Triple R Teaching

Welcome back to our Change Maker Series. This week we have a conversation with Kristen Wynn, Mississippi's state literacy director. This was such an interesting conversation for me. She taught me so many things about how it works to make change at such a big level. I know you're going to appreciate hearing about Mississippi's law as well as how they implemented it across the state, and how Mississippi made HUGE strides when it comes to helping every child learn to read.

Anna Geiger: Welcome, Kristen!

Kristen Wynn: Thank you, Anna! I'm glad to be here.

Anna Geiger: Kristen is a former first and second grade teacher. She also was a K-5 interventionist, literacy coach and coordinator, and is now the state literacy director for Mississippi. I invited her on the podcast to talk to us about how we can make changes at a local and then state level.

Kristen, could you talk to us a little bit about your history as a teacher and what brought you to the position you're in today?

Kristen Wynn: Absolutely. I started off my teaching career around 2005 as a first grade teacher. I really enjoyed that. I taught first grade for a couple of years, moved to second grade, and then I transferred to another district that was closer to home. When I did that, I still taught first and second grade.

Then I quickly moved into an interventionist position. With that position, I was responsible for working primarily with kindergarten through fifth grade students that struggled with how to read.

I worked with them using a lot of different programs. This particular district that I worked in, we had lots of resources, so I had different things that I could choose from

based on their reading deficits.

Then I transitioned to literacy coach for the state in 2013 under our Literacy-Based Promotion Act, and I worked in a school and we moved that school from an F in our accountability system (it's an A, B, C, D, F system), and we moved that school from a failing school to a B!

I moved to regional coordinator, assistant state coordinator, and then in 2019 I took on the role as State Literacy Director in Mississippi.

I feel like all of those experiences, as a first grade teacher really understanding early literacy, as an interventionist, and then as a literacy coach, has really prepared me for the role that I'm in currently.

Anna Geiger: That is quite a background. It's so interesting.

Before I pressed record, you told me that you were a balanced literacy teacher at one time. Can you talk to us about where the transition came, how it started, and how you became aware of the science of reading?

Kristen Wynn: Absolutely. I confessed that yes, I was at one time a balanced literacy teacher because at that time when I started teaching in our state, and up until 2013 when a lot of things really changed in our state, balanced literacy really saturated our state. I was trained in the cueing system, we had Lucy Calkins writing, we did a lot of that, and we had the leveled text.

But as a teacher, and as an interventionist, I knew something was missing. It's always like this one thing, and you can't put your hand on it, but you knew something was missing.

So I started to just research. One of my colleagues was using another phonics program in her classroom, and so I said, "You know what? I'm going to use that with all of my students." I did that and saw tremendous gains in my classroom.

Then transitioning to an interventionist, I was trained in dyslexic therapy because I had

students with dyslexia that I was responsible for servicing. So I was trained in that, and that method is really explicit. In my mind I'm thinking, "If this is good for our students that really struggle, why can't we use this for all of our students?"

That was my first encounter with not necessarily formally knowing there was a name for the research, that the research was aligned to the science of reading, but that was my first encounter with understanding structured literacy, which is the application of the science.

Anna Geiger: Sure.

Kristen Wynn: So when I transitioned to the State Department in 2013 as a literacy coach, I'll tell you how bad balanced literacy was in our state. Our governor at the time in 2013 wanted seventy-five literacy coaches, because we were 49th in the country when we were looking at fourth grade reading. He wanted seventy-five coaches.

Our department went through five hundred to six hundred applications, and in the fall there were only twenty-four of us that walked in that door that knew or had some background knowledge of structured literacy and the science of reading.

Anna Geiger: Interesting.

Kristen Wynn: That kind of gives you an idea of what was happening then and where we were.

When we transitioned, we procured LETRS. That is a professional development training grounded in the science and the research on how students learned to read. So we procured that, and then the first cohort of us that went through LETRS were the coaches. The twenty-four of us went through the program first and it was very intense. That was my first real, real encounter in gaining a deep knowledge, I would say, of the research that we know of as the science of reading.

