

Achieving Dramatic Improvements in Literacy at LAUSD

Leveraging DMBreakthrough Results to Support Students and Build District Capacity



Craig Gibbons, Jenny Zhou, and Becky Vogel

In spring 2021, Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) achieved remarkable results in first-grade literacy using the DMBreakthrough Results approach. Efforts were focused on 2,500 first-graders from some of the most high-need populations; these students included English learners, students experiencing homelessness or part of the foster care system, and other historically underserved students. Most were reading well below grade level or were even categorized as nonreaders.

“The results, simply put, are astounding,” said former LAUSD Superintendent Austin Beutner. By the end of just 10 weeks, this group of students had approximately doubled their average reading ability across foundational skills. Even after the 10 weeks of DMBreakthrough Results work, these students continued growing, as they had developed a foundational set of reading skills and a love of reading. By the end-of-year reading assessment, these students had on average nearly reached the benchmark in the majority of reading skills (*Exhibit 1*). With this effort, LAUSD was making tremendous strides in delivering on its Primary Promise — the district’s commitment to help all elementary school students build a foundation in literacy, math, and critical thinking skills.

“
The results,
simply put,
are astounding.”



Austin Beutner

Former Superintendent (May 2018–June 2021)
Los Angeles Unified School District

How Did LAUSD Achieve These Results?

Teachers and staff at LAUSD achieved these remarkable results for students by unleashing their ideas and talents with the DMBreakthrough Results approach.

What Is the DMBreakthrough Results Approach?

The DMBreakthrough Results approach is based on the premise that “successful change programs begin with results.”*

Consider why many initiatives fail. Reasons typically cited include:

- Goals are broad and complex, lacking clarity and specificity;
- Success measures are misaligned (the focus is on activities instead of performance outputs);
- Long timelines create a lack of urgency;
- Resource requirements are unrealistic or ill-defined;
- There is no clear owner or too many owners of the objective;
- “Doers” are not well informed or well prepared;
- There are too many competing initiatives;
- Progress is unclear as it often takes a long time to access performance results.

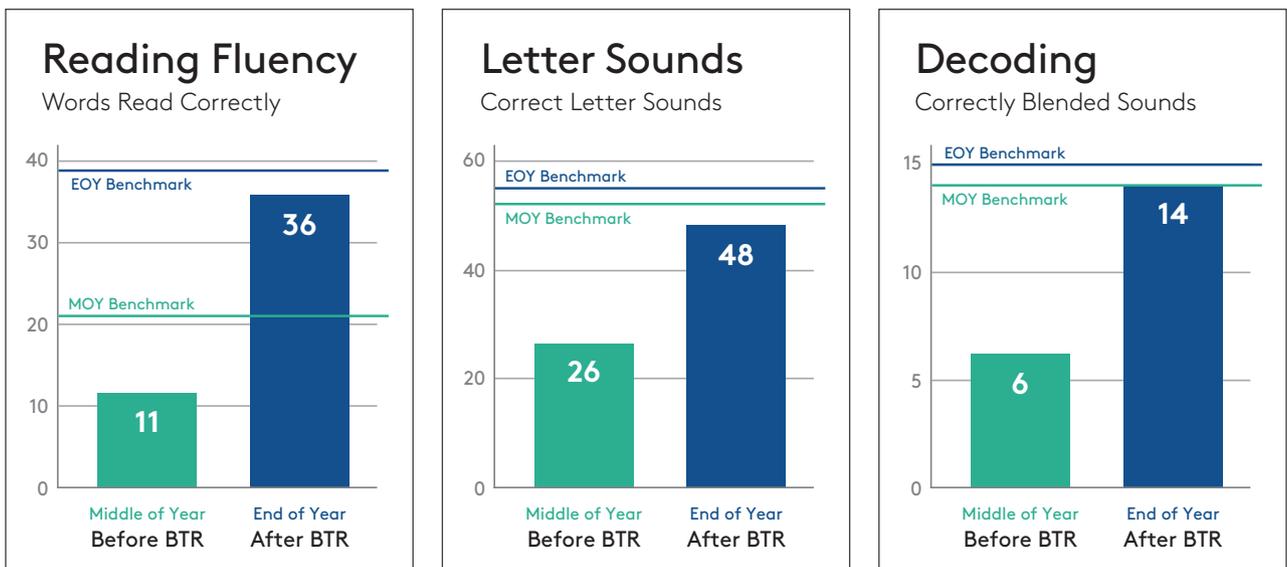
The DMBreakthrough Results approach avoids these pitfalls with a unique methodology that creates the necessary conditions to increase focus, build a sense of urgency, improve transparency, and provide team members with support, while simultaneously maintaining accountability.

