

# Integrated Letter Sound & Shape Methodology Produces Dramatic District-Wide Literacy Outcomes

Located just 30 minutes from Chicago, Munster has historically been a prosperous residential community with top rated schools. In 2000, 3% of Munster families lived below the poverty line and 92% of the population was white. Today, 64% of the Munster students are white and almost 20% qualify for free/reduced lunch.

## The Sunform™ Alphabet System

Maureen Stafford was principal at Hammond Elementary School for 8 years and then became the district's curriculum director for 10 years. In 2000, several Hammond kindergarten teachers discovered Sunform at a conference. Stafford was willing to pilot the program in kindergarten for a year noting that "with ball and stick, or D'Nealian handwriting instruction, we had experienced a lot of letter reversals and disintegration."

The decision to pilot Sunform was outcome-based. Stafford included all 1st grade teachers in the decision making process. The team's objective was to optimize sound and letter acquisition. Because of Sunform's integrated approach to teaching letter sounds and shapes, Hammond Elementary had to modify its instructional handwriting program (motor skill) plan as well.

*"With other commercial programs, there's no research on the sound acquisition order, or the motor plan. In fact, I was amazed to discover that the sound acquisition support is so weak in the other programs we used, students actually memorized the decodable readers – because they couldn't decode them!"*

Maureen Stafford,  
former Principal,  
Frank Hammond  
Elementary School,  
Town of Munster,  
Munster IN

## Fast Facts

- District: School Town of Munster
- High-achieving suburban district
- Three elementary schools
- Far NW corner of Indiana

## Munster's Sunform Implementation Plan

- Screen all incoming K students
- Supplement regular K curriculum
- 1st grade – review for automaticity
- Screen K-2 students new to district
- Analyze ISTEP data

## Implementation

The following year, based on the pilot outcomes, Hammond and one other Munster elementary school implemented Sunform with all of their incoming kindergarten students. Again the implementation was strategic and Stafford noticed by spring, all of the kindergarten students were beginning to write systematically.

The third elementary building adopted a different program. During the year that school's parents began hearing that their children weren't making as much progress in literacy as the other two schools' students. Stafford noted differences on quantitative reading outcomes between the schools as well. She was also able to relate benchmark assessment data and summer school qualifications to Sunform as well as to the Sunform program fidelity. So Munster standardized on Sunform.

## Intervention

Because the Sunform letter devices can be used as a simple screening assessment of letter sound and shape recognition, Munster used Sunform to screen all incoming kindergarten students during the first two weeks of school. Those who needed additional support received a double dose of Sunform instruction until they caught up. Munster also implemented Sunform as a Title 1 intervention.

## Professional Development

Because Sunform instruction is scripted, the program requires a minimum of training. All K, 1st, 2nd and 3rd grade teachers, Title 1 teachers and assistants, and special education teachers received initial half-day Sunform training. They also received voluntary annual refresher trainings.

## Writing Instruction

Because all students learned their letter sounds and shapes so quickly, the district had to modify its writing plan, Stafford said. "Our teachers introduced cursive writing to our 2nd graders in the spring semester and two notable changes occurred with Sunform. Using ball and stick, students always had to relearn their letter shapes, but they didn't have to with Sunform. In addition, many of our 1st graders just transitioned to cursive on their own!" Stafford also noticed that the students who struggled with writing in 2nd grade tended to be students who didn't start in Munster."

*"With Sunform we literally didn't need pre-primers in 1st grade anymore. The Letter People was taking an entire year to teach, and Sunform took less than a semester. Sunform completely eliminated the time we had previously needed for reinforcement. The students became more strategic and creative with their writing. Many of the 1st graders were writing pages!"*

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## Outcomes

During Indiana ISTEP/Terra Nova testing, districts considered 10% of 3rd graders at Below Basic, a desirable goal and difficult to achieve. Munster's percentage varied from 3% to 5% (the equivalent to a handful of students) and in some years the district actually achieved 0%! ISTEP is now reported in scaled scores. This chart shows Munster's 3rd grade ELA results, showing almost no students in the three lowest proficiency levels:

Writing Application							
Points (1–6)	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
2009	0%	0%	3%	14%	42%	19%	21%
2010	0%	1%	5%	15%	47%	25%	6%
2011	0%	1%	4%	13%	42%	37%	2%
2012	0%	1%	4%	12%	46%	19%	17%

Language Conventions					
Points (1–4)	0	1	2	3	4
2009	0%	0%	3%	17%	78%
2010	0%	1%	4%	25%	69%
2011	0%	1%	5%	19%	75%
2012	0%	1%	3%	17%	79%

## About Sunform

Sunform's unique integrated pictograph mnemonic-based approach to alphabet instruction establishes the foundational letter sound proficiency necessary for the subsequent development of automatic word recognition and word memorization. Daily 10–15 minute lessons enable students to master the 26 beginning letter sound-symbol correspondences to automaticity. Most English speakers will begin blending after just 8–10 weeks of instruction. This approach is consistent with the latest evidence (Roberts, 2021) and produces dramatic literacy gains in Pre-K, K-2 and remedial settings.

## About Ventris Learning

Our linguistically responsive instructional and assessment resources help educators better meet the needs of all students including those who become underserved in literacy.

Roberts, T.A (2021). *Learning Letters: Evidence and Questions From a "Science of Reading" Perspective*. *Read Res Q*, 00(00), 1–22.

