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ITAWAMBA  
COUNTY  
SCHOOL  
DISTRICT  
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# A **STEP** CASE STUDY



# THE FACTS

Itawamba County School District is located in Northeast Mississippi and serves eight schools: Mantachie Elementary, Mantachie High School, Dorsey Attendance Center, Fairview Attendance Center, Itawamba Agricultural High School, Itawamba Attendance Center, Itawamba Career and Technical Center, and Tremont Attendance Center. The student population is approximately 3,500 students, 90% of whom are white, 8% are black, and less than 5% are Hispanic.

The 4-year graduation rate for Itawamba County Schools is 82% which is consistent with the state graduation rate, and the dropout rate is 12.2% which is greater than the state dropout rate of 10.8%. In 2016 Itawamba County Schools was rated a “B” district, and the district is ranked 33rd out of the 143 districts included in the Mississippi Department of Education Accountability Report.



# WHY DID ITAWAMBA IMPLEMENT STEP?



Students were identified as having the ability to achieve more and to be more consistent in their academic performances than they were currently demonstrating before the district chose to partner with STEP. Attention and focus played a key role in academic success, and students were giving up from frustration because they were not successful in the classroom.

The district also learned of the impact eye tracking had on academic success and had already served students who were engaged in therapy to help correct eye movement. Because this type of therapy had been successful but was offered in so few locations, it was time-consuming and financially challenging for families. The district sought after a program that had similar eye tracking benefits but was much more convenient for parents and students and could meet their needs.

# HOW THE DISTRICT SELECTED STUDENTS FOR THE PROGRAM

Itawamba County School District identified students from among their special education population representing various needs. Disability categories, student IQs, academic grades, and STAR Reading benchmark assessment scores were taken into consideration when selecting students for STEP. The first quartile of students (or bottom 25%) of readers, according to STAR Reading benchmark data, was prioritized for participation, as were students struggling with focus and attention challenges and behavioral issues. Age and history of behavioral concerns that were not met by the IEP also played a role in selecting the group of STEP student participants.



# STEP PARTICIPANT PROFILES

89 students participated in STEP during the 2016/17 school year, the first year of implementation at Itawamba County School District. Of the 89 students, 40 attended Itawamba Attendance Center, 25 attended Mantachie Elementary School, 8 at Fairview Attendance Center, 10 at Tremont Attendance Center, and 6 attended Dorsey Attendance Center.

37 students were selected for participation beginning in the Fall of 2016 when the district initially formed a partnership with STEP. Another 52 students were able to begin participation in STEP through a generous grant from the Crane Family Foundation, and these students commenced the STEP program in January of 2017.



# ANALYSIS METHODOLOGY



Of the students who participated in STEP for the full school year, 32 students had baseline data for reading growth from the previous school year. Those students' outcomes during the 2016/17 school year were compared to their previous baseline data from the 2015/16 school year, the year before they participated in STEP. 21 of the students were male, and 11 of the students were female.

Because of the diverse population of student participants across the district, two cohorts of students were analyzed to compare reading outcomes within the subgroups: The first group consisted of students whose reading growth using STAR Reading benchmark testing from the previous year did not meet growth (growth was less than 1 school year). The second cohort ("Struggling Readers") was comprised of those students who showed changes of less than half of one school year's growth during the previous academic year.

## ANALYSIS

### COHORT 1 - STUDENTS NOT MEETING GROWTH

Itawamba County School District recorded each student's reading scores on the Renaissance Learning STAR Reading Assessment and reported the outcomes using benchmark testing at the beginning and end of the school year during which students participated in STEP.

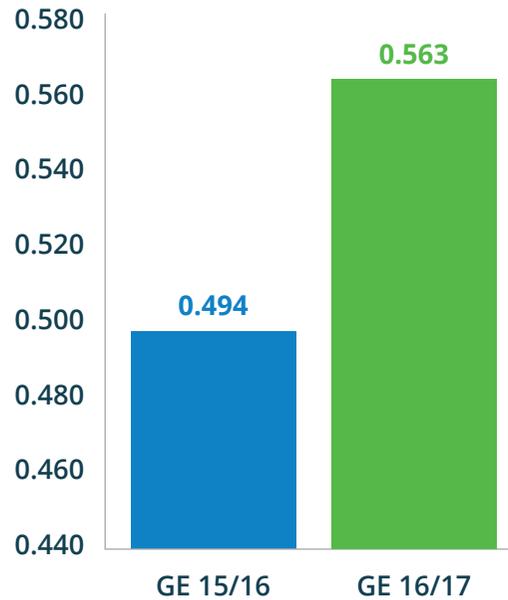
The data from the STAR Reading report was compiled to generate a meaningful average of students' Grade Equivalent (GE) changes from the beginning to the end of the school year. Among the students not meeting growth, during the year before STEP was implemented, the students' GE improvements averaged 0.494 year's growth. The following year- when STEP was implemented for these same students - the GE improvements averaged 0.563 year's growth, representing a 13.9% acceleration of GE growth over the previous year.



