

Expanding Regional Services for Children with Dyslexia

Manchester-by-the-Sea and Essex, Massachusetts

April 1, 2014



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INTRODUCTORY LETTER

April 1, 2014

Thanks to the generosity of the Community Innovation Challenge (CIC) Grant program, the Manchester-Essex Regional School District has launched a highly successful, financially self-sustaining Intensive Reading and Written Language (IRWL) classroom for children with dyslexia in grade six this year. This program represents an expansion of a CIC project initiated at the elementary level in FY12.

In FY2012, the Manchester-Essex Regional School District (MERSD) received a Community Innovation Challenge Grant to launch a project entitled *Regionalizing Special Education Services for Children with Dyslexia*. The goal of this project was to create a regional special education program serving Manchester, Essex, and other local communities committed to containing special education costs without sacrificing program quality for students with reading (dyslexia) and language-based learning disabilities at the elementary school level.

In FY2013, the MERSD was awarded additional CIC funds for an expansion of this program to the middle school level. Our current project, entitled *Expanding Regional Services for Students with Dyslexia*, resulted in the expansion of the IRWL program to grade six. In initiating this project, the District began the planning process in February 2013 and launched a specialized IRWL program at the middle school in September 2013. This program now provides small classes, individualized reading tutorials, and specialized teaching methodologies for children in grade six whose reading and written language skills fall more than one year below grade level. This program has already generated substantial cost avoidance and, most importantly, improved reading outcomes for the students involved. An FY2014 grant award from CIC will allow the MERSD to expand current programming for children with dyslexia and language-based learning disabilities through grade 8 in the upcoming school year.

We look forward to sharing our story with other school districts and serving as a model for similar initiatives designed to contain spiraling special education costs.

Best Regards,

Allison Brown Collins

Allison Brown Collins
Director of Student Services
Project Manager, MERSD CIC Grant

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In February 2013, the Manchester-Essex Regional School District (MERSD) launched a project entitled *Expanding Regional Services for Children with Dyslexia* thanks to the generous support of a Community Innovation Challenge grant. The purpose of this project was to expand the District's regional special education program to include sixth grade students with reading (dyslexia) and language-based learning disabilities in Manchester, Essex, and other local communities.

The new regional Intensive Reading and Written Language (IRWL) program is housed at Manchester-Essex Regional Middle School and provides sixth grade students with specialized instruction in English, Reading, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, and Study Skills. Curriculum and instruction are thematically based and parallel content in the mainstream sixth grade classroom. Assistive technology designed to support reading and written language development is integrated within the program.

Specific goals of program expansion were to: (1) Provide a continuum of services for students who accessed the IRWL program in grade 5 in 2012-2013 and planned to enroll at Manchester-Essex Regional Middle School in the 2013-2014 school year; and (2) Expand the cost-avoidance established by the elementary program to grade six and further reduce the need for out-of-district placements at nearby Landmark School.

Key successes of the program this year include improved outcomes for children with dyslexia and language-based learning disabilities, a reduction in out-of-district placements at the middle school level, and substantial cost avoidance for the District. Longer term goals include sustainability of the program in the District operating budget and enrollment in the IRWL program by multiple North Shore/Cape Ann area communities.

Success of the elementary IRWL program in 2012 and lessons learned through that process minimized the District's challenges in expanding the program to middle school in 2013. Parents were eager to have their children continue with methodologies and services that had been successful in elementary school. As an existing regional site for middle schoolers from Manchester and Essex, the Manchester-Essex Regional Middle School did not face the challenge of requiring children to transfer from a neighborhood school in order to access the program. At the same time, however, expansion brought a new set of challenges in aligning programming across two schools and effectively tracking short-term progress given changes in IRWL enrollment and assessment protocols across two different buildings.

SECTION 1: PARTNER COMMUNITIES

The Manchester-Essex Regional School District was formed in May 2000 under Chapter 71 of the Massachusetts General Laws and an Agreement between the Towns of Manchester-By-the-Sea and Essex. The MERSD provides public education for 1532 pupils from the member towns in grades kindergarten through twelve. The powers and duties of the District are vested in and exercised by the Manchester Essex Regional School District Committee, which consists of four members from Manchester and three members from Essex. MERSD comprises two elementary schools and one middle/high school.

The communities of Manchester and Essex partnered in undertaking the *Expanding Regional Services for Children with Dyslexia* project. In addition, the Rockport and Gloucester school districts submitted letters in support of the grant application. The Intensive Reading and Written Language program is open to neighboring North Shore/Cape Ann area communities on a tuition basis.

