



Success for All Foundation

How Steubenville City Schools Became One of the Best Districts in the Country

Outperforming State Averages for 20+ Years

School: Steubenville City School System (6 Elementary and Middle Schools)

Location: Steubenville City, Ohio

School Type: Rural, Title I

Number of Students: 2,850

SFA Implementation Start: 1999

BY THE NUMBERS

Decades of Literacy Excellence



98.5 % of low-income 3rd graders* scored proficient or above on Ohio's ELA assessment (vs. 62% statewide)



100 % of elementary and middle schools far exceeded the state ELA average



25+ years of using SFA, and their schools continue to outperform the state and many schools nationwide

Why is reading growth in 3rd grade so important?

Reading proficiency in elementary school is a critical skill for success in later schooling and life. Research consistently shows that students who are not reading proficiently by the end of 3rd grade are significantly more likely to struggle academically and are at much greater risk of dropping out of high school. **Helping more students reach proficiency by 3rd grade is one of the most reliable predictors of long-term academic success.**

THE CHALLENGE

Confronting Literacy Gaps in a High-Poverty Community

Located in Ohio's Rust Belt, 80% of Steubenville City Schools' students qualify for free or reduced-price meals, and the median household income is just over half the national average.

In 1999, Ohio's fourth-grade reading retention law placed new urgency on districts like Steubenville, where poverty and high student mobility had widened literacy gaps.

The district faced a difficult choice: continue promoting struggling readers or find a way to ensure every child learned to read on time.

"We had to act decisively," recalls former Assistant Superintendent Richard Ranallo in APM Reports' *Sold a Story* (2025).

After evaluating evidence-based programs, Steubenville chose Success for All (SFA), drawn to its schoolwide, research-proven model that had already helped thousands of schools close reading gaps.

THE SOLUTION

Building a Cohesive, Districtwide Literacy System

Rather than piece together separate initiatives, Steubenville adopted Success for All's comprehensive literacy system—a fully developed, evidence-based approach designed to help every child learn to read, write, think critically, and succeed in school.

SFA provided the structure, support, and coherence the district needed to turn strong intent into lasting impact.

Through the partnership, educators across Steubenville's PreK-8 schools:

- Implemented SFA's science of reading-aligned curriculum that integrates cooperative learning and ensures students build comprehension by discussing, reasoning, and problem-solving together.
- Received ongoing professional learning and embedded coaching to strengthen instructional practice and consistency across classrooms.
- Used data-driven regrouping and targeted tutoring to provide immediate, aligned support to students so they could fill critical gaps and achieve mastery.
- Integrated leadership development, family engagement, and social-emotional learning into one cohesive system that connects what's taught, how it's taught, and how learning is supported.

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“When anyone asks why we've had such success, we start with SFA,”
said Melinda Young, Superintendent, Steubenville City Schools.

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THE RESULTS

Outperforming the Odds, Year After Year

Despite many challenges, Steubenville has earned national attention for its extraordinary literacy success, consistently outperforming wealthier districts across the country.

More than two decades later, Steubenville continues to outperform the state and many schools throughout the country, demonstrating that sustainable success is possible in high-poverty communities.

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“Some researchers have called Steubenville the best school district in America,” Sold A Story, APM Reports

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Backed by 35 years of research and an ESSA Tier I “Strong” evidence rating, SFA's results in Steubenville speak for themselves:

- 98.5 % of low-income third-graders scored proficient or above on Ohio's ELA assessment (vs. 62 % statewide)
- Every SFA elementary and middle school far exceeds the state ELA average.
- The schools also saw stronger attendance, higher student engagement, and a schoolwide culture of shared accountability for learning.

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“As a whole-school improvement model, SFA helped us build the structures, consistency, and confidence teachers needed. The results speak for themselves,” said Lynnett Gorman, Principal of Steubenville City School District.

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Today, Steubenville’s success continues to inspire districts nationwide. Their story proves a simple truth: when schools build systems that work for teachers, students, and families, lasting literacy success follows.

You can learn more about Steubenville City Schools and Success for All’s partnership by listening to Emily Hanford’s Sold a Story Podcast on APM Reports, [Episode 11](#) and [Episode 12](#)

BRING SFA TO YOUR SCHOOL

Ready to Build Lasting Literacy Success?

Steubenville’s story demonstrates what’s possible when a district commits to an evidence-based, cohesive literacy system that supports teachers and ensures every child learns to read and achieve at the highest levels.

Ready to transform your school?

Visit www.successforall.org or contact Kenly at knovotny@successforall.org