Anna Geiger: Okay. So, you started at a really sad place, at 49th. What was it that really changed things for you?

Kristen Wynn: One thing that I think that really changed the landscape of literacy in Mississippi was our Literacy-Based Promotion Act, which is our state's early literacy policy. That act came into play in 2013, and it is very explicit and provides lots of details of specific things that have to be done. The goal of that law is to ensure that all of our students, kindergarten through third grade, are on the trajectory and are on track to being reading at or above grade level by third grade.

It required us as a state, by law, to do several different things.

One thing is it requires us to screen our students in kindergarten to see where they are at in the beginning of the year, and then at the end of the year, to determine readiness and growth.

It also required that all school districts screen their kindergarten through third grade students.

We have this Kindergarten Readiness Assessment that we give to show readiness and growth in kindergartners, but now also, our K-3 students have to be screened three times in the year to determine if there are any reading problems.

Then once teachers give those screeners, they are required to give a diagnostic to really drill down and determine where the areas of deficiency for students are.

So that law right there, in addition to our Kindergarten Readiness Assessment that's embedded within the law and our screeners that are embedded within the law, we also have literacy coaches. Our literacy coaches, per law, are to provide literacy coaching support to our lowest performing schools based on a formula that's in the law.

Also, our law includes our third grade reading assessment, which is an assessment that determines promotion or retention for our third grade students. There are good-cause exemptions and retesting opportunities.

I really feel like the big change that happened in moving us from a very saturated balanced literacy state and moving us into a science of reading state was that historic law that was placed and the strategies that we implemented to make sure we put that law into practice.

Then professional development was a part of that as well, because you have to create that common language around the science of reading to transition people from what we used to do with balanced literacy.

Anna Geiger: That's interesting because I think a lot of people, when they're trying to make these changes, the first question they want to know is, "What's your curriculum?" That's the one thing they think they need to know, and it's hard to get past thinking that that's the thing that's going to make all the difference.

That's very important, but what you're saying is we need to start with education for the teachers and the leaders and a system where we can find out through a screening process who's at risk for reading failure. Then we can drill down what exactly the issue is because screeners are supposed to be really fast, but when you see an issue, then you do a diagnostic maybe in phonics or something like that, so that the Tier 2 and Tier 3 intervention can be given to kids who need it.

Kristen Wynn: You're exactly right. One thing that we did not do is start with identifying our curriculum. The reason why it's so important to build teacher and leader knowledge first is because if you build the teacher knowledge first, the teachers and the leaders build the programs and they're able to implement the programs. They do it not just with fidelity, but with integrity, really looking at the needs of the students versus just putting a program in front of somebody.

If you put a program in front of me, but you don't give me the why, why is this important? Then I'm not going to really use it as it is intended to be used.

But if you give me the why first, and then you put the how and the what in front of me, I'm able to really use it to make sure that I provide the students the instructional supports to meet their need.

So we started with creating this common language because if we just pushed another program in front of our teachers, lots of questions would've come up like, "How's this any better from what we were already doing?" So giving teachers the why first, building their knowledge, I think is so important.

Anna Geiger: So when you have a new teacher in Mississippi, like a brand new teacher, is there something in place where they get this particular instruction or are

they not hired unless they show an understanding of the science of reading? How does all that work where you get new teachers on board?

Kristen Wynn: Like many other states, we are a local-control state. But because of this law and because of the strategies and components of it and what teachers are required to do, especially our early K-4 teachers, we offer the statewide literacy professional development that's grounded in the science at the state level for free. We have that every year. We have cohorts of teachers and leaders that go through that training.

Yes, it's very intense. It's like a college level master's course, and it's a year-long course, but we offer that to them. They can sign up in the summer and start their course in the fall, and they're typically finished the next spring, but they're able to apply some of those things as they're going through the course and learning within their classrooms.