SECTION 2: GOALS

The focus of the *Expanding Regional Services for Children with Dyslexia* project is to increase the District's continuum of high quality programming for children with reading and language based learning disabilities and contain out-of-district placement costs. In addition, the program is designed to compete with nearby Landmark School by providing a language-based curriculum, strong repertoire of specialized instructional and reading methodologies, highly credentialed staff, and low teacher-to-student ratios.

The project established three goals for the grade six program: (1) Reading scores of children enrolled in the program will increase; (2) The number of children placed out-of-district will decrease; and (3) MERSD will realize substantial cost-avoidance as a result of the program. Longer term goals included sustainability of the program in the District operating budget and enrollment in the Intensive Reading and Written Language program by other North Shore/Cape Ann area communities.

SECTION 3: IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

The District's project implementation plan comprised referral and enrollment of students, staffing, ordering of materials, and teacher training. Upon receipt of grant funding, MERSD created a program description for staff and parents to use as a guide in referring students. This included detailed criteria for admission and the development of an admissions committee for review of referrals. When a parent or staff member expressed interest in the program on a child's behalf, the special education team convened to discuss the appropriateness of the placement and the admissions committee reviewed the student's recent evaluations and Individualized

Education Program to determine whether the student would be an appropriate match for the program. Children were referred from both the Manchester and Essex communities.

Hiring an experienced middle school teacher well versed in language based teaching methodologies was essential to the success of the expanded program. The District posted the IRWL teacher position on school spring and convened an interview committee with teachers, the regional middle school principal, and a parent. Substantial networking and recruiting also occurred in an effort to generate a strong pool of candidates. Candidates with appropriate credentials participated in two rounds of interviews and a demo lesson. The successful candidate was hired from another public school district with a longstanding language based program for children with reading disabilities. A part-time assistive technology specialist was also hired for the program. The District hired an in-house staff member for this role, which allowed flexible scheduling of assistive technology support for the IRWL teacher and students.

Preparation for program implementation included teacher training and purchase of supplies and materials for the new classroom. Purchases included instructional technology hardware and software (IPads, Lexia, Read Write Gold, Eno Board) as well as instructional materials (leveled readers, Visualizing and Verbalizing, Saxon math). Teachers received training and consultation in Assistive Technology as well as Framing Your Thoughts, Lindamood Bell, web site design, and Empower writing. Reading specialists associated with the program attended a conference on dyslexia.

SECTION 4: BUDGET

The District received \$73,000 to expand the Intensive Reading and Written Language program to grade six. This budget included partial contribution to the teacher salary as well as funding of staff training, technology, and supplies and materials.

Budget for Intensive Reading and Written Language Program:

Budget Item	Amount Requested	Actual Expenditure
Partial Teacher Salary	\$40,000	\$40,000
Staff Training	\$6,000	\$6,000
Assistive Tech	\$16,000	\$16,000
Supplies and Materials	\$6,000	\$8,000
Assist Tech Stipend	\$5,000	\$3,000
CIC Grant Total	\$73,000	\$73,000
District Contribution	\$39,769	\$39,769
Grand Total	\$112,769	\$112,769

Hiring of an in-house staff member as the assistive technology specialist allowed the District to realize a reduction in the budgeted amount for this position. An amendment was filed to reallocate funds to supplies and materials.

SECTION 5: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

Overall, the planning and implementation of the *Expanding Regional Services for Children with Dyslexia* project has been a great success. The Community Innovation Challenge grant award in February 2013 afforded the District substantial time for planning, training, and hiring, which was essential to the success of program expansion.

In addition, the District developed effective solutions to challenges that arose in the program planning and implementation phase as detailed below.

Finding an Appropriate Space and Location

Challenge: The middle school is housed in a new building that was not built with specialized programs in mind. The District needed to establish a classroom that would fit seamlessly within the middle school setting and maintain peer connections for the students involved.

Solution: Thanks to the flexibility of the general education grade six team, a literacy classroom was moved in order to allow the IRWL class to be located in a spacious classroom within the sixth grade wing of the school. This location has promoted connectedness for the IRWL students, allowed them to transition easily to inclusion classes, and learn in a setting that is comparable with their peers.

Attaining Continuity and Alignment with a New Program

Challenge: As a program expansion, the IRWL program for grade six needed to preserve continuity of strategies and methodologies from grades four and five while aligning with the grade six curriculum. In addition, as the sole teacher for the program, the District's new hire was assigned to teach four different content area subjects, which required substantial daily preparation and new curriculum development.

