

## **Four Steps to Reading Intervention Prevention**

*A Pennsylvania elementary school's blended learning approach to reading intervention helps its struggling readers learn to love literacy*

By Linda Baker

For many students, learning to read doesn't come easily. Today, we know that flashcards and vocabulary tests aren't the answer for everyone. At Joseph Ferderbar Elementary in the Neshaminy School District (PA), we implemented a blended learning model for our reading intervention program that includes 1:1 instruction, small group activities, whole-class instruction, and an engaging digital curriculum. We also created more opportunities for parents to get involved and support their child's learning outside of school. Our vision is to ensure that each child is a proficient reader before entering third grade, preventing the need for additional intervention and setting them up for success down the road.

After implementing a district-wide blended learning model last year, we saw enormous growth in a majority of our students, especially among struggling or reluctant readers. We found that focusing on foundational reading skills that connect written text to spoken language has proven most effective. Using an explicit, systematic, multisensory approach provided our students with the ability to bring what they've learned into the classroom, successfully bridging the gap between intervention and our ELA curriculum. Here are the four steps that made our vision a reality.

### **Step 1: Training Teachers and Students to Decode**

Until four years ago, educators at each school developed intervention materials based on best practices. The need for consistency led to a search for a better, more uniform way to deliver instruction to students throughout the district so that students who changed schools would have the same experience regardless of what classroom they were in. A small team of teachers attended trainings offered by [Reading Horizons](#), and quickly realized how powerful the "decoding" and phonics approach could be for their students. Since that first encounter, we've expanded our use of the curriculum to all seven of Neshaminy's elementary schools.

At Ferderbar Elementary, nearly 20% of struggling K-2 students spend at least 30 minutes a day, five days a week in small-group reading intervention. That's in addition to daily classroom lessons that teach students new concepts in reading and literacy. For reading intervention, we use a daily "pull-out" model. Reading intervention students leave the traditional classroom during independent work time (or what we call "The Daily 5") and focus on mastering one to two skills per week. These phonetic and decoding skills allow even our youngest students to "crack the code" of the English language to become more successful readers.

[Research](#) shows that when students receive systematic direct instruction that is easy to follow, accurate decoding and fluency become second nature and guessing is dramatically reduced. The Reading Horizons method incorporates a unique marking

system as part of a visual, auditory, and kinesthetic approach to help students decode multisyllable words on their own. This is where the blended model really takes off! Students are empowered to make the connections they need in order to work independently on the software. When they are ready, students can participate in whole-class, small-group, or one-on-one instruction with their teachers, leading to more meaningful interactions with text and improved comprehension.

## **Step 2: Active and Personalized Intervention Sessions**

An intervention classroom at Joseph Ferderbar looks and sounds subtly different than the traditional school setting. We've found that students learn better when standing and looking up at what they're doing as opposed to looking down at a worksheet or iPad. By using wall-mounted whiteboards, students can speak, write, hear, and see the words, all while having fun. This model works well for small groups to get students up and moving and actively engaged in activities that showcase what they've learned.

When marking and decoding words, students are urged to "stay on the road," which simply means to begin marking under the word from left to right, then up and around the end of the word in order to "prove" the vowel sound. To encourage this, each student has a personalized "driver's license" with his or her photograph and name on it. The licenses provide motivation for students to "stay on the road" and create a challenge for doing well during sessions.

Last year, Joseph Ferderbar adopted the digital platform *Reading Horizons Discovery*® as the backbone of our blended learning model. In addition to the 30 minutes a day spent on direct instruction, intervention students spend at least one hour per week using the software. The digital curriculum allows students to access lessons, vocabulary, and instructional games targeted to their individual needs and to use what they've learned to read decodable text at their reading level in the online library. Students are often so engaged in these fun activities that they forget they're learning!

## **Step 3: Inspiring Parent Involvement**

We've found that students who practice outside of school develop fluency and comprehension at an increased rate, allowing them to feel more confident when reading and writing. We involve our parents by encouraging them to help their child use the digital curriculum at home and over the summer. During the school year, students are sent home with folders that include skill words and sentences as well as decodable "little books" to reinforce classroom instruction. Additionally, parents have the choice to attend workshops our district hosts where they are introduced to the marking system that their children use and learn to decode words on whiteboards. Parents have shared that after attending these workshops, they had a better understanding of how to help their children at home, and felt more prepared to support their children's academic progress.

## **Step 4: Measuring Progress**

Today, our students are excited to engage in reading and we have seen the difference this makes in their progress. Frequent informal and periodic benchmark assessments give us the information to deliver effective instruction and the data provided by the software is invaluable in identifying the needs of individual students and prescribing targeted support. The approach is working: Ten to 15% of students entering the intervention program at the start of the school year were able to “graduate” and transition back to the traditional classroom by January. We believe the blended model is the best way to address a variety of learning styles and prevent “summer slide” and the necessity for reading intervention later by providing the support that students need to become better readers now.

*Linda Baker is a veteran reading specialist at Joseph Ferderbar Elementary in the Neshaminy School District in Bucks County, PA. Follow the district on Twitter: [@Neshaminy SD](#).*