

# The Dunn Institute's Innovative "RtI" Project Sees Early Successes

In 2008 the Dunn Institute launched the RI Literacy Partnership – an initiative developed in collaboration with the renowned Hanson Initiative for Language and Literacy (HILL)<sup>1</sup>. The HILL has developed an effective whole school change model that provides the structure and content expertise schools need to dramatically improve student reading proficiency. As the professional development provider of Reading First and Early Reading First initiatives in Massachusetts, the HILL has worked in over 130 schools and has collected extensive data demonstrating the effectiveness of their long-term intensive school-change model.<sup>2</sup>

## Demonstration Project Funding Partners

**Andrade Faxon Foundation**  
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**CVS\***  
**Hasbro, Inc.\***  
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**June Rockwell Levy Foundation**  
**O'Halloran Family Foundation\***  
**Textron**  
**Tri-Mix Foundation\***

\*indicates multi-year partners

The project began in the district of Cumberland, across five elementary schools in January, 2008.

In September, Dunn launched a Demonstration Project in four public schools with the interest, need and capacity to engage in school-based literacy reform work over a five year period – the Highlander Charter School, Elizabeth Baldwin Elementary & Fallon Memorial Elementary in Pawtucket, and Fort Barton Elementary in Tiverton. To date, the Dunn Institute has raised \$618K of this \$1.1 million five year project to demonstrate the local efficacy of this model (see sidebar for funding partners).

Initial work consisted of a comprehensive needs assessment -- conducted in each of our nine partner schools, which involved faculty and staff interviews & surveys, as well as historical information on professional development, literacy grants, curriculum, and interventions. Each school emerged from the process with a different literacy profile – and varied recommendations for future work.

In addition to the Needs Assessment, the focus of work at each partner school during the fall and winter has been around student assessment. All 3,865 students in our partner schools were benchmarked using DIBELS<sup>3</sup> or AIMSWEB subtests; all students were re-assessed in the winter, and will be assessed again in the spring. All 348 of our partner school teachers have come together by

<sup>1</sup> HILL is a group housed with the Communication Sciences and Disorders Graduate Program of the Massachusetts General Hospital. <http://www.mghihp.edu/hill.html>.

<sup>2</sup> For a copy of the HILL's four-year data report, please contact Cathy Sanford at the Dunn Institute ([sanfordcw@aol.com](mailto:sanfordcw@aol.com)).

<sup>3</sup> The Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) are measures for assessing the acquisition of early literacy skills from K – 6th grade. Each measure is research-based and demonstrates reliability levels of 93% in predicting later reading proficiency. [www.dibels.uoregon.edu](http://www.dibels.uoregon.edu)

## The Dunn Institute

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grade levels to analyze the data at their schools – looking for trends, identifying struggling students, forming instructional groups and seeking out instructional content that will meet student needs. The process is intense and time-consuming – and critical to successfully supporting the diverse learners in every classroom. Through this process, teachers have received professional development on assessment scoring, administration, and analysis and interpretation of results – as well as resources and model lessons to address the specific needs identified by student assessment results. The Dunn Institute is able to bring a unique lens to this work given our experience supporting students with learning differences – and our professional development resources centered on intervention approaches.

Students who are identified as needing strategic or intensive interventions have received systematic intervention and frequent progress monitoring. Interventions become increasingly intense as students fail to respond adequately. Intensity is achieved by altering critical components such as group size, duration of lesson, and frequency of intervention.

While it is too early to see dramatic changes in the assessment scores of our partner school students, pockets of data are already starting to move. The work we have started this year is creating a strong foundation for sustainable

improvements over the next three years. Partner schools & districts are currently engaged in action planning in the areas of curriculum, assessment and professional development. While each school will focus on similar tasks and instructional components, the work will look very different at each school – allowing Dunn to leverage strengths and address needs in a

*“Our involvement in the Demonstration Project has helped our school adopt – and actively use -- a standard K-4 reading assessment for our students. My teachers are excited and motivated by the fact that they know precisely what areas of reading must be addressed to move their students to benchmark. I am truly grateful to be part of this project.”*

*- Suzette Wordell, Principal, Fort Barton Elementary*

tailored model that exemplifies what we hope to accomplish at the classroom and student level. For example, the district of Pawtucket has focused intensively on literacy and Response to Intervention for years; with a strong, research-based literacy model already in place they are far ahead of their peers. Consequently, Dunn is able to accelerate their current goals by focusing on implementation at the classroom and building level. A few anecdotes help to illuminate our work across diverse public school environments:

At Fallon Elementary, the examination of data has led to daily instruction in phonemic awareness and a focus on interventions in grades K and 1. The new reading coach has been absolutely critical to uniting the teachers around the data, modeling lessons, and activating the School Literacy Team with a "Whatever It Takes" approach. Special educators and reading teachers have stepped up to the plate, finding every available minute in their schedules to deliver tailored services to students. This work is supported by a principal with a relentless focus on data-driven decisions and accountability.

