

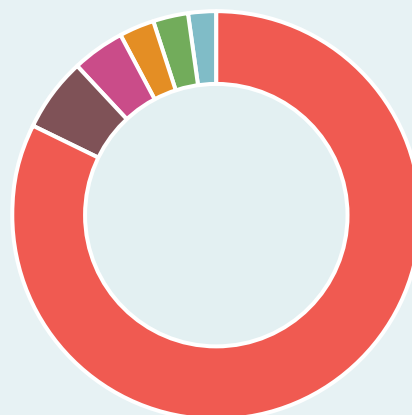
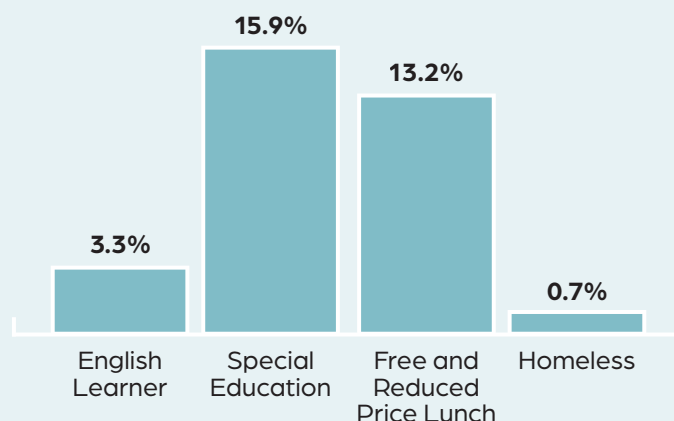
# Literacy Best Practice *in Action*

## A PROFILE OF **WILDWOOD ELEMENTARY**

As schools in Minnesota begin to implement the sweeping changes required under the Read Act, many leaders are looking for guidance on making large shifts in literacy instruction, curriculum, and professional development. The school profiled here, Wildwood Elementary in Mahtomedi Public Schools, can offer insights as it had already begun shifting to science of reading-based literacy instruction before the Read Act's passage. **Read on for insights from teachers, literacy coaches, administrators, and parents from Wildwood on key changes and their takeaways.**

### SCHOOL DEMOGRAPHICS

- Wildwood Elementary School
- Stillwater, Minnesota
- Mahtomedi Public School District
- Serves Kindergarten through Grade 2
- Enrolled 584 students in 2024



White	82.4%
Multiracial	5.8%
Latino	4.1%
Black	2.9%
American Indian	2.7%
Asian	2.1%



## THE SEED FOR CHANGE

Wildwood Elementary School uses the University of Florida Literacy Institute (UFLI) curriculum to teach phonics and phonemic awareness. The shift to this approach began when one teacher, who now works as a literacy lead, became frustrated with her students' reading scores, stating "kids could never get out of intervention—there had to be something we were missing." After doing research on her own, she went through a LETRS (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling) training and brought what she learned to her school and district. She said the transition took "8 or 9 years," with heavy disruptions due to COVID-19, but as of the 2022-23 school year, the entire school was using UFLI in foundational reading instruction.

## WHY IT'S WORKING

- **Structure and repetition of the curriculum.** All teachers interviewed reported that they've never seen gains in their students like they are now, and they attribute it to the structured and sequential nature of the UFLI curriculum.
  - One teacher reported that the structure of the curriculum "matters a lot" to her as someone who also has dyslexia and is parenting two children with dyslexia. She pointed specifically to the phonemic awareness component of the curriculum, saying students can draw connections and see patterns in the English language she previously did not know was possible.
  - A parent said this curriculum is hugely different from what her older child received 6-7 years ago and her younger children are "reaping the benefits" of the changes the district has made. Watching them learn to read with such success has been "a joy," and she attributes that to Wildwood's current approach.
- **Collaboration and trust between teachers and administrators.** Both teachers and administrative staff made clear that outside of the quality of the curriculum itself, this was by far the most important component in their success.
  - Wildwood's principal stated "the culture of trust goes both ways" from principal to teacher and vice versa. He approached the change with the philosophy of "communicate early and often," sharing his goals for the change and the "why" behind it with staff for over a year before any changes were actually made. This enabled staff to ask questions and "work out the kinks" before implementation began.
  - Teachers echoed this sentiment, saying administrators "allowed us not to love it for a minute," referring to making such a large change. They also repeatedly praised the building's literacy leads as passionate and "phenomenal" leaders who meet teacher concerns without judgment.
- **High-quality professional development: empowering teachers with knowledge.** All staff interviewed commented on the quality of LETRS training, the detailed understanding they gained on how the brain learns to read, and how it's improved their pedagogy.
  - A first-grade teacher and the building principal emphasized how LETRS shows teachers how the brain learns to read, empowering them to understand why students are struggling and provide specific remedies. They both reflected on their past teaching experience and frustration with knowing something is wrong but now knowing how to help. LETRS "bridges that gap" and allows them to pinpoint what aspect of learning to read is challenging for individual students.
  - Wildwood's principal reflected that LETRS training is knowledge-based, so "you can never take it away," regardless of changes in curriculum that teachers will inevitably undergo throughout their career.

