

Small School, Big Gains: A First-Year Look at Xtreme Reading in Rural Illinois

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When “Reading Lab” appeared on my schedule as a new teacher at Winchester High School this year, I felt a knot form in my stomach. I am not a reading specialist. I have taught high school English in west central Illinois for over a decade and have worked with students across a wide range of needs, but strategically supporting students who are several grade levels behind in reading was new territory for me. Realistically, my toolkit at the time consisted of two strategies: “sound it out” and “read it again more slowly.” Neither felt adequate for what I knew was coming.

I also knew going in that there was no curriculum in place for this intervention class. Whatever I used, I would need to find it myself, and it would need to teach *me* how to teach reading intervention at the same time it was teaching my students. I had seen a popular computer-based reading program in use at another school, and I knew that wasn’t the answer for us, however slick the marketing may be. In my experience, students often click through digital programs without truly engaging, and the format makes it easy for the teacher to disengage too. After years of Chromebook fatigue in the wake of the pandemic, I wanted something built on paper, pencil, and human interaction. When I searched for a paper-based reading intervention for older students, I found Xtreme Reading and made my pitch in my second-ever conversation with my new principal.

My district made a significant investment to train me in this program in time for the new school year, and as a new employee, I felt the weight of that. What I didn’t anticipate was how much of that weight would be lifted by my mentor, Bonnie Palasak, whose guidance proved utterly irreplaceable throughout the year. Used to training whole teams at a time, she was quick to adapt things to suit my cohort of one, and my pilot class of only 6 students.

Placement and the First Days

Working with our 8th grade ELA teacher, we used end-of-year STAR testing data to identify six incoming freshmen out of approximately 48 who met the criteria for Xtreme Reading. It was an informal process, and one I hope to refine as I advocate for the middle school to adopt NWEA MAP testing, which Winchester High School uses as its benchmark assessment, to create more consistent data across the transition years. However, it’s not just about testing data. Factors like attendance and behavior are also crucial to the success of the intervention, so teacher recommendations are key.

From the very first units, “Xpect to Achieve” and “Possible Selves,” it was clear that a significant part of this program is about changing how students see themselves as readers. That framing shaped everything I did. My own master’s thesis was original research on the value of independent reading in high school, and I knew from that work how essential student choice is to building reading identity. On the day we selected independent reading books, I surprised each of them when they walked into class with a curated stack of books on their desk, handpicked based on their interests and present reading levels. Most of them chose one of the books I had selected for them. I was intentionally trying to send a clear message: your teacher listens to you, and she thinks you can handle this.

I also made a decision that first week that paid dividends all year long: I collected notecards on which students had answered questions about how they felt about themselves as readers and about reading aloud. In December and again in May, I asked those same questions on our semester exams and then revealed the original notecards to them. Every single student smiled. Several said some version of the same thing: “that’s so different than how I feel now.”

What Xtreme Reading Made Possible

One thing I hadn’t anticipated was how much I would love the guided reading component. Whole-class read-alouds aren’t something I’d had much room for in standard high school English, but Xtreme Reading gave me both the structure and the freedom to choose novels that genuinely mattered to these students. We started with *Wild Life* by Cynthia DeFelice—a YA survival story featuring a boy and his dog—because I suspected my rural students would be drawn to a cover featuring a kid in camo with a hunting rifle. I was right, and it was an engaging way to start the year and get buy-in on reading out loud. However, the book they said was their favorite was *Freak the Mighty*. They were devastated by the ending. It’s strange to say how much their sadness at the ending gave me joy, but they were invested in the characters because they were getting so much more than superficial plot points.

The strategies transferred in ways I hadn’t predicted. For example, during our word mapping unit, I introduced new vocabulary in English I and asked if anyone knew a particular prefix. The hands that went up were exclusively Reading Lab students. They were so proud to be the “quick” kids in class for once. I also watched one girl, during independent reading time in English I, pull out the small whiteboard we keep under student desks and begin dissecting a word

on her own using the Word ID strategy. No one asked her to. She just did it because she wanted to figure out a word on her own.

