

May 2018

# Developing Teacher Practice through Unit Starter Implementation

Teacher Leaders: Taking Action through Professional Learning



Department of  
**Education**



# Introduction

*The success of Tennessee’s students is defined by the strength of Tennessee’s educators. With that understanding, the Tennessee Department of Education identified Educator Support as one of five priority areas in its strategic plan, **Tennessee Succeeds**, when it was released in late 2015. The vision that guides the work is one of a highly effective teacher and leader in every classroom in Tennessee to ensure all students have the knowledge and skills to successfully embark upon their chosen path in life.*

Building a network of educator support that includes the state department, higher education, district, school, and classroom-level partners is critical to this success. In order to research, identify, develop, disseminate, and learn about proven and promising practices for advancing student growth and achievement, each lever must be part of the work to support educators. As such, state-level goals for the educator support priority include:

- Increasing the number of **classroom-ready teacher candidates** graduating from Tennessee educator preparation programs
- Improving the **quality of feedback** teachers receive as a part of the teacher evaluation system
- Promoting **best practices** embedded in teacher professional learning opportunities
- Developing a cadre of **teacher leaders** across the state who work collaboratively with educators to support their use of best practices through embedded professional learning opportunities

Tennessee’s goal pertaining to teacher leadership is particularly critical. According to the 2017 Tennessee

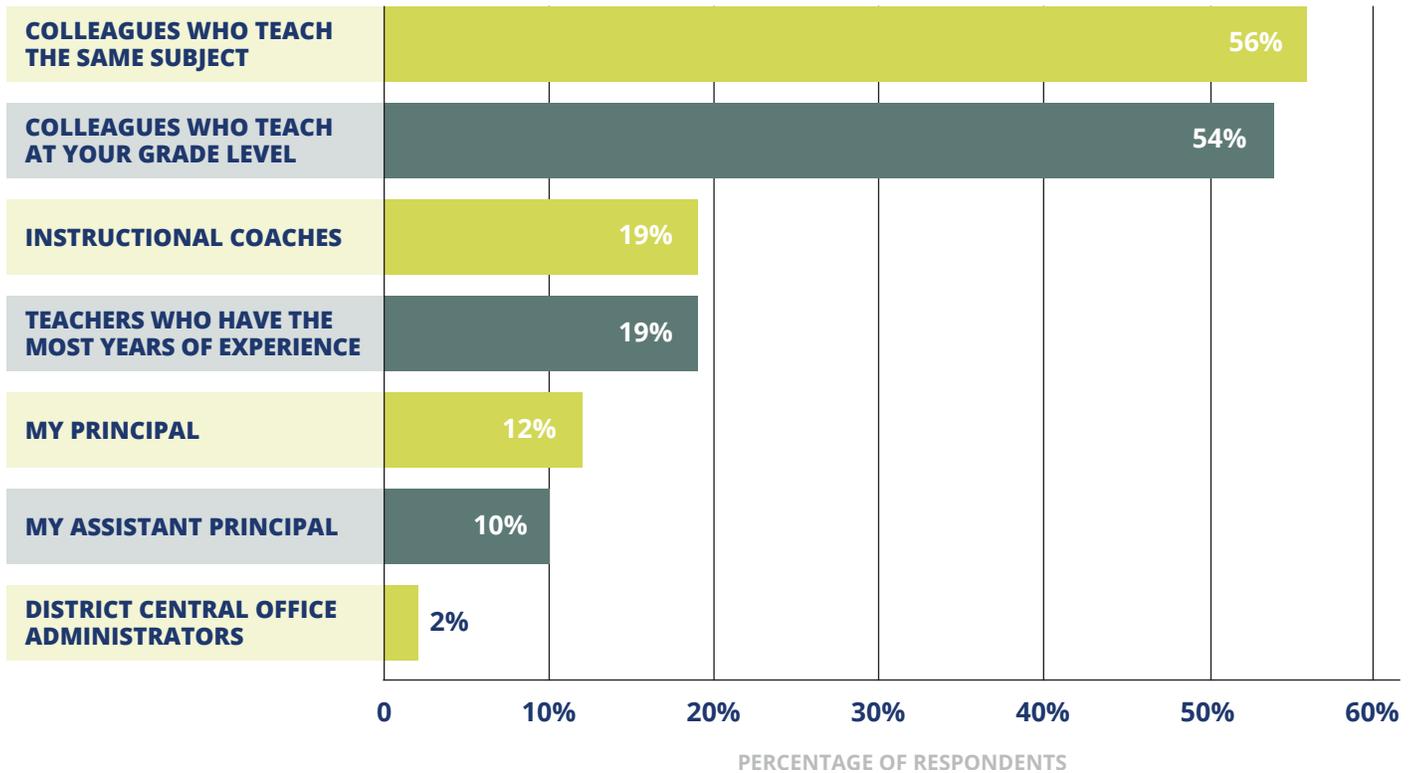
Educator Survey, teachers overwhelmingly reported that they prefer to go to colleagues before other sources for advice about refining their practices (see figure 1). With this in mind, it is clear that teacher leaders are integral to educator success and to the success of the state’s many strategic initiatives. Teacher leaders have been and continue to be the backbone of Tennessee’s work in building literacy skills in early grades through programs like Read to be Ready, providing all students with individualized supports and opportunities like RTI<sup>2</sup>, and preparing more students for postsecondary completion through initiatives like increased access to early postsecondary opportunities (EPSOs).