We offer those not only to our new teachers, but veteran teachers, pre-service teachers, which are teachers-

Anna Geiger: Oh, yeah.

Kristen Wynn: ... who are in school. Because along with our Literacy-Based Promotion Act, along with our law, in Mississippi pre-service teachers are required to take a Foundations of Reading Assessment, which means you have to show based on an exam that you are ready to go in a Mississippi classroom and teach students how to read. That's a requirement.

Because of that, we've had to make some changes in the preparation area, and so we do offer the training to some of our pre-service teachers as well as our professors so that they're able to try to catch them. We want to catch them on the front end to be preventative. We offer that training across the state.

Anna Geiger: You said 2013 is the year where this all started?

Kristen Wynn: That's that change year for us.

Anna Geiger: How did that go over? When I think of myself as a teacher, I think back to when I was die-hard balanced literacy. If this would've come down to me, I don't think I would've taken it very well. How did you get everybody on board? Is that still an issue?

Kristen Wynn: It's really not an issue now. The issue now now is, "Can we host trainings in our district? I have 200 teachers that need to be trained right now." So, I mean, those are good problems to have at the moment.

But when we started, we really faced some resistance at first, because when you are trying to change something, change is hard and a lot of times people don't want to change because change requires me to learn something different and get out of my comfort zone.

So yes, at first we did, but what we did was we started ... It was required for those districts that were assigned literacy coaches. I think I mentioned this earlier, that a part of our law was our literacy coaches. We placed literacy coaches in our lowest performing school districts. So when we did that as a non-negotiable, as you may say, we required those school districts to attend the training.

Anna Geiger: Okay.

Kristen Wynn: So, that was a requirement, you had to attend.

Some of the school districts that were not on our lists that were our higher performing districts were writing letters to say, "We opt out. We don't want to do it," and things of that nature. Which was fine.

We started where we knew we needed to start. And so we called districts, we got them to partner with other districts to roll this out. We rolled it out with our literacy coaches first and our literacy support schools.

Then our Kindergarten Readiness Assessment was in place. Once that got in place and once we got the training rolling, we saw growth in just kindergarten in some of our lowest performing schools. They were starting to outperform our higher performing schools and districts.

Then it was, "Oh, let me see what this training is that you all are doing. Let me see what's happening." Because this district, who hadn't been necessarily performing very well, was outperforming this district that was considered in our state a higher performing district, just in their kindergarten when their kindergarten teachers were being trained in the research.

So we started to get traction, we started to get buy-in. We coupled our training with coaches. Our coaches really got into schools and helped teachers navigate the content for the professional development. They did additional PLCs on how. We started to see things shift and change even with screener data and kindergarten assessment data.

Once that started happening, and fast-forward to 2019, when we saw we were number one in growth for fourth grade reading on the NAEP, then it really was like, "Oh, what are y'all doing? What happened? How did you go from being the lowest performing state and states surrounding us saying, 'Thank God for Mississippi.'" Which was the running joke in 2013.

Anna Geiger: Yes. Yes. I remember that.

Kristen Wynn: Yeah, and now folks are like, "Okay, so what are y'all doing over there? What's happening?"

We took a real sense of urgency type stance and took a really bold stance to say, "We are making these changes. This is going to happen. We have to do this for our communities, for our state, for our students." And so, that's it in a nutshell.

Anna Geiger: So, really it was the data-

Kristen Wynn: It was.

Anna Geiger: ... the data that really made the difference.

Kristen Wynn: Mm-hmm.

Anna Geiger: If someone would just want to know really quickly, we're talking very high level today, but just to get into the weeds a little bit, what would you see that was different in these kindergarten classrooms after the teacher had the instruction? What was looking different than compared to previously?

Kristen Wynn: Yeah. What I saw in a lot of these, and kindergarten was the example with the data that we had, but what I saw in a lot of these classrooms K-3 was initially we had been using the leveled text, and then you started to see more structure, you saw more explicit instruction.

