

Does Reading First Work?

Data Trends from Evaluations in Five Western States

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As researchers, we know a single study is never able to capture all the information that can be gained about a particular program or initiative. Instead, it takes multiple studies over time to provide a rich and accurate understanding of how well a program works. This is why the oversimplification of findings from the recent Reading First Impact Study is troubling. The study found no significant differences in performance on a comprehension measure between students at a subset of Reading First schools and students at non-Reading First schools in the same districts.ⁱ Some media coverage interpreted this finding simply as “Reading First doesn’t work.”ⁱⁱ

The findings of the impact study are important, but they do not represent the entire picture. This short summary of data trends draws on results from statewide evaluations of Reading First in five western states to provide a more nuanced picture of the program. Specifically, statewide evaluations by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) found the following trends in outcomes across states:

- There was steady improvement in the percentage of students performing “at benchmark” on the DIBELS assessment.
- There was a decrease over time in the percentage of students performing at the lowest (“intensive”) level on the same assessment.

In addition, NWREL’s evaluation of the implementation of Reading First revealed a trend that raises some questions about the validity of comparing Reading First and non-Reading First schools within the same district, as the impact study did. Across the five states, the evaluations found that:

- In districts with Reading First grants, non-Reading First schools frequently implemented many Reading First program components.

Including these points in the discussion of the meaning of the impact study helps to provide a more realistic, if less straightforward picture of a multifaceted reading initiative.

What Is Reading First?

Reading First is a federal initiative to strengthen the instruction of reading to primary grade students. Since 2003, Reading First has provided unprecedented amounts of federal funding to states for K–3 reading programs, with the goal of having children read at grade level by the end

of third grade. Reading First, however, is more than just a monetary grant. Schools awarded grants were required by federal legislation to use curricula and practices that were grounded in “scientifically-based reading research.” These components included using a research-based core reading program, hiring a reading coach, providing at least 90 minutes of reading instruction per day, regularly assessing students’ reading skills, and providing reading interventions to struggling students. States were responsible for providing grantee districts and schools with the professional development and technical assistance necessary to implement these and other Reading First requirements.

To date, about 6,000 schools nationwide (about 8 percent of all elementary schools) have received Reading First funds. The first cohort of schools (“cohort 1”) received funding in either 2003–2004 or 2004–2005, depending on when their state was awarded a grant. Many states initiated subsequent cohorts in later years. Each state developed its own formula for determining school eligibility for Reading First grants, but in all cases, high rates of student poverty and low levels of reading achievement factored into the equation. States also varied somewhat in exactly how they implemented Reading First and how they supported their grantee schools. However, the federal requirements and accountability measures have made implementation more similar than different across the state programs NWREL has evaluated.

Data Trends From NWREL Statewide Evaluations

Each state was required to hire an independent organization to conduct an annual evaluation. In 2003 or 2004, NWREL was hired as the external evaluator in four western states: Alaska, Montana, Washington, and Wyoming and also contributed to the evaluation in a fifth state, Arizona, in collaboration with the Arizona Prevention Resource Center at Arizona State Universityⁱⁱⁱ. The evaluation in each state examined Reading First implementation as well as student achievement outcomes. These evaluations were designed to help states make ongoing, data-based decisions about their program.

Across the five states, the Dynamic Indicator of Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) was the primary measure of student outcomes. This assessment includes a set of standardized, individually administered measures of early literacy development. Kindergarten and first grade include several assessments of phonemic awareness and phonics and, in the case of first grade, oral reading fluency measures. At the end of second and third grade, they consist of assessments of oral reading fluency^{iv}. Students obtaining adequate scores on these assessments are said to be “at benchmark,” while the students scoring at the lowest level fall into what is commonly called the “intensive group.” DIBELS data analyzed by NWREL show the following trends over time and across the five states:

There was steady improvement in the percentage of students performing “at benchmark” on the DIBELS assessment. Figure 1, below, shows this trend in third grade for the first cohort of schools in each state through spring of 2007, providing four years of data for three states, and three years for Wyoming and Alaska, which started funding schools a year later^v. With the single exception of Montana from year 2 to year 3, there was an increase each spring in the percentage of third graders at benchmark.

