



## CASE STUDY: The Lexile® Framework for Reading

# North Port High School Uses Lexile Measures as the Cornerstone of Its Pilot Intensive Reading Program to Increase Student Motivation, Reading Skills and State Test Scores

*“If you match students to texts—novels, articles and textbooks—their reading gains are going to be tremendous. The research on Lexile measures is definitive. They work.”*

The state of Florida has been a nationwide leader in the effort to emphasize and promote reading as a top priority in education. Established in 2001 by executive order, Just Read, Florida! was created by former Gov. Jeb Bush as a “comprehensive, coordinated reading initiative aimed at helping every student become a successful, independent reader.” Based on the belief that “reading is the most powerful common denominator in education and paramount to an individual’s success,” Just Read, Florida! aims to ensure that all of Florida’s students are reading at or above grade level. By state law, passing the reading portion of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) given in tenth grade is a requirement for high school graduation.

In light of these mandates, North Port High School’s reading scores constitute a crisis. Established less than a decade ago, and located at the southernmost tip of the Sarasota, Fla., school district, far from the metropolitan hub, North Port lags behind the district’s other high schools and is struggling to keep pace with Florida’s rigorous state reading standards. In 2008, approximately 68 percent of North Port’s sophomores failed the reading portion of the FCAT.

A large school with about 2,500 students in grades 9–12, North Port has experienced changing demographics in its attendance area over the past several years. A recent increase of minority students to 24 percent and an influx of immigrants from places like Russia and South America have presented new challenges to the school’s devoted staff of teachers. The need for ESE (special education) and ESOL services is on the rise. Further, many students face a plethora of personal problems and social ills, including substance abuse, poverty and even home foreclosures resulting from the current economic crisis.

### **North Port High School Implements a Pilot Intensive Reading Program Based on the Effectiveness of Lexile Measures**

Students who score in the lowest two levels (Levels 1 and 2 out of 5) of the FCAT for reading are required by Florida state law to receive remedial reading instruction. Because of its students’ chronically low scores, North Port has gradually built a substantial reading program since the school’s inception. Five years ago, literacy coaches were hired to train teachers of all subjects in reading strategies and instruction. Next, reading specialists were hired to augment the existing English Language Arts program. Currently, struggling readers take combination “block” courses in English and reading, an approach referred to as “fusion.”

This year, for the first time, a pilot intensive reading program for struggling readers is being implemented at North Port. Created and spearheaded by the school’s Reading/English Chairwoman, Barbara O’Brien, Ph.D., the program is informed and backed by the latest reading research.

A cornerstone of the pilot approach is the use of The Lexile Framework for Reading, which employs a common developmental scale to match reading ability with text difficulty. Under the new program, Lexile measures are used to drive and differentiate reading instruction and to measure student progress. O’Brien, who used Lexile measures to back her dissertation findings and has long advocated their use, considers the Lexile Framework an indispensable tool. “If you match students to texts—novels, articles and textbooks—their reading gains are going to be tremendous. The research on Lexile measures is definitive. They work.”

### **Reading and English Teachers Use Lexile Measures to Group Students, Differentiate Instruction, Guide Independent Reading and Research, and Monitor Progress**

The principles that comprise North Port’s pilot reading program are intended to increase students’ reading election, engagement, endurance and enjoyment. The program emphasizes high-interest young adult literature, guided reading instruction in small groups, reading strategies for comprehension, and daily sustained independent reading. Teachers are encouraged to strive for a ratio of 30 percent fiction and 70 percent nonfiction (or “informational”) materials, in accordance with state recommendations.

Research shows that struggling readers learn best when English and reading classes are organized around thematic units incorporating texts of various genres on specific topics, according to O’Brien. North Port’s students, therefore, often begin a unit by reading a high-interest novel on a particular theme, such as “abuse.” As questions arise about the theme, students are required to conduct online research for informational articles that might provide answers and explanations.

“Since students know their Lexile [measure], they can look for articles of relevance and interest at the appropriate level of difficulty,” says O’Brien. “Once they locate the articles, the students read them using reading strategies and then present the

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information they discover to the rest of the class.” This self-selection of materials, enabled by Lexile measures, helps to empower students and “increase reader motivation and incentive.”

