



institute for
multi-sensory
education



CASE STUDY



Durango School District Durango, Colorado

Durango School District (DSD) is a rural school district in southwest Colorado serving approximately 4,300 students across Pre-K–12. With 40% of its students qualifying for free or reduced-price meals and a non-white student population of 35%, the district trusted IMSE to help it deliver effective literacy instruction across age, socio-economic, and linguistic categories.

School Profile



11
Schools



4,300
Students



Pre-K–12
Grades



40%
Students Eligible For Free
or Reduced-Price Lunch



CHALLENGE

DSD began sending teachers through IMSE's Orton-Gillingham Plus training as early as 2016, recognizing the potential of Structured Literacy to improve student outcomes.

Laurie Rossback—then school leader at Needham Elementary School and now the district's Executive Director of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment—identified some key challenges with the district's approach. While teachers were enthusiastic about the program, not all of them were trained, and those who were, applied their training in very different ways. Without a unified framework or clear, district-wide expectations, educators often picked and chose which elements to use and taught them with varying levels of fidelity. Overall, DSD teachers seemed unsure about what exactly to teach and when.

This fragmented approach led to long-term issues. DSD students were progressing through the grades with different levels of proficiency and exposure to Structured Literacy techniques. When they greeted a new cohort, teachers found themselves facing uneven skill sets that required backtracking to foundational literacy concepts.



SOLUTION

The student outcomes from different district classrooms showed why fidelity was so important: in classrooms where teachers were closely following IMSE's program, students were scoring higher year after year on DIBELS and other assessments. Creating a common scope and sequence to ensure high fidelity across every K-2 classroom became the district's number-one priority.



If teachers are all using the same language, strategies, and pacing, it creates a seamless experience for students. As we made more efforts to create district-wide consistency, we started seeing real, lasting growth."

Laurie Rossback
Executive Director of Curriculum,
Instruction, and Assessment
Durango School District

In 2021, Durango School District adopted a policy of training every K-2 teacher through IMSE's Orton-Gillingham+ program, ensuring that all early elementary educators shared a common foundation in literacy instruction. To maintain the integrity of implementation over time, the district also began offering regular refresher trainings, helping teachers retain skills, revisit best practices, and adapt instruction as needed.

To provide on-the-ground expertise and support, the district designated Rachel Tabor—an experienced classroom teacher who had achieved exceptional results using the IMSE framework—to be an IMSE-certified literacy instructor for the whole district. In this role, Rachel now supports all seven elementary schools, helping K-2 teams calibrate IMSE routines and maintain consistency across classrooms. From modeling lessons to co-planning with teachers, she plays a crucial role in sustaining fidelity of implementation across the district.



The IMSE approach can have a huge impact not only on student proficiency but also on teacher capacity and confidence. I love watching what happens when teachers are given the tools, the resources, and the phonetic understanding to really teach foundational literacy well."

Rachel Tabor
Reading Interventionist
and IMSE Master Instructor
Durango School District

In addition, to help school administrators understand the goals and particulars of the strategic shift, Rachel hosted groups of principals to observe exemplary IMSE Orton-Gillingham Plus instruction in action.

The primary goal was for principals to experience firsthand how high-quality, equitable literacy instruction could be delivered across the district. This partnership with principals has been integral in increasing student reading proficiency and building shared ownership of the work. By creating a space for leaders to see the program in practice, this created alignment between different roles and ensured that literacy instruction in the district could change from all directions at once.

