



Excellence in Teaching and Learning: Literacy

"In the Near North District School Board, we believe in the power of public education to improve the lives of students, make our communities stronger and the future brighter." ~ *Multi-Year Strategic Plan, 2021-26*

More Info:
www.nearnorthschools.ca

Preface

This document provides a “point in time” summary of the Near North District School Board’s current literacy plan, response to the OHRC Right to Read Report, and the subsequent commitments made by the Ontario Ministry of Education, including the release of a new Language Curriculum in the Spring of 2023.

Highlights include responsive strategic planning, proactive investments in evidence-based, systematic literacy resources and assessment tools, scaffolded professional learning activities, and tiered approaches to literacy intervention.

“Researchers now estimate that 95 percent of all children can be taught to read by the end of first grade (with future achievement constrained only by students' reasoning and listening comprehension abilities).” ~ Dr. Louisa Moats

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#UntilEveryChildCanRead



Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC): Right to Read Report

The Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) released its report on human rights issues affecting students with reading disabilities Feb. 28, 2022, calling for critical changes to Ontario's approach to early reading, in areas such as curriculum and instruction, screening, reading interventions, accommodations and professional assessments.

The Right to Read inquiry determined that Ontario's public education system is failing students with reading disabilities (such as dyslexia) and many others, by not using evidence-based approaches to teach them to read.

The Right to Read inquiry report emphasizes that learning to read is not a privilege but a basic and essential human right. The report includes 157 recommendations to the Ministry of Education, school boards and faculties of education to help dismantle barriers that affect the right to learn to read. The report combines research, human rights expertise and lived experience of students, parents and educators to provide recommendations on curriculum and instruction, early screening, reading interventions, accommodation, professional assessments and systemic issues.

- OHRC [News release](#)
- Right to Read: [Executive summary \(PDF\)](#)



Provincial Context: Literacy Learning

In February 2022, the ministry committed to taking immediate action to improve student literacy as part of its response to the Ontario Human Rights Commission's (OHRC) Right to Read Report, including commitments to revising the elementary Language and Français curriculum and issuing new de-streamed Grade 9 English and Français courses for implementation in September 2023.

In preparation for the implementation of these new curricula, the ministry has encouraged school boards to take a proactive approach to ensure that teachers are supported in this transition during the upcoming school year.

These commitments also included a focus on helping educators reach young students sooner to support the development of reading skills, including the release of Effective Early Reading Instruction: A Teacher's Guide in English and French last Spring, to support evidence-based effective instruction in early reading. It provides teachers with information on foundational early reading skills, an understanding of how these skills develop in young children, and examples of evidence-based systematic and explicit instructional strategies to support students to become proficient and fluent readers.



District Response: Strategic Planning and Priorities

The Near North District School Board is well positioned to respond to the recommendations from the OHRC Right to Read inquiry, including proposed revisions to the Language curriculum. In fact, this work has already begun.

During the 2019-20 school year, in anticipation of the OHRC's release of the Right to Read report, a central team of Program and Special Education staff worked collaboratively to identify key priorities, actions, and performance measures that have informed our district's plan to support improved literacy outcomes for all students. Key objectives include:

1. **Engage staff in professional learning** that will align classroom instruction with research/evidence-based practices - to grow educators' capacity to provide systematic and explicit literacy instruction.
2. **Initiate strategic investments in literacy resources** and learning materials - to facilitate research informed, evidence-based practices and differentiated literacy learning across the K-12 continuum.
3. **Provide evidence-based assessment tools** that help educators identify risk early - to identify and implement universal screening tools to determine which students are at-risk of reading difficulties.
4. **Implement timely and effective literacy intervention programs** - to ensure timely and tiered approaches to literacy intervention.

Professional Learning to Promote Evidence-Based, Explicit and Systematic Reading Instruction:

Members of the Teaching and Learning team have proactively provided teachers with professional learning experiences related to foundational early reading skills, understanding of how these skills develop in young children, and adopting evidence-based systematic and explicit instructional strategies to support students in becoming proficient and fluent readers.

