

GREAT PLAINS INSTITUTE  
OF READING AND WRITING

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SCIENCES

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA LINCOLN

# ANNUAL REPORT

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NEBRASKA READING FIRST

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**Nebraska**  
Lincoln



The Great Plains Institute  
of Reading & Writing  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln



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## Students

The students included in the following analyses of Reading First were only those who were assessed during either fall or winter and again in spring, unless specifically stated otherwise. This eliminates two groups of students that were present in the schools. The first group consists of students who appeared after the winter assessment window. We assume that these students did not receive enough instruction to benefit from the Reading First initiative. The second group consists of students who moved away before the spring assessment window. This group was of interest, as their mobility cannot be assumed random. The characteristics of mobile students are addressed in the section about **student mobility**.

All reports were based on school district generated data. District data has been verified as much as possible but small inaccuracies in reporting were still possible as Nebraska does not currently have a statewide reporting network for all grades.

### ***Demographic Characteristics of Students***

Students in Reading First schools were demographically similar to other students across Nebraska (see table 1) with few exceptions in ethnicity and household income. Ethnic minority students were 37.7% in Reading First Schools compared to 21% statewide, an 80% increase.

*Table 1: Demographic Characteristics*

	RF Schools	State†
Free Reduced Lunch	<b>51.0%</b>	33.9%
Special Education	12.7%	15.0%
English Language Learners	3.4%	5.6%
White non-Hispanic	62.3%	79.0%
Hispanic	12.9%	10.0%
African American	<b>21.6%</b>	7.0%
Native American	2.3%	1.6%
Other Ethnicity	1.0%	4.0%

† State Level data was generated from the Nebraska State of the Schools report for 2003-4, found at <http://reportcard.nde.state.ne.us>

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More specifically, African-American, Hispanic, and Native-American students were represented in higher proportion than in Nebraska’s schools. The percent of students who received free and reduced lunch was 51% for students in Reading First compared to just fewer than 34% statewide (50% more than in other schools).

It is important to note that the proportion of English Language Learners (ELL) was lower than was present statewide, creating a concern that districts with high concentration of ELL students (with the exception of Sunrise Elementary in Lakeview) were not benefiting from the Reading First initiative. The low rates of ELL and Native American students make any generalizations about the efficacy for these populations somewhat suspect.

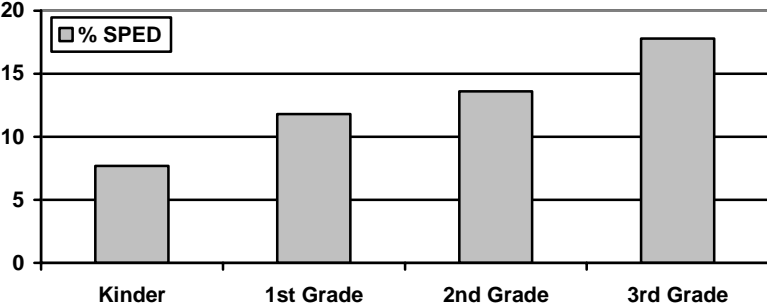
English Language Learners were present in significant proportion in two districts: Lakeview (Sunrise Elementary) 58.5% and Beemer 21.9%. While not a large percentage within the district the largest concentration of ELL students was in Omaha Public Schools 83 students (8.5%). The number of ELL students presents these districts with unique challenges not faced by other RF districts currently.

Ethnic diversity in Reading First schools was significantly different in different districts. The average 37.7% presented in Table 1 camouflages very different schools districts. Diversity was not directly related to district size or location; however, it is important to note that the least diversity

is found in small rural school districts. As a result, the challenges faced by high diversity districts have to be weighed as we examine student performance results. A full breakdown is presented in Table 2.

The overall proportion of students receiving Special Education services was 12.7%. Unlike all other demographic characteristics, the proportion of students served was different by grade. By 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, a full 17.8% was served by special education. We expect these numbers to diminish as Reading First has an impact on the development of mild disabilities.

Figure 1: Percent of Students Receiving Special Education Services in RF Schools



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Rates of students receiving Special Education services fluctuate between districts. Very low proportions were reported in one of the smallest districts and the largest, namely Elkhorn Valley (4.8%) and Omaha Public Schools (7.7%). On the other side of the spectrum high proportions were reported in McCook Public Schools (23.2%) and Beemer Public School (28.1%).

*Table 2: Minority Students in Reading First Schools*

<i>District</i>	<i>% of Minority Students</i>
Ainsworth	1.6
Anselmo-Merna/Broken-Bow	5.0
McCook	7.5
Bancroft Rosalie Allen	9.9
Sidney	11.2
Elkhorn	14.5
Chadron	19.5
North Platte	25.5
Gering	32.3
Beemer	34.4
Lakeview	83.0
Omaha	88.4

### ***Student Mobility and Achievement***

Students were defined as mobile if they were not assessed at least once in fall or winter and again in the spring. Overall 86.6% of students were stable in Reading First schools, compared with 86.1 reported statewide in 2004 (<http://reportcard.nde.state.ne.us>). There were significant differences in mobility based on grade-level, gender, special education services, or ELL status.