For almost a decade, the department, in partnership with Vanderbilt University, has surveyed all educators in the state to gain insight and include teachers’ voices in department strategy, policy decisions, and goal-setting. One area included in the survey is related to “teacher evaluation and instructional improvements.” As noted in the figure below from 2017 survey data, Tennessee teachers are consistently connecting with colleagues to refine their practice. In this brief, we will hear directly from a teacher team about how their collaboration has benefited not only their own professional learning but also the continued improvement to the instructional practices within their school and district.

FIGURE 1

## TEACHER EVALUATION AND INSTRUCTIONAL IMPROVEMENT

Which of the following do you prefer to go to most for advice about refining your teaching practices?



Teachers who have been in the profession for any length of time realize that change and refinement are critical to the success of any learning community. As they embrace impactful change with a high degree of adaptability, educators know their students are the benefactors. They understand that building their own professional knowledge is essential to success and can be achieved through a mindset of continuous learning. Whether participating in collaborative opportunities within learning communities that **plan, implement, and reflect** upon units of study that build students’ knowledge and conceptual understanding or engaging with teacher evaluation as a means of identifying strengths and areas for improvement in instructional planning and delivery, Tennessee’s teachers are answering questions like: “What are my next steps?” and “How do I prepare my students?” and “Why is this important?”

The first grade team at Rockvale Elementary School in Rutherford County is one example of teacher leaders who are embodying the power of true collaboration at the classroom, building, district, and state levels, and they are doing it through their use of unit starters in the context of literacy. As they read “the what” and “the how” in the [Vision for Third Grade Reading Proficiency](#) and [Teaching Literacy in Tennessee](#), the [Teaching Literacy in Tennessee K-2 Unit Starters](#) serve as tangible guidance for

exploring how these concepts can transfer to practice within the literacy block.

The use of the unit starters as a foundation for collaborative teacher work is leading teachers to deepen knowledge around text types and text purposes, impacting the rigor and accessibility of grade level standards for all students and their teachers’ instructional approaches. Likewise, teacher collaboration around the unit starters is enhancing lesson planning, questioning, and expectations for the outcomes of student work through daily and long-term expectations. They gather to make critical decisions regarding instruction and connect on student work, identifying opportunities for how best to differentiate instruction in the process.

Together, these Rutherford County teachers share the power of collective growth and opportunity as they work to create learning opportunities that promote equity and excellence for the range of learners in their classrooms. Their passion for “getting better at getting better,” as well as their willingness to answer the call for helping others, is evident. The Rockvale team sets an example for all Tennessee teachers, whether they are using unit starters, or teaching secondary or other content areas, as they embody the collective power of teacher leadership.

# How to Adapt the Unit Starter to Meet Your Students' Needs

As educators, our goal is for our students to gain knowledge from our instruction that students may carry on from year to year and practice in their own lives. The unit starter might be overwhelming at first look, but it breaks down each component to ensure that both teachers and students have a deep understanding of the content. We all have those staple texts that we read in our classroom every year. Maybe these texts teach a certain concept or are used as a mentor text to support student writing. Instruction must be centered around high-quality, intentionally sequenced texts, because it allows students to engage in content in a meaningful way. Rich text provides opportunities to reread text for multiple purposes.

## CONTRIBUTING TEACHER LEADERS

Rockvale Elementary  
Rutherford County, TN

Stacey Badger  
First grade

Sydni Miller  
First grade

Meghan Parks  
First grade

See page 15 for teacher profiles.

## Questioning that Develops Analytical Thinking

To build a solid foundation in the content, teachers must activate prior knowledge in their students. By asking basic level questions, a teacher can receive feedback about what the students know and clear up any misconceptions. From there, the teacher will build questions to extend the student's learning. By doing this, the students are pushed to analyze the text and use their critical thinking skills to guide them in their new learning. The question sequence supports students in their daily tasks. Each task and set of questions act as building blocks that allow students to compile all the new information. Students provide teachers a plethora of feedback when answering questions. It is important

to not limit yourself to a sequence of questions; instead, use student responses to steer the conversation into the correct thinking pathway. **By planning for both questions and exemplar student responses, teachers can ask probing questions to help drive the student discussions and responses toward the expectations of the daily task.** Students benefit from teachers' intentional planning to map out potential questions, so that all questions posed meet the high expectations and are able to elicit higher order thinking.

