

CASE STUDY

Science of Reading Brings 'Incredible Growth' for Students With Dyslexia

McAllen Independent School District
McAllen, Texas

Lexia[®]
ALL FOR LITERACY™





“The No. 1 thing is ‘students first.’ They’re our future tomorrow.”

Sal Flores, director-RTI/504/dyslexia for McAllen Independent School District in Texas, has lived and breathed that mantra for the last five years and is proud his work and the work of his educators is paying off.

Currently, McAllen Independent School District educators have identified approximately 1,700 students with dyslexia in grades K-12. Flores expects that number to creep closer to 2,000 once screening is complete for all first and second grade students. While recent Texas legislation is bringing big transitions, Flores is focused on creating the best possible outcomes for students in dyslexia-focused classes across the district’s 30 campuses.

McAllen, Texas

1,721 students with dyslexia have been identified as of this year.

“Personally, the science of reading is much, much needed across districts in the state of Texas,” Flores said. After 31 years in education, he knew the importance of the science of reading and saw the impact on student scores and reading skills when curriculum and instruction were not based on it.

Flores' solution for students was implementation of a science of reading-based literacy program, hand in hand with teachers helping students with dyslexia getting trained in the science of reading. "We have the most certified academic language therapists, we're incorporating Lexia®—Core5 and PowerUp—and layer that with Lexia® LETRS®, and it seals everything we want for our students. They all learn in different ways and we have the tools and knowledge to meet them where they are," Flores said. "We've seen incredible growth in our district."

A Rough Start

Five years ago, when Flores started in his current role, parents constantly called him.

"I came in, and my first week I had parents meeting with me because they weren't happy with where we were," Flores said. "I told them I wasn't planning to make any changes until the beginning of the school year. Then, the pandemic hit. What an eye-opener."

The program in use at the time wasn't computer-based, making the pandemic an especially rough experience academically—and that's when Flores knew it was time to search for a new solution.

'Incredible Program' Offers 'True Data'

During his search, Flores was introduced to LETRS, a professional learning course for educators, but he knew he wanted to get the correct literacy program in place first, in alignment with his "students-first" mantra.

When Flores discovered Lexia® Core5® Reading, its structured, science of reading-based approach checked all the boxes. As a bonus, the Adaptive Blended Learning model made pandemic-era instruction more effective. He opted to pilot the program, and after just a few months, his teachers came to him saying, "Sal, this is it. This is what we want."

"My teachers fell in love with Core5 because, for the first time, they were able to see what they call 'true data,'" Flores said. It was no longer acceptable to make assumptions about whether or not a child was progressing in their learning. Now, the educators had a reliable source of real-time progress data, where they could see exactly where a student was excelling and where they might need extra support.

The real-time data isn't just for teachers—Flores follows the numbers closely to ensure all of his student populations are seeing progress. "I track the progress of all my EBs [Emergent Bilinguals], my special education students, the GT [gifted and talented] students, my general ed. I look at the entire data," he said.

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“My teachers tell me, ‘Sal, whatever happens, do not remove these Lexia programs. They’re making a big impact in our school.’ And they are, I can see it. The data tells us what we’re doing is making a difference.”

— **Sal Flores**, Director-RTI/504/Dyslexia
McAllen Independent School District, Texas

In the Rio Grande Valley, most students speak Spanish as their first language. That means many students with dyslexia are also Emergent Bilinguals. With native language support in eight additional languages, Core5 helps teachers navigate instruction and target skill gaps for all students. “I can tell you right now our scores have increased with our EBs,” Flores said. “Many of our students with dyslexia see a lot of gains with Core5, whether it be one grade level of growth or two.”

“By utilizing this incredible program, we know we’re building on the skills of each child individually. And we’re seeing that growth,” Flores added.

Adding Professional Learning

After implementing Core5 for a few years and seeing the difference it was making for students, LETRS was Flores’ top choice for a professional learning course because it was research-based, and he knew his teachers would buy into it. Developed by Dr. Louisa Moats and leaders in the field of literacy, LETRS is a two-year program that teaches educators about the how, what, and why of literacy acquisition, backed by the science of reading.

“Dr. Moats is mentioned multiple times in the dyslexia handbook,” Flores said. So, to train his teachers through the professional learning program Dr. Moats helped develop was a no-brainer. “They knew and heard about her and the research she’s done,” Flores said.

McAllen educators recently completed the two-year course, and in Flores’ words, “LETRS has been phenomenal. Teachers are understanding the way the brain works, learning all the way up to what we should be doing with our students, how to apply this in the classroom.” His teachers particularly appreciated the face-to-face sessions and that Flores was in the training with them.

Currently, all of Flores’ teachers are trained in LETRS, and he plans to bring it back in as new teachers are hired. “When we moved into the second year, I started seeing teachers apply all these great strategies and processes. We finally have a program where we know everyone can teach phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency—everything is aligned with those pillars. Thanks to LETRS, teachers know what they need to do,” he said.



He adds, “It’s making a big impact in our district. We can see that every day—our teachers utilize a lot of the skills and strategies they learned in LETRS when they’re teaching and working with Core5 and PowerUp.”