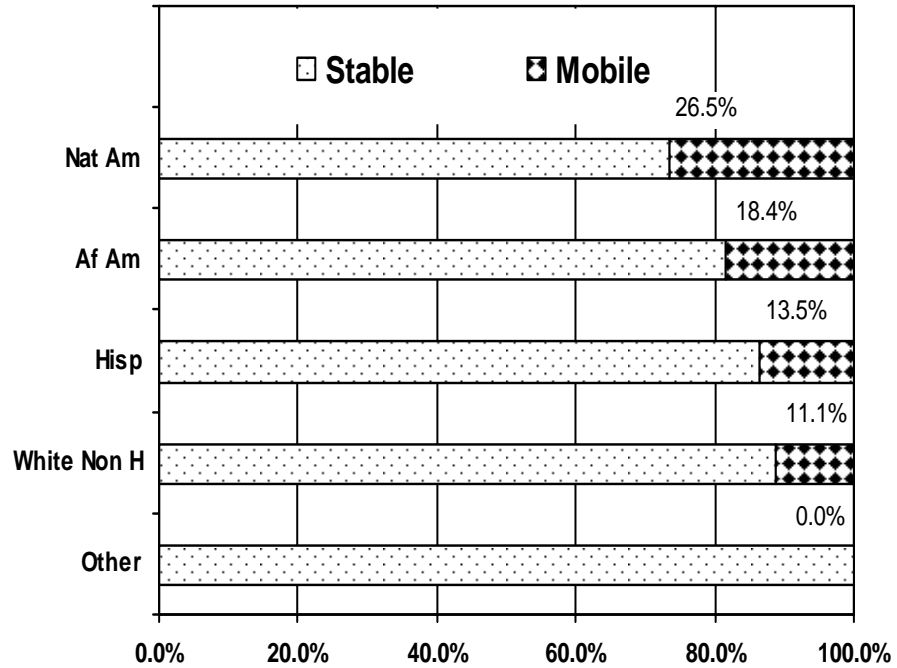
Low-income students (those receiving free or reduced price lunch- FRL) were 80% more likely to be mobile (18.5%) than students who did not receive FRL (10.4%); furthermore, even larger differences were detected based on ethnicity. Data in Table 3 shows a great discrepancy in mobility rates based on ethnicity. Native Americans and African American students have the highest rates, while White and Other (mainly Asian American) have low rates. Mobility was highest in Lakeview (19.7%) and Omaha Public schools (18.7%) and lowest in Bancroft Rosalie (7.1%, and Elkhorn Valley (7.5%).

Overall, mobile students started the year with lower achievement than stable students did. Mobile students in kindergarten had lower achievement than stable students in letter naming fluency but not in initial sound fluency. In first grade, stable students



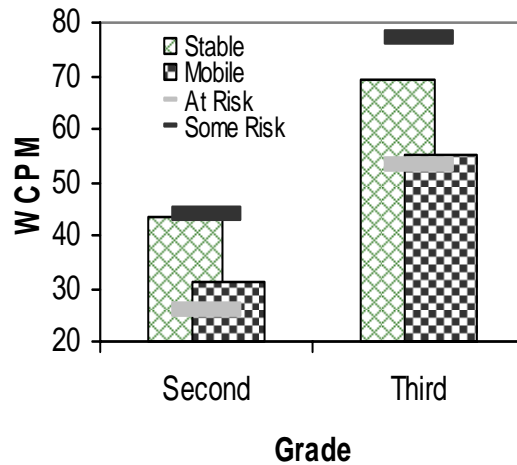
had significantly higher achievement in letter naming fluency and decoding but NOT in phonemic awareness. In second and third grade, there were significant differences on all measures. Across grades, the difference between stable and mobile students increases as students spend more time in school.

Figure 2: Student Mobility across Ethnic Groups



The data shows that mobile students were more frequently minority and low-income students who also have lower achievement. That is, the higher mobility of these groups creates an overestimation of the impact of Reading First on low income and minority students.

Figure 3: Differences in Oral Reading Fluency between Mobile and Stable Students in Fall of Second and Third Grade





## Student Achievement

Grade-level achievement was determined using a different outcome measure at the spring assessment in each grade to match grade-level expectations.

In Kindergarten, we used the DIBELS Phoneme Segmentation Fluency.

In First Grade, we used the DIBELS Non Word Fluency.

In Second Grade, we use the DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency.

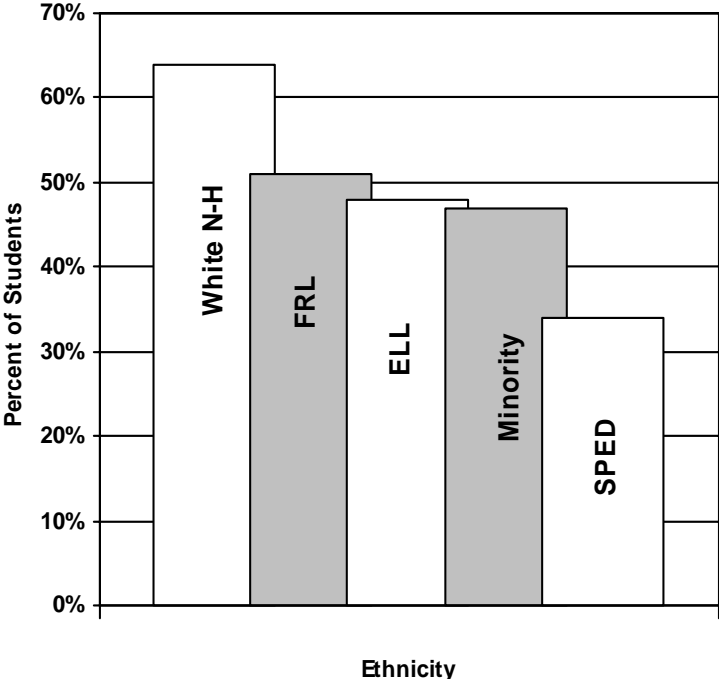
In Third Grade, we used the Gates MacGinitie comprehension results.

