

Mary Doe Donecker  
Step By Step Learning  
PO Box 230  
Whitehall, PA 18052



March 15, 2010

The Honorable Stanley E. Saylor  
Chairman  
House Republican Policy Committee  
414 Main Capitol  
Harrisburg, PA 17120

Dear Chairman Saylor:

Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you and other members of the House Republican Policy Committee to discuss the positive results students have achieved with Step By Step Learning® through our partnership with school districts.

Step By Step Learning® is a unique organization that focuses on implementing the best practices with the highest of fidelity and integrity. We are solely focused on the steps necessary to provide for an educational system that builds strong readers.

Students with strong literacy skills are less likely to dropout of school; have an increased likelihood of attending universities; and have greater opportunities to contribute to the workforce.

I have detailed a description of our company, our associates, our clients, and the results we achieve in the pages that follow. Upon review of our testimony and the sustainable results our clients achieve, we are hopeful that you will urge the Department of Education to redistribute existing funds to support successful programs like this in all of Pennsylvania's public school districts!

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Mary Doe Donecker'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name 'Mary' being the most prominent.

Mary Doe Donecker  
Vice President, Step By Step Learning®

## **Step By Step Learning®**

Step By Step Learning® (SBSL) works with school districts to implement a comprehensive, research-based approach to literacy that includes assessment, effective classroom instruction techniques, collaborative problem solving, research-supported intervention models, and real-time technology to ensure all students succeed in reading. Through a professional development model that includes ongoing coaching and mentoring support, SBSL crafts a unique implementation strategy for each local district.

### ***Our Associates***

Each associate is student-focused and motivated to achieve the best outcomes. We are mentored by the leading reading researchers in our field and certified to support schools, teachers and students. As former educators, we draw on classroom and administrative experiences to coach current school personnel.

Our associates understand the value of coaching and mentoring to support and implement the best practices. We are working with teachers and administrators everyday to:

- Survey evidence-based findings from research
- Interpret data and adapt instructional approaches to student needs
- Refine processes and procedures to support the literacy initiatives

SBSL associates undergo a one year training process to certify their knowledge and consultative skills to enable them to engage students, teachers, and administrators within a school district. This unique investment to prepare our staff, supported by the guidance and mentorship of leading researchers, substantially differentiates us from others who provide professional development to school districts. .

The relationships SBSL has built with the most renowned researchers and contributors to reading and reading instruction has enabled us to best define the services and processes we implement in our client school districts. We are translators of best practices grounded in the evidence. Our associates are expected to be clinical in our understanding of research in that our decisions must be substantiated by data. We only implement proven, research-supported methods that translate to results for students.

## ***Our Clients***

Every school district that partners with Step By Step Learning shares a common vision—they desire positive, sustainable results for students. Our clients are varied in their demographics. We work with small, rural school districts that are challenged to meet accountability standards with a reduced budget where resources are spread thin and often unavailable. We also engage in projects with larger, urban districts that service students from high risk neighborhoods where low socioeconomic status, English language learners, and little parent involvement are but some of the challenges.

Our clients engage in a partnership where all stakeholders agree to be actively involved in the solution. Administrators understand that they must be involved in the day to day operations to improve as instructional leaders who can empower their teachers and students to succeed by providing the necessary resources. Teachers understand that increased knowledge in the *science* of teaching reading coupled with their ability to adapt their instructional practices based upon real-time data will ultimately transform students' abilities regardless of their background.

