

A graphic of a spotlight shining from the top left towards the center of the page.

# Alaska School SPOTLIGHT

*Petersburg Elementary School Principal, Heather Conn, shared with DEED about their journey toward reading proficiency at Rae C. Stedman Elementary School.*

**W**ith the passage of the current legislation, the Alaska Reads Act, we started our planning journey right from the start in fall of 2022. This last fall we met as a staff and started to prepare for an MTSS and RTI model that would match what the state had laid out in its proposals. We didn't know where this would end up, but we could at least start planning. Together we started to piece together a plan that would work for our community, our families, and our students. Questions and scenarios swirled through our brains at all hours of the day. What leadership teams do we put in place? When can these teams meet? What does our intervention time look like? Do we invest in interventionists? Who supports our interventionists? How do I give our interventionists time for plans and writing? Which interventions do we use and not use? How can we keep it simple?

In searching for answers, our district was awarded the opportunity to be part of the DEED ELA Core Curriculum Grant and the RTI/MTSS Refresh Grant. These opportunities gave us the money to financially afford to implement a new ELA core curriculum and reading interventions. At this time, we also decided to pilot the new literacy screener from the state, DIBELS 8th Edition. Our hope was to practice and become proficient before the fall of 2023 when the Alaska Reads Act would be implemented.

When the State of Alaska rolled out its first *Keys to Literacy* class I had signed, hoping to get ahead of the Alaska Reads Act implementation. There are a few others in the school who are also working through similar classes offered by the State in our building to obtain their Reads Act certification.

Plans are coming together for next year. Some challenges are sharing staff with the middle and high school and their rotating block schedule. We are working together to make this happen. We are implementing an Eagle Power block into Stedman Elementary. This forty-minute block will be our intervention time for all students. We are under the belief that all students will be given what they need in this enrichment time. We look forward to providing a block of time outside our core time for these interventions to occur. Even though our focus has been on reading, math is still a thought and problem to solve. However, we believe that within time this



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intervention time will work itself out by offering interventions from reading, math, writing, and social emotional support.

Michelle Brock is a 2nd grade teacher at Stedman Elementary. Michelle started within PSD as a pre-school special education teacher. To date, Michelle has taught special education, kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd grade. Michelle has her literacy block well developed. "I truly enjoy my current literacy block and feel it is very effective. It took about six weeks to work with students at the beginning of the year, and students have become very independent and successful in using the established Daily 5 model." With over twenty years of experience Michelle looks forward to adopting a new ELA core curriculum and servicing students for needed interventions outside the literacy block.

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*~Michelle Brock*

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Kerri Curtiss has taught at Stedman Elementary for over ten years. In her time at Stedman she has been a reading interventionist, and has also taught kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd grade. Most recently, Kerri has requested a transfer from 1st grade back to reading interventionist. Kerri spoke in regard to this change. "As Stedman transitions into a new ELA curriculum, tackles the many unknowns of the Reads Act, and creates a three-year school improvement plan, I am excited to narrow my

focus and put all my energy into supporting our team and our READERS." She went on to explain, "I am passionate about the foundations of reading, the science behind how children learn to read, and I enjoy (to a fault) collecting data to make informed and timely decisions on skill deficits and what students need in order to grow their reading skills."

Most recently added to Stedman's K-2 team are Ethan Bryner and Erin Hofacre. Both are fresh out of college and ready to teach in the town where they were born and raised, and to give back. Erin Hofacre has been partnered with Kerri Curtiss in 1st grade and Ethan Bryner has been partnered with Michelle Brock in 2nd grade. These powerful teaching teams are setting plans in motion to meet the initiatives in Alaska.

During the recent 2023 Alaska Science of Reading Symposium, I was asked to be one of "The Symposium Seven: Alaskan Educator TED Talks. Here is what I shared:

### **My Story**

Good afternoon, everyone, and thank you for having me here today to share our story. My name is Heather Conn, and I am the principal of Stedman Elementary School in Petersburg, a small fishing town in Southeast Alaska. My personal story started as a reluctant reader. I am now the principal in my hometown navigating the challenges and opportunities presented by recent legislation, such as the Reads Act.

My family fished year-round. I was my father's crew member on the Frigidland. Spending my summers in Lynn Canal shoveling ice and buying fish from a very young age to the time I graduated. As a migrant student I was given an opportunity to select books for my summer adventure. It would soon be a long and busy three months tendering for Petersburg Fisheries. During my summers on the boat, I was forced to read the books that I had chosen to my brothers who are younger than me. They never listened and reading didn't come easy for them either.

