

PILOT RESULTS BRIEF

What Happened This Summer

Coachella Valley Unified School District • Mountain Vista and North Shore • June 16 – July 14, 2026

15 of 16

children across all three cohorts gained letter sounds, from +2 to +17

0 → 4

children in the TK cohort began blending CVC words, from a cohort-wide baseline of zero

6–14

sessions per child; within the measured cohort, more sessions tracked with larger gains

~81 min

total instruction per child in the measured cohort, across the four weeks

FROM THE FOUNDER

The work happened in a supply room at Mountain Vista Elementary, in desert heat that ran past a hundred degrees most days. A child came out of class, sat down for five or ten minutes, and went back. Then the next child.

I taught that cohort myself, every program day of the pilot. I could have handed the sets to teachers and waited for the data, and this report would carry a smaller asterisk if I had. But I had built something that worked at my own kitchen table, and I wanted to know whether it held up inside a real school day, with its field trips and absences and the ordinary noise of a summer program. That meant being in the room myself.

The pilot

Over four weeks of Coachella Valley Unified School District's summer program, Read With Me volunteers and the system's developer delivered brief one-on-one literacy sessions using Word Nuts Reading, a tactile system aligned with the Science of Reading. A session runs five to ten minutes. One adult, one child, a set of color-coded cards with raised lettering, and a threaded bolt of rotating letter blocks. The adult guides the bolt; the child traces, sounds out, and blends. The children in this pilot were almost entirely of Latino or Hispanic descent, reflecting the community CVUSD serves.

The anchor of the pilot, and of this brief, is the transitional kindergarten cohort at Mountain Vista: seven children taught daily by the system's developer and assessed on a consistent protocol from baseline through exit. Its results are the measured evidence, and they lead this document.

Alongside it, two volunteers from Read With Me ran kindergarten cohorts at North Shore on lighter schedules, two and three sessions a week. What happened there is covered in its own section.

MEASURED

Mountain Vista • TK

- 7 children
- Daily sessions
- Taught by the developer
- Consistent protocol, entry to exit

OBSERVED

North Shore • Kindergarten

- 9 children
- 2–3 sessions per week
- Taught by unpaid volunteers
- Recorded in the field

Coverage

Volunteer	Site	Grade	Schedule	Children	Sessions
Alena Callimanis	North Shore	Kindergarten	3 sessions / week	4	40
Mike Reilly	North Shore	Kindergarten	2 sessions / week	5	37
Michael Land	Mountain Vista	TK (<i>measured cohort</i>)	Daily	7	71

Table 1. Cohorts covered in this brief. Mountain Vista is highlighted as the group where a single instructor ran a consistent protocol from baseline through exit; its results appear on the following page.

The delivery model

The operational question this summer asked was simple. Can a volunteer with no specialist training sustain one-on-one literacy practice inside a program that also contains field trips, absences, and shifting rosters? They could.

Sessions ran on schedule for the full four weeks at both sites. Neither volunteer capacity nor volunteer willingness was the binding constraint at any point. Child attendance was.

The model works in untrained hands because the session itself does the teaching. The child traces a raised letter on the card, saying the sound as the finger moves, then traces the same raised letter on the block: same shape, same sound, a second surface. The adult turns the bolt and the next sound rotates into position. Then two sounds together, then three, then a word. The sequence, the order the sounds arrive in, the moment a letter becomes a word: all of it is guided by the mechanical rotation of the letter blocks on the threaded rod. That motion is the delivery's most distinctive feature, and it is what carries the instruction.

The letter is seen, heard, spoken, and felt at once, and because the cards and blocks sit on either side of the child, the tracing alternates between the dominant and non-dominant hand. The adult controls the pace, so a five-minute session holds many repetitions without turning into a drill, and repetition is what moves a sound from something a child works out to something a child simply knows.

What the adult supplies is attention and a few minutes. Volunteers received the set, a printed guide, and a two-hour orientation. No certification, no curriculum binder, no scripted lesson to master. A volunteer could be placed and running within a day.

What held their attention

Across cohorts and grade levels, the same observation appeared independently: the materials held children's attention where paper had not. Children who struggled to stay seated for other tasks stayed seated for this one and came back the next day without resistance. Two TK children found focus genuinely difficult, and what stood out was how quickly the system called them back.

This is a claim about attention, not outcomes. But a child who will not sit down cannot be taught, and everything measured in the pages that follow rests on the fact that these children sat down and stayed.

