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Bay State Reading Institute: A Case Study of Teacher Culture Change

Introduction

Community changes bring new learning needs

Between 1990 and 2010, the demographics of Everett, Massachusetts underwent significant change. Families that were new to the community, and new to the United States, arrived to the predominantly white working-class community, bringing ethnic and linguistic diversity—including 54 native languages. Everett Public Schools faced a challenge in accommodating a more diverse student body at the same time that academic performance was plateauing. District leaders felt like they had too many initiatives that did not support a coherent vision for the district, and they knew they were not serving all students well.

Within the last five years, the district set a north star to improve college and career readiness with a particular emphasis on developing workplace ready skills. This included improving achievement, leveraging community support, and implementing a focus on social-emotional learning. To pursue these strategies, schools needed new tools and approaches. Meanwhile, administrators at the Keverian Elementary School, the district's lowest-performing elementary school at the time, began to research models for improvement.

Discovering BSRI

Keverian School Principal John Obremski saw promise in the Bay State Reading Institute (BSRI), a small-group instructional model using literacy as an entry point to changing teacher practice and culture. After visiting a BSRI school in Revere, Massachusetts and examining performance data for other BSRI schools, he decided to pilot BSRI in the hopes that it would jump-start performance.

The Keverian pilot began in the 2012-13 school year. Despite the challenges inherent in implementing a new initiative, both school and district personnel saw enough positive results by the second year to warrant continuing with the model. By the end of their third BSRI year, the Keverian had risen in the state's accountability system from Level 3 achievement status to Level 1, and other principals in the district were expressing curiosity about the model. After another year of continued positive results, the district decided to implement BSRI in two additional elementary schools, Parlin and Lafayette, in the 2016-17 school year.

The potential of changing teacher practice

Everett Public Schools offers the unique and valuable opportunity to compare the BSRI implementation process across three schools in the same district. According to teachers and administrators, the Keverian saw substantial changes in teachers' classroom practice in their first two years, which became cultural norms embedded in the fabric of the school by years 3-5. Though the Parlin and Lafayette implemented only one year of BSRI before the completion of this study, teachers and administrators report practice changes that mirror early shifts at the Keverian and suggest the seeds of cultural change that could result from taking a similar path. Everett offers an example of how to move the needle on data-driven instruction and differentiation with a combination of specific changes to teacher practice and dedicated support structures. Further, this investigation into Everett's implementation of the BSRI model suggests that teachers buy into the power and potential of a new model when they can see shifts in their own and their colleagues' practice, and when these changes translate into positive outcomes for student learning.

The graphic below offers a generalized model of BSRI implementation, drawn primarily from the Keverian's first five years.

