



**A Line in the Sand: Turning Around Early Literacy  
in One of the Nation's Largest School Districts**

Case Study

## **In 2008, a large, urban school district confronted an enormous literacy problem.**

Year after year, though children were entering kindergarten with skill levels higher than those of children in other large, urban districts, by the end of 2nd grade, this district's children were performing at significantly lower levels than their peers in other districts. In the lowest performing schools, every day of ineffective instruction worsened an already dire situation.

Classroom observation and literacy assessments had made clear that in many cases, at-risk students required help they weren't receiving: they needed personalized instruction in small groups to teach exactly what was needed, when students needed it, and until they understood the material.

The district drew a line in the sand, committing to reversing the trend and delivering the kind of high-quality instruction that could immediately improve student learning.

The challenge of addressing widely varying student needs was compounded by the range of teaching expertise across classrooms. While some K–3 teachers had vast experience, knowledge, and proven skills, many did not. The district was going to need to implement solutions that could both leverage expertise where it existed and rapidly strengthen many teachers' abilities to deliver effective, differentiated reading instruction. Consequently, professional supports for teachers needed to be highly personalized as well.

The most common approaches to providing differentiated intervention at scale with an unevenly trained and skilled teacher corps clearly would not work. One-day workshops led by outside "gurus" couldn't provide educators with the specific and targeted development that they needed. Software that turns over instruction from a teacher to a computer would fail to develop lasting professional

expertise, and, as indicated by a federal study<sup>1</sup>, would likely deliver no real gains.

The program this district used addressed all these needs. It:

- ▶ provided precisely targeted and personalized, teacher-delivered intervention instruction to students based on detailed data;
- ▶ provided highly personalized professional supports to teachers to rapidly enhance their delivery skills;
- ▶ ensured that when instruction began to drift from its objective, alarms would sound and action would be taken to keep proper implementation on track.

## **Key Turnaround Components**

▶ **New technology for assessment, instruction, and teacher support:** Burst®:Reading was implemented in the district's most needy schools. The technology behind Burst:Reading uses formative assessment data to organize small groups of students based on shared skill needs and generates 9-day sequences of lessons appropriate for each group. Teachers deliver the intervention, and on the 10th day, a brief progress monitoring assessment is delivered and the cycle begins again with a new, data-driven 9-day lesson sequence. From the start, every teacher was able to match instruction precisely to students' needs, every day. Simultaneously, teachers developed and deepened their own knowledge and skills through the experience of using the Burst program and teaching the curriculum.

▶ **Expert, differentiated, whatever-it-takes professional development:** Wireless Generation built an efficient, effective, intensive professional development program that recognized the wide variance in teacher abilities. For some teachers, this meant a few days of learning about literacy development, assessment tools, or small-group

instruction, with a focus on their own school and student data, not hypothetical cases. For others, it meant side-by-side coaching in classrooms. For all schools, it meant tracking the quality and consistency of assessment and instruction, and stepping in where needed.

▶ **Commitment to the institutional changes required to develop and sustain good instructional practices:**

Wireless Generation worked closely with the district at every level to identify potential obstacles and develop a comprehensive change management roadmap. Unprecedented visibility into real-time performance and fidelity of implementation data enabled the district’s leadership to maintain open communication with participants at every level and reinforce the priority of everyone’s efforts toward targeted instruction and student growth.

**The Results?**

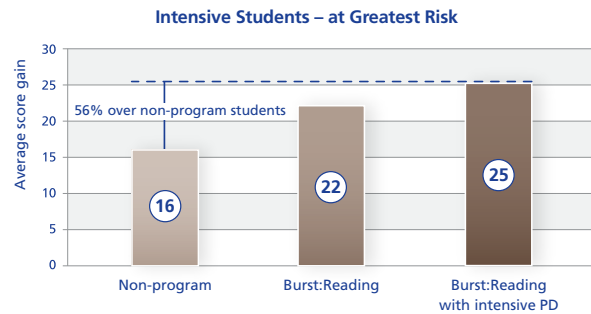
After just six months, students in the program gained significantly more key, foundational literacy skills than students not in the program — building on the skills with which they entered kindergarten and taking a critical step toward reversing the 2nd-grade slide.

Over one semester (from Middle-of-Year through End-of-Year benchmarks), kindergarten and 1st-grade Burst:Reading students, especially those whose teachers were part of the intensive professional development program, gained significantly more on key reading skills than students not in the program. The students in the groups represented in the charts were identified as in need of intensive intervention — those at greatest risk — by the DIBELS® (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) assessment.

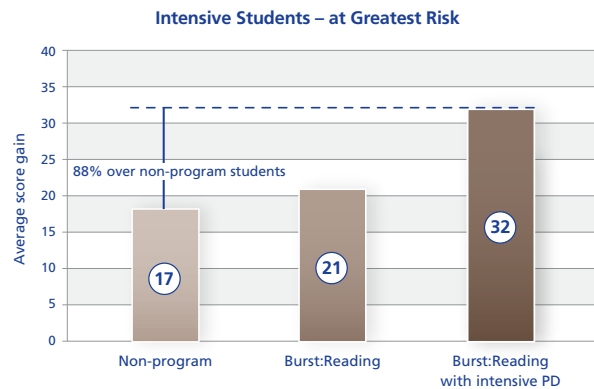
This targeted focus on instruction at the classroom level, including the tools, support, and cultivation of a data-motivated culture, was one of the most important pieces of the district’s overall reform effort.

**Reversing the Trend**

**Kindergarten DIBELS PSF (Phonological Awareness) Score Gains**



**First Grade DIBELS NWF (Alphabetical Principle) Score Gains**



○ = Mean Gain

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