



## CASE STUDY



### Nick Erber

Director of Learning Acceleration  
Uplift Education  
Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas

### Imani Thomas

Primary Dean, IB PYP Coordinator  
Uplift Luna Preparatory  
Dallas, Texas

# Uplifting Young Scholars: Supporting Struggling Readers in Early Grades

## The Reading Roadblock

Across the nation, literacy skill proficiency during the pandemic suffered, and while the data is trending upward, the percentage of students in grades K-2 who are ready for core instruction in early literacy skills is still below pre-pandemic levels.

Texas has passed legislation to support literacy skill growth. Enacted in 2019, House Bill 3 requires schools to adopt high-quality instructional materials aligned with the Science of Reading (SoR). House Bill 1605 further supports SoR by requiring that research-based best practices be used for phonics and early reading instruction.

While these are steps in the right direction for Texas readers, data proves that there's more work to be done.

## Uplifting Young Readers

**Nick Erber** is the **Director of Learning Acceleration** for **Uplift Education**, a charter school network located in **Dallas-Fort Worth**. He noted that Uplift was not immune to these literacy challenges, and stated, "We saw a lot of gaps in student knowledge from the COVID pandemic. We had Kindergarteners, first graders, and second graders who either never stepped into a classroom or had gone hybrid and were only in a couple of days a week. We saw that we really had a lot of trouble catching up on grade-level literacy."

Uplift knew that the work of **improving reading skills in K-2 students** couldn't be placed solely on the backs of Uplift teachers. The organization implemented a high-impact tutoring initiative and works with multiple tutoring providers to serve different needs in different schools.

When it came to supporting necessary **literacy interventions for young readers**, OnYourMark Education was the right fit.

## Snapshot

To address literacy proficiency gaps in some K-2 students at **Uplift Education**, a charter school network in **Dallas-Fort Worth**, Uplift participated in a **randomized controlled trial** with OnYourMark Education's virtual high-dosage tutoring.

The **students who received tutoring achieved gap-closing rates of literacy skill growth**. Uplift has since expanded their pilot to additional schools in their network.

As an organization, Uplift uses SoR best practices for reading instruction and **DIBELS assessments** to monitor student growth and areas of need. OnYourMark uses **Amplify's mCLASS Intervention**—which aligns with SoR and DIBELS assessments—as one of its main curricula when working with schools to create individualized tutoring programs. Both SoR and DIBELS, when used correctly, are well-established **literacy resources for primary educators**. DIBELS is a powerful tool for identifying students in need of early reading intervention. SoR is a collection of research that identifies five key areas of literacy instruction.

OnYourMark was all-in to support Uplift's goal of **closing reading gaps in primary grades**. "The idea in working with OnYourMark was to make sure those gaps got filled and kids were reading at or above grade level by the time they exited the program," notes Mr. Erber.

## Turning the Page

Uplift Education has a mission: *to create and sustain public schools of excellence that empower students to reach their highest potential in college and the global marketplace.*

Importantly, the administrators at Uplift Education understand that this mission isn't possible without the full support of the teachers and staff doing the work in the classroom. Notes Mr. Erber, "You have to have everyone on the same page and you can't ask people to implement something that they don't understand or that they don't believe in."

Getting a team to unite behind a common mission demands a relationship built on trust and transparency. It's this that OnYourMark set out to achieve with the Uplift team from day one, starting with implementation at Uplift Luna.

## Starting With OnYourMark

**Uplift Luna Preparatory** is a Title I school within the Uplift Education network. **Imani Thomas, Primary Dean** at Uplift Luna Preparatory, was a teacher at Uplift Luna during part of OnYourMark's pilot program for the 2022–2023 school year.

Admittedly, Ms. Thomas points out that she was initially skeptical, especially as someone who taught during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I was hesitant because of OnYourMark being virtual. I was concerned about scholar engagement."

Skeptical, yes, but primarily, she and her colleagues were open to supporting their literacy instruction and students with OnYourMark. But that meant understanding the logistics, like:

- How it works,
- Proof that it works,
- And an assurance that Uplift and OnYourMark would be working together to improve outcomes for scholars

## The OnYourMark Method

OnYourMark's virtual tutoring sessions take place during the school day to supplement existing reading instruction. The OnYourMark team partners with classroom teachers providing **differentiated reading instruction for early grades**; OnYourMark's tutors work alongside classroom teachers by providing Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions to students who need them.

Uplift scholars identified as needing literacy support receive highly focused tutoring four days each week; each session is 20 minutes long. Scholars always see the same tutor who is trained by OnYourMark with SoR best practices and often has a background in early literacy instruction.

## 5 Components of the Science of Reading

- 1 Phonemic Awareness**  
The ability to identify and play with individual sounds in spoken words.
- 2 Phonics**  
Reading instruction on understanding how letters and groups of letters link to sounds to form letter-sound relationships and spelling patterns.
- 3 Fluency**  
The ability to read words, phrases, sentences, and stories correctly, with enough speed, and expression.
- 4 Vocabulary**  
Knowing what words mean and how to say and use them correctly.
- 5 Comprehension**  
The ability to understand what you are reading.

Citation: National Center on Improving Literacy (2022). The Science of Reading: The Basics. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Office of Special Education Programs, National Center on Improving Literacy. Retrieved from <http://improvingliteracy.org>.