## Differentiation to Meet the Needs of All Learners

We hear about the importance of "rigor" regularly. This word is buzzing around in the educational community, but how do

*Questioning That Develops Analytical Thinking:*

**One question we asked during our second read of *The Reasons for the Seasons* by Gail Gibbons was, "This diagram helps us understand what the author is saying with her words. How are the words *equator* and *Northern* and *Southern Hemisphere* related? How does the author know that the seasons of one hemisphere are always opposite of those in the other hemisphere?" Questions like these, coupled with prior knowledge, helped students understand the cause of the seasons and how different parts of the world experience those seasons.**

we ensure rigor in practice? Lessons should be scaffolded so that all students can grow—not plateau. Daily tasks foster student learning and build upon each other so that students are capable of completing the end-of-unit task. ELA standards promote and support comprehension. Educators know that one size does not fit all in terms of student learning. Differentiation and accommodations, like drawing or dictating sentences, may be necessary to ensure all students are successful. At times, students need additional supports that may include referring back to the text. This not only serves as a model as to what good readers do in text, but also gives those learners the necessary support and scaffolds as reference. We want all students to access material and demonstrate their understanding. This may mean that different students have different support so they can best demonstrate their understanding.

### Shared Reading

It is important to make text accessible to all students. Shared reading connects learning from the interactive read aloud and enables students to engage in discussions with their

**It was impressive and reassuring to see our students grow and able to read texts that initially seemed too challenging.**

peers about text that is on level. It is important to note that the text chosen must appropriately fit students' reading development and the current pace of the academic year. In the *Observable Patterns in the Universe* unit starter, we felt the text chosen for shared reading was not appropriate for our students at that time of the year. It was necessary to revise the reading and, rather than read it in its

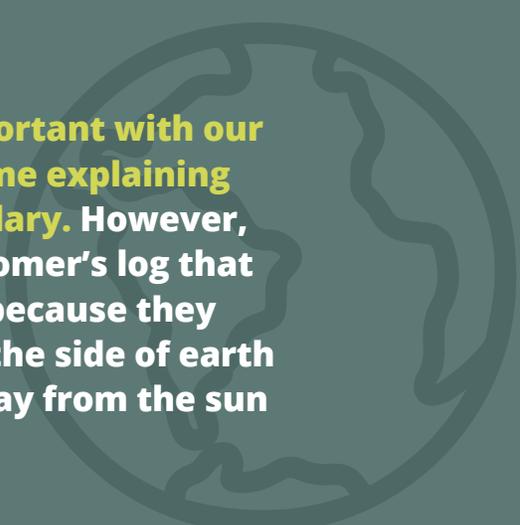
entirety, read only a portion of the text. Although the complexity may have appeared to be more rigorous than our students could handle, high expectations were met with fluent readers who could comprehend and discuss the changing of our Earth's seasons. With each exposure of the text, our students' stamina increased and those struggling readers gained confidence in their own reading ability.

### Small Group

By exposing students to complex texts during the interactive read aloud, grade-level text in shared reading, and differentiated text in small group, students have numerous exposures to the content and vocabulary. Small group allows students to demonstrate their skills and provides additional opportunities to read and participate. Students make connections to other texts that were previously read or locate vocabulary words in their own text that had been previously taught. Small groups allow for more opportunity for students to feel comfortable asking questions related to their learning that they may not have shared formerly. It also gives the teacher more opportunity to see their students demonstrate skills and determine what content or skill gaps exist. With all this in mind, it was important in our planning process to not limit complex text to just shared reading and interactive read alouds. Differentiated texts and tasks were created so that students at all phases of reading development had the opportunity to increase their knowledge of observable patterns in the universe. Small group was where we saw many "light bulb" effects. For instance, during one small group, our students were reading *Introducing Planet Earth* by Celeste Fraser. One student demonstrated his understanding when he said, "I notice that the equator is dividing the Earth into hemispheres." As he continued to read, he used this knowledge to support his understanding of longitude and latitude: "These lines are like a map. They help us find locations on our Earth."

### *Differentiation to Meet the Needs of All Learners:*

**Differentiation and accommodations were really important with our ESL and SPED students because they had a difficult time explaining these extensive concepts using the advanced vocabulary. However, we could tell through their illustrations in the astronomer's log that they, in fact, understood what caused day and night because they had the sun and the earth positioned correctly, with the side of earth facing the sun in light and the side of earth facing away from the sun in dark with appropriate labels.**



# Resources for Effective Implementation

The unit starters go back to the very core of reading—authentic text. In alignment with Read to be Ready, the unit starters not only look at the qualitative and quantitative features of a text, but they also meet the enduring understandings of the unit starter. **When considering texts, it is necessary to be flexible in decision making so that the texts fit the standards appropriately.** Teachers must be open minded in seeking out unfamiliar texts or portions of texts that help support their students' learning. In reflection, we saw how critical it was to expand our text selection and incorporate texts that would not have previously been considered.