Specific, Structured, and Supported Implementation Leads to Success

With nearly 2,000 students across the district identified with dyslexia or needing that extra instructional support, there are many classes where every student in the room has dyslexia. To support them, each of McAllen ISD’s campuses has between one and three dedicated teachers helping students with dyslexia, based on how many students have been identified at that school.

Flores and his teachers created a blended learning model to ensure every student receives the instructional support they need. “When you walk into the classroom, you might see kids on the computer working on Core5 or PowerUp, and then you’ll see another group of kids possibly working one-to-one with a teacher on the Skill Builders that we use, incorporating, of course, the knowledge from LETRS and everything that we do,” Flores said. “And then we have students getting recorded lessons and larger-group instruction, on what is a vowel, or what is a noun and so on, and they rotate.”

Flores feels strongly that station rotations allow students to work more directly and fruitfully with their teachers, which is the core of successful instruction. “You can’t have students on computers 24/7—it doesn’t work,” he said. “There has to be balance. They need one-on-one.”

That’s one of the reasons he appreciates Core5 and PowerUp so much—Lexia products are designed to keep the teacher at the center of instruction while providing individualized learning paths.

Flores also knew he needed administrator buy-in at each of his campuses to ensure his teachers were fully supported. He got that buy-in by returning to the data. “I brought the administrators in at the beginning of the year and gave them a username and password, so they were able to see the data from the work we did in Core5 and PowerUp,” Flores said.

Flores also made them aware of the additional layer of support provided by LETRS training among the teachers and provided a new walkthrough form so that when they visit a classroom for students with dyslexia, they know what to look for. The walkthroughs are important, Flores emphasized. “When you walk into a dyslexia classroom, don’t expect to see what you see in a general class,” he said. “Look for these things I’m giving you. Then, look at the scores, find out how well the kids are doing, and we make adjustments across the district to support every child at their level.”

In surveys conducted after LETRS professional learning sessions,

100%

of McAllen educators said,
“I feel confident delivering instruction rooted in the science of reading.”

That data has encouraged positive competition between the schools. “You’ve got principals wanting their school to be ‘No. 1,’” Flores said. That friendly competition also encourages collaboration. When one school has strong results, other principals want to know what they’re doing differently so they can also utilize it for their schools.

From Pilot to Passing Progress

When Flores considers how he’d advise administrators making large curriculum/program changes, he recommends following his lead. “If there’s a doubt, start with a pilot. Pilot Core5 and get that teacher’s buy-in. The kids get to see something new, and you can decide whether you want that program,” he said. For LETRS, he recommends keeping the end in mind. “It’s so much information. But it’s important. If you want to get to the end results, you have to start with how the brain works,” Flores said.

As much as Flores and his teachers love Core5 and PowerUp, he points out that a program is still just a program. “If we don’t train our teachers correctly, it doesn’t matter. You have to make sure that your teachers understand the science of reading, understand the process of it so they can utilize programs such as Core5 and PowerUp,

and make sure we provide that instruction for every child individually,” he said. “That is what makes a huge impact in our district.”

For McAllen ISD, Flores is proud to report 55% of elementary and 58% of secondary school students with dyslexia are progressing with a passing grade. “That’s huge,” Flores said. “When you look at our scores, wow, 50% or more of these students with dyslexia are now passing, and why? Because we have trained our teachers correctly, and we have the right systems and programs that support them.”

Statewide changes are coming in Texas in the upcoming school year, since dyslexia instruction will be moved under the special education umbrella, and Flores feels his district will be in great shape to weather whatever additional changes are coming in the future. The district is now piloting Lexia English Language Development™ to further support Emergent Bilingual students’ language acquisition—setting them up for continued success.

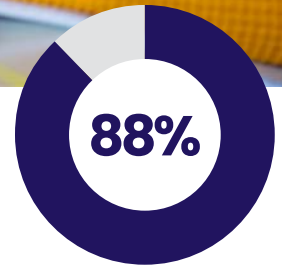
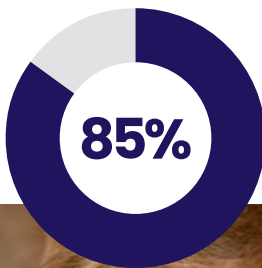
And the parents? “The calls I was getting from parents—truly, our call numbers have minimized so much,” Flores said. “I’ve had parents thanking me because we brought in these programs that made a huge impact in our schools.”

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For students using Core5, **85%** of students who met usage and **65%** of ALL students advanced at least one grade level of material.

The number of students working in or above grade-level material **more than doubled**.



For students using PowerUp, **88%** of students ended the school year in the Intermediate or Advanced skill zones for comprehension.

By the end of the year, the number of students working in Intermediate or Advanced zones **doubled** for Grammar skills and **tripled** for Word Study skills.



Lexia®, a Cambium Learning Group company, is a leader in science of reading-based solutions. For 40 years, the company has focused on pre-K-12 literacy and today provides solutions for every student and educator. With a complete offering of professional learning, curriculum, and embedded assessment, Lexia helps more learners read, write, and speak with confidence.

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