Currently SBSL services twenty five (25) school districts in the state of PA. In the past, we have serviced forty seven (47) additional schools. These schools typically fund their projects with SBSL by using funds from sources such as legislatively initiated School Entity Demonstration Grants, Title I, Accountability Block Grants, and ARRA. *More schools could implement and sustain our methodology if current funding was redirected to projects that demonstrate effectiveness.*

Many districts choose to work with SBSL because they have an overwhelming number of students identified for special education due to reading difficulties. They wish to reduce the number of special education referrals and prevent reading difficulties by improving teacher effectiveness. "Key findings of the 2009 Special Education Report include: Providing a basic, quality education for students eligible for special education requires, on average, more than twice the cost of teaching students without special needs." (Costing Out the Resources Needed to Meet PA's Education Goals for Students in Disabilities, 2009)

## ***Our Services***

Many schools struggle to implement research findings in their everyday practices in the classroom. Often times, schools are subject to purchasing materials and programs in hopes of demonstrating gains in student achievement that never actually materialize. Step By Step Learning® is a consulting group that acts as a

translator of evidence-based research to the practice in the classroom. We utilize modern communication technology to assist schools in implementing assessment to drive instruction; provide professional development and ongoing coaching to improve teacher effectiveness; and advise school administrators in creating a district literacy plan to sustain a lasting commitment to student achievement. When involved with schools, SBSL does not require the purchase of any proprietary equipment specific to our company. Instead, we recommend and use the tools in the marketplace that are supported by evidence and proven to be effective—many of which school districts already have in place.

## **Assessment**

SBSL implements a comprehensive assessment plan that includes the use of universal screening, progress monitoring, diagnostic, and outcome measures to drive the actions within partner school districts. Technology is used to reduce the time spent collecting and analyzing data and to provide data storage and meaningful reports necessary to make instructional decisions. The data, and the ability to share it quickly, determines and drives the actions necessary to meet the needs of each student.

Through training and ongoing coaching, school districts learn to integrate real-time assessment into their instructional practices. By forming data resolution teams, our client schools learn how to interpret data in a meaningful and time-sensitive way to prepare and implement the appropriate instruction for every child to ensure progress with their individual skill needs.

Ongoing data is collected using handheld devices to monitor student progress. Anecdotal reports and formative assessments collected in instructional logs are further documented to link with norm-referenced and criterion-referenced assessments to direct teachers in measuring student progress. The real-time progress monitoring reports are then reviewed by collaborative teams of teachers, specialists, and administrators to alter instructional plans as necessary in weekly grade level meetings.

Teams of teachers in successful schools collect, record, and discuss assessment data regularly. They access the data in the form of charts and graphs from their online databases to determine if students are progressing along their “aim line”. Ultimately, they discuss the necessary adaptations to students’ instruction such as the frequency, duration, intensity, and escalation of resources for each child. This level of collaboration is rarely demonstrated in traditional school settings. When teachers are acutely aware of student progress and the priority skills students must master in a specific sequence to meet the next milestone, they can better monitor each child’s mastery of skills. Teachers in our partner schools quickly adapt their instruction and deliver the appropriate modifications with expert precision.

## **Professional Development**

The National Council for Teacher Quality reported in May 2006 (<http://www.nctq.org/p/publications>) that teachers were not prepared in their undergraduate studies with the *science* to teach reading. Instead, local school districts bear the burden to provide the professional development suitable to teach how the brain of struggling young readers functions, the instructional techniques supported by evidence, and the importance of the language-literacy connection. This requires a strong determination on the part of the school districts to focus, coordinate, and sustain their professional development endeavors.

Unlike the traditional in-service model, Step By Step Learning supports teachers and administrators in their learning of a new methodology until the competency is integrated, applied, and mastered in their classroom. The process begins with an initial new information training to learn the theory. In order to learn how to apply the theory in the classroom, teachers observe an SBSL consultant modeling the behavior in the classroom. Teachers follow these sessions by practicing the behavior in the classroom with their consultant as a coach by their side. The feedback they receive in their classroom enables them to apply the learned behavior and new knowledge independently in their classroom. The process repeats itself for every piece of new knowledge taught within the project. The information is layered to build the information into the teachers' repertoire rather than dispense it all at once, as is done in traditional professional development courses.

Step By Step Learning is unique in that we offer the courses and the structure to support school districts in professional development.. We make a commitment to support our clients *by guaranteeing our results*.

