



institute for  
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## CASE STUDY

# Independent School District 318 Grand Rapids, Minnesota

Grand Rapids Independent School District 318 is located in Itasca County in Grand Rapids, Minnesota. District 318 serves approximately 4,000 students from Kindergarten through 12th grade, along with additional programs that serve individuals from birth to adulthood. The district includes Grand Rapids, Cohasset, Bigfork, Marcell, Warba, and many smaller towns and townships over a 2,200 square-mile area. The district’s mission is ‘Teaching and Learning for Life’ to Achieve Excellence.

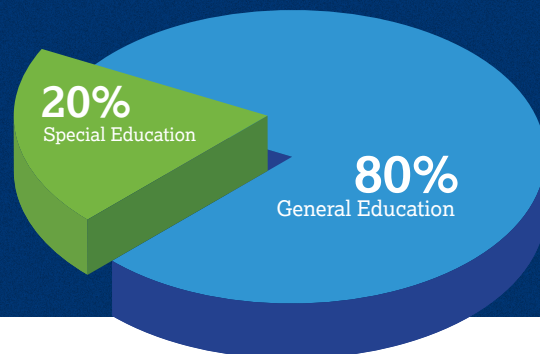


4,400+ STUDENTS

254 EDUCATORS

12 SCHOOLS

The district’s mission is “Teaching and Learning for Life to Achieve Excellence.”



## CHALLENGE

In 2017, a slow and gradual decline in reading proficiency began to show within ISD 318 K-5 students, and universal screeners showed a similar trend. Across the four elementary schools in the district, far too many students failed to demonstrate basic reading proficiency. Checkpoints outside of standardized tests revealed that even students in second through fifth grade were deficient in fundamental reading skills.

Despite the district’s goal of 90–95% reading proficiency – based on the Minnesota DOE’s statewide goal of 90% reading proficiency with no student group below 85% by 2025 – between 50–60% of the district’s students needed reading support. At the time, Grand Rapids followed a Balanced Literacy curriculum, but

something didn’t seem right to the faculty. It was clear that the majority of elementary-aged students in the district needed something more when it came to reading.

In fall 2020, the Teaching and Learning and Special Education Departments began the district’s journey with MTSS and the Science of Reading. Screeners from FastBridge and STAR Renaissance were implemented for students to take three times a year, from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Through that screening, the teams could clearly see that the Balanced Literacy approach was not working and that their kids were significantly behind in reading skills coming out of kindergarten, first and second grade in decoding, phonemic awareness, phonological awareness, phonics, and fluency.

## SOLUTION

In late 2017, ISD 318 sent some of its teachers to a specialized literacy instruction course from IMSE to train them in a program based on Orton-Gillingham, or OG, resulting in seven teachers trained to teach literacy using IMSE in their classrooms. The feedback to the district was incredibly positive. Five more teachers attended the training in 2018, and two more completed the training in 2019.

Jennifer Sjodin, Head of the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) for ISD 318, was trained by IMSE in the spring of 2019, and brought what she learned back to her classroom in the first half of the year, implementing structured literacy, and OG lessons and strategies. She was then trained in LETRS in 2020, which provides the "what" of literacy instruction based on the Science of Reading. Around this time, the Covid-19 pandemic brought disruption to teaching and learning. Sjodin was confident that if it had been a normal school year, she would have seen her best reading scores.

The Teaching and Learning team started screening students during the pandemic. They realized very quickly that they needed to do something more to explicitly teach their students phonics and phonemic awareness in kindergarten, first, and second grades.

There was now a collective "buzz" from the teachers and administrators, who were ready to adopt IMSE's Orton-Gillingham programming as the primary instructional tool for literacy. Step one was to have all K-2 teachers trained by IMSE. In 2022, the 27 remaining classroom teachers, special education

teachers, licensed interventionists, and principals all attended more than 30 hours of in-person OG training, unpaid. In December 2022, the last five teachers in the district were virtually trained by IMSE. Today, 100% of K-2 classroom teachers, licensed interventionists and K-2 special education teachers have been trained.

The support and commitment have come from every level of the district, and the teachers have demonstrated a "thirst" for learning.

Ryan Debay, Teaching and Learning Director at the District, said, "If we didn't change during the pandemic, we would be in a very bad place. We said that we were going to push forward for what was right for our kids, and we are still doing it. Our teachers have embraced literacy instruction with a sense of urgency and made significant gains; I couldn't be more proud of them."

"Our school board and superintendent have been behind us every step of the way in our journey," added Sjodin.