We created lots of resources at the state level. As coaches we created a 90-120 minute literacy block for our schools. That was one of the non-negotiables. We had a list of non-negotiables that we gave schools, and that was one of them to have this uninterrupted literacy block.

Now you see there's an uninterrupted time for reading to be taught. That uninterrupted time included instruction that was really explicit for teachers within the five components of reading. You saw students and teachers moving from using leveled text to decodable texts in kindergarten.

Then you saw the kindergartners, based on our Kindergarten Readiness Assessment, entering kindergarten not necessarily ready, but leaving kindergarten as emergent readers. They were beyond ready, to the point where first grade teachers, you've got to beef it up a little bit now because you're getting these cohorts of kindergartners that are leaving ready.

One thing I do want to point out that was coupled with our Literacy-Based Promotion Act was our Early Learning Collaborative Act, which also put pre-K classrooms in some parts of our state. It added additional pre-Ks to our state.

We started off with only a few collaboratives, and then we moved to having more. So we really started this in pre-K, but kindergarten was a part of our Literacy-Based Promotion Act.

To see the transition from going in and looking at leveled texts and the Shared Reading, to now seeing very explicit instruction during an uninterrupted block of time, it made a

big difference, coupled with coaches right there side-by-side with teachers helping them.

Anna Geiger: Okay. So, for people who are looking for more specifics, can you lay out for us what that literacy block might look like in the kindergarten and the primary grades?

Kristen Wynn: Sure. We actually developed the literacy block based on our professional development training at the time, which was LETRS, our science of reading professional development. We based this on the recommended times from that.

We have a kindergarten block because we have kindergarten guidelines, but our 1st-5th grade block has time alotted within it for foundational skills instruction, which means the phonological awareness is in there, the phonics is in there, the fluency instruction is embedded within that block.

Then you have the block of time within that literacy block where we're talking about language comprehension, building the knowledge, using high-quality instructional materials during that language comprehension block of time. So you have your foundational skills block and you have your language comprehension block.

We started off with 90 as the recommended non-negotiable uninterrupted block, but there was so much that needed to be done within that, and we wanted to make sure we had small group instruction. Now you have a block that has whole group, and you need time for small group instruction to really remediate and do some small group things with students that are not performing where they need to be.

Then we added writing instruction because reading and writing should be parallel and go together. As a part of our state assessment, there is a writing assessment. We had to get kids and teachers out of their comfort zone with writing every single day, and that writing needed to be connected to the texts they were reading.

So that block includes a foundational block, a language comprehension piece, building the background knowledge through read-alouds and really high-quality complex texts, and then you have your writing portion, and small groups. That's the layout that we have within our literacy block.

Anna Geiger: Thank you for sharing that, and I'll definitely link to any resources that you give me that will help people learn more about that.

We've talked about the big picture of how this got started, about how it trickled down to the schools, and about what some of the day-to-day things look like.

Now if you're willing to share any curriculum recommendations that you might have, I know that that's not where we want to start, but everybody wants to know. What do you like?

Kristen Wynn: Haha! I'm going to say it this way because I have to be politically correct for a lot of it.

Anna Geiger: Sure. Sure.

Kristen Wynn: We have a High-Quality Instructional Materials initiative happening in our state, and I can send you the link to our Mississippi Materials Matter website. As a state, we have adopted five ELA curricula that we deemed high quality based on our rubrics. Our rubrics are really closely connected to the EdReports rubrics. We worked with them to develop our rubrics.

Anna Geiger: Okay.

Kristen Wynn: But one thing that we really did differently, like I told you before, we started with building teacher leader knowledge. In Mississippi, really focusing on those foundational skills was so important to us. The curricula that's on our list could not make our list, I would say, if they didn't pass Gateway 1, which we added a very strong criteria on foundational skills in that gateway, because that's extremely important for us.

