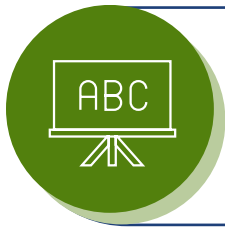




institute for
multi-sensory
education



CASE STUDY



McDowell County Schools

Marion, North Carolina

McDowell County Schools, a rural PreK–12 district located in the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina, serves approximately 5,000 students across 15 schools. With 68.1% of students qualifying for free or reduced-price meals and a growing population of English language learners, district leaders recognized that McDowell's teachers needed a consistent literacy system in order to provide its diverse student body with a strong foundation in reading.

When they discovered IMSE's Structured Literacy approach, they made a district-wide commitment that has transformed how every student in McDowell County learns to read.



District Profile



15
Schools



68.1%
Students eligible for free
or reduced-price lunch



~5000
Students



455
English Language
Learners



PreK–12
Grades



THE CHALLENGE

For years, McDowell County's eight elementary schools operated without a unified approach to phonics instruction. Each school's improvement team had independently chosen whatever program seemed most appropriate. This patchwork approach left students, teachers, and families without a consistent experience, especially when students transferred between schools within the district.

Leaders attempted to introduce a shared phonics program, but the results were inconsistent. Phonics instruction alone was not translating into mastery, and foundational skill gaps persisted across grade levels. As the science of reading gained momentum across the country and state accountability expectations rose, McDowell County's leadership wanted a solution that was rigorously research-based, systematically structured, and practical enough to implement across an entire district.

"We had so many holes in our foundational phonics and phonemic awareness delivery. We knew everybody needed an intervention in core instruction."

Crystal Hamby

Assistant Superintendent for Learning, McDowell County Schools



THE SOLUTION

After evaluating multiple programs against science of reading research, McDowell County's elementary principal team selected IMSE's Orton-Gillingham Plus (OG+) supplemental curriculum and professional learning. What distinguished IMSE was the depth and clarity of its training model, which also retained the benefits the district had seen from previous train-the-trainer approaches.

The rollout began with a small cohort of teachers, and the results were immediate. Word spread quickly among staff, and teachers who hadn't yet been trained began asking when it would be their turn. The initiative grew into a comprehensive PK-8 literacy infrastructure.

Today, McDowell County has trained staff with IMSE at every level of the organization:

- All elementary teachers are trained in IMSE's OG+ curriculum
- Grade 3–5 teachers and all middle school ELA teachers are trained in Morphology Plus
- All special education teachers are trained in both OG+ and Morphology Plus
- All pre-K teachers received full implementation training in the 2025–26 school year
- ESL teachers and ESL instructional assistants are trained in OG and Morphology
- Every one of the district's 55 instructional assistants are trained in OG+
- All K–5 principals are trained in both OG+ and Morphology Plus, so they can conduct informed classroom walkthroughs

The decision to train instructional assistants was a turning point. Rather than treating instructional assistants as classroom aides, McDowell County invested in equipping them as true instructional partners, capable of delivering core elements like the three-part drill, following lesson plans independently, and supporting small-group instruction. Principals even arranged for retired teachers serving as tutors to receive training.

"The power of explicit, systematic literacy is multiplied when every educator speaks the same instructional language. Literacy is not one teacher's responsibility in a classroom. It is our district's shared commitment."

Michelle Baker

Director of Differentiation and Advanced Learning,
McDowell County Schools

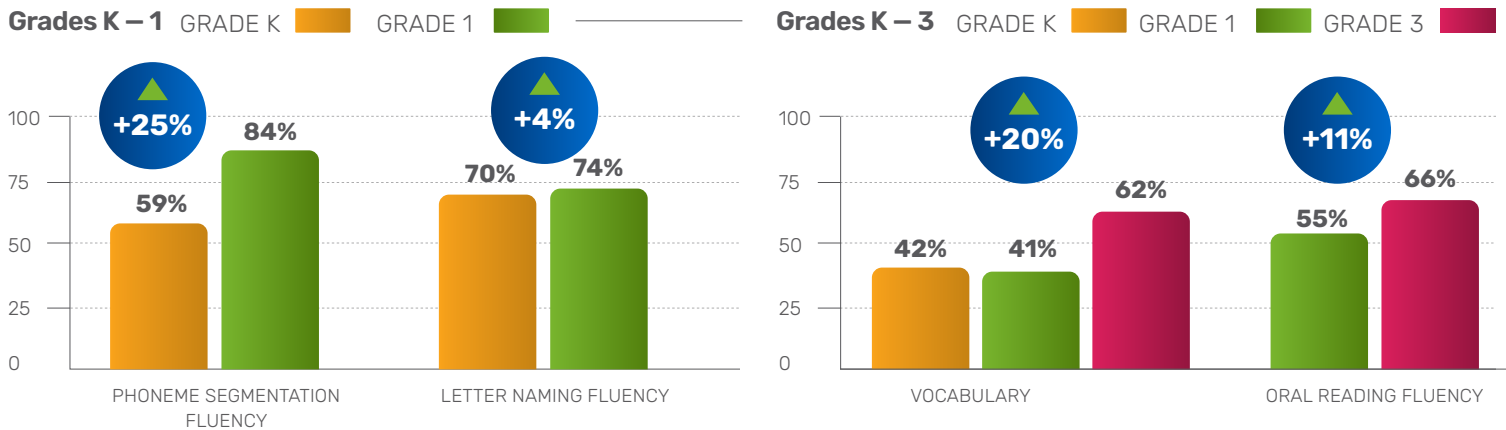
Principal training was equally intentional. By ensuring that PK–5 building leaders had completed the same IMSE coursework as their teachers, McDowell County gave principals the knowledge to recognize high-quality instruction during classroom visits and to coach teachers when elements like multisensory activities were being skipped.



THE RESULTS

The impact of McDowell County's IMSE implementation is visible across every grade band from pre-K through middle school. The district has tracked a cohort of students from kindergarten through the 2025–26 school year, measuring their performance against grade-level benchmarks in key literacy skills. Foundational skills like letter naming and phoneme segmentation are tracked from kindergarten through 1st grade, while oral reading fluency and vocabulary are tracked through 3rd grade. Across every skill and every grade span measured, the share of students meeting benchmarks rose.

2022–2026 Kindergarten Cohort Literacy Growth % of students meeting grade-level requirements



At the same time, over four years, McDowell has tracked a 23-percentage-point decline in students arriving at kindergarten with severe significant literacy risk. This rapidly improving trajectory is largely driven by pre-K instruction and sustained IMSE implementation in the early grades.

With IMSE's Pre-K Literacy Plus, Orton-Gillingham Plus, and Morphology Plus curricula working in tandem, the district has found a way to support every student from the moment they enter the district to the moment they leave. Teachers have more trust in their own classroom practice, and more students every day are changing the stories of their lives.

McDowell County began its IMSE journey because students needed better foundational skills, and teachers needed a better system. What they built is something worth imitating: a district-wide culture of literacy that reaches from pre-K to high school, where every trained educator shares a common language, a common curriculum, and a common commitment to helping every student learn to read.

"In my 11 years as a school administrator, equipping our entire team with this training stands out as one of the best investments our district has made."

Deeana Ray

Principal, Glenwood Elementary



EVIDENCE
for ESSA

ABOUT IMSE

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

Visit imse.com or contact info@imse.com to learn more about our work with school districts around the country.



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