## Text Accessible for all Students

A range of text types is necessary to build the foundation for student knowledge. Students must be exposed to articles, graphics, fictional texts, and texts that inform. This incorporation of multiple text types allows students to see concepts in an array of media and assists them in answering higher order thinking questions that deepen their comprehension. It is important to make text accessible to students. During the literacy block, students build knowledge around concepts through interactive read alouds, shared reading, small group reading, independent reading, and writing as they explore different texts for a variety of purposes. Students engage in meaningful conversations about the text.

## Hands-on Learning

The best lessons are not always about what is taught, but rather how students experience it. In addition to the listening, reading, speaking, and writing that occurs during the literacy block in connection to the unit, teachers are able to expand content area learning outside the literacy block through hands-on activities, experiments, inquiry-based lessons, student-driven research, and project-

based learning. These types of experiences are especially important in the early years to make new information more concrete. This exposure to content during the ELA blocks allows for further exploration of the content in other academic areas, such as science and social studies.

## Technology

The age of information is right at our fingertips. Instead of shying away from technology in the classroom, we should embrace it. Many times, technology can enhance learning and support those students who have varied learning styles. This is not a passive experience, but rather an opportunity to interact with other media and connect it with the information in the text. For example, when our students observed a video clip on the cause of the Earth's seasons, they heard vocabulary recurrently and saw a visual representation presented in a hands-on experience. As a result, a rather abstract concept was portrayed in a way they could understand and conceptualize their learning. During our literacy station time, students were able to independently research the observable patterns of the universe, which sparked their interest and curiosity in the content. Technology adds another layer of information to the students' developing schema and assists in solidifying the information.

### *Hands-on Learning:*

**During the *Observable Patterns in the Universe* unit starter, students imitate Earth's rotation/revolution by spinning and moving around a peer. Motion gives meaning and context to the vocabulary explicitly taught before the lesson. Later, students conduct an experiment using an orange, a pencil, and a flashlight to model the tilting of the Earth on its axis and show its position in relation to the sun.**



# Successes of the Unit Starters

As teachers, we love to discuss the successes we see in our classrooms. With the unit starter, we were blown away by the rate of success in students meeting our high expectations, retaining content knowledge long term, growing immensely in writing production, and increasing their overall stamina. We could not resist sharing our successes with our colleagues whenever possible.

## Raising Expectations for All Students

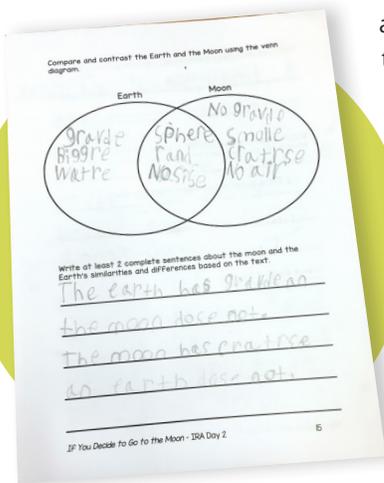
As teachers, whether new to the classroom or with years of knowledge in the education field, it is ingrained in each of us to set high expectations for our students. Setting high academic expectations in the classroom can range from simple to challenging depending on classroom dynamics. However, the unit starters set high expectations for students from the first interactive read aloud to the end-of-unit task. Students are not asked to purely recall information, discuss ideas explicitly noted in texts, or complete basic daily tasks. Instead, students are stretched to think critically about the concept, build knowledge from multiple texts, apply their

learning to real-world concepts, and express their learning through a variety of speaking and writing experiences.

Teachers may be skeptical about whether their students will be able to meet these high expectations; yet if teachers are willing to open their minds to the possibility and implement the unit starter, students will be able to reach and exceed these expectations.

## Supporting Content Knowledge Development and Retention

Although we were initially skeptical about whether our students would be able to grasp the deep and complex content knowledge presented in the first unit starter, we have now raised our expectations. Students were asked to explain through illustrations, informative writings, and discussion how the rotation of the Earth causes day and night, how the revolution and rotation of Earth produces our seasons, and how the moon phases are created. Students were also exposed to rigorous vocabulary words (i.e., waxing and waning) that required a great deal of background knowledge. Though we were skeptical, we were on board to fully implement the program in our classrooms and see how far our students could go. After only the first week of instruction, we were amazed by the knowledge students had already begun to conceptualize. Students were applying vocabulary words to their daily lives. Throughout the three-week unit, students built more content knowledge about space than most students were exposed to before third grade. Months after implementation, our students are still able to explain the concepts they learned in the unit starter, make connections to our current interactive read alouds, and continually use the unit's vocabulary words. The content knowledge our students gained from the unit starter was not temporary; it will be a building block for their learning in the future.



