District
Management
Group

Delivering on LAUSD's Primary Promise

Accelerating Literacy with the DMBreakthroughTeams Approach

by Jenny Zhou and Kathleen Choi

Originally published in the *District Management Journal*, v.29, Spring 2021

> *Given the exceptional results achieved, LAUSD has expanded the use of DMBreakthroughTeams across multiple local districts, more than tripling the number of first-graders supported.*

Delivering on LAUSD's Primary Promise

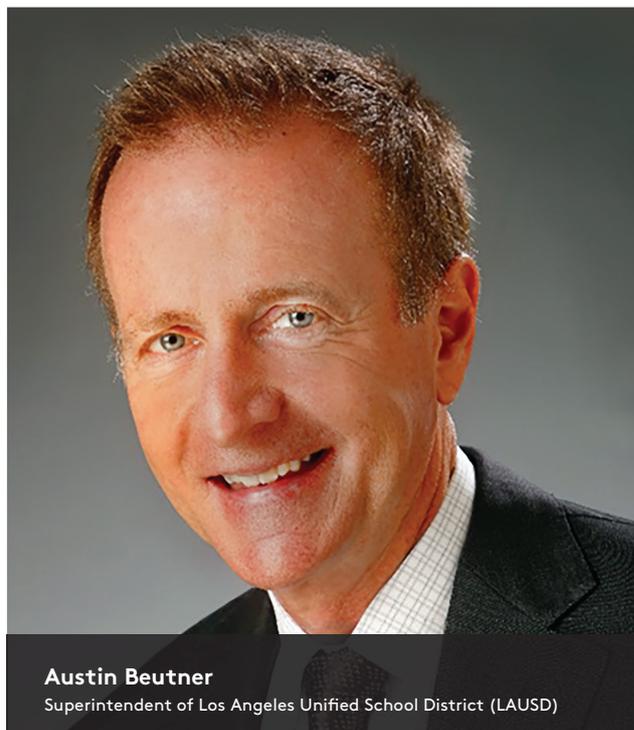*Accelerating Literacy with the DMBreakthroughTeams Approach*

Jenny Zhou and Kathleen Choi

With the COVID-19 pandemic raging, all Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) schools remained shuttered in fall 2020, with all instruction delivered remotely. But LAUSD Superintendent Austin Beutner was determined to maintain the connection with students and to continue providing them with an education. Given that 80% of LAUSD families live in poverty and three-quarters of them have had someone in their household lose work due to the virus, Superintendent Beutner and his district leaders were particularly concerned about supporting their students in high-needs communities.

In August 2020, Superintendent Beutner launched Primary Promise as part of LAUSD's commitment to help all elementary school students build a foundation in literacy, math, and critical-thinking skills. Upon receiving results from quick diagnostic tests of first-graders taken at the beginning of the school year, the district determined that children just learning to read were among those most impacted by the shift to online learning. District leaders knew they couldn't wait until next school year to help students recover, and they decided to take quick action.

Superintendent Beutner decided to leverage a technique that was being used successfully in LAUSD South to achieve tangible results in reading, math, and attendance – District Management Group's DMBreakthroughTeams approach. In fall 2020, he encouraged two of LAUSD's local districts – Local District South and Local District West – to pilot the DMBreakthroughTeams approach to deliver on the Primary Promise, focusing specifically on first-grade literacy.

Austin Beutner
Superintendent of Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD)

Over 750 first-grade students were targeted for direct intervention across 48 schools, and the results were nothing short of remarkable. In just nine to ten weeks, average reading fluency quadrupled and reading accuracy doubled.

Given the success achieved last fall, the work has been expanded. Currently, about 2,500 students struggling to read are receiving this direct intervention. The target group includes those disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, including English learners, students with disabilities, and homeless and foster youth.

> **"When we build this proper foundation in early learners, they'll gain much more from everything else along the way to graduation."**
>
> – Austin Beutner
> Superintendent of Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD)