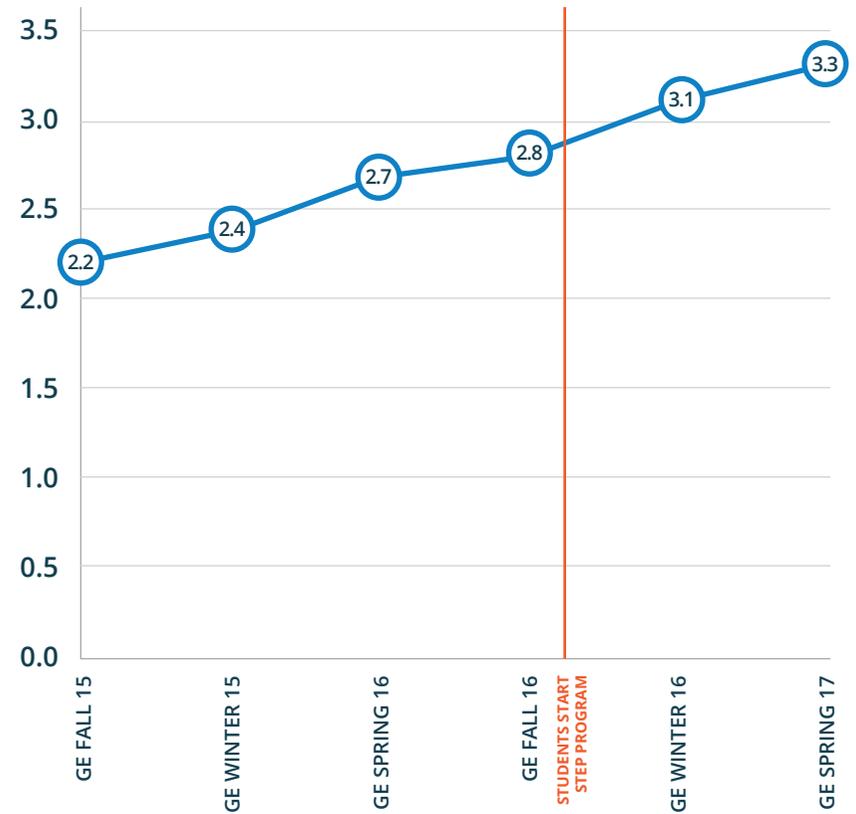
# ANALYSIS

## COHORT 1 - STUDENTS NOT MEETING GROWTH (continued)

Average GE growth changes before and after STEP - readers not meeting growth



GE scores over time - readers not meeting growth





## ANALYSIS



### COHORT 2 - STRUGGLING READERS

A second analysis of more “Struggling Readers” - identified as having annual reading growth of less than .5 years’ growth during the year previous to beginning STEP—was utilized to compare these students to all students not meeting growth.



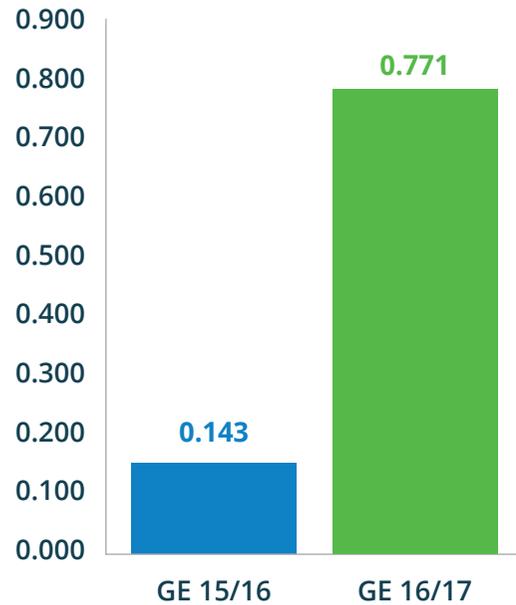
Among this second cohort of struggling readers, during the year before STEP was implemented, the students’ GE improvements averaged 0.143 year’s growth. The following year - when STEP was implemented for these same students - the GE improvements averaged 0.771 year’s growth, representing a 440% acceleration of GE growth over the previous year.



