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Using Enhanced Coaching of Teachers to Improve Reading Achievement in Grades PreK–2 in Chicago Public Schools

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Using Enhanced Coaching of Teachers to Improve Reading Achievement in Grades PreK–2 in Chicago Public Schools

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Chicago Public Schools is working to improve early literacy outcomes through a multiyear professional development initiative for preK–2 teachers. The P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative aims to improve literacy instruction by training teachers to implement effective early literacy instruction balancing systematic foundational skills instruction with reading and writing instruction involving rich, complex texts. The initiative began in 2016/17 and served 23 percent of all district elementary schools by 2018/19. The district designated 26 of the 115 elementary schools implementing the initiative in 2018/19 to receive enhanced supports, including intensive, site-based coaching, to support students' independent reading. This study compared the reading achievement of students who attended schools that received the enhanced supports (priority schools) with the reading achievement of students who attended similar schools that received only the initiative's standard supports (nonpriority schools). It also examined differences between priority and nonpriority schools in teachers' and administrators' participation in professional development sessions and looked at the successes and challenges of implementation. The study found that one year after implementation of the initiative, attending a priority school did not lead to higher end-of-year reading achievement than attending a nonpriority school after other factors were adjusted for. Teachers and administrators in priority schools were more likely than those in nonpriority schools to participate in the initiative's core professional development sessions. Interviews with select district, network, and school leaders; instructional support coaches; and teachers suggest that several aspects of the initiative's professional development were valuable, most notably the opportunities for teachers to deepen their understanding of the initiative's professional development, receive feedback through observation and school-based coaching, and learn from one another. But instructional support coaches' limited capacity, due to competing responsibilities, was a challenge. District leaders might consider increasing the number of coaches available and limiting their competing priorities so they can focus on the initiative.

Why this study?

Proficiency in reading by the end of grade 3 is key to academic success in later grades. Students who are not proficient readers by the end of grade 3 might struggle in subjects such as science, social studies, mathematics, and English language arts, where they are expected to read to learn throughout the curriculum. Students who cannot decode or comprehend grade-level text are more likely to struggle academically in middle and high school and to drop out of school (Hernandez, 2011).

Recognizing the importance of reading proficiency by grade 3, the Illinois State Board of Education set a goal that by 2032, 90 percent of grade 3 students in the state would score proficient on its state standardized test (Illinois State Board of Education, 2018). Chicago Public Schools, the largest district in the state and the third largest in the United States, must improve students' reading proficiency to meet this goal. As of 2018, 36 percent of grade 3 students in Chicago Public Schools met or exceeded expectations on the English language arts state assessment (Illinois State Board of Education, 2018).

For additional information, including background on the study, technical methods, and supporting analyses, access the report appendixes at https://go.usa.gov/xFzBr.

Chicago Public Schools has both a vision and a plan to improve early literacy outcomes for its students. In 2019 the district released *Success Starts Here: A New Five-Year Vision for Chicago Public Schools* (Chicago Public Schools, 2019). The

goals of that five-year vision include increasing the number of incoming kindergarteners who demonstrate school readiness by 50 percent and ensuring that 65 percent of grade 2 students are proficient in reading.

Chicago Public Schools is working to achieve that vision of improved early literacy outcomes through a multiyear professional development initiative for preK–2 teachers. That initiative—the P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative—aims to improve the ability of teachers in preK–2 classrooms to guide students in reading and analyzing challenging texts. The initiative trains teachers to balance systematic foundational skills instruction with reading and writing instruction involving rich, complex texts (see appendix A).

Although balanced literacy approaches often include whole language instruction, which lacks evidence of effectiveness (Snow, 2020), the P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative guidance calls for explicit and systematic instruction in phonics and phonological awareness, consistent with recommendations based on research in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (National Reading Panel, 2000; Rose, 2006; Rowe, 2005). The P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative also includes word study lessons with shared reading integration, interactive read aloud that provides direct instruction and guided practice, independent reading, and individual and small group conferences. Elements of the approach are consistent with findings from the Reading for Understanding Initiative (Sabatini et al., 2018) and the What Works Clearinghouse practice guide on supporting reading for understanding in kindergarten through grade 3 (Foorman et al., 2016). That practice guide recommends four practices: teaching students academic language skills by engaging students in interactive reading activities; developing students' awareness of segments of sound and letter-sound relations; teaching word decoding, how to recognize and write word parts in isolation and in text, and high-frequency words; and ensuring that students read connected text every day with feedback to support reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension.

As part of the initiative, teachers receive three one-day professional development sessions per year in their geographic network (see appendix A).[1] During each session teachers assess themselves on instruction, set goals for their development, and track student progress using district reading assessments chosen by the school. Principals or other school administrators attend a parallel professional development series designed for school leaders (which 75 percent of networks opted into). The district believes that this initiative, if implemented well, will improve teachers' instructional practices and, in turn, early-grade reading proficiency. The focus of the 2018/19 professional development was on individual and small group instruction, referred to as conferencing, which is consistent with the evidence-based recommendation to provide opportunities for oral reading practice with feedback to develop fluent and accurate reading with expression (Foorman et al., 2016). Teachers can maximize their instructional time to provide individualized feedback to each student weekly by engaging other students in independent reading or small group work (Foorman et al., 2016).

