

## Focus on phonics has increased reading test scores

***Editor's Note:** Systematically aligning reading assessment and instruction with reading research is a daunting task. Curricula are purchased. Philosophies are set. Heels are dug in. WY Lit would like to recognize the leadership and bravery of the Wyoming educators who are pioneering this complex and emotional process of change. We invited a few of these leaders to guest author our next two articles. We hope this inspires other Wyoming educators to share their reading instruction successes with us. We appreciate all of our dedicated, competent Wyoming teachers.*

Improving reading instruction in schools is an essential, but difficult task. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), nearly 60% of Wyoming 4<sup>th</sup> graders are below proficient in reading. Everyone can agree that students who can read and write well achieve higher levels of success in life. Creating those readers and writers should be the mission of our public school system. How do we achieve this goal? How do we sort through the many voices that promise answers to such a complex problem?

Weston County School District #1 made a commitment to that goal in 2012. Over the past eight years, a focus on intensive professional development, the use of evidence-based reading instruction and materials, and support from all levels of the school system have achieved impressive results. Our first step was to educate our staff in the science of reading. We hired Dr. Carol Tolman, a national reading consultant, to present to our staff on the science of reading- how the brain works to read. We were blown away by how much we did not know! Overwhelmingly, teachers wondered why they had not learned this in college. The information was new to most of us and we made the commitment to this initiative as a district. We began a multiyear process to educate our staff at high levels in the science of reading. We brought the professional development into the district, rather than send staff members out to conferences. We wanted to ensure that each staff member received the information they needed to make good instructional decisions in reading. Over the ensuing years, our staff has had sessions with the national trainer, local workshops and local data meetings.

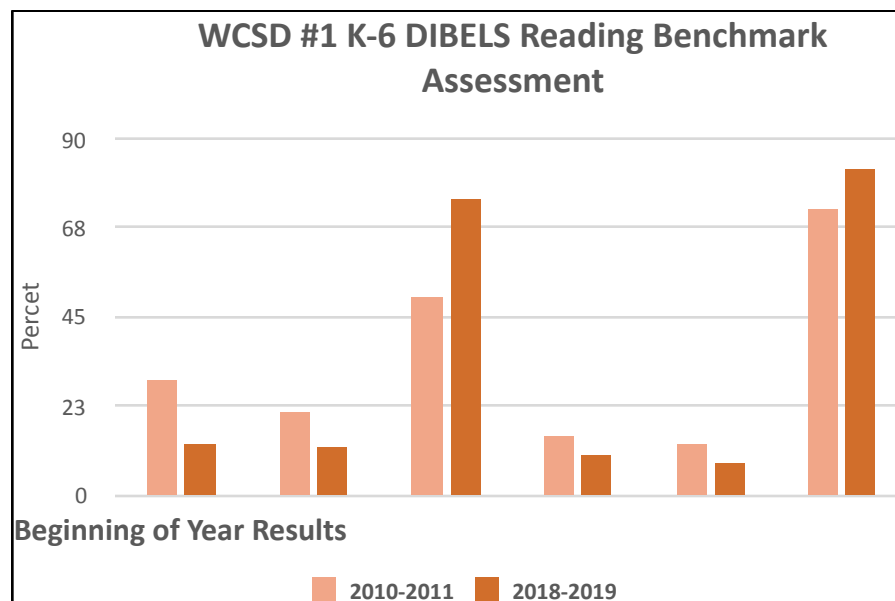
Several staff members have become certified trainers in LETRS (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling) in order to carry on the initiative to ensure that new staff receive the same scientifically based instruction in reading. We trained everyone onsite on a rotational schedule to ensure we are building the knowledge capacity of our staff. We often opened these trainings to everyone to get refreshers on and see with a different lens. The first time the information is shared, it is often overwhelming. As we revisit topics, such as vocabulary instruction, progression of phonics skills, spelling instruction and intervention data, we have discussions about best practices that help us apply our knowledge to specific situations.

As we have learned more about the science of reading, we have ensured that teachers use materials and practices that are based in solid science. As new evidence has come to our attention, we have changed or enhanced instruction to reflect that science. As we learned that reading researchers agree that explicit, systematic instruction in phonics is essential to building readers, we shifted instruction to provide explicit phonics instruction to all students. We examined the phonics instruction in our reading series and added materials, instructional strategies and intervention for struggling readers. We identified a problem with “summer slide” for our students.

When the research of Dr. David Kilpatrick pointed to the great importance of phonology as a key to preventing that, we infused more phonology into our daily whole group instruction in K- 2 and into our Walk to Learn model of intervention. The results have been very positive. As we selected materials for our language arts adoption, the staff used their deep knowledge of reading to select materials that reflect a more intensive level of rigor for our students, knowing that we have the knowledge to scaffold and enhance the material as needed.

We view reading as a mission for all members of our staff. We use a Walk to Learn model for intervention, which requires involvement of all staff members, teachers, paraprofessionals and Special Ed staff. Our knowledgeable staff pours over student data to make instructional plans for whole group, small group and individual students. This has allowed us to provide skills intervention for all our students in a small group setting. The commitment of our administration, curriculum director, speech pathologist, instructional facilitators, teachers and paraprofessionals has kept this initiative purposeful and intensive.

Our data has shown dramatic improvement in our reading scores over time. We have used the



DIBELS benchmark assessment as one tool to inform our instruction. In 2014-2015, 69% of our sixth graders were proficient on DIBELS at the end of the year. In 2018-19, 85% of 6<sup>th</sup> graders were proficient on this same measurement tool. This has been a consistent result for several years. We have seen

the number of intensive and strategic students drop over time, as seen on the chart below.

Another tool used to determine the longitudinal effectiveness of our K-12 system is the state summative assessment; we have two consecutive years of WYTOPP data that were analyzed. Two categories to highlight are the percent of students who are proficient or advanced in “All Students” and “Free & Reduced Lunch Students” as shown below.

ALL STUDENTS				FREE & REDUCED LUNCH			
Grade	2018-2019 Proficiency Comparison to the State Average	2017-2018 Proficiency Comparison to the State Average	2-Year Average	Grade	2018-2019 Proficiency Comparison to the State Average	2017-2018 Proficiency Comparison to the State Average	2-Year Average
3	13.67	9.27	11.47	3	23.03	11.53	17.28
4	4.11	2.72	3.415	4	6.93	-6.29	0.32
5	9.9	3.45	6.675	5	8.29	13.32	10.805
6	5.21	2.79	4	6	12.52	-2.85	4.835
7	-6.8	9.15	1.175	7	-1.79	7.65	2.93
8	9.12	3.8	6.46	8	17.96	2.47	10.215
9	12.25	10.4	11.325	9	12.79	0.34	6.565
10	-0.13	12.71	6.29	10	-7.15	10.54	1.695

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade WYTOPP results have consistently shown statistically significant positive results in both categories over the past two years. Do we still have reading challenges we are addressing?

Absolutely! We want to see our results on the WY-TOPP mirror what we are seeing in our DIBELS results. We have adopted rigorous new material with that end in sight. The story of our journey is best depicted in this [short video](#).

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