Literacy Coach Caroline Gernert cites the young adult novel, “Breathing Underwater,” by Alex Flinn as a way to illustrate the pilot program’s thematic, multi-genre approach. “Once we have students hooked with this very compelling novel set in Miami, we encourage them to follow the potential lines of inquiry that arise,” she says. “Students research everything from dating issues, abuse and counseling to the juvenile justice system and the geography of Miami.” Gernert calls this “an effective way to integrate informational texts in the teaching of English” and to “really develop student interest in reading.” Plus, she says, students are more willing to work through the frustrations of challenging texts using strategies and guided instruction if they are genuinely interested in a topic or theme.

Lexile measures are particularly helpful when trying to facilitate group work. “Grouping students appropriately by ability was very difficult prior to the use of Lexile measures,” according to Gernert, because “state tests are too broad to base groupings on.” When Ileana Reich, who teaches English I and intensive reading, assigns articles, she uses the students’ Lexile measures to provide pieces of low, medium and high difficulty to different groups so that everyone has a chance to participate in class discussions.

Reich also finds Lexile measures helpful when guiding students toward appropriate independent reading materials. “Offering students choice is extremely important,” says Reich. With the confidence afforded by Lexile measures, she can ensure that her students are not squandering their silent reading time on materials that are too easy, or giving up on reading altogether because their selections are too difficult.

Each basket of books available in Reich’s classroom is labeled with a Lexile range. Since students know their Lexile measures, they can choose appropriate texts. “If students are going to read aloud to the class, I encourage them to select something at or slightly below their Lexile level. If they are aiming to sharpen their reading skills, I encourage them to attempt a book about 100L above their Lexile measure—something in their ‘frustrational level’ that might require effort and guidance but will surely result in improvement,” Reich says.

North Port’s teachers often start a semester or year with a very high-interest series like the “Bluford” series, which engages students immediately, but has a rather low Lexile range of 600L–700L. Then, capitalizing upon this eagerness and excitement, teachers slowly introduce texts of equal appeal but greater difficulty. “We’ve had a lot of success,” Reich says, “in finding out what high school students are interested in reading while at the same time making sure that they are intellectually challenged. Lexile measures make this balance possible.”

### **Teachers Encourage Students to Embrace Lexile Measures and Tackle State Tests With Confidence**

The Scholastic Reading Inventory, which yields students’ Lexile measures, is easy to administer and most students take it very seriously, according to Ileana Reich. She believes that the test’s emphasis on “vocabulary and inferencing skills” makes it a very accurate measure of student reading ability. Struggling readers are required to take the test three times throughout the school year to ensure effective monitoring of progress.

All students are sensitive about being labeled with “numbers,” according to O’Brien. Any low score can seem like a stigma, especially to a struggling student. But the difference with Lexile measures, she says, is that “they represent a reading ‘range,’ which implies flexibility and potential.” Great care is taken, she adds, “so that students feel empowered by their Lexile [measures] and know what they need to do to improve them.”

The result? “Students love to see the improvement in their reading scores,” according to O’Brien. “Kids are so excited when their scores go up,” Reich agrees. “When my freshmen see the improvement in their scores over the course of the year,” she says, “the importance of Lexile measures becomes real to them.” Teachers promote Lexile measures as a useful tool among North Port’s students by requiring them to articulate their career goals and reminding them that they need to attain certain reading skills in order to succeed in particular fields.

Gernert says that students “absolutely embrace Lexile measures” because they help students to set goals and track their own progress. She points out that Lexile measures “help students read within their range and feel successful so that they keep reading and continue to improve their ability to tackle more challenging texts.” Gernert describes the pilot program’s approach as trying to “empower students in the exercise of literacy” since the ultimate goal of any reading program should be to encourage students to seek out literary experiences on their own later in life. “We first need to help students become competent, eager readers before we can expect them to appreciate the great classics of adult literature,” Gernert says.