The initiative began in the 2016/17 school year with four to six schools in each of the district's 13 geographic networks, with a goal of scaling up slowly each year. District leaders selected schools they believed would benefit from professional learning in effective early literacy instruction based on grade 2 reading achievement, growth patterns for schools, and conversations with network and school leaders. By 2018/19 the initiative served 115 schools, or 23 percent of the district's elementary schools.

In addition to scaling up the initiative in 2018/19, the district designated 26 of the 115 schools implementing the initiative as priority schools that would receive further support to close achievement gaps. Network leaders

1. Chicago Public Schools has 13 geographic networks for elementary schools, each of which provides oversight and support to schools within their region.

selected priority schools based on observable data and anecdotal information from instructional support coaches and early childhood staff. Schools that were selected had the following features:

- A preK program.
- A rating of in good standing or in need of provisional support on the district's School Quality Rating Policy.[2]
- Three or more teachers who needed intensive coaching.
- Instruction or primary literacy identified as a goal area in the school's Continuous Improvement Work Plan, which is the school's strategic planning process that establishes its mission, strategies, and milestones.
- Standardized test scores that indicated a high percentage of students reading below or far below grade level or evidence of substantial achievement gaps.
- Adequate resources to support the launch of independent reading in fall 2018.
- A commitment from leadership to ongoing progress and teacher development.

Priority schools received enhanced services and resources in addition to the standard set of supports that all schools in the initiative received. At priority schools teachers received intensive, site-based coaching support twice a month, and administrators received additional support from instructional support coaches. The coaches, together with principals, observed teachers' literacy instruction at priority schools three times a year, using a tool to track implementation. The tool helped coaches and principals develop a shared understanding of what literacy instruction should look like in preK–2 settings and supported principals as instructional leaders.[3]

District leaders wanted to know whether attending a priority school led to higher student reading achievement at the end of 2018/19 than attending a nonpriority school. They also wanted to learn what conditions were necessary to successfully implement the initiative. To address these questions, the Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest Early Childhood Education Research Alliance requested this study to determine whether attending a priority school led to higher reading achievement than attending a similar nonpriority school that received the initiative's standard supports.[4] The study also examined differences between priority and nonpriority schools in teachers' and administrators' participation in the initiative's core professional development sessions. In addition, the study team interviewed select district, network, and school leaders; instructional support coaches; and teachers to gain insight into their experience implementing the initiative's professional development as a whole in order to learn the conditions under which implementation can be most successful. Chicago Public Schools leaders can use the study findings to make decisions about the design and use of the initiative with enhanced coaching. Education leaders from other districts can use the findings to decide whether to offer more intensive group professional development sessions focused on literacy instruction with coaching supports.

2. The School Quality Rating Policy establishes indicators of school performance and growth and benchmarks against which a school's success is annually evaluated. The rating is based on several indicators of success, including attendance, data quality, closing achievement gaps, school culture and climate, and student test score performance and academic growth. Schools that receive a rating of Level 2+ are in good standing, and schools that receive a rating of Level 2 need provisional support. In 2018/19 about 40 percent of Chicago elementary schools had rating of Level 2+ or Level 2 (Chicago Public Schools, 2021).
3. In late spring 2019 priority school teachers also received a collection of interdisciplinary books tailored to the cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity of the district, referred to as classroom library infusion sets, to support students' independent reading. Because the books were introduced late in the school year, they were not part of the additional supports for priority schools examined in this study.
4. The Midwest Early Childhood Education Research Alliance members represent the following organizations: District U–46, District 186, Chicago Public Schools, Rockford Public Schools, Valley View Public Schools, Governor's Office of Early Learning and Development, Illinois State Board of Education, Illinois Head Start Association, Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, Illinois Department of Human Services, Northern Illinois University, and Foresight Law and Policy. The study team thanks the alliance members, particularly those who participated in the study's advisory committee, for their support in conceptualizing this study. The advisory committee, which included district administrators from Chicago Public Schools, provided valuable feedback on the research questions, analytic approach, and dissemination strategy.

Research questions

The study addressed three research questions:

1. Did attending a priority school lead to higher 2018/19 end-of-year reading achievement for K–2 Chicago Public Schools students than attending a nonpriority school, after student and school differences were adjusted for, and did the effect vary by student or school characteristics?

2. Were there differences between priority and nonpriority schools in teachers' and administrators' participation in professional development sessions during the 2018/19 school year?

3. From the perspective of district and school leaders, instructional support coaches, and teachers, what conditions are necessary to successfully implement the enhanced coaching supports and other professional development supports that are part of the P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative?

Definitions of key terms used in the report are in box 1. The data sources, sample, and methods used to answer the research questions are summarized in box 2 and detailed in appendix B.

