



## CASE STUDY

# Central Bucks School District

## Executive Summary

Central Bucks School District, Pennsylvania's third-largest district with over 17,500 students, sought to improve reading outcomes through the "Read by 3" initiative. Recognizing the limitations of previous approaches and inspired by the science of reading, the district piloted *Reading Horizons® Discovery* in 2019, later adopting it districtwide for phonics instruction. This method, emphasizing direct, systematic instruction, was integrated into both core and intervention curricula.

Despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, Central Bucks successfully implemented Reading Horizons® in the fall of 2020. Professional development and teacher coaching were prioritized to facilitate the shift from Balanced to Structured Literacy. By the end of the first year, Reading Horizons® Leadership Academy trained 15 reading specialists to support ongoing teacher development and program integration.

The results have been transformative. By 2023, the proportion of K–2 students scoring in the Top Tier Core Support on the DIBELS assessment more than doubled, with over 77 percent achieving proficiency, a notable improvement from less than 46 percent in 2019. The program's direct and explicit instruction in phonics, supported by tools like *Reading Horizons Discovery Sound City™*, has driven year-over-year growth in student outcomes and teacher confidence.

Moving forward, Central Bucks plans to explore Extended Transfer activities to deepen student learning and pilot the latest version of *Reading Horizons® Discovery*.

## Things to consider before reading

Use this checklist to determine if Central Bucks' literacy success aligns with your school's goals and needs:

Does this description sound like your school?

- Are you a district or school administrator focused on ensuring students read **proficiently by third grade**?
- Are you seeking a shift from **Balanced to Structured Literacy** methods?
- Do your student **demographics** include similar populations?
  - MLLs (e.g., 3.1 percent) and/or students receiving special education services (e.g., 14.6 percent)?
- Do you have these **foundational supports**?
  - Access to professional development for teachers
  - Leadership teams committed to implementing research-based reading practices
- Can you ensure **resources** are available for successful program implementation?
  - Training and coaching for literacy specialists
  - Tools like *Reading Horizons Discovery Sound City™* to support phonemic awareness instruction

If these conditions resonate, Central Bucks School District's success with Reading Horizons® may offer valuable perspectives and strategies for achieving your literacy goals.

Checklist adapted from Danks (2023)





# Central Bucks SCHOOL DISTRICT Case Study

The Impact of the *Reading Horizons*® Method  
Implementation on Student Learning

## AT-A-GLANCE

Central Bucks School District  
2019–2023 Academic Year

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“The growth I have seen in my students is absolutely incredible. My kindergartners are able to decode and encode with confidence. Teaching Reading Horizons is my favorite part of the day.”



—A. BACH, KINDERGARTEN TEACHER

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Where reading momentum begins™



## Background and Goals

Central Bucks School District, located in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, ranks as the third-largest school district in the state, boasting a student population of about 17,540. Across the district, 3.1 percent of students are English Language Learners, and 14.6 percent of students benefit from special education services.

After observing several years of stagnant reading scores in mainstream and intervention classrooms, district administrators recognized the need for change. Harnessing the momentum of the Science of Reading movement, they actively pursued an explicit phonics program as a vital step forward.

Elementary schools within the Central Bucks School District initiated a pilot program with *Reading Horizons Discovery*® alongside Wilson's Foundations. Following the conclusion of the pilot, teachers opted to continue with Reading Horizons. They emphasized its ease of implementation, child-friendly language, and simplicity of materials as key factors in making the decision. After the pilot year, Reading Horizons became part of the core and intervention curriculum for reading throughout the district, specifically for phonics instruction.

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“Reading Horizons has been more than a curriculum that we have adopted. It has allowed our teachers to understand and embrace systematic and sequential phonics instruction into our primary classrooms. The addition of Sound City this year has given our teachers a way to explicitly teach and discuss the relationship between phonemes and graphemes, which has been very exciting to observe.”



—C. RICK, LITERACY SPECIALIST

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“Reading Horizons has definitely been a game changer for me in the way I teach phonics. I love that it follows the science of reading and skills are taught in a direct, systematic way.



—M. SHINKUNAS, SECOND-GRADE TEACHER

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The primary objective for this Pennsylvania school district was to enhance student outcomes. To achieve this, they implemented an initiative known as “Read by 3,” which aims to ensure that all students attain proficient reading skills by the conclusion of their third-grade year. Incorporating Reading Horizons into their teaching arsenal played a significant role in advancing this initiative.

## Implementation

The Reading Horizons pilot was initiated in 2019, and what began as a typical school year took an unexpected turn by March 2020 due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the disruptions caused by the pandemic, the school district remained committed and prepared for a full district rollout of the program in the fall of 2020. The first year of program implementation was a success, motivating Central Bucks School District to further immerse themselves in the program and way of teaching reading to beginner readers.

Also happening at this time was the immense amount of learning about the body of research known as the Science of Reading and the importance of moving from a Balanced Literacy approach to teaching to a Structured Literacy approach. The administration learned the importance of explaining the rationale behind teaching an explicit, systematic phonics program to teachers. Time for professional development was prioritized, and in time teachers understood the importance of the instructional shift.

“After implementing the RH program into my daily instruction, I feel like I am truly giving my students systematic and effective instruction on how to decode words. They have the best tools in their reading tool belts to know exactly how to approach an unknown word by using the sounds and phonetic skills I have explicitly taught them. Reading is no longer a guessing word game. The growth I have seen by ALL my students is quite impressive!”



