

CASE STUDY



Austin ISD Tests New Approach to 'Break the Cycle' for Struggling Middle School Students

After repeated efforts to improve fluency and comprehension were unsuccessful, 5 schools tested a new approach. The result? Significant and rapid improvement as students gained new decoding and word recognition skills

Austin, Texas, is a city known for good music, hip festivals, great food, and a rich blend of cultures. That cultural mix is most apparent in the Austin Independent School District (AISD) where almost 75,000 students attend classes at 129 different campuses.

While the diverse student population enriches all aspects of the educational experience, it also presents some challenges. As is frequently the case across the country, many of Austin's students, particularly those who are English Learners and those with learning difficulties, are at higher

risk for failing to read with comprehension. The district identifies those students who struggle with reading and works to provide the right intervention at the right time. Despite the district's efforts, some students continue to struggle to reach reading proficiency. The district found that many of these students have difficulties with foundational reading skills. But even with significant phonics and fluency work, students continued to struggle. Undeterred, district principals and teachers were committed to identifying the 'missing link' and decided to try a new approach.



PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

During the 2019-20 school year, five AISD middle schools participated in a study to determine the effectiveness of a new system of assessment and intervention. The study was designed to (1) identify students whose reading fluency and comprehension were adversely impacted by deficits in foundational skills and (2) test a groundbreaking approach to develop the word recognition skills necessary for fluency.

WordFlight (formerly the Foundations Learning System), is an online literacy solution designed to attack gaps in literacy knowledge and skills in a way that directly targets the development of automatic word recognition – a key precursor to fluency. *WordFlight* includes a powerful diagnostic to help identify exactly where problems lie. The *WordFlight Instructional Program* provides personalized, adaptive instruction that prepares each student to automatically use foundational skills resulting in fluency, and ultimately, supporting reading comprehension. *WordFlight's* combination of screening, assessment, and instruction uniquely addresses development of decoding knowledge, automatic word recognition, and the generalization of skills. *WordFlight* has been proven effective for persistently struggling readers, special needs students, English language learners, and students who learn differently.

“Student engagement went up, as compared to other similar reading interventions. Students became more aware of concepts such as syllables and the role they play in developing stronger reading skills.”

-- Shayna Tipton, Teacher, Lively Middle School

CONDUCTING THE STUDY

To determine whether *WordFlight* could positively impact reading proficiency for struggling readers, the study divided the students into a treatment group and a control group. In both conditions, there were:

- Struggling readers
- English learners (EL)
- Students with a diagnosis of dyslexia
- Students receiving accommodations under section 504
- Students with IEPs

Students from both groups were initially screened using the *WordFlight Screener*, which identified whether students likely had deficits in automatic word recognition. The treatment students then began *WordFlight*, which contains the *WordFlight Diagnostic* and the *WordFlight Instructional Program*. For a deeper understanding of student needs and progress, testing of decoding and automatic



word recognition skills using *WordFlight's* Diagnostic was scheduled to occur three times for the treatment students:

1. Before initiation of the *WordFlight Instructional Program*
2. At the mid-point of the curriculum; and
3. At the end of the curriculum or the school year, whichever occurred first.



In addition, independent district tests were to be administered near the end of the school year. The control students were to take the *WordFlight Diagnostic* at the beginning of the study and at the end of the school year. The Screener and the initial Diagnostic revealed that while these schools had tried a host of interventions, persistent deficits in foundational skills remained as a barrier to fluency and comprehension.

Although the project was interrupted by COVID-19 in mid-March 2020, most students were able to continue the instruction and take the second diagnostic at home. Despite the issues and limitations created by the pandemic, the study continued and data were collected and analyzed from students in both groups who completed the pre- and mid-diagnostics.

WORDFLIGHT: PREPARING STUDENTS FOR FLUENCY

WordFlight does not stop at mastery of foundational skills. It is designed to enhance the ability to automatically apply those skills to new words and in new contexts. The power of *WordFlight's* Diagnostic allows districts to understand the 'missing link' between phonics and fluency – automatic word recognition. *WordFlight* is specifically designed to help students become more automatic so they can quickly generalize and flexibly apply what they have learned to new words and contexts.