Box 1. Key terms

Measures of Academic Progress of Primary Grades (MAP). An adaptive assessment, developed by the Northwest Evaluation Association, that is administered online. Students in Chicago Public Schools are required to take the MAP in the spring of grade 2 and in the fall, winter, and spring of grades 3–8. Chicago Public Schools elementary schools can administer the MAP in earlier grades but are not required to.

Multilevel regression modeling. A type of statistical model commonly used in education research to estimate associations between one or more features and an outcome when students are nested in schools.

Priority status. Chicago Public Schools designated schools in the P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative as priority and nonpriority schools. Teachers and administrators in both priority and nonpriority schools were offered three professional development sessions per year. In addition to the professional development that teachers and administrators in all schools in the initiative could receive, teachers and administrators in priority schools were offered site-based coaching support.

School Quality Rating Policy. A district policy that establishes indicators of school performance and growth and the benchmarks against which a school's success are annually evaluated. Schools receive a rating based on several indicators of success, including attendance, data quality, school culture and climate, student academic growth, student test score performance, and closing achievement gaps.

Text Reading and Comprehension assessment. An early reading assessment, developed by Amplify and administered three times a year, that many Chicago Public Schools elementary schools, including 85 schools in the study sample, use to assess K–2 students' reading fluency, accuracy, and comprehension.

Box 2. Data sources, sample, and methods

Data sources. This study used administrative data collected by Chicago Public Schools and the Illinois State Board of Education, as well as interviews conducted by the study team.

Chicago Public Schools

- Implementation data on the P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative for the 2018/19 school year, which included records of attendance by teachers and administrators in professional development sessions.
- Measures of Academic Progress for Primary Grades (MAP) assessment data for the 2018/19 school year, which provided information on reading achievement for students in grade 2. The data included results for grade 2 students in all schools in the sample, who took the formative assessment in spring 2019. This was the only standardized assessment of reading common to all schools in Chicago Public Schools.
- Text Reading and Comprehension (TRC) assessment data for the 2018/19 school year, which provided information on grade-level student proficiency in reading. The data include results for kindergarten and grade 1 students who took the assessment in fall 2018 and spring 2019.
- Administrative records for students enrolled in grades K–2 in any of the P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative schools. The records provided information on students' demographic characteristics, including gender, grade, eligibility for the National School Lunch Program (an indicator of economic disadvantage), whether the student received special education services, English learner student status, race/ethnicity, number of days the student was present, and the school they were enrolled in for the 2018/19 school year.
- Accountability data, which included School Quality Rating Policy ratings.

Illinois State Board of Education

- Data from school report cards, which included school attendance rates, and grades that schools served in the 2016/17–2017/18 school years.

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- Data from interviews conducted by the study team with district, network, and school leaders; instructional support coaches; and teachers working in and with priority schools about their experiences with and perceptions of the P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative.

Sample. The sample for research questions 1 and 2 was the students and teachers in the 115 schools that participated in the P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative in 2018/19—26 priority schools and 89 nonpriority schools.

To address research question 1, the study team combined administrative records and assessment score records with data on school characteristics for students in kindergarten, grade 1, and grade 2. Students in preK did not have consistent and valid reading assessment scores and were therefore not included in the analysis. The study team used the MAP assessment data and TRC assessment data to measure students' end-of-year reading achievement, the primary outcome for this study.

The MAP assessment was used for grade 2 students because it was the assessment with the most complete data for grade 2 (because Chicago Public Schools requires that schools administer that assessment to all grade 2 students at the end of the school year). The MAP analysis sample included 5,882 grade 2 students in all 115 schools in 2018/19. About 11 percent of the students in the MAP analysis sample were missing spring 2019 assessment data, and about 55 percent were missing fall 2018 assessment data. (The fall 2018 assessment was not required for school accountability purposes, so some schools opted to administer a different assessment.) The TRC assessment was used for kindergarten and grade 1 students because it was the assessment with the most complete data for those grades. The TRC analysis sample included 8,642 kindergarten and grade 1 students in 85 of the 115 schools that participated in the initiative.[1] About 7 percent of the students in the TRC analysis sample were missing spring 2019 assessment scores, and about 10 percent were missing fall 2018 assessment scores.

For both analysis samples, students with and without assessment data were similar in demographic characteristics (see table B3 and text in appendix B). For research question 1 the study team used multiple imputation methods to address missing test scores and demographic data and conducted analyses using the subset of students who had all test score and demographic data.

Because the data for the fall 2018 MAP assessment were missing at such high rates, the study team also conducted analyses omitting the fall scores (see appendix B).

The analysis sample for research question 2 included all preK–2 teachers whom network leaders identified as eligible to participate in the P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative and administrators in all schools that were part of the initiative in 2018/19. The analysis sample for this research question included 115 schools, 964 teachers, and 98 administrators.

The analysis sample for research question 3 included seven district and network leaders, three instructional support coaches, one principal, and three teachers from priority schools who agreed to participate in brief interviews about their experiences with the initiative (see appendix B for details on how interviewees were selected).

