

Hampton City Schools: Increasing Reading Proficiency Through a Culture of Literacy

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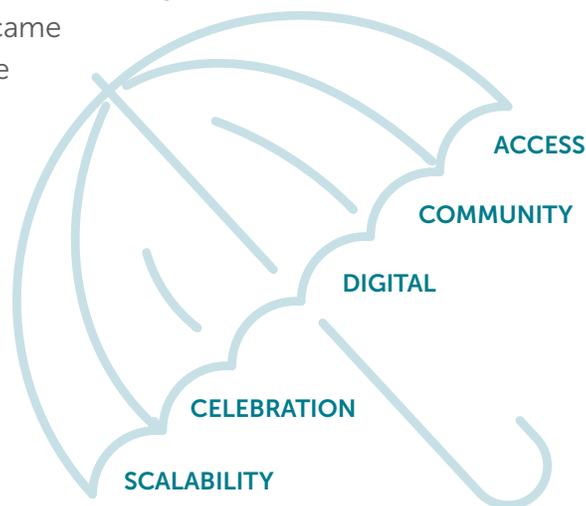
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Introduction: Literacy Under One Umbrella

When Hampton City Schools set a bold goal, to ensure that every child could read on grade level by third grade, it became clear that no single program or curriculum would be enough. The district needed a comprehensive, sustainable approach that touched every aspect of a child’s learning environment.

Hampton built the Umbrella Framework: a holistic literacy strategy made up of interlocking supports. Just as an umbrella needs multiple ribs to stay upright, Hampton’s literacy success depended on access to books, community partnerships, digital tools, schoolwide celebration, and a commitment to equity.



What started as a summer book pilot in a handful of Title I schools evolved into a district-wide, year-round initiative that dramatically increased reading proficiency and fundamentally changed how Hampton’s students, staff, and families engaged with literacy.

Why It Started: An Urgent Need for Access

In 2017, internal surveys and school-level conversations revealed a significant gap: only about half of Hampton’s students had books at home. For a district with over 18,000 students, more than 10,000 of whom were eligible for Title I support, that lack of access posed a threat to literacy growth, especially over the summer months when learning loss is most common.

With the support of the Hampton superintendent, the ELA Lead began by assembling a small group of reading specialists—educators who understood classroom challenges and opportunities. This “coalition of the willing” helped lay the foundation for what would become the Access to Books Program. From the start, the goal wasn’t just to distribute books but to build a community-wide culture of reading.

HAMPTON CITY SCHOOLS DEMOGRAPHICS

- 32** Schools
- 20,000** PreK–12th Grade students
- 62%** Eligible for free or reduced lunch

Only about half of Hampton’s students had books at home.



The Framework in Action: Literacy That Reaches Beyond the Classroom

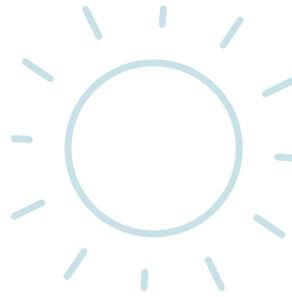
Each year, new layers were added to the initiative to increase access and reinforce Hampton's belief that literacy development doesn't stop when students leave the building.

1. Year-Round Book Access

Summer Take-Home Books were the first major rollout, with titles selected by educators to align with grade-level content and student interests.



Spring and winter break distributions followed to ensure access during every out-of-school period.



The following year, kindergarten registration books were added so that new families could begin building home libraries right away.

Student choice was also introduced in year two of the Summer Take-Home initiative.



Through Hampton Reads One Book, every PreK–5 student received the same book and participated in a **shared reading experience** supported by community videos and classroom activities.



2. Family and Community Partnerships

Hampton leveraged the power of the community to extend literacy support beyond school walls:



Public libraries offered incentives and summer programs tied directly to the take-home books.



Healthy Families and **Parks & Recreation** partnered to integrate literacy into after-school and out-of-school programming.



Even the local **police department** got involved. Officers carried copies of the book distributed through the Hampton Reads One Book initiative in their vehicles and chatted with families during neighborhood patrols.



Local businesses and **banks** provided financial support and promotional space for literacy events, like the large-scale winter book distribution on Mercury Boulevard, complete with music, snacks, and family activities.

3. Digital Tools for Continuity

In 2018, Hampton implemented Scholastic Literacy Pro, a digital platform that provides student access to thousands of ebooks and embedded assessments. Because Hampton was already a 1:1 device district, students could continue reading and tracking their progress from home—a lifeline during the COVID-19 school closures.

4. Celebration as Strategy

Hampton made reading something to celebrate in various ways:

- Recorded calls from school leaders and students encouraged reading during the summer.
- Public recognition, from school board shoutouts to in-school rewards, highlighted milestones like the most minutes read.
- Community-wide read-aloud videos and kickoff events made literacy feel exciting, joyful, and shared.

These celebrations weren't one-offs; they were woven into the school year with intention. Hampton Reads One Book happened twice a year, winter events brought families together, and back-to-school reading celebrations set the tone each fall.



Results That Speak Volumes

By September of 2019, Hampton City Schools experienced significant changes:



100%

of Hampton schools

were fully accredited, a significant increase from just 41% in 2015.



88%

of students in Grades K–2

entered the next grade level reading on benchmark.



Millions

of reading minutes

were logged on Literacy Pro.

A true literacy culture had taken root, one visible in classrooms, neighborhoods, libraries, and even grocery stores. Because reading performance is a key driver of school accreditation in Virginia, increasing reading proficiency, especially in Grades K–2, was critical to improving school ratings across the district. By 2019, all Hampton schools became fully accredited for the first time. The district continues to maintain this significant achievement to this day.



Keys to Hampton's Success

What made Hampton's approach work wasn't a single product or program. It was a mindset shift that can be adopted by any district:

- Start with what you have: The program began in Title I schools with committed staff and existing community partnerships, then branched out to include other areas.
- Listen and adapt: Book choices were informed by educator input and student interests, and professional development ensured staff confidence in implementing programs.
- Celebrate often: Recognition, joy, and shared experiences made reading feel important and exciting.
- Be transparent: By openly sharing data and needs, Hampton built trust with families and brought in unexpected partners.

A Model That's Possible Anywhere

Hampton's story is powerful not just because of the outcomes but also because of the process. The district didn't wait for perfect funding or a large grant. It began with a small group, a clear purpose, and a belief that literacy should be joyful, visible, and shared.

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