*Supporting Content Knowledge Development and Retention:*

**One student was thrilled to tell our Read to be Ready coach that at recess, he planned to “revolve” around the walking track to get some exercise.**

## Facilitating Growth in Writing Opportunities and Production

In our first grade classrooms, we focus a great deal on developing students into readers and writers. When our students enter first grade, they are able to write and draw one complete thought with prompting and support from the teacher. Throughout the year, we work to develop writers who can introduce a topic/opinion, support it through facts/reasons, and conclude their writing appropriately. From the beginning of the year to the end, we expect our students to grow immensely in their writing. The unit starters foster a wonderful chance for students to grow and strengthen their writing. Our students were given the opportunity

to write about their learning every

day. Through this

continuous

exposure, we

were able to see

students who

previously could

not express

their thoughts

or ideas in

written form

mature into

writers who

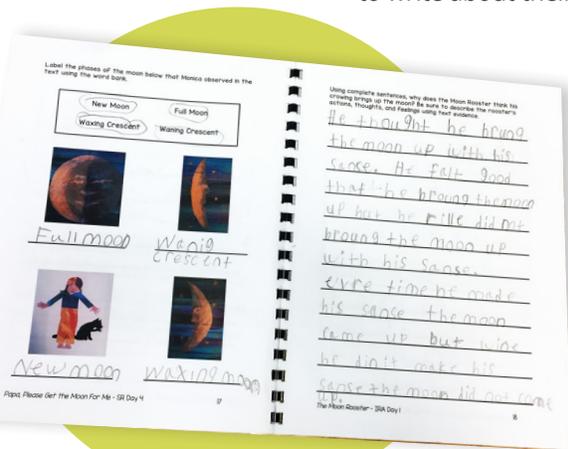
were excited

to explain their

thinking in multiple sentences. There were no grunts or groans when it was time to write about their learning each day. Instead, students were excited to express what they had learned for others to see.

## Increasing Interest and Engagement

Throughout implementation of the unit starters, we noticed a great change in our students' overall stamina. Before implementing the unit starters, our students were not able to sit for extended periods of time on the carpet actively listening to an authentic text and discussing its content in depth. Because the unit starters are built around a unit concept, all texts, question sequences, and tasks work simultaneously to build knowledge on one content-specific concept. The unit starters focus on important science or social studies standards that jointly support a wide range of English Language Arts standards. Science and social studies concepts are interesting, intriguing, and eye opening for students. Since these concepts are the basis for the unit starters, they automatically grab students' attention and instill a sense of excitement in their learning. Students were excited to learn about concepts that applied to their lives and were intrigued by all the new information they were exposed to daily. For these reasons, students were able to sit and listen to an authentic text for a longer period of time, discuss questions in depth, and engage with their peers. By the end of each lesson, they were still craving to learn more.



*Increasing Interest and Engagement:*

**Students would become restless after fifteen minutes of an interactive read aloud or shared reading lesson. As we began implementing the unit starters, we noticed how students were more actively engaged in the lessons, asking thought-provoking questions, and were excited about the new knowledge they learned from each lesson.**

# Challenges of the Unit Starters

Teachers have numerous challenges and obstacles to overcome throughout a school year. The unit starter was no different. As we began planning and implementing the unit starter, we had to adjust our mindset, be flexible in collecting resources, make continuous modifications, and be wise about our time management. Even with the challenges that arose, the successes greatly outweighed the challenges.

## Adjusting Our Mindset

When we were introduced to the unit starters, we were initially concerned with how we were going to implement such an intensive and complex unit into our first grade classrooms. We had many concerns about the depth of the content students were expected to learn, the lengthy texts selected for the unit, and the difficult tasks students were

**If we had not adjusted our mindsets to fully support the unit starters, our students would have missed out on a wonderful opportunity to engage with authentic texts and meaningful tasks.**

expected to complete. However, we jumped on board with the unit starter and put our apprehensions behind us. We implemented the program to the best of our ability with the interactive read alouds and shared reading during our whole group reading times. We also incorporated the unit concept into our small group reading lessons, reading

rotation literacy stations, and independent reading times for the duration of the unit. Because we were able to fully execute the unit starter as intended, our students benefited substantially more than they would have with a few simple read alouds focusing on the same unit concept.

