

Teachers as Architects of Change

The Morgan County Middle School Success Story



Teachers and administrators possess the unique power to shape, impact, and change the trajectories of their students' lives. Throughout their careers, they witness remarkable stories of transformation and growth that echo long after students leave their classrooms. At Morgan County Middle School, two dedicated educators—Dr. Lindsay Peaster and Mrs. Cheryl Powers—have been at the forefront of this mission, shaping, innovating, and redefining literacy for hundreds of students.



Dr. Lindsay Peaster has over 20 years of experience in education and currently co-teaches a middle school English Language Arts class for struggling readers. She holds advanced degrees in Communication Disorders and Special Education and serves on the Dyslexia Task Force for Georgia.



Mrs. Cheryl Powers is an English Language Arts teacher with nearly 30 years of experience, co-teaching a reading class focused on students facing literacy challenges. She holds an Ed.S. degree in Special Education with a Dyslexia endorsement.

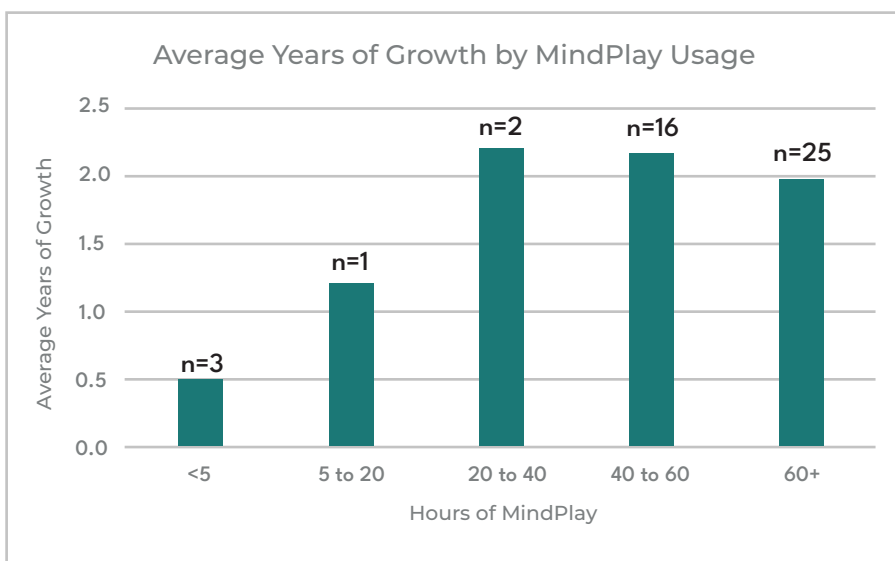
From helping students overcome significant literacy challenges to celebrating academic milestones, the growth at Morgan County Middle is nothing short of inspiring. In their group reading intervention classes, Dr. Peaster and Mrs. Powers create a classroom culture where, as they describe it, students “feel honored and liked while receiving evidence-based instruction to improve their literacy skills.” Their teaching is driven by connection, intention, and a commitment to prescriptive strategies that unlock the potential of every student in the room.

The Strength of Unity: Education Teams as Catalysts for Change

At the heart of their success is the belief that students in special education and those receiving Tier 2 and 3 intervention services are not defined by their labels or perceived limitations. Dr. Peaster and Mrs. Powers embrace each student's individual journey. Their classrooms are not just places of instruction, but safe havens where students, teachers, and families come together to support learning.

The educational team has adopted a set of Critical Actions that serve as a "north star" in their approach: students are encouraged to show G.R.I.T. (Growth Mindset, Resilience, Initiative, and Tenacity), while families engage in shared ownership of communication and support. And at the core of everything is a culture of honor—one that recognizes each student's unique strengths and celebrates their progress.

The two teachers have consistently emphasized to both students and their families the importance of regularly engaging with MindPlay. The progress resulting from this commitment is truly remarkable; students can directly connect their dedicated time in MindPlay to significant improvements in reading, spelling, and writing. In fact, students who engaged with MindPlay for at least 20 hours throughout the school year experienced an average gain of 2.06 years in their reading skills. This outcome underscores the effectiveness of consistent practice in enhancing student learning.



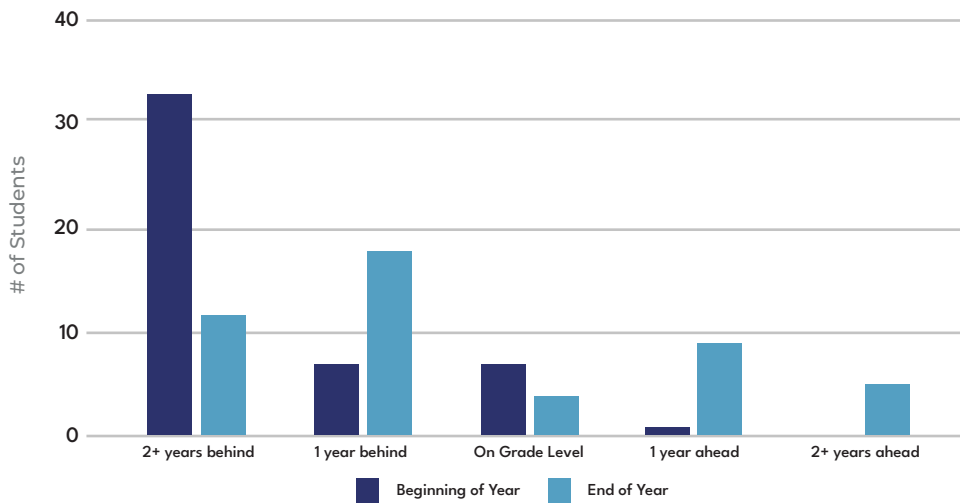
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As Mrs. Powers reflected, many students enter the classroom feeling anxious, questioning their intelligence. *"A lot of our kids come in with anxiety, thinking, 'Why can't I read this? Why can't I spell this?' We try to explain that it's not their fault; it's about learning in a different way."* This message of reassurance is especially powerful for students who have struggled for years with reading. MindPlay's individualized and differentiated learning paths combined with the safe, supportive environment fostered by Dr. Peaster and Mrs. Powers help students rediscover their confidence.

