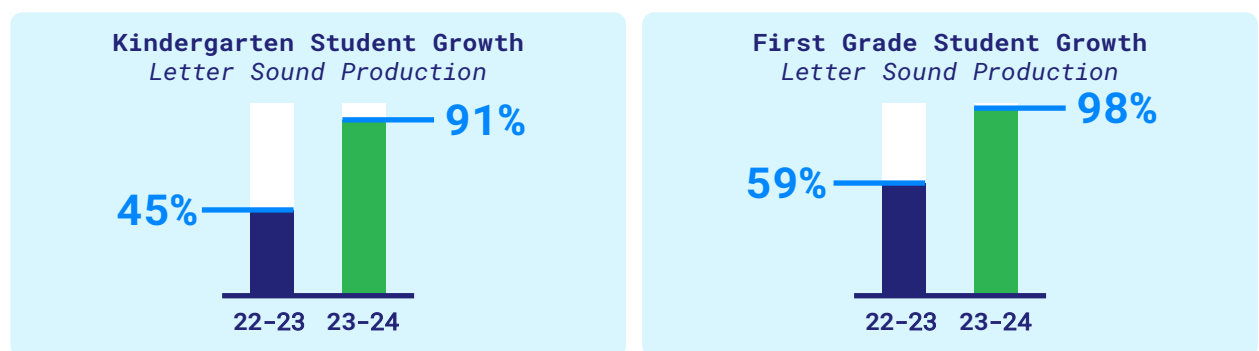**Riverside Insights®**

ESGi ✓

White Paper

Closing the Foundational Literacy Gap:
How ESGI Transforms Early Reading Success

Overview

Improving early literacy skills is essential for long-term student success, yet educators often struggle to gather timely, specific insights that align with students' rapidly developing foundational reading abilities. ESGI (Educational Software for Guiding Instruction) addresses this challenge by enabling teachers to monitor progress on targeted reading skills, pinpoint student needs, and effectively group learners for intervention. As a result, educators can deliver instruction and support that meet students exactly where they are.

Granite City Community Unit School District 9 exemplifies the transformative impact of ESGI. Teachers reported significant growth in foundational literacy skills such as letter recognition and decoding. By equipping teachers with ESGI, they have access to real time data, ensuring every student can confidently move to the next skill.

Kindergarten Student Growth
Letter Sound Production

91%
45%
22–23   23–24

First Grade Student Growth
Letter Sound Production

98%
59%
22–23   23–24

Source: Granite City School District

This paper explores how literacy consultant Donna Whyte partnered with Granite City Schools to implement ESGI, helping teachers use skill-based progress measures, targeted groupings, and strategic lesson planning to accelerate students' reading growth. Through research, real-life success stories, and actionable strategies, we demonstrate why ESGI is indispensable in supporting all students' reading proficiency.

The Foundational Literacy Gap and the Need for Real-Time Insights

Despite widespread recognition of the importance of early reading, many young learners still face a foundational literacy gap. In 2021–2022, only 47% of kindergarten and 48% of first-grade students had developed grade-level reading skills. The pandemic magnified existing disparities, particularly for students in lower socioeconomic contexts who lacked consistent access to early literacy resources.

*In 2021–2022, only **47% of kindergarten** and **48% of first-grade students** had developed grade-level reading skills.*

Catching up becomes increasingly difficult when students fall behind in reading during the early grades. Research shows a 90% likelihood that students who struggle early will continue to do so unless they receive timely and targeted interventions. This underscores the necessity of precise, real-time data on individual students' progress.

While summative assessments are important for understanding overall achievement, they arrive too late and have too broad a scope to inform immediate next steps in teaching. Educators need ongoing insights into specific foundational skills to differentiate instruction, provide appropriate interventions, and close gaps before they widen.

*Research shows a **90% likelihood** that students who struggle early will continue to do so unless they receive timely and targeted interventions.*

Source: Reading Rockets

What the Research Says About Progress Monitoring and Formative Assessment

Decades of evidence confirm that **progress monitoring** is a cornerstone of effective instruction. Rather than waiting for end-of-year data, ongoing progress checks allow teachers to identify skill deficits early, adapt their teaching, and help more students meet proficiency benchmarks by the end of the year.

Many established progress monitoring tools measure skill growth across a grade-level curriculum or use general outcome measures (like word reading fluency) to predict overall reading performance. While these tools are valuable for broader tracking, they may not offer the detailed insights teachers need to target specific skills—particularly for early or struggling readers.

Formative assessments, known as **mastery measures**, fill this gap by evaluating individual skills in depth. Mastery measures enable teachers to see precisely which foundational literacy skills students have acquired and which require additional practice.

With ESGI, Teachers can:

- Identify mastered skills and those needing more reinforcement.
- Group students for targeted intervention based on specific needs.
- Determine when students are ready to progress to the next skill.

