



RUTGERS–NEW BRUNSWICK
Graduate School of Education



Rutgers Center for Literacy Development

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Letter from the Director

September seems to come earlier every year. However, it suggests a fresh start, a new beginning, great expectations, and some anxiety. Our students experience many of the same thoughts and feelings as they think about new markers, notebooks, friends, and backpacks.

The Center for Literacy Development has many exciting events planned for the coming school year. On October 23, Tim Shanahan will speak about Improving Comprehension with Difficult Text. On December 11, Jennifer Serravallo and Leah Steiner will speak about Writing Instruction in Small Groups. In February, Megan Hargrave will address AI to improve reading instruction, and in March, Doug Fisher will speak about Foundational Skills for Children from Grade 4 through High School. For the first time, in January, we will host a conference for PreK. New Jersey is hoping for universal Pre-K throughout the state.

As in the past, we will be doing workshops, coaching in classrooms, and partnering with school districts to create strong reading programs. We will continue with the Literacy Leaders Institute, organized by Center coaches Alicia Drozd and Erin McBride. Several Rutgers Reading Clubs will continue from last school year, and new schools will be starting clubs. Students not only improve their reading, but we also hope to motivate them to want to read and build their self-esteem. Since we represent a university, children receive Rutgers certificates for participation, some Rutgers swag, and encouragement about how they can attend Rutgers as they improve their reading and writing skills.

Fall 2025

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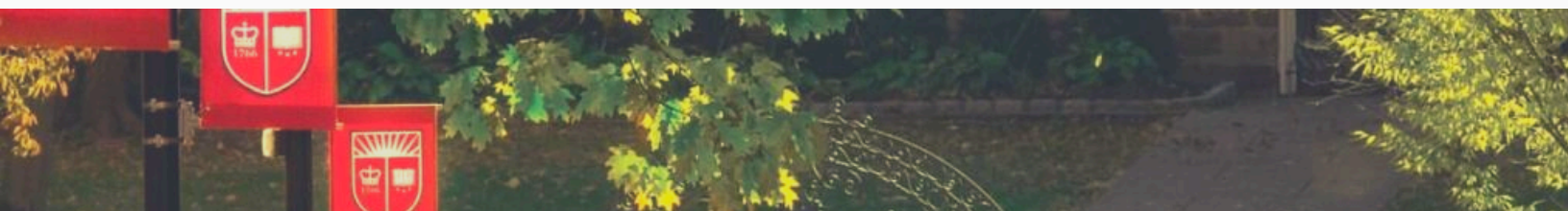
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We had a successful mini-course for MLLs taught by Dr. Rachael Lella about sheltered literacy instruction. We plan to run the same course during the year. Look for announcements.

We also have a new bilingual Family Literacy/Health program that began this summer. The project comes from a research study initiated by Dr. Manuel Jimenez, a pediatric researcher and professor at Rutgers and the Graduate School of Education. The program has one to four sessions, both in person and online. Topics include bedtime routines, nutrition, exercise, and social and emotional well-being. Each session provides the child and family with a storybook that matches the theme. The book sparks discussion, songs, letter and sound activities, and parent-child interaction. We are very excited about bringing this bilingual family program into more schools this year for PreK and Kindergarten families.

In this newsletter, teachers have written suggestions to start a new school year. The ideas are creative and should energize your students. During the year, think about how to engage your children with activities that are relevant to their lives. Bring joy to all content areas with music, dance, cooking, and virtual trips. Every day of the year is a special day. For example, in September, there are the following special days to celebrate: the First Day of Fall, Good Neighbor Day, International Talk Like a Pirate Day, and National Guide Dog Day. Make these special by reading appropriate books, inviting visitors, drawing pictures, and reciting poems.

The Poetry Friday Anthology for Celebrations by Sylvia Vardell and Janet Wong provides a poem for every month and every day. I love January. In this month, the following is celebrated: National Soup Month, National Bird Day, National Pizza Week, National Hat Day, the 100th Day of School, National Popcorn Day, National Compliment Day, and National Puzzle Day. Use your imagination to make these days in January—when it is cold, dark, and gloomy—special.

Being in the field of education is always special when the new school year begins. Like you, I still get excited, hopeful, and energized for a fresh start with great expectations.

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Leave August and Welcome September

Joanne L. Emery:
Supervisor of Literacy in Kent Place School



Begin the first school day with a poem called Leave August, Welcome September. Share what you wrote and ask the students to write what they leave behind in August and what they welcome in September. Here is my **Leave and Welcome** poem:

I leave sleeping late, summer sun streaming through the windows.