Real Results: Literacy Growth at Morgan County Middle

The results speak for themselves. During the 2023/24 school year, students in Morgan County's dedicated intervention classrooms, a population of 47, have improved their reading skills by an average of 2.2 grade levels, with some making incredible leaps of 3, 4, or even 5 grade levels. Notably, 67% of the students moved to being only one year behind or better, while 94% demonstrated growth of at least one year. Additionally, 61% of students grew by two or more years, with an average growth of 2.42 years. Furthermore, 10 students moved out of the "critical range" (defined as reading two or more grade levels behind), and 24% ended the year at or above grade level, with 13 students advancing into the "meets" or "exceeds" categories for their grade level.

BoY to EoY Change in Reading Level



One key driver of this progress is the focus on fidelity—students are expected to complete 120 minutes of MindPlay homework per week, which is assigned as work to be completed outside the classroom.

The reason for this is that the school prioritizes using teachers' extensive experience, research, and decades of expertise in special education to deliver high-quality instruction during class..

The homework serves as an extension of this, reinforcing and differentiating skill acquisition for learning taught in the classroom. This intentional practice has led to significant improvements in both reading levels and fluency rates. The connection between the number of lessons mastered and reading growth is undeniable. More importantly, the individualized instruction students receive ensures they get the support they need, right when they need it.

Dr. Peaster notes, *"It's almost like parents are getting free private tutoring through MindPlay. It's supplemental, but if I were a parent, I'd want my child to learn from us in the classroom because of our expertise, background, and understanding of teaching reading. MindPlay adds an extra layer of support, almost like having a private tutor that they don't have to pay for – the school covers the cost, but the benefit to the parents is substantial."*

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Bright Futures: Uplifting Stories of Transformation and Success

Morgan County's community is filled with stories of students who have overcome seemingly insurmountable challenges. One particularly powerful story is that of a young girl who entered the seventh grade with a significant language barrier—her family spoke Vietnamese at home, and she struggled academically and emotionally. But, by the time she completed the eighth grade, she had passed all her milestone assessments and was preparing for Advanced Placement (AP) courses in high school.

Mrs. Powers reflected emotionally on this student's progress, saying, *"She went from someone with a lot of anxiety to a rockstar who did everything she was supposed to do."* This success, much like that of countless others, showcases the profound impact of differentiated, adaptive instruction through MindPlay and the unwavering support of her teachers.

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Beyond the Classroom: Life-Changing Impact

The reach of Morgan County's efforts extends far beyond academic success. One of their proudest stories is that of a former student who now plays at a local university on a full athletic scholarship. Peaster and Powers played pivotal roles in his academic journey, supporting him from primary school through middle school. As Mrs. Powers proudly shared, "And I think we told you the last time—we have one of our students who we're super proud of, who is now a college athlete. Lindsay taught him in primary school, and I was able to teach him here for three years. Now he's playing D1 football on a full scholarship at a Division I school."

This inspiring story captures the essence of what Morgan County is all about: helping students change their trajectory and unlock their full potential—whether academically, athletically, or beyond. "That's what we're all about—helping these kids change their lives, you know, and get that trajectory to being the best they can be." This student's journey serves as a powerful reminder that the skills and confidence developed in the classroom extend far beyond standardized tests and reading levels, becoming the foundation for future opportunities, success, and personal growth.



A Commitment to Future Success: The Reach Scholarship

In addition to academic and athletic achievements, Morgan County has seen students earn the prestigious Reach Scholarship, a state-funded initiative that provides financial and mentorship support for low-income students through high school and college. This scholarship has opened doors for students facing personal and economic challenges, ensuring they have the support they need to succeed beyond high school.

Data-Driven Growth and the Power of Feedback

At the core of Morgan County's success are the real-time feedback and data-driven insights MindPlay provides. With tools like dashboards tracking Lexile scores and lesson mastery, teachers can adapt their instruction to meet students' individual needs. This level of personalization has empowered both students and educators, ensuring that progress is transparent, measurable, and achievable.

As Mrs. Powers pointed out, even when students see their progress graphs dip due to the complexity of the stories they're reading, they understand it's part of the process, not a reflection of their abilities. This clarity fosters a sense of ownership in students, motivating them to keep pushing toward their goals.

A Future of Limitless Potential

The stories from Morgan County highlight the transformative power of dedicated educators, evidence-based instruction, and personalized learning paths. MindPlay, combined with the intentional teaching practices of educators like Dr. Peaster and Mrs. Powers, continues to shape futures in profound ways.

As they look to the future, the team at Morgan County remains committed to their north star: creating opportunities, supporting students in their growth, and ensuring that every child has the chance to succeed—both in the classroom and in life.