Even Shakespeare became something these students owned. After our *Romeo and Juliet* unit, every Reading Lab student got on stage and performed a scene in original Elizabethan English. Several of them told me it was their favorite thing they read all year.

The Data and the Doubt

Winchester High School tracks student growth using NWEA MAP. Beginning-of-year scores confirmed what the San Diego Quick Assessment showed in the classroom: I had students reading at a fourth-grade level entering a school year full of demanding content across every subject. The pressure to get this right was real.

The hardest moment of the year came in January, when mid-year MAP results showed that nearly every Reading Lab student had gone down in reading by a point or so. I still don't fully understand what drove that mid-year dip. It wasn't unique to my students, as many freshmen school-wide declined, but as a first-year reading intervention teacher, it hit hard. I leaned on Bonnie, who told me to trust the process. She was right.

By spring, the end-of-year data was everything I had hoped for. Table 1 shows individual student growth across MAP Reading, MAP Language, and oral fluency levels from fall to spring. Reading Lab students gained an average of 6.7 RIT points in reading and 6.3 in language, moving up an average of 10 national percentile points in reading. Oral fluency levels rose an average of 1.8 levels across the group. One student moved from the 16th to the 45th national percentile in a single year.

Table 1. Reading Lab Student Growth: MAP Reading, MAP Language, and Oral Fluency, Fall to Spring 2025–2026

Student	BOY MAP Reading	EOY MAP Reading	Reading Growth	BOY MAP Language	EOY MAP Language	Language Growth	BOY Fluency Level	EOY Fluency Level	Fluency Change
Boy 1	212	211	−1	200	209	+9	6	8	+2
Girl 1	208	216	+8	209	211	+2	5	7	+2
Boy 2	215	222	+7	207	212	+5	4	7	+3
Girl 2	211	212	+1	202	220	+18	6	7	+1
Boy 3	200	208	+8	196	191	−5	6	6	0
Boy 4	198	215	+17	204	213	+9	5	8	+3
Average	207.3	214.0	+6.7	203.0	209.3	+6.3	5.3	7.2	+1.8

Note. MAP scores reported in RIT points. Fluency levels based on San Diego Quick Assessment administered in the classroom.

Perhaps most telling is the comparison shown in Table 2. The other seven freshmen in the school who began the year with similar reading scores but were not enrolled in Reading Lab lost an average of 5 national percentile points over the same period. Reading Lab students started the year at a *lower* average percentile than the comparison group and still ended *higher*.

Table 2. National Percentile Change: Reading Lab vs. Non-Enrolled Peers with Similar Beginning-of-Year Scores, 2025–2026

Student	Group	BOY Percentile	EOY Percentile	RIT Growth
C-1	Not enrolled	29th	29th	+1
C-2	Not enrolled	33rd	4th	–22
C-3	Not enrolled	43rd	22nd	–10
C-4	Not enrolled	43rd	31st	–5
C-5	Not enrolled	45th	35th	–4
C-6	Not enrolled	47th	68th	+11
C-7	Not enrolled	50th	33rd	–7
Not Enrolled Average		41st	32nd	–5.1
Boy 1	Reading Lab	41st	37th	–1
Girl 1	Reading Lab	33rd	47th	+8
Boy 2	Reading Lab	47th	60th	+7
Girl 2	Reading Lab	39th	39th	+1
Boy 3	Reading Lab	19th	31st	+8
Boy 4	Reading Lab	16th	45th	+17
Reading Lab Average		33rd	43rd	+6.7

Note. Both groups identified from the population of incoming 9th graders below the 50th national percentile in MAP Reading at the beginning of the year.

What I Know Now

I began this year nervous that I had nothing to offer students who needed real reading support. I ended it knowing that the right curriculum, the right mentor, and the right instructional attitude—one built on relationship, choice, and belief in students—can move the needle in a single year in ways that show up in data and in the small moments that don't.

Boys who told me in September that they hate reading were pestering our librarian by spring to order more books in a series or by an author they'd discovered.

Outside the library, a wall display tracked independent reading books finished across the school year. Reading Lab students filled their spaces with gold stars faster than almost anyone. They noticed. They were proud.

That pride is the whole point.