

# Digital Reading Check-ins: Supporting Independent Digital Reading

Cara Pavek, Michelle Vaughan

A digital reading check-in strategy addresses the challenges of supporting independent reading on digital platforms for beginning readers.

Navigating the world of virtual learning with young students presents both technological and pedagogical challenges. With schools across the globe operating in a myriad of modalities, instructional innovations are necessary to ensure that meaningful reading experiences are occurring for students in all mediums. In 2020–2021, many schools embraced a hybrid format for learning, with students attending in-person and virtually simultaneously. The scenario below outlines a challenge that arose during independent reading in a hybrid classroom setting with one-to-one iPads:

After presenting the reading mini lesson to in-person and virtual students simultaneously, the teacher says, “It’s time to go be readers! Remember, you should be reading books for 20 minutes. Friends in the classroom, please get reading in *Epic!*. My friends at home, remember that you should be reading and not listening to books in *Epic!*. Set a timer for 20 minutes and get started. Stay focused. Use all of your time reading. Ready? GO BE READERS!”

As virtual students open a new application and begin reading, screens go black, cutting off all visual contact for the teacher during independent reading time. Without additional teacher support connected to this activity, our readers may not be engaging with the digital platform as intended.

This vignette highlights the difficulty teachers face when students are sent off to read digitally, whether in the classroom or at home. As students work in digital reading applications, teachers lose the ability to “see” them reading. For young readers, this level of independence can have dire consequences. Students who are not supported may be off task, especially struggling readers. Students can get distracted or may simply avoid the task at hand. We know that independent reading time benefits from the support of a teacher (Topping et al., 2007). While we acknowledge that “more reading leads to better reading” (Sanden, 2012, p. 223), it is essential to modify our methods to maximize the efficacy of independent reading, specifically reading on digital platforms, by both in-person and virtual learners. Whether classrooms are online, in-person, or hybrid, the use of digital reading platforms continues to grow, and

students benefit from instructional strategies that complement their use. The following sections provide background information on the current state of digital reading in the classroom and the role of the teacher within independent reading. We will then explore a teaching strategy designed to enhance the independent reading experience of young students using digital reading platforms in any learning setting.

## Digital Reading in the Classroom

There are a plethora of digital reading applications and websites available for use in the classroom space. A recent post on [commonsense.org](https://www.common Sense.org) focused on options for “Elementary School Reading Apps and Websites,” and highlighted 33 different “top picks” in this educational category (Common Sense Education, n.d.). Many of these platforms are free to users and students can now access multiple texts that are of interest, making their personal “school library” the largest collection to date. In addition, reluctant readers may prefer digital books to longer, traditional texts (Picton, 2014). The addition of digital texts to a traditional classroom library is an opportunity to diversify the reading experience for all learners. With core reading programs shifting to include high levels of digital material, it is helpful to reexamine our instructional strategies to consider how students interact differently with digital reading material. Bates et al. (2017) explain that we should “consider the behaviors and strategies of developing readers” (p. 401) in addition to examining what features are available through these platforms that can support or hinder the development of the reading process.

Cara Pavek is a first-grade University School Accomplished Instructor at A.D. Henderson University School/FAU High, Boca Raton, FL, USA; email [cpavek@fau.edu](mailto:cpavek@fau.edu).

Michelle Vaughan is an Associate Professor at Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL, USA; email [mvaughan3@fau.edu](mailto:mvaughan3@fau.edu).

## Teacher Support within Independent Reading

The added component of teacher support during independent reading builds students' confidence to be successful when reading on their own (Sanden, 2014, p. 169). Small groups or individual conferences are common practice, and allow a teacher to provide reading support that is data driven, unique to that group or individual student (Macken, 2018). Palmer and Wehmeyer (2003) found that instruction, which included goal setting, increased students' self-determination for problem solving and goal setting. Goal setting can be particularly helpful during independent reading to increase reading stamina and focus. For beginning readers, the amount of focused time spent reading plays a key role in their development as a reader (Larson, 2015). Increased reading volume positively impacts reading achievement, and this impact may be further strengthened by easy access to self-selected texts (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2021), highlighting the important role digital reading platforms may play in classrooms. This teaching and learning guide outlines a strategy to support young students' reading stamina in a digital platform through individual goal-setting and visual cues.

## Teaching and Learning Guide: Digital Reading Check-Ins

This teaching and learning guide outlines a strategy used during the 2020–2021 school year to successfully increase the amount of time virtual learners spend independently reading within their digital platform. Digital reading check-ins walk students through reflecting on data and the goal-setting process.

### Classroom Inquiry Background

This classroom inquiry focused on 20 first-grade students at a public university laboratory school in South Florida.

A lottery-based admission process is used to create a student body that mirrors the demographic profile of the state. This classroom is a representative sample of the school's population that included 15.5% Black, 26.4% Hispanic, 10.9% Asian, and 41.6% Caucasian with 31.4% students receiving free or reduced lunch. A 20-year veteran teacher used this strategy with five virtual learners in a hybrid classroom. Their data were compared to the data of 15 classmates learning in person.

