

Helping Johnny Read Better

Overcoming Common Myths
About Reading First Ohio



A White Paper from the Reading First Ohio Center

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Summary

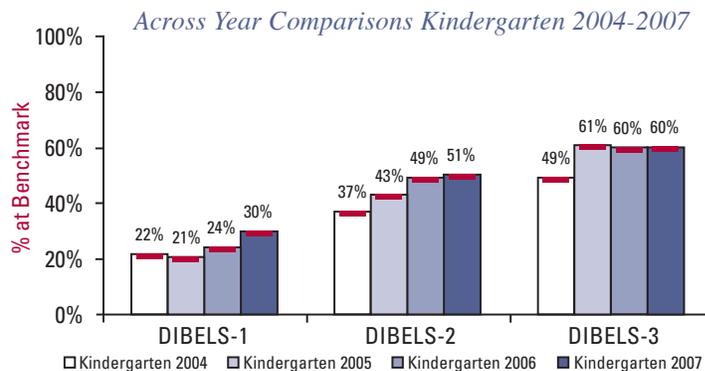
Literacy education in the poorest schools has often resembled a race between well-intended instruction and mandatory promotion to the next grade. Teachers made their best efforts with the training and resources available, but thousands of children per year nevertheless advanced to the next grade without adequate reading skills.

What happened for these educators – and the children, more importantly – to realize more than a year’s improvement from one grade to the next? How did they manage to meet grade-level expectations for students of color, reverse backsliding among lower-achievement students and also challenge above-grade-level students? How did they implement a scientifically based program in which children improved faster than in comparable schools, like those in Title I programs?

- *Applying scientifically-based reading research (SBRR) in Ohio’s classrooms has improved reading in some of the state’s lowest-performing, highest-poverty schools.*
- *Reading First Ohio has helped over 3000 teachers learn how to better assess and teach reading to over 52,000 students in 130 schools statewide.*
- *The principles that have guided Reading First Ohio in helping teachers to teach reading can guide literacy improvement efforts in all schools.*

Reading First Ohio

The answer is Reading First Ohio. Funded by No Child Left Behind, Reading First Ohio has benefited over 52,000 students and 3000 teachers in 130 schools across the state. The results since it began in 2003 have been steady and well documented. These results include helping students to close the gap on state performance on the third-grade Ohio Achievement Test (OAT) while gaining more than one year’s reading improvement for each year they spend in the program. Furthermore, these positive results have been repeated in 31 school districts around the state.



Even with these documented successes, a number of myths continue to surround literacy improvement in general and Reading First Ohio in particular. This paper addresses several such myths and lays them to rest with the documented results from the program’s record of helping teachers to instruct students in Ohio’s most needy schools to read at grade level by the end of the third grade. The goal of this paper is to arm decision-makers both inside and outside of the field of education with the most important talking-points around Reading First Ohio. It will also serve as a reminder of why Johnny can read better now and how he accomplished it.

Background

Reading First Ohio is a literacy improvement program that targets students in kindergarten through third grade, when there is the most to both gain and lose in teaching children to read. Its funding comes from the federal Reading First initiative in No Child Left Behind, which has a congressional mandate to fund literacy improvement programs. Its instructional focus comes from the findings of the congressionally commissioned National Reading Panel (2000), whose report identified what works in early reading instruction (usually referred to as scientifically based reading research or SBRR).

In Reading First Ohio, teachers receive high-quality, ongoing training in SBRR techniques that they apply in the classroom to improve core reading instruction and to intervene with struggling students early and appropriately. The program further supports teachers with coaches (called Literacy Specialists) in each school, SBRR reading materials and instructional practices, and the skills and tools to monitor students' progress.

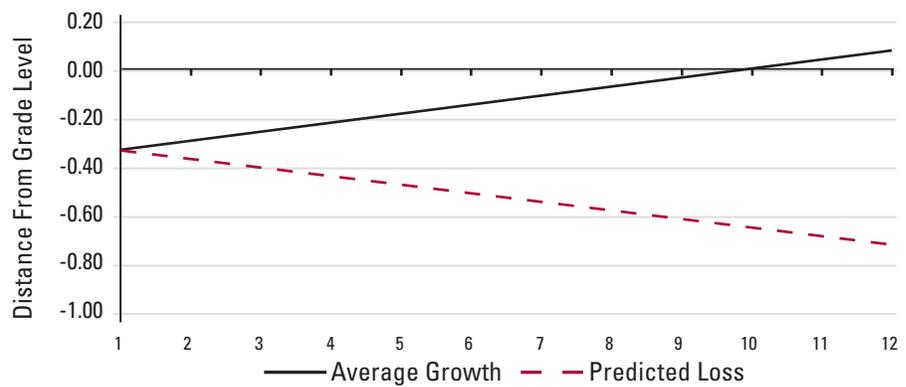
The frequent monitoring in particular helps students to become better readers than those in schools not implementing SBRR techniques. As a result, students in Reading First schools are reading better than children in these schools have ever read, and they are moving towards state proficiency averages at a greater rate than schools not participating in Reading First.

