

# Implementing a Structured Literacy Approach



Learning MATTERS

## CASE STUDY

featuring

### St Patrick's SCHOOL

*Children of the Light*

Kelly Townson and Abby Bates, Literacy Leads at St Patrick's School in Invercargill, recognised an opportunity to enhance literacy outcomes when approached by Learning MATTERS to participate in a Ministry of Education-funded Literacy and Communication (lit/comm) support trial. Since embarking on this journey, they have led their school through significant changes, resulting in improved literacy levels.



**13**   
classrooms

roll   
**291** 

equity index **476**

formerly: decile 3

**19**   
teachers

**12**   
teacher aides

year levels **0 1 2 3 4 5 6**



“ We were one of 15 schools across New Zealand to participate in a **Ministry-funded lit/comm trial** with Learning MATTERS in 2022. The purpose was to provide professional development and resources for explicit spelling and reading instruction, focusing on accelerated support for Tier 2 and Tier 3 learners with the **iDeal Approach**. Targeting Years 4 to 6, we had both trial and control groups. What struck us most, even before seeing the data, was our first real exposure to the ‘why’ – the science of reading. After commencing the trial and undertaking some training, we proposed whole-school Structured Literacy to our board and principal. Once we understood the ‘why,’ **we couldn’t turn back, and the data speaks for itself.**”

– Abby Bates, Literacy Lead, St Patrick’s School



## BEFORE STRUCTURED LITERACY

Prior to the trial, St Patrick’s employed a balanced literacy approach with the Reading Recovery programme for intervention. Progress was being made with many children, but about 25%, Abby says, they couldn’t shift, despite intervention and a lot of effort from teaching staff.

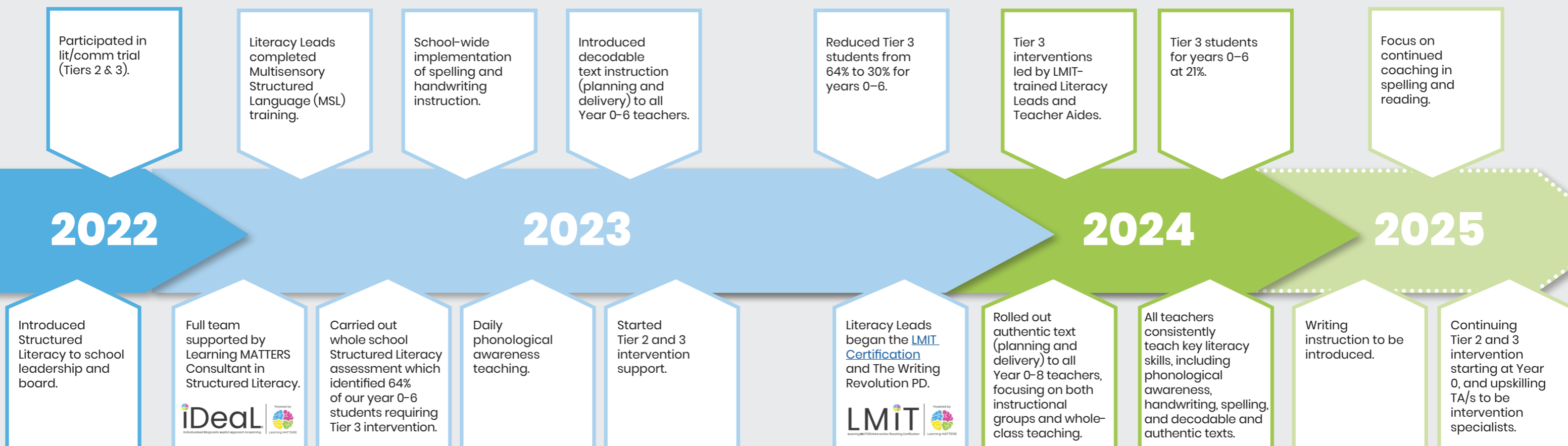
“ **We now know spelling is the window to reading and writing.**”

– Abby Bates

“We used to think these children weren’t ready, but looking back, we just didn’t have the tools or knowledge to move them forward. Structured Literacy gave us the understanding we needed.”

“We now know spelling is the window to reading and writing.”

## JOURNEY AT A GLANCE





# RECALLING THE STEPS

As part of the lit/comm trial, they assessed all Years 4 to 6 ākonga for spelling using the iDeal Spelling Assessment. This assessment categorises stages by complexity to identify students' capabilities and immediate teaching needs in phonological awareness, the alphabetic principle, vocabulary and fluency, aligning with the systematic iDeal scope and sequence. The data was then used to allocate Tier 2 and Tier 3 trial and control groups through the iDeal Intervention Allocation document. As Kelly and Abby deepened their understanding, they recognised the scale of change required and knew they needed to inform the senior leadership team and board.

