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## South Wirral reading: a tiered intervention model for improving reading outcomes in secondary schools

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## South Wirral reading: A tiered intervention model for improving reading outcomes in secondary schools

### What's the BIG Idea for SEND?

## Project Focus

This project aimed to address the significant number of students entering secondary school without being secondary ready in reading. The intervention was designed to rapidly improve reading ages through a tiered approach—phonics, reciprocal reading, and curriculum-led reading—while embedding a whole-school culture of literacy. The strategy was developed to support both SEND and non-SEND learners and has since been scaled across Key Stage 3.

## Introduction

At South Wirral High School, a third of the incoming cohort each year is not 'secondary ready' in reading. The school had already embedded reading across the curriculum, empowering teachers to lead meaningful reading moments. However, intervention was limited to reading aloud to a teacher. The Big Idea for SEND enabled the school to develop and share a structured, impactful reading intervention strategy that has shown strong results and is now embedded across the school.

South Wirral Reading is a rapid, sustained reading intervention that benefits students below age related reading who may or may not experience SEND. The strategy (modelled on *\*Diagnosis, Therapy, Testing*) sits outside the curriculum, it follows students through a crafted process from KS2 SATS analysis, phonics assessment, phonics intervention, small group reciprocal reading and curriculum level interventions. Interventions take place throughout the week, ideally every day or as often in the week as the setting will allow, for 30 minutes at a time.

## Implementation

### Wave 1: Identification and grouping

The intervention begins with a detailed analysis of Key Stage 2 SATs data, which is used to rank students and identify those in need of support. Students are grouped based on their scores:

- **100+:** No intervention; gifted readers flagged for enrichment.
- **99–95:** Curriculum-led reading; monitored.
- **94–90:** Assessed for phonics gaps; may enter phonics or reciprocal reading.
- **Below 90:** Likely to enter phonics intervention.

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 Improved mental health and wellbeing of learners with SEND

 Increased engagement of learners with SEND

## Implementation (continued)

The SENCO and teaching assistants play a key role in ensuring that students are placed appropriately, taking into account individual needs beyond raw data.

### Wave 2: Targeted intervention

Students with phonics gaps begin with targeted phonics sessions using Read Write Inc. Fresh Start or similar programmes. These sessions run four times a week for 30 minutes, ideally during tutor time to avoid disrupting curriculum entitlement. Reading ages are reassessed every 6–8 weeks, and students exit phonics once gaps are closed.

Those who complete phonics or who show no phonics gaps but still have low reading ages move into reciprocal reading groups. These small group sessions use engaging texts and continue until students reach within 12 months of their chronological age or, by the end of Year 9, achieve a reading age of at least 13 years.

Intervention sessions are delivered four times a week, each lasting 30 minutes. These are ideally scheduled during tutor or form time to ensure maximum attendance without disrupting the core curriculum. The intervention timetable is reviewed and reset each term to reflect student progress and changing needs.

Each intervention group is supported by a dedicated teaching assistant, ensuring consistency and personalised support. Staff delivering phonics interventions receive initial training, which varies depending on the chosen phonics programme. Once the initial resources and training are in place, the model incurs minimal ongoing costs, making it a sustainable approach for schools with limited budgets.

### Wave 3: Whole-school strategy

Alongside these interventions, the school has embedded a whole-school reading strategy. Staff receive regular CPD, including three INSET sessions focused on reading pedagogy, modelling strategies, and curriculum planning. Reading ages are included in student profiles and shared with staff to inform teaching. The school also maintains a strong communication strategy with families, although sharing reading age data with parents is handled sensitively due to potential concerns.

## Outcomes and Impact

The impact of the intervention has been significant. In Year 7, students gained an average of 18 months in reading age over just eight weeks. Year 8 students typically gained between six and twelve months, while Year 9 students saw more modest gains of around three months. Some students progressed rapidly, while others remained in intervention throughout KS3, ultimately leaving as stronger readers.

Attainment improved across subjects, with students moving from lower to higher teaching groups. Individual case studies showed students achieving grade 4s and 5s across the board. Behaviour also improved, with students who had previously resisted intervention becoming engaged readers and even peer mentors. Staff confidence in teaching reading increased, and teachers began using a wider range of texts and strategies to support literacy.

While attendance did not show a direct correlation with reading improvement, students with strong attendance were more likely to succeed in the programme. The school also noted that parental support was crucial, especially when students were reluctant to participate.



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## Outcomes and Impact (continued)

Improved behaviour was frequently observed among students who experienced success through the reading intervention. In several cases, students who had initially resisted participation—often due to anxiety, fear, or avoidance—later became enthusiastic advocates of the programme. Some even returned in later years to support younger peers as reading mentors, demonstrating not only personal growth but also a deepened sense of responsibility and pride in their progress.

Staff confidence in teaching reading grew steadily as the intervention became embedded across the school. Quality assurance activities revealed that teachers were using a wider variety of texts and strategies to engage students, reflecting a shift in practice. With access to reading age data and targeted CPD, teachers felt empowered to tailor their reading support to meet individual student needs, resulting in more responsive and inclusive classroom environments.

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## Key Learning

- KS2 data is a powerful tool for early identification.
- Phonics gaps are common—even in secondary settings.
- A tiered approach ensures students progress through appropriate stages.
- Whole-school culture and CPD are essential for sustainability.
- Parental communication must be clear and consistent.

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## Conclusion

South Wirral's reading intervention model demonstrates how a structured, data-led approach can significantly improve reading outcomes for secondary students. By combining phonics, reciprocal reading, and curriculum integration, the school has created a sustainable system that supports both SEND and non-SEND learners.

This model is scalable and adaptable. With sufficient TA capacity and leadership commitment, other schools can replicate the approach to improve literacy and engagement across Key Stage 3.



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