Progress

The following key points underscore the progress Reading First Ohio has made:

- K-3 students in Ohio have gained more than a year’s reading achievement for each year spent in the program, and if they stay within the program, the average child catches up to grade-level scores in reading fluency.

Average Growth in Reading Achievement and Predicted Growth for Urban Students in Reading First Ohio in Cohort 1 – 2003-2007



Note: Students (N=1099) were in kindergarten in 2003 and participated in a minimum of ten (of 12) DIBELS tests between Fall 2003 and Spring 2007. A flat line on this figure would indicate that students are achieving a year’s growth for each year’s worth of instruction. A positive slope would indicate more than a year’s growth for each year’s instruction; a negative slope less than a year’s growth for each year in school. Predicted loss estimate is based on research by Fryer and Levitt (2004).

- Students have closed the gap on state performance on the third grade OAT over the past four years. While the state’s passage rate has remained at 78%; Reading First students in the third cohort went from a 60% to 67% passage rate, closing the gap by nearly 40%.
- Teachers have helped students close the achievement gap for students of color.¹
- Equally importantly, Westat’s (2008) independent evaluation of Reading First Ohio has documented that the more time that students spend in Reading First schools the more they outperformed their peers in comparison schools across the state.

Thus, by teaching, testing to and exceeding recognized, scientific literacy criteria (“standards-based reform”) – for example, orally reading 110 words per minute in grade level materials by the end of the third grade and using strategies like Question-Answer Relationships (QAR) to respond to comprehension questions – Reading First Ohio has proven successful for teachers and students in some of the traditionally lowest-performing, highest-poverty schools in the state.

¹ For further elaboration on the points above, please see Response to Reading First Interim Report and Research Brief on Urban Schools’ Achievement in Reading First Ohio; both are available at www.readingfirstohio.org.

Common Myths About Reading First Ohio

In spite of demonstrated progress in Ohio elementary schools, several misconceptions about Reading First in general have tainted the success of Reading First Ohio in particular.

Myth 1: Reading First usurps local control in school districts.

“We gave the school districts a guide [The Consumer’s Guide to Effective Core Reading Programs, K-3] to researching and choosing the programs and vendors they wanted, and we encouraged them to continue using the tool for the life of the grant so that they could change programs if desired. That process not only brought them on board but also taught them how to perform good research into literacy training.”

*Angela Sangeorge
Director, Office of Literacy,
Ohio Department of Education*

Reading First is a top-down federally funded program that forces schools to conform to specific teaching methods.”

Reading First is not an actual mandate. No state or school district was ever forced to join the program or use a particular reading program, and no school district saw its budget cut for not choosing to participate in the program. In fact, a provision of the 1978 Department of Education Organization Act, repeated in No Child Left Behind, prohibits federal officials from requiring that local school districts adopt a particular curriculum or teaching method.

While Reading First sets out and enforces the funding requirement that core reading programs be based on SBRR, it allows local school districts broad discretion as to the programs they implement. This important concession to local control honors the role of the teacher as decision-maker. It is also consistent with the long-held notion that teachers themselves are in the best position to help children learn to read, especially when they have materials based on SBRR and use them with up-to-date information on students’ progress.

To this end, Reading First Ohio does not have a list of “approved” core reading programs from which districts must choose. Instead, districts make their own choices based on a tool, The Consumer’s Guide to Effective Core Reading Programs, K-3 (Simmons & Kame’enui, 2003), which helps them to qualify programs according to local preference and allows them to change programs later if appropriate. With this degree of local control came the responsibility for deep analysis that often increased local buy-in. As a result, the 31 districts participating in Reading First Ohio collectively proposed using seven different SBRR core reading programs; all 31 districts retained their local control and were funded.²

² The Reading First Ohio Center (2006) analyzed performance data throughout the program and had not noted any significant differences that would make one program clearly superior or inferior to the others.

Myth 2: Reading First only helps schools that qualify for the federal program.

“Whether it’s because our students are high achievers or because we’re not poor enough, our school didn’t qualify for Reading First, so what’s in it for us?”