—K. ECKENRODE, FIRST-GRADE TEACHER

## Results

Central Bucks celebrates year-over-year growth for all grade levels. Before implementing Reading Horizons, fewer than 33, 46, and 36 percent of students in grades K, 1, and 2, respectively, scored in the Top Tier Core Support levels on the DIBELS Next assessment in 2019. However, after implementing *Reading Horizons Discovery*® during the 2021 and 2022 school years, the percent of students scoring in the Top Tier doubled (Figure 1). By the spring of 2023, greater than 77 percent of students scored in the Top Tiers. Scores improved in spite of learning losses as a result of the pandemic.

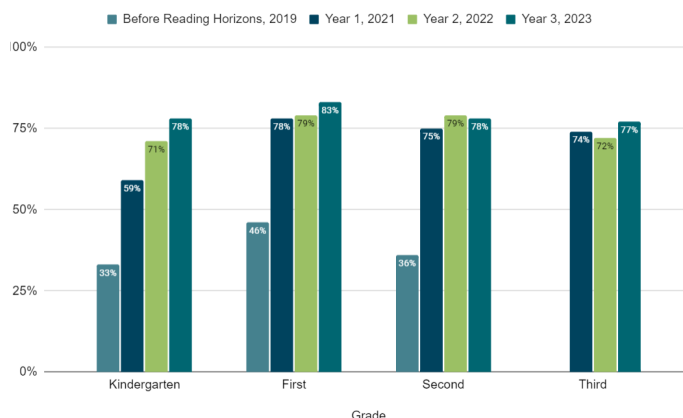


Figure 1. Percent of Students Scoring Top Tier Core Support on EOY DIBELS assessments

Note: Central Bucks uses DIBELS Next and DIBELS 8 as a universal screener to determine students who are at risk in reading. Even though some sub-tests changed, both versions of DIBELS are norm-referenced and provide data to determine risk in reading and need for intervention. Correlations among DIBELS 8 sub tests with DIBELS NEXT composite scores are generally strong, suggesting that DIBELS 8 edition is a similar measure compared to DIBELS NEXT. Also note that the district did not use DIBELS as a universal screener for third grade until 2020-2021.

At the conclusion of the initial year of implementation, the administration enrolled 15 reading specialists in the Reading Horizons Leadership Academy. This intensive four-day training equips school leaders with the tools and knowledge necessary to actively support teachers in their schools. The district also attributes their success to the invaluable support, training, and coaching provided by Reading Horizons throughout their years of program implementation.

As the sun set on another school year, Central Bucks School District celebrated their journey from stagnant reading scores to a community of proficient readers. The commitment to the “Read by 3” initiative, dedication of teachers, and unwavering support from Reading Horizons had begun to transform their educational landscape.

Throughout the next few years, the Reading Horizons implementation continued to strengthen. It became evident to everyone that direct and explicit instruction and the emphasis on decoding words rather than relying on a cueing system were making a significant impact. The district came to recognize how much their previous reading instruction had lacked, and Reading Horizons proved instrumental in bridging these gaps for all students.

## CENTRAL BUCKS SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Central Bucks leaders attribute their rapid growth to *Reading Horizons Discovery*®'s direct, explicit, and systematic phonics instruction starting with simple to more complex skills. The district's Supervisor of Reading K–6 and Federal Programs, Ashley Christie, stated, "Our data showed that in 2018–2019, before [using *Reading Horizons Discovery*®], we had a significant need for intervention, and many students showed a risk for reading failure. This need indicated there was an opportunity to change teaching practices within our Core Instruction. We had a need to explicitly teach phonics." She concluded that, "We attribute much of this growth to RH as it provided the missing link. Direct, explicit, and systematic phonics instruction starting with simple to more complex skills."

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"Teaching Reading Horizons has completely changed the way I view how students learn to read. I left first grade for a number of years to teach third grade, and when I came back to first, reading instruction looked completely different than what I had remembered. In place of word walls were sound walls, in place of 'look at the picture' were 'check the vowel' cues, and in place of leveled readers were decodable texts that made so much more sense to expect my first graders to read. It is incredible to see the immense growth that my first graders consistently experience year after year with this explicit phonics instruction. Their confidence as readers is an inspiration!"



—J. STUHLTRAGER, FIRST-GRADE TEACHER

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"Although I am a veteran primary teacher, Reading Horizons provided my first opportunity to deliver an explicit, systematic phonics program to support my second graders' reading and writing skills. I value the routines of the Core Four format and find the structure of each lesson predictable, easy to implement, and most importantly, effective."



D. KASPRZYK, SECOND-GRADE TEACHER

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### Next Steps

Central Bucks Schools have seamlessly integrated the Reading Horizons phonemic awareness component, *Reading Horizons Discovery Sound City*™, into their reading block. Through this incorporation, ongoing coaching sessions are being conducted to highlight the significant impact of phonemic awareness and emphasize explicit teaching of articulatory gestures during reading time. A key objective for the current school year is to explore methods for introducing extended transfer activities for students. While teachers have demonstrated mastery of the Daily Core 4, the focus has shifted to enhancing transfer, recognizing its potential for an even more substantial impact on student learning. As the academic year progresses, administrators will diligently analyze end-of-year data to identify the specific needs of teachers and students, guiding future initiatives and support. Central Bucks School District is exploring plans to transition to the new *Reading Horizons Discovery*®.