

CASE STUDY:

Switch to Lexiles Improves Elementary Student Test Scores, Reading Motivation in North Carolina School District



Lexile: Matching readers to text

When a school district decides to change its approach to teaching students, the decision has a seismic impact. It affects the administration, teachers, technology staff and parents, before the students even take their seats. Just such a challenge was faced by the elementary school district in Wilkes County, N.C., in 2001. Despite the district's longtime use of a reading management software system, improvement in standardized reading and language test scores was slow. Susan Sidden, Wilkes County's K-5 supervisor of reading and writing, knew they could do better.

Sidden had noticed a disconnect between the classroom activity and results in the End-of-Grade tests required in North Carolina. Concerned that the students weren't being empowered to pursue independent as well as guided reading, she set out to find a program with a balanced literacy approach. (For more information about Wilkes County's success using Lexiles® to encourage independent reading, read the case study "North Carolina Students Use Lexiles to Build Reading Skills"). After learning about Lexiles at a professional development workshop, Sidden discovered a success story right in her own district, at an elementary school that was already using Lexiles to help students build reading skills.

Changes = Challenges

Convinced that a reading improvement program based on Lexile measures would mean improved performance in its 13 elementary schools, Wilkes County offered its principals a deal: if they agreed to change from the old, entrenched program to Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI), which reports in Lexiles, the district would help foot the bill. The principals unanimously agreed, and the switch began. Even with complete buy-in from teachers and principals, it was an enormous task. "The hardest part was the complete changeover in the media department," recalled Sidden. "Even though the director of media and technology couldn't have been more supportive, and the technical support was awesome, it was one of the more difficult areas to get on board. Because of the software and the labeling of books it took a couple of years to complete the changeover in media." In contrast, many teachers "Lexiled" their classroom libraries—adding Lexile measures to all of their materials—over the summer. Media department staff members in each school were deputized as Lexile and SRI trainers to assist teachers and administrators with the transition.

In retrospect, Sidden visualized a more efficient way to make the changeover throughout the district, words of wisdom she was eager to pass along to other educators. "It would have been really cool to get a Lexile team together—staff or parent volunteers—to go from school to school and re-label all the materials."

Changes = Improvements

With the switch to a Lexile-based student reading program complete, the district continues to hold meetings and workshops for its teachers to help them maximize results, although, Sidden noted, "What works best is always word of mouth, teachers telling each other about great results." In turn, teachers motivate the students by offering free movie passes or other rewards for achieving level goals. "At CC Wright Elementary they have medals for every certain number of Lexile points achieved, which are given out during assembly," Sidden said. "As the kids receive medals, they keep piling them on, more and more, like Mr. T. It's a big hit."

Lexiles are also a big hit with the schools' administration, since it's now an easy task to keep track of students' progress. "Every time you want a Lexile score, you administer a (Scholastic Reading) Inventory," said Sidden. "The beauty of Lexiles is that

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when principals monitor the program through their own computers, they can see how much progress a class or an individual is making.” It has also made it easier to communicate with parents about progress. Now, armed with information about how Lexiles work, parents can track their children’s scores and progress through the SRIs to the End-of-Grade tests.

The impact of the switch to Lexiles in Wilkes County went beyond the standardized test results—it also changed the district’s approach to curriculum. The district’s testing coordinator took things a step further and created a county-wide average Lexile and used it to develop reading lists for the third, fourth and fifth grades. The results brought some surprises, Sidden noted. “In some cases, books that, say, a fourth-grade teacher wanted were actually no longer challenging enough for the average fourth grader.” That initiative will be ongoing.

In addition to further targeting reading material for classrooms, the changeover to Lexiles also caused the implementation of “literacy libraries” in each school, offering multiple copies of titles for guided reading, which ensures that kids receive materials that match their reading levels.

The district’s efforts have paid off, Sidden said. “I have seen the circulation of books increase in the media center, and I’ve seen the enjoyment of reading increase, as well as the pride of classrooms.” Several schools now hold a Push Week, in which classes vie to read the most books. “They battle with neighboring teachers, trying to read so many books in a week. The kids really enjoy that.”

The Wilkes County School District has 13 elementary schools serving a population of just over 66,000 residents. Wilkes County, N.C., is a rural county in the northwest part of the state.

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