



Residency model powers district's structured literacy reform

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The Canadian education system receives accolades on international assessments, yet nearly 1 in 5 of Canadian adults' literacy skills are at a basic level or below (Statistics Canada, 2013). For decades, Canadian early literacy

instruction has tended to emphasize implicit, inquiry-based teaching of global competencies, to the exclusion of explicit skills instruction (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022).

While about 50% of children learn to read regardless of instructional style, many require explicit teaching

in foundational skills to become successful readers. In fact, with effective instruction, over 90% of children can learn to read (Moats, 2020).

In 2012, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that learning to read is a fundamental human right and failure to provide appropriate education



for students with reading disabilities is discriminatory (Moore v. British Columbia, 2012).

In Ontario, Canada's most populous province, the Human Rights Commission's inquiry in 2022 found the province's educational system was not adequately honoring this right, and its report called for policy and curricular changes across system levels. Provinces such as Manitoba and Saskatchewan recently launched similar Right to Read inquiries.

As a result, Evergreen School Division, in the Interlake region of Manitoba, initiated a change to structured literacy for its reading instruction, intervention, and assessment. Evergreen borders the shores of Lake Winnipeg from Chalet Beach north to Hecla Island. Its eight schools, with about 1,400 students, are situated in the four diverse communities of Arborg, Gimli, Riverton, and Winnipeg Beach.

During Evergreen's 2019 transition to a new superintendent, the division integrated student services and curriculum departments. This effort aimed to make available the full breadth of the division's expertise and talent for each priority — especially literacy.

Meanwhile, Evergreen's learning coordinator was fielding questions from division principals about clinical assessment referrals and processes for identifying students to receive reading interventions.

Evergreen's middle and high schools were reporting that incoming students had significant literacy challenges. In addition, each primary school had its own variously rigorous system of identifying and monitoring students for literacy intervention.

Rather than relying on vague indicators of literacy proficiency such as running records (a formative assessment tool for coding and analyzing reading behaviors of a text read aloud), the divisional team sought evidence-based assessments that provided actionable insights into students' reading abilities.

Evergreen began a transition toward structured literacy to equip students with a literacy foundation by focusing on explicit instruction in decoding skills, fluency, vocabulary, and background knowledge. The vision for organizational change was clear: to equip teachers with tools that accurately assessed students' reading and to adapt teaching practices to meet learners' diverse needs.

In 2019, Evergreen's learning coordinator, with the school psychologist and speech-language pathologist, worked together to determine appropriate steps to improve reading instruction in Evergreen, which led to implementing structured literacy practices.

CULTIVATING A RESPONSIVE, SYSTEMWIDE LEARNING ECOSYSTEM

Building capacity for effective instruction is the responsibility of all educators within a school division (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016). From the onset, Evergreen's senior leaders understood that the successful integration of structured literacy would require cultivating a systemwide learning ecosystem (Díaz-Gibson et al., 2021). This ecosystem included educators across all levels, including senior leaders, school leaders, and, most importantly, classroom teachers and school-level support staff.

Evergreen's strategic approach began when upper-level administration recruited a learning coordinator to integrate curriculum and student services. Division leaders cultivated strong working relationships with

primary and elementary principals so the leadership team could have open, trusting conversations about current programs and curricula.

This enabled division leaders to understand principals' willingness to make significant changes to Tier 1, or whole-class, reading instruction, and Tier 2 and Tier 3 (more intensive) small-group interventions.

Across the system, educators supported and learned from and with each other as they sought to build their expertise. The result is a strengthened foundation that supports teachers' development of knowledge and expertise to integrate structured literacy into their diverse classroom contexts. In doing so, school and system leaders also built on their knowledge, particularly by creating conditions that empower teachers to invest in their instructional practice (Grissom et al., 2021).

In fall 2020, division leaders began learning as much as possible about structured literacy: reading articles, taking online courses, reviewing instructional resources, and talking to knowledgeable professionals. They hired a literacy consultant in 2022 who worked with principals to develop a plan that would be consistent across the division.

Evergreen offered school-based professional learning for teachers, and in spring 2022, a local Orton-Gillingham expert offered sessions to middle leadership. Around the same time, Evergreen established a research collaboration with faculty at Memorial University of Newfoundland, and together they drafted an explicit, foundational word knowledge scope and sequence to augment the Manitoba language curriculum.

Teachers engaged in comprehensive structured literacy professional learning in spring 2022. Following this, they participated in a virtual professional learning community (PLC) to introduce the new scope and sequence.

However, it quickly became apparent that this approach did not adequately support teachers, who

reported being overwhelmed and discouraged by the rollout. This was partly due to simultaneously managing COVID-19 learning loss and associated behavioral challenges.

PIVOTING TO A RESIDENCY MODEL OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Within weeks, Evergreen pivoted to a residency model of classroom-embedded professional learning. Evergreen's literacy consultant identified teachers interested in exploring new structured literacy curriculum materials. She organized weeklong residencies where she demonstrated daily lessons and equipped teachers with resources to sustain the instruction independently. Initially, she reached out to teachers with whom she had previous relationships.

