

Rocky Mountain Reading Together: Denver Public Schools and Learning Ally



Success Soars Mile High
for Denver Public School Students
with Learning Disabilities

Denver Public Schools and Learning Ally



“When a teacher assigns a novel, one student is reading it as a paper book, and another may be reading it as a Learning Ally audiobook. Who cares? They’re reading the same book. The student who is using Learning Ally can participate in class at a higher level than they used to, at a deeper level than they used to; they can interact with comprehension questions the same as other students.”

—AMY KALINCHUK
DPS Special Education Teacher

BACKGROUND

At the center of Denver’s 4,532 square miles lies Denver Public Schools — one of the fastest-growing urban school districts in the country in terms of enrollment, and the fastest-growing large school district in Colorado in terms of academic growth.

In one year, DPS has expanded from 189 schools to 226 schools, including traditional, magnet, charter and pathways schools, with a current total enrollment of 90,150 students. Of those, 56.7% of the school district’s enrolled students are Hispanic, 21.9% are Caucasian, and 14.1% are African American. More than 70% of the district’s students qualify for free and reduced lunch.

For students with special needs, the DPS Department of Special Education provides standards-based education based upon the individual needs of each child, as prescribed and defined by the state’s Exceptional Children’s Education Act.

THE CHALLENGE

As a leader in providing specialized instruction to students with special needs, DPS recognized the need to help students who struggle with reading and have been identified with a print-based reading disability.

The most common form of learning disability is dyslexia, often referred to as the disability that “hides in plain sight.” Dyslexia comes in many forms, and affects nearly one out of every five students in America’s classrooms. If not identified, dyslexia can result in a variety of significant struggles for these otherwise gifted and talented students.

DPS recognized the need to implement specialized interventions and specific assistive technologies that would enable these students to read and help them succeed as confident and independent learners.

THE SOLUTION

In the fall of 2013, Denver Public Schools piloted the Learning Ally audiobook technology program in 40 of its schools.

Founded in 1948, Learning Ally is a national nonprofit organization that supports students who read and learn differently due to dyslexia, blindness and other disabilities. The organization serves students and teachers in 10,000 schools across the U.S., and provides a digital library of more than 80,000 human-narrated audio textbooks and literature titles. The audiobooks are specially produced for readers with disabilities, can be downloaded by students and teachers, and read using computers, smartphones and tablets. Using a teacher-assigned account, Learning Ally’s technology allows students to read inside or outside of the classroom on a computer or any iOS or Android device.



Over 4,000 of the most popular Learning Ally audiobook titles feature VOICEtext technology, allowing students to combine ear reading with eye reading by following text highlighted on their device screen in sync with the book’s human narration.

DENVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

According to Amy Kalinchuk, Special Education Department Chair at Hamilton Middle School, there are proven benefits to using audiobooks for struggling readers. "Using audio books enhances students' reading progress and their abilities in many ways," she says. "Listening to a proficient reader read a book expands vocabulary and comprehension. The moment students turn on the audiobook and an adult voice is reading to them, they are engaged."

As the special-education department chair for her building, Kalinchuk is the go-to person for general-ed teachers when they need to provide differentiated instruction in the classroom. "For students with learning disabilities, being able to download multiple books onto a device that you already carry with you — and having the text at the same time as the audio — is revolutionary," she says. "Textbooks and novels of all different levels are available. Children's books, middle-school age, young adult novels and adult books are there. It opens up a world of opportunities to teachers and students with disabilities."

Following early success of the pilot program's launch in 40 schools, the program was expanded into more DPS schools thanks to resources from a \$500,000 donation made by a private donor through The Denver Foundation.

THE OUTCOME

For the first time in their lives, students who had long struggled to read were able to keep up with assigned class texts on par with their peers. They also began requesting popular books for enjoyment. While becoming avid readers in class, these students were also motivated to read on their devices at home.

Since the initial pilot in 2013, Learning Ally's use in DPS grew to serve more than 5,500 students across 173 schools, which represents 89% of all schools in the district.

More than 63,000 books have been added to students' bookshelves since the program's inception in DPS, with students having read more than half a million book pages using Learning Ally's Audio app and Link software. The numbers grow each day, as Learning Ally continues to add new book titles, based on curriculum needs and trends among young readers.



226
Schools



90,150
Students



Up from
189



57%
Hispanic



22%
Caucasian



14%
African American



71%
Free/
reduced
lunch

2013 Pilot Program



40 Schools



200 Students

2015 Year Two Progress



173 Schools



5,500+ Students



63,000+
Books downloaded



392,000
Pages read

Note: page count does not include books accessed through older Read Hear software; total page count is over 500,000

Year 3 Projected Target
6,000+ students



“Students can read using Learning Ally anytime. They can read at home, on the bus to school, at lunch, and during reading time in class. It works everywhere the student is. If they have a device, they can do their reading.”

THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN READING CHALLENGE

In In 2015, as the Learning Ally program was gaining strong momentum in Denver schools, DPS teachers observed that students were actually encouraging and motivating each other to read. Teachers worked with Learning Ally to launch a district wide reading contest -- the Rocky Mountain Reading Challenge. Students competed to see who could read the most books, using Learning Ally over a one month period.



The competition was high, yet fun; and it created a sense of inclusion and pride among the students involved. “These kids who had struggled just to read a single paragraph just a year ago, were now proud to be competing in a reading contest,” marveled Amanda Knowles, Special Education Teacher at Strive Federal School.

Jessica Pandorf, a special education teacher at DC 21 at Wyman’s, added that “All of my students were excited to get some reading done this summer. Having access to audiobooks has been such an awesome motivator for them.”

The Challenge winner, a 4th grader at Teller Elementary School in Denver, was able to read 2,000 pages of text during the contest. Within one school year using Learning Ally, she made an exponential leap in her reading ability – from the fourth percentile up to the 41st.

Now this young and motivated contest winner is encouraging every eligible student she knows to use Learning Ally audiobooks and urging her peers to read more, so they can all win the next contest together. Her success and drive is mirrored by thousands of other students across DPS, who have joined together in a movement to read more and to give back by helping their fellow students succeed in school.

“Learning Ally has been a tremendously valuable source of investment in reading for so many of our students,” says Amanda Knowles, “which is why we have such a high usage, and practically all of our caseloads are signed up with accounts.”

The Learning Ally program in Denver Public Schools — which includes the audiobooks, professional development for teachers, student advocacy efforts, and other key initiatives — is made possible thanks to a generous private donor through the Denver Foundation.



Learning Ally
TOGETHER IT'S POSSIBLE
LearningAlly.org

**To bring Learning Ally into your school or district,
call us at 800.221.1098 or email us at programs@LearningAlly.org.**