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At Fort Barton, a struggling first grader had not responded to any of the interventions attempted by her teacher. After examining the data, the first grade and Kindergarten teachers decided to share responsibility for intervention, and had the student split time in each classroom to develop core foundational reading skills. In three months, the student reached grade level benchmarks.

At Highlander, a primary teacher requested support in the areas of scheduling and small group instruction. The class was grouped according to their reading strengths and needs. After 2 weeks of modeling

and co-teaching, the teacher felt comfortable taking over the small group instruction. Rescheduling enabled a resource teacher to take a second group; 1:1 intervention was put in place for the most struggling student. The team is optimistic about how this new structure will impact spring benchmark assessments. As the coach remarked, "This model is encouraging active problem solving, and I am witnessing the resulting teacher empowerment and student progress."

The goal for the months – and years – ahead is to transform these student and classroom successes into comprehensive instructional frameworks that impact every student in every classroom. The work demands innovative problem solving from every teacher, diligent and intentional leadership practices from the building principal and reading coach<sup>4</sup>, and a dedicated School Literacy Team that identifies best practices (as supported by the data) and brings them to scale through the development of comprehensive assessment frameworks and tiered models of instruction (see side box below).

<b>Highlander Kindergarten</b> (24 Students) DIBELS Initial Sound Fluency Sub-test				<b>Highlander First Grade</b> (36 Students) DIBELS Phoneme Segmentation Fluency			
	Low Risk	Some Risk	At Risk		Low Risk	Some Risk	At Risk
<b>Fall</b>	63%	13%	25%	<b>Fall</b>	31%	56%	14%
<b>Winter</b>	75%	17%	8%	<b>Winter</b>	92%	5%	3%

<b>Fallon Kindergarten</b> (85 Students) DIBELS Initial Sound Fluency Sub-test				<b>Fallon First Grade</b> (80 Students) DIBELS Phoneme Segmentation Fluency			
	Low Risk	Some Risk	At Risk		Low Risk	Some Risk	At Risk
<b>Fall</b>	52%	30%	18%	<b>Fall</b>	39%	43%	18%
<b>Winter</b>	65%	30%	5%	<b>Winter</b>	84%	7%	9%

The comparison of Fall and Winter DIBELS scores at Highlander & Fallon exemplify the overarching goal of the Demonstration Project: To support the development and wide scale implementation of strategies, protocols and solutions that move "at risk" children to benchmark as quickly and efficiently as possible.

<sup>4</sup> In order to participate in the Demonstration Project, each partner school was required to hire and retain a dedicated Reading Coach. This role is critical to the speed and success of the reform process as well as the ultimate sustainability of the initiative.

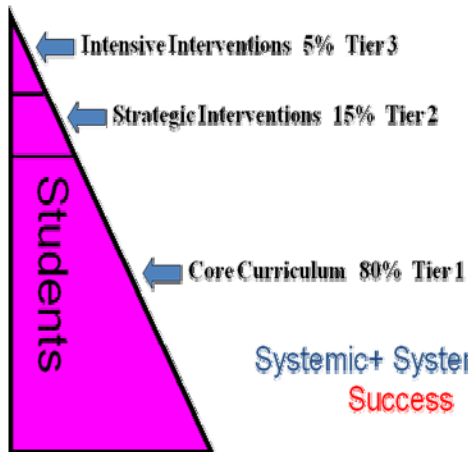
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The Dunn/HILL model aligns perfectly with “Response to Intervention” (RtI), which encourages schools to construct a pyramid of interventions and monitor their effectiveness before referring a student for Special Education services. A “tiered model” of instruction – pictured above – provides parameters for measuring the effectiveness of current curriculum and interventions. For example, if core reading curriculum does not meet the needs of approximately 80% of the students in a classroom, it may not be well-matched to student needs and requires evaluation.

The RI Literacy Partnership initiative has the potential to impact schools and districts across the state, and is already emerging as a replicable model for improving literacy proficiency across diverse school environments. To date, three additional districts have expressed interest in the model. Additionally, Dunn has been tapped to participate in a newly formed Literacy Council (established by the RI Department of Education) as well as the RI Urban Education Task Force (convened by Governor Carcieri and the Annenberg Institute).

For more information about the RI Literacy Partnership at the Dunn Institute, please contact Lead Facilitator, Dawn August ([daugust@highlandercharter.org](mailto:daugust@highlandercharter.org)) or Director, Cathy Sanford ([sanfordcw@aol.com](mailto:sanfordcw@aol.com)).

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