

Bridging the gap from phonics instruction to fluent, independent reading: a case study

Johnsburg CUSD 12 • Johnsburg, Illinois

Ringwood Primary School, a public elementary school, used LitLab's curriculum-aligned decodable texts to close the gap between phonics instruction and fluent, independent reading.

AT GLANCE

100%

of teachers reported stronger decoding skills because of LitLab

95%

say LitLab content aligns to core phonics curriculum

90%

report improved engagement with reading practice

2025–26 School Year

Ringwood Primary School, part of Johnsburg Community Unit School District 12 in Johnsburg, Illinois, serves approximately 300 students across grades K–2. Like many schools implementing structured literacy, Ringwood's educators had adopted UFLI Foundations as their core phonics curriculum, but they faced a persistent gap: students were learning phonics skills in isolation and struggling to translate that into fluent reading.

In the 2025–26 school year, Ringwood partnered with LitLab to provide teachers with curriculum-aligned decodable texts that directly reinforce UFLI lesson objectives. After one semester of implementation, a comprehensive survey of 20 educators revealed striking results across every dimension measured: student skills, teacher satisfaction, and instructional alignment.

This case study presents the full picture of Ringwood's implementation: the challenge that prompted the adoption, the rollout strategy, measured impact on student outcomes, and the qualitative feedback from teachers who use LitLab daily in their classrooms.

Results at a Glance

100%

of teachers agree
LitLab strengthens
decoding skills

95%

agree content aligns to
core phonics
curriculum

95%

agree LitLab
supports
differentiation

90%

agree LitLab
improves student
engagement

90%

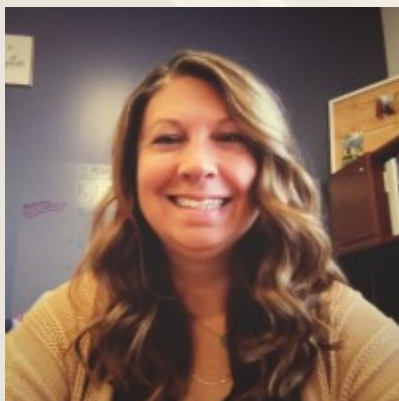
agree LitLab builds
student confidence as
readers

92%

Agree that LitLab student
data helps monitor and
respond to student needs

The Challenge: Phonics Skills Without Transfer

Ringwood's instructional leaders identified a pattern that will be familiar to many literacy teams: students were performing well during explicit phonics instruction but failing to apply those skills when reading connected text. The gap between "knowing the sounds" and "reading fluently" was persistent and visible across grade levels.



"Our students were not applying the skills that they were using through the phonics instruction in their reading. They were still chopping words and stretching them out, but wouldn't put them together in a fluent word."

— Dawn Barrett, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Johnsburg School District 12

This is a well-documented challenge in structured literacy implementation. Phonics instruction teaches students to decode individual words, but the transfer to fluent reading requires extensive practice with texts that are well-aligned to instruction. Without that bridge, students develop decoding strategies but struggle to translate it into fluent, automatic reading.

Ringwood needed decodable texts tightly aligned to their specific phonics programs' scope and sequence, not decodables aligned to a different phonics program. And they needed students to actively practice reading aloud those decodables so that they could apply exactly what they'd just been taught.

The Solution: Curriculum-Aligned Reading Practice

LitLab stood out to Ringwood's leadership because of its direct, lesson-level alignment to Ringwood's chosen phonics program, UFLI Foundations. Rather than offering a generic library of decodable texts, LitLab maps every story to specific UFLI lessons, ensuring that students encounter only phonics patterns they have already been taught. This tight curriculum alignment was the decisive factor in adoption.

"The decodables were able to focus on the UFLI skill of the week. It was specific to what they were teaching and it has strong decodability rather than students being introduced to words they have not been taught to decode yet."

— Dawn Barrett

Beyond alignment, LitLab provided Ringwood teachers with tools to personalize and differentiate instruction. The custom story generator allowed teachers to create decodables featuring student names and interests, a feature that Dawn specifically credited with boosting engagement. The digital student practice mode gave students the ability to read independently on Chromebooks and iPads. And the platform's print-ready formats made it easy for teachers to send decodable texts home for additional practice.

Critically, 95% of surveyed teachers agreed that LitLab saves them time finding high-quality instructional materials. Time that was previously spent searching for decodables that matched their scope and sequence, often unsuccessfully, was able to be repurposed and put towards students.


Lightweight Rollout, Wide Classroom Impact


Dawn championed a thoughtful approach for Ringwood's rollout to best fit their small district size while minimizing disruption and building internal expertise. LitLab offered Ringwood a virtual onboarding at the beginning of the school year. Dawn prioritized this training for Ringwood's two MTSS (Multi-Tiered System of Supports) leaders. These leaders became the school's resident LitLab experts, and brought LitLab to their teaching staff.


