



## Glean Education's Ed Leaders in Literacy Podcast Episode #2 - Dr. Jack Silva (Bethlehem Area School District)

Speaker 1: The results they've been immediate and we had one of the biggest shifts in the state.

Speaker 2: It's, it's almost magical when it all comes together. And I think to myself, this is what education is about.

Speaker 3: There were inequities everywhere. My students in south Texas ultimately taught me more than I taught them.

Jack Silva: Over 40% of our students were leaving third grade with less than proficient reading skills. And that was just something we had to stop.

Speaker 5: The bottom line is that we can prevent reading failure. We can change the trajectory of these students' lives. And I just want to shout from a roof, it can be done

Jessica: From Glean Education. This is Ed Leaders in Literacy, a podcast series that features educators and administrators who have made hard decisions about instruction, curriculum, intervention, and school to close the achievement gap and build equity by improving literacy. I'm Jessica Hammond, founder of Glean Education. And on the show today, Dr. Jack Silva, he's the assistant superintendent and chief academic officer for the Bethlehem Area School District. The sixth largest in Pennsylvania. He's been a director of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, a principal, and a teacher. His educational career got started as a high school social studies teacher at the Central Bucks School District. Jack, welcome today.

Jack Silva: Thank you for having me, Jessica.

Jessica: Take us back to what that first teaching experience was like.

Jack Silva: I was a social studies teachers, stepped into teaching American history, and I tried to emphasize at the time, a lot of skill development on the part of students and having them more engaged in their education rather than just static delivery of content. So I was always interested in having active learners who had the skills to really do things in the content area.

Jessica: And did you feel prepared to step into that classroom?



Jack Silva: I was prepared in the sense of having a good background in content knowledge in social studies. I had a good background in pedagogy, classroom management, instructional techniques. Where I probably didn't have as much would be in the area of student services, child psychology, or in the sense of academics. It's probably not a whole lot of training on how students learn how to read, especially in the early years, but also in later years in the content areas. But overall knowing that you can't know everything before you go into the classroom, I think I had a pretty typical, pretty strong preparation to be a teacher.

Jessica: And how about as you moved into administration, into principalship and then curriculum, and instruction, and assessment, how did that progression happen?

Jack Silva: One of the nice things about my time in the classroom was that I got to teach two different levels and a lot of different courses. And I was able to team teach with both teachers on middle school teams from all the core areas, and then when I was a high school teacher, I team taught a social studies english course. So I was always in other teacher's classrooms. I was always collaborating with teachers and as such, I think I had a good exposure to the wide range of practice. A lot of the peers I worked with were very creative and very student centered. That gave me a perspective that then I had at one time a principal who used me as an instructional coach. So I was able to do that, especially working with new teachers, sometimes struggling teachers.



Jack Silva: My default position is always towards instruction is the most important variable in the classroom. So I'm glad that I had a pretty long career. If you include my very first job to the time that I took my first administrative job, I was in the classroom for 13 years, and those were very rich instructional years in terms of levels, subject areas, collaboration, and changes in pedagogy that were going on in the eighties and nineties.

Jessica: I First heard about your work through a podcast by Emily Sanford, entitled Why Millions of Kids Can't Read and What Better Teaching Can Do About It. It seems like you, now in your position as assistant superintendent and chief academic officer, have done a lot of work in the area of literacy in your district. Can you tell me a bit about how that started? What spawned your interest in supporting this change and where it's gone so far?

Jack Silva: Yeah, the interest started when looking at our reading achievement levels of our students and noticing that almost six out of 10 of our students were proficient on the state reading assessment. That means over, over 40% of our students were leaving third grade with less than proficient reading skills. And with the knowledge that that third grade reading indicator is a very strong correlation, not only of subsequent school success, but in many cases life success. We just couldn't go on that way. In the end, letting more than 40% of your kids move forward, knowing that the most important foundational skill was not secure was just something we just had to stop. Being the assistant superintendent and the chief academic officer, the



responsibility lies with me. So I remember talking with our superintendent and our school board saying, look, this is something that we need to address. Then we assembled our principles together and said, this is the challenge for us, and for us to really move this indicator, we're going to have to approach things differently than we have in the past.

Jack Silva:

Knowing from my instructional background, that the primary challenge was going to be instructional. And some of the mindsets that went along with that, we knew that it was going to be multiyear, multifaceted, long term, a pretty steep climb, but it was something that we had to do. I guess then the issue became what to do. And, you know, when in doubt, look at evidence based practices, not just in student services, but also in instruction, and question yourself of whether we're doing the very best approaches that we can. And it was pretty clear in the past that our students from the data that we were collecting had large gaps in key foundational skills of reading, and that our curriculum was more of a balanced literacy approach, fragmented.