This misconception puts the cart before the horse because, in fact, Reading First has the potential to help all schools with grades K-3.

Reading First is built upon a foundation of the National Reading Panel’s (2000) findings that the best literacy programs in which to invest precious time and money are rooted in SBRR and have been scientifically tested. While only eligible school districts could apply for Reading First Ohio funding, all schools and districts are able to implement Reading First techniques and strategies without receiving additional federal money.

These SBRR strategies are being further promoted in Ohio’s schools through state money provided with the Literacy Improvement Grants (LIG), so that even those schools that do not qualify for the funding can still improve their literacy efforts by aligning them with SBRR and standards-based reform.

Professional Development (PD) to Help the Teacher

- 180 minutes per month of classroom, slide presentation, individual e-learning or group e-learning within working hours
- University-trained literacy specialists

SBRR to Help the Student

- Phonemic awareness
- Phonics
- Reading fluency
- Vocabulary development
- Reading comprehension

Data-based Instructional Decision-Making to Help Both PD and SBRR

- Value-added analyses
- Dynamic Indicator of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS)
- Ohio Achievement Test (OAT) and TerraNova

Myth 3: Reading First is expensive.

“We’d like to implement Reading First and SBRR in our district, but we don’t have the money.”

Reading First costs needy schools nothing and offers a model for all schools to make investments they will eventually make anyway.

At the core of any literacy program are books, classroom materials and training for teachers. Even the poorest of school districts invests in these on a regular basis – no school uses the same books for twenty years – and for poor school districts Reading First represents an opportunity to federally fund this investment. Furthermore, the district enjoys the chance to bring its early literacy curriculum up to par with the most recent SBRR programs available. Thus, Reading First is federally funding schools to do what they can and should do on their own, with or without federal funding.

Another avenue open to poor schools is Title I, the compensatory education funding provided to all schools with high concentrations of poverty under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. School districts have considerable latitude in how they spend these funds, so some Reading First schools in Ohio are using Title I funds to pay a literacy teacher to work across grades, lead professional development and help the K-3 students. Even more strategically, some of these schools are paying personnel with Title I money to sustain their Reading First Ohio success beyond the current funding cycle.

Myth 4: Reading First is all about phonics.

“Balanced literacy instruction is what our teachers know and want, so the best way to teach reading must lie between this SBRR stuff and our current practices.”

This misconception is common in schools and districts that have not followed (or subscribed to) recent research on scientifically based methods of teaching reading. Current practices in the classroom almost always trail the most current scientific knowledge of instruction.

Many teachers tend to use isolated, anecdotal experiences to replace professional knowledge and best practices³ in their literacy efforts. Also, there are still entire school districts that teach reading by “whole language” (sometimes mistakenly called “balanced literacy⁴”) principles and programs. Whole language approaches tend to regard reading as an inherently natural process – like learning to speak – and do not require explicit and systematic instruction. The distance between these approaches and SBRR leads to misunderstandings about and aversion to practices used in Reading First.

The essence of Reading First – professional development for teachers in K-3 classrooms – rests upon two pillars: SBRR (National Reading Panel, 2000; National Research Council, 1998), and data-based instructional decision-making. In SBRR, reading instruction includes the five essential components of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. While exclusive emphasis on phonics may lead to improvements in word recognition, the research underpinning SBRR has demonstrated that only proper instruction in and measurement of all five components leads children to read and understand accurately the words on the page – the essence of reading.

For teachers who base their literacy efforts on anecdotal experience or whole-language principles, or for those who did not learn phonics and phonemic awareness in college, the techniques required by SBRR may seem alien, artificial or strained. However, Reading First does not require teachers to figure out scientific instruction and decision-making on their own; the professional development in these practices gives them the skills to help their students achieve better reading results through all five components.

“Four decades of rigorous scientific studies demonstrate that most young children need explicit instruction in phonics and phonemic awareness in order to learn how to read. This is especially true for disadvantaged youngsters.”

Chester E. Finn, Jr. and Michael J. Petrilli (Stern, 2008)

5 Essential Components of SBRR

- **Phonemic Awareness** – ability to hear and manipulate individual sounds in spoken words
- **Phonics** – recognizing that individual sounds (phonemes) are associated with letters and that these sounds and letters have predictable relationships
- **Fluency** – ability to decode words at an acceptable rate in order to read with expression and understanding
- **Vocabulary** – the store of words that are available to understand (receptive vocabulary) and communicate (expressive vocabulary) with others
- **Comprehension** – ability to understand what is read in print, including the ability to pull out literal and implied meanings

³ See works by Michael Fullan (1994), Judith Little, (1990), and Mike Schmoker, (1999)

⁴ See Louisa Moats (2007) for a full discussion

Myth 5: Reading First requires the DIBELS test.