This classroom used the reader's workshop model with conferring being a critical component of the students' learning. This study focused on increasing the number of minutes students were actively engaged reading digital books during independent reading time. The digital reading check-ins focused solely on minutes spent in books, counting only those read, not read aloud to students in *Epic!*, a free, online digital library for educators ([www.getepic.com](http://www.getepic.com)). These check-ins utilized reports generated by *Epic!*, but most digital platforms can produce similar reports, or a teacher-made spreadsheets can create the same visual tool.

We will discuss two main components of the digital reading check-in strategy, setting individual goals and the use of color-coded reading logs. We will also review data on their initial impact in the classroom. [Table 1](#) outlines steps of the strategy in practice.

This strategy's step-by-step process allows teachers to quickly examine data, reflect, and set a goal with students. Step 1, Researching the Reader, is the most critical. For a teacher to efficiently get through digital reading check-ins in a timely manner, they must be prepared. They must look at the student's log prior to the check-in and review the books the student is choosing to read, ensuring the student is choosing regular books, not audiobooks. While listening to text read-aloud is a valuable experience within a reading program, if students rely heavily on listening to books, they are not practicing decoding skills, an important skill for beginning readers (Morris, 2015).

**Table 1**  
**Digital Reading Check-in Strategy**

Step	Procedure
1. Research the Reader	Teacher checks digital application's reading log to prepare for check-in (Prior to Check-in)
2. Text talk	Teacher asks about recent texts read through the digital application and asks student to share their thoughts (1–2 minutes)
3. Data review	Teacher shares color-coded data based on previously set goal (1 minute)
4. Reflection	Student discusses what helped or hindered them in meeting their previously set reading goal (1–2 minute)
5. Goal setting	Student sets (or keeps) reading goal for the next check-in (1 minute)

### Reviewing Data and Individual Goal Setting

Creating goals with students keeps them focused when reading independently. During digital reading check-ins, the teacher reviewed the status of each student's current reading goals using reports provided by *Epic!* and set new goals as needed. These reports allow teachers to see the type of books a student is selecting and how much time is spent "exploring" in the app, flipping through pages. While minutes spent reading was the main focus for this research study, the teacher monitored the quality of their independent reading time during Step 2 (Text talk). Comprehension checks during this step provided additional understanding of student learning and indicated if students needed additional reading support or instruction. Virtual students wrote their daily goals on sticky notes and posted them in their learning spaces as a reminder of their goals. A student recognized the impact of this visual reminder by saying, "I moved my goal sticky note onto my wall right in front of me. I can see it all the time, all day."

During this classroom inquiry, performing digital reading check-ins every day was not sustainable, so check-ins occurred with each virtual learner every 2–3 days. Individual meetings ensured virtual learners received the one-on-one attention that in person students were getting within the classroom and provided privacy to build trust and strengthen relationships with virtual learners.

Setting individual goals is essential for students to take ownership and have accountability of their independent reading. Reflecting on their progress toward their goal is an opportunity for students to discuss what aspects of their learning environments are helping or hindering their independent reading. Independent reading at home can be a vastly different experience than reading in a classroom, so the conditions for virtual students should be discussed during the check-ins. Discussions with students at school may include identifying distractions in the classroom that might be keeping them from reaching their goals.