**"IMSE offered a systematic, explicit, and foundational approach to literacy, phonemic awareness, phonics instruction, and more," said Sjodin. "It provided the scope and sequence for this work."**

Three years into the adoption of this framework, 100% of teachers at ISD 318 have been trained by IMSE and 86% are using OG as their primary literacy instruction for Tier 1 classrooms. In fall 2023, 100% of primary teachers will be using OG as their primary phonics instruction.

“At winter screening, the last screener that year, my kids were decoding words like Mexico on their math test. I was completely sold on IMSE and Orton-Gillingham.”

**Jennifer Sjodin**

*Head of the Multi-Tiered System of Support*



## RESULTS

Since embracing IMSE's training, rooted in the Science of Reading, the district's literacy proficiency level has risen an average of 16% for grades K-5. Additionally, at each grade level, the number of students at high-risk in literacy proficiency has been reduced throughout the district.

One district teacher said, "The explicit and sequential phonics piece is what was missing from my literacy instruction. It is truly amazing what my kindergartners can do and the confidence they now have from the knowledge they gained in our OG lessons."

Another teacher said, "My students were struggling to be independent readers and disengaging during instructional time. IMSE and Orton-Gillingham

taught me how to bring in multi-sensory elements into my lessons that were engaging, motivating, and easily differentiated."

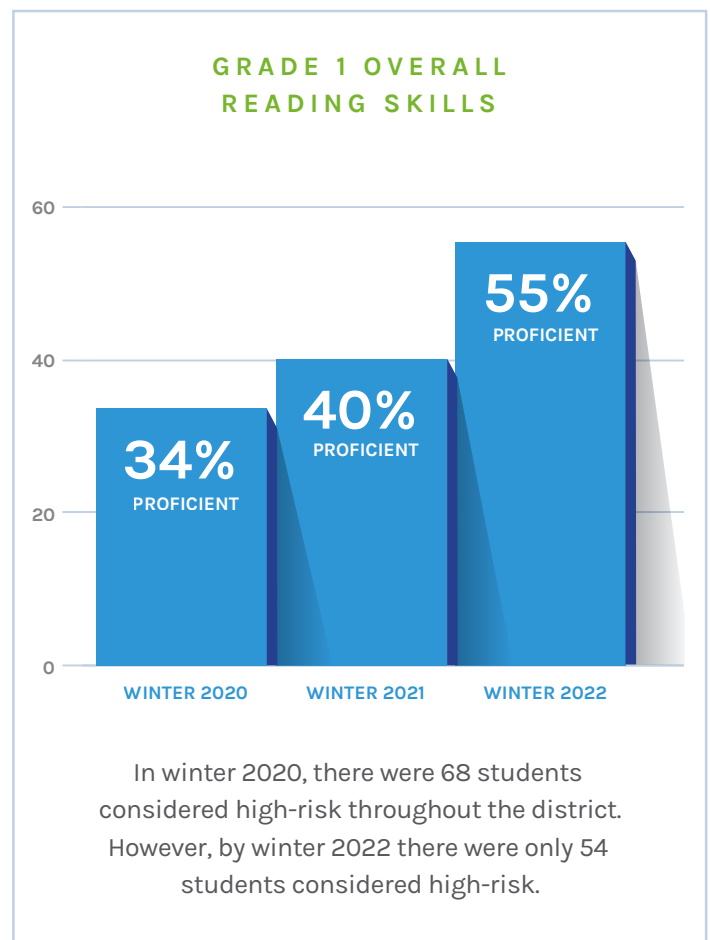
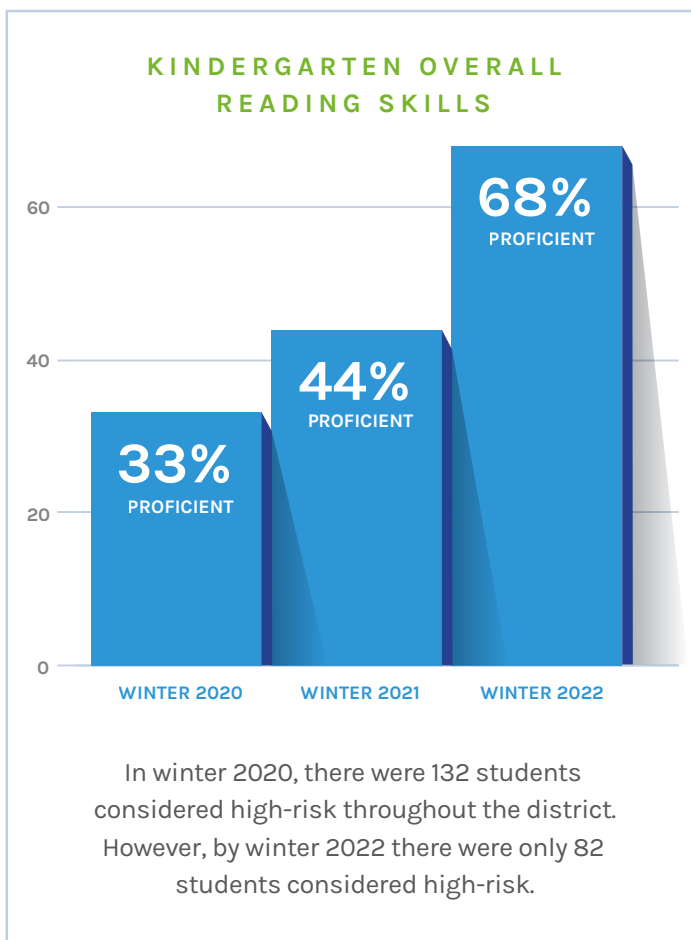
While Sjodin and other teachers in the district had originally believed the Orton-Gillingham methodology to be a resource effective only for dyslexic students, they now embrace the approach and credit it as the main reason behind the incredible improvements and success they are seeing across all tiers of their students.