STUDY APPROACH

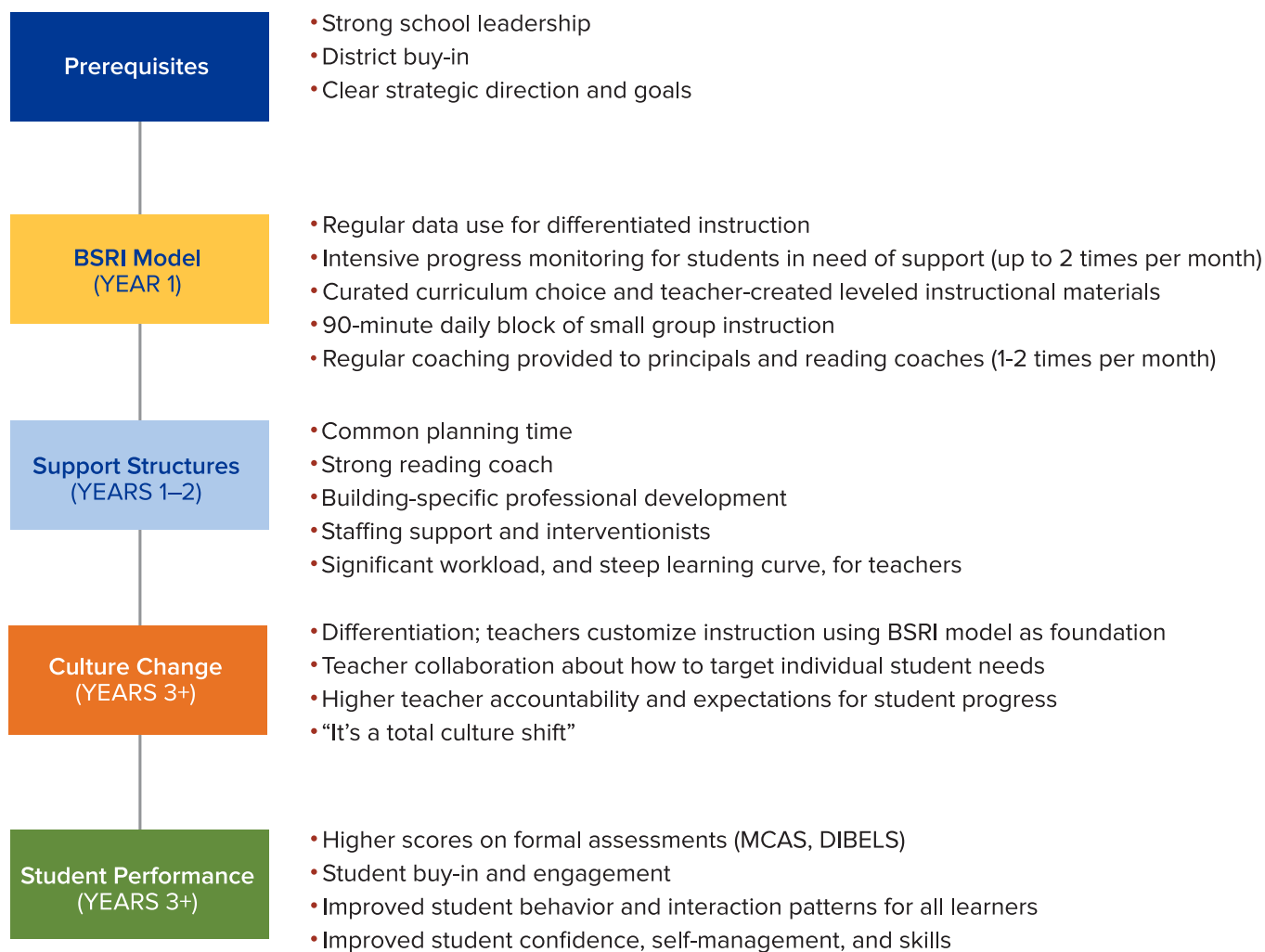
In this study, the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy sought to uncover a model of the early stages of BSRI implementation, including necessary conditions and supports as well as shared challenges. This study examines the following research questions:

- What does the first year of an initiative designed to impact educator culture look like?
- How has BSRI impacted educator culture in Everett elementary schools?
- What promising practices about school change and improvement can be learned from Everett?

To address these research questions, the Rennie Center team collected data at Keverian, Lafayette, and Parlin, the three schools implementing BSRI. At each school, researchers observed classrooms and teacher team meetings during BSRI implementation. The study team also conducted two rounds of interviews with groups of teachers, administrators, and the instructional leadership team at each school, as well as one round of interviews each with district leaders and BSRI staff members.

During their first BSRI year, staff at the Parlin and the Lafayette report similar experiences of changing teacher practice, evolving structures to support the model, and creating teacher buy-in for elements of BSRI. In ensuing years, the Keverian's experience suggests that these seeds of change can result in broader school cultural shifts and improved student outcomes.

As more schools and districts around the Commonwealth welcome diverse student bodies with a variety of learning needs, it will be important for them to consider how to adopt a unified strategy for promoting improvements in teacher practice and student success. The following elements of Everett's experience may be useful points of consideration for school or district leaders seeking to catalyze cultural change and improve student outcomes in their own schools.



Unpacking the Process

How did it start? Prerequisites

Strong school leadership. At the Keverian, staff identified Principal Obremski's advocacy as a critical element of early implementation. Not only did he research and recommend BSRI to the superintendent, but he also worked closely with reading coach Michelle Rooney to lead the schoolwide effort. Teachers said that Obremski asked them what they needed to be successful and was committed to “working out the kinks.” He restructured the school schedule and staffing to make time for implementation and allocated funds for Rooney to use at her discretion to support instruction, based on teacher needs.