Methodology. To address research question 1, the study team created a series of statistical models to examine whether there were differences in end-of-year reading achievement between priority and nonpriority schools, after differences in student and school demographic characteristics and baseline scores were adjusted for. Specifically to understand differences in reading outcomes between students in priority schools and similar students in nonpriority schools, statistical analyses were conducted to create a comparison group of nonpriority schools that was similar to the priority schools in initial reading achievement level, demographic composition of the student body, average attendance rate, teacher experience, whether they offered preK, and School Quality Rating Policy rating. After using a statistical technique to minimize differences on these characteristics between the two groups of schools, the study team compared the reading outcomes for students in the two groups at the end of the school year, adjusting for beginning-of-year test scores and any remaining differences in student and school characteristics. (See table B7 in appendix B for information about the differences in student and school characteristics between priority and nonpriority schools before and after statistical adjustment.) The student characteristics included gender, grade, eligibility for the National School Lunch Program, whether the student received special education services, English learner student status, race/ethnicity, and number of days the student was present. The school characteristics included whether the school offered preK in the previous year, the mean School Quality Rating Policy rating, and the mean percentage of daily attendance across the 2016/17 and 2017/18 school years. Student and teacher data for 2018/2019 were aggregated to the school level to produce school-level indicators of the proportion of students who were female, English learner students, eligible for the National School Lunch Program, receiving special education services, and Black, Hispanic, White, and other race/ethnicity; the proportion of teachers at the school who were certified; and the average years of experience in Chicago Public Schools across all teachers in the school. The modeling approach accounted for the nesting of students in schools.

To address research question 2, the study team calculated the number and percentage of teachers overall and the percentage of teachers in each school who attended zero, one, two, or three professional development sessions and whether at least one administrator in a school attended zero, one, two, or three professional development sessions. Descriptive statistics were calculated overall and separately by priority and nonpriority schools, and the study reports group differences of 5 percentage points or greater.

To understand the conditions necessary to successfully implement the initiative's enhanced coaching and other professional development supports (research question 3), the study team examined transcripts from audio recordings of interviews with district, network, and school leaders; instructional support coaches; and teachers in priority schools. Two study team members reviewed the interview data individually to identify themes in relation to the research question. The study team members then reconciled their findings to establish common themes.

Appendix B provides more detail on the methodology, along with the interview protocols for research question 3.

Limitations. This study has six main limitations. First, the study cannot make strong causal claims about the impact of the additional coaching supports in priority schools in the P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative on student reading proficiency because the models could be missing important unmeasured variables. Second, the analytic models used to address research question 1 did not include teacher-level predictors, which would allow the study team to estimate whether the program outcomes varied by teacher demographic characteristics or by professional development participation, because the data to link teachers to students in schools were unavailable. However, the analytic models did adjust for school average teacher experience and teacher certification rates. Third, the study lacked a consistent measure of student reading achievement across grades, and there were no consistent reading assessment data available for preK students. In addition, a substantial number of students were missing data for the fall 2018 MAP assessment. Results from analyses where the study team imputed fall MAP assessment scores and where the study team did not include fall assessment scores as a covariate were consistent with those presented in the report. A related limitation is that the TRC assessment was administered and scored by teachers, so the additional coaching the teachers in priority

schools received could have affected how they scored the assessments. Fourth, the sample for research question 3 was small and not representative of the larger sample of district and school leaders, instructional support coaches, and teachers involved in the initiative, limiting the ability to generalize the findings. Fifth, the results might not be generalizable to school districts with different characteristics. Sixth, the study had only one year of follow-up data. More years of data might be needed to see a change in student outcomes associated with attending a priority school in the P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative.

Note

1. Compared with the schools that did not administer the TRC assessment, schools that administered the TRC assessment had a higher percentage of Hispanic students (47 percent versus 19 percent), a lower percentage of Black students (45 percent versus 71 percent), and a higher percentage of English learner students (24 percent versus 13 percent). Schools that did not administer the TRC assessment and those that did were similar on the following characteristics: average number of days students were present, share of students eligible for the National School Lunch Program, share of students receiving special education services, and whether the school offered preK. Priority schools were more likely (85 percent) than nonpriority schools (71 percent) to administer the TRC assessment during the 2018/19 school year.

Findings

This section presents the key findings regarding the outcomes and implementation of the P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative during the 2018/19 school year. Additional findings are in appendix C.

Attending a priority school did not lead to higher end-of-year reading achievement than attending a nonpriority school, after other factors were adjusted for

There was no statistically significant difference in kindergarten and grade 1 students' 2018/19 end-of-year TRC reading proficiency rates between priority schools and similar nonpriority schools, after beginning-of-year differences in student demographic characteristics, initial reading proficiency scores, and school characteristics were adjusted for. The adjusted probability of TRC reading proficiency for an average student was .47 in priority schools and .51 in nonpriority schools, a nonsignificant difference (figure 1).

