



institute for
multi-sensory
education



CASE STUDY

Coeur d’Alene School District Coeur d’Alene, Idaho

Situated in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, the [Coeur d’Alene School District](#) (CdA) is diligently focused on a thoughtful approach to literacy instruction. With 18 schools and a committed team of over 1,200 educators, CdA serves a community of more than 9,000 students. The district includes a preschool, 11 elementary schools (K-5), three middle schools (6-8), three high schools (9-12), and one Joint Technical school. With a robust and diverse population of students spanning all socioeconomic statuses and learning capabilities, the educators at CdA are dedicated to providing all of their students with a well-rounded learning experience, preparing them for success within and beyond their academic journeys.

The school’s mission is “invest in each student to prepare, challenge and advance well-educated, resilient and future-ready citizens.”

CHALLENGE

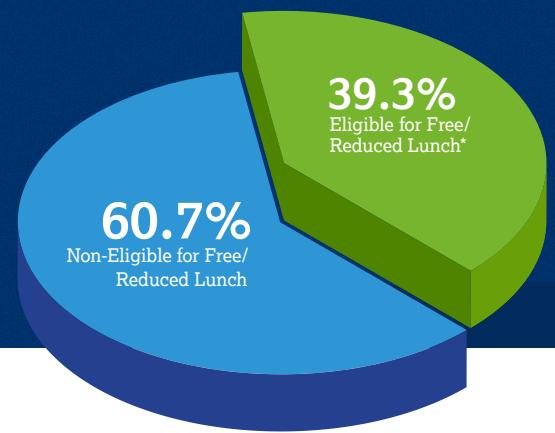
Structured literacy has long been a cornerstone of CdA’s literacy strategy. Across its 11 elementary schools, CdA integrated interventions like Lindamood-Bell, LETRS, Read Naturally, and Reading Mastery into the core curriculum. After years of structured literacy instruction, the district switched to a balanced literacy approach in 2015. CdA embraced methodologies such as [\(PEBC\)](#) thinking strategies to focus on understanding questioning, and community building—all while cultivating a profound love for reading.

Heather Somers, Director of Federal Programs and Assessment and former CdA elementary school principal, reflected on the transition from structured literacy to balanced literacy, stating, “We were so structured that kids didn’t have time to read for enjoyment, so we started swinging the other way.”

Shortly after the shift happened, it began leading to discouragement among readers and frustration among teachers, many feeling like they had veered “too far” from foundational skills, outside of reading intervention.



- 9,000+ STUDENTS
- 1,200+ EDUCATORS
- 18 SCHOOLS



[The Idaho Reading Indicator \(IRI\) benchmark](#), a crucial assessment for literacy success for Idaho districts, historically positioned CdA at the top or near the top, with scores in the 95th percentile. However, the move away from a structured literacy approach, while boosting reading enjoyment overall, saw a decline in scores.

This trend continued until the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent shutdown, prompting a reassessment of literacy teaching strategies at CdA.

"We wanted to still have well-stocked classroom libraries, but we also needed to have foundational skills that were consistent across levels."

The demand for a robust Tier 1 level of instruction to effectively intervene and support readers across all grade levels became evident, aligning with CdA's Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS).

Dr. Nelson explained, "We were not seeing those contextual skills transferring as much as we wanted, from grade level to grade level, as kids were matriculating through the system."

Somers noticed the same challenges across various K-1 students struggling to show growth. Despite the best efforts of its seasoned staff, "there were instances where we couldn't move the needle for some of our students."

SOLUTION

A decline in assessment scores and an increasing number of struggling readers prompted a community-wide response, with some families seeking outside help through tutoring. Investigating these external literacy

interventions, Somers discovered the Barton System, a method akin to Orton-Gillingham (OG), being employed by tutors. Recognizing the potential of OG methods for dyslexia through individual research, Somers found a solution to support struggling students without imposing financial burdens on parents as outside tutoring often did. With the approval of the elementary director, Somers initiated training sessions through the Institute for Multi-Sensory Education (IMSE)'s Orton-Gillingham approach for the Title 1 intervention program and their special education teacher.

Embracing site-level leadership, CdA's schools endeavored to address literacy challenges in various ways. Amidst these efforts, it was IMSE's OG that educators consistently gravitated toward. Through extensive implementation and 'action research,' OG gradually became the gold standard for CdA's literacy work. It not only connected the dots to foundational skills for the students but fostered engagement between the educators and students alike.

