

Arizona District Implements the Science of Reading

Mesa Public Schools' Director of Specialized Instruction, Lindsay Massey, spoke with us at EPS School Specialty to share her remarkable insights about the district's efforts to improve literacy skills among special education students. Mesa Public Schools has implemented two reading programs, S.P.I.R.E. and its preparatory program Sounds Sensible, and Massey reported to us that the results they've witnessed have been extraordinarily impressive.

"When we started this implementation in August of 2022, at least half of our 10,800 special education students in Grades K-12 struggled with reading," Massey said. "But now that they have access to these exceptional programs, each one of these thousands of students has been given a powerful opportunity to improve their reading skills."

Choosing and Implementing the Right Intervention Program

The decision to choose these programs required district leaders to first go through a lengthy, rigorous evaluation process. "A large team of district leaders, community parents, instructional coaches, and teachers headed an initiative," Massey explained. "They assessed a large, diverse set of programs, evaluated according to a rubric that prioritized any programs implementing Science of Reading principles and comprehensively addressing all five areas of reading. After a careful review process, S.P.I.R.E. and Sounds Sensible stood out as the top programs, so we decided to go with them both, and we purchased subscriptions."

After just 7 months of using the program:

1086 students jumped a full level.

536 grew 2 levels.

144 grew 3 levels.

76 grew 4 levels.

100 grew 5 levels!

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To ensure a smooth implementation process, the district engaged instructional coaches to help familiarize teachers with the program and provide train-the-trainer programs. "We also ordered a wide range of different teacher trainings, and we required all teachers providing reading instruction to participate," Massey said. "We arranged things with our governing board to ensure that we were meeting the needs of our students with dyslexia or special needs in reading. EPS School Specialty provided essential, instrumental help and support for our teachers at every point throughout the implementation process."

Stunning Results

The results speak for themselves. In just one year, the district has seen tremendous growth in reading skills among special education students. "We collected data in April just to see student growth from the beginning of that school year through April," Massey said, highlighting the numbers they had tracked so far. "Look at all this growth happening across all our special education classes just this year: 1086 students jumped a full level, 536 grew two levels, 144 grew three levels, 76 grew four levels, 100 grew five levels—and 78 students tested out of S.P.I.R.E. entirely, which means they improved so much, they no longer had decoding or fluency needs at all."

Massey added that, of all the amazing success stories she'd already witnessed, Grades PreK–8 demonstrated the most significant growth. "Many of these students started off unable to even pass the initial placement test. Filling in foundational skill deficits immediately gave thousands of students the tools, skills, and freedom to improve," Massey said. "We've seen such enormous, dramatic leaps and bounds in growth, improvement, and confidence. It's more than I can even explain."

A Program Educators Can Believe In and Trust

A reading specialist before becoming Director of Specialized Instruction, Massey feels proud of the progress the district and its students have made. "Helping students read and helping teachers implement reading curriculum is the best part of my job and it means a lot to me," she said. "It makes me so happy that our educators have access to these programs now. As a reading specialist, if I'd been able to select programs myself, S.P.I.R.E. and Sounds Sensible are the ones that I would choose to use. I would want to use them with my own child, I believe in them so much. They've already helped thousands of our students tremendously. We are really impressed and very grateful."

In year two, 86% of the district's teachers have fully implemented the programs, with the 14% remaining mostly composed of teachers hired mid-year, or long-term substitute teachers in those positions. Almost all full-time teachers throughout the district now successfully utilize the programs, with that percentage only set to grow.

Looking to the Future

Mesa Public Schools have made great strides in improving the literacy skills of their special education students, students with disabilities, students with dyslexia, and students with health impairments. District leaders confidently assert that the implementation of Sounds Sensible and S.P.I.R.E. has been the foundation of this progress. At EPS School Specialty, we're deeply grateful to have been part of Mesa's meaningful implementation and its ongoing success.



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