Programs in Brief: Empower™ Reading Program

What is the program?

The Empower™ Reading program is designed to teach word identification skills and decoding strategies and to promote the effective use of these strategies. Applying these strategies effectively, the student can develop the basic skills needed for independent reading for meaning, information, or pleasure. The program focuses on 5 strategies: Sounding Out strategy, Rhyming strategy, Peeling Off strategy, Vowel Alert strategy, and SPY strategy, embedded in a metacognitive framework. The student selects which of these strategies to apply by utilizing Game Plan, a sports analogy that emphasizes selecting appropriate strategies, evaluating the success of the strategy chosen and being prepared to choose another strategy if unsuccessful.

The Sounding Out strategy teaches the phonological skills and letter-sound knowledge necessary for accurate word reading using a structured format. A Teacher Presentation Manual is used to guide the students through the Sounding Out portion of the lessons.

The Rhyming strategy teaches students how to use what they do know to figure out what they do not know. To use the Rhyming Strategy, students must understand key concepts such as: ‘same, different, beginning, middle, and end’; rhyming rules; and rhyming skills.

The Peeling Off strategy enables students to read longer and more difficult words. Students learn to identify, segment, and, read affixes at the beginning (e.g., un-, re-, mis-) and end of a word (e.g., -ing, -er, -tion), thereby reducing the unknown word to a smaller root.

The Vowel Alert strategy teaches students that vowels and vowel clusters have alternate pronunciations and pose difficult challenges for readers. Students learn to be ‘alert’ to possible decoding difficulties, to attempt alternate pronunciations of vowels in unknown words, and to keep trying until the correct word is identified.

The SPY strategy allows students to use their growing word knowledge to recognize small known words or word parts in longer, unknown words. Students learn that this strategy is most effective when confronted with compound words, e.g., bookmark, shipwreck.

Why does this matter?

⇒ Reading skills are a basic foundation for other learning skills. It is important to use reading intervention strategies that have good evidence that they are effective.

⇒ Reading intervention strategies that use a variety of strategies may produce better outcomes than programs that only focus on one or two strategies.

⇒ Reading intervention strategies that build on current practices and are “tried out” in local schools are more likely to be widely adopted.

Programs in Brief articles can be found at:
http://www.hwdsb.on.ca/e-best/
Empower™ Reading Program

How is the program delivered?

The program consists of 110 lessons, each an hour in length. The program is designed to be delivered five days a week, and completed within one school year. It is designed to be delivered in small groups of 4 to 8 students, and requires a dedicated space for the posting of support materials.

Teachers who wish to be trained to instruct Empower™ Reading must participate in a total of four full day in-service workshops. Two of these in-service days are offered in early September; the two subsequent in-services are offered during the school year. In addition, each teacher is assigned a teacher mentor who visits the new Empower™ Reading teacher’s class at least four times and offers feedback and support (e.g., modeling of a class, answering questions) during these visits. During year two of teaching Empower™ the teacher must attend a refresher in-service in late September and mentoring is ongoing as needed.

The Empower™ Reading program is delivered in addition to the literacy program in the classroom. It is not meant to replace any component of the regular literacy program but is an additional intensive training program over and above the regular literacy program that targets specific core deficits.

Who is the program aimed at?

The Empower™ Reading program is recommended for children who are in grades 2 to 5, are having significant difficulty acquiring age-appropriate reading skills, specifically in the areas of phonological awareness and decoding, speak English as a first language or are English language learners, and have low average to above average cognitive ability.

Empower™ in HWDSB

Empower was first introduced into 10 HWDSB schools during the 2006/07 school year, grew to include 46 elementary schools in 2010/11 and expanded to include 88 schools with a primary division in 2011-2012. Two special assignment teachers support the training of new Empower teachers and offer mentorship to all to ensure program fidelity.

What’s the evidence the program works?

The Empower™ Reading program was developed by the Learning Disabilities Research Program at the Hospital for Sick Children. Information about the program is available at: http://www.sickkids.ca/LDRP/Empower-Reading/index.html

Component parts of the program have been the subject of several evaluations in recent years, and there is good evidence that these components are effective. Details of these evaluations are available in:


The overall program is currently being evaluated in a number of school board districts in Ontario, including HWDSB. Findings from HWDSB have been positive and a report is being prepared for publication.