For simplicity of presentation, only these scores will be presented in the section.

### General

Out of 3,625 stable students in Nebraska’s Reading First schools 57.7% were at grade-level in the spring of the first year of implementation. Disparities based on poverty, ethnic groups, special education status, and English learning status were present. Only 50.5% of low-income students, 48% of English language learners were at grade-level, and 34.2% of students receiving special education services were at grade-level. Grade-level data break down presented in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Percent of Students at Grade-level

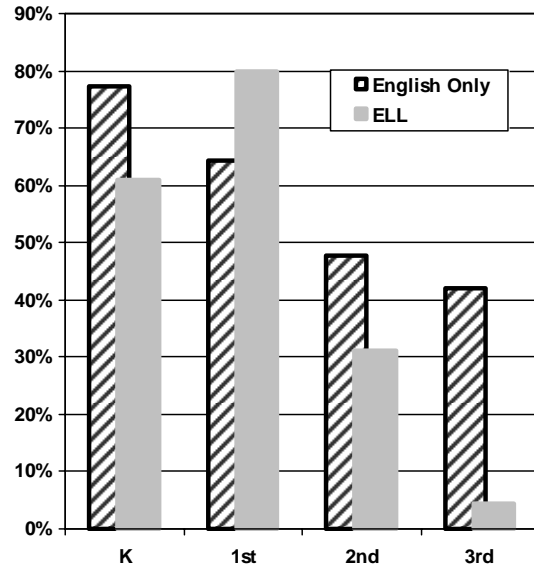


The overall results obscure a significant interaction between students’ actual grade-level and their achievement levels. Students in higher grades had lower rates of grade-level achievement. The gaps based on demographic variables showed a similar trend with the gaps larger in each subsequent grade. In kindergarten, 76.5% of students were at grade-level. This rate declines to



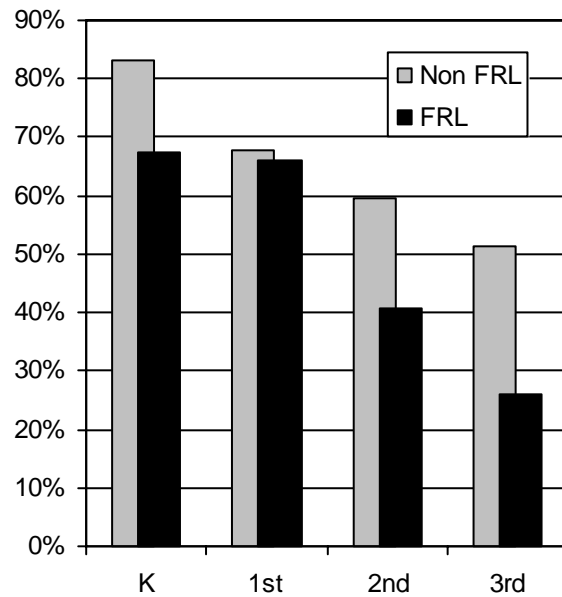
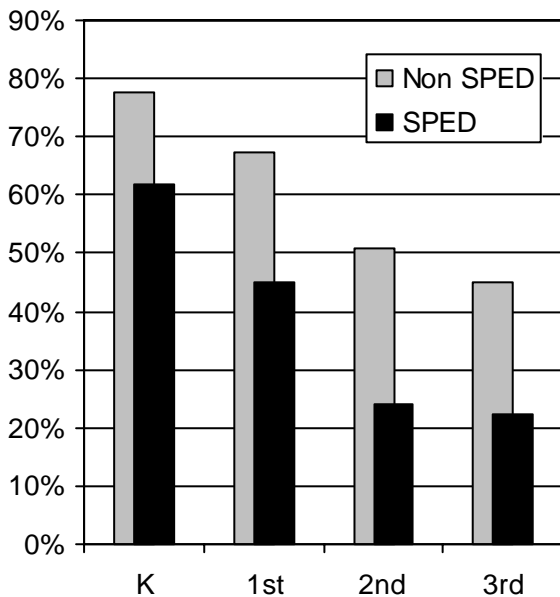
64.9% in first grade, 47.3% in second grade, and finally only 41% in third. The impact of this trend can be viewed when looking at English language learners (Figure 5).

Figure 5:  
Achievement  
and English  
Learning



The gap was 16% in Kindergarten and actually favored ELL students in first grade. But the gap reopened in second grade and grew to 37% by third grade. The pattern of growing achievement gaps across grades applied for students receiving Special education services and those who receive FRL.