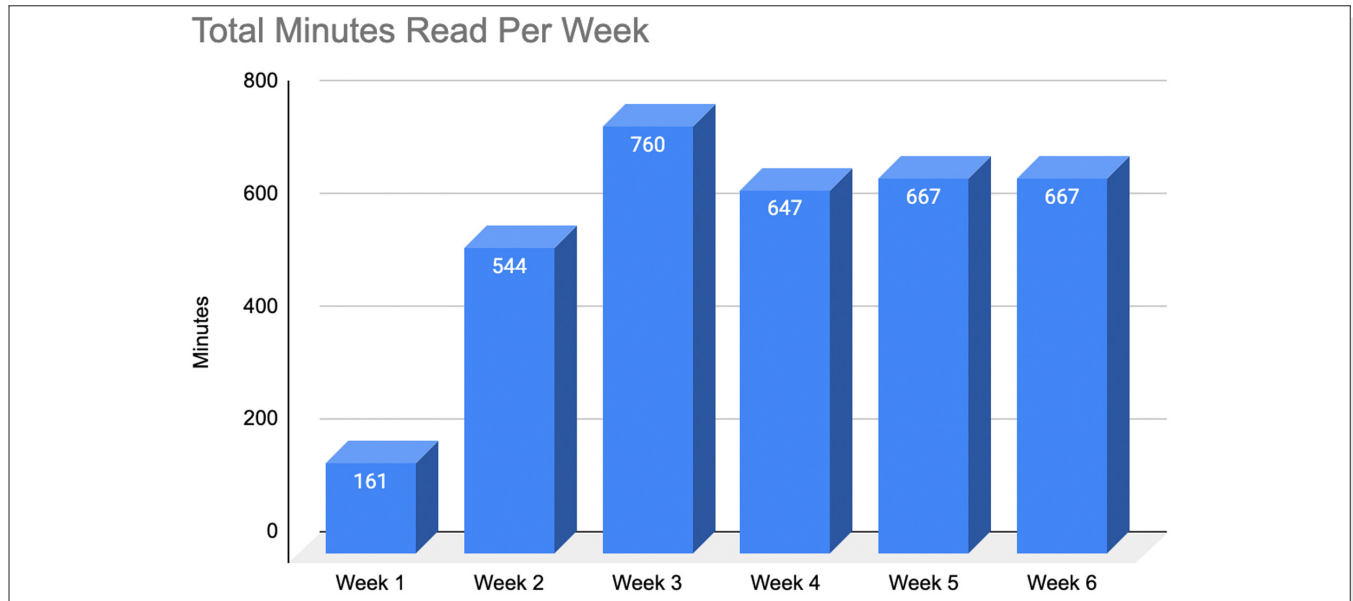
### Color-Coded Daily Reading Log

A week into the study, the teacher noticed a need for a visual to refer to when discussing the data with students. Using a color-coded daily reading log from *Epic!*'s website, the teacher introduced a visual to help students see their independent reading minutes (see [Figure 1](#)). *Epic!*'s color codings are generated automatically, based on a goal of 20 minutes a day. If a child reads 20 or more minutes, the box is green, and 1–19 minutes is yellow. If the box is gray, the student has not read at all that day. Again, a teacher-made spreadsheet with color-coded data would suffice. The use of individual reading logs during check-ins encouraged students to truly own their data and goals.

**Figure 1**  
Daily Reading Log from [getepic.com](https://www.getepic.com)

ROSTER		DAILY READING		STUDENT LOGS		ASSIGNMENTS		QUIZZES	
Virtual Student... ▾		March 8 - 14, 2021						Download Log ▾	
STUDENT NAME ▾		3/8 Monday	3/9 Tuesday	3/10 Wednesday	3/11 Thursday	3/12 Friday	3/13 Saturday	3/14 Sunday	Days with 20 Minutes
Student 1		30 mins	30 mins	23 mins	35 mins	0 mins	0 mins	0 mins	4 days
Student 2		38 mins	39 mins	27 mins	40 mins	29 mins	0 mins	0 mins	5 days
Student 3		27 mins	27 mins	45 mins	21 mins	0 mins	0 mins	0 mins	4 days
Student 4		38 mins	35 mins	31 mins	40 mins	26 mins	0 mins	0 mins	5 days
Student 5		46 mins	38 mins	33 mins	44 mins	18 mins	0 mins	0 mins	4 days

**Figure 2**  
Tracking the Total Number of Minutes Virtual Learners Read Each Week on Epic



Early in the study, one student stated, “I have two yellows, oh no, and a gray one! I want my goal to be 42 minutes so I can be green and meet my goal.” Each student began to refer to the goal as “my goal” as opposed to a class goal or requirement within the classroom. In addition, student enthusiasm for the check-in meetings increased when they could visually chart their progress.

In the first 6 weeks of implementing this strategy with the virtual learners in a hybrid classroom, the total minutes read dramatically increased (see Figure 2). The data leveled off in the last couple weeks of data (potentially due to spring break). Nevertheless, the data indicate that students’ reading volume increased while participating in digital check-ins. They also addressed the students’ need for more one-on-one attention in the virtual setting. As one student said, he liked one-on-one check-ins because “no one else can hear my goal, [and] I get to talk to you by myself.” Students were already receiving small-group instruction regularly, but the individual digital reading check-ins provided individualized attention.

## Conclusions

These digital reading check-ins were a chance for students to receive one-on-one attention with positive reinforcement for reaching goals and guidance on how to set new, realistic goals. The one-on-one format in combination with the color-coded visual aids assisted students in

consistently achieving their goals. These results support the practice of goal setting in reading and the importance of individualized attention in a virtual teaching environment. The check-ins help build student–teacher relationships and student confidence with understanding their data. They are more likely to take ownership if the data are presented in an organized and visually stimulating way. While reading conferences are certainly not a new idea, their importance within teaching has skyrocketed because the learning context for each virtual or hybrid learner is highly individual.

Lastly, the results of this classroom research have implications regarding the benefits of digital reading check-ins in all settings. As more schools choose to continue with the use of digital libraries in classrooms, these results indicate the importance of check-ins to keep students accountable during independent reading. Digital reading changes how teachers need to monitor students for on-task behaviors. While traditional conferring can be used for comprehension checks, these check-ins are also a way to monitor students’ minutes in books. For beginning readers to succeed using digital reading platforms, strategies like digital reading check-ins are necessary pedagogical innovations.

## Conflict of Interest

None.

## Funding Information

None.

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