## Collecting Resources

The unit starters are filled with authentic, knowledge-building texts that were chosen to build one unit concept based on state science or social studies standards. However, these texts were not always easy to access. Many of the texts chosen for the *Observable Patterns in the Universe* unit starter were not texts we already owned or used to teach these concepts. We had to ask colleagues to borrow texts and search our school and local libraries to find multiple copies of each text. We also had to choose a variety of leveled texts that supported the unit concept to incorporate into our small group reading lessons. Other resources we collected were additional texts for independent reading, videos and songs to engage students, and literacy station activities to include in daily reading rotations. Collecting all of these resources was not an easy task and was time consuming. Although it took a great deal of time and effort, the benefits of collecting every resource needed were

*Making Enhancements:*

**One song we used was very beneficial in helping the students understand the difference between rotation and revolution. "Watch Me (Revolve & Rotate)" pairs concepts with movement, which helped the students create concrete images in their minds for these essential vocabulary words.**

worth every minute. Our students gained a vast amount of knowledge from these resources that they would not have accessed otherwise.

## Making Enhancements

As teachers, we know that all of our students learn and succeed at different ability levels. The unit starters are merely a framework for teachers to follow and adjust based on their students' needs. As we were planning to implement the unit starter, we had to analyze where we believed our students would thrive and struggle based on our knowledge of our students. During the planning process, we knew our students would likely face significant struggles to complete one of the daily tasks associated with an interactive read aloud. In order for our students to be successful, we adjusted the daily task to be less extensive on the first read aloud. Then, we enhanced the second read aloud of the text to include additional questions in the question sequence in order for the students to be successful in the original daily task outlined in the unit starter. We also knew our students would need additional exposure to specific concepts through hands-

on activities and supplementary resources such as videos, songs, dances, etc. These are the types of additions we made to develop a complete literacy block. We had to make adjustments in our daily lessons to support time for these experiences in order for our students to succeed in understanding the unit concept. Since the unit starters are not concrete lesson plans for teachers to follow, we were able to adjust our plans to best benefit our students.

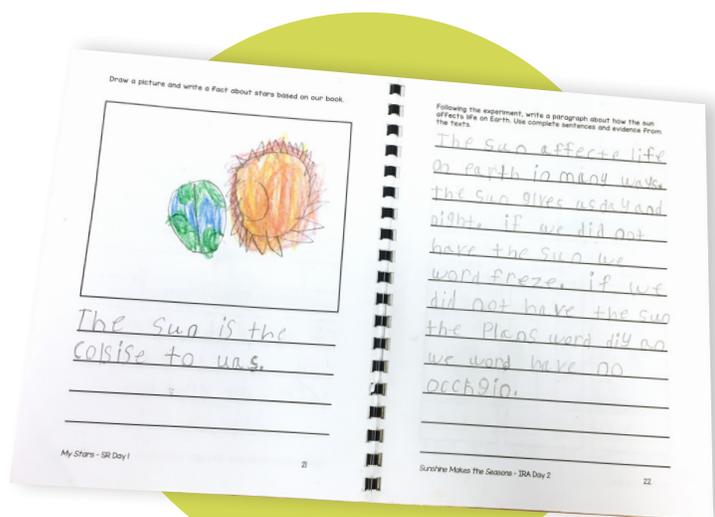
## Managing Time

Time is precious in the world of teaching. We never have enough time to teach everything we would love to instill in our students, plan the perfect lesson plans for each subject,

**It was a challenge but absolutely worth it, not only for our students' successes, but also for improving our teaching practices.**

and complete all the other requirements we have as teachers. The unit starters are time consuming for teachers to plan and implement in the classroom, but now that we have completed a unit starter, we are ready to take on another one. We spent a great

deal of time analyzing the unit starter, adjusting it to our students' needs, and gathering resources and materials for implementation. Our ability to collaborate and work as a team was extremely beneficial to the planning process. We were able to divide and conquer particular tasks and then come back together as a team to evaluate our work. During instruction of the unit starter, we also had to be mindful of and diligent about our transition times between lessons, the appropriate amount of time needed to complete independent tasks, and the duration of lessons in general. As experienced teachers, we are always conscious of our time. We simply had to pay closer attention to the time we allotted for lessons, tasks, and experiences. By being mindful of this, we were able to successfully implement the unit starters into our standard English Language Arts time frame in the classroom.



# How Unit Starters Develop Better Teachers

Truthfully, when beginning the unit starters, we were concerned about whether they would be beneficial to our students because of the complex components that we had never considered in our instruction. However, after planning, implementation, and reflection, we have realized that not only were the unit starters helpful to our students' learning, but they were also extremely valuable in molding us into becoming better teachers. With the unit starters, every aspect of instruction becomes more intentional, higher quality, and more rigorous. We found that unit starters:

## Encourage Reflective Teaching

One of the major benefits of developing and implementing the unit starters is that they require intentional thinking and/or analyzing current teaching practices in the classroom. This reflection encourages teachers to consider how instruction might be improved or altered to foster better learning outcomes. Since the unit design and instructional components offered within the unit starters might be new for some educators, it's essential to consider your teaching practices for understanding what changes can be made to benefit student learning and growth. When we implemented the *Observable Patterns in the Universe* unit starter in our classrooms this school year, we were required to contemplate after each lesson what worked and what did not, how we could extend or remediate learning, what enhancements we would make to our teaching for future lessons, and how we could refine the tasks and questions to help scaffold our students to be successful. After implementation, we have continued to use these reflective techniques in our everyday instruction.