THE POWER OF THE DIAGNOSTIC - THE ONLY VALIDATED MEASURE OF AUTOMATIC WORD RECOGNITION

The patented *WordFlight Diagnostic* reveals important information the district would not otherwise know. *WordFlight* uniquely identifies and illuminates why students struggle to achieve fluency. Educators have immediate insight when they view student profiles showing gaps in decoding and automatic word recognition skills. The Diagnostic for middle schoolers

The *WordFlight Diagnostic* is the only patented and operationalized measurement of automatic word recognition available today. The measures obtained predict reading fluency.

is validated against the Woodcock Johnson and Texas Middle School Fluency Assessment, providing scaled scores for decoding and automatic word recognition on a 600-point scale.



“Apart from seeing their scores go up, students’ enthusiasm in learning increased. . . Students felt accomplished when they moved up to a new level.”

-- Patty Stebbins, Teacher, Lively MS

IMPRESSIVE RESULTS ILLUSTRATE STUDENTS’ ACQUISITION AND USE OF NEW SKILLS

At Austin ISD, the study revealed substantial, positive change with their middle school students who used WordFlight. Significant gains were made and many at-risk students, for the first time, moved to proficiency in decoding, automatic word recognition, or both, which had not been achieved by previous interventions. These changes came as no surprise to one of the district’s middle school teachers:

“I have seen excellent growth in my dyslexic students who have used *WordFlight*. Absolutely excellent growth! The program definitely gave my students self-confidence in taking on reading tasks they normally would not do. It also allowed them to see each other as a team, helped them to engage and excel with one another, and share thoughts and connections to and strategies used for reading tasks at hand.”

-- Deanessa Zuniga, M.Ed., Dyslexia Interventionist,
Lamar Middle School



VISIBLE CHANGES AFTER USING WORDFLIGHT

Confidence and collaboration, clear indicators of student learning and agency, were obvious to both students and teachers. Additionally, the numbers speak for themselves in literacy gains. Here is a closer look at some of those changes in performance from pre- to mid-test in *WordFlight* and control groups:

Significantly more students showed improvement in the *WordFlight* group

A total of 90% of the students in *WordFlight* improved in decoding and 87% improved in automatic word recognition while only 63% of the students in the control group improved in each of the areas of decoding and automatic word recognition.

