What Happens When Students with Persistent Reading Difficulties Receive EBLI?

Findings from a Two-Year Developmental Pilot at Hyde Park Day School

Dennis Ciancio, PhD
SignalPoint Research
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+25 wcpm	+12 percent	+6.0 points	+4 times	+40 wcpm
Average gain in Oral Reading Fluency	Average gain in Oral Reading Accuracy	Average gain in Written Spelling standard scores	more fluency growth per hour than previous years	Average fluency gain over two-year span

Hyde Park Day School (HPDS) had a problem that looked straightforward on paper but frustrating in practice: struggling readers weren't making progress, despite receiving high-intensity explicit instruction. HPDS is a private school for students with dyslexia or students of average-to-superior intelligence with significant learning disabilities that impact their reading, writing, and academic progress. Over the past several years, HPDS instructors noticed that students with severe delays in reading were not progressing as hoped, despite hours of targeted, explicit instruction using an Orton-Gillingham-based program that is HPDS's primary literacy curriculum.

What resulted was a real-world, two-year-long developmental pilot study. Six teachers and speech language pathologists volunteered to be trained in EBLI: Evidence-Based Literacy Instruction, a linguistics phonics speech-to-print approach, and implement it with a small group of students with persistent reading, spelling, and difficulties, students who had not made expected progress despite sustained Orton-Gillingham instruction. Unlike traditional phonics programs that move from print to speech (asking students to learn letter names and rules, then connect them to speech), EBLI begins with the sounds of spoken language and builds toward print. This approach is grounded in how language is neurologically processed. The pilot asked sensible questions—*Would EBLI fit with HPDS's other instructional components? Would HPDS students who were struggling, despite years of Orton-Gillingham instruction, make progress?*—and the answers are promising.

About the Author. **Dr. Ciancio** has over two decades of experience leading projects to improve learning and instruction in PreK-12 settings. His 50+ works of scholarship include experimental evaluations of promising interventions, conducting formative research, tools for educators to improve practice, and formative assessments of academic skills. Dr. Ciancio has served on the faculty WestEd, the University of Tennessee and the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston. He received his PhD in Developmental Psychology from the University of Notre Dame.

The project setup

HPDS implemented the pilot across three campuses over two school years with a total of 53 students in grades two through seven and six total trained educators. Twenty-seven students participated in the 2023–24 school year and forty students participated in 2024–25; fourteen students received EBLI instruction across both years which allowed the team to understand a small set of two-year trajectories. Instructional settings varied; students in classroom instruction were taught in groups of 5-6, while those taught by SLP's were taught 1:1 or 1:2. Students received an average of roughly 86 hours of EBLI instruction. However, due to differences in implementation models (described below), some students received approximately 106 hours of EBLI instruction as their core reading instruction while others received closer to 20 hours of EBLI instruction as an intervention supplement.

Before EBLI was introduced, the students selected for this pilot had been receiving Orton-Gillingham-based instruction, in many cases for multiple years. The educators, while very experienced with Orton-Gillingham, were also new to EBLI.

HPDS utilized assessments already embedded in its instructional cycle to track growth: DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) and Oral Reading Accuracy, and the Test of Written Spelling (TOWS).

SignalPoint Research analyzed HPDS benchmark data on three primary outcomes:

- Oral Reading Fluency
- Oral Reading Accuracy
- Spelling

2023-24 SCHOOL YEAR

	CLASSROOM TEACHERS EBLI as core		SPEECH & LANGUAGE PATHOLOGISTS EBLI as supplement				
Campus	Northfield	Lemont	Lemont	Chicago	Northfield	Chicago	
Educator	T0001	T0002	T0003	T0004	T0005	T0006	TOTAL
Grade 2	-	-	-	-	-	2	2
Grade 3	-	-	-	-	-	4	4
Grade 4	4	-	1	-	-	-	5
Grade 5	-	5	2	2	1	-	10
Grade 6	-	-	1	4	1	-	6
Grade 7	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
TOTAL	4	5	4	6	2	6	27