## THE CHALLENGES

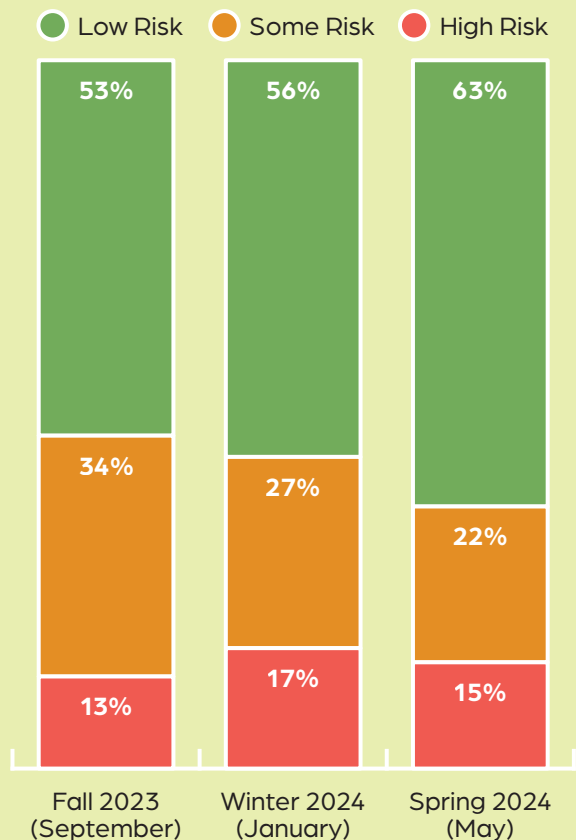
- **Coping with change.** Multiple staff interviewed discussed the growing pains that came along with shifting their approach. A literacy coach remarked that re-learning how to teach something “requires a level of humility” and it can be hard for teachers to go back to the position of being a learner themselves. She said that within a few months time, teachers were “floored” with student progress, but the beginning of the transition was stressful for them specifically with the curriculum’s fast-paced and rigid nature.
- **Time and effort required to undergo high-quality professional development.** Wildwood’s principal reflected that “LETRS is thorough and hard. It’s like taking a Master’s course.” In order to complete the training with fidelity and reduce burnout in his teachers, the principal chose to remove other areas of professional development while his staff completed LETRS. “I took everything else off their plate—otherwise we’d never get it done.”

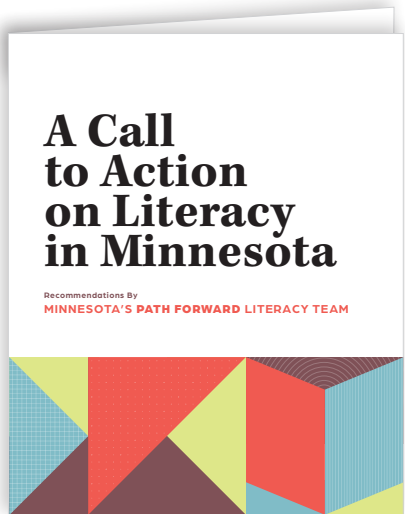
## THE RESULTS

As Wildwood serves students up to second grade, they have publicly shared FastBridge data for kindergarten and first grade. Additionally, below are anecdotal reports from teachers and parents on their students’ progress.

- ▶ FastBridge data show that Wildwood increased the share of kindergarten and first grade students at “low risk” for reading difficulties by 10% over the 2023–24 school year.
- ▶ A kindergarten teacher said “we are all pleasantly surprised with how well our students are doing this year.” She said her students’ progress is “amazing,” and she’s seeing writing skills come together at the same time as reading, which she hasn’t seen in years.
- ▶ A first-grade teacher said since adopting this method, she’s seen more aggressive growth than she’s had in 27 years of teaching. Her results have been so promising that even with a class last year with a higher proportion of struggling students she “still had great growth.”
- ▶ A parent of four, whose two younger children are currently at Wildwood, said they are exceeding her expectations and “will never need to receive literacy intervention or tutoring,” unlike her two older children who were not taught using these methods.

### FastBridge earlyReading Assessment for Kindergarten and First Grade





Learn more about the state of Minnesota's literacy education by reading **"A Call to Action on Literacy in Minnesota: Recommendations By Minnesota's Path Forward Literacy Team"**

To address Minnesota's current literacy crisis, literacy experts joined together to help identify the strengths and challenges of Minnesota's current system, break down the impacts of recently-passed legislation such as the Read Act, and outline a proposed action plan moving forward.

The contributors to this report come from a variety of backgrounds, including higher education, state government, policy research and advocacy, business, and non-profit organizations. Many are classroom teachers. Despite the diversity of their backgrounds, they are united in their deep commitment to improving literacy outcomes in Minnesota.

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Read the report by using the QR code or visiting:  
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