

## **Implementing and scaling Differentiated Literacy System: A case of evaluators' voices channeling outside-in and bottom-up perspectives for equity and continuous improvement**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Digital Promise is supporting the implementation and scaling of Differentiated Literacy System (DLS), a tool and instructional coaching for K–3 teachers to meet individual students' literacy needs. Based on interviews with over 200 teachers, principals, and district leaders, we bring forward our voices as evaluators by highlighting uncomfortable truths that lie at the crux of DLS' desired impact on education. We place primacy on teachers' "bottom-up" perspectives as those charged with creating instructional change. With a continuous improvement stance, we go beyond reporting findings to draw clear and actionable implications for DLS. The summary below presents key findings and recommendations that focus on organizational policies, structures, and practices to better support DLS and improve consistency in service quality for schools.

### **SUMMARY**

#### **Background**

Digital Promise is supporting a large federal grant to improve K–3 instruction using Differentiated Literacy System (DLS, pseudonym). DLS helps teachers meet individual students' needs, using assessment data to group students and recommend the number of minutes by instruction type (decoding and comprehension, either independently or with the teacher) for each student group. Participating schools receive access to the tool and coaching from DLS coaches. Through monthly meetings, the coaches help teacher grade-level teams use the tool, interpret DLS data, implement small group instruction, and change instructional activities.

Based on interviews with over 200 teachers, principals, and district leaders, we bring forward our voices as evaluators by highlighting uncomfortable truths that lie at the crux of DLS' desired impact on education. We place a primacy on teachers' "bottom-up" perspectives as those charged with creating instructional change by amplifying their voices to inform the developer's continuing efforts to meet school and teacher needs.

#### **Methods**

*Data collection.* From fall 2018–fall 2019, Digital Promise conducted focus groups with K–2 teachers and interviews with coaches, principals, and district leaders ( $n=205$ ) across 21 schools in 9 districts to illuminate implementation factors. We also conducted classroom observations to understand the context of literacy instruction in each school.

*Data analysis.* We captured audio recordings and notes for each interview and focus group, and conducted within-case analysis using a structured debriefing form for each school after each round of data collection. We systematically compared data within and across schools to generate key themes about implementing DLS and implementation factors. For each theme, we coded which schools and data from which respondent type provided evidence supporting the theme. We noted disconfirming evidence and the contextualized reasons for divergence from dominant themes. We also triangulated school-based data with data from classroom observations, where possible, to further confirm or disconfirm emergent themes across multiple schools.

## **Findings**

We juxtapose teachers' current literacy practices and experiences integrating DLS with DLS' assumptions about how their program should be implemented and the benefit to students and teachers, and draw key findings for continuous improvement. Focus group and interview data demonstrate that participating teachers vary widely in existing practices, resources, and understandings of effective literacy instruction, and in their willingness to use DLS as a catalyst for differentiating literacy instruction. While most school stakeholders agree that increasing small-group literacy instruction is necessary, some schools have more experience—and therefore are further along—in moving towards implementing small groups. Data from the first year of implementation showed that in 10 schools, teachers had been facilitating whole-class instruction for several years and had a steeper curve to learn how to differentiate their instruction within small groups. Their needs, in contrast to those more familiar with small-group instruction, thus were different in kind.

Similarly, teachers express varying levels of comfort and trust in using data from the DLS assessment to inform their instructional practices. While some teachers are open to adopting a new way of using assessment data to inform their literacy instruction, other teachers express frustration that the DLS assessment does not provide the same type and amount of diagnostic information that they are used to receiving from other more familiar tools. After 1.5 years of implementation, data show that teachers realize the importance of small group instruction and now have a better understanding that students need varying amounts of code-focused and meaning-focused instruction, whether working with the teacher or independently. However, some teachers have difficulty releasing students to work independently, expressing that significant time spent in independent small-group learning is underserving lower-performing students and exacerbating equity gaps. As a result, the extent to which teachers buy into using the DLS tool varies greatly across schools.

In addition, after focusing on K–1 in the first year, the DLS developer's model provides DLS coaches with less time supporting them and more time supporting 2nd-grade teachers new to DLS in the second year of implementation. However, our findings demonstrate that K–1 teachers varied significantly in implementation levels after the first year and may continue to need consistent external coaching support due to a wide range in student readiness each year.

Lastly, our findings demonstrate that inconsistency in messaging and supports, especially at the beginning of implementation, creates confusion around small group instruction for teachers in a few schools. In some cases, DLS coaches modify expectations for DLS implementation based on the level of the teacher buy-in. In other cases, modifications were made unintentionally, and rather as a result of the coaches' different interpretations of how DLS should be implemented. Such modifications made it more difficult for some district leaders and school administrators to clearly communicate one message regarding the expectations for DLS implementation. Instead, establishing clear expectations around DLS expectations and clearly communicating the extent to which coaches may modify their supports remains important.

## **Discussion**

Our team plays an honest-broker role between DLS coaches working directly with participating teachers and DLS directors who have less contact with practitioners implementing the program. With a continuous improvement stance, we go beyond reporting findings to draw clear and actionable implications for DLS to improve the consistency and quality of service to schools.

Since teachers have varying levels of experience and expertise with small group instruction, coaches must meet the teachers where they are, rather than simply advocating for DLS tool use. Addressing teachers' key needs in literacy instruction and situating the role of DLS tool in the broader context may be central to garnering their buy-in and gaining their trust in using DLS as a way to inform their small group instruction. Our findings also suggest that DLS' reduced model of support for K–1 grade-level teams to accommodate expansion to 2nd grade may not meet all teachers' needs and underscore the importance of differentiating support to meet teachers' diverse contexts. Moreover, given the breadth of the DLS coach's role and the complexity of changing teachers' instructional practice, coaches could benefit from additional training to ensure consistent messaging around DLS expectations and supports to schools. In a loosely coupled system like K–12 education, effecting any classroom-level change requires alignment in policies, expectations, and buy-in at the district, school, and teacher levels. Ensuring that there is clear understanding of the stated DLS expectations and benefits for teachers and how the coach's role can support instruction remains critical.

The above key recommendations focus on organizational policies, structures, and practices to better support DLS coaches and improve consistency in service quality for schools—messages that had not been elevated through DLS' internal communication channels.