



How Garrison Elementary School shifted its approach to literacy and reading instruction

Based on the early successes of schools like Garrison Elementary School, many public elementary schools in D.C. are beginning to incorporate the science of reading instruction and structured literacy tools in how they teach reading. Informed by the Garrison Elementary experience, in 2022, District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) began providing literacy training on science of reading instruction to all elementary school teachers. And in September 2023, the District’s Early Literacy Taskforce recommended that teachers and administrators in D.C.’s public elementary schools receive training in structured literacy instruction.ⁱ

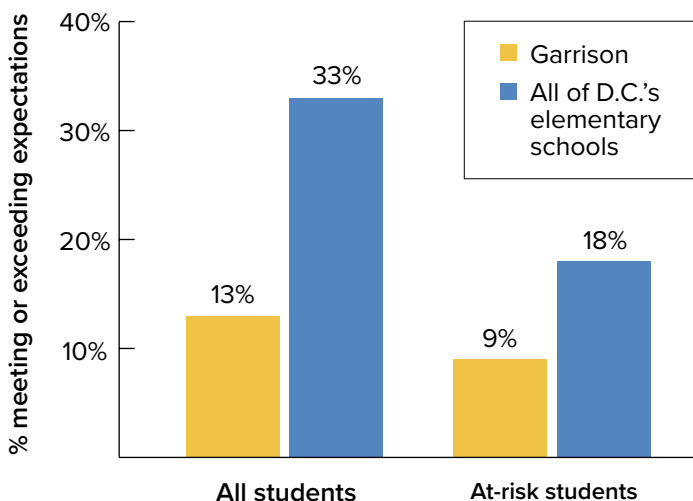
What can we learn from the Garrison experience? This case study provides a look at how Garrison made the big move to change their approach to reading instruction.

Motivation for change

In school year 2017-18, Garrison served 250 students, and 38% were at-risk, a lower share than what prevails across all public schools in D.C.ⁱⁱ Yet, reading outcomes in this year on the statewide assessment were lower than at other elementary schools in D.C.:

The leadership at Garrison—in particular, the school principal and the ELA instructional coach—knew that they had to overhaul the way students were being taught how to read. Research and initial suggestions from a representative affiliated with DIBELS software (a tool to measure literacy skills acquisition) pointed them to the science of reading—a convergence of evidence on what matters in early literacy instruction.

Outcomes for English Language Arts (ELA) on statewide assessment, 2017-18



The **science of reading** brings together evidence on what works in early literacy instruction: phonological awareness, phonics and word recognition, fluency, vocabulary and oral language comprehension, and text comprehension.ⁱⁱⁱ The National Reading Panel found that this type of phonemic awareness instruction positively impacts students on various socioeconomic levels, children at risk for future reading issues, PK-6th graders, children with normal reading development skills, students learning English, and students with disabilities.^{iv}

i. Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). 2023. Recommendations for Structured Literacy Instruction in the District of Columbia. • ii. Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). Annual enrollment audit reports for 2017-18. Retrieved from <https://osse.dc.gov/node/1306796> • iii. Jiban, C. 2022. "The science of reading explained." NWEA. Retrieved from <https://www.nwea.org/blog/2022/the-science-of-reading-explained/> • iv. National Reading Panel. 2000. Teaching Children to Read: An evidence-based assessment on the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction.

Implementation of the science of reading

In school year 2018-19, with guidance from the DCPS DC Reading Clinic, the ELA instructional coach at Garrison led an effort to change how teachers approached reading instruction, beginning with a focus on grades 3 to 5 that spread throughout the year to encompass kindergarten through grade 2.

Key aspects of Garrison's approach:

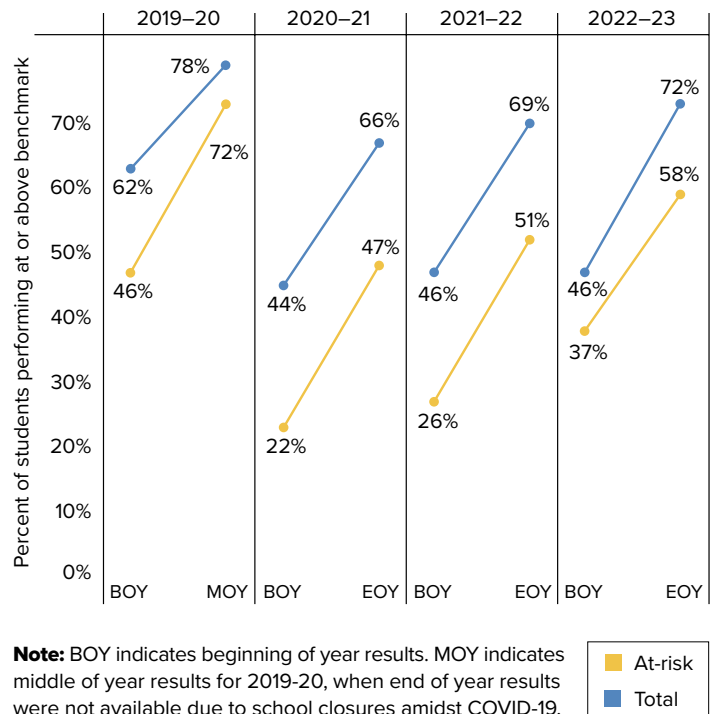
- Heggerty phonemic awareness curriculum
- Procedures to identify reading issues earlier based on Joseph Torgesen's research
- Decodable texts instead of guided reading and level texts
- More small group instruction with multisensory lessons to teach sounds, phonics patterns, reading practice, spelling practice, and connected text reading
- Professional development, especially coaching and training on phonemic awareness

Early and sustained improvements

By the middle of school year 2019-20, Garrison was seeing large improvements in the acquisition of literacy skills. As measured by DIBELS, 62% of students (46% of at-risk students) began the year at or above benchmark and 78% (72% of at-risk students) did so by the middle of the year, resulting in a presentation to DCPS Central Office and a plan to share out with other schools. However, COVID-19 shifted all students to virtual learning through school year 2020-21. While virtual, Garrison maintained the core components of structured literacy with whole group and needs-based small group lessons, and experienced some gains over the year.

With the return to in-person learning in school year 2021-22, Garrison could redouble its efforts in literacy instruction. In school year 2021, the share of students meeting the literacy acquisition benchmark on DIBELS improved by 13 percentage points to 69% at the end of the year, higher than 48% in an EmpowerK12 citywide estimate^v and doubling for at-risk students at 51% (higher than EmpowerK12's estimate of 35% of at-risk students at benchmark). On average, students began the year at a higher reading level than they did the previous year. School year 2022-23 showed further growth and a narrower gap between at-risk and all students.

Early literacy outcomes at Garrison Elementary School, grades K-2 (DIBELS results)



Lessons learned

1. **Early strong results** can build momentum and increase teacher buy-in
2. Both a **strong school champion** and **support from the administration** are critical
3. **In-person learning** is important for early literacy instruction
4. **Coaching** is essential when shifting literacy instruction approaches