“Without DIBELS we can’t do what Reading First says needs to be done.”

Good literacy instruction requires valid and reliable testing to be effective, and this applies to Reading First as well. While Reading First Ohio made the choice to go with the Dynamic Indicator of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), this is not the only option available to schools.

Assessments in Reading First serve the four purposes of screening deficiencies in reading skills, diagnosing reading strengths and weaknesses, monitoring progress, and measuring outcomes. Of these measures, DIBELS is sometimes the most controversial. Since Ohio has chosen it, however, it has become a mainstay for many schools and districts, both in and out of Reading First. In 2007, for example, DIBELS was in use in over 2500 school districts in the U.S. and Canada, covering almost 2 million K-3 students.

Although many educators are drawn to standards-based literacy reform, some may not want to use DIBELS, so school districts are free to use other reliable, highly predictive assessment measures. In Reading First Texas, for example, teachers administer the TPRI⁵, and other states use assessments based on their own criteria.

DIBELS is well suited to Reading First Ohio because students’ results on the DIBELS tests are predictive of performance on the state’s own OAT and with the nationally normed TerraNova test (Salzman et al., 2005).

⁵ Formerly the Texas Primary Reading Inventory, now known simply by the initials.

Myth 6: Reading First requires too many tests.

“We’re testing kids to death. There’s no time to teach them because we’re testing them all the time.”

Testing is already a way of life in the classroom – weekly spelling tests, pop quizzes, unit tests, chapter tests – and it is one way of measuring progress.

At the heart of effective instruction is accurate assessment of student strengths and weaknesses in order to make instructional decisions based on valid data. Reading First Ohio works with teachers to make assessment an integral, not separate, part of their teaching by helping them to measure progress and identify the benchmarks that students must reach to meet grade-level reading expectations. Brief DIBELS tests, conducted three times per year and lasting only a few minutes per child, provide important information in a time-efficient manner, to help teachers design instruction.

While the assessments required by Reading First may appear to be heavy, they are designed to identify instructional needs of students; the results are used by teachers to address those students’ needs. The goal of effective teaching, of course, is not simply to help children achieve better test results; however, effective literacy teaching will lead naturally to more capable students achieving better test results.

Myth 7: Reading First is tainted by conflicts of interest.

“It’s a scandal-ridden program that will soon be gone anyway, so why bother implementing it?”

In September 2006 the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) of the U.S. Department of Education issued a report criticizing Reading First Director Chris Doherty for intervening in the review process in several states to prevent funding of certain publishers’ literacy programs. Despite expert opinion at the time which supported Doherty’s belief that the programs did not follow the required SBRR guidelines, the OIG interpreted his intervention as inappropriate. The OIG also found that, although Reading First officials actually went beyond what was required in the law and drew up protocols for weeding out financial conflicts of interest in appointing reading experts to the review panels, those procedures did not flag résumés of some reviewers who had “professional links” with some reading programs, and therefore the protocols were “not effective” (Stern, 2008).

This report (whose conclusions have been taken to task by many in the field) concerns people and politics far away from the state’s poorest school districts. Reading First Ohio has succeeded in preserving local control in the selection process for literacy programs, with the result that seven different programs, each based on the principles of SBRR, were in use among 31 districts in the 2006–07 school year.

Reading First does indeed rely on congressional funding that is subject to periodic renewal, but the underlying scientific basis of its educational component is enduring. Now that educators know and largely agree on how to teach children to read, they can follow a well-documented path in the book purchases, assessment measures and teacher education in which they must invest anyway.

Conclusion

Reading First is the largest undertaking in the history of the federal government to improve literacy instruction for elementary students. To date, that has meant over \$6 billion to states to improve early reading instruction.

Any project of this size is bound to attract scrutiny and spawn misconceptions. In spite of the efforts of those with agendas that do not include what's best for Ohio's students, the documented successes of Reading First Ohio has taught us what works in improving early reading instruction. Teachers now have a validated model for teaching reading with scientifically demonstrated techniques and tools for accurately measuring students' progress. The lessons we have learned in educating children in Reading First Ohio can and should be used to benefit all Ohio students.

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For More Information

Visit: www.readingfirstohio.org.

Watch for upcoming articles and papers describing the techniques that have made Reading First Ohio more than just another early literacy program.

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