

Best Practices for Your Tier 1 Literacy Solution

Lessons learned from a California school district

Fairfax School District is located in a small community on the southeast side of Bakersfield, in Kern County, California. The district currently has 4 schools (they're adding a fifth) with a total of 2688 students.

We spoke with David Mack, EdD, Chief Administrator of Business Services. David has worn many hats in his time in the Fairfax School District—from math teacher to school principal. He did his dissertation on the topic *Improving Fidelity of Implementation of a Tier I Phonics Program: an Improvement Science Study**. We spoke with him about his research, his experience in the district, and what he's learned about best practices in implementation of the science of reading, and in particular, of the Tier 1 phonics program, 95 Phonics Core Program®.



We'd love to hear a little about your background and how you got involved in the science of reading.

I've been working for Fairfax School District a little over 10 years now. Before that I was a math teacher so my background all comes from the math field. Yet now I find myself loving the science of reading, specifically in early literacy.

My first principal job was at a K-6 elementary site. When I started there, I had the mindset that "we are going to take over the world with math." But I found very early on that I had students who couldn't read. And before I could teach math, especially with the Common Core State Standards and the Smarter Balanced assessments, I needed my students to read, so all of a sudden my priorities shifted.

We started looking closely at our programs. I had a site that was very, very particular in the way they taught reading. But from my approach as a former math teacher, there was really no data or rhyme or reason for why we were teaching reading that way. I always taught in a very systematic way. So I looked at what other schools were doing.

We took a year to put some feelers out to help figure out what we were going to do. Then in my second year we started doing Acadience testing and we brought in 95 Percent Group. We used their whole Tier 2 program. We were very, very, very successful with it and over a four-year span we saw the greatest growth in reading scores, specifically when you look at students that are low socioeconomic. We had the best growth in all of Kern County for our demographics. And in fact, we actually became a Title One model school. The Title One

Federal Program Monitoring Team came to showcase our school and our different programs.

The 95 Percent Group Tier 2 model was very key along the way. We really got our Tier 2 program going on, but we didn't have a solid Tier 1 phonics program of instruction initially. Then 95 Percent Group came out with the Tier 1 program and the first year that it came out, I ordered a couple of sets which I piloted in kindergarten, first, second, and third grade classes. We saw a lot of success. Teachers really enjoyed it and the next year we went district-wide with the Tier 1 program—that was last year.



During this time, I was attending George Fox University working on my doctorate. I knew I wanted to study something around early literacy. I did an improvement science approach and realized I wanted to look at a systematic way of implementation because in schools we're constantly bringing in new programs. I wanted to make sure that we're implementing programs so that when we get data from our students, we can say that the growth is due to that program. I wanted to make sure that when we're evaluating programs' effectiveness, we can say we're seeing the improvement be-

cause we've implemented these programs with fidelity. My goal was to understand the root causes of when and why we're not implementing this Tier 1 Phonics program with fidelity and to enhance the fidelity of implementation. I used the Dane and Schneider** framework for the five factors that affect implementation fidelity: adherence, exposure, quality of delivery, differentiation, and participant responsiveness. For the in-depth analysis, you can read the dissertation linked in the references below.

What are some of the best practices you discovered?

Initially, we noticed that some teachers were doing the program two times a week, some people were doing it five. And we realized we had no measurement of how the program was being implemented. So we asked ourselves a few important questions: Do the teachers understand why consistency is important? Do they understand what phonics and phonemic awareness is? Do they understand that phonics is best taught utilizing a

systematic instruction setting?

It's important to understand we are not changing the program. We are changing what we're doing to increase adherence, exposure, and quality of delivery. When we are delivering that product—are we exciting? Are we engaging the students with it? How we speak to our students makes a difference with the program. Are we differentiating the program with the students to meet them at their levels and meet them at their needs?

So with our Tier 1 phonics program, we measured the frequency, the duration, the perception, and the program quality. We evaluated the data and then we constantly made improvements based on the implementation of change ideas.

Here are our 12 lessons learned.



1. You have to be able to tell the story.

It's important for administrators to have the knowledge, the passion, and the interpersonal skills to bring new programs in and build the culture to ensure that the programs succeed. When I teach admin classes, I tell all upcoming administrators that they have to be storytellers. You have to be able to tell your story of why a new program is important to get the buy-in because if you don't have a story and you just say "because it worked over there," it's not going to work. I have to model it myself and show the importance of it. As a leader, you need to have a passion project for your staff that you're excited about. That's how you change the culture.

2. Administrators and principals need to be deeply involved from the ground up.

The administrators are a very important piece to this. We need administrators that are knowledgeable in the science of reading, who are looking at and using their data. They have to be willing to follow their passion and create a change at the school site level in the culture and in what their teachers are doing inside the classroom. Administrators at the district level must understand that the principals need to be involved from the ground up in implementing these programs. It's important that the administrators and principals are doing the work alongside teachers—we're becoming the experts, we're collecting data, and presenting it to them so that they understand that this is important to us, and it's important to them, and it's important to students. We're sharing that knowledge along the way.

3. Explore your literacy data through a continuous improvement mindset.

You need to equip your administrators and instructional leaders to have the ability to look at data, and at the very least, to be able to look at data through a continuous improvement mindset. A lot of people don't take that step of analyzing data because, very simply, if you look at your data you're going to find a problem. Then you have to be doing something with that data. Are you just collecting it for no reason? Are you spending time with it? When you find problems, you need to figure out what your root causes are. We use the 95 Phonics Screener for Intervention™ (PSI™) to do that.