Similarly, there was no statistically significant difference in grade 2 students' spring 2019 MAP scores between priority schools and similar nonpriority schools. The adjusted MAP score for an average student was 182 in priority schools and 185 in nonpriority schools, a nonsignificant difference (see figure 1).

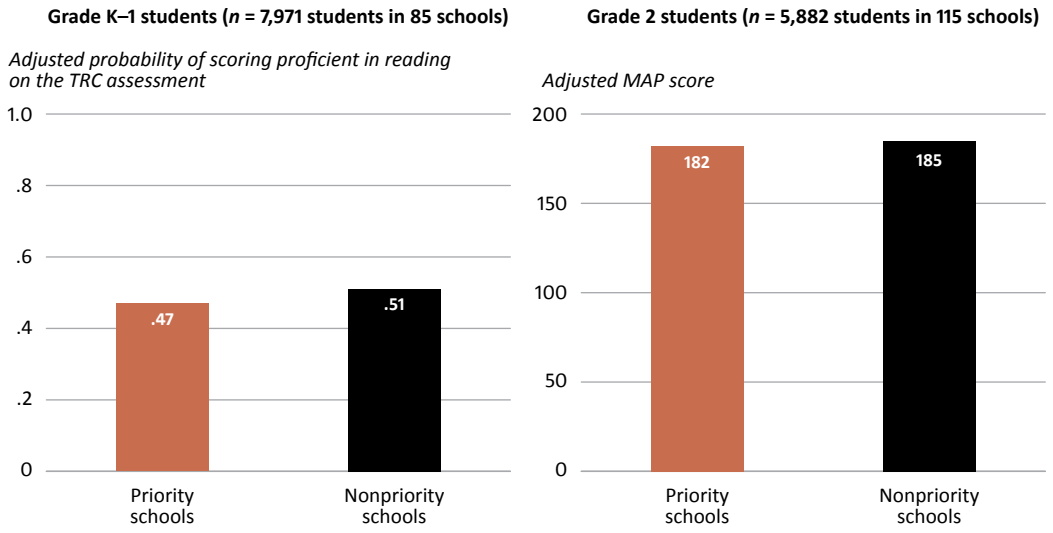
The absence of an effect of attending a priority school on end-of-year TRC reading proficiency scores among kindergarten and grade 1 students was consistent across student and school background characteristics (see table C2 in appendix C). Likewise, the absence of an effect of attending a priority school on end-of-year MAP scores among grade 2 students was consistent across student and school characteristics (see table C3 in appendix C).

Teachers in priority schools were more likely than teachers in nonpriority schools to participate in P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative professional development sessions

Teachers in priority schools were more likely (38 percent) than teachers in nonpriority schools (26 percent) to attend all three P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative professional development sessions (figure 2). Teachers in nonpriority schools (20 percent) were more likely than teachers in priority schools (8 percent) to not participate in the professional development sessions.

Administrator participation in the professional development was higher in priority schools than in nonpriority schools. Of the 13 Chicago Public Schools regional networks participating in the initiative, the leaders of 8 networks offered the administrator professional development to administrators in their schools. In those networks priority schools were more likely than nonpriority schools to have at least one school administrator participate in all three professional development sessions, but the difference was not statistically significant (figure 3).

Figure 1. Attending a priority school had no effect on students' end-of-year reading achievement compared with attending a nonpriority school, after other factors were adjusted for, 2018/19

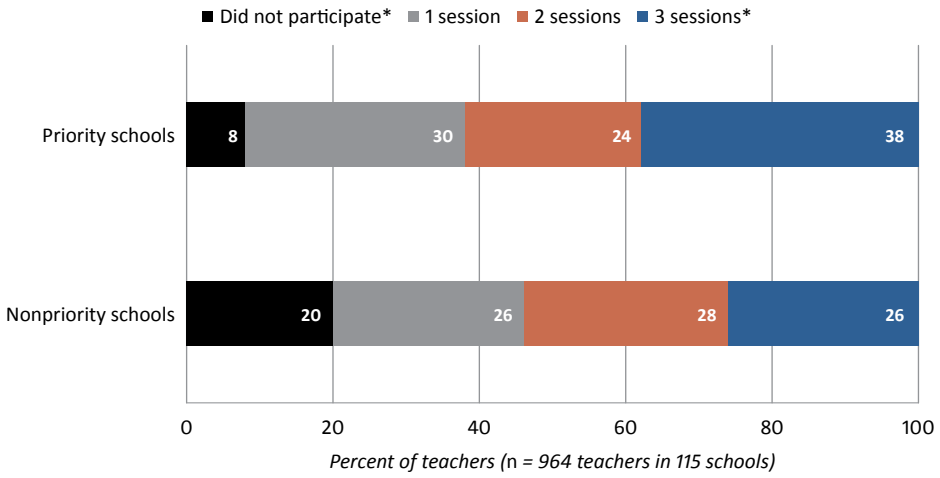


TRC is the Text Reading and Comprehension assessment. MAP is the Measures of Academic Progress Primary Grades assessment.

