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Harlem Community School District 5:

Sowing the Seeds for Literacy to Flourish



Executive Summary

After the ambitious New York City Reads initiative's first year, data released in August 2024 revealed discouraging results: fewer than half of New York City public school students demonstrated proficiency in reading—a decline from the previous year.

But there was a rare bright spot. **Harlem Community School District 5** made up significant ground, hitting its highest literacy rates in decades. District 5 was one of just three NYC districts to show literacy gains on the 2024 state exams. More detailed data from iReady reveals similar trends:

- By the end of the 2023–24 school year, 38% of the district's students scored at or above grade-level expectations for reading on iReady, **a significant improvement from just 14% at the start of the school year.**
- All grades saw proficiency at least double, and four schools **increased iReady scores by over 30 percentage points** from the beginning to the end of the year.
- Kindergarten and 1st grade showed the largest changes in students scoring at or above grade level with **43 and 33 percentage point increases**, respectively.

This report unpacks the investments that likely contributed to these improvements, exploring an innovative partnership between **New York City Public Schools** and **Leading Educators**, a national nonprofit that helps school systems cultivate and scale excellent teaching.

- Leaders at District 5 and Leading Educators have built a dynamic improvement system that enables teachers to build knowledge in how students learn to read, practice using high-quality instructional materials, and receive targeted development.
- Unlike traditional, one-off professional development, this effort has built durable capacity by aligning leadership and instructional practice toward a shared vision.

Using quasi-experimental methods carefully reviewed by external researchers, we found compelling evidence of impact, including a 97% chance the program had a positive impact and a nearly 70% chance it was larger than 0.10 standard deviations. **Achieving this level of confidence in a program effect of this size after using state-of-the-art quasi-experimental methods is particularly impressive in the first year of a new curriculum.**

This report looks beyond student test scores in the first year of NYC Reads implementation to examine how teacher practices and the conditions for deeper learning have evolved to support greater student success. The partners adjusted aspects of the implementation approach in the second year and will analyze the implications in a future publication.



The Start of a New Era for Literacy

As 40 states and the District of Columbia work to enact laws or new policies connected to evidence-based literacy, also known as “the science of reading,” the home of the Harlem Renaissance offers a shining example of what is possible.

Dr. Sean L. Davenport, the superintendent of Harlem Community District 5, is seeing the district’s steadfast commitment to literacy pay off. In an interview, he shared,

“We have a 40 percent literacy rate right now—one of the highest percentages the district has seen—but we need to continue to move that number forward.”

District 5 is one of three bright spots from the first year of NYC Reads implementation, a historic system-wide effort to align teaching, curriculum, and literacy strategy in New York City with the growing body of research on how children learn to read and write.

In its first two years, NYC Reads gradually required all K-5 classrooms to adopt a single, uniform curriculum. Each district chose one of three pre-approved reading curricula that have proven to be effective, as stated on the initiative’s website. Harlem Community District 5 is implementing HMH Into Reading, a curriculum known for having rigorous texts organized to support knowledge-building.

Grounding the Charge in the Community

Dr. Davenport knows that literacy is just one part of a larger vision for what students will experience and achieve. He says,

"We want to make sure [our students] can communicate, advocate for themselves, and fight to be seen and heard within the greater society. We want them to be viable citizens and civically engaged. We want them to be the best versions of themselves, and that comes with holistic education."

Dr. Dawn Brooks DeCosta, the deputy superintendent who has served various instructional roles in District 5 for more than 28 years, adds,

"District 5 is a vibrant community. We're in the heart of a lot of historical excellence. The arts, education, and culture make up a center of culture in the city, and those assets in the community should enhance what we provide for the students."

In working to meet NYC Reads' requirements, the leadership team felt it was important for these community assets and broader goals to inform the strategy authentically. At the same time, shifting teaching practices and installing a more demanding curriculum is not a simple feat. It requires intentional learning across layers; effective support structures for teaching teams to build new knowledge, internalize materials, and practice using them; and capacity to help educators meet their students where they are.

That's why the district began a partnership with **Leading Educators** in the fall of 2023. A national instructional improvement nonprofit, the organization specializes in designing ongoing professional learning that supports educators in deepening their content knowledge, practicing and refining upcoming lessons, and learning from robust student data to improve continuously.

While it is too early to isolate the specific effects of this work on Harlem Community District 5's historic literacy gains with traditional research methods, this report explores evidence of changes across varying parts of the instructional system that suggest a theory of change.

When Teachers Learn, Students Learn

In April 2023, EdTrust–New York released a report highlighting systemic barriers to literacy in New York City and demanding immediate solutions.

It stated, "The widespread use of non-evidence-based practices in teaching reading across the state is compounding the problem. Worse yet, the state's earliest learners are being denied access to proven resources shown to boost reading skills."

That led to new literacy investments citywide, including reviews of high-quality instructional materials, new funding for professional support services, and new requirements for community districts, as well as a galvanizing goal.