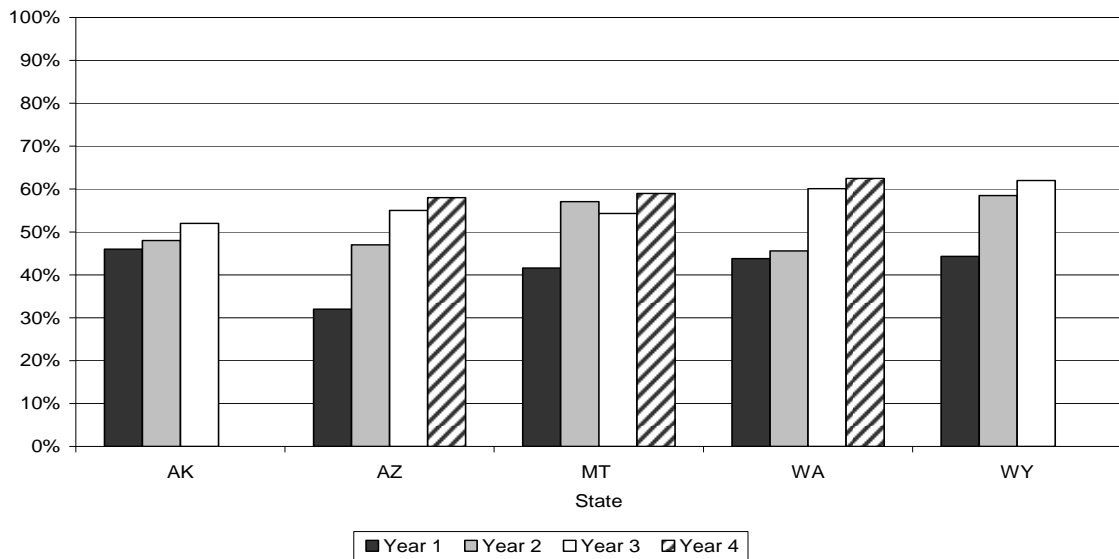


Figure 1. Percentage of Reading First Cohort 1 Third Graders “at Benchmark” on DIBELS