ESGI supports a school—or district-wide approach by providing customizable assessments aligned with curriculum scope and sequence. Results are presented in user-friendly formats, helping teachers swiftly adjust instruction. Research consistently shows frequent progress monitoring and immediate, data-informed teaching improve reading outcomes. ESGI streamlines this process, ensuring educators can recognize emerging skill deficits early and intervene before these gaps become persistent barriers to reading success.

District Spotlight: Foundational Reading Skill Growth in Granite City Schools

District Profile: Granite City Community Unit School District #9 – Granite City, IL

5660
PK-12 Students

20% Black
15% Hispanic
57% White
<2% Other
7% Two or More Races

7% English Learners

61% Students from Low Income Backgrounds

Granite City educators grappled with ongoing challenges in helping their kindergarten and first-grade students master key early literacy skills such as letter recognition and letter sounds. During the 2023–2024 school year, literacy consultant Donna Whyte collaborated with district leaders, including Executive Director of K-12 Professional Development and Curriculum Kristen Novacich-Koberna, and Instructional Technology Coordinator Jennifer Smith, to address these concerns.

Granite City adopted the Brainspring phonics program, grounded in the science of reading, to support learners. Using ESGI, Whyte created assessments aligned with Brainspring's scope and sequence so teachers could gather actionable data on students' progress. Uniquely, these ESGI assessments focus on specific reading skills rather than assuming a one-size-fits-all grade-level approach. This flexibility means they can be used with any student working on foundational reading skills—whether in kindergarten, a struggling second grader, an English-language learner, or a student with disabilities.

With immediate feedback on student performance, Teachers can:

- Tell when most students have mastered a skill and confidently move on to the next.
- Create small groups of students with similar needs for targeted intervention.

"ESGI helps our teachers plan their instruction, particularly for Tier 1 and Tier 2," said Novacich-Koberna. "Teachers can see what students actually know and determine if they need more practice, so it helps teachers plan and know when to reteach a topic."

Through ESGI's integrated progress monitoring, teachers in Granite City could:

- Form skill-based intervention groups.
- Adjust instruction in real-time as soon as data indicated a need.
- Transition students to new skills only when mastery was demonstrated.

Granite City teachers quickly saw results. For instance, in the 2023–2024 school year, the percentage of kindergarten students mastering letter-sound production jumped from 45% to 91%. In first grade, 98% of students were proficient in letter sound production compared to just 59% the year before using ESGI.

Beyond letters and sounds, Granite City educators saw broader reading growth. Two years ago, fewer than half of the district's first graders started the year knowing their letter sounds. This meant valuable class time had to be spent rebuilding these foundational skills. In contrast, this year, 97% of first-grade students arrived with letter sounds already mastered, allowing teachers to concentrate on reading comprehension, vocabulary, and writing right from the start of the year. Photos of student work from the beginning of the school year further underscore how these strong foundational skills accelerate reading and writing development.

Granite City teachers also noted how well ESGI fits into their Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). Tier 1 data provided insights into overall class performance, Tier 2 data uncovered decoding deficits among older students lacking foundational skills, and Tier 3 data guided more intensive and targeted interventions.

A notable example is a co-taught first-grade classroom that effectively differentiated instruction using ESGI. With a combination of general and special education students, 96% of the class met or exceeded grade-level reading benchmarks going into second grade, and behavior referrals decreased as students remained engaged and motivated by targeted, successful learning.

> "
>
> You can't read what you can't decode. We can now move students beyond a phonics focus to comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency more quickly, creating truly comprehensive readers.
>
> *— Donna Whyte*

Figure 1. Percentage of Kindergarten Students Meeting Proficiency Benchmarks in Early Literacy Skills Before and After ESGI Implementation
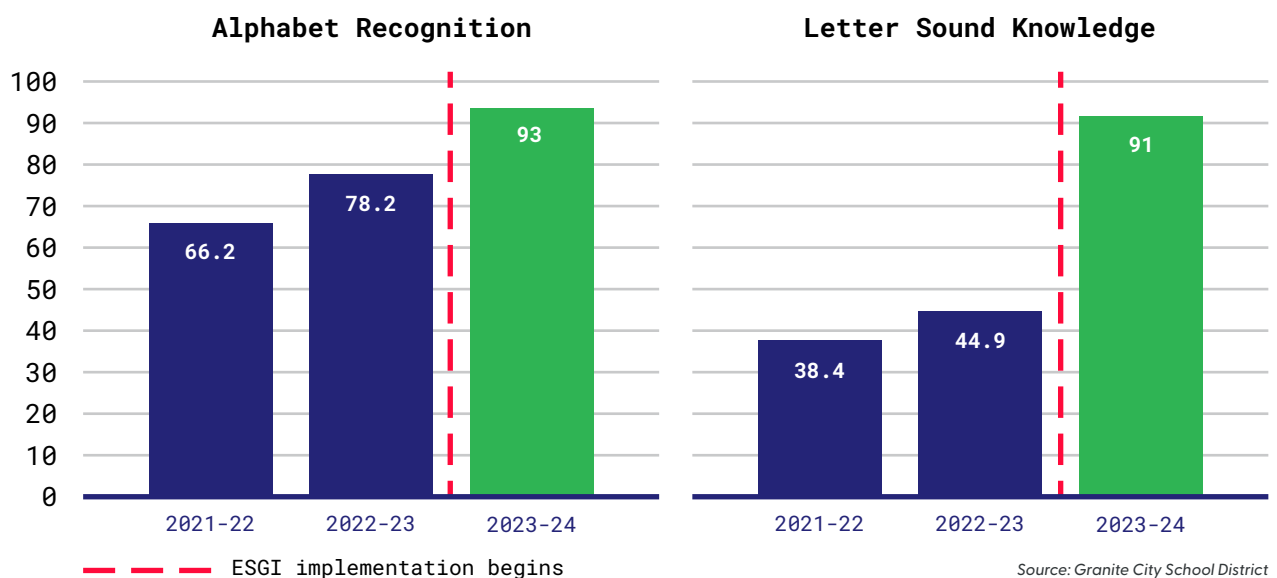
Alphabet Recognition