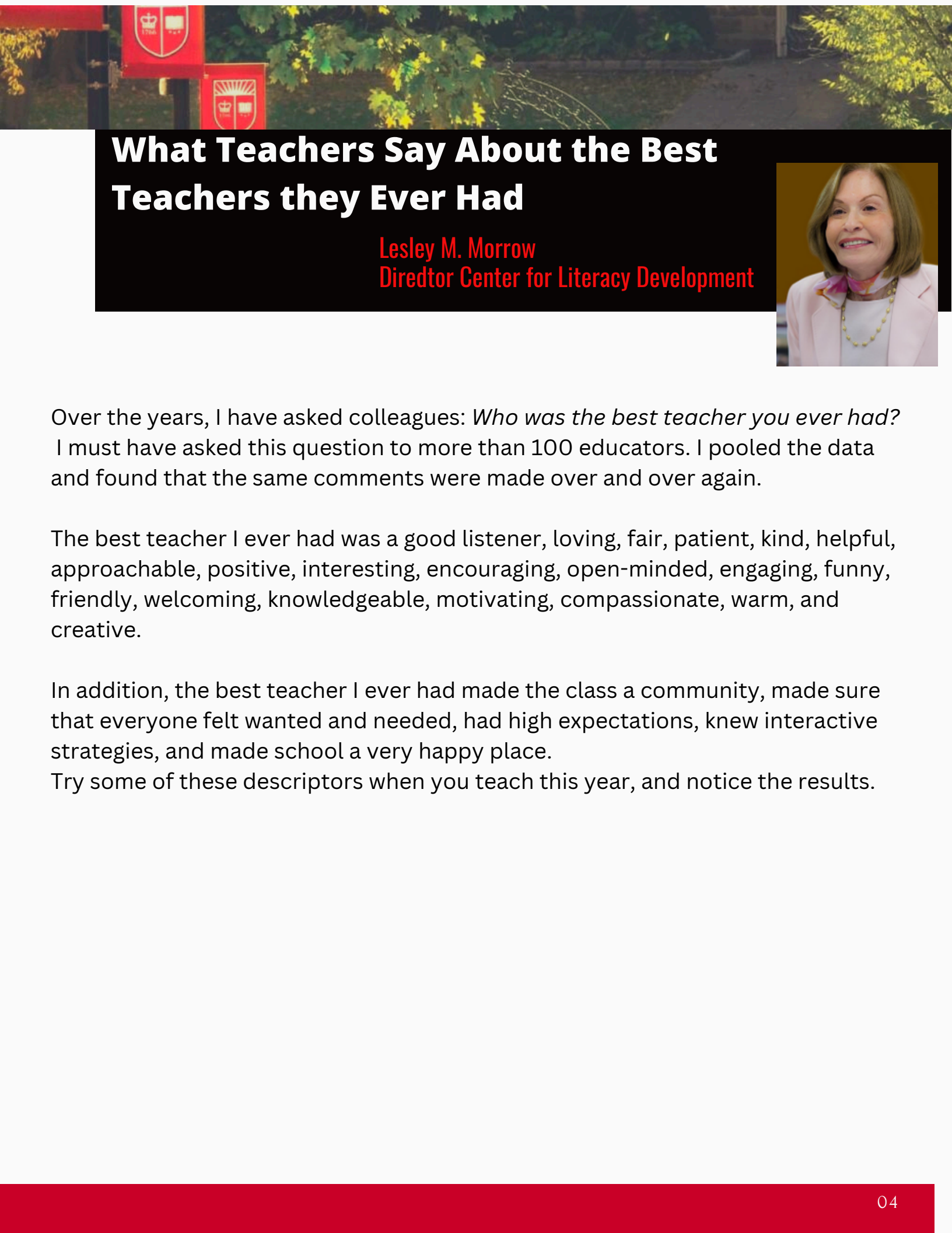
I welcome cooler days, my drive to school, new young faces ready to learn.

I leave books I read of my own choosing—romantic, mysterious, inspiring, or hilarious.

I welcome camaraderie, new ideas, and moments of laughter with colleagues.

I leave family trips, with new sights of the sea and the mountains.

I welcome new books, crisp pages, fresh paint on old walls, and once again,
a new school year.

The background of the top section is a photograph of a paved path leading through a wooded area. On the left side of the path, there are several red signs or markers, some of which feature a crest or logo. The trees have green and yellowing leaves, suggesting an autumn setting.

What Teachers Say About the Best Teachers they Ever Had

Lesley M. Morrow
Director Center for Literacy Development



Over the years, I have asked colleagues: *Who was the best teacher you ever had?* I must have asked this question to more than 100 educators. I pooled the data and found that the same comments were made over and over again.

The best teacher I ever had was a good listener, loving, fair, patient, kind, helpful, approachable, positive, interesting, encouraging, open-minded, engaging, funny, friendly, welcoming, knowledgeable, motivating, compassionate, warm, and creative.

