



WHY A DISTRICT IN SEATTLE SUBURBS TURNED TO TOOLS 4 READING SOLUTIONS

Nova Williams has been with the Mercer Island (Wash.) School District for 14 years, the last eight serving as Assistant Director of Learning Services–Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment. During her 19-year career, she also has spent time as a classroom teacher.

The Mercer Island School District, located less than 10 miles southeast of Seattle, operates seven schools on the island: four primary schools; one middle school; one high school; and one alternative secondary school.

FINDING A LITERACY SOLUTION THAT WORKS

With a goal of ensuring the teachers at Mercer Island are empowered with the tools they need for optimum literacy instruction, Williams and the district six years ago turned to solutions from Tools 4 Reading. At the outset, the district provided literacy kits to its teachers, which included Kid Lips Cards and Phoneme/Grapheme Cards, as well as the Student Sound Wall Folder, which displays the Consonant Chart and Vowel Valley for use in the classroom and at home.

Further, Williams outfitted all her district's K-2 teachers – 48 classroom teachers, two ELD teachers, four reading specialists, six special education teachers, and support paraprofessionals – with Tools 4 Reading Value Packs.

“Teachers absolutely loved the cards during virtual learning,” Williams says, reflecting on the 2020 and the 2021 school years when students were staying home due to the pandemic. “Our kindergarten teachers were our first group of teachers trained and they use these tools quite a bit. Our first- and second-grade teachers have created more sound walls than kindergarten, by nature of the volume of resources available. Our ELD (English for Literacy Development) teachers love Kid Lips as a support for learners, as do the reading specialists.”

A first-grade teacher at West Mercer Elementary School, Kelly Flaherty has seen first-hand in her classroom the impact Sounds Walls, Kid Lip Cards and the Phoneme/Grapheme Cards have had on her students.

“Before the 2022-23 school year started, I made a sound wall that covers an entire class wall,” Flaherty said. “I combined the Kid Lips cards and clip art to make a large vowel valley and consonant wall graph, and we use it all day, every day.”

She said her students can often be found looking at a Kid Lips card while getting out their mirrors to see how their mouths are moving. “They are super focused and will analyze it,” Flaherty said. “It’s beautiful; I love Sound Walls!”

Plus, she praised the training she has received from Tools 4 Reading. “I feel so lucky to have gone through it and the materials and manipulatives provided were unbelievable.”

USABILITY, CONSISTENCY ARE KEYS

Williams said that usability is the biggest value derived from the Tools 4 Reading solutions.

“These tools can be applied in so many ways. Teachers are creating sound walls that are interactive and pulling down cards during their instruction to support knowledge of articulation (Kid Lips) and spelling (Phoneme Grapheme Cards),” Williams says. “Teachers use them during whole group instruction as they introduce new sounds and small group instruction as they reinforce this learning or practice a skill in phonics.”

Williams cited the consistency of the use of these materials as students’ progress from kindergarten through second grade.

“The teachers who use these tools more than others find greater success in progress with their students,” she says. “While there’s the variable of general investment in that work, I can pinpoint the teachers whose progress is greater on account of their use of these and other tools to support student learning. Especially because our training provided the ‘how to use’ part of it.”

HELPING STUDENTS WITH DYSLEXIA

Because the state of Washington started requiring schools starting in fall 2021 to screen for “areas of weakness associated with dyslexia,” Williams said she participated in an advisory role to help facilitate choosing state-approved screening tools and guidance documents.

“We knew this requirement was coming when it was passed into law in 2018 and began planning for the rollout of structured literacy professional learning as a requirement of all elementary staff members (K-5), she says. “While there wasn’t anything ‘wrong’ per se, there were things we knew we could do better.”

Williams said they focused on supporting student learning with sound walls using Tools 4 Reading’s Sound Wall Solutions™ or helping with articulation of the English speech sounds using Kid Lips. She says teachers now have access to these tools and others.

“We wanted to fill what we knew to be gaps in our instructional tool with something that could provide more extended practice for students in both whole group and small group instruction.”

“I love the Kid Lips cards, Kids Lips Instructional Guide with the user-friendly lessons, and the Phoneme/Grapheme cards. Our teachers love them, too.”

Nova Williams
Assistant Director
Learning Services-Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment
Mercer Island School District