They presented their findings to the board, who were supportive. Abby recalls, "Our Learning MATTERS Consultant was crucial in creating a strong strategic plan. We worked with the management team to implement evidence-based literacy gradually."

Kelly noted the need for both a mindset shift among staff and the **removal of ineffective teaching practices**: "We had to completely change lessons – no more three-cueing or guessing. We taught students to sound out words and understand concepts, equipping them with the tools to read. So, we had to review and refine our teaching practice."

Once leadership was on board, they explained the **'why'**, **'how'**, and **'what'** to the team, reflecting on the entire literacy block. They also informed whānau through letters about the Learning MATTERS partnership and the changes they would notice in homework.

“We worked with the management team to implement evidence-based literacy gradually.”

– Kelly Townson

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– Kelly Townson, Literacy Lead, St Patrick's School



# SNAPSHOT



The Team at St Patrick's School (Invercargill)





# IMPLEMENTATION

When a school transitions to a Structured Literacy approach, the process typically begins with Tier 1 and gradually incorporates Tiers 2 and 3. However, the lit/comm trial took St Patrick's on a different path, focusing specifically on Tiers 2 and 3 first.

Initial testing showed 64% of our year 0-6 students identified as requiring Tier 3 intervention. The first six months focused on spelling and handwriting, followed by instruction with decodable texts. Now in their second year, the focus has shifted to authentic texts.

A Learning MATTERS Consultant collaborated with Kelly, Abby, and the management team to create a strategic roadmap for implementing Structured Literacy. The consultant modelled lessons, and teachers were encouraged to reflect through video or peer reviews. Observations, coaching, and feedback were provided. Time is allocated for staff to build knowledge, and new staff receive an induction document.



## A Typical day of Structured Literacy

Classroom teachers explicitly teach spelling, pre-concepts, phonological awareness, handwriting, reading, vocabulary instruction and writing four days a week, dedicating two hours each morning to the literacy block.

Reading and writing are integrated into topic studies. Structured Literacy is applied across all classrooms and year levels (0-6).

*"We focus on consistent, explicit instruction – cutting the fluff and teaching the stuff."*  
– Kelly Townson

Tiers 2 and 3 interventions are delivered in groups, with most students receiving at least three 30-minute sessions per week, some receiving four. School-wide assessments ensure consistency from Years 0 to 6.

# TIER 2 & 3 INTERVENTIONS

Abby recalls, *"Participating in the lit/comm trial allowed us to implement Tier 2 and 3 interventions immediately."*

Kelly and Abby, now the school's most qualified Structured Literacy teachers (MSL & LMIT), lead Tier 3 intervention support. Kelly highlights, *"Our most qualified teachers deliver evidence-based teaching to our most vulnerable students; we also have a Teacher Aide supporting Tier 2 and 3 interventions."*

**“Our most qualified teachers deliver evidence-based teaching to our most vulnerable students.”**

– Kelly Townson

# RESULTS & IMPACT

School-wide initial testing in 2023 revealed 64% of Year 0-6 students qualified for Tier 3 intervention. Toward the end of the year, the number has decreased to 30%, showing significant progress. Students who had historically struggled are now making notable gains.

In 2024, this number reduced to 21% of Year 0-6 students qualifying for Tier 3.

Kelly says, *"We're moving as quickly as we can while ensuring a deliberate approach. The shift is challenging but rewarding, and we're seeing results that reflect the effort."*

## Total Resources and Costs (2022-2024):



iDeal Approach subscription: \$4,377



Learning MATTERS PD/Consultancy: \$35,389 (includes Learning MATTERS Consultancy, travel, and x 2 LMIT training).



Decodables: \$12,881.



Resources from Learning MATTERS: \$1,923.



Team Training/Travel: \$16,244 (includes Holy Family Wanaka trip and MSL).

Supporting materials: \$8,310 (includes stationery).

Overall total investment from the school excluding MOE-funded elements such as RAPLD is \$79,124 over the three years, which is a cost of \$90.63/per pupil per year).

*\*Releasing: Kelly Townson (0.8) and Abby Bates (0.2) for intervention programmes – approx. \$100K per annum (funded by the Board)*

# Advice for Schools

starting their

## Structured Literacy Journey

Successful implementation of Structured Literacy requires collective leadership knowledge. It is not the responsibility of one or two individuals, but a team effort driven by the leadership team.

**“Invest in understanding the ‘why’ before implementing change. Building knowledge takes time, and Structured Literacy should be the primary focus for at least two years.**

**Do it once, and do it well.”**

— Abby Bates

## Teacher and Student Reflections

Teachers are observing tangible improvements, although the transition has required a significant shift in practice and pedagogy.

**“We’re fostering a self-reflective teaching culture, which is challenging but necessary for growth.”**

— Staff Member

Students have responded positively to the structured approach, with routines fostering confidence and progress.

**“My writing is improving. I can now form letters and sound out words. People can read my writing now.”**

— Year 5 Student



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