

CUMBERLAND COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS, NORTH CAROLINA

# Using Structured Literacy to Improve Reading Proficiency



## A Military Community

As the fifth largest district in North Carolina, Cumberland County Public Schools are also notable for being an adjacent community to Fort Bragg, one of the largest US Army installations in the world, with 54,000 military personnel stationed there. As a result, local schools have a diverse student body with one quarter of the students attached to military families. Tours of duty often conflict with schools' academic schedules, disrupting learning for many students and school staff.

With an already mobile community as its foundation, followed by two years of disrupted learning due to the pandemic, managing school was difficult for a district with one of the highest poverty rates in the state. "These last two years have been rough," said Catherine LeCleir-Salas, Instructional Specialist for K-5 exceptional students. "Honestly, our focus has been as much on keeping our teachers on board as it has on implementing programs with fidelity."

## Returning to a Sense of Normalcy

"It's been a strange first semester this year," said LeCleir-Salas. "Everyone is different, and it took until almost December for everyone to settle in." Not that any school will return to what it was before the

**48,796**  
students



**25.92%**  
13,196 in military families



**3,300**  
teachers



**53**  
elementary schools



**68.8%**  
free/reduced lunch

pandemic, but LeCleur-Salas says that getting students and families back to a school routine makes it seem more normal. “The kids want to be back and learn in school,” she said. “Getting back on track is now our goal!”

One of the bright spots for Cumberland County has been the stability of their reading program that carried them through in-person, remote, hybrid, and virtual learning. They had previously used Wilson Reading for nine years until the teachers reported that Wilson wasn’t meeting their needs. However, they wanted to find another program that used the Orton-Gillingham pedagogy, that was scripted, but allowed them some creativity in their teaching. Orton-Gillingham is a direct, explicit, multisensory, structured, sequential, diagnostic, and prescriptive way to teach literacy.

The Orton-Gillingham method is also an ideal approach to fulfill the North Carolina Excellent Public Schools Act of 2021 that requires all state Pre-K and elementary teachers to be trained in the Science of Reading and to use structured literacy to teach North Carolina students. The district had been using S.P.I.R.E. as their Tier 3 intervention tool for years when they decided to look for something new with a more robust reading comprehension piece, which is what teachers felt was lacking in Wilson Reading.

## Teachers Choose S.P.I.R.E.

Although they planned to continue to use S.P.I.R.E. for their Tier 3 reading program, in 2009 the district asked several vendors to present other reading programs to teachers, including S.P.I.R.E. After they reviewed the various programs, in 2010, 97% of teachers recommended the district purchase S.P.I.R.E., in large part because they liked how the Orton-Gillingham methodology is applied. S.P.I.R.E. is firmly grounded in structured literacy and is research-proven to open up the ability to read to non-readers, struggling readers, and students with dyslexia.



S.P.I.R.E.’s research-proven, data-driven reading intervention includes teacher-led instruction, continual practice, and review to ensure measurable results. Its structured, spiraling curriculum incorporates the six critical areas of structured literacy: phonological awareness; phonics; spelling; fluency; vocabulary; and comprehension.

LeCleur-Salas is convinced the reason that their implementation of S.P.I.R.E. has seen such good results is that it was the teachers who selected it. They liked that S.P.I.R.E. was based on the Orton-Gillingham system and was more user friendly and more visual than the Wilson program and had teacher guides that were easy to follow. S.P.I.R.E. also provided a bridge through remote instruction until progress monitoring with S.P.I.R.E. STAR Digital Teacher Companion was available this year. Now all the teachers use digital materials and can seamlessly transition to remote instruction should the need arise again.

Cumberland County is using a mix of S.P.I.R.E. materials, including the digital version of S.P.I.R.E., which allows teachers to score students’ print assessments and track their progress on line. They found that their younger students needed the magnetic board to manipulate for physical interaction to learn. So, the district is using print, digital, and blended S.P.I.R.E. materials.

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S.P.I.R.E. (has been) our Tier 3 intervention tool for 10 years, the print version and now the hybrid 4th Edition. Teachers find it easy to follow and teach. Our students demonstrate meaningful progress. S.P.I.R.E. teams are responsive to our needs. The S.P.I.R.E. reading program works!

—CATHY LECLEIR-SALAS

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## Pandemic Results

When the district implemented S.P.I.R.E. at all 53 elementary schools, it was a relatively easy transition to a new program. "The 10-step lesson based on explicit instruction was familiar to teachers," said LeCleir-Salas. "The teacher-led lessons include all critical areas of reading, multisensory learning and mastery of concepts presented in a logical sequence based on language development."

LeCleir-Salas also gave high marks to S.P.I.R.E.'s flexible professional learning program. "We have used both in-person and virtual professional development for S.P.I.R.E. and found the trainers to be very knowledgeable and supportive," she said. "The training has been excellent preparation for teaching the program."

Cumberland County had between 85% to 90% teacher participation in using S.P.I.R.E. for the 2017–18, 2018–19, and 2019–20 school years. "Teachers kept their own data for student progress," said LeCleir-Salas, "and at the district level we monitored the implementation and performed random fidelity checks on program usage."

"Fall 2022 will be more normal, and we'll be fully staffed and back on track with data, checking for fidelity," said LeCleir-Salas. "The voice and choice of our teachers has made S.P.I.R.E. reading a success for us."