4. It takes a village to transform a literacy curriculum.

The network improvement committee (NIC) that we created included the site principal, the coordinator of student support which is like a vice principal, myself as the chief administrator of business, the reading specialist for the site, the teacher of special assignments for the EL students, as well as the assistant superintendent of instruction, and all but one of the teachers at the site.

5. Educators need more knowledge in phonics.

If you ask most teachers coming out of a teacher preparation program, they cannot tell you the difference between phonics and phonemic awareness. So we are educating our staff so they can now tell you the difference between the two. Phonics is best utilized with systematic instruction. Training needs to be intentional and personal. We need to train specifically on what the needs of those teachers are to make their classrooms most effective.



6. Ongoing coaching to master effective literacy instruction is essential.

The NIC found there has to be ongoing coaching and ongoing communication and collaboration about our programs. The mindset that "I taught it to you once so you should understand" would never be acceptable in the classroom. We observed that if we don't bring in ongoing coaching, programs seem to peter out and you don't see the gains that you see in the early years. I've emphasized this with all our principals. We're bringing in the 95 Percent Group coaching again this year for our Tier 2. We understand that you want to get that strong initial professional training. Without it, some teachers start making their own changes to the model and that can spread. We want to make sure that we have fidelity to the program because that's where we're going to see the largest gains in our students with it. We have to keep the passion alive. And our business leaders need to understand how essential ongoing coaching is so that we can budget appropriately to make sure those things are happening.

7. Maximize reading resources, ensure teachers are confident with the technology.

Research has shown that if teachers are not confident with the tools they are using, that can be very off-putting to the students that are working with them. Our teachers needed more training specifically in manipulating the presentation tool digital. We made sure they were comfortable using the presentation tool and we made sure they knew where to find all the online resources that are available.

8. Identify a point person—your literacy champion.

Teachers need a point person at the site that they can contact—a person who can be the go-to pro for the program. We saw that when we identified a pro on campus that teachers could go to and ask questions, they started understanding what the program was for and why it was important. We identified who the strongest teachers were who were implementing. So for example, in the first grade level, that go-to person was a first year teacher—she's a very dynamic first year teacher. She went through a full teacher preparation program. She had a passion and desire and she jumped right in and studied and she would ask for help. She would really get with our reading specialist.



9. Provide regular opportunities for observing model reading instruction and support collaboration.

We recognized that teachers rarely see other teachers teach. Initially participants varied in resource utilization and had a lack of understanding of the available resources. When we identified those key people that they could go to and they could see the lessons and they had a system for collaboration where they could talk about the weekly lessons, we saw confidence levels increase.

10. Systemic literacy change requires culture change.

In most schools, the teachers often don't get out of their classroom. And so we want to make sure we invest our time and resources so our teachers get the opportunity to see great teaching going on. We want to brag about our teachers and share the amazing things that are going on. We want to market them. We want to make sure when good things are going on, other people can see them. That takes a change in culture—to have teachers receptive to let people into their room and to trust and understand that we're going to suspend judgment, that we're all here to learn. As educators, we need to be lifelong learners. I'm not saying we're a hundred percent there yet. There are still some people that don't want anyone in their classroom and they have no desire to go see other people teach.

11. Ultimately time is one of our most valuable commodities in reading improvement.

Time has to be considered when implementing new programs because we know that if we want to implement these programs with fidelity, it takes a certain amount of work and commitment to make it happen. And so we want to make sure that we're not just setting aside funds, but that we're setting aside time, right? So we ask the question, If we're bringing in this new Tier 1 phonics program, what is that taking the place of? We make sure that teachers actually have the time to implement it correctly, and that they're not feeling rushed within their day.

12. Assess reading progress, put a clear monitoring process in place.

We learned that teachers had a lack of clarity of a reporting process for progress monitoring. Some participants were unsure or lacked understanding of the reporting process or how to share with each other how their students were doing. Because we know that what is monitored is what is done, we created clear monitoring processes for how they're implementing the program and how we're doing walkthroughs. We understood that there needed to be a routine and schedule specifically for them, as well as specific observations to make when they watched each other implementing the program with their students.

We're not modifying the phonics program, but how the program is implemented. We're making sure that there's consistency across the board in that. We're making sure that there's collaboration time so teachers can talk about what is working, what isn't, how I was able to get through this in a certain amount of time, how I wasn't, right? And we're making sure those lessons are engaging and accessible for everyone. We encourage collaboration and peer support among teachers to facilitate that and we want to make sure that as administrators, we're giving clear communication and providing the support systems that they need.

Looking into the future: science of reading, supporting teachers

One thing that I'm thinking about is developing a science of reading academy. The state of California has a [reading specialist grant](#) and I want to try and build something like an academy that would incentivize teachers to go back and do some graduate level coursework. I don't really know what it's going to look like yet, but the goal would be to increase their capacity on the science of reading to a different level.

I really want to help them to be able to develop a new mindset around data—Ok, we have this data, how do we dig in to the data and analyze it? I want to help them master the skills to look at that data. I'd like every one of my K-3 teachers to be a reading specialist because that's what it takes in those grade levels.

*Mack, David B., "Improving Fidelity of Implementation of a Tier I Phonics Program: an Improvement Science Study" (2023). Doctor of Education (EdD). 203. <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/edd/203>

**Dane, A., & Schneider, B. (1998). Program integrity in primary and early secondary prevention: Are implementation effects out of control? *Clinical Psychology Review*, 18(1), 23–45. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-7358\(97\)00043-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-7358(97)00043-3)

We're very excited about the great work that the Fairfax School District is doing. We'll be following their progress closely.

Stay tuned!

Learn more

Are you interested in learning about how you can bring an effective and efficient structured literacy approach, grounded in the science of reading, to your school or district? Contact us today.