Solution: The new teacher and IRWL elementary teachers received funding for curriculum planning during the summer months. During the school year, these teachers met several times and the new teacher conducted observations of teaching methods in the grade four and five classroom. In addition, the District arranged for the new IRWL teacher to attend grade six common planning meetings in order to collaborate with content area teachers. Given the extensive curriculum development required for the new program, horizontal alignment of IRWL content in grade six will continue during the summer of 2014 and next year.

Creating a Progress Monitoring System

Challenge: During the first year of the IRWL program, the District identified the need for an annual progress monitoring system for all students receiving intensive reading services. More routine progress monitoring for IRWL students from elementary to middle school remained a challenge due to differences in assessment tools across buildings and changes in the student cohort from the first to second year of the CIC program. As a result, progress for students in the elementary program could not be compared directly to progress in the middle school program.

Solution: The District established baseline data for students in April/May 2013 with a plan to repeat the same assessments annually. In addition, IRWL teachers and reading specialists agreed to a common battery of progress monitoring tools that will include the Qualitative Reading Inventory, Read Naturally, and a self-designed decoding assessment that will be created in summer 2014.

SECTION 6: OUTCOMES

The District targeted three measures of success for the *Expanding Regional Services for Children with Dyslexia* project:

- Increased reading scores of children enrolled in the program
- Decrease number of students placed out-of-district
- Cost-avoidance figures (per pupil cost of program versus out-of-district tuition)

Benchmark reading assessments were conducted for five students receiving reading tutorials in the IRWL program during the fall, winter, and spring to measure progress in reading fluency, decoding, and comprehension.¹ On average, students demonstrated a 32 percent increase in reading fluency (words read correctly per minute) on a *Read Naturally* assessment. Students with weaknesses in the area of decoding improved their scores by 23 percent and moved up by one level on a formative decoding assessment. On the Qualitative Reading Inventory, students on average moved up by one full assessment level and demonstrated a 19 percent increase in correct item responses. See reference section 2 for a detailed report of student test scores.

As of this final report, the District is not funding any special education out-of-district tuitions for middle school students with dyslexia or language-based learning disabilities. The overall number of students placed out-of-district has remained unchanged from April 2013 to April 2014.

¹Six students participated in the IRWL program in 2013-2014; however, one student no longer required reading tutorial services.

The projected cost of six Landmark tuitions plus transportation is \$304,200. The cost of the IRWL program for the 2013-2014 school year (including funds from the MERSD operating budget and CIC grant) is \$126,769. Projected cost-avoidance is \$177,431.

In addition to quantitative measures of progress, three parents provided qualitative feedback on the success of the program:

As a parent of a 6th grader in the IRWL Program, I have found that my daughter has benefitted from and internalized the learning strategies that are taught. They are targeted to her way of processing information and she now employs many of them on her own! The small class size is also conducive for her teacher to closely monitor her progress.

Our lives have changed because of the IRWL program. [Student name] was struggling in her classes and was not accessing the curriculum. With the IRWL program in the elementary school, she made significant progress in all academic areas. In 6th grade, she continues to excel in the IRWL program. The program has allowed her to learn new strategies to get her thoughts organized and expand on her thinking. It has now become second nature to her, as she uses these strategies in all areas of her academics. The individualized attention that she receives has helped her gain confidence in herself while increasing her understanding of the material. [Student name] is a hard-working girl and with the skills that she has learned in the IRWL program, she has exceeded our expectations.

Our son has had a wonderful experience this year with the IRWL program. We are thrilled that he has been able to get specialized instruction in the areas he needs, taught in the way he needs. In addition, he still attends and enjoys other mainstream classes with his broader peer group. We've seen great improvement this year in his academics and his confidence. IRWL is a great model for serving kids with learning needs within their school system.

In summary, the District's expansion of the Intensive Reading and Written Language program surpassed expectations for student progress and cost avoidance. While families initially demonstrated hesitancy in enrolling children in a new program, the program's credibility is now established and five additional students have been referred for the 2014-2015 school year.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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REFERENCE 1: PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Manchester-Essex Regional School District Intensive Reading and Written Language Program

Mission: The Manchester-Essex Regional School District (MERSD) is committed to providing an inclusive and supportive environment for students who require intensive remediation due to significant reading disabilities. Our mission is to ensure a high quality continuum of programming and services that remediate challenges in reading and writing, teach compensatory strategies, foster self-awareness, and promote independent learning skills that prepare students for success in inclusion settings.

Program Description: The Intensive Reading and Written Language (IRWL) program provides students who have diagnosed reading disabilities (dyslexia) with specialized instruction designed to remediate areas of weakness and maximize independent access to grade level curriculum. Instruction is thematically based, parallels academic content in mainstream grade level classrooms, and prioritizes development of reading, writing, language comprehension, and oral communication skills. Class size is limited to 8 students. Assistive technology designed to support reading and written language development is integrated throughout the program.