## **Sustained Commitment**

Each of our schools creates a literacy plan to document the policy and procedures that will outline how they implement literacy instruction. The written document serves as guiding principles for the duration of the project while SBSL is engaged, and continues as standard operating procedure beyond our engagement. The literacy plan defines the curriculum, professional development, and assessment plans, among other items. It requires the administration to become knowledgeable about consensus evidence from effective schools research and to implement effective strategies in their district. Many of the plans are then ratified by the school board to ensure a lasting,

sustained commitment to the plan they construct. This typically protects the investment of human resource development, the tools and the materials the district purchases, and the time invested to create a successful system. Therefore, all parties needed to create success are invested in the plan, the resources necessary to implement the plan are aligned, and the return on investment is secured.

Once a school district demonstrates success and results as reflected in their data, Step By Step Learning further works with the school district to create local capacity. A Step By Step Learning consultant will teach, coach and mentor those who can drive and sustain the processes and actions in place. Once local capacity is in place, SBSL can exit the project. We maintain a relationship with the district, as may be necessary, to serve as advisors and monitor the data to ensure sustained results.

## ***Our Results***

**Pleasant Valley** – Teach Me to Read at Home – Parent Training Program  
*Study validated by The Center for Promoting Research to Practice, Lehigh University*

Step By Step Learning® conducted a series of five 90-minute family literacy training sessions through the 2006-2007 school year for families whose children were entering Kindergarten in the Fall of 2007. Families participated in a large group session during which they learned about a particular literacy topic while their children played literacy games, supervised in another room. Discussion topics included: reading aloud to your child, vocabulary, letter recognition, phonological awareness, and letter-sound correspondence. Families were then divided into smaller breakout groups, each with a teacher volunteer, to practice the lessons related to the topic that was discussed in the larger group. The children were then reunited with their families, who then practiced the newly learned lessons with their child(ren). Teacher-trainers provided real-time feedback and guidance to the families as they worked through the lessons. To determine the effectiveness of the family session in improving their children's literacy skills, comparisons were made between the Kindergarten literacy skills of students whose families participated in the program (the intervention group) and students whose families did not participate (the comparison group). The results suggest that the family sessions had a significant effect on improving certain literacy skills for children. Moreover, these effects were validated upon the children's entry into Kindergarten, as well as later in the school year.

Specifically, program participants entered Kindergarten with higher skills in Letter Naming Fluency. Additionally, their performance in Nonsense Word Fluency, Phoneme Segmentation Fluency, and Initial Sound Fluency continued to be significantly higher throughout the school year than that of students in the comparison group. Families provided their children with more assistance in particular skills during the year prior to Kindergarten entry, as a result of their

participation in this program. These findings suggest that providing families with literacy training can improve particular literacy skills in their Pre-K and Kindergarten children that are critical to reading success.

### **Brookville School District – RTII Project K-2**

SBSL brought the use of high quality professional development in reading instruction and assessment technology to the Brookville School District. The concepts learned in the professional development sessions were transferred into the classroom through on-going modeling and coaching. This enabled teachers to design and implement meaningful and purposeful classroom application.

Never before had the district been able to drill down and interpret data to determine specific needs of children. Using this data teachers have been able to design explicit, systematic, whole and small group instruction to meet the individual needs of students.

The district staff feel as though “the tools and processes that SBSL has provided have taught them how to use screening, progress monitoring and diagnostics tools to determine the instructional level of each child in our classroom.” This data is used to design specific interventions and is linked with modern technology to help our students become successful readers.

SBSL has facilitated BASD teachers, administrators, and staff to become a community of learners. This collaboration has empowered teachers to become leaders in the district and expect higher levels of student achievement. The new, higher expectations have challenged the district to expect more from themselves and their peers to increase student achievement.

Prior to SBSL involvement in the district, Kindergarten 80-85% of students met proficiency standards. Currently in the Winter of 2010, 97% of students are benchmarked with 3% of students receiving strategic intervention. It is important to note that **0% of Kindergarten students are below basic**. This year, a record number of students entered First Grade benchmarked (86% Fall '09 compared to the previous high of 76%). Equally importantly, these students are maintaining their levels whereas in the past they dramatically decreased from Fall to Winter.