Note: Priority schools are schools that implemented the P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative and received enhanced supports, including intensive, site-based coaching, to improve students' independent reading. Nonpriority schools are schools that implemented the initiative and received only the standard supports. The figure on the left displays the probability that students in the sample scored proficient or above in reading on the TRC assessment in spring 2019, after differences in student and schools characteristics were adjusted for. Adjusted probabilities were computed based on logistic regression analysis (see table C2 in appendix C). The figure on the right displays the MAP score for students in the sample in spring 2019, after differences in student and school characteristics were adjusted for. Adjusted scores were computed based on regression analysis (see table C3 in appendix C). Differences between priority schools and nonpriority schools were not statistically significant at $p < .05$. The 95 percent confidence interval for the adjusted probability of TRC reading proficiency for grade K–1 students is (.42, .52) for priority schools and (.37, .66) for nonpriority schools. The 95 percent confidence interval for the adjusted MAP score for grade 2 students is (179.61, 183.69) for priority schools and (181.20, 188.69) for nonpriority schools.

Source: Authors' analysis of 2018/19 school year data provided by Chicago Public Schools and publicly available 2016/17 and 2017/18 school year data from the Illinois State Board of Education and the Chicago Public Schools Accountability Reports.

Figure 2. Teachers in priority schools were more likely than teachers in nonpriority schools to attend all three P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative professional development sessions, 2018/19

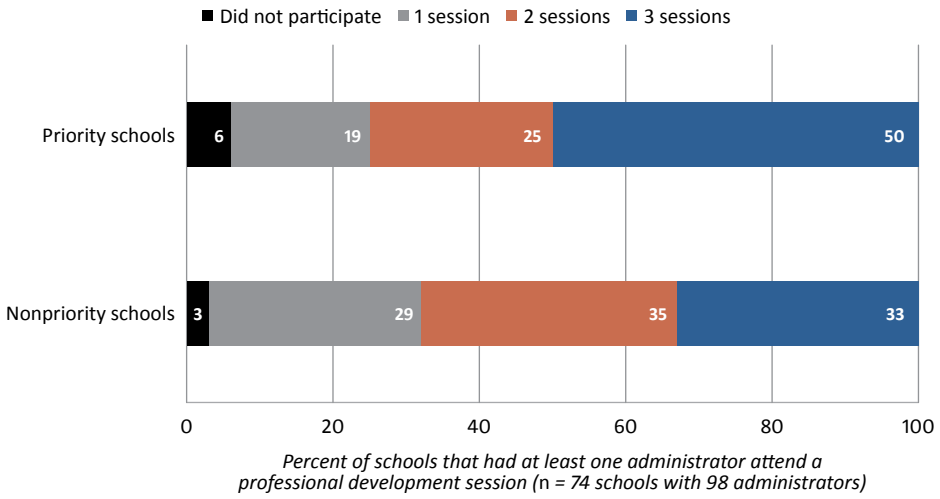


* The difference between priority schools and nonpriority schools was significant at $p < .05$ (based on Pearson chi-square tests).

Note: Priority schools are schools that implemented the P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative and received enhanced supports, including intensive, site-based coaching, to improve students' independent reading. Nonpriority schools are schools that implemented the initiative and received only the standard supports.

Source: Authors' analysis of 2018/19 school year data provided by Chicago Public Schools.

Figure 3. Priority schools were more likely than nonpriority schools to have at least one administrator participate in the P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative professional development, 2018/19

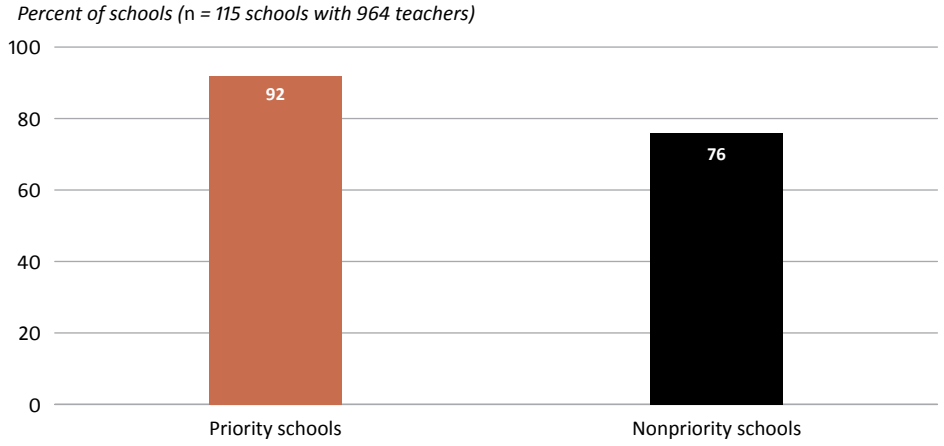


Note: Includes only schools from the 8 Chicago Public Schools regional networks that participated in the administrator professional development. Priority schools are schools that implemented the P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative and received enhanced supports, including intensive, site-based coaching, to improve students' independent reading. Nonpriority schools are schools that implemented the initiative and received only the standard supports. No differences between priority schools and nonpriority schools were statistically significant at $p < .05$ (based on Fisher's exact two-sided tests).