2024-25 SCHOOL YEAR

	CLASSROOM TEACHERS EBLI as core		SPEECH & LANGUAGE PATHOLOGISTS EBLI as supplement				
Campus	Northfield	Lemont	Lemont	Chicago	Northfield	Chicago	
Educator	T0001	T0002	T0003	T0004	T0005	T0006	TOTAL
Grade 2	-	-	-	-	-	4	4
Grade 3	-	-	-	-	-	10 *(1)*	10
Grade 4	-	-	-	-	-	5 *(3)*	5
Grade 5	5 *(2)*	3	-	2 *(2)*	-	-	10
Grade 6	-	3 *(2)*	-	-	4 *(2)*	-	7
Grade 7	-	-	-	3 *(2)*	1 *(1)*	-	4
TOTAL	5	6	0	5	5	19	40

Figure 1. HPDS implementation of EBLI in 2023-24 included 27 students and 6 educators on 3 campuses (top panel). HPDS implementation of EBLI in 2024-25 included 40 students and 5 educators on 3 campuses (bottom panel); students who were provided EBLI instruction in both years are indicated in parentheses in the 2024-25 panel.

Two instructional pathways: a natural experiment in dosage

The pilot unfolded in two distinct instructional models, and that split became a natural experiment in dosage and context.

- **EBLI as core:** Two classroom teachers replaced their Orton-Gillingham block with EBLI as the primary reading block. Students in this model received roughly **50 minutes of whole-class EBLI as their core instruction five days a week**—a high-dosage, immersive approach. This group of students did not receive additional intervention instruction.
- **EBLI as supplement:** Four Speech-Language Pathologists added EBLI as a supplemental intervention while students continued to receive their regular Orton-Gillingham instruction from their classroom teacher. In this model, EBLI instruction was delivered 1:1 or 1:2 for about **20–30 minutes, twice weekly**—a lower-dosage supplement layered on top of the core program.

MODEL	EBLI as Core	EBLI as Supplement
CORE INSTUCTION	EBLI replaces O-G instruction	O-G remains core program
DELIVERY FORMAT	Whole-class instruction 1:6	Supplemental intervention 1:1 or 1:2
TIME & FREQUENCY	50 minutes 5 days/week	20–30 minutes 2 times/week
DOSAGE LEVEL	HIGHER dosage Immersive, consistent exposure	LOWER dosage Targeted, strategic support
WHO DELIVERS	Classroom teachers	Speech-Language Pathologists
ADD'L SUPPORT	None	EBLI added to O-G instruction

Figure 2. EBLI Implementation Models at HPDS

Measuring Growth

SignalPoint calculated students' yearly growth, or total growth, as the difference between their fall and spring scores. Because students received different amounts of reading instruction and EBLI instruction, we calculated two instructional efficiency metrics:

1) growth for each hour of EBLI instruction
2) growth for each hour of any reading instruction

Typical Growth in Oral Reading Fluency

Typical grade-level growth in oral reading fluency for general education students in grades 1-5 is approximately +32 wcpm per year (Hasbrouck & Tindal, 2017) or approximately +1 wcpm per week and + 0.13 wcpm per instructional hour (see note at the end of this document). For dyslexic readers, typical growth in oral reading fluency is about +16 wcpm per year, +0.5 per week (Torgesen et al., 2001) which we estimate as +0.07 wcpm per instructional hour. The 20 HPDS students for whom prior growth data were available averaged approximately +9 wcpm per year, +0.28 wcpm per week, and approximately +0.04 wcpm per instructional hour.

What changed: Project Results

The aggregated numbers are simple and difficult to deny. Across all students:

- **Average fluency** rose by **~25 words correct per minute (wcpm)**.
- **Oral reading accuracy** improved by **~12 percentage points**.
- **Spelling** increased by **about 6 standard score points**[1] on the TOWS.

Those improvements are impressive considering many students entered the pilot well below grade level. HPDS students started in the 5th–9th percentile on the Word Identification and Spelling Test (WIST) prior to starting EBLI. For students who hadn't responded well to previous instruction, these changes marked significant growth.