Jack Silva:

Our assessments were not necessarily in line with what we were looking for. And most importantly, the capacity of our instructional leaders and our teachers was in a mindset that a significant number of students probably wouldn't be able to be successful. But when we looked at the evidence that with the right kind of instruction and the right kind of supports, both to the teachers and students, that 90, 95% of the students can and should be able to read, if we just focused our energy. We had some challenges organizationally to get ourselves in a position to be able to respond to that. We had challenges to go to scale with a thousand



students per grade, and about 50 to 70 teachers per grade. So this was going to be a biggie.

Jessica: Can you tell me a little bit more about those school system challenges and implementation challenges?

Jack Silva: This period of time corresponded, this was five years ago, with our district coming out of the recession years and the challenges of our budget. So it was a didn't like we had a deep bench of coaches or supervisors or people who were ready to increase our instructional leadership within the organization. We basically had an educational program's office, a pupil services office, and some supervisors, but we didn't have that core of instructional leaders, and we relied upon our principles, which is a blessing. I mean, we were able to add some additional central administration, supervisors of literacy, supervisor of early learning, but that was going to be a part of approach that included first and foremost, bringing our principles up to speed on the science of reading, the change process, implementing change, and eventually just being strong instructional leaders so that they could both encourage and supervise their teachers.

Jack Silva: So we spent a full year training principals in the science of reading. There were 28 days during the school year where principals came down to the education center and we hired consultants who did the letter's training, the science of reading training for our principals, and really made them experts, instructional experts before we ever started talking about reading with the teachers. Simultaneously, that was the same year that we moved to full day kindergarten.



Believe it or not, Pennsylvania didn't require full day kindergarten and any school districts in our area were half day. So we had some full day programs, mostly for kids at risk, but in that year that we trained the principals in the science of reading, we also went to full day kindergarten. So that was going to be helpful with some outcomes just because students were going to have more time on task, but we were at the same time hiring some central administration.

Jack Silva:

So Mrs. Kim Harper came on as our K to 12 literacy supervisor. And she would be the chief lieutenant in the work going forward. We brought in Dr. Frankel, one of our experienced elementary principals and gave her the new position of supervisor of early learning. So that we were going to focus on the students coming in at grade level and strengthening our relationships with our childcare and pre-K programs, because we know the stronger they come in, the more success we can have with them. So that was sort of like the ready set year and really changing the mindset of the principals, building a common approach. We called at BASD, which stands for Bethlehem Area School District RBG3, reading by third grade. We were not only just building the science of reading among our leaders, we were building sort of a common cause. And when you have 16 elementary principals, they become their own best cohort in supporting each other, some cases challenging each other, making sure that when we were going to go with a formal implementation, that we would do it with a high degree of fidelity,

Jessica:

You started with building administrator knowledge, which is so wise because the administrators really need the knowledge in order to have the oversight to support the educators.



Jack Silva: Yeah, well, the assistant superintendent needs to have the knowledge too. And I was aware of the reading wars and a lot of the back and forth between balance literacy, and explicit instruction and all that. But I really didn't know what it meant as far as managing the curriculum, monitoring the instruction, best assessment practices. We really needed to do that in terms of more explicit instruction, more evidence based instruction. So yeah, you start with the people who have the responsibility for the results. So it sort of started with me, but then building principles in Bethlehem are highly dedicated and highly skilled, and they want to own their results and they want those results to be, to be good results. So...

Jessica: And so when you started building this teacher knowledge, this administrator knowledge, were you starting to see elements of the curriculum that either worked and aligned with these practices or perhaps didn't, and was there conflict there?

Jack Silva: Yeah, we had an old curriculum that had basically fallen into disrepair. We didn't really have a reading program that had the philosophy that we thought was going to be successful. And even if we did, we didn't have the consistency of implementation, fidelity to the material. So we knew that we were going to have to invest in a new curriculum, but I was unwilling to do that until we had the knowledge behind it, because you know, the old curriculum had a lot of the features of the science of reading in it. But if you're not familiar with that science, you tend to not to use those parts, you





use the part that's only comfortable. And I think that's pretty common in schools, but once we, you know, we boned up on the science of reading, we knew that we had to start with that with the teachers, and then we can start talk about materials, because then the materials could be implemented faithfully, but also meaningfully because the teachers were aware of the science that went to the development of those materials.

