

Partner Profile: Salisbury Elementary School

September 2020

Jim Montanari, principal of [Salisbury Elementary School](#), says coaching for educators is not all that different from coaching for professional athletes.

“David Ortiz – one of the best hitters in Red Sox history – had a batting coach,” he said. “As great as Big Papi was, he knew there was always room for improvement.”

According to Mr. Montanari, the coaching provided by [Momenta](#) over the past two years has helped to transform his school. Since September 2018, Momenta coaches Miffy Somers and Ben Scherz have worked closely with Salisbury teachers and administrators to accelerate student learning in reading and literacy.

“They’ve changed the way we look at things,” said Mr. Montanari. “Now everything we do is with a purpose.”

Salisbury Elementary, in the [Triton Regional School District](#) on Massachusetts’ North Shore, serves nearly 500 students in pre-K to grade 6, with almost half considered “high needs.” At the end of the 2017-18 school year, the school was looking for professional development in reading and literacy. At the same time, John and Mollie Byrnes from the Peter and Elizabeth Tower Foundation were looking to support a public school on the North Shore with teacher training. And so the partnership with Momenta began.

Momenta provided two days of professional development, and immediately began helping teachers restructure their classes to rely less on teacher-driven, whole-group instruction and more on student-driven learning, including small group



and independent reading. In kindergarten and grade 1, Mr. Montanari said, having students work independently was challenging at first.

“But then the Momenta coaches brought us to a school they were working with in Beverly, and we saw it in action,” he said. “We came back to our school, and Ben [Scherz] modeled it for us. Right away, teachers were 100 percent in.”

Building a “culture of connectedness”

Throughout the year, Momenta coaches observe instruction to give teachers feedback and coaching. In addition, Ms. Somers provides leadership coaching to the principal. She advised Mr. Montanari to conduct walk-throughs to follow up on the strategies his teachers were learning.

“Over the past two years, I feel like I’ve become a stronger instructional leader than I’ve ever been,” said Mr. Montanari. “Now I say to my teachers, ‘Miffy and Ben showed you reciprocal teaching last week. When can I come by to see you practicing it?’”

The Momenta team also helped the Salisbury faculty redesign their planning time for stronger collaboration – within and across grade-level teams, composed of both general education and special education teachers, as well as with the principal, assistant principal, and the school’s reading specialist.

Darlene White, the reading specialist, said, “Classroom teachers and special education teachers weren’t always communicating about their students and their practice, but by being engaged in the Momenta work together, they started speaking the same language and using the same strategies. Momenta has helped us build a culture of connectedness.”

The Momenta coaches also have helped the Salisbury faculty transform their approach to data analysis. The team is now able to adapt their lessons and differentiate instruction based on what they see in student assessment results.

“If the data tell us that some students need more instruction in reading comprehension, we give that group a comprehension intervention,” said Ms. White. “We’re looking at data through a much more focused lens.”

Ms. White said their Momenta partners also encouraged the school to offer students more challenging texts, including a lot of non-fiction, to promote grade-level reading. They helped the team select a reading program, Reach for Reading from National Geographic, and provided teachers with training in the materials.

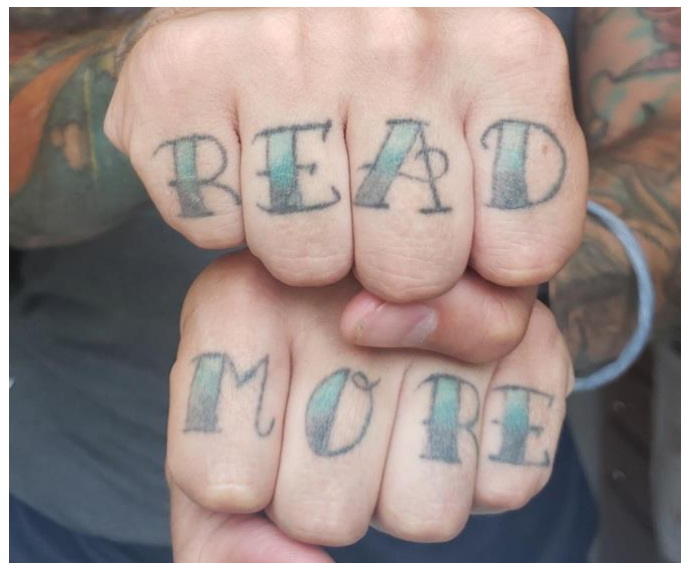
Getting students on track to mastery

As a result of these and other strategies, Mr. Montanari said, students are reading far more, and at levels their teachers once thought unimaginable. There’s now a school-wide push for students to read whenever and wherever they can. One teacher, Graham Eaton, went so far as to tattoo the words “READ MORE” onto his knuckles to motivate his students.

