

Flexible Student Grouping at Riverside K–8

CLEVELAND METROPOLITAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

What is flexible grouping? Teachers use flexible grouping to personalize instruction for students. It involves using data to identify students’ needs and strengths, and organizing students who share similar needs into small groups for short intervention and/or enrichment cycles. Students move in and out of different groups over time based on how their needs evolve. Flexible grouping may be used within a classroom, across classrooms in a grade, or cross-grade depending on students’ need and teachers’ collaboration.

Context: Principal Baublitz-Watkins became principal of Riverside K–8 in 2014, and has worked with her staff to increase the role that data plays in determining student interventions. As of fall 2015, these efforts include a new approach to intervention in grades K–2: teachers in these classrooms now use assessment data to flexibly group students across their classrooms for 50 minutes, Monday through Friday, to provide targeted small-group support in literacy. Remediation efforts focus on specific skills, and group composition changes every four to six weeks based on student progress. All teachers in grades K–3 rely on the Fountas and Pinnell Leveled Literacy Intervention system as the foundational curriculum during flexible grouping.

Riverside Fast Facts (2015)

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|---------------------------|--|---------------------------------|
| • Student enrollment: 513 | • Budget: \$5.2M | • Grade 3 ELA Proficiency: 80% |
| • Special Education: 19% | • Dollars per pupil: \$10.2K | • Grade 3 Math Proficiency: 70% |
| • ELL: 8% | • Student : Teacher ratio: 17:1 | |
| • FRPL: 57% | • Student : Instructional staff ratio (teacher + TA): 13:1 | |

MAKING IT WORK: RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS



PEOPLE

- **Vertical teaching team:** The kindergarten and Grade 1 teachers collaborate in a vertical team to determine how to regroup students across their respective classrooms during the daily literacy block. Average class size across these two classrooms is approximately 22 students, and during flexible grouping, the average student group size is roughly four to five students. Group size, however, varies based on student need.
- **Support from an intervention teacher:** Two cross-categorical intervention teachers are assigned to grades K–2. They typically push-in to flexible grouping three times per week to co-teach, and also work with smaller groups of two to three students to provide targeted support.

- **Expert support:** Principal Baublitz-Watkins leads all professional development (PD) and collaborative planning time related to flexible grouping and its supporting curriculum. She also takes responsibility for the analysis of STAR and NWEA data needed to drive decisions about how to regroup students.



TIME

- **Frequency of regrouping:** Teachers in grades K–2 typically regroup students roughly every four to six weeks but sometimes collaboratively choose to move students more frequently.
- **Dedicated time for flexible grouping:** A 90-minute literacy block takes place at Riverside every day at the same time for all students in grades K–3. Within that block, 50 minutes in grades K and 1 are dedicated to flexible grouping across classrooms.
- **Targeted PD:** The following targeted opportunities have been provided to teachers on flexible grouping:
 - A two-day long summer conference for eight teachers on the curriculum used to guide flexible grouping (Fountas and Pinnell Leveled Literacy Intervention).
 - A two-day, in-house summer institute for teachers in grades K–3 to lay the groundwork for flexible grouping, including:
 - Reviewing of common lesson plan formats in School Net to enable lesson sharing.
 - Discussing Anne Davies’ work on co-constructed criteria as basis for future book discussion.
 - Reviewing 2015 data and classroom groupings.
 - Developing a common understanding of flexible grouping.
 - Supplemental targeted PD continues as needed. In February 2016, a subset of teachers in grades K-2 visited another school to observe how they use the Leveled Literacy Intervention System while the remaining teachers worked directly with a consultant to further develop strategies for instructional differentiation.
- **Collaborative planning time:** Collaboration across teachers in grades K–2 is required for decisions about student regrouping across grades to take place, and to ensure they are aligned about what type of intervention is needed. This collaboration is integrated into the PD that Principal Baublitz-Watkins provides through her expert support, and it takes place through the following:
 - All three full PD days since the beginning of the school year have focused on how to use data to adjust instruction, with implications for student regrouping. Roughly one full PD day every four to six weeks is dedicated to data analysis and regrouping decisions.

