

Q&A: When Early Learning Serves as a Catalyst for Change

Dr Darryl Henson, Superintendent
Marlin ISD



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Early learning is taking centre stage in education, and for good reason.

As schools across New Zealand navigate resource constraints and ongoing workforce shortages, innovative approaches to early childhood education are delivering impressive results. By using data to guide instruction, strengthening community connections and providing targeted support for students, some schools are seeing remarkable improvements in academic performance. What can educators learn from these success stories?

To explore effective strategies in early learning, **EdSurge**, an editorially independent education news site covering primary and secondary education, spoke with **Dr Darryl Henson**, superintendent of Marlin Independent School District (ISD) in Texas. The interview was produced as part of a content collaboration with 3P Learning. Though the interview centres on the US context, the challenges Henson describes and the solutions his district implemented will resonate with New Zealand educators, with some terminology adapted to reflect local education language and conventions.

Henson has worked across multiple roles in education, including as a teacher, instructional coach and principal. Since May 2020, he has led Marlin ISD, transforming it from what he calls ‘the state’s best-kept secret’ into a shining example of educational excellence.

What’s an independent school district?

In the US, a school district is a local education authority responsible for overseeing schools in a defined geographic area. An independent school district (ISD) operates independently of a city or other local government.

Q: Marlin ISD has shown remarkable academic growth under your leadership. How has early learning contributed to this transformation?

A: Marlin ISD in 2022 had the highest academic growth in the entire state of Texas, a proud badge of honour for our community. Keep in mind that we were the state’s longest low-performing school district and the fifth longest in the United States. So, when I joined, I knew we needed to make an immediate impact on our students, faculty and staff. I quickly realised that the curriculum resources we provided to our students and staff would be critical. I needed a solution that could differentiate to meet the needs of all students while also serving as a user-friendly resource for faculty and staff as they worked to become stronger educators.

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When I looked at [Reading Eggs](#) and [Mathseeds](#) from [3P Learning](#), I felt confident – and I continue to feel confident – that we have a platform that allows us to track the progress of all students. Our educators have access to data showing where students stand, as well as tools and resources to help turn potential into performance.

Early literacy is the foundation for all students and is a key focus in Marlin ISD. Early intervention is important. If a Year 1 student in New Zealand is performing at an early childhood level, they're two year levels behind, but it's not too late to catch them up. We don't wait until Year 3 or 4; we intervene early.

Q: How has Marlin implemented the Science of Reading principles, and what impacts have you seen on literacy outcomes?

Editor's note: In New Zealand, the approach Dr Henson describes is more commonly referred to as structured literacy – an instructional framework grounded in the same body of scientific research. Strengthening foundational literacy is a key focus in New Zealand education, reflected in Te Mātaiaho and recent government initiatives to embed structured literacy approaches across schools.

A: The Science of Reading is highly important because children must know how to read. That's why our early literacy programmes have strongly focused on phonemic awareness and phonics. Students need to know sounds because we can focus on comprehension once they can decode words.

We ensure our teachers are trained in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency and vocabulary, not just sight words. Sight words contribute to fluency and phonics, but vocabulary is about understanding the actual context of a word. For example, students might decode the word 'empire', but do they understand what it actually means?

This work doesn't stop with early childhood education. Many of our students are emergent learners, regardless of age or year level. By focusing on rhyming, sounds and fluency, we've built a foundation that allows us to go deeper, examining the author's purpose or making inferences.

Q: How does Marlin use data to inform early learning instruction and interventions?

A: We leverage data in every aspect of our early learning instruction and intervention. By analysing student performance, we identify specific needs and tailor our instruction accordingly. It's very difficult – and often unrealistic – to expect teachers

to differentiate instruction for 20 kids at once. That's why it's important to partner with programmes and resources that can support differentiation.

For example, a few years ago, we noticed a significant gap in our kindergarten students' [children in early childhood education] phonemic awareness skills. After analysing the data, we pinpointed specific areas that caused the most challenges for certain students, such as diphthongs and consonant blends. Once we had this information, we implemented targeted interventions during the school day.

We focused on these specific skills with intense precision. For instance, with consonant blends, we drilled and practiced until the students mastered them. By zeroing in on those gaps and addressing them head-on, we could close them completely in just three weeks without falling behind on our curriculum.

Q: How does Marlin ensure students develop both literacy and numeracy skills, and why do you believe this balance is essential for long-term success?

A: There's a critical connection between early literacy and numeracy. Numbers are words. They have sounds, and you need to be able to read and understand what those sounds say. It's also about building a strong foundation for the well-rounded academic child. We track where children are while ensuring our curriculum is highly integrated and intertwined. I work to eliminate silos of instruction wherever possible.



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It all ties back to professional development. I don't expect teachers to be curriculum developers – I want them to be curriculum implementers.

We involve families, giving parents the same or very similar training and using the same language we use with teachers and support staff. I don't believe in watering things down or oversimplifying for parents. They deserve the same level of respect because, in many ways, they are their children's first teachers.

Q: Looking ahead, what are the biggest challenges and opportunities for early learning?

A: We need to be realistic about the national teacher shortage, though addressing the reasons behind it would be an entirely separate conversation. Additionally, we must elevate the level of respect for the teaching profession.

One persistent challenge is that research, while invaluable, is ever-changing. The pendulum keeps swinging, and while we can learn from research, its constantly shifting nature poses challenges.

I believe the teacher shortage will become even more pronounced in early childhood education. This new generation – and the one coming up behind them – raises questions about whether they'll have the heart, mentality and tenacity to work with young children, especially when those children may exhibit behaviours outside the norm.

To tackle these challenges, we must prioritise early childhood education and not focus just on the tested years [the year levels that drive school accountability and reporting requirements]. While tested year levels keep the lights on, investing in early childhood creates a solid foundation that makes everything smoother years down the road.

We also need to invest in high-quality professional development – not just PD for the sake of it, but training that is effective, intentional and tailored to the needs of your school. Leveraging technology is equally important, but it must be the right technology – tools that work, not just the latest gadgets.

Another critical piece is building strong community partnerships. If schools are facing major challenges, why not involve the whole community?

Finally, we must embrace the data and information and respond realistically. Jargon won't solve anything. My staff knows that in meetings, I want honest, straightforward answers, not buzzwords. Let's have real conversations about barriers and challenges and how we can work together to remove them – all for the benefit of our students.

Key insights from Dr Rasinski

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