

Sioux Falls School District

Midwestern District Elevates Foundational Skills in Literacy

PROFILE

Sioux Falls School District (SFSD) is a district in the Great Plains region of South Dakota. SFSD comprises 33 schools (23 elementary schools, 5 middle schools and 5 high schools), serving more than 24,000 students. Sioux Falls is the largest city in South Dakota and receives a significant number of international refugees. SFSD has several schools identified as Title 1, and 42% of students come from low-income families. In addition, one elementary school is full Spanish immersion. Nearly 40% of students identify as non-white, 15% receive special education services, and almost half of the elementary students across the district receive free or reduced-price meals.

CHALLENGES

In 2009, SFSD adopted an English Language Arts (ELA) whole-language based curriculum from a large publisher. By 2015, it was clear to educators, administrators, and parent groups that the curriculum was not making progress toward the district's literacy goals, namely getting all students reading at grade level by the end of their third-grade year. Teachers across the district were supplementing and using a variety of other ELA curricula. In the fall of 2015, SFSD began the search for a new ELA program that was standards-aligned, had a clear scope and sequence from K–5, and incorporated whole-group, small-group, and independent work. The curriculum search team, which included stakeholders from multiple grade and organizational levels, spent nearly a year extensively researching best practices for curriculum adoption. Following this research, SFSD created a rubric to evaluate curriculum on the basis of its integrated assessments and intervention, and instruction in explicit phonics, phonological awareness, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. The curriculum search team was not convinced that it would find a program that met all of its criteria.

“When we started to look at how far apart we were and what pieces were missing, particularly foundational skills, we were convinced we needed a unified curriculum that built readers through a unified scope and sequence,” said Susan McAdaragh, elementary curriculum coordinator at SFSD. Using the district-created rubric, the team found that Collaborative Literacy (*Being a Writer, Being a Reader, and Making Meaning*) more than satisfied the criteria for standards-alignment, a clear scope and sequence from K–5, and whole-group, small-group, and independent work.



Photos courtesy of Sioux Falls School District

IMPLEMENTATION

In the fall of 2016, SFSD conducted a pilot program of Collaborative Literacy in a limited number of classrooms with the goal of launching district-wide in 2017. SFSD placed the Collaborative Literacy pilot program into classrooms led by search committee members, then strategically selected classrooms and teachers for the first-year rollout. Leadership was committed to the implementation of Collaborative Literacy, using the pilot program to create peer experience in the teaching community and to identify and resolve any potential cultural or practice issues before a large-scale program introduction.

Having taught guided reading and shared reading for many years, some pilot teachers found it challenging to shift to sequential systematic skills development. With close collaboration and professional development support, however, they were able to demonstrate success with their students. “We really liked the connections made from text to text between *Making Meaning* and *Being a Writer*,” said Abby Doss, an instructional coach at SFSD who supported a pilot classroom.

Teachers and principals were apprehensive about the change to such a different curriculum, but SFSD and McAdaragh were clear with everyone that this was to be the new curriculum for the schools. In the summer of 2017, prior to the fall implementation in additional classrooms, SFSD and Collaborative Classroom partnered to deliver onsite professional development for all teachers, engaging in lesson study and hands-on group training on how the curriculum worked. Extensive visits and on-call support time helped SFSD teachers and staff transition, train, and problem-solve. Collaborative Classroom continued to deliver extensive professional development days across the district in the first year in coordination with Doss and building-level literacy coaches. “I’ve never come across a program that has all the professional learning and support for teachers that this has,” said McAdaragh.

In the first year, the change to Collaborative Literacy—particularly *Being a Reader*—was challenging for some teachers and students, but following the first year of implementation, SFSD saw progress. The district also added *SIPPS* (Systematic Instruction in Phonological Awareness, Phonics, and Sight Words), a research-based foundational skills program proven to help both new and struggling readers, as a summer school pilot program for Tier 2 interventions. *SIPPS* is a short-term intensive

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intervention aligned in scope and sequence with *Being a Reader*. In the summer of 2018, Collaborative Classroom conducted a regional conference at nearby Augustana University that included plenary sessions and topic-specific breakouts across the day and was attended by more than 150 SFSD teachers and coaches.

In 2019, the *SIPPS* program was expanded to eight Title 1 schools and two additional schools. In addition, the district selected a dedicated *SIPPS* teacher. Literacy gains from the *SIPPS* pilot program in Title 1 schools led to SFSD expanding the availability of the program. It is now the introductory curriculum for higher need student groups with lower phonological awareness and decoding skills.

Now in year three, elementary school teachers report the value of using *Being a Reader* with their students. “Teachers realized that students had to be able to blend and segment words proficiently and efficiently enough to read and write, leading to a shift in their mentality,” said Doss. “These teachers have seen the results with their students.”

At the intermediate grades, teachers initially had mixed feelings about *Making Meaning* and its Individualized Daily Reading (IDR). *Making Meaning’s* emphasis on listening comprehension and the use of mentor texts, however, proved to be a new way to enhance student comprehension and a means to foster deeper thinking about the texts.

RESULTS

Collaborative Literacy and *SIPPS* have given SFSD a comprehensive ELA curriculum. Administrators, teachers, and families are excited at the reading, writing, and fluency progress they have seen in their students since implementing Collaborative Literacy and *SIPPS*. The district reports that in the first few years of using Collaborative Literacy, the number of Tier 2 students has decreased, and there has been strong vocabulary acquisition and growth across the district. Studies demonstrated that between fall 2017 and fall 2019, there was a statistically significant increase in student writing scores, as well as increases in total averaged scores after two years. The results were consistent across all groups—English Language Learners, Title 1 students, Tier 2 students, and non-white students. The district also observed that student encoding is developing right alongside decoding for most students, and improvements in encoding efficiency have led to increased writing ability and fluency. “Students early on have better knowledge of early literacy skills in phonological awareness and phonics,” said Doss. “They are having greater success learning to read at an earlier age, and Collaborative Literacy has taken out the guesswork in reading for students.”

Collaborative Literacy has done more than improve literacy skills among SFSD students. The curriculum has also greatly improved teacher facilitation techniques, and its embedded professional learning and stance have become part of the teaching culture. In addition, the embedded social-emotional learning (turn-taking, listening to and building on one another’s thinking) has had an impact on students not just in the lower grades but in middle school as well. “The students are so much better at having conversations with each other, listening to each other, and using curriculum-provided statements like, ‘I disagree with you because,’” said Doss.

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