The new IRWL grade six classroom offers intensive, language-based instruction in English Language Arts, Social Studies, and Science as well as supported inclusion in mathematics. Daily individual or small group reading tutorials are tailored to address student weaknesses in decoding, fluency, and/or comprehension.

Program Core Values and Strategies: The Intensive Reading and Written Language program offers developmentally appropriate curriculum and instruction designed to support student strengths and address vulnerabilities through the following strategies:

- ❖ Emphasize skills acquisition in reading and writing;
- ❖ Incorporate a clear, sequential, and multi-sensory approach to learning, including ongoing use of visual reinforcements and opportunities for kinesthetic learning;
- ❖ Preview and review vocabulary relating to each lesson;
- ❖ Employ multi-modal assessment to maximize students' ability to demonstrate learning;
- ❖ Utilize micro-uniting (also known as "chunking") and structuring of tasks;
- ❖ Automatize concepts and strategies through frequent opportunities for practice and review;
- ❖ Provide rigorous grade level content aligned with the Massachusetts curriculum frameworks;
- ❖ Conduct frequent progress monitoring and use results to inform instruction;
- ❖ Prepare students to transition into an inclusion classroom once skills are strengthened and compensatory strategies developed;
- ❖ Integrate assistive technologies that support students' independent access to the curriculum;

- ❖ Offer opportunities for increased independence and inclusion, preparing students to transition into mainstream programming.

Specialized Instruction and Methodologies: The Intensive Reading and Written Language Program utilizes specialized decoding and reading comprehension programs and incorporates language based instruction across the curriculum using the following specialized curricula and methodologies:

- ❖ Highly structured, systematic, research-based reading programs matched to student needs (LIPS, Wilson, Orton Gillingham)
- ❖ Brain Frames
- ❖ Structured Sentence Development Instruction
- ❖ Visualizing and Verbalizing
- ❖ Read Naturally Reading Fluency Program
- ❖ Assistive Technology

Student Profile and Admission Criteria:

The admission process for the Intensive Reading and Written Language Program begins with a referral by the special education team based on the criteria listed below.

- ❖ A primary diagnosis of reading (dyslexia) or language based learning disability;
- ❖ Average to above average cognitive ability based on standardized measures;
- ❖ Scores more than a year below grade level on multiple measures of reading ability;
- ❖ Documented difficulties in accessing an inclusion curriculum in multiple content areas despite special education supports;
- ❖ The need for a specialized curriculum that builds reading and written language competencies across content areas;
- ❖ No history of significant behavioral or emotional issues.

The program admissions committee will conduct an observation of the student, review the student record, grades, and recent evaluations, and consider recommendations of classroom teachers prior to making a decision.

Exit Criteria:

The mission of the Intensive Reading and Written Language Program includes a commitment to educating students in the least restrictive environment. Students receive intensive, highly structured, small group and individualized instruction with the goal of returning to the inclusion classroom. When students have attained the following skills, the Special Education Team will reconvene to develop a Transition Plan:

- ❖ The student demonstrates the ability to access grade level text through improved reading skills and compensatory strategies;
- ❖ The student produces grade level written language with or without the use of assistive technology;

- ❖ The student displays an increased level of independence as a learner;
- ❖ The student understands his/her strengths and needs as a learner and self-advocates effectively with adults and peers.

REFERENCE 2: STUDENT READING SCORES FOR IRWL POGRAM

Assessment	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5
Fluency (words correct per minute)					
Fall	118	94	128	103	77
Winter	124	103	152	124	108
Spring	149	121	153	134	130
Increase Fall-Spring	26%	29%	20%	30%	69%
Comprehension Level and Percent Accuracy					
Fall	L5 – 88%	L5 – 100%	L5 – 63%	L5 – 75%	L5 – 63%
Winter	L5 – 100%	L5 – 100%	L5 – 88%	L5 – 100%	L5 – 75%
Spring	L6 – 88%	L6 – 88%	L5 – 100%	L6 – 88%	L5 – 100%

REFERENCE 3: SAMPLE IRWL DAILY SCHEDULE

Block 1	IRWL English
Block 2	IRWL Social Studies
Block 3	Reading Tutorial
Block 4	Exploratory Class (health, physical education, art, music)
Block 5	IRWL Science
Block 6	IRWL Math or Inclusion Math
Block 7	IRWL Learning Strategies

RESOURCES

Reading Programs:

Academy of Orton-Gillingham Practitioners and Educators

Lindamood Bell Learning Processes

Wilson Language Training

Software Programs:

Kurzweil Educational Software

IXL Math Program

Read Naturally