The DMBreakthrough Results approach begins by establishing a highly specific goal, and then empowering small teams of teachers and staff to be singularly focused on achieving this goal within a short period of time — usually about 10 weeks. Teams meet weekly to devise and refine strategies; they are encouraged to be creative and solution-focused. Every two weeks, data is collected to measure progress; based on this data, teams innovate and iterate in rapid cycles. All team meetings are supported by a dedicated DMBreakthrough Results performance coach who provides coaching and professional development and helps eliminate impediments. Another important factor is that multiple teams are launched simultaneously, creating a sense of community as well as a healthy sense of competition among the teams.

With this approach, teams achieve results while building their capacity to lead and effect change. By the end of the cycle, teams are excited by the results they have achieved and feel empowered to continue the work. Indeed, the process shows that “successful change programs begin with results.”

Exhibit 1 LAUSD’S SPRING 2021 PRIMARY PROMISE — LITERACY RESULTS

By the end-of-year assessment, students had on average nearly reached the benchmark in the majority of reading skills.



Source: DMGroup analysis of LAUSD DIBELS results.

*Robert H. Schaffer and Harvey A. Thomson, “Successful Change Programs Begin with Results,” *Harvard Business Review* (January-February 1992), <https://hbr.org/1992/01/successful-change-programs-begin-with-results>.



Alma Kimura

Administrator of Instruction, LAUSD Local District South (CA)

LAUSD Teams Take Action

At LAUSD, 131 teams from 5 local districts were launched in spring 2021 to support 2,500 first-graders to improve their literacy skills. Each team was composed of four to six team members and one team leader, creating a cross-functional group of those closest to the work and to the students — teachers, reading experts, coaches, assistant principals, and principals.

Supported by a dedicated DMBreakthrough Results performance coach, each team began by setting a SMART goal — a Specific, Measurable, Aggressive but Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound goal for the 10-week cycle of work. Thereafter, each team met weekly with their performance coach to critically assess historical practices, prepare action plans, review bi-weekly data to assess progress, and devise and refine strategies. These team members were empowered to get results; they were encouraged to be entrepreneurial, solution-oriented, and creative as they stayed singularly focused on achieving their goal.

With the DMBreakthrough Results approach, LAUSD's inspiring and ambitious Primary Promise — the district's commitment to help all elementary school students build a foundation in literacy, math, and critical thinking skills — was deconstructed into highly specific, smaller-scale stretch goals. Small teams of those closest to the students and to the work could then tackle

“What has made the difference is a 10-week cycle of focused, targeted instruction based on the unique needs of each student.”

– Alma Kimura

Administrator of Instruction, LAUSD Local District South (CA)

these more manageable goals with singular focus in rapid cycles. “What has made the difference is a 10-week cycle of focused, targeted instruction based on the unique needs of each student. Teachers come together as a team once a week to review the progress, determine where each student needs help, and then provide each student what they need,” said Alma Kimura, administrator of instruction for Local District South.

Supported by just-in-time practical professional development and coaching, team members built their capacity and were energized by the results they were achieving. And they had fun together. With all of the teams working toward the same overarching goal, there was a strong sense of community, camaraderie, and collaboration. Teams willingly shared ideas, while also feeling a healthy sense of competition, as no team wanted to be the one that didn't reach their goal!

The amazing results they achieved in only 10 weeks created a groundswell of excitement. During a year when many educators were feeling overwhelmed and defeated by the challenges of working through a pandemic, these teams were energized by the results they were getting for their students. “Learning to read unlocks a young learner's future,” Chief Academic Officer Alison Yoshimoto-Towery said. “Reading opens doors to all subject areas, fosters self-confidence and critical-thinking skills and sparks a lifelong love of learning.” Even after the 10-week cycle ended, the teams were motivated to continue their work and were even eager to tackle other challenges using this technique.