In addition, the best teacher I ever had made the class a community, made sure that everyone felt wanted and needed, had high expectations, knew interactive strategies, and made school a very happy place.

Try some of these descriptors when you teach this year, and notice the results.



From the First Day to the Last: Using Student Letters to Capture Growth

Amanda Thiede
Hoboken Charter School
K-8 Humanities Special Educator



The first day of school is always a measurement of growth. It calls for new shoes, bigger clothes, and a chance for reinvention. Caregivers clamor for first-day-of-school photos marking both the passage of time and forthcoming maturation. As teachers, we can capitalize on the first days to measure present levels of literacy while also honoring students' potential for growth by asking them to write a letter to themselves on the last day of school. Regardless of grade level, when students write for themselves, it is low stakes in that they are their own audience. By imagining their June selves, students can reflect on who they are in the present, their current goals and dilemmas, while acknowledging the temporary nature of their challenges.

Writing to themselves encourages metacognitive planning, prompting students to ask questions like, "What do I want to have achieved by the end of this school year?" and "What will I want to remember about myself at this moment?" Teachers can use these writing samples as pre-assessments that can help drive instruction and be added to student growth portfolios. Ultimately, when students write their future selves a letter, they are creating a time capsule that can be enjoyed after 180 school days of instruction. When they revisit these letters, both students and teachers can marvel at their accomplishments, building confidence to draw upon for school years in the future.



Kickstart Your Year by Building Positive Rapport and Student Connections for Student Progress

Dr. Diane Appleby
Center for Literacy Development



The start of the new 2025-2026 school year marks a time when teachers come together to develop engaging, effective learning experiences that set their students up for success. In doing so, they conscientiously consider their students' unique personality and learning differences to create an inclusive and supportive classroom environment. One of the most important cornerstones to achieving these goals is building positive student connections and rapport from the beginning of the year. Building a healthy rapport with students is crucial for their academic progress and overall well-being. Effective student-teacher relationships are not defined by personal preferences but grounded by the ability to create a connection founded on a deep sense of trust, mutual respect, and a genuine caring for all learners. According to Dr. James P. Comer, "No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship, also supported by Dr. Rita Pierson through her highly recognized and motivational TED Talk. "Every Kid Needs a Champion" (<https://youtu.be/SFnMTHhKdkw?si=6tZ3C8C-Ran86F5S>).

One of the most effective ways to build rapport with students is through open-ended questions. They are powerful tools as they establish meaningful conversations which enable the teacher to learn about their students' thoughts, feelings, interests and sometimes difficulties, promoting a culture of trust. Also, effective is when teachers share some of their own personal experiences with their students. <https://www.edutopia.org/article/6-ways-build-rapport-students/> Students build comfort with teachers who are consistent in expectations, kind, show an interest in their hobbies and provide encouragement and praise for their efforts.

...continued

Kickstart Your Year by Building Positive Rapport and Student Connections for Student Progress

Dr. Diane Appleby

Here are some easy to implement strategies and activities that include:

<https://www.edutopia.org/article/23-ways-to-build-and-sustain-relationships/>

- **Morning Meetings**-time to set the tone for the day with prosocial greetings, reflections and sharing, easy stretching and deep breathing, goals for the week and any celebrations are shared.
- **All About Me Activities** (teacher included)-create a class mural, posters, dioramas, 10 facts about me game where students find out about their classmates and even a video recording with each students sharing some facts about themselves.
- **Friendly Fridays**- (or any day of the week) one student is selected each week to pull the name of one of their classmates out of a jar and then all students share a positive comment about this student in a circle.
- **Gratitude Walls**-dedicate an area on the wall where students can post pictures of themselves during notable events and write about why they are grateful. They can include pictures of people they are grateful for and why.
- **Identity Portraits** (found on the web) After drawing a line down the middle of a paper outline of a student's head, each person uses colored pencils or crayons to add skin tones and clothing on one half and on the other side adding pictures or words describing themselves, such as their ethnic backgrounds, hobbies, interests and traditions.
- **Greet each student at the door each morning**
- **Assign seats but change them often**-promotes student connections and fosters relationships
- **Two-Minute Talks**-ask students to write questions that they would like to discuss with others in small groups and/or you write the questions and lead the group for younger students



Speaker Series 25-26



Oct 23, 2025

Timothy Shanahan

**Enhancing Comprehension and
Fluency When Teaching Reading
with Complex Text -All Grade Levels**



Dec 11, 2025

**Jennifer Serravallo
and Leah Steiner**

**Teaching Writing in Small
Groups in K-8 Classrooms**



Jan 14, 2026

**Keynotes: Muriel Rand
and Lesley Morrow**
**Engaging Pre-K Children
in Joyful Active
Experiences, Using
Evidenced Based Literacy
Strategies**



Feb 12, 2026

Meghan M. Hargrave

**Navigating Literacy
instruction in the Era of
Artificial Intelligence
(AI) (K-12)**



April 16, 2026

Douglas Fisher
**Teaching Foundational
Skills in Grades 4 - 12:
Word Recognition,
Vocabulary, Fluency, and
Comprehension.**

[Click here to register https://cvent.me/PAkR8D!](https://cvent.me/PAkR8D!)



