

CASE STUDY

Using Structured Literacy to Improve Reading Proficiency

Cumberland County Public Schools, North Carolina



A Military Community

As the fifth largest district in North Carolina, Cumberland County Public Schools are also notable for being an adjacent community to Fort Bragg, one of the largest US Army installations in the world, with 54,000 military personnel stationed there. As a result, local schools have a diverse student body with one quarter of the students attached to military families. Tours of duty often conflict with schools' academic schedules, disrupting learning for many students and school staff.

With an already mobile community as its foundation, followed by two years of disrupted learning due to the pandemic, managing school was difficult for a district with one of the highest poverty rates in the state. "These last two years have been rough," said Catherine LeCleir-Salas, Instructional Specialist for K-5 exceptional students. "Honestly, our focus has been as much on keeping our teachers on board as it has on implementing programs with fidelity."

48,796

students

26%

13,196 in military families

3,300

teachers

53

elementary schools

68.8%

free/reduced lunch



A Stable Reading Program

“It’s been a strange first semester this year,” said LeCleur-Salas. “Everyone is different, and it took until almost December for everyone to settle in.” Not that any school will return to what it was before the pandemic, but LeCleur-Salas says that getting students and families back to a school routine makes it seem more normal. “The kids want to be back and learn in school,” she said. “Getting back on track is now our goal.”

One of the bright spots for Cumberland County has been the stability of their reading program SPIRE, which has carried them through in-person, remote, hybrid, and virtual learning. They previously used Wilson Reading until teachers reported that Wilson wasn’t meeting their needs in a range of categories, including reading comprehension. The district had already been using SPIRE as their Tier 3 intervention tool

for years. They decided to replace Wilson by looking for another Orton-Gillingham-based program that was scripted, while allowing them some instructional creativity. Orton-Gillingham is a direct, explicit, multisensory, structured, sequential, diagnostic, and prescriptive way to teach literacy.

The Orton-Gillingham method is also an ideal approach to fulfill the **North Carolina Excellent Public Schools Act of 2021** which requires all state Pre-K and elementary teachers to be trained in the science of reading and to use structured literacy to teach North Carolina students. The district had been using SPIRE as their Tier 3 intervention tool for years when they decided to look for something new with a more robust reading comprehension piece, which is what teachers felt was lacking in Wilson Reading

“SPIRE (has been) our Tier 3 intervention tool for 10 years, the print version and now the hybrid 4th Edition. Teachers find it easy to follow and teach. Our students demonstrate meaningful progress. SPIRE teams are responsive to our needs. The SPIRE reading program works!”

—Cathy LeCleur-Salas

Teachers Choose SPIRE

They knew they wanted to continue using SPIRE for their Tier 3 reading program. In 2009, the district asked several vendors to present reading programs to teachers, that could replace Wilson, including SPIRE. In 2010, after reviewing the various programs, 97% of teachers recommended that the district purchase SPIRE, in large part because they liked how the Orton-Gillingham methodology is applied. SPIRE is firmly grounded in Structured Literacy and is research-proven to promote reading success for striving readers and students with dyslexia.

SPIRE’s research-proven, data-driven reading intervention includes teacher-led instruction, with continual practice and review to help ensure measurable results. Its structured, spiraling curriculum incorporates the six critical areas of Structured Literacy: phonological awareness, phonics, spelling, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

LeCleur-Salas believes their implementation of SPIRE has produced such good results because the teachers selected it. They appreciated the user-friendly, Orton-Gillingham-based system, which was more visual than the Wilson program and had teacher guides that were easy to follow. SPIRE also provided a bridge through remote instruction until progress monitoring with SPIRE STAR Digital Teacher Companion was available



this year. Now all the teachers use digital materials and can enable seamless transition to remote instruction should the need arise.

Cumberland County uses a mix of print, digital, and blended SPIRE materials, including the digital version of SPIRE, which allows teachers to score students’ print assessments and track their progress on line. They found that their younger students needed the magnetic board to manipulate for physical interaction to learn. So, the district is using print, digital, and blended SPIRE materials.



Solid Results

When the district implemented SPIRE at all 53 elementary schools, it was a smooth transition to the new program. “The 10-step lesson based on explicit instruction was familiar to teachers,” said LeCleir-Salas. “The teacher-led lessons include all critical areas of reading, multisensory learning and mastery of concepts presented in a logical sequence based on language development.”

LeCleir-Salas also gave high marks to SPIRE’s flexible professional learning program. “We have used both in-person and virtual professional development for SPIRE and found the trainers to be very knowledgeable and supportive,” she said. “The training has been excellent preparation for teaching the program.”

Cumberland County had between 85% to 90% teacher participation in using SPIRE for the 2017–18, 2018–19, and 2019–20 school years.

“During that time teachers kept their own data on student progress,” said LeCleir-Salas, “and at the district level we monitored the implementation and performed random fidelity checks on program usage.”

“Fall 2022 will be more normal, and we’ll be fully staffed and back on track with data, checking for fidelity. The voice and choice of our teachers has made SPIRE a success for us.”

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