Figure 6: Ethnicity and Poverty Achievement Gaps

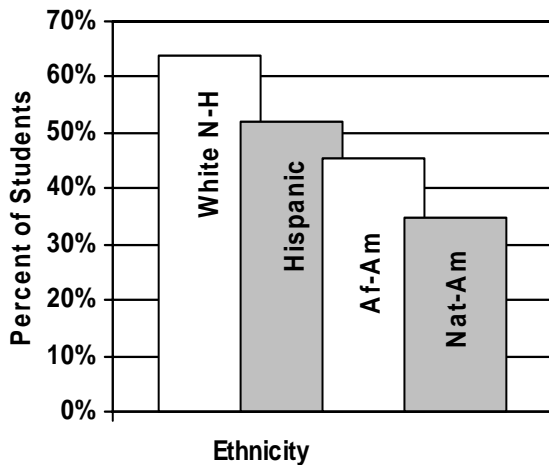






The trend of diminishing scores across grades and growing gaps is by no means unique to Nebraska. Florida’s Reading First initiative reported similar trends in the first two years of implementation. While there is no way to provide a causal explanation of this grade-level effect, a few possible explanations emerge. The demands at each grade-level were different and get progressively harder, as a result, students were able to keep up in the early grades but less so as they go up the grades. A second explanation is that the educational history of second and third grade ELL students puts them at a disadvantage as they lack basic skills they should have acquired in kindergarten and first grade. Finally, as observed in classrooms, Reading First implementation was stronger in the lower grades than it was in second and third grades. The growing gaps also highlight the need to implement specialized interventions to answer the needs of struggling readers in all grades. We believe that the results of the second year of implementation will be an improvement over year one, based on carry over of students who started in RF last year, and growing teacher/administrator expertise.

Figure 7: Break Down of Students At-Grade-Level by Ethnicity



Results range from 44.7% in Omaha Public Schools to 77.3% in Sidney. However, after taking into account student demographic information, the differences were smaller but stayed significant. Size of the school district, curriculum, and number of students involved were not predictors of school and district success.

### Achievement Growth

A way of measuring the annual growth of students is by examining the end of the year scores for students who were at grade-level at the beginning of the year. If most (at least 80%) of students



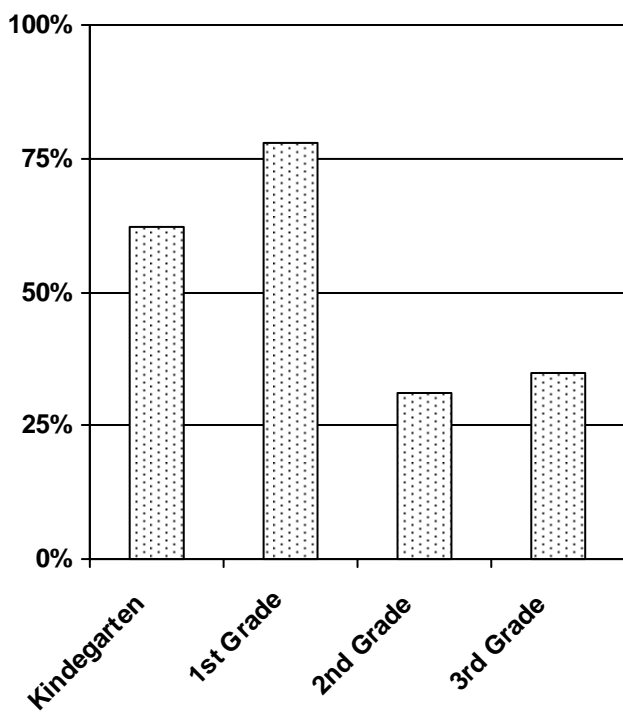
who were on grade-level at the beginning of the year are still on grade-level at the end of the year then the instruction was adequate to advance students at an adequate pace.

The percentage of students on grade-level that had at least a full year's progress were 81.4% in kindergarten, 81.7% in first grade, 87.7% in second grade, and 83% in third grade.

Using this measure of stability, we have examined the growth of at-grade-level-students by demographic categories. English language learners were as stable as English-only students across all grades. Income-level (FRL) wasn't a key factor for students on grade-level with the exception of first grade (only 74.8% of grade-level low-income students fared well at the end of the year). Ethnic groups did not present a coherent picture and, overall, students of both majority and minority backgrounds had stable progress if they started at grade-level. Students who were receiving Special Education services were not as stable and, in general, had a significantly lower probability of staying at grade-level.

The growth of students that started the year below grade-level is paramount. The main idea of Reading First is that students who were behind will reduce their risk and eventually reach grade-level. The data in Figure 8 confirms previous results. A majority of students below grade-level in kindergarten and first grade reduced their risk over the year. In second and third grade the percentage of students who reduced their risk dropped to about 30%.

Figure 8: Percent of Students below Grade-level who Reduced Risk in Reading



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## ***Summary of Student Achievement***

- Impact on Kindergarten and first grade students was very significant. Structured Phonemic Awareness and Phonics instruction is producing results.
- Impact on students in second and third grade was positive, but not as large. The second and third grade “slump” was observed nation wide. Lower achievement was due to the growing complexity in reading instruction and less effective teaching strategies.
- English language learners were doing well in kindergarten and first grade but fall far behind in second and third. The observed difference was due to the combined effect of newcomers, increased reading demands, less effective previous grades, and less effective fluency and comprehension instruction.
- Special Education students were NOT closing the gaps that were widening as demands increase. This signifies the need to put secondary and tertiary interventions in place for this population based on diagnostic instruments. The preferred model will be a response to intervention (RTI) model.

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## Teachers

### ***Demographic Characteristics***

Teachers:

The majority of classroom teachers involved with Nebraska's Reading First were white women (over 95%) with considerable teaching experience (average 16 yrs).