Here, we share the work done by LAUSD this past fall, and we look forward in the future to sharing the results of this spring's expanded efforts.
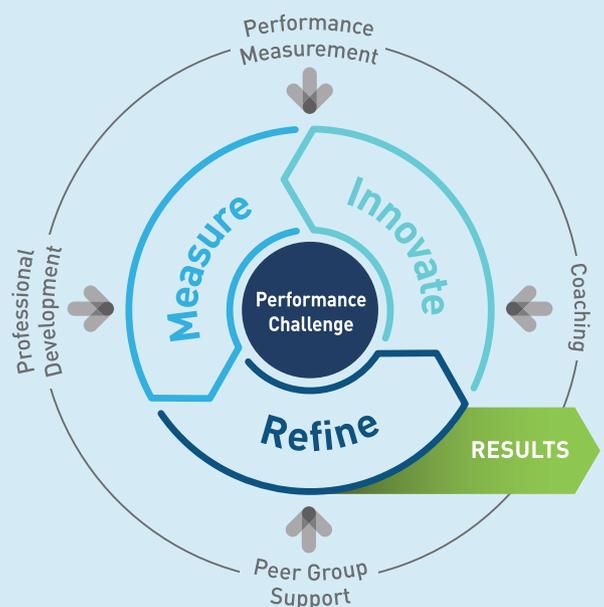
The Approach

The remarkable results achieved in fall 2020 were the result of the work of teams of first-grade teachers and staff at Local District South and Local District West, all during a period of remote learning.

Each of the 48 participating elementary schools formed a team of five to seven staff, including first-grade teachers, instructional coaches, and reading experts. Each team selected a group of target students to focus their efforts on, usually those students scoring well below benchmark who needed the most support. Then, with their target group in mind, each team was challenged to create a SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable but Aggressive, Relevant, Time-based) goal. The SMART goals were highly specific in order to create focus in the work. Some examples of the teams' goals included:

- By December 11, 2020, 30 targeted first-grade students scoring an average of 6 words per minute (WPM) will grow to an average of 18 WPM on the DIBELS ORF progress-monitoring post-assessment.

- By December 18, 2020, 11 out of the 14 students (80%) who scored between 13 to 24 on the NWF-CLS preassessment will grow by 20 points or more on the post-assessment.

How the DMBreakthroughTeams approach works:

▸ Districts typically launch multiple teams simultaneously, with each team composed of a cross-functional group of five to seven members.

▸ Each breakthrough team identifies a performance objective to achieve with a short time frame – usually 10 weeks.

▸ Based on the performance objective, teams formulate SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Aggressive yet Attainable, Relevant, and Time-Bound) that are highly specific and relevant to the team members.

▸ With the support of a dedicated DMBreakthroughTeams performance coach, teams test innovative strategies, track weekly progress, learn quickly from successes and failures, and iterate in rapid cycles to achieve results.

▸ Just-in-time performance coaching and targeted professional development help team members develop the skills needed to address challenges and overcome obstacles.

Source: DMGroup.

Each team had nine to ten weeks to achieve their respective goals. Every week, each team gathered for one hour over Zoom; a dedicated DMGroup Performance Coach attended each meeting to support the team with real-time coaching and practical professional development as needed. In the initial meetings, the team generated ideas for how to achieve the goal. Then they put their ideas into action. At the end of each week, they would assess students to measure the week's progress, discuss the work, and then innovate and refine their approach to improve on those results. Sometimes that meant tweaking or building upon an idea or approach, or sometimes it meant completely abandoning the approach and moving on to the next idea. A few examples of the techniques included:

- Focusing on "words of the week" with corresponding flash cards and songs

- Stretching letter sounds to help students hear the whole word, rather than segmenting the word into its individual sounds (whole word vs. sound-by-sound)

- Collaborating with families to support attendance, at-home practice, and finding quiet spots at home to learn more effectively

The teams had a great sense of urgency; they were acutely aware of the importance of early literacy in determining their students' life trajectories, and were especially concerned about learning loss during this period of remote learning. Setting short-term goals motivated teams to think creatively and try new ideas, but also allowed them to really focus on the highly specific goals.

The DMBreakthroughTeams approach also generated a fun sense of collaboration and competition. With 48 teams all working toward the same overarching goal of improving first-grade literacy, there was a strong sense of community with teams willingly sharing ideas, but there was also a healthy sense of competition! Even though teachers were spending much of their days on Zoom, this team approach to the work energized them.
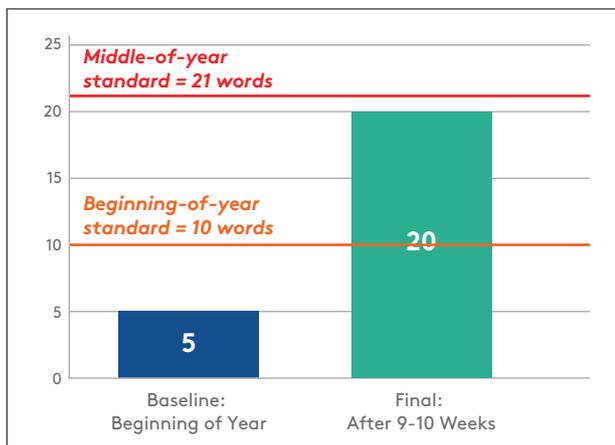
Remarkable Results

The results were nothing short of remarkable. In just nine to ten weeks, average reading fluency quadrupled and reading accuracy doubled.