In the short term, those involved with the pilot program hope to increase students’ chances of succeeding on the FCAT. Gernert stresses that students need to be reading consistently throughout the year to prepare for the state’s high-stakes reading test,

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which she describes as “quite challenging, requiring reading endurance and sophisticated metacognition.” The best way to guarantee that students actually read on a steady basis, she says, is to provide them with high-interest materials at appropriate levels of difficulty that get them excited about further reading. “Kids reading more—and being excited about reading—results in increased skills and scores,” Gernert says.

She cites the practice of “Christmas-treering” the FCAT answer sheet as a warning about what happens when students give up on their ability to tackle the high-stakes test. “Students who get too frustrated by the reading exam simply fill out the bubbles on the multiple-choice answer sheet in a random pattern that resembles the shape of a Christmas tree,” she says, in hopes that some of the “guesses” will be correct. “This is the kind of resignation and surrender we’re seeking to avoid with our pilot reading program.”

### Embracing Literacy and Lexile Measures Across the Curriculum

When two-thirds of the student body is below grade level in reading, improving literacy skills must become the number one priority and mission of every teacher. At North Port, all teachers—English and “content” teachers alike—are provided with their students’ Lexile measures and are offered intensive training in the use of Lexile measures and reading strategy instruction.

Dena Henderson, a theater instructor at the high school, says that “despite the theater elective’s tendency to attract the brightest tier of students, I still have quite a number of struggling readers in my classes.” Therefore, she uses Lexile measures to choose appropriate scenes and scripts for particular students, and to assess outside articles and materials for accessibility.

When Henderson decided to teach her students about the origins of “theater superstitions,” for example, she conducted research and found a variety of articles on the topic. After measuring them with the Lexile Analyzer®, she placed her students into groups based on their Lexile measures and assigned the articles accordingly. “Of course, I wanted each group to be challenged, but I also wanted them to be able to read their article successfully.” When the groups reconvened as a class, every student was able to contribute something meaningful to the ensuing discussion.

“They all participate because they all do the reading,” Henderson says. “If I didn’t have Lexile measures to help me assign appropriate articles, many of my struggling readers would simply give up and quit. They would have no incentive to participate.” Henderson points out that “to act out a scene effectively, students need to understand story and character, and to grasp those things, they have to be skilled readers who use comprehension strategies.”

Though it might seem a natural fit for a theater class—a necessary component of drama—reading also is promoted and required in several less likely places at North Port. Michele Slay, the school’s dance teacher, for example, assigns articles to accommodate her “broad spectrum of readers, from struggling to AP students.” Since state and national associations for dance educators advocate reading and writing assignments related to dance, Slay also requires students to write “essay critiques” of dances they watch and study.

Students even are required to read in physical education classes. According to Gernert, students read fitness articles and the rules to games in which they participate. “All of our teachers incorporate reading whenever and wherever they can,” says Gernert.

### High Hopes for North Port’s Pilot Intensive Reading Program

The reading curriculum built at North Port High School over the past five years already has yielded a steady rise in FCAT reading scores, and has contributed to improvement in the school’s state rating from a grade of “C” last year to a grade of “B” this year. Sadly, severe budget cuts due to the current economic crisis already are resulting in staff layoffs and threatening to impede the high school’s progress. Media specialists, for example, are being excised and the administration is contemplating a shift back to seven-period days in lieu of the current block scheduling so popular with teachers and students alike.

However, O’Brien is confident that her new Lexile-based intensive reading program will yield further measurable results in student reading ability and improved state test scores. “We have an extremely energetic and devoted staff of reading professionals at our school and we are dedicated to helping our students succeed,” she says. If O’Brien’s pilot program is as successful as anticipated, it likely will be adopted by other schools in the Sarasota district and could help Florida meet its goal of having all students read at or above grade level.

For more information on Lexile measures, visit [www.Lexile.com](http://www.Lexile.com).

MetaMetrics, an educational measurement and research organization, develops scientific measures of academic achievement that link assessment with targeted instruction to improve learning. The organization’s renowned psychometric team created The Lexile Framework for Reading; El Sistema Lexile para Leer, the Spanish-language version of the reading framework; The Quantile Framework for Mathematics; and The Lexile Framework for Writing. In addition to licensing Lexile and Quantile measures to state departments of education, testing and instructional companies, and publishers, MetaMetrics offers professional development, resource measurement and customized consulting services.

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