Jack Silva:

So in the next year, following the training of the principles, we were going to do one grade level at a time. Many instructional initiatives have gone down the drain because they took on too much, too soon without the degree of intensity and supervision. So I remember speaking to the kindergarten teachers on the first day of school and I went over everything that I'd just been telling you, that our existing levels of achievement weren't satisfactory, that we were setting a goal of 90% of all students reading at grade level by the end of third grade, within four or five years. And that the process would start at kindergarten and that we had to get them off to a very good start.

Jack Silva:

And I remember there was some anxiousness, some anxiety, but then I said, but you know, the supports are going to be there. We're going to follow a high expectations, high supports environment, and that's going to mean a lot of training in the science of reading, a lot of training in new materials, assessment skill, support on assessment, an up to date data system, so that it's easy for teachers to use data. Forms of inservice and coaching, so that what they learned in the science of reading training, they would be able to practice every eight to 12 days in the class room with instructional coaches



so that we could keep the strategies and the bloodstream throughout the whole year, not just on the training day.

Jack Silva:

But you know, the principals not only sat through letters' training by themselves in the first year, but in year two, they were with their kindergarten teachers learning letters' again. Not just reinforcing it with the principals, but also having those courageous conversations in the training with the kindergarten teachers who some of them, the other mindset might be that students weren't developmentally ready to do this by December, where the evidence and the curriculum and science showed, no, we really should be able to get them there.

Jack Silva:

So there's a real power of principles and teachers learning together so that the cracks and the gaps in understanding, or belief, or mindset can be discussed and crossed and then addressed in the classroom. So the kindergarten teachers were amazing. We adopted the philosophy that there is no failure except failing to try. So in doing the training, and doing the coaching, and implementing the science, there were times where we asked them to take risks and do things. And the coaches were always there and we didn't make it about evaluation, we made about developing professional competency. And that sort of hearkens back to my old instructional coaching days, which was sort of a principle that we always used to be able to make teachers comfortable enough to adjust mindsets and try new strategy.



Jack Silva:

The kindergarten teachers got it rolling. And by mid-year our benchmark assessments were showing us that the students were growing faster than they had been in previous years. And then by the end of the year, that year 88% of our kindergarten students were at benchmark at the end of kindergarten, which was like, we had never been anywhere near that before. And the confidence that the kindergarten teachers had, especially when they noticed that the results in the schools really didn't correlate to socioeconomic levels. So we had schools that had high degrees of poverty that were outperforming schools with very low degrees of poverty, with the variable being, not economic circumstances of the students, but the instruction of the teachers. So when we did that, we knew we had both an instructional gain, but we also had a gain in equity.

Jack Silva:

And I'm a believer that the most powerful tool can do to empower students and move towards greater equity, both in your school and your community, is giving students the ability to read at grade level. So we really felt that, and we celebrated that, and that gave us a lot of momentum to go in and then do the training of grade one the next year. In addition to training grade one the next year after that, we also then knowing that we had some science of reading background, we bought new curriculum. We used the Wonder's Curriculum, the one that is not the balanced literacy version, but the more explicit instruction version of it. And we got the materials for special education. We got the materials for English language learners. You know, we made sure that everybody had what they needed, and we continued the coaching.



Jack Silva: And Mrs. Harper worked with the scope and sequence. And again, the principals went through letters' training with their first grade teachers. We did common walkthroughs of classrooms because you know, any good instructional coach will tell you that walkthroughs are very important, not just for classroom management and strong routines, which are very important, but also the gradual release model of instruction, the small group strategies, the things that we were really emphasizing in the training were happening regularly and effectively in the classroom. So the new materials, it was just another hill to climb. And in that year we found success again with our kindergarten and our first graders.

Jack Silva: So we intensified our work with our pre-K program, and our childcare program, and our after school program, so that we were making sure that all of our support services were in the same reading by third grade orbit. At the same time, we were also making investments in our data systems so that it became less onerous for principals and teachers to use data, to inform real time instruction. And then we began the training of second grade teachers. And then now when we're in the process of training third grade teachers.

Jessica: So it seems like it's been a multi-year process, which I think is really important for other people trying to make this type of progress to understand. This is hard work that takes a real long view. You're breaking down assumptions that may relate to teachers' preconceived notions, or unintentional biases of certain students as they come in and what they can or can't do. And you are taking on new materials, new curriculums, asking teachers to change their practice. This type of hard work does not happen overnight. And



the progress you guys have seen does not happen in a flash either. Can you just tell me how you got around that mindset? Because I think that's a very difficult mindset to go into. Everyone wants progress immediately for the children present there right now.

