able to move them even further.’”

Grade 8 reading teacher William Paull said *Frankenstein* is one of his favorite units to teach, as it suits students with varying reading abilities. The graphic novel illustrations help emerging readers make meaningful connections, while more nuanced readers discuss knowledge gained from the text.

Grades 7 and 8 reading teacher Megan Pantuso also spoke to the ease of adapting the curriculum for students reading below grade level. She gave an example in the Edgar Allen Poe unit where students could play the words aloud in the platform to learn their meaning. Pantuso’s class would never have read Poe without the accommodations Amplify ELA provides to teachers.

Pantuso said, “We hear a lot that our [lower-performing students] can’t do Amplify—it’s too hard; the texts are super-hard. They are difficult, but the fact is that students are being exposed to grade-level text. They’re understanding it; they’re able to participate and improve. They’re able to respond with a whole paragraph, because we’re able to scaffold them.”

After a successful pilot, West Jefferson Hills adopted the Amplify K–8 literacy suite. Starting in the 2021–22 school year, West Jefferson Hills implemented Amplify CKLA and Amplify ELA, pairing the elementary and middle school core reading programs with the mCLASS assessment and intervention platform and the Boost Reading and Boost Close Reading personalized learning programs.

Making the shift to the Science of Reading with Amplify, West Jefferson Hills has become the top-ranked district for Grade 3 through 8 reading growth among the 43 school districts in Allegheny County. During the 2022–23 school year, the district reached a perfect middle school growth score of 100, meaning all demographic groups of students showed improvement.

## Results

### Reading growth

One noteworthy result was that economically disadvantaged students had a growth score of 92 out of 100, which Patterson said was the highest score seen for this group in the past five years.

Patterson credits the rapid growth to Amplify ELA engaging students with rigorous texts, building vocabulary, and pushing students to think on a deeper level than they had before. Paull and Pantuso agreed, commenting that the program helps students ask “why” and find evidence.

### Student engagement

West Jefferson Hills students have also experienced higher levels of engagement than ever before, which Patterson attributes to the background knowledge they’ve built in various topics across Amplify CKLA and Amplify ELA.

“Natalie Wexler, author of *The Knowledge Gap*, talks about the baseball study—where students’ prior knowledge about baseball had a greater impact on reading comprehension than their reading ability,” Patterson remarked. “It’s the same thing here. Kids who have that background knowledge engage with the text better regardless of their reading level.”

### Professional development

Patterson credits West Jefferson Hills teachers, paraeducators, and administrators for the district’s successful implementation, recalling, “This group, early on, said, ‘We don’t want to be just fine. We want to be the very best.’”

With professional development from Amplify that Patterson described as “exceptional,” district coaches and teachers have grown confident teaching Amplify ELA.

Since adoption, West Jefferson Hills has opened its doors to nearly 90 other districts looking to implement Amplify curriculum.

“We had a hard time keeping up with the visits, and I never wanted to turn anyone away, because if somebody had turned us away five years ago, we wouldn’t be where we are today,” Patterson said. “We have a responsibility to give back to the profession and to others that are seeking to make a change.”





## Science of Reading outreach

In 2023, West Jefferson Hills hosted the first Pennsylvania Science of Reading Educator Summit with speakers including Amplify CEO Larry Berger, The Reading League Pennsylvania President Pam Kastner, and reading comprehension researcher Nancy Hennessy. District teachers led breakout sessions and taught model lessons for over 400 attendees, spreading the word about Amplify to the surrounding community.

“When those folks come in, our teachers are training them and sharing their stories,” Patterson said enthusiastically. “Now, they’re the experts, and as a result of that, their confidence has increased greatly.”

Knowing that many surrounding districts have adopted Amplify in the last few years because of this outreach, West Jefferson Hills plans to hold the summit again.