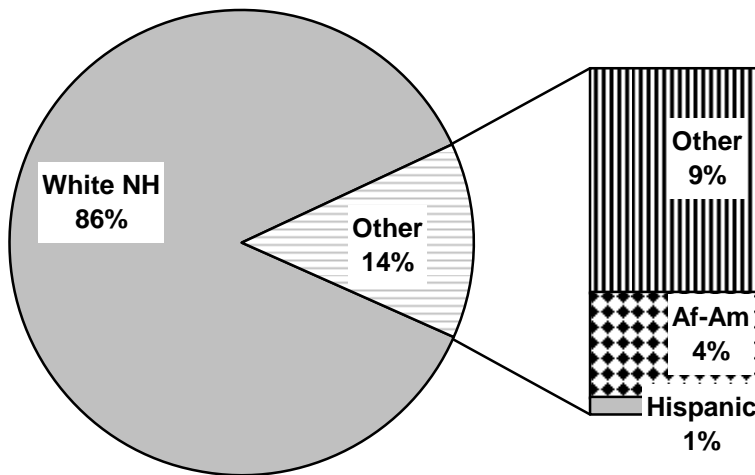


Figure 9: Teacher Ethnicity

While statewide most teachers were experienced, the data across districts reveals some differences as can be seen in Figure 2. In two districts (Omaha and Sidney) teachers were significantly less experienced, a fact which may impact the ability to implement Reading First. Sidney results should be viewed carefully since they were based on only a few teacher responses.

All teachers were certified and 95% of all teachers were employed full time. Teachers reported varying degrees of professional development in Reading Language Arts in the past 5 years. Omaha Public Schools and Ainsworth teachers report moderate to high levels of professional development. All other district/ consortia teachers report low to moderate levels. These trends may reflect rural isolation in western and middle Nebraska.

### ***Collective Self-Efficacy***

Teacher Collective Self-Efficacy is a measure of teachers' belief that as a faculty they were up to the task of raising student achievement in the schools. Efficacy beliefs are important since they often determine teachers' motivation to make the efforts associated with change. As 65% of teachers acknowledged in the fall surveys the Reading First, plans across all districts required major changes in practice planning; thus, motivation becomes a crucial element in successfully transforming instruction.



Sample statements of self efficacy were:

- As teachers of this school, we are able to teach reading even to the most difficult students because we are all committed to the same educational goals
- I believe in the potential of our school's faculty to establish scientifically based approaches to reading instruction even when faced with setbacks
- I am convinced that we, as teachers, can guarantee high instructional quality even when resources are limited or become scarce
- I am certain that we, as teachers, can achieve our reading instruction goals because we stick together and do not get demoralized by the day-to-day hassles of this profession

Since the Collective Self-Efficacy survey was adapted to Reading First use, we examined its technical qualities. As expected, the survey was unidimensional (producing a single factor). Furthermore, the survey was highly reliable; a measure of internal consistency (coefficient alpha) yielded .88 for the fall survey and .90 for spring.

Fall results showed high collective self-efficacy in most schools. Even so, by spring collective self-efficacy has improved significantly. This trend shows that despite the difficulties in implementation teachers still felt their peers and themselves were up to the task. There were no significant differences between participating districts in collective self-efficacy.

### ***Attitudes toward Reading First***

The Reading First Evaluation team interviewed twenty-four randomly selected teachers from eastern and western Nebraska. Each interview lasted approximately 25 minutes and covered the following topics:

- 1) Confidence in teaching the curriculum
- 2) Confidence in teaching faculty and staff
- 3) Understanding of Reading First program
- 4) Communication with other teachers and staff
- 5) Reaction to professional development
- 6) Developing goals and expectations for the students
- 7) Participation in the Reading First Grant

The interviews took place in 10 school districts over a period of three months. Teachers were told the interviewer is not part of the Reading First grant and that the information they shared will be kept confidential and anonymous. The interviewees received a \$35 honorarium. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Teachers' experience ranged from one year to over twenty years. Results from interviews were incredibly similar; no patterns by district size, location, or student demographics were detected.



Main themes emerging from teacher interviews were:

**Communication.** Teachers feel there was much more cooperation with peer teachers and staff than in previous years and in previous programs. Coordination ranges across all grade-levels and, for the first time, teachers felt they know better what is taking place in other classes and in other grade-levels. The improved communication led to improved understanding of grade-level expectations and improved collaboration among teachers. As never before, teachers felt they could ask and receive support from peers, coaches, and in some cases administrators. Support ranged from help with theoretical understanding to planning and modeling. The support emerging from better communication came in real time, often during the school day as need and problems arose.

**Students.** Teachers acknowledged that before Reading First their expectations were lower than the results actually achieved by the program. Most teachers did not expect such growth in student achievement in such a short time. This includes at-risk students as well as those already receiving Special Education services. They recognized that not all students have reached benchmark goals, however, their progress was already much faster than anticipated. Teachers felt they were part of the students' success individually but even more so as a group. Whenever asked if they felt they had part in the students' success individually, all teachers began discussing the group effort made by all teachers and staff that led to this success.

**Professional development.** Teachers felt they learned a great deal in the professional development sessions offered over the summer; however, the majority of the teachers admitted that the *hands-on* demonstrations, where they were taken in to the classrooms and shown the *how-to* by a professional, was most helpful.

*"It was nice to know the theory behind it all, but it's more helpful to me to see how to do it"*  
[Elizabeth, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teacher]

Interview results were confirmed by the results of spring teacher surveys. Over 90% of surveyed teachers thought that, "The staff of Reading First provided me with many useful ideas and resources for changing my classroom practices". Eighty one percent of teachers agreed that Reading First coaches and staff provided useful feedback on instructional practices. Finally, 93% of teachers valued highly the kinds of changes called for by the district Reading First plan.

The results of the interviews and surveys strongly affirm the changes that Reading First has initiated in participating schools. Before Reading First, 40% of teachers felt the district had ambiguous and even conflicting reading goals; 48% did not have adequate information about students and literacy practices in other classrooms. This change in practice was not a minor one, as 65% of teachers felt that Reading First implementation was a significant departure from previous methods of reading instruction.