Evidence-based systematic and explicit instructional approaches are critical elements of what is known as “structured literacy”. Staff continue to participate in professional learning activities (virtual and in-person) that focus on facilitating explicit instruction in 5 key components of reading instruction, including: Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Vocabulary, Fluency and Comprehension.

In May 2020, a team of central staff (inspired by Lead Speech Language Pathologist, Kara Macie) initiated a series of professional learning webinars, to enhance comprehensive, evidence-based approaches to literacy instruction and intervention. Over 300 educators attended the live webinars. Webinars continued to support literacy capacity building throughout the pandemic. The recordings have subsequently been viewed 1556 times.

During the last week of August 2022, NNDSB invited staff and coterminous boards to participate in the Summer Learning Literacy Institute. Internationally acclaimed literacy researchers Dr. David Kilpatrick and Joan Sedita (*founder of the “Keys to Literacy” organization*) complemented a diverse range of local and provincial presenters throughout the 2-day literacy conference. The institute was held at West Ferris Secondary School in North Bay and educators from all three regions of the district participated. Educator response to the Institute was incredibly positive.

“I wish every teacher I work with could be here, it has just been amazing - all of it!”
Elementary Teacher, North Region

Creating a Culture of Continuous Professional Learning

Board-wide Professional Learning

Throughout the 2022-23 school year, learning activities during professional learning days (PD days) have provided opportunities for all staff to develop their understanding of systematic, evidence-based literacy instruction and assessment. Aligned with provincial priorities, learning topics have focused on the following:

- evidence-based, systematic and explicit literacy instruction - *structured literacy*;
- research informed assessment tools (including screening tools);
- supporting students in Grade 9 de-streamed contexts.

To support the implementation of the new Grade 9 de-streamed English course, secondary English teachers have launched a “Subject Council” learning community to foster a deep understanding of culturally responsive approaches to learning, differentiated instruction and assessment and evaluation practices.

Facilitated Classroom-Embedded Professional Learning

During the spring budget process, the NNDSB prioritized funding to support hiring 4 full-time, school-based literacy facilitators for the 2022-23 school year. These roles have been instrumental in facilitating classroom embedded professional learning related to evidence-based systematic and explicit approaches to literacy instruction and intervention. Working under the supervision of the Student Achievement and Well-being Principals, School-Based Literacy Facilitators have been assigned to schools in response to local contexts and student needs. As instructional leaders, the School-Based Literacy Facilitators have enabled deep collaborative learning and implementation of evidence-based approaches to literacy instruction and intervention.

Learning Through Inquiry

Increasingly, educators are taking ownership of this learning and are now engaged in teacher-led collaborative inquiry. Fall 2022, teachers across the district were invited to submit applications to the Learning and Innovation Fund for Teachers (LIFT). 21 LIFT projects have been approved for the 2022-23 school year – 17 of which have a literacy focus. These projects are designed to deepen teacher inquiry and learning related to evidence-based approaches to literacy instruction.

“The School-Based Literacy Facilitator (SBLF) has supported the roll out and implementation of meaningful assessment tools which enable us to use data to drive intervention and instruction and to purposefully monitor the growth of our students and to determine where more intensive intervention is necessary. This work has also allowed us to determine specific areas of need for our students and to plan purposeful next steps for all of our students, whether it be for intervention or classroom instruction.”

Elementary Principal, West Region

Evidence-based Reading Assessments to Support Early Screening and Progress Monitoring

Evidence-based screening/assessment is the most effective way to identify struggling and at-risk readers. It is an objective and measurable way to improve student outcomes and reduce bias in assessment.

During the 2021-22 school year, staff in several schools participated in limited scope pilot projects to explore and evaluate a range of reading assessments, including universal screening tools. Following the pilot phase, classroom educators, system administrators and literacy leads determined which of the evidence-based tools were most effective and efficient in defining the needs of learners. Subsequently, the district purchased Acadience Reading K-6 and 7-8, and Core Literacy – Multiple Measures to support access to evidence-based assessments in all schools and classrooms.