## Require Integration of Content Areas

Unfortunately, content areas such as science and social studies are not as emphasized in daily classroom instruction because they are given less weight in standardized testing. The unit starters require teachers to integrate these standards into the literacy block to create the highly sought cross-curricular instruction. Because the unit starters are connected to science and social studies standards, the complex texts selected are content-rich, but this does not mean the literacy standards are neglected. The unit starters are a tool to integrate multiple content area standards in the classroom. In our experience of teaching, we have realized that students seem to be more enthusiastic about science and social studies than any other subject areas. This excitement about content helped us to successfully weave the literacy standards into the content with little notice by the students.

### *Encourage Reflective Teaching:*

**The suggested shared reading text was *Why Does the Earth Spin? And Other Questions About Our Planet* by Mary Kay Carson. After reviewing this text in detail, we decided that it was well above a shared reading level for our students at the time. But we thought one page (page 24) would be very beneficial to developing their understanding of how the Earth's tilting causes the seasons. As a result, we typed page 24 in a larger font and used that as our shared reading for the week.**

## Support Classroom Evaluations

Evaluations by administrators using the TEAM rubric are always a stressful topic for educators. Teachers are often overwhelmed by the variety and depth of the components included in the rubric. The unit starters alleviate the pressure and stress to achieve success in every area on the TEAM rubric because they are built into the plans. In our school, the two areas our administrators see need for improvement are questioning and thinking. The unit starters encourage and include higher level questioning from the teacher but also from the students, and the level of thinking required from the students is the most significant we have seen. Our first graders had full conversations about the waxing and waning of the moon, providing rich vocabulary and detail. For most, this would seem like a concept that was well above a first grade level,

but the unit starter prepared the students to analyze their thinking and have these types of discussions.

## Foster Lifelong Learners

The goal of any teacher is to develop a love of learning in his/her students. The unit starters created a fire in our students' eyes and a real yearning for more—more knowledge, more information, more experiences. They were innately curious and became fascinated by the content. Through the exposure to high-quality texts, vocabulary, complex concepts, and intentional discussions, students developed a passion for learning. Furthermore, their retention of the information was truly astounding. We conducted the first unit starter in October of last year, and in April our students were still capable of discussing (in detail) all of the observable patterns in the universe.

*Foster Lifelong Learners:*

**One student really impressed us with her knowledge of the moon when she informed us that “we would not see the moon at all if we did not have the sun.”** When probed further about her thinking, she added, “All the light of the moon comes from the sun. The moon does not make light of its own, so it has to reflect the light of the sun. Where the Earth, moon, and sun are in space tells us how much light we can see on the moon and what stage the moon is in.”



# How Unit Starters Develop Leadership Skills

Not only do unit starters help create better teachers, but they are also beneficial in developing leadership skills in educators. We believe teachers are natural born leaders. They possess certain qualities that allow them to lead by example in their classrooms every day. The unit starters help mold and refine those leadership skills.

## Setting Examples for Other Teachers

One of the best ways to develop leadership skills in education is to have or be a mentor. The unit starters allowed us to experience both sides of mentorship. We relied on our district and state coaches to guide our thinking, planning, and learning during the development, implementation, and reflection stages. They provided constructive feedback, advice, and praise throughout the process that provided guidance in setting and achieving goals for ourselves and our students. On the other side of mentorship: After developing and implementing the unit starters, we were able to serve as leaders for other teachers in our school and across the state. Our participation gave us the insight we needed to assist others in their ventures relevant to the unit starters. We stepped into the role of coaches and mentors by providing teachers with ideas, resources, feedback, and advice on how to get started and what paths to take after implementation began.

## Adaptability

One key trait of effective leaders is the ability to adapt to uncertain or new situations. Teachers are constantly encountering novelty and change in their field, and they need consistent flexibility to support all students in their classrooms. The unit starters foster the skill of adaptability through setting high expectations for students. Teachers

must react in situations where pupils are excelling or struggling with the concepts. Adjusting plans, timelines, lesson pacing, activities, and routines are all necessary elements in executing the unit starters. As far as timelines are concerned, we made several adjustments in order for our students to be successful in the unit starter. Adaptability helps educators reflect, refine their decision making, and remain committed to the profession. Educators and administrators admire flexibility and are more likely to follow a leader who is capable of managing the changes in situations that are likely to occur.

## Being a Catalyst for Change

Being content with the status quo should not be acceptable in the teaching profession. We often hear educators express concerns about the rigor or workload of new standards and expectations. In our work with the unit starters, we found teacher expectations for students were raised through high-quality, complex texts, intense vocabulary instruction, intentional conversations and collaboration, and rigorous written tasks. We also discovered that when teachers expected more, the students met and exceeded these expectations by being diligent and devoting the time and attention the work required. Teachers who implement the unit starters can become leaders and change the mindset of others who may be apprehensive about attempting this new way of thinking, planning, instructing, and reflecting.