## ***Classroom Practice***

### **Logs**

The evaluation team made extensive efforts to collect classroom practice data from all teachers. Despite these efforts, teacher response was partial at best (as can be seen in Table 3). The projected number of logs was just over 600. According to this estimate, we have only 50% of the expected data. Nevertheless, the 320 reports we do have allow us to explore the practices reported by a wide variety of teachers.

In reporting the instructional focus (Figure 9) during the Reading 90 minute block, we see a clear grade-level differentiation especially in teaching phonemic awareness and phonics. Phonemic awareness was a focus of instruction in kindergarten and first grade and was just mentioned on the fly in the upper grades. The use of phonics as the emphasis of instruction peaks in first grade and all but disappears by third grade. While it conforms to expected foci of teaching, we do wonder if there was no room for teaching complex orthographic patterns in second and third grade, especially to below grade-level struggling readers.

Instruction of reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension rise in second and third grade, but they were appropriately foci of instruction in the earlier grades too. While there were instructional differences between school districts, the partial response rates prevent us from reaching any conclusion.

The logs were able to capture specific instructional strategies in specific areas of instruction. In the next section we outline the major strategies used in teaching phonics, fluency, and comprehension.

Phonics strategies were

- Focused emphasis on segmenting and blending in 35% of lessons
- Sight words taught in 13% of the lessons
- Decoding strategies were incorporated into connected texts in 17% of lessons, there was a clear reliance on the CORE reading program 60% of the time and decodable texts in 51% of lessons
- Teacher modeling appears in only 17% of lessons
- Most of the work was centered on student practice with teacher feedback (54% of lessons)

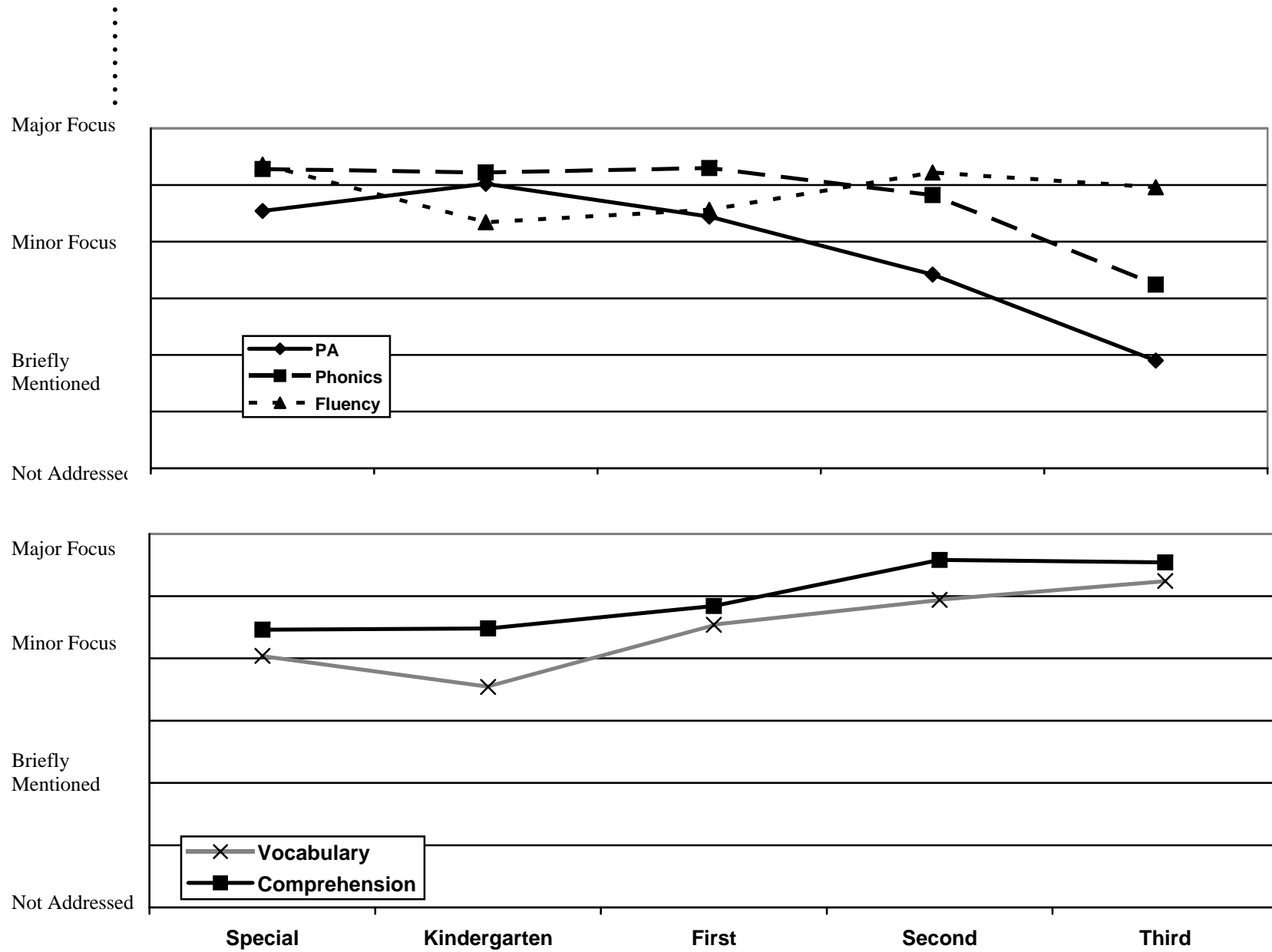


Figure 10: Lesson Focus across Grades



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*Table 3: Teacher Logs by District*