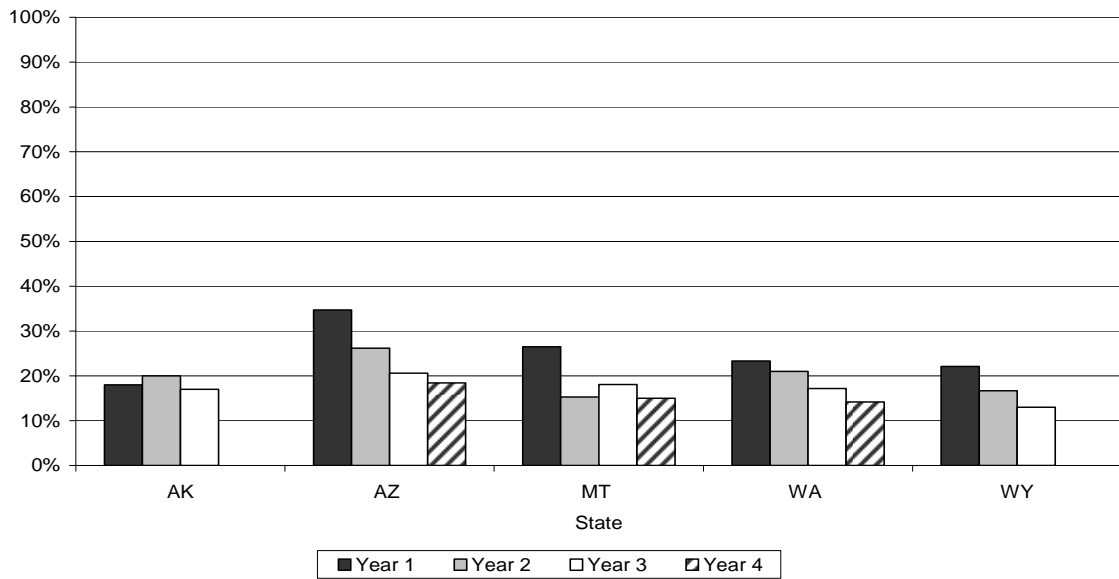


Figure 2. Percentage of Reading First Cohort 2 Third Graders “Intensive” on DIBELS

Note: All data are from end-of-year assessments.^{vi}

There was also a decrease over time in the percentage of students performing at the lowest (“intensive”) level on the same assessment. Figure 2, above, shows this trend in third grade. In Arizona, Washington, and Wyoming, there was a decrease each spring in the percentage of students classified at “intensive.” While the decrease was not steady in Montana and Alaska, both states reduced the percentage of third-graders at intensive over time.

Data from kindergarten, first, and second grades showed similar positive trends as described above for third grade. With minor exceptions, each year spring assessments showed an increase in the percentage of K–2 students at benchmark compared to the spring before. The same assessments also showed a decrease in the percentage of K–2 students in the intensive group; these decreases were actually more dramatic in grades K–2 than in grade 3. Despite overall positive trends, there was substantial variation among schools, meaning that while some schools made greater gains over time, others were less successful.

In addition to the outcome trends described above, the evaluation of the implementation of Reading First revealed a trend that raises some questions about the validity of comparing Reading First and non–Reading First schools within the same district, as the impact study did:

Within districts with Reading First grants, non–Reading First schools frequently implemented many Reading First program components. Survey data from the five states showed that many non–Reading First schools routinely used other funding sources (most often district funds) to implement key components of Reading First, such as a scientifically-based core reading program, a reading coach, regular assessments, and systematic interventions for struggling students.

Table 1. “Spillover” of Reading First Into non–Reading First Schools

Do non-Reading First elementary schools in your district...	Percentage of Districts		
	Yes, in some non-RF schools	Yes, in all non-RF schools	Yes, in some or all non-RF schools
Use DIBELS for benchmark assessments	17%	79%	96%
Have a 90-minute K-3 reading block	24%	71%	95%
Provide systematic interventions for struggling students	50%	45%	95%
Systematically progress monitor students	57%	33%	90%
Provide or attend ongoing, high-quality professional development in reading	40%	47%	87%
Use the same core reading program as RF schools	26%	52%	78%
Have a K-3 reading coach	31%	33%	64%

Source: NWREL evaluation district surveys in Alaska, Arizona, Montana, Washington, and Wyoming Reading First, spring 2007. Survey response rate was 95 percent. Data include responses only from the 43 Reading First districts with more than one elementary school.^{vii}

Specifically, in response to NWREL’s five-state survey of Reading First districts, the majority of districts with at least one non–Reading First school reported that Reading First had greatly influenced the reading program in non–Reading First schools. For example, more than 90 percent of these districts reported that some or all of their non–Reading First schools implemented components that are central to Reading First implementation: DIBELS benchmark and progress

monitoring assessments, systematic interventions for struggling readers, and 90 minutes of reading (see Table 1). Reading coaches and the use of a common core program were also common in at least some non-RF schools.

These results suggest that Reading First has had an impact that extends beyond the schools directly receiving grants. This “spillover” complicates any comparison of Reading First schools to non-Reading First schools since, in essence, many non-Reading First schools implemented similar reading programs with a different source of funding. It may be that studies (such as the Reading First Impact Study) that compare Reading First and non-Reading First schools within the same districts did not find differences in student achievement because the non-Reading First schools were implementing many of the components of Reading First.

