

**DATE:** December 16, 2014

**TO:** Board of Trustees

**FROM:** Darrel Robertson, Superintendent of Schools

**SUBJECT:** Firm Foundations and Reading 44 (Response to Request for Information #050)

**ORIGINATOR:** Mary Michailides, Assistant Superintendent, Support for Schools

**RESOURCE STAFF:** Janice Aubry, Bill Howe, Su Kerslake, Kathy Nawrot

**REFERENCE:** September 16, 2014 Board Meeting (Trustee Janz)

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### **ISSUE**

The following information was requested: provide information on the efficacy of two North Vancouver School District Programs: “Firm Foundations” and “Reading 44”. Was there a pilot project with Edmonton Public Schools? What were the results and what are potential next steps?

### **BACKGROUND**

Firm Foundations (2001) is a Kindergarten resource that contains mainly phonological awareness activities for teachers to use with students. Phonological awareness is a broad term which describes such skills as the ability to hear sounds in words, recognize and produce rhyme, segment words into syllables, and recognize sounds within words. Phonological awareness is one component of a comprehensive literacy program.

The intention of the Firm Foundations resource is to supplement the regular British Columbia Kindergarten program. Those students who are identified as needing more assistance in developing phonological awareness skills are provided more explicit instruction and practice.

Reading 44 (1999) is a reading resource that describes reading strategies and provides teaching activities for Grades 1 to 10. Reading 44 mainly addresses reading comprehension strategies, which include thinking processes such as predicting, monitoring for understanding, making mental pictures, connecting what one reads with what one already knows, inferring and summarizing.

Firm Foundations and Reading 44 were both developed by teachers from the North Vancouver School District.

Edmonton Public Schools (EPSB) conducted a two-year pilot project of Firm Foundations from 2009 to 2011 at nine schools. Teachers of Kindergarten and Grade 1 received coaching support, monthly inservice training and resources as part of this pilot. The Firm Foundations Final Report June 2011 indicates the following:

- The teachers involved had developed a stronger appreciation for the importance of phonological awareness for students’ future reading and writing success. Teachers indicated that this project positively affected their teaching of phonological awareness.

- An alternative resource was found to be more helpful than the Firm Foundations resource. During its implementation, the Firm Foundations resource was supplemented through the use of a variety of other materials.
- There was significant variance in the way Firm Foundations was implemented in classrooms.
- It was difficult to measure impact on teaching practice over the two years due to staff changes.

As there was no control group with which to compare student improvement, it was not clear as to whether the gains made were specifically contributable to the Firm Foundations resource.

Reading 44 is a resource that outlines strategies and activities that support literacy teaching and learning. Reading 44 was not established as a pilot at Edmonton Public Schools. A pilot was deemed unnecessary, as the strategies and activities described in the program were already included within the existing teacher training and resources of the District's Balanced Literacy teacher training program.

A search was conducted for existing research on Firm Foundations and Reading 44. From a review of the related research papers that have been published and through a follow-up conversation with a key researcher, Dr. Veronica Smith, no conclusive evidence was found that would recommend either of these resources above the use of strategies already commonly-held as strong practices for supporting phonological awareness.

#### **CURRENT SITUATION**

EPSB is committed to literacy development in all students. In its Strategic Goals, the District has identified a specific focus on literacy to ensure success for all students.

District literacy professional learning is provided to teachers in EPSB to support them in implementing strong literacy practices. The foundational professional learning provided to teachers includes strategies and resources for reading, writing, oral language development, phonological awareness and word study. This professional learning incorporates elements found in the Firm Foundations and the Reading 44 resources and is continuously updated to incorporate emerging research and improved strategies and activities to meet the needs of the District's student population. There are no plans to implement Firm Foundations and Reading 44 as a district initiative.

District schools determine the resources used to meet the literacy needs of their students. A variety of resources are available that contain strategies and activities that support the development of phonemic awareness in students. A resource of Student Center Activities produced by the Florida Center for Reading Research through Florida State University offers a similar, but more up-to-date program for phonological awareness. This resource was recommended in the Firm Foundations final report, is available free of charge, and is shared with teachers as a part of the current literacy professional learning provided to district teachers.

Firm Foundations and Reading 44 are both available for use by district teachers, but are not currently listed as recommended resources by the British Columbia Ministry of Education and are not listed as authorized resources by Alberta Education. Firm Foundations and Reading 44

manuals are available for purchase from the North Vancouver School District at a cost of \$44 each.

**KEY POINTS**

- EPSB conducted a two-year pilot project of Firm Foundations between 2009 and 2011.
- Teacher participants indicated that this project positively affected their teaching of phonological awareness, but it was unclear as to whether the improvements were attributable to this specific resource.
- No pilot project of Reading 44 was conducted.
- A wide range of resources, including free resources, are available to teachers to support the development of phonological awareness.
- Literacy professional learning supports currently provided to district Kindergarten and Grade 1 teachers incorporate most of the strategies that are presented in Firm Foundations and Reading 44.
- There are no plans to implement Firm Foundations and Reading 44 as a district initiative.

**ATTACHMENTS & APPENDICES**

N/A

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