Other indicators suggest students are making remarkable progress. For example:

- Data from the i-Ready assessment indicated that at the beginning of the 2019-20 school year, fewer than half of Salisbury third graders were on track with reading: 48% on or above grade level (green), 16% one level below (yellow), and 35% two or more levels below (red). By mid-year, these students had improved significantly, to 64% green, 22% yellow, and only 14% red.
- Gains were even greater among fifth grade students on the i-Ready assessment. The percentage of students reading on or above grade level soared from 30% in September to 56% in mid-year. During the same period, students scoring red (highest risk) decreased from 21% to 13%.
- On the DIBELS assessment, only 50% of Salisbury third grade students began the year reading text with adequate accuracy, and 29% were in the “intensive” (lowest) category for accuracy. By the middle of the school year, 88% of third graders were reading with accuracy, and only 8% were in the intensive category.

“There’s no question we were heading in the right direction,” Mr. Montanari said. “Then COVID hit.”



Staying the course through remote learning

When the pandemic closed all Massachusetts schools in March 2020, Salisbury teachers worked hard to apply their classroom strategies to distance learning, in order to maintain the progress students had made in reading and literacy. They were confident their students would demonstrate significant gains on the Spring MCAS and were disappointed when State officials cancelled the exams.

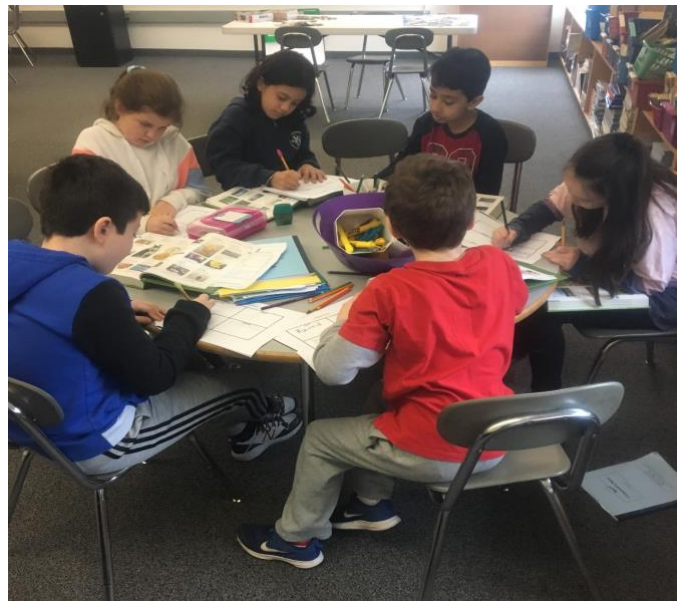
During the school closure, when he wasn't distributing Chromebooks or delivering meals to students' homes, Mr. Montanari was busy planning for the successful start of the next school year. Ms. Somers continued to support the principal remotely, serving as a thought partner on the tremendous leadership challenges he faced.

Through it all, however, Mr. Montanari remained certain that the improvements made through the Momenta partnership would remain intact when schools reopened, and the lessons learned would enable his teachers to overcome students' learning loss.

He said, "I knew that when our kids come back, we'd already have what we need in place – the teachers, structures, curriculum, and strategies – to get them caught up."

Now that the Triton schools have begun the school year with full remote learning, Mr. Montanari said he and his team will continue to engage Momenta for virtual coaching and support, and they will be ready to welcome them back into classrooms when it is safe to do so.

"One of the best things I've done as an elementary school principal," he said, "is to bring Momenta into this building."



Momenta
EDUCATORS TRANSFORMING EDUCATION

Momenta, formerly the Bay State Reading Institute, is an educational non-profit that partners with Massachusetts elementary schools to ensure that all students excel in reading and literacy.

Since 2005, Momenta has partnered with more than 100 Massachusetts public schools in 33 districts, including many with high concentrations of English Learners, students of color, and economically disadvantaged students.

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