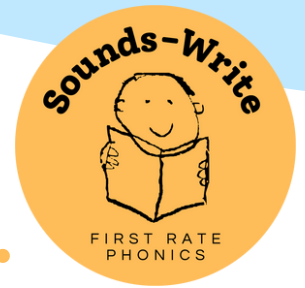
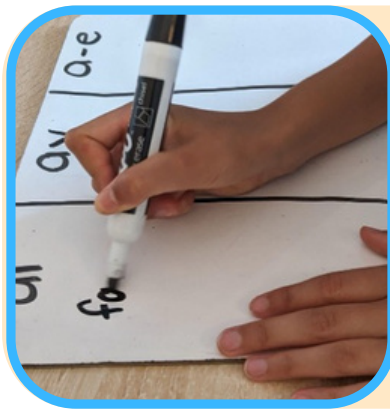


‘We are definitely doing something right!’

Bialik Hebrew Day School, Toronto, Canada, February 2025



Bialik is a dual-language school (Hebrew and English), which makes it more critical that time spent on English literacy is focused, and follows the best practices in how to teach children to become skilled readers and writers. Poppie Butler, Special Education Resource Teacher (Elementary), told us their experience of using Sounds-Write.



- 📍 School: **Bialik Hebrew Day School**
- 📍 Location: **Toronto, Ontario, Canada**
- 📍 Pupils on roll: **1500**
- 📍 Age range: **4-14**
- 📍 Languages other than English: **Hebrew, French**

Our literacy practices were rooted in the past and used Whole Language approaches such as memorization of whole words, drilling, and guessing words from first letter and accompanying pictures. Some explicit phonics was taught, but teachers could decide which phonics patterns to teach and how.

Although some of our students were learning to read and spell, it was clear that we were not reaching all of our students. Many lacked a fundamental understanding of the alphabetic code, of how speech sounds are represented in written language by letters and letter combinations. We needed to make a change and the research was clear that explicit systematic phonics instruction in the lower grades was the best way to teach children to become skilled readers and spellers.

We searched for a phonics program but were not persuaded until we found Sounds-Write. We started by training our teachers and found the training intensive but very accessible.

Teachers cannot teach the relationships between speech and print systematically, explicitly, and skillfully unless they themselves have a strong understanding of it.

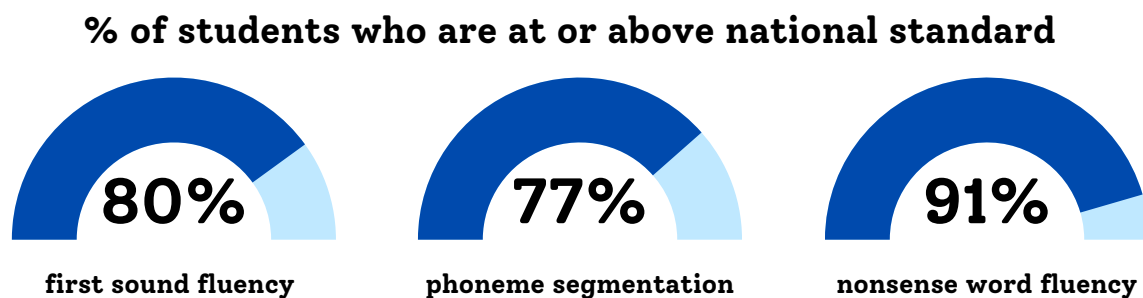
At the same time, we replaced our levelled readers with decodable ones, so that when our students sat down to practice reading, they would be presented with texts that for the most part contained only the specific letter-sound correspondences they had learned.

“I know how to read. You just say the sounds and read the word.
You just do that a hundred times until you finish the story.” (Liam, 5 years old)

What impact are you seeing?

We started using standardized assessments so we could truly measure our students' progress against other students their age. We only have one year of data so far, but even without a comparison from previous years, these results are very exciting. We are definitely doing something right!

Students that are below grade level are just given more intensive instruction in smaller groups, or in some cases even one-on-one with our reading specialist. They will get there, it just might take them more time, more exposure and more practice to build the strong foundation they need to become skilled readers and writers.



How did parents react to the move to Sounds-Write?

Some parents were very uncomfortable with the shift we were making, especially parents who had older children who had learned how to read just fine "the old way". So, we wrote a letter to parents outlining the research that "inspired" our shift to Sounds-Write and to a structured linguistic literacy approach, and also addressed it with our parent body on our teacher night. And once they started to see the results for themselves, they were definitely on board.

"I have two children, one in JK and one in Grade 2, and it amazes me how quickly they are picking up spelling. Even my 5-year-old is breaking apart simple words into their individual sounds and writing them down as she writes little notes or cards."
(Danielle, parent of a student in Junior Kindergarten and one in Grade 2)

"I have one older child who learned to read with predictive texts and one child who is now following the Sounds-Write phonics-based program. As a parent, it's so helpful to have a specific scope and sequence to review. I know what skills my daughter should be working on. There is an actual plan. There isn't an assumption that if we just keep practicing to read, our children will pick it up naturally."
(Ashley, parent of a student in Grade 2 and one in Grade 4)

What are your next steps?

We plan to continue with Sounds-Write and a structured linguistic literacy approach as the basis of our literacy program. It is clearly working. We will be training our Grade 3 teachers and extending the Sounds-Write program into our Grade 3 classes in the upcoming school year, and integrate explicit morphology instruction into our literacy program especially in older grades.