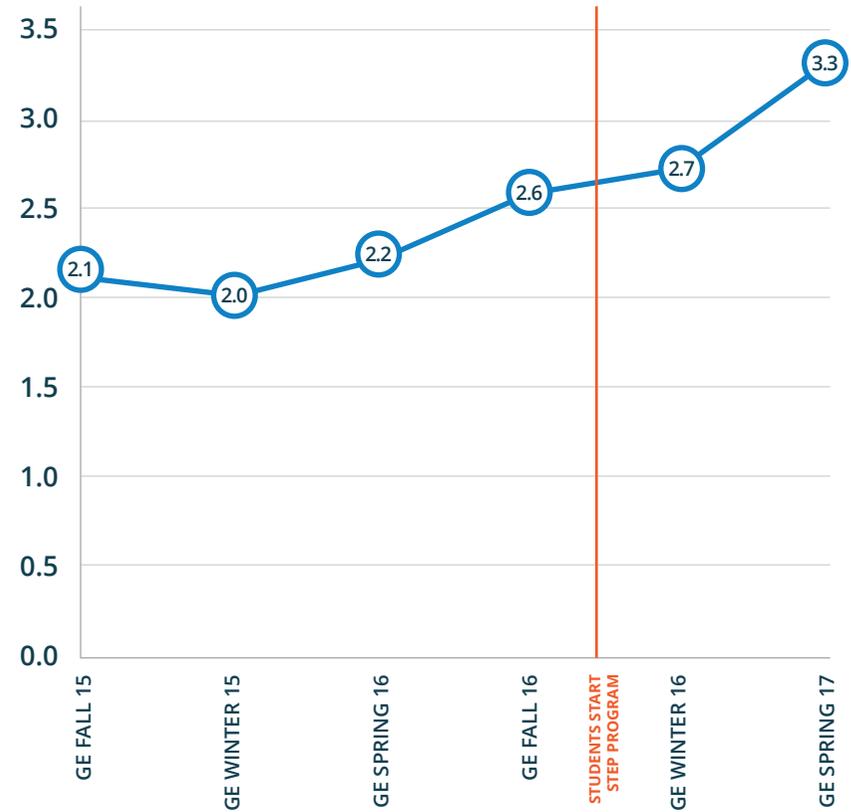
# ANALYSIS

## COHORT 2 - STRUGGLING READERS (continued)

Average GE growth changes before and after STEP - readers not meeting growth



GE scores over time - readers not meeting growth



# STUDENT FEEDBACK



In order to measure the student experience from STEP, an anonymous survey was devised whereby students completed a one page questionnaire structured as follows:

Read the question and select the face that most closely reflects your answer:

**I look forward to my daily STEP sessions.**



Strongly disagree



Disagree



Neutral



Agree



Strongly agree

**STEP has helped me be a better student.**



Strongly disagree



Disagree



Neutral



Agree



Strongly agree

**I hope to participate in STEP next year.**



Strongly disagree



Disagree



Neutral



Agree



Strongly agree

## HOW DID EACH SCHOOL IMPLEMENT STEP?



Throughout the district, Itawamba County special education teachers and teacher assistants were trained and certified as STEP Coaches who were tasked with working directly with student participants for 7-10 minutes, twice daily at school.

STEP Coaches embedded STEP within their daily schedules to coordinate with the times during which they normally pulled students from class, for example, during inclusion time. All sessions took place during the course of the school day but the times were different based on the individual schedules of the teachers and students.

When STEP Coaches pulled students (one or more) from class, they focused on working individually with the STEP students to complete their exercises while the other students who were waiting to participate in STEP completed classwork or intervention assignments.