What was measured: the Mountain Vista TK cohort

Scope. Everything on this page and the next describes one cohort only: the seven transitional kindergarten children at Mountain Vista, taught daily by the system's developer, with letter-sound knowledge assessed at entry and exit on a consistent protocol. It is presented because it is the window where instruction and assessment were controlled. It shows what the model produces when delivered as designed.

Letter sounds

Every child moved. Gains ran from four to seventeen sounds across entry points ranging from zero letter-sound knowledge to more than half the alphabet. Four of seven children eliminated their No Command pile entirely. Children received eight to fourteen sessions each, dependent on attendance.

Child	Sessions	Strong Command entry → exit	Sounds learned	Cleared from No Command
E.G.	14	12 → 26	+14	10 of 10
E.D.	11	8 → 19	+11	12 of 12
A.S.	10	14 → 26	+12	4 of 4
V.C.	10	4 → 21	+17	17 of 17
A.C.	8	12 → 17	+5	6 of 11
J.M.	10	0 → 6	+6	7 of 23
J.V.	8	0 → 4	+4	8 of 26

Table 2. Letter sounds learned per child, Mountain Vista TK cohort only (seven children), entry to exit. "Sounds learned" is the change in Strong Command, sounds the child could produce instantly. The final column counts sounds moved out of No Command, where the child could not produce the sound at all in June.

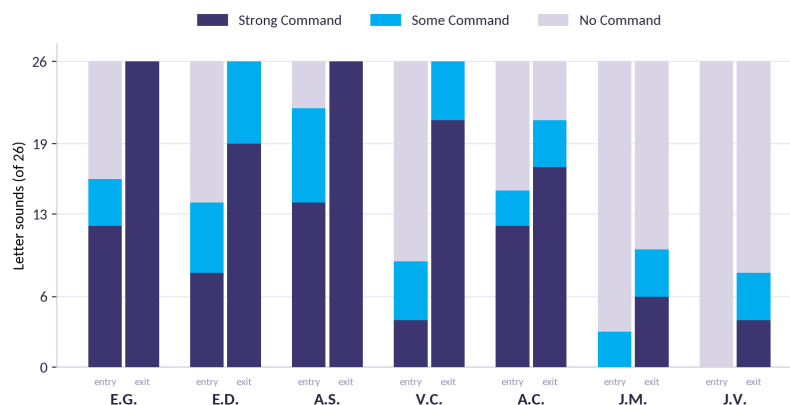


Figure 1. Every child in the Mountain Vista TK cohort, entry beside exit. Each bar sorts all 26 sounds by command level: Strong Command (instant), Some Command (needs a moment, or self-corrects), No Command (cannot produce the sound).

Blending

At entry, no child in the cohort could blend or decode a single CVC word. By the final week, four children had reached consistent blending. The two present for the formal decoding check read thirteen of sixteen and nine of sixteen words, each with the light adult support any beginning blender requires.

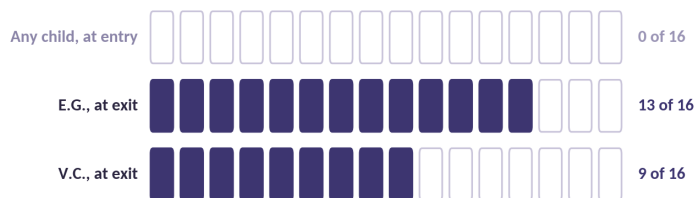


Figure 2. The 16-item CVC decoding check, word by word. Two additional children reached blending readiness in session but were absent on the day the check was administered.

The volunteer cohorts

Two volunteers, unpaid. Neither with specialist literacy training. Their preparation was the materials, a printed guide, and a two-hour orientation. Their students saw them not daily but two to three brief sessions a week, inside a summer program with field trips, absences, illnesses, and shifting rosters. Nine kindergarteners, four weeks, 77 sessions between them.

The children still made gains.

