

# Fluency Formula: Oral Fluency Assessment

**IMPACT STUDY**

**Fluency  
Formula™**



Fluency Formula:  
Oral Fluency Assessment  
A Successful Plan for Raising  
Reading Achievement

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## **The Challenge: To have 90% of Students Reading with Grade Level Fluency**

In September of 1997 a consortium of Minnesota school districts known as SCRED (St. Croix River Education District) implemented a plan to raise the level of reading achievement for their students. The primary goal of the plan was to have 90% of students reading at the target level of fluency for their grade. This five-year plan included three main components:

- Frequent assessment practices to monitor student progress
- Instruction based on students' changing needs
- Collaborative teaching to ensure the most effective instruction possible for each student

These three components were considered interdependent, because assessment informs instruction and collaboration makes strong instruction possible. To measure reading progress and readiness for state competency tests, Oral Fluency Assessments (OFAs) were used district-wide for students in grades K–8. Reading passages from Scholastic's Fluency Formula were among the resources teachers used to administer the oral fluency tests.

## **The Need: Oral Fluency Assessment**

Almost every state in the union has established a state assessment of reading competency. According to the requirements of the No Child Left Behind legislation, the first assessment must occur by the third grade. Reading experts, including those working with SCRED districts, believe that if students are to read proficiently by grade three, effective reading assessment must start in the earlier grades. The goal of assessment is to determine if students are successfully learning new skills and if instruction is meeting their individual needs. Early reading assessment allows for the opportunity to intervene and assist students who are not on target to succeed on their state's reading competency assessment.

Fluent reading requires speedy recognition of words, decoding accuracy, and oral expressiveness (prosody). Contrary to once popular belief, fluency does not simply develop naturally. Oral reading fluency requires direct instruction, extensive practice, and continual assessment. Research reveals that reading fluency is one of the strongest overall indicators of reading competence. Students' level of reading fluency strongly correlates with their ability to comprehend grade-level reading materials. This is because fluency is critical for bridging the gap between word recognition and comprehension. For these reasons, SCRED districts chose to monitor students' level of reading fluency as an important indicator of overall student progress in reading.

## **The Solution: Scholastic's Fluency Formula**

Scholastic's Fluency Formula was designed to provide teachers with the resources they need to meet the fluency requirements of No Child Left Behind and the National Reading Panel. These requirements state that all students must receive regular oral fluency assessment, direct fluency instruction and intervention, and leveled fluency practice. Fluency Formula provides a balanced approach to these requirements, including oral fluency benchmark passages for each grade level. These passages were originally developed, nationally normed, and validated by Ed.Formation, an independent educational research and development organization.

The experiences of the five school districts that comprise the St. Croix River Education District (SCRED) illustrate the effectiveness of oral fluency assessment, including Scholastic's Fluency Formula, as a tool for formative evaluation of student progress to bring about improvements in reading proficiency.

## **SCRED District Profile**

St. Croix River Education District (SCRED) is a collaborative service agency, which provides five independent member districts with shared resources, including scientifically research-based instructional and assessment materials. The member districts are committed to using only proven materials and methods with their students, the same principles that form the basis of the No Child Left Behind legislation. Member districts include:

- Chisago Lakes Independent School District
- East Central Independent School District
- Hinckley-Finlayson Independent School District
- Pine City Independent School District
- Rush City Independent School District

According to the SCRED Web site, "while SCRED districts are successful in providing the majority of their students with the basic skills they need, a disturbingly high percentage of students still have inadequate skills. This lack of success of a portion of the students in most SCRED districts has raised the issue of basic skill instruction to an area of immediate concern."

Thus, SCRED's goal for general academic outcomes support was to develop assessment, instruction and service delivery models for member districts that were based on proven-effective teaching principles expected to produce growth in the reading ability of all students.

### **Implementation: Oral Fluency Assessment Positively Affects Instruction**

Oral fluency assessment with Scholastic's Fluency Formula and other measurement practices played a key role in providing teachers with important information to raise student achievement levels in SCRED districts. To evaluate oral reading fluency students simply read from a grade-level passage while a teacher or classroom assistant recorded the number of words read correctly per minute (WCPM). SCRED districts used OFAs as part of their ongoing assessment practices in two ways. First, all students were tested for oral fluency three times per year to identify students of concern and for program evaluation purposes. Depending on the level of concern, students who were testing below level were monitored more frequently, as often as once every week. In SCRED, district assessment and instructional practices went hand-in-hand with a team-teaching approach among all teachers at each grade level. Teams of classroom teachers and specialists, including special education (SPED) and English-language learner (ELL) staff, met regularly to discuss the instructional needs of each individual student who was below target.

Oral Fluency Assessment was always used in conjunction with effective reading instruction that adhered to the "big ideas" in beginning reading, as described in the National Reading Panel's most recent research report. These big ideas include phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension. For students of concern, the results of oral fluency assessments were used during grade-level meetings in which teams of teachers discussed individual student progress and appropriate instructional strategies for teaching the five key areas of early reading. Frequent test results allowed teachers to quickly assess what was working and what was not working for individual students, and adapt instructional approaches accordingly.

### **Results: Identifying and Intervening With a Student at Risk**

As demonstrated above, it is critical to monitor students of concern regularly so that assessment data can inform instruction. During the 2002–2003 school year, SCRED elevated a student at risk to a competent reader through frequent monitoring with Scholastic's Fluency Formula passages and appropriate changes to instructional approaches.