District buy-in. Everett Superintendent Frederick Foresteire endorsed BSRI and demonstrated his support by budgeting \$30,000 for the Keverian to use at its discretion. These supplementary funds allowed Obremski to pursue his BSRI leadership strategy and tailor professional development, materials, and curriculum purchases to school needs. Staff at the Parlin and Lafayette were aware of the district’s commitment to BSRI, but received less district financial support than the Keverian, mentioning cuts to their aide pool, less money for implementation, and insufficient materials to fully support BSRI.

“[Principal Obremski] gave me a lot of leeway to purchase what was right for this building, train the staff, and get professional development going... which is just as important as the model to get things up and running.”

Reading coach, Keverian

YEAR 1

What did schools do? Learning the BSRI Model

BSRI is an instructional model involving regular assessment and data use, differentiated small-group instruction and intensive focus on reading, to improve student outcomes, teacher practice, and school leadership. As a whole-school reform model, BSRI works best with the active participation of all staff. When teachers, administrators and support staff all implement the technical components of the BSRI model, they build the foundation for these elements to develop into a broader cultural shift and school transformation.

Regular assessment and extensive data use. All three Everett schools implementing the BSRI model use the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), a diagnostic reading assessment of the acquisition of early literacy skills. Every student is DIBELS tested three times per year, and those in need of extra supports receive regular progress monitoring up to every two weeks. At all three schools, teachers said they used to assess students as if they were “checking a box” and that “nothing would happen with the data.” Now, not only do teachers collect and review the data regularly, but, as a part of BSRI, they analyze it regularly to inform instruction.

EXPANDING TEACHERS’ REPERTOIRE

Educators at all three schools felt that BSRI staff added “clout” to assist in acquiring supplemental literacy curricular materials Project READ or Lively Letters. Even so, the additional work of tailoring curriculum to the model and creating leveled materials is extremely time intensive in year one, especially when paired with the other demands of learning the model.

Curated and differentiated curriculum. Differentiation and data-driven instruction require materials that address students at different skill levels. Teachers at all three schools devised innovative strategies for the time-intensive task of creating materials for multiple levels of student ability. At the Lafayette, the third grade teaching team shares all materials on a web-based drop box. One teacher team at the Keverian divided tasks by domain (e.g., reading comprehension, vocabulary) and pooled the results. At the Parlin, the Kindergarten team rotates leveling duties by student skill level, taking turns working on materials for advanced readers, grade-level, and below-grade-level readers.

“It’s a huge learning curve for everyone, both students and teachers.”

Lafayette teacher

Intensive reading focus. Participating schools adopt a 90-minute BSRI block of differentiated center-based learning in which students do independent and small-group work. Because this entire block emphasizes reading instruction, teachers across all three schools report concerns about covering science, math, social studies, writing, standardized test (MCAS) preparation, and other content. Some teachers at the Keverian have responded to this challenge by experimenting with incorporating other content into the BSRI block.

YEAR 1: TAKEAWAYS

In Everett, strong leadership fostered the energy and set expectations for systemic commitment to BSRI. Because BSRI required a major shift in teacher practice—in particular, learning to use assessment data to differentiate instruction and incorporating a center-based model into the classroom—school- and district-level administrator support and commitment were essential.

What Worked? Necessary Support Structures

BSRI offers a model with certain fixed elements, but each school must tailor and integrate BSRI into the existing context. In the first years, schools incorporate drastic changes to their practice that are critical for success. Coaches from BSRI visit once or twice per month to consult with as they implement these changes. A base of materials, strategies, and structures developed over the course of year one facilitate the changes in practice that may ultimately produce culture change.

Common Planning Time (CPT). One administrator called CPT “more productive than being in the classroom,” as it allows teachers to share data, materials, and pedagogical methods, while collaboratively problem-solving about students’ needs. In year one, teams went from having CPT once every nine days (at the Parlin) or every four days (at the Lafayette) to approximately once every other day (at all three schools). CPT periods were secured through administrator advocacy and more selectively using “specials” to afford teacher teams blocks of work time.

Interventionists. All three schools created interventionist positions, assigning a second adult for additional coverage during the BSRI block. Educators described the interventionists as an exciting strategy to further individualize instruction and use resources to better address student needs. However, at the Parlin, due to difficulty in obtaining resources, interventionist support has been “sporadic at best.”