Pre-K Today Conference

Wednesday

January 14, 2026

Busch Student Center

Rutgers University

9:30am - 3:00pm



Keynotes:

**Muriel Rand, Ed.D. and
Lesley Mandel Morrow, Ph.D.**

**Engaging Pre-K Children in Joyful Active
Experiences, Using Evidenced Based Literacy
Strategies**



Workshop Topics Include :

Rachel Lella

Creating a Literacy Rich Pre-K Classroom

**Alexandra Figueras-
Daniel**

**Centering Multilingual Learners in Evidence Based
Approaches for Developing Oral Language**

Erin McBride

**Developing Phonemic Awareness, Sight Words
and additional Pre-K Foundational Skills**

Diane Appleby

**Using Informational Texts to Enhance Language, and
Build Knowledge**

Alicia Drozd

**Building Early Writers: Interactive Writing in the
Preschool Classroom**

Visit us at: <http://rutgersliteracycenter.org/>



READING CLUB

For Struggling Readers

WHAT IS THE RUTGERS READING CLUB?

The Rutgers Reading Club is an After School Intervention for struggling readers that takes place in your school.

- Evidence Based Small Group after school instruction twice a week for 12 weeks
- Professional Development provided for Club teachers
- Progress monitoring with collection of assessment data at the beginning and culmination of the program
- Data based instruction
- Participants and their families are invited to a celebration with a Rutgers certificate at the culmination



THE IMPACT

Children in the program demonstrated gains towards meeting the NJ state standards that applied to them, after the 12 weeks.



SUPPORT

An expert coach from our team partners with you and your school for the duration of the program to ensure quality implementation.



BEYOND LITERACY

Teachers also report an increase in motivation, engagement and overall confidence of the children in the program.



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rutgersliteracycenter.org



START STRONG: FAMILY LITERACY AND GOOD HEALTH PROGRAM FOR PRE-K AND KINDERGARTEN



Research-Based & Expert-Led

A grant-funded program combining early literacy and pediatric health for families to build literacy skills such as phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, listening comprehension and fluency.



Interactive Family Evening

One in person session to introduce the family and children to school routines as well as learning self regulation. With the use of themes we engage the family in some art, music, and guided dramatic play to illustrate how they build vocabulary and knowledge. The themes we will use deal with exercise, nutrition, bedtime routines and social and emotional well being.



Extended Support with Virtual Sessions

Four follow-up online sessions continue the learning with literacy skills, and discussions about good health habits. Promoting discussion and interaction of parents and children will be emphasized. At each session a the family receives a picture story book about the theme and activity pages to continue the learning. The program is bilingual in English and Spanish or English only.

About Us

Dr. Manuel Jimenez MD, MS Principal Investigator of the Research, is an Associate Professor of Family Medicine and Community Health, at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School and Children's Specialized Hospital.

Dr. Lesley Mandel Morrow, Ph.D. is a Distinguished Professor and coordinator of the Graduate Literacy Programs at Rutgers Graduate School of Education and the Director of the Center for Literacy Development. She has worked on the design the program.



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RUTGERS-NEW BRUNSWICK

Center for Literacy Development

Graduate School of Education

PROVIDING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: WORKSHOPS, LITERACY COACHING, & CURRICULUM DESIGN

Our Coaching and Professional Development Supports Schools with:

- Assessment
- Multiple forms of small group instruction
- Close Reading
- Comprehension
- Culturally Responsive Instruction
- Differentiated Instruction
- Digital Literacies
- Dyslexia
- Motivation
- Phonics
- English Language Learners
- Program Evaluation/Organization
- Family Literacy
- Fluency
- Foundational Skills
- Project Based Learning
- MTSS
- Data Based Instruction
- Social Emotional Learning
- Vocabulary
- Science of Reading
- Simple view of reading
- Active View of Reading



A comprehensive study found that using literacy coaches can help increase students' reading skills by as much as 32 percent.

(Biancarosa, Bryk, & Dexter, 2010)

Rutgers coaches guided us through the new NJSLS standards, helped calibrate writing rubrics, and strengthened our vocabulary instruction—transforming how we teach literacy.

Betsy Smith, Instructional Coach, Holmdel



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