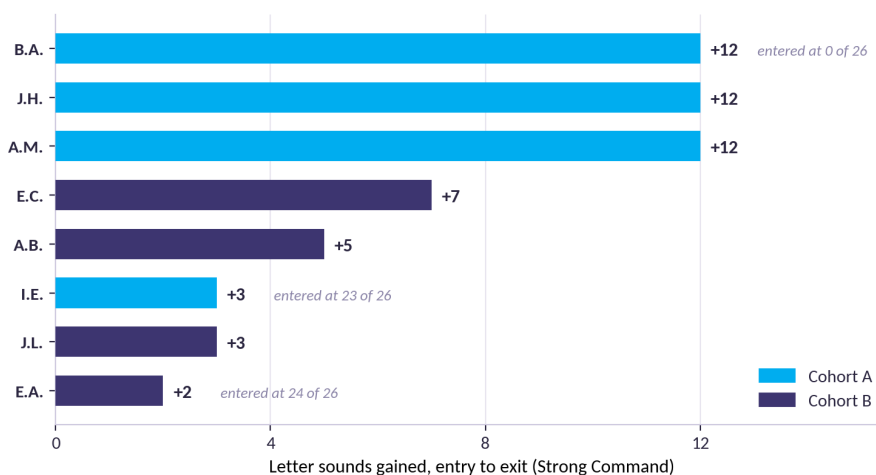


Figure 3. Letter-sound gains in the volunteer cohorts, entry to exit, as recorded by the volunteer instructors. Children marked with entry notes arrived near the top of the 26-sound instrument, with little room left to gain on it.

Eight of nine children moved. The gains are more modest than the daily, developer-taught cohort produced, and that is not a caveat to explain away. It is the finding. A fraction of the frequency, delivered by non-experts, still moved children, and the size of the movement tracked the size of the dose. One child entered the summer holding zero letter sounds and left holding twelve. Three children who arrived already near the top of the letter-sound instrument kept going instead of idling: several worked into blending and decoding, and two reached the digraph layer, where *ch*, *sh*, and *th* stop being letters and start being reading.

How to read these numbers

These results were recorded by the volunteers themselves, on their own schedules, without calibration or a second scorer, and they are reported here as observation rather than controlled measurement. They are directional, not precise. They are also internally consistent and complete at both entry and exit. Read them for what they are: the shape of what happened, recorded by the people who were in the room.

■ Sharpening the next round

This summer was a first field test, and it was designed with latitude: volunteers adapted sessions to their own students and recorded their own assessments. That is what a first round is for. The next round trades that latitude for a shared session protocol and calibrated scoring, so that what volunteers achieve can be reported with the same confidence as the developer-taught cohort. The delivery has been proven. The next step is measuring it properly.

■ What this opens up

Four weeks is a short window, and sixteen children across three cohorts is a small number of children. What this pilot establishes is narrower than proof and more useful than a hunch.

In the cohort where instruction and assessment were controlled, every child moved, four of seven cleared every letter sound they could not produce in June, and blending emerged from a cohort-wide baseline of zero. The total instructional cost was roughly 81 minutes per child across the entire summer. In the volunteer cohorts, at a fraction of the frequency and with no specialist training behind the sessions, eight of nine children still gained, and several worked past letter sounds into blending, decoding, and digraphs.

Taken together, those two pictures suggest something worth testing further: that the constraint on early literacy practice may be less about expertise than about whether the practice happens at all, consistently, in small enough doses that an ordinary schedule can absorb them.

The system continues in use with families, in library programs, and in classrooms, and each of those settings asks something slightly different of it. What is documented here is one window into a system still being learned about, by the people who built it as much as by anyone else.

What this pilot shows

- + 15 of 16 children gained letter sounds, across three cohorts and two schools
- + In the measured cohort, blending emerged from a baseline of zero
- + Roughly 81 minutes of instruction per child, total
- + The model ran in the hands of adults who had never seen it in June

What it does not show

- No comparison group, and four weeks is a short window
- The measured cohort was taught by the product's developer
- Volunteer results were self-scored, without calibration
- Sixteen children cannot stand in for a population

The next round is the one that counts.

This brief is a starting point, not a finished argument. The right column above is not a disclaimer, it is a to-do list, and most of it can only be crossed off with other people involved. If any of this raises a question, we would rather answer it than have anyone take our word for something.

- **Want the underlying data?** We will walk your team through every child's entry and exit sheet, the instrument, and the methods, and send the full report.
- **Work with early readers?** Classrooms, library programs, tutoring, and kitchen tables all ask something different of this system, and we learn the most from the settings we did not design for.
- **Could your organization host the next round?** Instructors who did not build the product, a shared protocol, and assessment separated from instruction. That is the milestone that matters, and it needs a partner to happen.

With thanks

To the volunteers who gave their mornings to this over four weeks, to the teachers and site staff who made room for it inside an already full summer program, and to the families who let us sit down with their children. Every number in this brief exists because someone showed up.

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