



institute for
multi-sensory
education



CASE STUDY



Poway Unified School District San Diego, California

Poway Unified School District, located in northern San Diego County, serves approximately 34,000 students across 40 schools. The district has a diverse student population with 9.9% of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals and 61.5% identifying as students of color. The district turned to IMSE for an evidence-based approach to early literacy instruction to close literacy gaps and ensure long-term success for every student.

District Profile



40
Schools



34k+
Students



7.7%
English Language Learners



9.9%
Students Eligible For Free
or Reduced-Price Lunch



CHALLENGE

San Diego County faces a persistent literacy crisis. According to NAEP, only 39% of fourth graders in San Diego performed at or above the proficient level in 2024. Within the county, 46% of third graders do not meet standards for reading and writing. Achievement gaps persist, with almost 70% of White students meeting language arts standards compared to 40% of Black students and 44% of Latinx students.

At Poway Unified, teachers and leaders saw the impact of this crisis in their own classrooms. Assessments revealed that many students lacked strong phonemic awareness and phonics skills, preventing them from mastering higher-level reading tasks.



When we traced assessments back, we saw that the breakdown was in phonics. Students didn't have the foundational skills they needed."

Trenace Sevilla
Elementary Curriculum Teacher on Special Assignment
Poway Unified

Teachers wanted solutions that were both practical and research-driven. They were overwhelmed by daily demands and wary of adding another program without proof it would work. Administrators worried about asking educators to change course, yet they also knew that staying with the status quo would only widen the gaps.



SOLUTION

In 2018–19, Poway Unified’s Special Education Department adopted IMSE’s Orton-Gillingham Plus (OG+) curriculum. Teachers needed a program backed by the science of reading, structured to build foundational skills, and practical enough to implement right away. The results were strong, and district leaders expanded the program into general education classrooms.

By 2020, Poway began training kindergarten through second grade teachers in IMSE’s OG+ program. Over two years, nearly 400 teachers were trained, representing 26 elementary campuses. Teachers were trained in cohorts to ensure manageable class coverage and sustained support.



The OG+ approach has given us a system that empowers teachers. When I visit classrooms now, I see both teachers and students confident in the process.”

Trenace Sevilla

The training went beyond theory. Teachers practiced multisensory lessons, collaborated on strategies, and received coaching to refine their instruction. Interventionists, general education teachers, and literacy specialists began to speak the same language, giving students consistency as they advanced through grade levels.

Trenace Sevilla, an elementary curriculum teacher on special assignment at Poway Unified, said, “When I walk into a classroom, teachers are specific about what they’re asking students to do, and students know exactly what to do. That level of clarity has been transformative.”



RESULTS

Poway Unified has seen measurable gains since implementing IMSE. Students are mastering foundational skills earlier, and grade-level reading proficiency has climbed across the board.

Key Outcomes:

2024-2025 School Year

- Kindergarten students performing at or above grade level increased from **57% to 91%** in one year.
- First grade proficiency rose from **34% to 84%.**
- Second grade scores climbed from **54% to 85%.**
- **97% of students** who completed pre- and mid-year testing showed improved literacy scores.

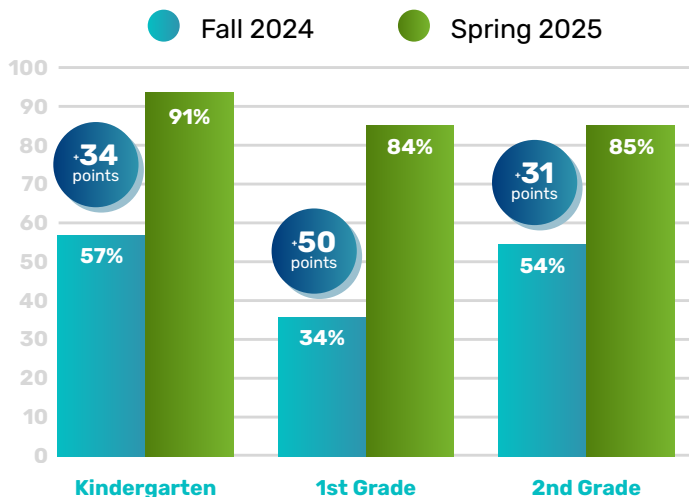
Beyond the numbers, Poway Unified has experienced a cultural shift. Teachers describe feeling empowered and supported, saying they finally have the knowledge to unlock reading for every student. Students, in turn, are engaged and confident, willing to tackle decoding, spelling, and more complex reading tasks.



Teachers tell me they finally feel like they know how to teach reading. They see results right away, and students are excited to show what they can do.”

Trenace Sevilla

Increase in Foundational Skills 2024-2025 School Year



Looking ahead, Poway Unified plans to expand teacher training into grades three through five with IMSE's Morphology Plus program, providing instruction in prefixes, suffixes, root words, and language origins.

As Trenace Sevilla says, "We know this is just the beginning. With a strong foundation in place, our goal is to continue supporting students as they move into upper grades. The consistency we've built will carry us all forward."

The success has drawn attention from other districts. Educators from across California and beyond have visited Poway classrooms to see IMSE in action. The PUSD educational community has also noticed the difference, commenting on the visible changes in student engagement and teacher instruction.

EVIDENCE for ESSA



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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