Strong reading coach. At each school, the reading coach worked closely with the principal, partnering to address both pedagogy and operations. An important part of the job, the reading coach at the Lafayette served as a liaison, communicating teacher needs to administrators who could adapt school structures and policies.

Professional development. At all schools, the reading coach provided professional development support for the model during weekly teacher team meetings, focusing on topics such as data use, setting learning goals and expectations, designing interventions and groupings, and instructional decision making. First-year BSRI teachers reported that interpreting and using assessment data required a lot of new skills, but some had already begun to feel that “progress monitoring now means something.” At the Keverian, by year three, teachers were able to articulate their professional development needs to the reading coach, who could further tailor teacher-training sessions.

Incorporating so many changes is a heavy initial load, making year one a challenge. Early in the first year, teachers reported feeling overwhelmed. Teachers had to re-enter a learning mindset. “You have to completely change the way you think about your teaching.” Several teachers in year one wished for more training, as they grappled with the “chaos” of early implementation. But, by the end of the first year, teachers had progressed through the “cycle of stress,” and at all three schools reported feeling more comfortable and confident.

A NEW ROLE FOR INTERVENTIONISTS

Based on the Keverian’s interventionist model, administrators at the Lafayette created new interventionist roles by repurposing school counselors, paraprofessionals, aides, and specialists to provide additional support during the BSRI block as well as pull-out supports for students with particular needs. Previously, interventionists had covered classrooms during common planning time; to assist with BSRI implementation, they assumed part of the instructional load and joined the core teacher team during the reading block. Interventionists can promptly help students who need extra support without removing them from the classroom during other parts of the day. “They are now an untouchable resource in reading classrooms,” said one administrator.

YEARS 1–2: TAKEAWAYS

In Everett, building sufficient supports for teachers to learn the BSRI model required a close partnership between the school principal and the reading coach. Over time, the reading coaches honed the pedagogical knowledge necessary for implementation, and worked with school leaders to design and deliver professional development. Meanwhile, administrators adapted school structures to support teachers, by allocating common planning time, creating interventionist roles, and securing additional resources.

What changed? Practice change sparks culture change

By the end of year one, teachers at the Parlin and Lafayette said they had bought into the potential of the BSRI model. They reported changes to how they think about their practice and their roles both in and out of the classroom, including expectations for all students, data use for instructional purposes, and professional responsibilities.

High expectations. Teachers at all three schools reported higher expectations about what their students could do, “regardless of background, disability, language, etc.,” said one administrator. In some cases, teachers also experienced more transparency—and scrutiny—as they are now evaluated on the basis of individual student progress. Teachers’ growing awareness that all students could, and should, be held to high expectations was coupled with increased feelings of responsibility for ensuring that students are held to those expectations and learn to their fullest potential.

“Before, the expectations for everyone were not as concrete. Now, we have accountability for teachers, for students—for every single role in the school. From reading coach to classroom teachers to interventionist.”

Parlin teacher

Data-driven differentiation. Teachers reported a better understanding of how to differentiate instruction and use data to guide their teaching. “In the past, the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) would come out great, but then the student couldn’t pass spelling tests and I didn’t know why,” said one teacher. Another said, “Now we identify the skill deficits much more quickly and use data to drive what we teach each week.” At all three schools, teachers also reported a shared understanding that everybody is responsible for reading, and that they are accountable for using data to examine impact and ensure that all students are individually supported.

“It took three years for us to build comfort, pool the expertise, and get it all under our belt.”

Keverian teacher

Teachers at the Keverian report moving beyond concrete practice changes to ingrained shifts in school culture characterizing later years of implementation. They describe a school-wide culture of collaboration, in which teachers collectively develop materials, review data together, and attend to alignment and continuity of scope and sequence across classrooms and grade levels. “We can do seamless work across the grade-level classrooms,” said one teacher. Teachers also saw improved teamwork during common planning time and other school-wide collaborative structures, as well as increased collegiality across

teams. One administrator called it a “total culture shift,” which now guides hiring decisions and impacts retention. “It’s the culture here, and no teachers are not bought in,” said a school leader. “This is the way we do it.”