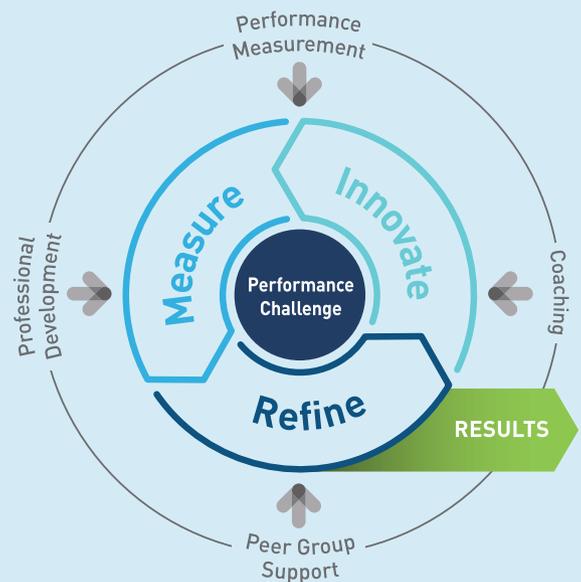


Implementing DMBreakthrough Results at LAUSD

With DMBreakthrough Results, LAUSD has achieved results in:

- ✓ Raising math achievement
- ✓ Raising reading achievement
- ✓ Increasing graduation rates
- ✓ Increasing support for specialized student populations
- ✓ Reducing absenteeism

DMBreakthrough Results Approach



The DMBreakthrough Results approach achieves measurable results for the district while building team members' skills and leadership capacity. This approach provides on-the-job experience, targeted professional development, and coaching to build meaningful and enduring skills.

To read more about this work, go to www.dmgrouper12.com/breakthrough

AT A GLANCE

LAUSD's DMBreakthrough Results Work (Spring 2021)

2,500 first-grade students supported

131 teams across 5 of LAUSD's local districts

750 participants, including home-room teachers, Primary Promise coordinators, reading experts, coaches, counselors, principals, and assistant principals

10 week cycle

LAUSD Expands Its Work

This fall, LAUSD expanded its use of the DMBreakthrough Results approach. All six local districts in LAUSD are now using this approach, with 315 teams addressing strategic initiatives in literacy as well as numeracy, algebra, and graduation. The teams are focused on their goals and energized by past results and the momentum of having so many colleagues involved in this work. We look forward to sharing the results of this exciting work. Stay tuned! ♦

“ Reading opens doors to all subject areas, fosters self-confidence and critical-thinking skills and sparks a life-long love of learning. ”

– Alison Yoshimoto-Towery
Chief Academic Officer, LAUSD Local District South (CA)

Reflections from **DMBreakthrough Results** Performance Coaches



My most rewarding moment was the shift in mindset over time. One teacher, who was less invested in the process at the beginning, shared at the end that a student that he had assumed was going to make the least gains had surpassed all of his other students! The teacher's reflection was that he will never count his students or his team members out again.

~ Nautrie Jones

I have seen individuals, initially hesitant to take the reins of a team meeting, flourish into leaders guiding a collective team toward a shared goal. This work not only helps individuals thrive as leaders, but also helps orient teams toward new leaders that already exist in their schools.

~ Kristen Lambertz-Berndt

I love working in partnership with educators as they step into their leadership, explore nuanced solutions to complex problems, and expand their assumptions about what is possible for students to achieve in such a short amount of time. There is no moment more rewarding than when they realize that they have reached their goal and they get to step back and say, "Wow, that was hard, but we did it. And we did it together."

~ DJ Cervantes

Teachers are the biggest lever for student success. The DMBreakthrough Results approach supports teachers to channel their collective wisdom and try their ideas in real time. The end result is not just increased student outcomes but also a sense of accomplishment for the amazing staff who always had it in them. My favorite moment is when all of a sudden someone says, "Have you seen my data? My kids made so much growth!"

~ Nicole Assisi



The magic of the DMBreakthrough Results approach is in the way teams come together around their common goal. The commitment they make to one another and to their students shows up as rigorous dialogue about student data and the vulnerable unveiling of their teacher practices. The push and pull of their collaboration sets them up for transformative growth in themselves and their students.

~ Morgan Craig

