

SUCCESS SPOTLIGHT

Tennessee Principal Uses Creative Funding to Support School Improvement

For years, the lack of a valid and reliable universal screener was a significant pain point for the leadership at Love Chapel Elementary in Tennessee's Unicoi County Schools.

Each time they explored improvement opportunities, administrators understood that more accurate student data was needed to give teachers the required insights to address individualized instructional needs.

Ben Evely, Love Chapel's principal, had previously explored *i-Ready* and felt this was the assessment solution his teachers and students really needed, but he didn't have any funding available. That changed three years ago when the school was added to the Additional Targeted Support and Improvement (ATSI) list—a federal designation for schools that need particular focus on their student group performance. This designation allows schools to focus on improving student group performance by also making them eligible for additional state funding to support improvement efforts. The ATSI designation came as a shock to the school's hard-working, caring educators—each of whom took the news personally—but with Evely quickly taking accountability for finding solutions, it was clear the school wouldn't hesitate to make improvements.

“I wanted to find solutions that would be very targeted in helping us address our needs,” said Evely. “And I really felt it was important for me to help our teachers work smarter, not harder. They already work so hard and care so much, and I knew it was a real ‘gut punch’ to them to feel as though we were failing some of our students. It was my job to find a solution that would help.”

Love Chapel Elementary



STUDENTS

347

GRADES

K-5

TITLE I

100%

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Collaborating to Secure the Funding

Along with the district's elementary curriculum supervisor Jenifer Lingerfelt, Evely evaluated the funding options available from the state and determined that the Adaptive Technology Grants were an ideal option to help purchase *i-Ready*. The program met the criteria for the grant as well as Evely's need for an accurate universal screener that would help teachers personalize instruction to meet individual student needs—all without overburdening teachers or over-testing students.

"I was very aware of 'implementation fatigue,'" said Evely. "We had a lot of pressure on us at this time, and with so many different things coming at teachers, it's unrealistic to expect a 'woohoo' excited response to trying 'another new thing.' I knew we had to make sure it was the right tool and the right implementation plan."

Evely had previously spoken with Jim Pinckley, a Tennessee educational sales representative with Curriculum Associates, about his desire to bring *i-Ready* to Love Chapel. Now that he had a funding source to target, Evely connected with Pinckley again to collaborate on the grant proposal. The two worked together to get an accurate quote on the pricing for *i-Ready* implementation at the school, ensuring that the funds requested from the grant would be aligned to actual costs. Pinckley also helped to articulate how *i-Ready* features such as the Diagnostic assessment, personalized online learning pathways, and differentiated support for students aligned to the objectives of the Adaptive Technology Grants and would help Love Chapel measurably improve student performance.

While Evely and Pinckley collaborated at the school level, Lingerfelt spoke with colleagues at the district office to explain the differentiators of *i-Ready* and how it would provide the school with the accurate screener and personalized instruction its faculty had long desired. Equipped with valuable information from Pinckley and the Curriculum Associates team, she was able to demonstrate how the grant funding would make a real impact on Love Chapel.

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—Ben Evely, Principal



Grant Approval and Accelerated Implementation

Love Chapel received grant approval early in the 2019–2020 academic year. This was great news, but it also meant a new challenge: Implementation had to begin in earnest to make sure teachers and students could access *i-Ready* as soon as possible. Evely again relied on collaboration with the Curriculum Associates team to meet this ambitious goal, with Pinckley providing onboarding for administrators and Dr. Darren Kennedy, a professional development specialist with Curriculum Associates, providing teacher training.

Kennedy, a former school principal, presented small group training sessions for teachers, showing them how to leverage the student data available in *i-Ready*, how to use the various Teacher Toolbox resources, and how to make the best use of each product feature designed to improve personalized instruction. Teachers also participated in a coaching day after the first Diagnostic assessment, in which they learned how to understand and use the Diagnostic data, as well as another professional development day following the second Diagnostic—by this time, student growth was evident.

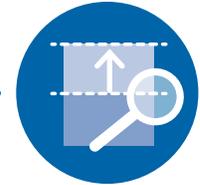
Small group training sessions included:



Before the first Diagnostic: Using the features and resources



After the first Diagnostic: Understanding and using the data



After the second Diagnostic: Understanding student growth

The collaborative implementation process paid off, as *i-Ready* was fully implemented by midyear 2019–2020. Starting a new program during the first half of a school year is always difficult. As Evely explained, implementation fatigue was a real concern, compounded by the fact that the school was also using a new social-emotional learning program at the same time.

However, teacher buy-in for *i-Ready* was already clear by the time the students took the first Diagnostic assessment. Teachers could see that each student was being provided with an individualized pathway to success and that they could avoid missing out on the best instructional opportunities to support each student, which ultimately is what every teacher cares about most. From there, Love Chapel was on a positive trajectory.

Love Chapel Achieves Impressive Growth Despite COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic upended the school's status quo in midyear 2019–2020, as *i-Ready* implementation was ongoing. Students transitioned to remote learning, and things remained this way for much of 2020–2021. The initial remote learning experience was especially difficult, as the school was not yet one to one with devices, but this was addressed during 2020–2021 when they made sure every student had a Chromebook™.

Evely and his faculty found that *i-Ready* provided a sense of stability during this difficult time of remote instruction, as students were able to complete lessons online. Evely said he prefers to have students focus more on lessons completed rather than time spent on the program, understanding that learners can sometimes “spin their wheels” when they’re not fully on task. As learners worked through their assignments, teachers could see evidence of student progress as they incrementally met proficiency goals. “If nothing else, we could say to our families, ‘Make sure your child completes one Reading lesson and one Math lesson today,’” said Evely.

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—Ben Evely, Principal

Regarding how the program’s real-time data supported teachers, he added: “I believe our teachers would tell you that *i-Ready* has been the best tool that we’ve ever put in their hands in terms of being able to figure out where kids are at, their needs, and how to push them forward.”

Student growth at Love Chapel was dramatic and undeniable. Within the first year of *i-Ready* implementation, the school went from the ATSI list to within one-tenth of a point of being named a Reward school, a designation given to schools that are improving achievement and growth for all students and student groups. The teachers at Love Chapel were able to improve Tier 1 instruction across the board and saw all student groups—from English Learners to special education students—benefit from the integration of small group instruction based on prerequisites set in *i-Ready*.

By staying true to their commitment to support every learner and identifying the opportunity among the challenges, the future at Love Chapel is bright. “If I had to do it over again, I wouldn’t change it,” said Evely. “Because we landed in a good place with implementing programs that are really good for our kids.”



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