Acadience Reading K-6:

Acadience Reading K-6 is a universal screening and progress monitoring assessment that measures the acquisition of early literacy skills from kindergarten through sixth grade. Acadience Reading is comprised of six brief measures that function as indicators of the essential skills that every child must master to become a proficient reader. These measures are used to regularly monitor the development of early literacy skills in order to provide timely instructional support and prevent the occurrence of later reading difficulties. Acadience Universal Screening and progress monitoring tools are now available in all schools. Acadience allows educators to identify students who may be at risk for reading difficulties and allows them to monitor individual student progress or response to intervention by tracking the targeted core literacy skill development to ensure growth.

Beginning in 2023-24, the ministry has indicated it will require all students in publicly funded schools in year 2 of kindergarten to Grade 2 to be screened for reading twice a year using evidence-based early screening tools. In preparation for this expectation, central staff and School-Based Literacy Facilitators have been working with educators in all elementary schools to implement the Acadience K-6, 7&8 Reading assessment tools. During the fall of the 2022-23 school year, 2364 assessments were administered.



Core Literacy, Multiple Measures:

The Core Literacy, Multiple Measures resource provides K-12 educators with a collection of tools to support the comprehensive assessment of skills related to reading. These assessments are diagnostic in nature and can help identify why a student is having reading difficulty, inform precise instruction, and monitor progress throughout a course of instruction.

Many educators, including Literacy Intervention teachers, now use the CORE Phonics Survey (one of the “multiple measures”) to inform instruction and observations of growth. The CORE Phonics Survey assesses the phonics and phonics-related skills that have a high rate of application in beginning reading. Each Survey has two sections: Alphabet Skills and Letter Sounds and Reading and Decoding Skills. The sections are further divided into parts. Some of the parts contain lines of real words and pseudo- words for the student to decode. Pseudowords, or made-up words, are included since the student must use decoding skills to correctly pronounce these words and cannot have memorized them.

IDAPEL:

The authors of Acadience Reading recently announced the limited release of IDAPEL for research partners during the 2022-2023 school year. IDAPEL is a series of French-language formative measures designed to assess the early literacy skills of students learning to read in French in grades K through 5. IDAPEL assesses the fundamental early reading skills of phonemic awareness, alphabetic principle, accuracy and fluency with connected text, and text comprehension.

French Immersion educators in the NNDSB have embraced the opportunity to be part of the research release. A group of teachers representing all French Immersion programs are scheduled to receive training in February 2023. The measures are time efficient and easy to use, and invaluable for progress monitoring student skill, and for evaluating student response to intervention.

Professional learning opportunities and resources continue to be developed in support of the implementation of these assessment tools.

Strategic Investments in Evidence-based, Systematic Literacy Resources

“Systematic and explicit instruction of early reading skills supports students’ development of reading comprehension and fluency. Systematic instruction refers to concepts and materials that are taught through a carefully planned scope and sequence, using decodable texts. It starts with basic concepts and progresses to more complex concepts broken down into small, manageable sections. Explicit instruction refers to teaching that is clear, direct and purposeful.”

Effective Early Reading Instruction: A Guide for Teachers, 2022

To support educators in implementing systematic and explicit instruction, the Near North District School Board has made significant investments in instructional tools and resources aligned with ministry priorities and the OHRC recommendations.

Phonological and Phonemic Awareness

Our district has purchased the Heggerty Phonemic Awareness Curriculum for each classroom, Kindergarten to Grade 2. Each level of the Heggerty Phonemic Awareness Curriculum provides a scope and sequence of daily lessons, focusing on eight phonemic awareness skills, along with two additional activities to develop letter and sound recognition, and language awareness. Lessons are designed for a classroom setting, and only take 8-12 minutes.