In the initial phases of implementation, witnessing significant success, Somers brought in one of their instructional coaches to evaluate IMSE OG's efficacy. Despite initial hesitation, the coach's excitement grew as she recognized how well IMSE's systematic and multi-modal approach worked with her students, seamlessly integrating into a cohesive framework.

Since 2017, CdA has trained 247 teachers in the comprehensive OG program, representing 87.8% of the current elementary instructional staff, including administrators, as well as 33 educators in Morphology Plus. Additionally, CdA trained their Pre-K developmental preschool staff, emphasizing the importance of early intervention and foundational pre-literacy skills.



“

Students were truly enjoying reading and having a lot of selection and choice, but at the same time, reading scores were going down.”

Dr. Mike Nelson
Deputy Superintendent of CdA

Recognizing the diverse needs of their student population, Somers has begun collaborating with English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers to explore how OG can benefit multilingual students.

RESULTS

Throughout Idaho, where the [statewide proficiency in reading declined](#) from 69.1% in the spring of 2022 to 66.6% in the spring of 2023, the CdA school district stood resilient. With a remarkable 75.4% of students reading at grade level, CdA showcased the efficacy of its literacy approach.

Somers emphasized the transformative impact of IMSE on both teachers and students, citing its multi-sensory approach as redefining how CdA's teachers teach and how students learn.

The district experienced tangible results from IMSE's OG implementation; 146 students significantly progressed two tiers in two years, transitioning from tier 3 to tier 1 instruction.

The Idaho Reading Indicator (IRI) data at Winton Elementary School clearly illustrated a significant positive impact on student literacy, showing significant growth percentages in first, second, and third graders over three years.

IMSE training has made an impact district-wide, especially at Winton Elementary, a school with the second-highest free and reduced lunch rate in the district, demonstrating remarkable growth. Dr. Nelson indicated that Winton was probably one of, if not the most, aggressive in getting their teachers trained faster than other schools in the district.



"If you look at their results and their trajectory, you're going to continue to see those positive results. With more than 84% of their K-5 educators trained in IMSE OG, Winton is committed to delivering successful literacy instruction."

Atlas Elementary's special education teacher also played a crucial role, encountering explicit challenges with two students in particular, for whom effective support seemed out of the question. The first, a first-grade girl, presented unique difficulties. Notably, in Idaho, kindergarten is not mandatory; the state remains among the last six states to not require it. This particular student did not attend kindergarten and consequently struggled with writing upon entering school. She lacked familiarity with her own name and was at the elementary stage of drawing letters. Despite qualifying for assistance, the district lacked a trained professional suitable for support. Luckily, the special education teacher became the first to undergo IMSE OG training, focusing on this child, which resulted in almost immediate, unprecedented progress.

Additionally, there was another student for whom intervention was not working. Young for his grade, his first year of schooling was spent getting him accustomed to being at school. This child was held back in Kindergarten. After the IMSE OG-trained special ed teacher started working with him, he successfully tested out of special education by second grade, and no longer required an Individualized Education Program (IEP). Another student, grappling with letter reversals, exhibited significant improvement after just two days of OG instruction, ceasing to reverse any letters going forward.

To Somers, these successes are not just stories, but clear evidence of positive strides in literacy instruction.

"It was such a validation of knowing we are doing the right thing. The multi-sensory piece is so amazing. Without that, it would be a great program, but because of those elements, it really makes such a difference for some of our students with unique struggles."

As the educators at CdA continue to witness more success stories, the district is moving towards critical mass training for K-3 teachers.

Said Dr. Nelson, "It's easier for us as a system to have them look each other in the eyes and ask, "Why are your kids doing so much better?" Fairly organically, teachers started to attribute how kids were performing relative to their training and application of IMSE OG in their classrooms."

CdA's community-focused approach, coupled with a commitment to collective student efficacy, has cultivated trust and collaboration among its educators, instilling a shared drive to enhance the learning experience for its students. Guided by a steadfast mission to empower every student for success, CdA is resolute in delivering a consistent, high-quality literacy curriculum no matter what building the student learns in and which teacher is responsible for their success. With numerous educators trained and a commitment to ongoing IMSE OG training district-wide, CdA is helping to ensure that every student, regardless of their status and capability, has the opportunity to learn how to read and benefit from an exceptional learning experience.



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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