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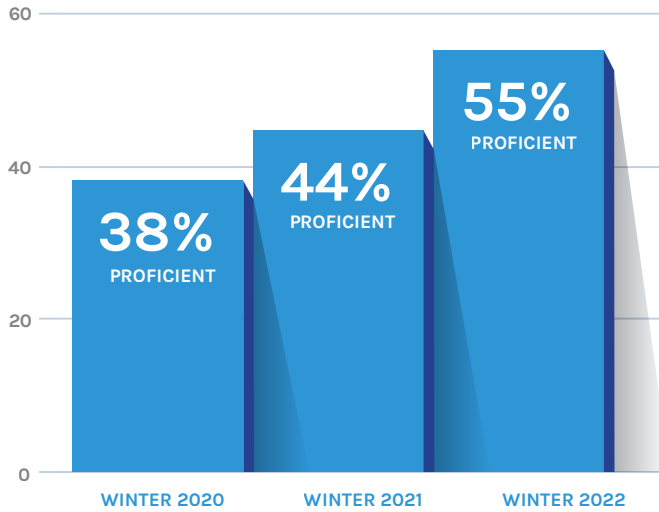
**"Our teachers are not building readers to take a test," added Sjodin. "We are building skilled readers for life."**

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### District Wide Data: Winter '20-'21-'22 (Based on Fastbridge early reading composite/4 subtests)

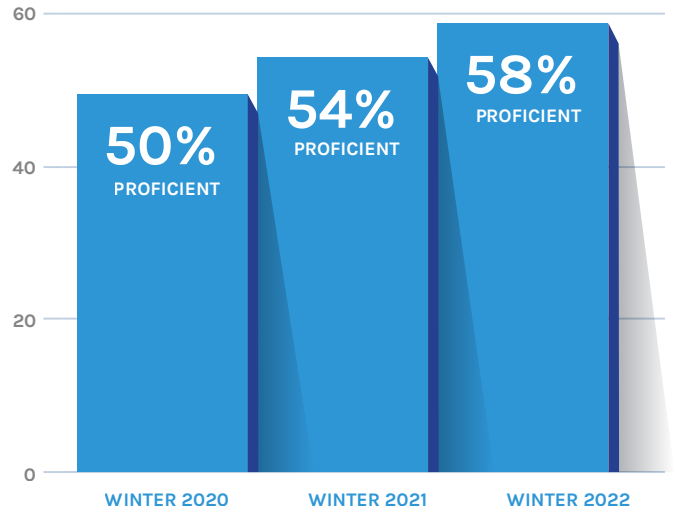


### GRADE 2 READING FLUENCY



In winter 2020, there were 65 students considered high-risk throughout the district. However, by winter 2022 there were only 49 students considered high-risk.

### GRADE 2 READING COMPREHENSION



In winter 2020, there were 69 students considered high-risk throughout the district. However, by winter 2022 there were only 54 students considered high-risk.

# 35%

#### AVERAGE INCREASE

in Kindergarten reading proficiency from Winter 2020 - Winter 2022

# 47%

#### AVERAGE INCREASE

in First-grade reading proficiency at Cohasset Elementary from Winter 2021 - Winter 2022



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#### ABOUT IMSE

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

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Contact [info@imse.com](mailto:info@imse.com) to learn more about our work with school districts around the country.