- The Kindergarten Curriculum, provides students with instruction in phonological awareness, progressing to the phoneme level through language play activities. It covers all consonants, short vowels, digraphs, blends, and rime patterns, with hearing words with long vowels being introduced in the later weeks of this curriculum.
- The Primary Curriculum, also known as “the Yellow Book”, goes further into long vowels and introduces R-controlled vowels, special vowel sounds, and multisyllabic words.
- “Bridge the Gap” is a series of systematic phonemic awareness intervention lessons for students in 2nd grade and above. The lessons can be used in small groups or with individual students who struggle to decode words automatically.



Alphabet Knowledge, Phonics and Word study

All primary classrooms now have access to Flyleaf Publishing resources. Flyleaf's decodable books provide beginning and struggling readers with abundant opportunities to transfer their newly acquired phonics knowledge to meaningful, engaging, and complex narratives, informational texts, and poetry. Flyleaf Publishing has created research-based instructional materials that support teachers in explicitly guiding students to develop the skills and habits of competent readers using a clearly defined scope and sequence (systematic, cumulative progression of foundational phonics skills). The decodable books authentically develop foundational skills and further enable evidence-based approaches to instruction. This resource is currently being used as both an instructional tool and an intervention resource.

Having decodable texts in a primary classroom for students to practice their decoding skills is an essential part of a structured literacy program. Decodable books consolidate the learning following explicit instruction of the code. These books provide students with the opportunity to read material that they can decode successfully versus using cueing and guessing strategies.

Additional titles purchased for the Primary division and to support intervention include:

- Dandelion Launchers
- Whole Phonics books
- SyllaSense

Furthermore, "Phonic Books Catch Up Decodable Readers" are now available to support students aged 8-14. These books explore topics appropriate and engaging for adolescent learners while developing foundational literacy skills.

"Decodable books and text contain words made of letter-sounds, spelling and morphological patterns (e.g. prefixes & suffixes) that a student has been explicitly taught."

(International Dyslexia Association, Ontario)

Phonics

The UFLI Foundations is an explicit and systematic basic/advanced phonics program that teaches students the foundational skills necessary for proficient reading. It follows a carefully developed scope and sequence designed to ensure that students systematically acquire each skill needed and learn to apply each skill with automaticity and confidence. The program is designed to be used for core instruction in the primary grades or for intervention with struggling students in any grade. This resource is now available in all schools.

In the classroom:

"...all Kindergarten to Grade 8 classrooms in my three focus schools are now implementing Acadience screening tools and using the data to determine next steps and guide instruction. Teacher implementation and confidence using board provided literacy materials, including Heggerty phonemic awareness lessons and Flyleaf decodable books, has grown tremendously over the course of the first term and is having a strong impact as students are being explicitly taught foundational reading skills. On a regular basis, educators have shared how these tools are impacting their instruction and allowing them to better understand and meet each student's unique learning needs."

Rebekah Felsman, School-Based Literacy Facilitator - West Region

"Flyleaf has been a wonderful addition to our classroom. I have noticed students become more confident readers. We start our day with a lesson and students are excited to learn and engage with the letters and words. It is evident that as my students become more proficient, the engagement level rises and there has been a noticeable excitement in their reading. Personally, I have noticed an increase in decoding words, enhancing both reading and writing skills."

Amanda Begin, Elementary Teacher - North Region

"As educators navigate new instructional approaches, implement assessment tools, moderate student work, interpret student data, and review relevant resources, they trust in the support of the School Based Literacy Facilitator to work alongside them as a collaborator. Student and teacher learning is prioritized every day alongside the School based Literacy Facilitator through co-planning, co-teaching, shared reflection and of course, through the celebration of progress. These are key conditions for improved outcomes for our learners."

Amanda Meighan, Elementary Principal - North Region

4

Ensuring Timely and Effective Reading Interventions

Early Intervention

Research suggests that the majority of children who enter kindergarten and elementary school, who may be at-risk for reading failure, can learn to read if they are identified early and provided with systematic, explicit, and intensive instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension strategies. The literature further suggests that the interventions that yield the best results are those that are delivered early along-side evidence informed classroom instruction, rather than in later years as remediation.