The target group of students began the year reading, on average, only 5 words per minute correctly as measured by DIBELS. This is well below the beginning of year (BOY) standard of 10 words per minute; in fact, many were non-readers, unable to read even a single word. Over the course of 10 weeks, these students learned to read an additional 15 words – quadrupling their reading fluency! Within 10 weeks, they had almost reached the middle of year (MOY) standard of 21 words per minute (*Exhibit 1*).

Exhibit 1 GROWTH IN STUDENT READING ABILITY

Reading Fluency
Words Read Correctly

Middle-of-year standard = 21 words

Beginning-of-year standard = 10 words

Baseline: Beginning of Year — 5
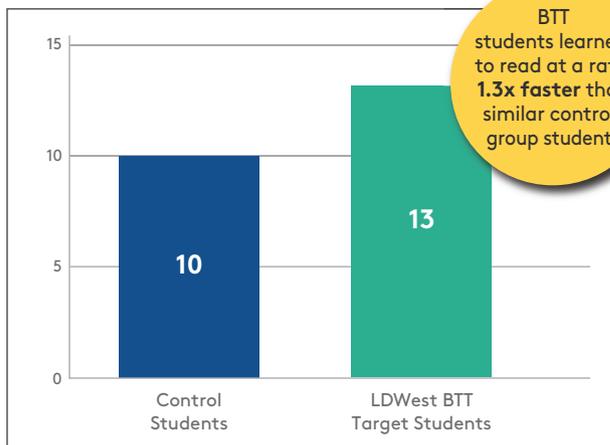Final: After 9-10 Weeks — 20

Note: Combines results from Local District South and Local District West.
Source: DMGroup analysis.

Exhibit 2 COMPARISON OF BTT AND CONTROL GROUP

Growth in Reading Fluency
Words Read Correctly

BTT students learned to read at a rate **1.3x faster** than similar control-group students

Control Students — 10
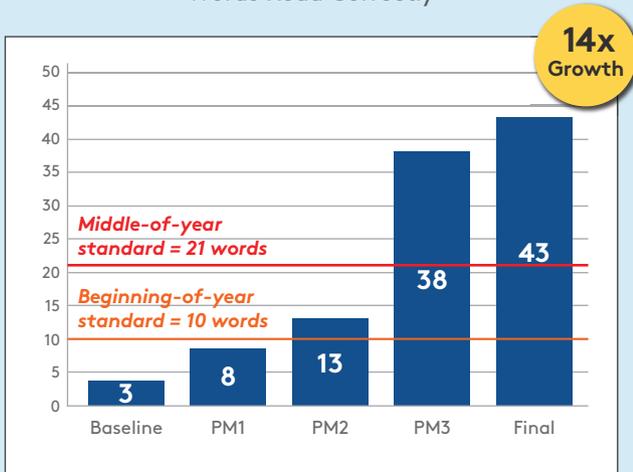LDWest BTT Target Students — 13

Note: 126 students from nonparticipating schools were chosen based on similarity in beginning-of-year DIBELS scores, and assessed using the same final assessment.
Source: DMGroup analysis.

Making a Difference for LAUSD's Students with the **DM**BreakthroughTeams Approach

Donna's Story

Reading Fluency
Words Read Correctly

14x Growth

Chart data (Words Read Correctly):
- Baseline: 3
- PM1: 8
- PM2: 13
- PM3: 38
- Final: 43

Middle-of-year standard = 21 words
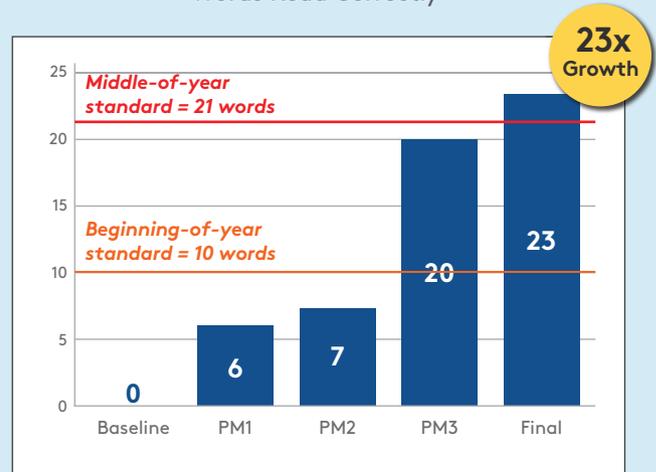
Beginning-of-year standard = 10 words