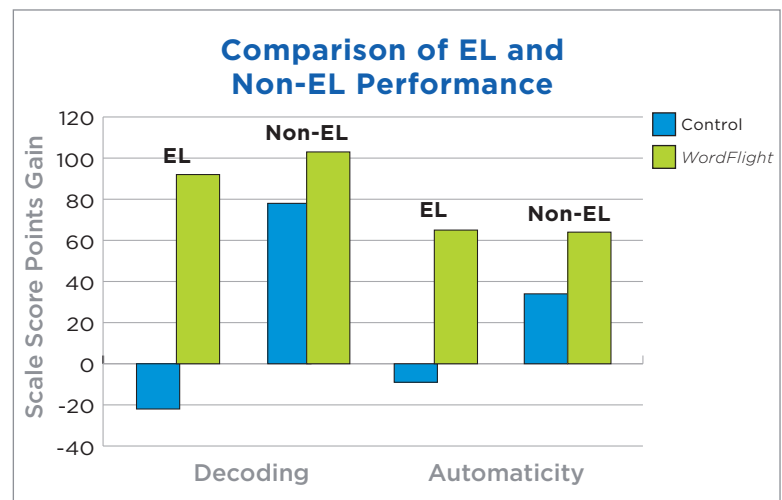
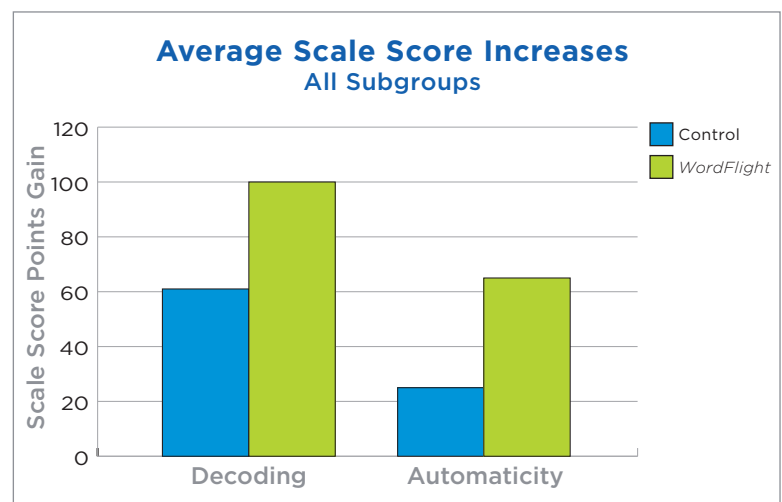
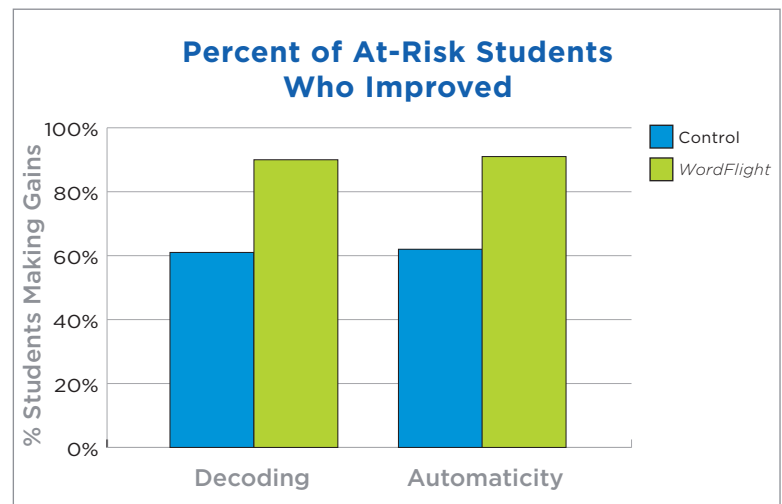
Higher gains were achieved by the *WordFlight* group

The *WordFlight* group excelled in both decoding and automatic word recognition scores. The control group averaged a 62-point gain in decoding compared to the significant 101 points gained by the *WordFlight* group in decoding. For automatic word recognition, the control group gained 27 points while the *WordFlight* group improved 66 points. Students showed similar responses of improvement across all subgroups (EL, Dyslexia, 504 plans and IEPs).

There also was substantial improvement for English learners

English learners in the *WordFlight* group improved by 93 and 66 points in decoding and automatic word recognition, respectively. In comparison, ELs in the control group lost 24 points in decoding and 9 points in automaticity.

The students at AISD showed considerable gains in only three to four months and it is anticipated that had the entire curriculum been completed, additional gains could have occurred. Overall, the study illustrates how *WordFlight* can improve both decoding knowledge and automatic use of reading skills, helping students become more fluent, proficient readers.



WordFlight (formerly the Foundations Learning System), is an online literacy solution designed to attack gaps in literacy knowledge and skills in a way that directly targets the development of automatic word recognition – a key precursor to fluency. *WordFlight* includes a quick Screener to identify students likely struggling with basic reading skills, a powerful Diagnostic to help identify exactly where problems lie, and the *WordFlight Instructional Program* that provides personalized, adaptive instruction — preparing each student to automatically use foundational skills resulting in fluency, and ultimately, reading comprehension.

WordFlight's combination of screening, assessment, and instruction uniquely addresses development of decoding knowledge, automatic word recognition, and the generalization of skills. *WordFlight* has been proven effective for persistently struggling readers, special needs students, English language learners, and students who learn differently.



For more information, please visit

www.wordflight.com | 888-701-3009