Growth under Different Implementation Models

We found that:

- Students receiving EBLI as their core literacy instruction gained approximately **+0.22 wcpm** in oral reading fluency for every instructional hour. Students EBLI added as a supplement gained approximately **+0.17 wcpm** for every instructional hour. **In other words, the students with less total instruction time (EBLI as core) were improving oral reading fluency at a faster rate than students with more total time in reading instruction (EBLI as supplement).**

  Regardless of implementation model, students' growth per instructional hour was four to five times the prior average for HPDS students (+0.04 wcpm/hr.) who had not previously responded to Orton-Gillingham instruction.

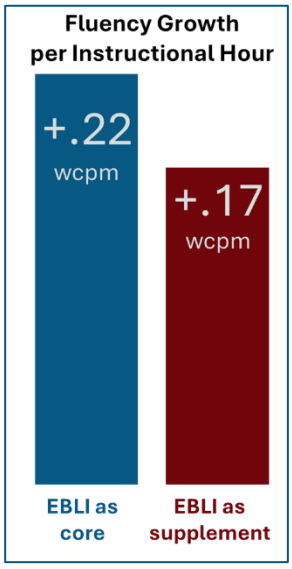

Figure 3. Average gains in fluency per instructional hour across models.

- Prior to beginning EBLI instruction, 55% of all students read DIBELS passages with less than 80% accuracy. By the end of the pilot, only 9% of students read with less than 80% accuracy.
- Student gains in oral reading accuracy per instructional hour were **+0.7 and +0.9 percentage points** across EBLI as core and EBLI as supplement, respectively.
- Student gains in spelling per instructional hour were **+.03 and +.04 standard scores** across models, respectively.

[1] The Test of Written Spelling is scaled to have a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 15; standard scores are norm-referenced and are expected to remain stable over time unless there is substantial change in relative standing. Changes of 3.75 to 7.5 standard scores (i.e., .25 to .50 standard deviations) are meaningful.

- Growth per instructional hour was generally higher for lower-grade students (grades 2-5), especially in oral reading fluency.
- Students at the Chicago campus achieved the highest fluency growth per hour of EBLI instruction; students at Lemont and Northfield were more varied.

The findings are important because they reframe the conversation from "*How much time does this take?*" to "*How much does each hour of instruction actually move the needle?*" For a population of students who have already spent years in intensive instruction with limited returns, efficiency is not a secondary consideration — it is the point.

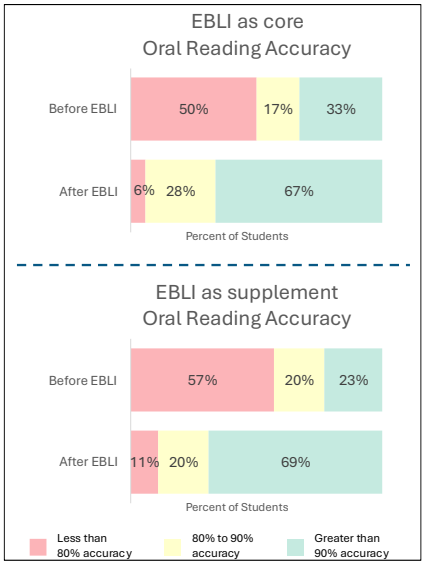

Figure 4. Students' oral reading accuracy prior to and after EBLI instruction by accuracy thresholds.

The most persuasive evidence: two-year trajectories

Data from the fourteen students who received EBLI for two years gives us the best sense of cumulative effects. Across two years, these 14 students averaged:

- **>40 wcpm** increase in oral reading fluency,
- **~20 percentage points** increase in oral reading accuracy, and
- **~10 standard score points** in written spelling.

For students who started with deep decoding and encoding deficits, those gains over two years are remarkable. They suggest that ongoing, intensive intervention — EBLI by itself or EBLI as supplement — can alter the long-term outlook for even our most struggling readers. That these students continued to make gains across both years, regardless of which model they were in, demonstrates that year-over-year intensive instruction promotes a trajectory of growth.