### *Adaptability:*

**There was only one pre-planned day for the interactive read aloud of *Sunshine Makes the Seasons* by Franklyn M. Branley. We decided after the first read that another day of instruction was needed in this text because we wanted students to develop a deeper understanding of the connection between the sun and the tilt of the Earth in creating the seasons. This was achieved by letting them conduct the experiment and reflect over two days instead of just one.**

# How Unit Starters Develop Collaboration Skills

Teachers rely on feedback and input from their fellow educators on a daily basis; collaboration is a key component to ensure the successful implementation of unit starters. The age-old adage that it takes a village is true, and this is especially applicable in the teaching profession.

## Strengthening Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

### Professional Learning Community (PLC):

Educators who, by engaging in a continuous cycle of improvement that is

- job-embedded,
- rigorous,
- personalized,
- sustainable, and
- learning-oriented,

work together toward a common goal of increasing student achievement.

These collaborative groups are formed to ensure students are learning, evaluate barriers to success, reflect on instructional practices, and monitor outcomes. If there is one thing in education that encompasses collaboration, PLCs are it! With the unit starters, we have found ourselves more reflective and open in our communication,

and that has led us to be much more fluid in the scheduling of PLCs. Our discussions and collaboration on planning, implementing, and reflecting were continuous and not limited to the PLC meeting that is scheduled one day a week.

## Engaging in Worthy Conversation

Educators consistently ask their students to engage in quality conversations with one another. The unit starters

encourage teachers to follow the example of their students by creating a need for worthy discussions about all aspects of the instruction. If two heads are better than one, imagine what eight can do! This is a way for all teachers to take responsibility for the learning of all students. To have a successful learning outcome, it's vital to share learning, experiences, ideas, and feelings with one another in the planning, implementation, and reflecting stages of the unit starters. The unit starters are not about competition, but they encourage teachers to help one another, share great ideas, talk through difficulties, and celebrate successes.

## Sharing the Workload

Implementing the unit starters or beginning to develop your own can seem like a daunting task, and for one person, it most certainly would be. When the responsibilities are shared and divided based on each team member's strengths, the workload seems to lighten significantly. In addition, it allows each member to narrowly focus their attention to one specific area or part, which allows for careful concentration in each component of the unit. Collaborative planning lends itself to positive educational outcomes because teachers have already collected quality resources, prepared lessons and activities, formulated and perfected appropriate teaching strategies, and addressed any potential problems with possible solutions and/or scaffolding.

### *Strengthening PLCs:*

**After our first interactive read aloud and daily task, we met to discuss the student success rate in understanding the difference between rotation and revolution. In this PLC, we evaluated our student work and came to the conclusion that more instruction was needed for students to grasp these similar but different concepts. During this meeting, we planned a supplemental lesson with music and movement to help the students connect the kinesthetic aspect to the vocabulary to assist with comprehension.**

# Reflection

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*The insights from the team at Rockvale Elementary School show us the power of taking risks to professionally stretch into uncharted territory. As these teachers share their experience, it is easy to picture the grit, tenacity, collaboration, and flexibility required to produce such positive results in their students. As a statewide community of learners, we have a sense of urgency to embrace the types of change that will be the catalyst for increasing students' literacy proficiency across the state.*

## Contributing Teacher Leaders

Rockvale Elementary, First Grade | *Rockvale, Tennessee*



### **Stacey Badger**

Stacey Badger has a bachelor's degree in political science pre-law and a master's degree in curriculum and instruction from Middle Tennessee State University. She has spent six years in the classroom: one year in kindergarten at Owl Creek School in Fayetteville, Arkansas, and five years in first grade at Rockvale Elementary in Rutherford County. Ms. Badger is currently Teacher of the Year at Rockvale Elementary. She is passionate about fostering an enthusiasm for learning in her classroom that her students can carry on throughout their lives.



### **Sydni Miller**

Sydni Miller has spent four years as a classroom teacher, including three years of experience in first grade and one year of experience in second grade. She has a bachelor's degree in elementary education from Middle Tennessee State University. She has worked as a R2BR facilitator and monitor of summer camps for the Tennessee Department of Education's R2BR Summer Grant Program. Ms. Miller is passionate about instilling a love for learning in each of her students in hopes they will become lifelong learners.



### **Meghan Parks**

Meghan Parks has a bachelor's degree in early childhood education from Middle Tennessee State University. She has taught for six years in Rutherford County. Ms. Parks strives to create an environment for her students in which they can grow academically and socially. Her high expectations and goal to create future problem solvers motivate Ms. Parks to continually adapt her teaching practices.