We only have five on the list. That's not to say that there are not others, but we define our high-quality instructional materials as being aligned to our standards, comprehensive, externally validated, and includes engaging and complex texts for all of our students.

Within the five, I have to say the districts that have used them started off using them with fidelity, which means learning the program and moving to integrity really fast. They've seen lots of growth just on their screeners from beginning of year to end of year.

So I'm really happy with what we have on our list. We will have another adoption cycle coming up, which we can add the others that EdReports deem as high quality on there, but if they didn't submit, we could not review them. There are some that are not on there, that didn't submit, but we only can review what was submitted. There were some that did not make our list because the criteria and the expectations are high.

Anna Geiger: Is there a link that I can send people to so they can see what you guys have approved?

Kristen Wynn: Absolutely.

Anna Geiger: Okay. I will send people to that.

Kristen Wynn: They can also see not only what we approve K-12, they can also see the rubrics and the evidence that we captured as we were looking at these curricula.

Anna Geiger: Yes. What's interesting too is that so many people just want you to give them the curriculum, "What's the best one?" I understand that question. I understand the urgency there, but like you said, if you don't have something to compare it to, like a rubric that says what you really need, and you don't understand the point of all those things, you're not going to know it's a good program.

Kristen Wynn: No. And Anna, I'll tell you this too. If you don't understand the science, even the theoretical models, if you don't understand the rope and how reading comprehension is acquired, then you're not going to be able to navigate some of the things within these curricula because I have to say this, the vendors are trying to appease both sides.

Anna Geiger: Oh, yes. Yes.

Kristen Wynn: The vendors will dump it all in, and I'm going to tell you something about our Mississippi leaders, teachers, and coaches, we challenge vendors. If there's something once we get in there that goes against what we stand for and what we're trying to do in our state, we call them out. We call them and say, "Remove it, take it out, or you're off the list. You won't be on the list again."

You can't be afraid to have those types of conversations. But again, you have to understand the rope and how reading comprehension is acquired to really understand what should and should not be within these curricula.

Anna Geiger: Yeah. So if there's someone out there who's listening to this and thinks, "Boy, that'd be great. My state's nowhere close to doing this, but I want to start making change in my little space, beyond my classroom." What would be some tips you'd give to a teacher who wants to start spreading the word in a way that's hopefully going to bring other people on board?

Kristen Wynn: That's a great question. As a teacher trying to get the discussion going in a school building, I would say start with your colleagues that are willing. Start with that. I would say, start with those who you can go to and say, "Hey, I know we've been doing it this way for a long time. There is something missing. I'm willing to shift my practices in my classroom, and then you come along with me. Let's do it together and collect some data, and then move forward from there." That may be the first step.

If you have a supportive administrator, for me the conversation would be going to your administrators afterwards. I'm a "bring all the data" type of girl. It would be great for a teacher to be able to take some data and say, "Hey, I know we had these gaps, so I went and tried this, and this is a strategy or an instructional practice that is aligned to the science, and it worked for my classroom. Could we see about implementing it school wide?"

So you may have to just start with the little small parts or small things, but I would say most definitely start with the data, the articles, and find schools that have done it. There's so much information out there right now of schools that have done it well, and they start with just maybe the foundational skills component and that. They started there and they saw the growth there. Take those articles, take the data from your class on what you changed, what you went in and decided to change, and how it impacted your students.

I would say for a teacher that's really trying to spark that conversation, I would say start there. Those would be my two things.

Anna Geiger: So the two words to remember are that data talks?

Kristen Wynn: Data talks!

Anna Geiger: And for teachers who aren't sure where to even start with that ... Because I know many schools are using a balanced literacy assessment like Fountas and Pinnell's or DRA, which I believe is balanced literacy too.

Kristen Wynn: Mm-hmm.