An initial oral fluency assessment revealed that this sixth grade student was reading at 60 WCPM in September of 2002, well below the target rate for sixth grade of 115 WCPM. The teacher established a goal for this student to read at 135 WCPM by the end of the school year. Access to multiple sixth grade level fluency passages enabled the team to try several different instructional approaches and then retest the student to evaluate progress. During the course of the first two interventions, which included new teaching strategies with phonics and repeated reading, the student demonstrated no progress with frequent fluency monitoring. These results allowed the team to quickly and effectively switch to a third intervention. After several interventions, the student achieved significant progress to be reading at 119 WCPM by May of 2003.

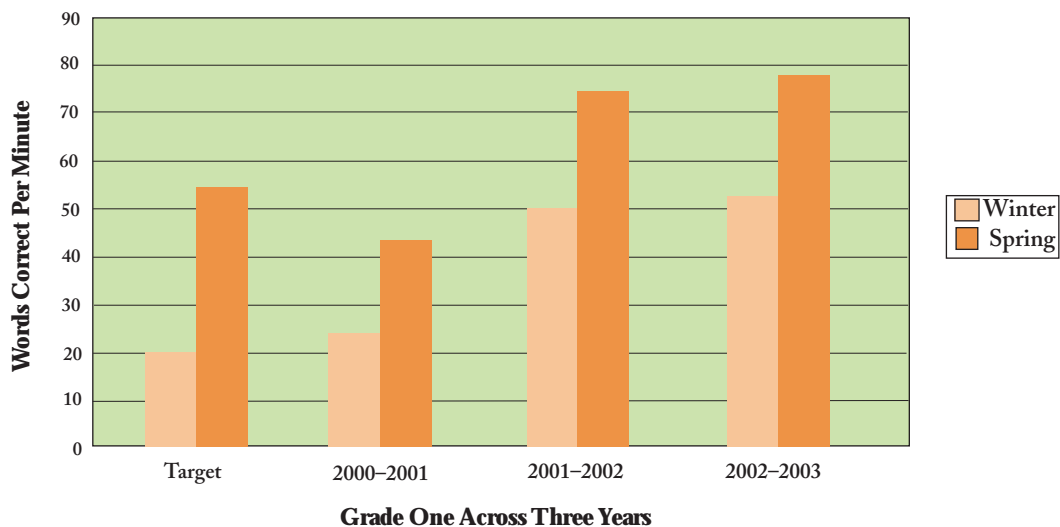
This student was at risk of "becoming a casualty of our educational system," according to an academic coordinator for SCRED. Without data from the Fluency Formula Assessment System to guide this team, they wouldn't have been aware of the lack of progress in time to make significant changes.

## Results: Proving Effective Program Changes

Using fluency assessment passages 2–3 times per year can yield important information about the effectiveness of instructional programs. (See Graph 1.) The following example illustrates how one SCRED district was able to validate its decision to switch to an all day, every day kindergarten program.

Fluency assessment passages, including those from Scholastic’s Fluency Formula, were administered two times per year to evaluate the progress of first graders in a rural Minnesota district that were performing under target reading levels. Target levels were 20 WCPM in winter and 55 WCPM in spring. First graders in this SCRED district received a consistent instructional curriculum (Direct Instruction) across the three years of evaluation. Students’ WCPM results were graphed after each oral fluency assessment. The 2001–2002 first graders were the first cohort of students to receive the all day, every day kindergarten program. As Graph 1 reveals, the WCPM scores of this cohort significantly improved for both the winter and spring. This oral reading fluency growth effect continued for the 2002–2003 first graders. After three years of monitoring, scores were above target (50 WCPM in winter). School and district administrators attributed these positive results for first graders to the introduction of an all day, every day kindergarten, as well as adoption of Direct Instruction, a systematic and explicit instructional program. Without specific data provided by the Oral Fluency Assessment, school and district administrators would not have immediately understood the effectiveness of the all day, every day kindergarten program and the curriculum changes that had been implemented.

**Graph 1: Median Oral Reading Fluency Scores Across Three Years**



*Graph 1: This graph displays the median scores in one SCRED district for three years of Grade 1 Oral Reading Fluency assessment. OFAs are measured according to Words Correct Per Minute (WCPM). This graph also provides comparison to the district’s target first grade OFA scores in the winter and spring. Note that in the first year of OFA monitoring (2000–2001), the first graders are on-target for the winter, but well below target in the spring. The 2001–2002 first graders were the first children to receive all day, every day kindergarten instruction. This change is reflected in their OFA scores, which are well above the district target in WCPM for both the winter and spring. This positive effect continues, and improves even more, for the 2002–2003 school year.*

## Summary

Saint Croix River Education District provides a powerful example of how oral fluency assessment is an integral part of raising reading scores for all students. According to a published report from SCRED, member districts are making steady progress toward their goal of 90% of students reaching grade-level reading fluency. Fluency passages, available in Scholastic's Fluency Formula, have been an important resource for SCRED teachers as they work collaboratively to meet each student's instructional needs.

Fluency Formula passages are normed and validated to ensure that passages at each grade level are of equal reading difficulty, unlike passages from basal textbooks, which tend to vary in difficulty. With Fluency Formula passages, teachers are able to compare individual students' test results over time to draw valid and reliable conclusions about their progress. With a consistent level of difficulty for passages at each grade level, it is easier for administrators to form conclusions about the effectiveness of instructional programs.

In the ongoing quest to improve student reading achievement, the Fluency Formula Assessment System provides results educators can use and trust in the classroom.

*This case study is based on interviews with SCRED staff and the following article available at [www.aimsweb.com](http://www.aimsweb.com): St. Croix River Education District (Howe, Scierka, Gibbons and Silberglitt), *Schoolwide Organization System for Raising Student Achievement Using General Outcome Measures and Evidence-Based Instruction: One Education District's Experience*.*



## Notes

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