My game changer didn't come until I was 20 years old. Skeleton Canyon was the book that captured my attention. J.A. Jance the author of this book has a few series in which I read every single one. Two of those series being Joanna Brady and J.P. Beaumont. She couldn't write fast enough, I was always eager, and patiently waiting for her to write the sequel.

In 3rd grade I went to a reading room for help and there was this rolling fluency machine where a passage would be placed on the rolling machine. From there, I had to read that passage at the speed dialed in or my hands would get smacked with a ruler. Anxiety is what I felt along with a deep sickness to my stomach. I despised that room, that teacher, and reading. This was my first memory of reading. Despite this experience I wanted to be a teacher.

Today I am the principal of Stedman Elementary, the same school I grew up in where I am surrounded by invested educators. Educators who have the passion to change and make a difference. We have over 80 staff and 440 kids. It is us!

When legislation first passed the Reads Act I was overwhelmed. I had been following this bill for many years with many different names. I knew that the bill would eventually pass, the idea to read by 3rd grade is a great idea.

I am “just” a principal and work alongside “just” teachers. With having only, a superintendent, finance director, special education director, myself, and a MS and HS principal hats are shared. This bill was exhausting to think about. It would create resistance amongst the community and staff with the changes it would bring to our district. We decided to take this as an opportunity. We set our path and decided to enlighten interested parties. We come from a community who I believe supports our schools. Together I believe we could make this happen. Trying to get ahead of this was challenging.

This last fall we met as a staff and started to prepare for an MTSS and RTI model that would match what the state had laid out in its proposals. We didn’t know where this would end up, but we could at least start planning. We started to piece together a plan that would work for our community, our families, and our students. By creating teams, processes, plans, and policies that would support this new legislation we began to develop schedules within our day.

The trick was how to develop a schedule without letting go of all of our current and beloved programs.

Questions and scenarios swirled through our brains at all hours of the day. What leadership teams do we put in place? When can these teams meet? What does our intervention time look like? Do we invest in interventionists? Who supports our interventionists? How do I give our interventionists time for plans and writing? Which interventions do we use and not use? How can we keep it simple?

Searching for answers, our district was awarded the opportunity to be part of the DEED ELA core curriculum grant and the MTSS/RTI Refresh Grant. These opportunities gave us the money to financially afford to implement a new ELA core curriculum and reading interventions. It is also the reason why we are here today.

We decided to pilot the new literacy screener from the state, DIBELS. Our hope was to practice and become proficient before the fall of 2023 when the Alaska Reads Act would be implemented. This has been a lot, but we are making it work with the end goal being what is best for students.

Early on we began organizing small informational gatherings within our community. We invited parents, guardians, and community members to come and learn about the Reads Act in a relaxed and informal setting. We made sure to provide clear and concise information about the purpose, goals, and potential that could be realized despite the challenges. We also partnered with our local radio station and newspaper to share our message.

We know that one of the keys to reducing family anxiety around RTI plans is to familiarize families with the kind of reports they will be seeing in the fall. In August, as a part of our Back to School Night, we will explain how these reports are tools for support and not judgments of students or parents.

We want to be sure to involve parents in the process at the start. We have rearranged our conferences to match up with the beginning of the year benchmark window. This will allow our parents to receive prompt feedback on where their child is at. This also allows us to meet the regulations laid out in the AK reads Act.

All of this is very overwhelming in itself. The question of did we take on too much, is always circulating through my head. To be honest we probably did, but I see what this will do for us come fall of 2023. I hold onto the thought that in 4 Monday's we get a much-needed break.

Our days, evenings, and weekends have been filled with meetings and a lot of hard work, but we have a wonderful team of supportive colleagues by our side. We are in this together, making the necessary changes and putting in the effort to make it work. We believe in ourselves and each other.

Our next step is to get through this year and help others understand what these changes will look like from the perspective of parents and the community. We are confident that with our collective efforts, we can make it work.

Along the way, we are having to set aside some of our long-held beliefs and traditions, but we believe that in the end, we will make a positive difference in the lives of our students. We are determined to see this through, we have what it takes to succeed. Together, we've got this!

There are nine of us here today from Petersburg. Give a wave Petersburg! If you would like to talk, we are more than willing to share our thoughts and experiences with you. One idea might lead to your idea and the next steps for you.

*Thank you!*