## The evidence-based features of OnYourMark Education's high-dosage tutoring program include:

- Small-group (1:1 or 2:1) sessions embedded into the school day;
- A consistent tutor assignment for each student;
- Initial tutor training and ongoing professional development focused on content knowledge, building relationships, and effective delivery of the intervention;
- High dosage and frequency of sessions (20-minute sessions, four times per week);
- A high-quality curriculum informed by the SoR with a focus on phonics, phonological awareness, and fluency; and
- Regular progress monitoring and data use to target specific early literacy skills via two-week lesson sprints.

Citation: Robinson, Carly D., Cynthia Pollard, Sarah Novicoff, Sara White, and Susanna Loeb. (2024). The Effects of Virtual Tutoring on Young Readers: Results from a Randomized Controlled Trial. (EdWorkingPaper: 24-955). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: <https://doi.org/10.26300/rtxg-5111>

At Uplift Luna, students are pulled out of the classroom by support staff to a separate space for their virtual tutoring sessions with OnYourMark. Ms. Thomas notes that this system works well for her scholars: it **empowers teachers to differentiate their instruction** for the students who remain in the classroom while also ensuring that those receiving tutoring services **get the support they need**. "It's what I needed. As a teacher, you really do try to do all of the things but I think it goes to that saying 'It takes a village.' If I'm able to work with them, the parents are able to work with them, and they're able to get tutoring, **we're just all able to pour into this scholar to uplift their overall knowledge.**"

## Proof That OnYourMark Works

Since its implementation in 2021, OnYourMark has proven itself to be a game-changer for literacy instruction at Uplift Education.

"We did a randomized controlled trial with OnYourMark and saw significant growth. For [other literacy programs], we did not get the best measurements for what we wanted to get out of it. And so **OnYourMark is probably the single unqualified success of all of our tutoring programs,**" says Mr. Erber.

Ms. Thomas adds, "I feel as though this year, we've been able to see even more results because last school year was more of a pilot, which meant that we [Uplift Education] were in partnership with the university."

The university in question? Stanford. Specifically, the **National Student Support Accelerator at Stanford University**. In a study conducted during the 2022-2023 school year, researchers found that "First graders in 1-1 sessions saw the most improvement, with tutored students performing about **6 percentile points higher on average than students who had not received tutoring.**"\*

With this successful pilot, Uplift Education was all-in with OnYourMark.

*"I think the biggest win is being able to see that growth. You send in those kiddos who are still struggling with letter recognition and then **they're coming out of sessions and not only do they know their letters, but they know their sounds and they're able to segment phonemes.**"*

—Imani Thomas

\*Source: Edweek | [A Virtual Tutoring Program Boosted Early Literacy Skills. New Research Shows How](#)

Kindergartners assigned to tutoring **gained an additional 13.4%** of the control group's average gains in letter sound mastery from beginning to end of year, or what translates to an **additional about 24 days of school** based upon the CMO's 178-day school year. First graders assigned to 1:1 tutoring gained an additional 28.4% of the BAU control group's average gains in decoding from beginning to end of year, or an **additional about 51 days of school** (Robinson et al., 2024).

## Beyond Books: Improving Outcomes Together

The last piece of the puzzle goes beyond books. As OnYourMark states on its website, **relationships matter**.

Educators often navigate sweeping education reforms, especially concerning curriculum and instruction, put on their shoulders by people who have never taught in a classroom and/or with little regard for the amount of work already on their plates. The resulting sentiment among teachers? A lack of buy-in.

OnYourMark boasts a team of experienced education professionals, many of whom know what it's like to be in the classroom. As a result, the team works to demonstrate transparency and partnership with its schools and the students and teachers within them.

Says Ms. Thomas, "I feel like the buy-in has been great because of our partnership and the explanation and the effort that has gone into creating it. For example, last semester, I was able to partner with Aaron [Schlessman, Senior Director of Partnerships for OnYourMark and former educator in Chicago for Noble Network of Charter Schools]. He met with with the K-2 teachers virtually to say 'Hey, this is what our program is all about. This is how we're going to support you. What questions do you have?' I think that **openness and transparency really do get teachers on board**." She explains that as site coordinator for Uplift Luna, her relationship with OnYourMark is such that when she or her teachers need support, she can bring their concerns to the OnYourMark team at their regular meetings, or even via email and text.

And parents? Parents love the improvement in literacy skills, but more importantly, they love the gains in academic confidence. "She used to quit if she was struggling but now, she will actually sound out her words and she is reading her sight words. **She is just more excited about reading**. [OnYourMark] has definitely helped her in second grade with her scores. But I still keep going back to the **confidence she has built**, because without the confidence you can't do anything else," says one Uplift parent in [this piece by Yasmin Bhatia](#), Chief Executive Officer of Uplift Education for Real Clear Education.

*"I know that the **tutors are really invested in the kids**. They've even said things like, 'Hey, I have a concern about this scholar, here's why...' 'I see the kids get excited to go to OnYourMark! So if it's Wednesday and we don't have it that day, they're like 'No! No OnYourMark today?' **They're genuinely excited about being there and learning. I feel like OnYourMark's relationship-building is definitely a strength.**"*

—Imani Thomas

## Conclusion

With an emphasis on efficacy via the Science of Reading, individualized high-impact tutoring, and relationship building, OnYourMark is helping students win the race against widening literacy gaps.

As Ms. Thomas shared, "I would genuinely be upset if we stopped using OnYourMark. **The data speaks for itself. I think the successes and the relationships speak for themselves**. I hope we can continue to partner with OnYourMark."

To speak to the OnYourMark team about supporting your literacy program, email [partners@onyourmarkeducation.org](mailto:partners@onyourmarkeducation.org) or [click here](#) to schedule a time that fits your schedule.