	Frequency	Percent
Ainsworth Community Schools	9	2.8
Anselmo-Merna/Borken-Bow Bow Public Schools	15	4.7
Bancroft-Rosalie Community School/Allen	20	6.3
Beemer Public School	8	2.5
Chadron Public Schools	10	3.1
Elkhorn Valley Schools	9	2.8
Gering Public Schools	42	13.1
Lakeview Community Schools	10	3.1
McCook Public Schools	48	15.0
North Platte Public Schools	16	5.0
Omaha Public Schools	119	37.2
Sidney	14	4.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>320</b>	<b>100</b>

Fluency strategies:

- Taught whole class 37% of the time
- Most common practice was:
  - Guided Reading (24%)
  - Repeated Reading (22%)
- Other practices:
  - Progress Monitoring (5%)
  - Paired Reading (7%)
  - Choral Reading (12%)
- Teachers modeled fluent reading only 6% of the time

Comprehension strategies:

- Low use of specific strategies and structures:
  - Story maps/ story grammar in 10% of lessons
  - Compare and contrast (8%)
  - Problem solution (8%)
  - The most common mode of teaching was question and answer by the teacher in 24% of the lessons
- Pre-Reading strategies were present 28% of the lessons
  - Use of Graphic Organizers and mental imagery was at 6% each



Analysis of teacher logs results shows a much more organized approach to early reading skills than to fluency and comprehension. Comprehension strategies in particular seem to still lack a coherent number of strong strategic approaches and seem to have changed less than instruction in other areas.

## **Observations**

The Reading First observers visited 62 classrooms across the state. The observations were conducted in the second half of the year to provide sufficient transition time for schools and teachers. Observations were 20- 45 minutes in length, most averaging about 30 minutes. Overall impressions indicated that schools and teachers were executing the plans set by their schools. Fidelity to the Reading First plan and clear instructional focus were more evident with kindergarten and first grade teachers than by second and third. Schools have started to modify curriculum to fit student needs and shortcoming of specific curricula (e.g. insufficient phonemic awareness in kindergarten). Teachers were still, for the most part, at a loss as to what to do with benchmark and progress-monitoring results, although schools have started making gains in this direction in later monitoring and evaluation visits.

The thing that stands out most from the classroom observations is the consistency within and across schools. It was obvious that the teachers in the classrooms were implementing the program in a fairly uniform way, and they were seeing results.