This lightweight approach worked. Ringwood's teachers reported high ease of use across all dimensions, with 95% of teachers saying that it was easy to find stories, and 85% reporting that it was easy to assign practice aligned to their curriculum


Flexible Use Across Grade Levels and Settings


One of the most notable findings from Ringwood's implementation is how naturally teachers adapted LitLab to different instructional contexts across the foundational literacy continuum:

 **Second Grade:** Teachers used LitLab decodables primarily as independent center work, giving students the autonomy to read curriculum-aligned texts on their own during literacy rotations.

 **Kindergarten and First Grade:** Teachers used LitLab in small-group instruction, reading decodables together with students in guided contexts to scaffold fluency development.

 **SPED, Title I, and MTSS:** Specialists used LitLab to supplement intervention sessions. One SPED resource teacher noted that she gives students choices among several LitLab books and that “they like having control over that portion,” building agency alongside skills.

 **Multilingual Learners:** Ringwood’s ML teacher reported that her students “are always asking me to print off more books for them to practice at home,” a strong signal that the texts are accessible and engaging even for students navigating a new language.

 **Home Practice:** Multiple teachers reported sending LitLab decodables home with students, extending practice beyond the school day. One first-grade teacher shared that her “students love the decodables and share they practice them often at home.”

Impact: Stronger Student Outcomes and Actionable Data

Teachers were asked to what extent LitLab has helped their students across six key dimensions:

STUDENT OUTCOME	% OF TEACHERS WHO AGREE
Develop stronger phonics and decoding skills	100%
Improve performance on UFLI-based weekly assessments	94%
Stay engaged with reading practice	90%
Build confidence and agency as readers	90%
Improve reading fluency and accuracy	85%
Increase reading comprehension	80%

Teachers are seeing LitLab’s impact show up directly on the assessments they already trust. With 94% agreeing that students improved on UFLI-based weekly assessments, the gains are visible in the same formative measures Ringwood uses to track phonics progress.

That assessment signal is reinforced by a broader instructional shift. 100% of teachers agreed that LitLab developed stronger phonics and decoding skills, which supports LitLab’s role in helping students move beyond isolated skill work into real reading.

Student data that is actually actionable

Teachers were also asked how well LitLab delivers on its core promises to educators. The results confirm strong alignment with instructional priorities:

VALUE PROPOSITION	% OF TEACHERS WHO AGREE
Content aligns well with our core phonics curriculum	95%
Saves me time finding high-quality instructional material	95%
Supports differentiation in foundational literacy	95%
Improves the quality of student independent practice	94%
Student data helps me monitor and respond to student needs	92%

The strongest signal here is how consistently teachers point to data as actionable, not just informative. With 92% agreeing that student data helps them monitor and respond to needs, LitLab isn't just surfacing progress, it's tightening the feedback loop between practice and instruction. Teachers can see skill-level performance tied directly to phonics patterns and immediately adjust grouping, pacing, or intervention without needing to triangulate across multiple tools. That shifts data from something retrospective to something operational, embedded in daily instructional decisions rather than reviewed after the fact.

In Their Own Words: Teacher Perspectives

Teachers were also asked how well LitLab delivers on its core promises to educators. The results confirm strong alignment with instructional priorities:

“LitLab is a great resource for independent practice with UFLI skills. They are also great books to print and send home for kids to practice.”

— E.E., 1st Grade Teacher

“My students love the decodables. They practice them often at home.”

— A.C., 1st Grade Teacher

“The students seem to really enjoy the books. They're short and sweet and engaging. My ML students are always asking me for more books.”

— M.C., ML Teacher

“Students are engaged with the books — I give them choices between several books to read when we have extra time and they like having control over that portion.”

— D.K., SPED Resource Teacher

“t's a great program to practice phonics skills independently.”

— D.G., 2nd Grade Teacher

“The decodable passages are engaging for the students. It’s very user friendly and aligns well with our phonics program.”

— K.T., 2nd Grade Teacher

“It is easy and effective.”

— B.B., 1st Grade Teacher

Looking Ahead

Ringwood Primary’s experience demonstrates what happens when practice is tightly aligned to a school’s phonics scope and sequence: students transfer skills from instruction to reading, teachers save time and trust the materials, and the gap between “learning phonics” and “reading fluently” begins to close. Every teacher surveyed agreed that LitLab strengthens students’ decoding skills. Teachers across every role — gen ed, SPED, Title I, MTSS, and multilingual learner — found ways to integrate the platform into their instruction. And students are not just building decoding and fluency skills; they’re building confidence, independence, and a genuine love for reading.

METHODOLOGY

Data collected via online survey administered January 2026 after one semester of LitLab implementation. Twenty (20) respondents across grades K–2, including classroom teachers, SPED resource teachers, a Title I reading teacher, MTSS specialists, a multilingual learner teacher, and a student teacher. Student outcomes and value propositions measured on a Likert agreement scale. Behavioral observations were multi-select. Ease of use measured on a four-point scale. Open-ended responses from site lead collected via structured interview.