Despite initial reservations about a scripted curriculum, teachers quickly realized its advantages in maintaining consistency and alignment, providing clarity, enhancing efficiency, fostering student engagement, and implementing evidence-based practice. Many reported the scripts were a powerful learning resource.

Enthusiasm spread throughout the school, prompting requests from other teachers. Educators across the division eagerly signed up for residencies. Following each week-long residency, the consultant conducted visits to support teachers as they implemented the new curriculum, ensuring fidelity to the instructional approach. Additionally, she collaborated with teachers to review and refine the divisional scope and sequence, ensuring alignment with grade-level expectations.

To support Tier 2 and Tier 3 intervention, Evergreen's speech-language pathologist developed a PLC model whereby interventionists met once every six weeks to discuss student data and responsive teaching. Teachers engaged in professional learning and shared videos of their teaching for

feedback. Between PLCs, the speech-language pathologist met with each interventionist to observe lessons, discuss data, and provide feedback.

DATA REVEAL CONSISTENT IMPROVEMENT

We conducted an impact study, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (grant number 892-2022-3020), and the early results are promising. The chart on p. 57 illustrates a trend of closing the literacy skills gap over the 2022-23 school year, but perhaps even more consequential is that the 2023-24 data reveal smaller disparities between the beginning and end of the year than in the previous year.

IMPLICATIONS

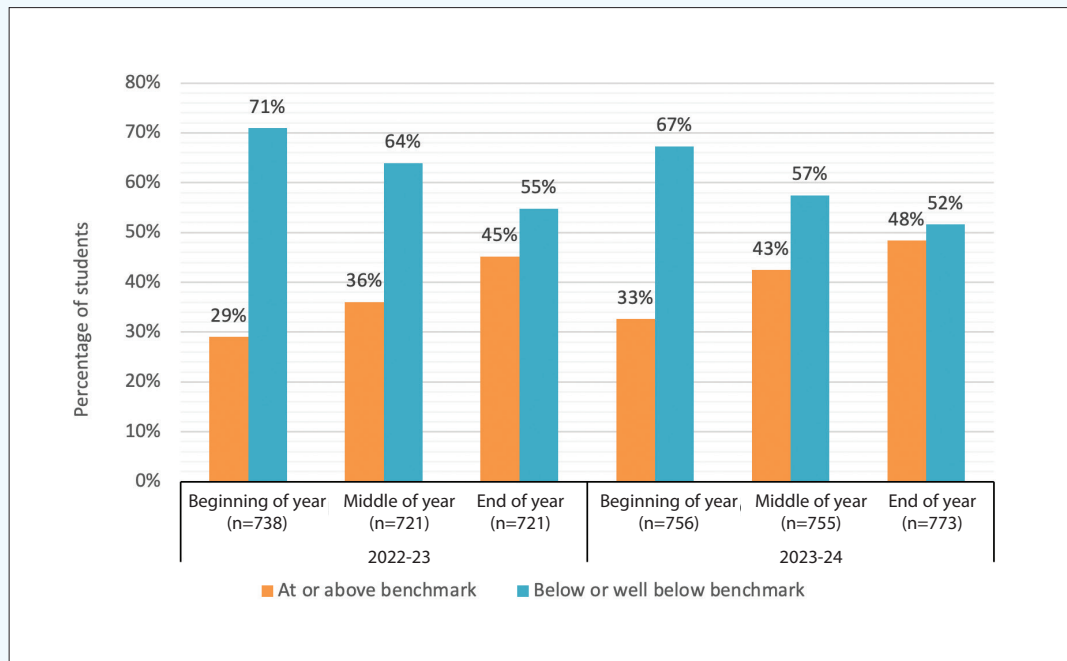
Evergreen's locally developed structured literacy initiative was galvanized by the Right to Read inquiries that continue to resonate across Canada. While Evergreen has made great strides toward achieving its goals, fidelity to the structured literacy program is still a work in progress.

The division's ongoing commitment to cultivating strong relationships enables collaboration and consistency across schools: deep and sustained learning through continuous, targeted, and practical professional learning, regular assessment of program effectiveness, and adjustments based on feedback and outcomes.

Our learning over the past three years emphasizes the importance of creating new positions that enable creative leadership and finding the right people to realize and evolve those positions, nurturing trusting relationships among educators at all levels of the system, and fostering an environment for all educators and leaders to be able to be learners — that is, where they can make themselves vulnerable.

Evergreen's model illustrates system reform through a lens of an intrinsic, educator-motivated, data-driven

CHANGES IN EVERGREEN’S READING BENCHMARK SCORES 2022-24



Note: Data are DIBELS composite scores, grades K-6.

approach. This model emphasizes improvement in teaching based on local needs and input, rather than external pressures.

Sustained investment in communication, trust-building, and deprivatization of practice can continue to generate new resources and ideas to support Evergreen’s systemwide reform. In highlighting critical elements of a model that is leading to successful educational reform, our hope is that Evergreen’s story can serve as a case study to prompt discussion, reflection, and learning for colleagues who are focused on improving reading instruction.

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