Source: Authors' analysis of 2018/19 school year data provided by Chicago Public Schools.

Central to the theory of action of the P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative is that teachers within schools should work together to improve instruction. For that collaboration to take place, teachers need to attend the professional development sessions together. To understand school-level teacher participation in the initiative, the study team examined the percentage of schools in which at least 75 percent of teachers attended at least one professional development session. A higher percentage of priority schools (92 percent) than of nonpriority schools (76 percent) had at least 75 percent of teachers attending at least one session, but the difference was not statistically significant (figure 4).

Figure 4. A higher percentage of priority schools than of nonpriority schools had at least 75 percent of teachers who attended at least one P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative professional development session, 2018/19



Note: Priority schools are schools that implemented the P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative and received enhanced supports, including intensive, site-based coaching, to improve students' independent reading. Nonpriority schools are schools that implemented the initiative and received only the standard supports. The difference between priority schools and priority schools was not statistically significant (based on a Pearson chi-square test).

Source: Authors' analysis of 2018/19 school year data provided by Chicago Public Schools.

Interviews with a purposive sample of district, network, and school leaders; instructional support coaches; and teachers in priority schools suggested that the enhanced coaching could be improved by allowing more time for instructional coaches to work with teachers; the interviewees also indicated strengths of the initiative and suggested areas for improvement such as time for teachers to learn from one another, alignment and consistency for diverse learners, adminstrator buy-in, and aligned and culturallly relevant materials

District, network, and school leaders and teachers reported that school-based coaching was valuable but that instructional support coaches had a limited capacity and often could not dedicate sufficient time to all teachers. Instructional support coaches reported having competing interests that made it difficult to prioritize the P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative.

District leaders emphasized that instructional support coaches were invested in the initiative and appreciated the opportunity to connect and build relationships with schools. But unlike teachers, whose time could be protected by their administrators, the coaches served many schools and thus were often pulled in many directions. They did not have the ability to dedicate as much one-on-one time with teachers as they would have liked. One district leader shared,

"Something that might hinder [the initiative] is just that time piece, the amount of responsibility on an instructional [coach's] plate. And when we started this initiative, we tried really hard to ensure that there was safe and protected time for these instructional [coaches] that have this unique role in this learning series, and I think that depending on the network, that's not always protected just based on other competing priorities as well."

District, network, and school leaders; instructional support coaches; and teachers noted that the opportunity for teachers to learn from one another was one of the most powerful components of the initiative's professional development. Interviewees appreciated opportunities for teachers to learn from one another, which included observing other classrooms in their schools and watching videos of other teachers in the district teaching the curriculum. One district leader shared,

"I think we've started to make visible for teachers what this could look like, and we did that really geographically and regionally so people can see that in my community, these are practices that could look like this and could work like this."

Teachers noted that earlier versions of the professional development included videos of model classrooms with student populations that were not representative of the students they were working with. In response, district leaders created videos of Chicago Public Schools teachers, which were much more helpful. Observations of other classrooms were another component of the initiative that allowed teachers to learn from one another. Instructional support coaches noted that teachers could meet with the classroom teacher they were observing before and after the observation to learn about that teacher's strategy and ask about how the initiative was being implemented in the classroom. One coach said,

"[Teachers] love to collaborate with other teachers. Across the years, that's what teachers want the most is to be able to learn, and talk, and collaborate, and engage in job-embedded professional learning with their colleagues. That has really, really helped."

District leaders and school leaders highlighted the consistency of the professional development across time, schools, and classrooms as a strength of the initiative. Teachers and administrators noted a common expectation that school initiatives will be short lived. The endurance of the P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative for more than three years has increased buy-in among teachers and administrators. Administrators also noted that there is

consistency across classrooms in the instruction students are receiving, though they saw room for improvement. One principal shared that the consistency of the initiative supports across classrooms has ensured that all learners at the school were receiving the same opportunities. That principal said,

"Every room is going to have X, Y, or Z, but then you see common practice because teachers have bought into it. I think that becomes really important. We have a large English learner population. There's also that idea that when [the P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative] is really being implemented to its fullest, it shouldn't matter which grade you walk into or whether it's an English-dominant or Spanish-dominant classroom, that you're still seeing the same practices happening. We have the same opportunities for kids as well."

One area for improvement would be to ensure that all learners receive the same level of rigorous instruction. District leaders and teachers noted that a lack of alignment of the initiative for special education staff and students and for English learner students was a limitation. District leaders commented that school administrators were aware that they needed to ensure consistent instructional content and rigor regardless of student body composition. One district leader said,

"We've been able to set up a lot of co-teaching through Balanced Literacy and make sure special education students can access the learning. Working with [principals], it's been positive because they have a lot of concerns around special education students and bridging the gap."