Jack Silva:

Yeah. We didn't sugarcoat what the level of effort was going to be. So what you're saying Jessica's correct. I mean it could go off the rails at any one of many points. So if our school board wasn't providing the resources, that could take us off the rails. So we gave them constant updates of what we were doing and they became very strong supporters, and our school board has been nothing but totally constructive and us in supporting RBG3. So we had to fortify the governance piece, the central office, the superintendent, Dr. Joseph Roy, and myself. We have to make sure that we both think that this is the most important thing in the school district and we're adjusting our messaging, and our approach, and our evaluation of principles to make this the goal. So we had to keep that on track. Then we had to make sure that the professional development was real professional development.

Jack Silva:

You know, the kind that you read about in books that tell you what real effective professional development is and isn't well, you have had to make the commitment to what it was. So if you didn't have job embedded coaching, and real evidence based instruction of teachers, that's where it could go off the rails. If you didn't change the schedule, we changed the schedule to make sure we have 140 minutes of reading for K to three in every elementary school. Well, if you don't have enough time, or if you don't protect the time, it could go off the rails there. If you don't have a good, strong and



explicit scope and sequence to new materials that align, it could go off the rails there.

Jessica: So understanding all the cogs in the wheel is critical for entering this type of work.

Jack Silva: And frankly, that's why the most districts throw in the towel. Because it's those type of things create a universe or a new ecosystem for literacy development. You just, it isn't just a professional development challenge, although it is. It isn't just a curriculum challenge, although it is. It's not just a leadership challenge, although it is. And you had to make sure that you were developing all of those relative to each other in the best way that you could. Now, I don't want to say Jessica, we had everything figured out in advance before we marched out and kept marching. We were making adjustments as we went along and everyone knows it. It hasn't always been a smooth road, but we were able to keep the momentum going so that we didn't have it go off the rails and that teachers could reconcile their own professional growth, their improvement, and their own satisfaction as being successful teachers to the progress and the goals that the district set for the students.

Jack Silva: And when those things started coming together, we had some teachers who frankly, may have been, you know, a little on the doubtful side at the beginning, become some of our strongest teachers and advocates when they saw the results of their students. So it's a constant shaping and reshaping, and keeping and



monitoring, and keeping in front of us. You have to have a degree of humility about this. We can't to be drinking our own Kool-Aid just because we were successful at the start. You know, I always remind folks a home run in the first inning doesn't win the ball game. And it just gets more challenging year after year as those gaps become either bigger or more solidified as students are moving towards the ability to read.

Jessica: And so where is your progress now? Where does it stand with respect to your goal for the district?

Jack Silva: Yeah. This year, we're looking for this coming school year for 90% of our grade two students to be at benchmark at the end of the year, because those second graders have had the deluxe of our program. They've had teachers with the training. They've had teachers with the coaching, they've had the full curriculum materials. They've had the new assessment materials, they've had the technology. So I never thought it was fair to demand results when the contributing pieces of those results weren't in place yet for the students and the teachers. So for all those pieces to come together, it means that that cohort of students who is now in second grade is the cohort we have.

Jack Silva: When our current second graders finish third grade, next year, they will have had the very best we could give them. And hopefully they'll be at the level where science and evidence based practices show where they could be, because Bethlehem kids are no different than any other kids. They can and they should be able to learn. And



our teachers are excellent teachers. Ultimately it comes down to, are we organizationally ready to do what we need to do to good quality instruction so that students can be successful. And can we support teachers through that high expectation, high support environment?

Jessica: I Really commend your hard work, your vision and what you're seeing through for your district.

Jack Silva: Well, thank you for the kind words and the encouragement and we hope that we can hear good news.

Jessica: All right. Sounds great. Thanks for chatting with us today.

Jack Silva: Thank you very much.

Jessica: Did you like hearing from Dr. Jack Silva about his work at Bethlehem Area School District in Pennsylvania? Learn more about the district and their continued progress by visiting [beth.k12.pa.us](http://beth.k12.pa.us) or by following Dr. Jack Silva on Twitter @basdjacksilva. Thank you for listening to our Ed Leaders in Literacy podcast. To find links to the articles and resources mentioned in this podcast, go to [gleaneducation.com/edleaderspodcast](http://gleaneducation.com/edleaderspodcast) and access them in the show notes. Bye for now.

