

In 2018, I was ending my third year as a school principal and celebrating the strongest year of academic outcomes at our public charter school. It was an especially exciting time for our 3rd Graders. Our state gives two literacy assessments to 3rd Graders. One is a measure of their foundational skills, while the other assesses language comprehension and writing. We had attained tremendous double-digit reading and math growth on our state assessment and our 3rd Grade foundational skills exam was passed by every single one of our 3rd Graders. It was quite a feeling to say 100% of 3rd Graders were “reading proficiently.”

Yet something still troubled me; if we had 100% of 3rd Graders proficient in the foundational skills of reading, why then were our 3rd Grade reading and writing scores sitting at just over 40%? I scoured our instructional model to think about what things were disconnected. We incorporated Orton-Gillingham that year and it was making a profound impact on decoding abilities. But we were also using a balanced literacy model that used leveled readers and three-cueing with a significant focus on sight word mastery. I also began to question (and still do) the accuracy of the state Foundational Skills assessment. There were only pieces of Foundational Skills assessed and the amount of foundational skills-aligned questions could not possibly offer a complete picture of word recognition.

It further troubled me that the students who barely passed the Foundational Skills state assessment were the same children who were far below proficiency on the more rigorous reading and writing assessment. I was confused and in hindsight, so was our instructional model.

Teachers were just as confused when they encountered students who struggled with decoding, especially at the older grade levels. We would assess them using our internal leveled literacy assessment and then we would do what we always did – have them memorize more sight words and use “better” prompting when they came to an unknown word. Some struggling readers progressed and most of them did not.

At the end of the 2019 school year, I had the opportunity to work alongside another educator to co-found an equitable academic model for a new public charter school, Adelante Schools. We had been introduced to Natalie Wexler’s work on building knowledge and had heard the term “science of reading” but thought it was just another education shift that would be gone as soon as it arrived. However, the more we read about how old the body of research was, we began to dig deeper into the research on what works when teaching children to read.

We embarked on looking at the citations of articles, researching the researchers, and asked curriculum and assessment experts at Great Minds and Amplify to point us in the direction of schools building knowledge in the science of reading and using evidence-aligned practices at their instructional core. We attended conferences, chose a consultant who could help us in our journey, and selected a curriculum that was rooted in research. We also did things that made us feel uncomfortable; we got rid of a Guided Reading block and de-emphasized the sight word lists that made us feel like we were teaching students to read.

Learning from the confusion I had experienced at my previous school, we knew that building a literacy ecosystem was essential. Instead of a “reading block,” we asked ourselves what it could look like if every piece of our literacy model aligned to a strand of the Reading Rope and did not incorporate curriculum or strategies that were in direct opposition of the science of reading. I imagined what could have been possible if I just would have know about things like the Reading Rope before.

In 2020, we “opened the virtual doors” to our school and embarked on the journey of teaching children to read using practices aligned to the science of reading. We have implemented a tool called “Practice Clinics” where teachers gather to read research, identify proven instructional strategies, and then practice implementation with colleagues. We selected a universal screener and diagnostic assessment that incorporates progress monitoring. Once we knew what data we would have at our fingertips, we adopted a data cycle of assessment, analysis, and action that we unapologetically keep consistent. The most valuable data for us is aligned with the skills we have taught and measured by our progress monitoring tool. Above all else, we remain nimble and optimistic about our future. We recognize that a lot of the content we read is new for us and can pose challenging implementation situations, so we work to focus on the small wins and consistent progress.

At the beginning of the 2022-2023 school year, just 18% of our Kindergarteners were on benchmark according to our early literacy assessment. By implementing the systems and routines mentioned above, we ended the year with 76% of Kindergarteners reading at or above grade level. The data for our other grade levels is just as promising with growth in 2nd grade going from just 15% proficient to 74% proficient. While there are still many areas we need to address to meet the our 95% goal we know is possible, we feel like we finally have the right tools to make it happen for our kids.