Building capacity to support systematic and explicit approaches to literacy intervention

During the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years, Literacy Intervention teachers engaged in professional learning related to evidence-based, systematic interventions. What was initially a focus on post-pandemic learning recovery evolved into a critical inquiry in response to the OHRC Right to Read report. Over the course of the learning, Literacy Intervention educators have demonstrated increased confidence and efficacy. Artifacts and resources from this initiative have been collected and posted to the NNDSB online Professional Learning Portal and now act as a learning resource for staff across the district.

Critical Investments and Resource Development

Critical investments in literacy intervention resources have enabled students in all schools to benefit. In January 2022, NNDSB staff launched a new Literacy Intervention Manual aligned with evidence-based systematic and explicit approaches to literacy intervention. Furthermore, the district has increased literacy intervention staffing allocations by 18% for the 2022-23 school year. The increased capacity will continue to support learning recovery and renewal and enhance efforts to realize the recommendations from the OHRC Right to Read inquiry.

Lexia PowerUp Literacy

Additional investments, including technology-enabled literacy tools, have been purchased to support developing readers in the Junior and Intermediate grades. Lexia PowerUp Literacy, (Grades 6-12) is designed to enhance core literacy instruction for non-proficient readers. PowerUp Literacy accelerates the development of both fundamental literacy skills and higher order thinking skills through personalized learning paths. PowerUp Literacy addresses the instructional needs of a wide range of students, from struggling to nearly proficient readers, by identifying skill gaps and providing personalized, systematic instruction in Word Study, Grammar, and Comprehension. This explicit instruction prepares students to comprehend and engage with complex texts across a range of genres. To date, 554 Lexia licenses have been allocated to schools and are available to Grade 9 English students in all NNDSB secondary schools.

LEARNstyle Corrective Reading Program

In Partnership with LEARNstyle, the NNDSB has offered targeted virtual tutoring supports, including Corrective Reading to 36 intermediate division students. The Corrective Reading Program is a Tier 3 intervention (intensive individual instruction) for students who need support with decoding, fluency and comprehension. In this program, students meet one-on-one with skilled Reading Intervention Coaches and work through a set of lessons using direct instruction, where content is taught to mastery. Each student is screened and assessed prior to beginning with Corrective Reading to allow for an individualized program.

Before and After School Literacy Programs

Near North District School Board has invited all schools to access Tutoring Supports funding to initiate or extend learning opportunities that engage students who have been impacted by learning disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. 63 teacher tutors have been hired to support before and after school literacy and math programs. Tutors have been trained to use new evidence-based systematic and explicit literacy tools. During Term 1 of the 2022-23 school year, 1018 literacy-focused tutoring sessions were delivered to students in all regions of the district.

Teacher Tutors have been provided with data collection tools to support monitoring student participation and progress towards academic goals. Both quantitative and qualitative measures will be used to assess the effectiveness of tutoring activities and support reporting processes at both the district and Ministry level.



Moving Forward

Near North District School Board's literacy plan has identified clearly defined objectives and actions that will improve student literacy outcomes and provide foundational skills for academic and professional success.

Over the past three school years, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on students in the Near North District School board, and across the globe. Our district remains focused on improving literacy outcomes for all students. The recommendations from the OHRC Right to Read report have inspired changes in how we teach reading and how we support students who are experiencing difficulties reading.

The NNDSB literacy plan has identified clearly defined objectives and actions that will improve student literacy outcomes and provide foundational skills for academic and professional success.

The impact of the literacy plan is increasingly visible in School Improvement Planning (goals and monitoring), as more schools are referencing key learning and measures. With consistency, teachers are implementing evidence-based practices and structured literacy activities across classrooms and schools.

Our district is very much engaged in a learning journey, guided by the understanding that reading is a skill fundamental to the success of our students.

We wish to acknowledge staff at all levels of our organization, who continue to engage in this learning and embrace this challenge.

"We are beginning to see the impact that these approaches are having on our students through observations and successes they are celebrating within the classroom.

But we also recognize, we have only just begun to scratch the surface of the work that needs to be done..."

*Elementary Principal,
North Region*