2021–22	2022–23	2023–24
66.2	78.2	93

Letter Sound Knowledge

2021–22	2022–23	2023–24
38.4	44.9	91

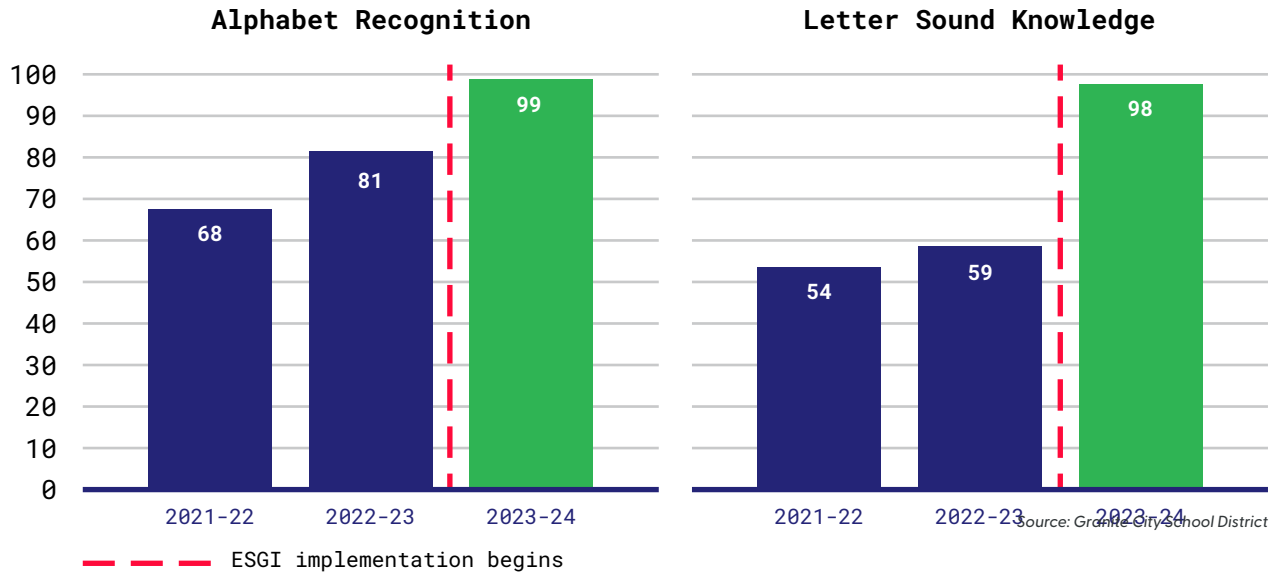- - - ESGI implementation begins

Source: Granite City School District

Figure 2. Percentage of First Grade Students Meeting Proficiency Benchmarks in Early Literacy Skills Before and After ESGI Implementation

Alphabet Recognition: 2021–22: 68, 2022–23: 81, 2023–24: 99 (ESGI implementation begins)

Letter Sound Knowledge: 2021–22: 54, 2022–23: 59, 2023–24: 98 (ESGI implementation begins)

ESGI implementation begins

Source: Granite City School District

Why ESGI is a Game Changer

Granite City's journey with ESGI reveals several pivotal insights:

1. **Start Small, Then Scale:** Quick success in kindergarten built excitement that led to rapid adoption across the district.

2. **Immediate Impact:** Teachers noted measurable improvements by the first grading period.

3. **Teacher Empowerment:** ESGI streamlined the RTI process, reducing teacher workload and boosting instructional confidence.

4. **Flexibility Across Programs:** Regardless of evolving curricula, ESGI's adaptability ensured long-term effectiveness.

These key lessons affirm ESGI's potential to transform teaching practices and significantly improve student outcomes in foundational reading.