YEARS 3+: TAKEAWAYS

By year three of implementation, teachers at the Keverian had internalized the core BSRI practices and felt more comfortable taking ownership of the model. New skills, like data-driven differentiation, evolved into ingrained interaction patterns that had teachers collaborating on data reviews, co-creating individualized instruction plans, and viewing all students as capable of success.

Student Performance

Five years into BSRI implementation, the Keverian has moved from Level 3 to Level 1 status in the Massachusetts statewide accountability system, with higher standardized test (MCAS) and diagnostic assessment (DIBELS) scores, as well as high growth scores. Beyond formal assessments, they have seen improvements in various student outcomes including student engagement, behavior, skills, and confidence.

Engagement. In the classroom, teachers report that students are “more aware of what they are learning” and “invested in hitting their goals.” They are more confident and independent at self-managing their own learning, “holding themselves accountable” to meeting their benchmarks.

“Students can do a lot more than I expected from them before.”

Lafayette teacher

Behavior and teamwork. Like teachers, students required an adjustment period as they learned to work in new ways. However, teachers reported that students are more engaged with learning, both independently and in teams. They “talk more about what they are reading,” and Keverian staff see “partner reading, debate, and constructive feedback between students” without direct teacher involvement.

In addition, teachers report higher baseline expectations for what incoming students can do at the beginning of each year in terms of independent and peer work skills.

SERVING ELLs AND STUDENTS WITH IEPs

The BSRI model has particularly helped the ELL students at the Keverian. As one administrator noted, “A student-centered classroom involves students talking to each other. Peer relationships are more important than some academic components for learning language... Doing this, ELL kids acquire language faster.” They have seen similar results with students with special needs.

YEARS 3+: TAKEAWAYS

After five years of BSRI, Keverian had reached Level 1 in the state’s accountability system and was the highest-performing elementary school in the district. Increased levels of student engagement, better teamwork, and improved skills (across all student subgroups) have accompanied changes to teacher culture and greater investment of students in their own learning goals.

Continuing Challenges

Many of the teachers and administrators in this study feel that adopting BSRI has been beneficial. From initial implementation through the first year, Parlin and Lafayette teacher perspectives on the model became increasingly more positive. At the same time, interviews with staff at all three schools offer insight into the challenges inherent in BSRI implementation. Two common themes are discussed below.

Professional support. Due to scheduling complications, many teachers in these schools were consistently unable to attend BSRI's professional development workshops. Instead, teachers relied on reading coaches to convey much of the information they received from BSRI staff. Some participants wished for more opportunities to receive training and suggestions directly from BSRI. In addition, although Everett staff viewed BSRI specifically as a model for reading instruction, some Keverian teachers have begun to experiment with incorporating BSRI principles into their teaching of other subjects. It may be useful to devise supports that help teachers new to the model connect with BSRI staff more frequently. This would facilitate teachers exploring the BSRI model as a pedagogical structure that can move beyond reading and accommodate a range of content.

Workload. Although the work of implementing the BSRI model was generally considered worthwhile, teachers at all three schools agreed that BSRI required substantially more work than they had previously done. Administrators and reading coaches invest considerable time in monthly or biweekly consultation with BSRI staff as they learn to support teachers. Teachers inevitably experience stress, particularly in year one, when they take on the time-intensive dual roles of learning new skills and creating leveled materials. As BSRI continues to expand its network, it may be helpful to consider how to effectively disseminate leveled materials across partner schools and whether/to what extent these materials and resources should remain within the domain of reading.

“It was a hard start to get it up and running, but now, seeing it every day? I see benefits. I see the hard work pay off.”

Parlin teacher

Key Considerations

The Everett Public Schools experience offers insights for educators interested in BSRI or other schoolwide reform initiatives. Both district leaders (e.g., superintendents) and school leaders (e.g., principals) play critical roles in the success of such efforts; the section below offers considerations for administrators at each level.

For district leaders

Changing school culture requires a substantial investment of people, time, and resources. A school pursuing BSRI will require strong commitment from the central office, including providing funds for materials and professional development. In Everett, the district's support included allocating funds, which the Keverian leadership team identified as an essential element of their implementation. While district commitment was a necessary pre-condition and set the expectation for reform, the model cannot be implemented solely based on top-down decision-making. Teacher and school leader buy-in were central to achieving the positive outcomes seen at Keverian. Lessons garnered from implementing BSRI in this district also suggest that schools benefit from autonomy to support instructional priorities; in Everett, improving literacy in the elementary grades was deemed critical.