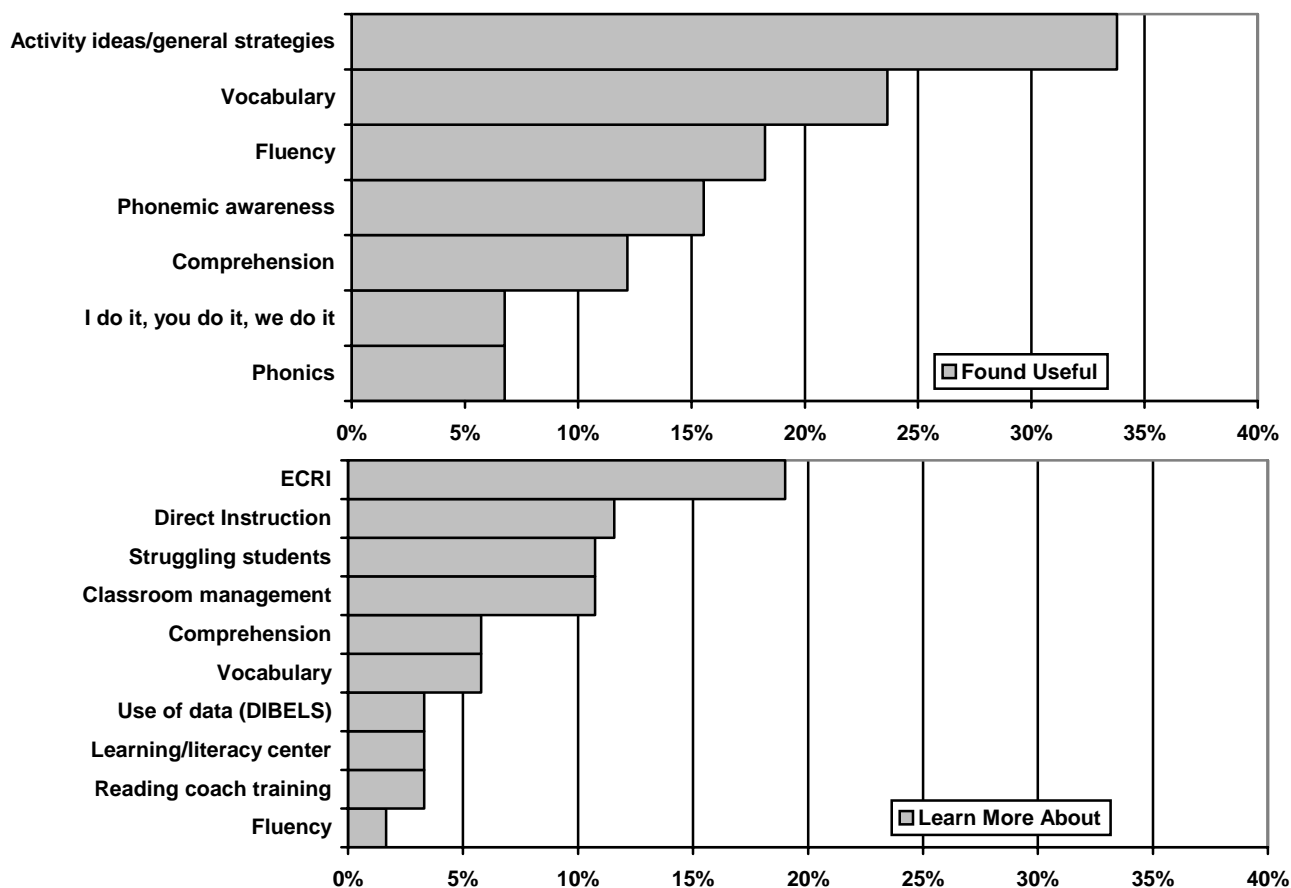


## Professional Development

### Reactions to Professional Development

Reading First State leadership carried out high quality professional development. Reading First has consistently used national experts to support local efforts. After each professional development we collected data about the perceived benefits through open-ended surveys. The response to professional development was overwhelmingly positive. Over 60% of participants included unsolicited positive comments. None included an overall negative comment. Responses to professional development fell in three major categories: (1) useful ideas and techniques, (2) ideas to learn more about, and (3) general comments and suggestions.

Figure 11: Professional Development Participants found Useful/ Wanted to Learn More About



Teachers have benefited the most from professional development in the five components of reading. The emphasis on phonemic awareness, phonics, and general strategies has been



significant (Figure 12). A sample of the comments about learning outcomes made after professional development included:

- Strategies. Overview and how to fit it into first grade
- How to use read-alouds more effectively to improve comprehension and vocabulary knowledge
- Everything especially phonemic awareness
- I do it; you do it. The little secrets to help students to succeed in reading
- How important it is to be structured consistent and to follow a routine. All teachers need to use a consistent language and to have considerable expectations

Comprehension is a key skill in second and third grades. Comprehension was not addressed as well as phonemic awareness and phonics. This shortcoming may be the reason for lower impact of Reading First in second and third grade. A sample of comments expressing future professional development needs included:

- More examples to use for struggling readers- resource students especially
- Other Reading First schools curriculum
- Just wish we had more time to do hands-on things. What we did was wonderful!
- We need to learn more about specific strategies!
- How to do or adapt our reading series to direct instruction- behavior management.

Separate survey results confirm the overall positive impact of Reading First professional development. Eighty seven percent of teachers agreed with the statement “The staff of Reading First provided me with many useful ideas and resources for changing my classroom practices”.

## ***Monitoring Visits***

Monitoring visits were conducted in all Reading First schools throughout the year. Other sources of information verify that teachers, Reading Coaches, and principals found these visits extremely beneficial. The benefits were in feedback, guidance, and motivation to keep Reading First as intended.

Some positive impacts were present at almost all school visits. Teachers saw the utility of grouping by achievement or skill level. Teachers and administrators noted that multiple stakeholders: staff, parents, and community had been positive. Teachers have found the focus on the five components of reading and the accompanying strategies and activities very helpful. Most schools were consistently adhering to the 90 minute block and 75% articulated that the 90 minute block was a positive development. At about 50% of the schools assessments were being used to guide instruction successfully, they saw a benefit in creating a K-3 curriculum consistency, and benefited from staff development.



Sample positive comments were:

- Constant monitoring through ongoing assessment
- Quality data to share with parents
- Flexible grouping which challenges ALL students
- Most students are on task reaching mastery of all the skills

During the same visits both monitoring team and teachers have articulated a series of challenges. The first challenge expressed in all schools was time demands for planning for Reading First demands. About half of the schools indicated scheduling challenges, assessment, and interpretation as key issues that they were still facing as Reading First plans were implemented in their respective schools. Other common issues mentioned were creating homogeneous groups and lack of intervention resources.

Sample Challenges articulated at the summary of monitoring visits were:

- Hard to find the time for preparation and planning with new materials
- We are still learning how to best prioritize the best use of materials
- Overwhelming! Too much stuff!
- With Title 1 students it's hard to reach everyone.

Summaries of monitoring visits show that all Reading First schools were engaged in a serious process of change. Schools were recognizing the strengths of the Reading First mandates and directions. They identify useful elements in this initiative, namely 90 minute block, assessment, and coaches and act on them. The struggle of making sense of assessment and plan time were challenges that any meaningful change in an organization causes. We hope, that as the program unfolds, the time constraints will lessen. It is clear, from observing the change within schools over the past year, that many of the instructional challenges will be resolved as teachers increase their proficiency.



## Summary and Recommendations

- Teachers and schools have made a real effort to change
- Student performance in the earlier grades has shown great promise for the following years
- Growth in fluency and comprehension in grades 2 and 3 were not as impressive and require additional attention
- Overall, students make at least a year's progress in most schools and most demographic groups
- Schools can make much better use of the data they were collecting and need further direction in this area
- The assessment results were triangulated by observations in the classrooms, interviews, and teacher responses to professional development- teachers know how to teach PA and the alphabetic principle but were still struggling with:
  - finding time and effective strategies for fluency training
  - teaching comprehension strategies
  - teaching self monitoring
- Growing gaps for SPED, Ethnic minorities, and ELL students suggest an emphasis on the secondary and tertiary levels of intervention in the schools

### ***Evaluation and Assessment recommendation***

- Use the GORT in first grade only with a larger sample
- Teacher Logs limited to 3 times a year
- Add focus groups
- Increase teacher response to logs
- Shorter teacher surveys and logs (at about 50%)
- New teacher knowledge survey- shorter focus on case studies