One finding that does not appear in the headline numbers but deserves attention: the students who received EBLI instruction across both

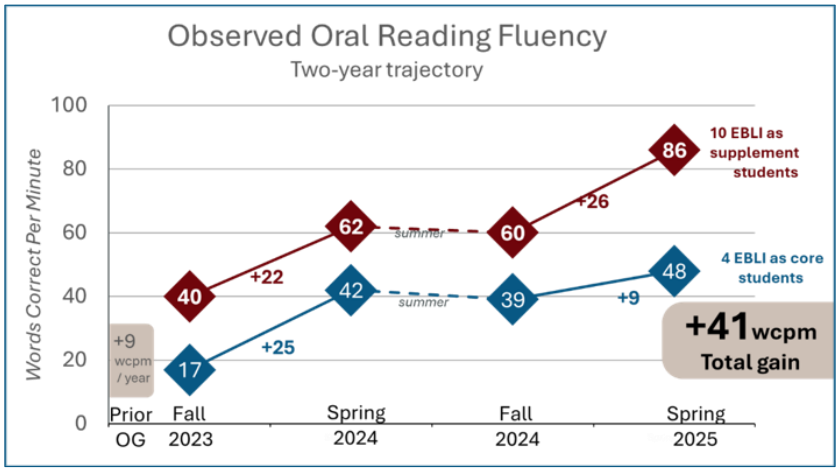

Figure 5. Average oral reading fluency rates for students receiving EBLI across two academic years.

years of this pilot showed minimal summer regression. For students with dyslexia profiles, the “summer slide” (loss of academic gains over the summer break) is a well-documented and disproportionate challenge. Struggling readers typically lose more ground over summer than their peers, compounding the achievement gap year over year (Blanton, 2015). In this pilot, average fluency scores measured after summer (Fall 2024) held close to levels prior to summer break (Spring 2024); see Figure 5 for details. This suggests that EBLI instruction may support durable skill consolidation and that the gains students made weren't fragile or context-dependent but had moved into longer-term memory in a way that held over the summer.

What teachers saw that numbers don’t fully capture

Qualitatively, teachers and SLPs noted changes beyond those measured by scores:

- Students gained confidence and stopped guessing. They systematically decoded unfamiliar multisyllabic words, one syllable at a time.
- Educators noticed better phoneme–grapheme correspondence, more thoughtful attempts at spelling, and increased flexibility when students were stuck.
- Teachers explained that EBLI’s routines and ready-to-use lessons reduced prep time, allowed them to attend to student thinking, and helped instruction feel more targeted and language-focused. SLPs explained that EBLI aligned seamlessly with their language goals and allowed them to target phonology, morphology, and vocabulary within one lesson.

Ecological changes like increased student confidence, strategic behavior, and teacher capacity may be indirectly related to test score improvements but are nonetheless meaningful to students, teachers, and parents.

Limits, caveats, and what the data cannot say

This was a **developmental study** intended to examine individual change over a period of time. It was not an impact study designed to compare instructional programs or to prove that one implementation model was better than another. Key limitations include:

- **Nonrandom selection:** Students identified as O-G non-responders were selected because they had not made expected progress despite sustained Orton-Gillingham instruction.
- **Dosage/timing varied:** Students began EBLI at different times of the year with varying hours of instruction.
- **Fidelity not monitored:** Although five of six implementers completed EBLI training, there were no formal fidelity checks or observations conducted during the pilot. Implementation, as described during interviews, varied across teachers and SLPs.

Given these constraints, the results of this pilot should be interpreted as describing what happened in this setting, rather than as generalizable evidence of EBLI's impact. What this work shows is how dosage, starting skills, and instructional context impacted the students at HPDS. They suggest that ongoing, intensive intervention—EBLI by itself or EBLI as supplement to Orton-Gillingham instruction—altered the long-term outlook for HPDS's most struggling readers. They are certainly suggestive that persistent, targeted intervention mattered.

The pilot did not provide conclusive data on every aspect of EBLI's comparative effectiveness. But it did exactly what a well-run developmental study should: identify what's working on the ground; uncover where implementation can be improved; and provide the school with a framework for thoughtfully scaling successful components.

A final, human metric

Data provided for this report indicate that students improved academically. Teachers reported to SignalPoint Research that students changed behaviorally. Neither of these outcomes tell the whole story of the pilot. But together they are convincing evidence of the pilot's success.

When guessing at words becomes syllable-by-syllable decoding, when hours of teacher prep time are replaced by observing and responding to student thinking, classrooms become places where learning is actually happening. For kids who have been struggling for years, those improvements could mean the difference between continued frustration versus truly learning to read.

Works Cited

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