Limitations

Studies of Reading First that have been published to date have all had limitations to what they could and could not say with certainty. Our review of trends across five states is no exception. One limitation of our look at the improvement in DIBELS outcomes is the lack of a comparison group. We do not know if non-Reading First schools saw similar gains in reading achievement over the same years. Like many evaluations, the scope of the evaluation was limited by time and budget constraints, but even with unlimited funds, it can be difficult to find appropriate comparisons when Reading First grants are not randomly assigned and other schools in the same districts, and elsewhere, are implementing many of the same program components.

A second limitation to our review is its reliance on the DIBELS as a primary outcome measure. DIBELS measures oral reading fluency, not comprehension, which was measured for the recent IES study. While studies have found that fluency correlates to comprehension among native English speakers^{viii}, it does not guarantee adequate comprehension of text. Unfortunately, there are few pieces of data available from these states that address comprehension and none that exist across states. Furthermore, research has not yet established a firm correlation between fluency and comprehension for English language learners, who make up a large proportion of Reading First students in these five states. Finally, because oral reading fluency is a skill specifically taught and often practiced in Reading First classrooms, it may be easier to affect change in fluency as compared to comprehension.

Summary

Reading First is a complex, multifaceted program implemented in many different school and district contexts across the country. It is not surprising that multiple evaluations should come to different conclusions about both implementation and outcomes. These variations make it all the more crucial that policymakers and practitioners consider multiple reports and data sources and their limitations before making decisions that will affect the education of many thousands of disadvantaged students in some of the poorest schools in the nation.

More information about NWREL’s evaluations of Reading First can be obtained by contacting Dr. Theresa Deussen at (800) 547-6339 or deussent@nwrel.org.

Notes

ⁱ Gamse, B.C., Bloom, H.S., Kemple, J.J., & Jacob, R.T. (2008). *Reading First Impact Study: Interim Report* (NCEE 2008-4016). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance.

ⁱⁱ Zuckerbrod, N. (2008). Study: Bush administration's reading program hasn't helped. *USA Today*, May 1, 2008; Manzo, K.K. (2008). "Reading First doesn't help pupils "get it." *Education Week*, May 1, 2008.

ⁱⁱⁱ NWREL also assumed the role of evaluator in a sixth state, Idaho, in 2007.

^{iv} For the oral fluency measure, students read short grade-level passages for one minute and receive a score based on the number of words read correctly in that minute.

^v Data from spring 2008 are currently being analyzed and will be released in summer 2008.

^{vi} Years are labeled "Year 1," "Year 2," etc., rather than by school year (2003-2004) because Reading First did not start at the same time in all five states. Arizona and Washington schools began in fall 2003. Montana schools began in January 2004. Although Alaska staff received some training prior to the 2004-2005 school year, school-level implementation began in fall 2004, as it also did in Wyoming. In Year 4, Arizona, Montana and Wyoming schools were in a "continuation" phase, meaning they received substantially less funding from the state. In all cases, only data from students who were enrolled for the entire school year were included. Percentages for Arizona Reading First differ slightly from those published in some of the annual evaluation reports because reports often merged cohort 1 and cohort 2 results and/or included a few schools that have since discontinued Reading First. Data reported here include the same schools for all four years.

^{vii} While the outcome data reported included only the first cohort of Reading First schools, the district survey data includes districts from all cohorts.

^{viii} For example: Stanovich, K.E. (1991). Word recognition: Changing perspectives. In R. Barr, M.L. Kamil, P. Mosenthal, & P.D. Pearson (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research*. (Vol. 2, pp. 418-452). New York: Longman.; also Hasbrouk, J. & Tindal, G. (1992). Curriculum-based oral reading fluency norms for students in grades 2 through 5. *Teaching Exceptional Children* 24(3), 41-44.