For school leaders

Many Everett staff perceived BSRI as a reading program. However, school leaders may be better able to leverage BSRI if they view it as a school reform model using literacy instruction as its catalyst for change, with the potential to impact instruction and culture school-wide.

School leaders interested in implementing BSRI must therefore commit to actively fostering culture change by adapting school structures, and supporting teachers through this change, especially in regard to differentiating instruction and redirecting resources. They should select a reading coach with the potential to become an effective advocate, liaison, relationship-builder, *and* pedagogue, and foster a strong partnership among peer teachers. Everett’s experience also illustrates the importance of creating common planning time and staffing coverage so teachers can review data and prepare materials. Differentiation is also most effective with additional staff support, such as interventionists, especially as students adjust to independent/peer work.

Finally, interested school leaders must recognize that BSRI implementation requires a large investment of time and energy, not only for teachers to improve their practice but also for reading coaches and administrators to grow their instructional leadership. All stakeholders in Everett—including administrators, teachers, and students—experienced a large learning curve as they worked to incorporate new skills. School leaders should be aware that culture change will be challenging unless, as in Everett, teachers come to see the potential of the work and embrace a learner mindset.

In Summary

Pairing high expectations for differentiation and data use with targeted professional development, BSRI provides a promising model for elevating student achievement in reading in elementary grades. As is evidenced through Everett’s experience, BSRI is not a quick fix reading intervention. Fidelity to multiple aspects of the BSRI model—requiring significant work from leaders, teachers and administration, alike—is essential to bring about a schoolwide shift in instruction. Implementation of BSRI at the Keverian school offers important insights into a school-wide change process; leaders and teachers invested in using performance data to differentiate classroom instruction, which in turn, enhanced teacher culture. This sequence—known to drive improved student learning outcomes—operates as a proof point for BSRI.



Research conducted and brief produced by the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy

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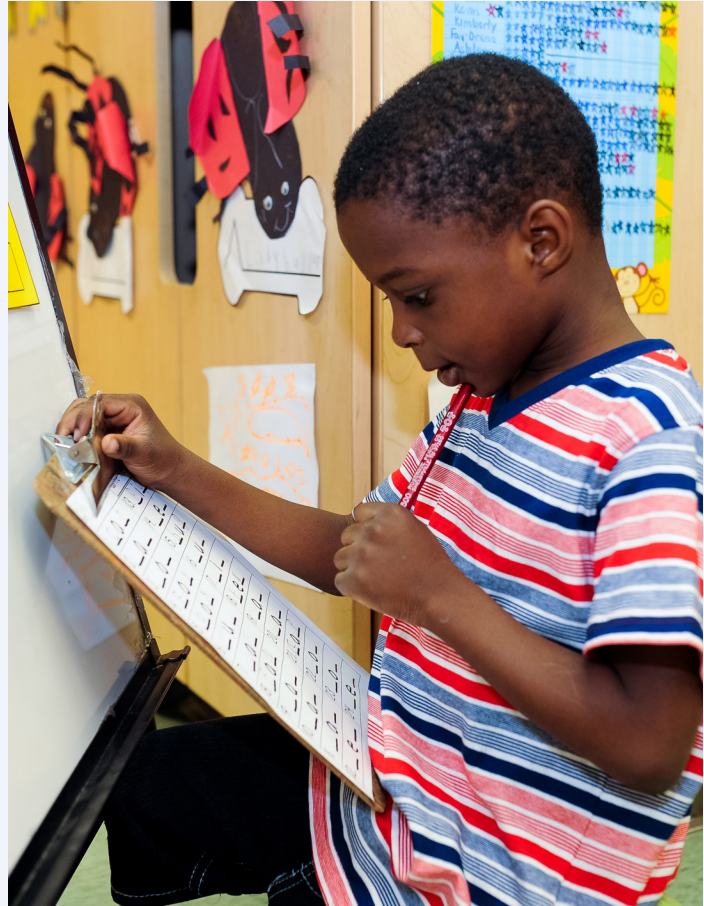
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