Both district leaders and teachers emphasized the importance of school administrator buy-in for successful implementation of the initiative. School administrators play an important role in facilitating the initiative. Administrators who supported the goals of the initiative emphasized providing time for teachers to focus on literacy instruction. Teachers shared that administrators' decisions to allocate resources and time to the initiative are imperative for its success and that administrator prioritization of the initiative acts as a model for teachers to do the same. One principal shared,

"I think teachers as professionals are used to the idea of competing priorities, but the more that administration can protect them and filter and focus what's coming down to them, [first] it gives them more just mental energy to focus on in this case, the P–2 [Balanced Literacy] Initiative. And then it also creates buy-in from teachers because they actually see the administration prioritizing this learning themselves, which makes it more likely for them then as teachers to prioritize it."

Administrators' understanding of early childhood literacy research helps them buy in. Administrators who lack an understanding of early childhood literacy development might be less supportive of the initiative's goals. A teacher said of one principal, "She didn't have a direct connection to early childhood. . . . Even when coaches would come in and make recommendations that were developmentally appropriate or would set students and teachers up for success, there were barriers"—because the principal lacked knowledge about alignment across development and best practices.

School leaders, instructional support coaches, and teachers highlighted the importance of sufficient resources. Resources included protected time for professional development and planning and a robust classroom library that included culturally relevant texts. One instructional support coach noted the importance of the classroom resources for all schools, saying,

"Definitely books that children can see themselves in—we did a lot of work with making sure our classrooms had culturally relevant texts. And then making sure that teachers are modeling reading behaviors and reading strategies during whole-group instruction and small-group instruction, and then the kids having an opportunity to practice those skills independently."

District leaders also noted that a lack of aligned materials could limit the success of the initiative, even if teachers embraced the curriculum. The district's introduction of library infusion sets in priority school classrooms in spring 2018/19 was a positive step toward providing sufficient, aligned, and culturally relevant texts in all classrooms.

Limitations

This study has two limitations that should be highlighted. First, it cannot make strong causal claims about the impact of the additional coaching supports in the P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative on student reading proficiency. The statistical models used enable comparisons between students in priority and nonpriority schools based on observable characteristics related to initiative participation and outcomes. But the models might be missing important unmeasured variables. The results of these analyses suggest that the priority and nonpriority students and schools were similar across a variety of characteristics, including students' beginning-of-year reading levels, and the analyses adjusted for initial differences in reading levels and other student and school characteristics. Still, the study team could not account for some characteristics when constructing a comparison group, such as whether schools had adequate resources to support the launch of the initiative and whether leadership was committed to ongoing progress and teacher development, two of the criteria by which network leaders chose priority schools.

Second, Chicago Public Schools is a unique school district. The results might not be generalizable to school districts with different characteristics, such as districts of different sizes, locales, and student compositions.

Implications

The study findings suggest the need for additional research on the implementation of the P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative in priority schools and the impact of the initiative across multiple years. The study found that one year of implementation in priority schools did not lead to meaningful change in students' end-of-year reading achievement. This suggests four approaches to identify additional supports needed to increase the initiative's effectiveness.

First, district leaders might consider systematically collecting data to better assess whether the professional development supports are working as intended for teachers and administrators, including data on whether and how teachers and administrators are improving instructional practice in both priority and nonpriority schools and on the quantity and quality of school-based coaching in priority schools. Those data were unavailable at the time of this study, which limited its ability to examine how differences in implementation and receipt of professional development supports were associated with students' reading achievement.

Second, district leaders also might consider exploring other reasons for the lack of a difference in student outcomes between priority and nonpriority schools, such as the limited capacity of instructional support coaches. Interviews with select district, network, and school leaders; instructional support coaches; and teachers suggested that several aspects of the initiative's professional development were valuable. Coaching and expert feedback can help teachers reflect on and change their practice and can increase teachers' engagement with experts on professional learning and their time and focus on implementing their practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). If limited coach capacity affected implementation, district leaders might consider increasing the number of instructional support coaches available and limiting the competing priorities that coaches face so they can focus on the P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative. If the district cannot increase the number of coaches, district leaders might consider implementing web-based coaching to reduce the burden on coaches (Kraft & Hill, 2020).

Third, findings from the interviews suggest topics for further exploration around how the district could strengthen the initiative as a whole. Recommendations from the research literature regarding effective professional

development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017) are consistent with those suggested by the district, network, and school leaders; instructional support coaches; and teachers interviewed for the study. Teachers in particular expressed enthusiasm about the opportunity to learn from and collaborate with other teachers.

Fourth, district leaders might consider creating additional opportunities to engage administrators in planning and rolling out professional development. Administrators also might consider continuing to emphasize consistency across time, schools, and classrooms in implementing professional development. In a more intensive investigation into implementing the initiative, district leaders could conduct more systematic interviews with a larger number of teachers and instructional support coaches from priority schools to follow up on these topics.

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