When Donna started the first grade, she was considered a nonreader, but after nine weeks of working with teachers participating in the DMBreakthroughTeams approach, she was reading at grade level. Donna started first grade reading only three words correctly when given a set of sentences to read. After three weeks of the DMBreakthroughTeams approach, Donna was able to read eight words. After seven weeks, she was able to read 38 words, and after nine weeks, she was up to 43 words.

Her teacher shared that Donna started off the year shy and hesitant, and was very nervous during the first test. But with the DMBreakthroughTeams approach, Donna, her teacher, and Donna's mother worked to create an individualized plan to help her meet her goals. Donna has become comfortable enough to work with larger groups of students, and her teacher commented, "Donna's confidence is through the roof! She is more self-motivated, excited to learn, and has become an outstanding student."

Lisandro's Story

Reading Fluency
Words Read Correctly

23x Growth

Chart data (Words Read Correctly):
- Baseline: 0
- PM1: 6
- PM2: 7
- PM3: 20
- Final: 23

Middle-of-year standard = 21 words

Beginning-of-year standard = 10 words

Lisandro began first grade knowing some letter sounds but could not decode words at all. He was very quiet and shy during whole-group lessons. But after four weeks of working with teachers participating in the DMBreakthroughTeams approach, Lisandro was able to read six words; after six weeks, he was reading seven words. After eight weeks, Lisandro's skills started taking off and he was reading 20 words. By 10 weeks, Lisandro was at 23 words, and had exceeded the middle-of-year standard.

His teacher noted that Lisandro is now eager to participate in small groups and looks forward to his daily lessons. Lisandro's teacher enthusiastically shared: "It was very exciting. You see kids break the code. To see the growth of where they started and where they are in just 10 weeks, it was so exciting to see their confidence go up!"

> **"** *Given the exceptional results achieved, LAUSD has expanded the use of DMBreakthroughTeams across multiple local districts, more than tripling the number of first-graders supported.*

The results, compared to those of students who did not receive the intervention, are striking. Without the intervention, students would expect to learn to read an additional 10 words in 10 weeks,[1] but thanks to the focused and dedicated efforts of teachers working on DMBreakthroughTeams, they quickly outpaced "typical" growth. At Local District West, where the cycle was only nine weeks, the skills of those receiving the intervention grew 1.3 times faster than those not in the targeted group (*Exhibit 2*).

Beyond Results: Benefits That Last

The teachers, staff, and district leaders amazed themselves with the results they were able to realize. And the fact that this improvement was achieved during a period of entirely virtual learning felt truly extraordinary. Given the exceptional results achieved, LAUSD has expanded the use of DMBreakthroughTeams across multiple local districts, more than tripling the number of first-graders supported this spring.

But the benefits extend even beyond the phenomenal results achieved. Through this work, team members built capacity supported by just-in-time, practical professional development and coaching. Teachers and staff were coached on how to lead successful, action-oriented team meetings, how to analyze and use data to draw insights, and how to work cross-functionally to better support their students. Plus they had fun together. The success and collaboration generated during the cycle built a strong sense of community that is likely to endure well beyond the 10 weeks. Teams are eager to continue their work on literacy and to tackle other challenges. The success achieved is fueling excitement and shifting mindsets about what is possible. LAUSD is excited to be expanding the use of the DMBreakthroughTeams approach this spring to help more of the district deliver on its Primary Promise. ◆

[1] Based on 2017 historical data on first-graders' average growth in DIBELS ORF.

Build enduring skills while achieving measurable results

The DMBreakthroughTeams approach combines focused goals, weekly metrics, rapid action cycles, performance coaching, and targeted professional development to help teachers and staff build skills and reach peak performance.

The DMBreakthroughTeams Approach is applicable for a variety of challenges:

✔ Improve math achievement ✔ Reduce chronic absenteeism ✔ Raise graduation rates

✔ Improve ELA achievement ✔ Increase engagement ✔ Increase operational efficiencies

To learn more about the DMBreakthroughTeams approach, visit **www.dmgroupK12.com/breakthrough**