# WHAT STUDENTS & TEACHERS SAY ABOUT STEP

**I thought it was going to be crazy. Exercises that help you concentrate? I don't know about that. Usually when I take a test, my mind wanders off. Now I can concentrate on my work instead of what everybody else is doing. It's not so scary now. It's helped a lot.**

Ali Holcomb, Student

**The program is activating both main parts of the brain, the cerebrum and cerebellum. The key to improving our student outcomes is addressing the needs of both. Our students are utilizing STEP exercises to achieve this at school each day.**

Julie Watson, Teacher and Certified STEP Coach



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WHAT THE  
DISTRICT  
SAYS ABOUT  
STEP



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**STEP is geared toward eventually retraining the brain. Our overall goal is increased focus and improved learning. We're seeing a lot of changes in student confidence. The students let us know how much better they feel about school. Obviously, the overall goal is to see the participants' test scores increase because of the exercises (which they have), and, as administrators, we believe self-confidence goes hand-in-hand with academic performance.**

LeAnne Robinson, Special Education Director

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**A lot of kids will learn something one day and will not recall it the next. We want them to be working to make repetitive tasks second-nature, like picking up a cup and taking a drink, and the same for classroom activities like reading and writing. We always want to be challenging our students. For a lot of our kids, self-confidence levels are low. STEP has made a difference. We are working to impact the Whole Child, and STEP has helped us to do so more effectively.**

Hope Spencer, Positive Behavior Specialist

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# MEASURING STUDENT FEEDBACK



48 students completed the survey. Student responses to the anonymous questionnaire were aggregated by assigning numeric values corresponding to each answer. -2 corresponded to "Strongly Disagree", -1 to "Disagree", 0 to "Neutral", 1 for "Agree", and 2 for "Strongly Agree".

Averages of all responses from each question were taken, and the results are summarized below:

**I look forward to my daily STEP exercises.**

1.0625 - On average, the result was slightly better than "Agree" across all student respondents.

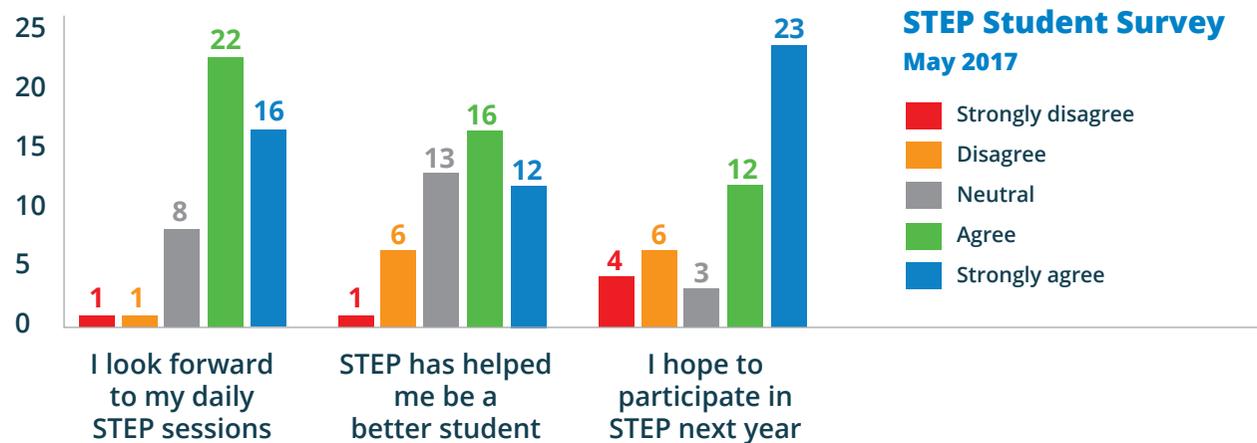
**STEP has helped me be a better student.**

.667 - The responses were better than "Neutral" but just below "Agree".

**I hope to participate in STEP next year.**

.917 - Students responses averaged just slightly below "Agree" but well above "Neutral"

A visual representation can be seen in the following graph:



# KEY LEARNINGS



While STEP may be able to benefit any child, it appears that when struggling students are targeted specifically for participation, these students demonstrate stronger, more positive outcomes than those who are already strong readers.

Districts should take prior reading performance and growth into account when selecting students for participation in STEP. Those students whose reading performance shows less than half of one year's growth should be prioritized over students whose reading growth is nearer to meeting full growth.

However, it does appear that all students showing reading growth below the expectation of one grade level per year may be expected to accelerate reading growth, on average.

The majority and average of students report that they not only enjoy participating in STEP, but they see the value, themselves, in having participated in STEP during the school year - and look forward to continuing!