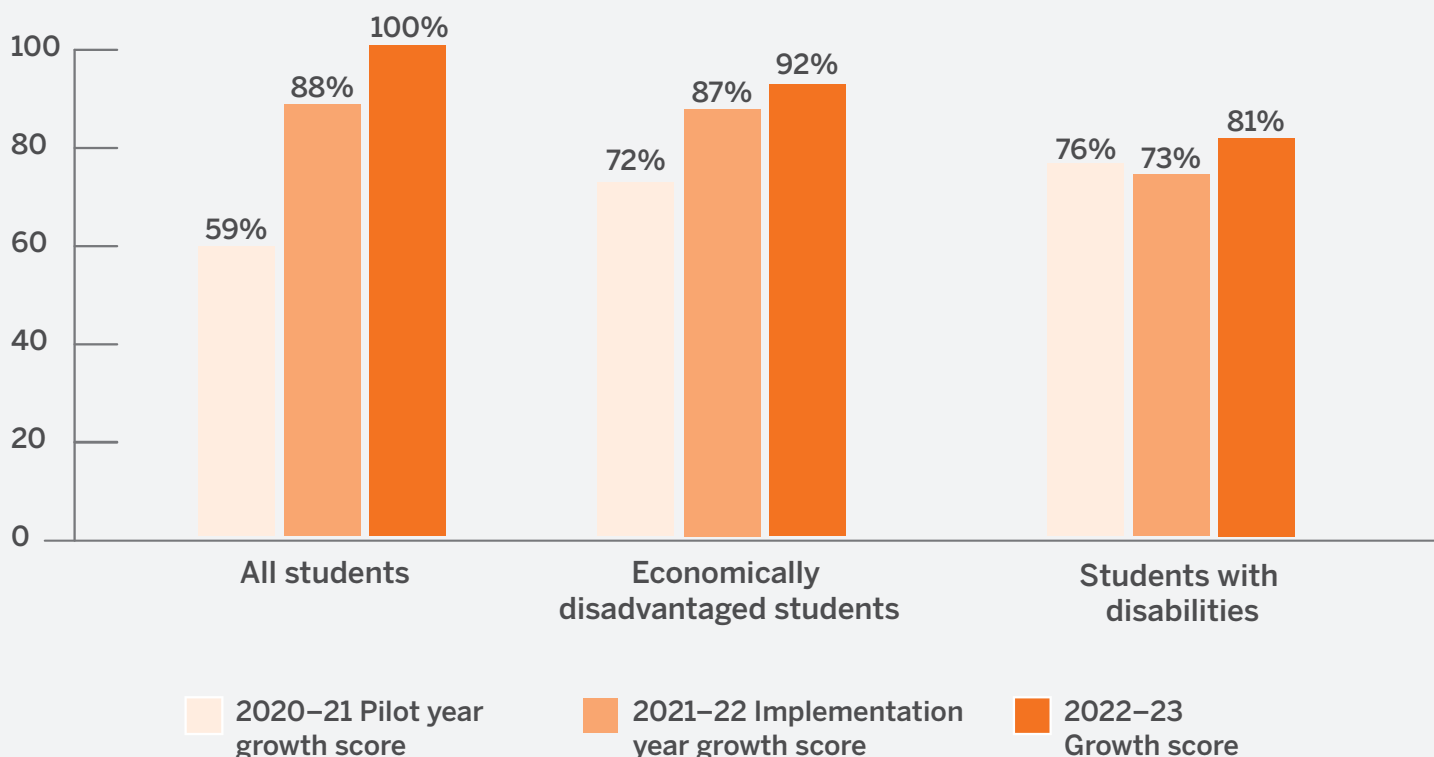
To those looking to make the shift to the Science of Reading, Patterson says, “Press on.” He suggests emphasizing the “why” behind making the change and supporting your staff through the transition.

“I have not talked to one single district yet that said we made the wrong decision,” Patterson reflected. “We’ve made the right decision, and it’s a decision that is going to be with us for a very long time.”

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Matthew Patterson, Assistant Superintendent, West Jefferson Hills School District

## West Jefferson Hills middle school students meeting annual academic growth expectations in ELA







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