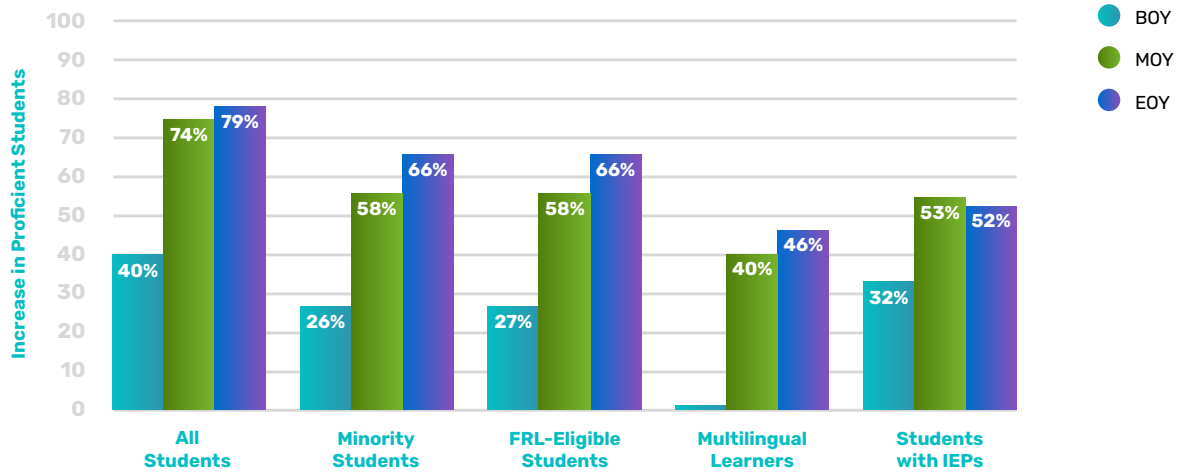




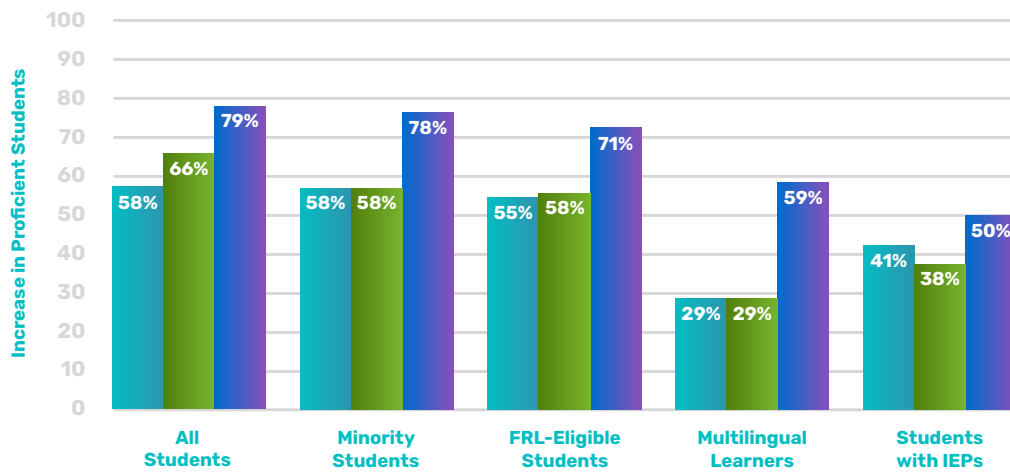
RESULTS

The results of prioritizing consistency with IMSE's Structured Literacy approach have been transformational across the Durango School District. Yearly data shows dramatic growth in student reading proficiency, particularly in early elementary grades and among economically disadvantaged students. All groups have made progress—pointing once again to the fact that science-based reading instruction works for all students.

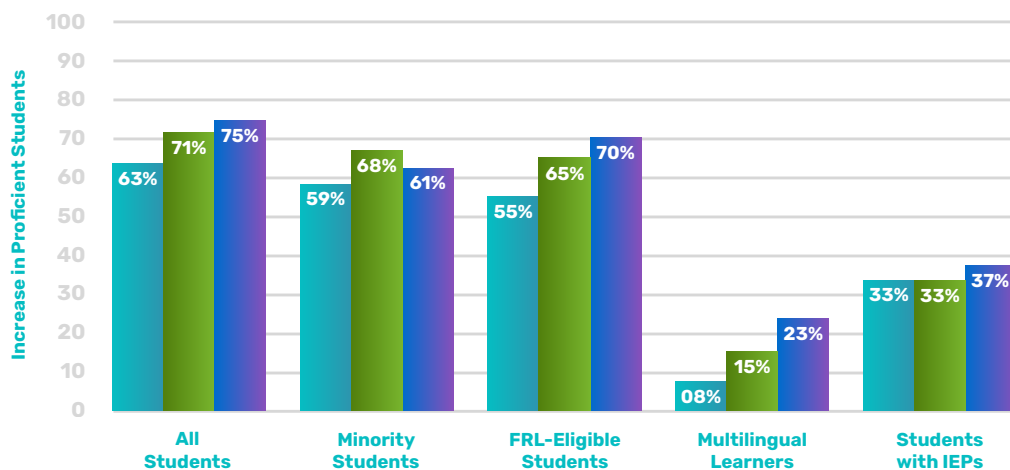
DIBELS 8 (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills)
Kindergarten Growth from Fall 2024-Spring 2025



1st Grade Growth from Fall 2024-Spring 2025



2nd Grade Growth from Fall 2024-Spring 2025





ADVICE TO OTHERS

What Durango School District has learned in its journey with IMSE can be summarized in four priorities for school and district who want to be champions of literacy:



1. Start with a long-term vision.

Success with Structured Literacy requires strategy, structure, and sustained commitment over years, not months.



2. Lead with empathy.

Shifting to a new reading framework is a major lift for teachers. School and district leaders should acknowledge that learning and implementing something new with fidelity takes time, support, and understanding.



3. Make time for literacy.

Don't try to squeeze new routines into leftover minutes. Be intentional about prioritizing and protecting time for reading instruction in the daily schedule.



4. Go beyond training.

Ongoing support is what makes a new approach stick. Provide follow-up coaching, collaboration time, and classroom support to help teachers perform at their best.



Once you fully commit to high-fidelity implementation, the true impact and value of these programs is revealed."

Laurie Rossback

By investing in educators and trusting the science, Durango School District is making effective literacy instruction a core part of its mission—and preparing its students for lasting success.



ABOUT IMSE

IMSE is an education pioneer and the leading provider of Structured Literacy solutions based on the science of reading. IMSE solutions incorporate the Orton-Gillingham methodology and all five pillars of literacy to empower teachers from day one.

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Contact info@imse.com to learn more about our work with school districts around the country.