- o Twice a month, 45 minutes is dedicated before school to teacher collaboration on flexible grouping. The main purpose of this time is to ensure teachers are aligned on what type of intervention is being carried out and how students are progressing, but targeted regrouping decisions are also made if student progress warrants it. This time is part of Riverside's use of its weekly 200 minutes of teacher professional time.
- o Weekly teacher collaboration meetings also address flexible grouping efforts as needed.
- **Expert support prep time:** Because Principal Baublitz-Watkins provides all expert support on data-driven flexible grouping, she takes significant time to prepare in advance of collaborative planning sessions and PD days.
 - o In advance of each PD day, she spends approximately 10 to 12 hours collecting updated NWEA and STAR data, identifying trends, preparing discussion questions for teachers and any training that's relevant to a current development need.
 - o In advance of the 45-minute CPT focused on flexible grouping every other week, she spends approximately one to two hours synthesizing her observations from the previous two weeks, pulling relevant data, and preparing the agenda for the meeting.



MONEY: \$82K TOTAL IN NON-PERSONNEL SPENDING

- **Leveled Literacy Intervention System (LLI):** Teachers in grades K-3 rely on the Fountas and Pinnell Leveled Literacy Intervention System to guide small-group instruction during flexible grouping. Relying on one common intervention curriculum is particularly useful for teachers in grades K and 1 as they regroup students across their respective classrooms. The cost of LLI was covered by CMSD centrally as part of a literacy intervention pilot that Principal Baublitz-Watkins designed. If the cost had come out of the school's budget directly, it likely would have been roughly \$30,000.
- **Supplementary technology to support LLI:** Because students rely on iPads to complete some portions of the LLI curriculum, the pilot Principal Baublitz-Watkins structured also required approximately \$30,000 in supplementary technology. This cost was also covered by CMSD's central office and did not come out of Riverside's budget.
- **Summer conference cost:** Eight teachers attended a conference in the summer of 2015 before implementing flexible grouping with the LLI system. This targeted PD, including travel expenses, came at a cost of \$12,000 to Riverside.
- **Leveled book room:** Principal Baublitz-Watkins dedicated \$10,000 of Riverside's budget to a wide range of texts to supplement the LLI system, which are located in a dedicated Leveled Book Room that teachers can access.

SUPPORTING STRATEGIES

- **School culture and personal relationships:** Prior to the implementation of flexible grouping and LLI, Riverside began a strong focus on building a more cohesive and positive culture among students and staff. This has included the incorporation of “Morning Meeting,” advisory, and a Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports.
- **Teaching Teams:** Cross-grade flexible grouping is made possible through the vertical teaching team that grades K and 1 have formed. This team’s work is enabled through expert support, sufficient time to collaborate, access to high-quality data, and a strong professional culture. Related data-driven teaming efforts include a focus on science and social studies CAP data to support the creation of short cycle interventions.

LEARNING FROM IMPLEMENTATION

- **Encouraging teacher buy-in:** When flexible grouping and LLI was initially proposed, not all teachers were ready to shift away from traditional instructional methods. Buy-in was built over the course of Principal Baublitz-Watkins’ first year, through the AAP process, dedicated time in the summer through the conference and in-house PD she provided, and ongoing efforts to cultivate buy-in with her staff. Over time, hopefully more teachers will feel comfortable with targeted grouping across grades.
- **Structuring a pilot:** Principal Baublitz-Watkins was facing a negative budget variance in the winter of 2015 as she explored different options to meet the needs of struggling readers in grades K-3. After making several trade-offs, including the reduction of encore positions, she requested supplementary financial support from CMSD to pilot the dedicated LLI block. To show Riverside’s commitment to this pilot, she ensured she had a clearly designed plan in the school’s AAP, including relevant research, provided all PD in-house, and paid for supplementary summer PD and student books out of Riverside’s budget. In response to her strong plan and request for supplemental funding, CMSD funded the roughly \$60,000 associated with the core LLI system and associated technology.
- **Building expertise:** It’s challenging and time intensive for Principal Baublitz-Watkins to serve as the primary source of expertise on flexible grouping and data-driven instruction in addition to fulfilling her administrative duties. As she and her staff work to implement this new initiative, she hopes to release responsibility and support teacher leaders in managing flexible grouping efforts.

RESULTS

Flexible grouping efforts that began in the fall of 2015 are already showing promising results: In just four months, Riverside has seen the percentage of students demonstrating proficiency on STAR K-2 literacy indicators increase from 62 to 85 percent.

School Artifacts

- 1. Riverside K-8 Master Schedule**
- 2. Riverside K-8 Academic Achievement Plan**
 - Overview
 - Full version
 - Research Addendum
- 3. Principal Baublitz-Watkins' Professional Development agendas focused on support for the Leveled Literacy Intervention System**
- 4. Sample data report used to support flexible grouping decisions**