

# Spotlight California: Driving momentum for systemic literacy change

## Student literacy support needs a data-driven approach

When moving students from a Student Support Team (SST) model into an Response To Intervention or RTI (now referred to as Multi-Tier Support System or MTSS) model, the typical path at Val Verde Unified School District—as with many other school systems—was to provide IEP-determined accommodations and modifications within a teacher’s classroom and curriculum. These might have included things like preferential seating, proximity to teacher or the board, extra time for assessment or assignment, or modification of assignments depending on a student’s needs.

A few years ago, district leaders at Val Verde realized that perhaps what these students actually needed was a more data-driven

approach to their learning support. They began using DIBELS, a universal literacy screener; but were at a loss for what to do with all of the data they collected.

When Jessica Warren, Coordinator of Elementary Education at Val Verde, reached out to a colleague for resources, he gave her the influential book by Susan Hall, EdD, ***Implementing Response to Intervention: A Principal’s Guide*** (Corwin, 2007). Reading this book by Hall, cofounder of 95 Percent Group, led Val Verde right to 95 Percent Group and their literacy intervention products.



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# Prevention + intervention lifts all students

As literacy leaders and teachers at some Val Verde schools began implementing [Tier 2](#) Intervention solutions like the [95 Phonics Screener for Intervention™](#) (95 PSI), [95 Phonics Chip Kit™](#) (PCK™) and the [95 Phonics Lesson Library™](#) (PLL™) in more classrooms, it pulled back the curtain on some of the gaps they hadn't seen before. They gained clarity on what was sitting underneath their students' Tier 2 challenges in reading. Still the progress they were making with their struggling students was impressive, so they continued on that path.

"95 Percent Group was opening up possibilities," Aimee Garcia, K-12 director of education services for the district, implored. "We realized: here's this evidence-based practice where we're seeing a lot of research. It's very scripted, and very easy to use—let's start being more targeted with these products."

Eventually as they watched their students make progress quickly with 95 Percent Group's Tier 2 products, they realized that they didn't necessarily have an intervention problem. What they had was a literacy curriculum that hadn't been implemented with fidelity and that wasn't moving enough students toward grade-level success.

They decided to step back and figure out what teachers needed in order to have equitable implementation of the Tier 1 reading curriculum across classrooms and schools. "We had the 95 Percent Group products here already," Garcia explained. "But we needed to systemize it."

While they acknowledged that this was a difficult decision to make, district leaders knew that in order to enact change within the whole system, they had to make sure their Tier 1 curriculum instruction was their "first best instruction." If students weren't getting their first best instruction until they needed intervention, then something wasn't right.

Garcia said, "We started responding to the intervention data, but also asking the question: How does this connect back to Tier 1? Can we be responsive and preventative by doing two things at the same time?"

Through this process, leaders and educators at Val Verde were able to see that two things were true: They needed to continue with Tier 2 intervention using the One95™ Literacy Ecosystem™, and that they needed to support their teachers with ongoing learning and coaching in order to ensure everyone was on the same page across all classrooms and all schools in the district.

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## Slow but steady → Bold system-wide literacy change through phonics

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That year, none of our students ended up qualifying to go into that tier 3 intervention because we were able to provide the data to show that the interventions we were doing with the PSI and 95 Phonics Chip Kits were helping them to achieve their goals.”

JESSICA WARREN

Coordinator of Elementary Education

Although systemic change takes patience and dedication, leaders at Val Verde knew it was worth the time and effort to work toward ensuring all of their students could reach their full potential. And they have already begun to see the fruits of this labor.

One example of progress comes from the End of Year (EOY) data over the past two years from May Ranch Elementary School, a school in the Val Verde Unified School District. At the end of the school year in 2021, only 41% of Kindergarten students were scoring at or above the grade level benchmark. By the end of the 2023 school year, after using products from the One95 Literacy Ecosystem, that number was up to 83% percent scoring at or above grade level.

Maybe most exciting is the Beginning of Year data (BOY) for this school year (2023) for third grade students at another school, Triple Crown Elementary. 77% percent of students in third grade at Triple Crown scored at or above the grade level benchmark—up from 54% in 2021.

# Further Evidence of Literacy Improvement:

The second part of a new, two-year, peer-reviewed study on progress in the Val Verde Unified School District is coming out this fall! The research highlights the evidence of progress made over time in first and second grade classrooms with dedicated implementation of products in the One 95 Literacy Ecosystem—specifically the 95 Phonics Lesson Library:

- Rising second graders gained significantly more points on their composite score from Fall 2021 to Fall 2022 when they used the PLL, a 21-point increase.
- Skills gained and retained by students in the PLL group led to an additional 14 percent of students starting Fall 2022 On/Above grade level (51% up from 37%).

[Read the year 1 report here](#) and stay tuned...the year two report will be published this fall!

## Coaching offers a common language and momentum for change

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This is when we realized: the scope and sequence of a program is essential—if everyone is choosing to do their own thing, we are unintentionally creating an equity problem because we can't guarantee that all students will receive instruction on the skills they need at the time they need it.”

AIIMEE GARCIA

K-12 District Director of Education Services

To ensure all stakeholders were all on the same page, the district invested in professional development and coaching through 95 Percent Group. Initially coaching was provided externally, but later, coaching teams were onboarded onsite. This approach allowed all teachers to access the same parts of the curriculum and ensure consistent instruction across schools.

This provided a level of alignment and accountability that's crucial to this type of whole-system change. The district emphasized the importance of alignment across all levels, from district leadership to principals and teachers. They encouraged teachers to follow a structured scope and sequence for early literacy skills to guarantee

all students received instruction on the skills they needed, preventing the unintentional creation of equity issues.

All three educators were adamant that the 95 Percent Group onsite coaching has been a huge part of their implementation success.

“I think for me,” said Shari Kirkpatrick, a member of the early literacy instructional support team, “bringing in the coaching with 95 Percent Group gave us a clear distinction between: what is core instruction—what should we be doing for everybody? And then, how do we give a second layer of support?”

They specifically appreciated the common language and crucial conversations that professional development and coaching opened up between grade levels in order to leverage the important skills that are expected upon entry to the next grade.

“The biggest benefit from coaching,” Kirkpatrick asserted, “is that it gives us one language around best practices, and the ability to share information on students to make our Walk to Intervention model run smoothly. We have 120 kids shared by four classroom teachers and intervention teachers. When we can easily share information and pinpoint skill gaps, this means everyone is supporting the learning of these students—it's not just on one classroom teacher to make sure the students get what they need to reach their full potential.”

Garcia spoke to the effort in ensuring all educators were brought along with the science of reading professional development and given everything they needed to understand the Why behind the What.

“We knew,” she said, “that in order to change the whole system, first we had to change the minds and hearts.”

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