Anna Geiger: What they might want to do is check into Acadience or DIBELS 8. I like Acadience, I think it's really easy to use. It's free for you. If you want to have the part where it actually puts all the data on a chart, I believe you pay for that part of it, but you wouldn't need to do that. It's very easy to administer once you understand how it works and it doesn't take long.

Kristen Wynn: Yeah.

Anna Geiger: If you had a volunteer come in and read to the rest of your class while you're doing that in a separate room, I mean, you can get all the kids done in a few days. Do that multiple times in the year, and that will give you data and you'll see how it's working.

Kristen Wynn: Yeah.

Anna Geiger: That would definitely be the place to start, I think, because people can't argue with that.

Kristen Wynn: They cannot. They cannot.

I mean, if you're trying to go for school-wide change, start with your administrator and

start with looking at, what does your school look like? What is the proficiency rate of students within your building? How does that look? If you're dealing with a significant amount of students not being proficient, then talk to your administrator about forming a committee and creating a school literacy action plan.

We do those action plans in our literacy support schools, and they're really powerful because the first step of the action plan is really looking at the landscape of literacy within the school. What is the data telling us? Like you said, they can use their DIBELS data. If they wanted to use their DRA data, they can use that and triangulate that data with something else, because that data may tell you that your kid is reading on grade level, but then you get something like DIBELS and they have all of these gaps.

Anna Geiger: Yes. That's another really good point because there's the work of Matt Burns, I think it was Matt Burns. He's done some work on this where he's compared kids' results on the Fountas and Pinnell assessment compared to the state assessment, and it just showed that the Fountas and Pinnell assessment was about as useful as flipping a coin would be for finding out whether kids were going to be successful as readers or had problems.

So that's a really good point. You want to compare it and say, "Hey, this assessment rating says this kid's a good reader, but look at the beginning of the year, I mean, look at all the holes they had." Then you can show the growth. For sure, that's excellent.

So it's been ten years since Mississippi has started the change, right? Where's Mississippi now and what's next?

Kristen Wynn: Oh, wow. We are so excited to say that in 2013 we were 49th, and in 2022 we're now 21st!

Anna Geiger: Wow. That's amazing!

Kristen Wynn: I always say this, we still have our foot on the gas because all of our students are not proficient yet, and until we get to that point, we haven't arrived. We're still refining different things.

Like you said, we have this system in place, but we're just refining things with our High-Quality Instructional Materials initiative. That's something we've brought on, and

that's fairly new.

We will be offering layers of our science of reading course.

Our leaders go through layer one. It's just the foundational layer of the course where you just really unpack the science, you really understand the theoretical models, what does that mean in your role as a leader, and really create that school literacy action plan. As a teacher, it's the same thing, that PD is provided for you.

But the second layer that we're working on for the upcoming year is a structured literacy course. We'll have that for teachers as an option if they've gone through the first one. It will be a structured literacy course and a writing course for teachers and leaders.

So we are trying to be really innovative in our approach to moving things forward. We're always looking at the data and the gaps and where we need additional supports.

We've created a coaching academy to get more coaches on the ground because our PD model is our statewide PD, our regional trainings that are created by our coaches and literacy leaders, but then also coaching. It's like our model is triangulated. We can't leave off coaching. We know that's so essential to the gains that we've seen.

We are just trying to move and continue the work and trying to fill in the gaps where we see things need to be tweaked a little bit.

Anna Geiger: Yeah. Well, congratulations. That's really amazing. I did not know that final number, so that's very exciting!

Kristen Wynn: Thank you.

Anna Geiger: Thanks for helping us get a big picture overview of how this looks at a state level and how a state can make big changes.

Kristen Wynn: You are so welcome! Anytime.

Anna Geiger: You can find the show notes for this episode at reachallreaders.com/episode138, including a link to Mississippi's approved curricula.

I hope you'll join me for the rest of our Change Maker Series, as well as our short Wednesday episodes, which are intended to be practical ways where you can apply the science of reading right away. Talk to you next time!