

ALASKA READING FIRST

Annual Evaluation Report: 2007–2008



June 2008



Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Alaska Reading First strived to provide a statewide program focused on supporting schools and staff members to improve K-3 reading instruction, with the ultimate goal that all K-3 students would read at grade level by the end of third grade. In the fourth year of school-level implementation, it witnessed both successes and challenges. Reading First was implemented in 14 schools across three school districts, impacting over 2,000 students. To reach its goal, the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills or DIBELS test was administered to each student three times a year—fall, winter, and spring—to monitor student progress. Based on collective results, an overall instruction support recommendation (ISR) was calculated for each student—“intensive,” “strategic,” or “benchmark.” Reading First immersed students in a core reading program taught during a daily 90-minute uninterrupted reading block. Depending on their ISR status, students might walk-to-read to receive instruction at their instructional level or they might stay in their classes and receive instruction at their grade level and/or instructional level. The state also expected strategic and intensive students to receive intervention outside of the reading block. Part of Reading First was for each school to have a Reading Leadership Team (RLT) and grade-level-meetings. Teachers, coaches, and principals were supported by professional development.

Professional Development

The state continued to provide a comprehensive approach to professional development, which included four conferences, technical assistance, and coaching for teachers. The focus of conferences varied—the Consortium on Reading Excellence (CORE) Reading Leader Institute was for principals, the CORE Coaches Institute was for coaches, the Reading First Summit was for all school staff

members from Reading First and non-Reading First schools, and the Reading First Data Retreat was for school teams. On-going technical assistance was provided by CORE consultants on the school level, but not at schools in the rural Lake and Peninsula School District. Coaches continued to work with teachers.

Overall, principals, coaches, and teachers were pleased with the quality of the conferences that they attended, but thought that much of the Reading First Summit was review for them and was not sufficiently differentiated. Compared to last year, principals reported higher approval rates for the CORE Reading Leadership Institute than last year and were less pleased with the Summit. They also indicated that the amount of training they received had declined since the previous year. Coaches' attitudes towards the conferences were mostly unchanged from last year—they were pleased with the Data Retreat (90%), but less than one-half (43%) were pleased with the Coach Institute. Few coaches (21%) indicated that they had received enough training. Teachers received most of their training through their coaches. Interestingly, while the number of modeled lessons has steadily decreased since 2006, teachers continued to see their coaches as valuable resources and allies. Also, teachers found their overall 2008 training as less on-going, intensive, and focused on the classroom than in the previous year.

Alaska Reading First continued to offer technical assistance to the schools either by the state coordinator or CORE consultants. Coaches and principals viewed the state coordinator's technical assistance as responsive and extremely valuable, although the transition to a new state coordinator meant that the

relationship between the schools and state was not as close as in the past. CORE visits were viewed as extremely helpful. On the other hand the schools in Lake and Peninsula School District received no technical assistance from the CORE consultants and minimal assistance from the state coordinator.

Leadership

District coordinators, principals, and coaches were responsible for developing structures and systems that encouraged collaboration and assisted individuals to implement change. To promote leadership, district coordinators, principals, and coaches participated in different strategies, such as attending professional development, facilitating RLT and grade level meetings, and using data. District coordinators attended most of the Reading First professional development and meetings and reported that they were useful. They found the state's expectations of their districts to be clear; however, only one of the district coordinators (33%) found them reasonable. District coordinators felt that their district's support for Reading First was very high. Principals corroborated this high level of district support for Reading First.

Principals universally supported Reading First and identified their three primary obligations as ensuring fidelity to Reading First, providing leadership, and using data. Principals ensured fidelity through classroom observations and walk-throughs. However, only a minority of teachers reported that their principals visited their classroom (37%) or provided feedback (25%) at least monthly. Both principals' observations and feedback to teachers has declined across the years. Principals continued to report that they provided leadership to the school primarily through their participation in the Reading Leadership Team (RLT) and grade-level meetings. However, in interviews, principals commented that they did not attend regularly unless invited or a specific item needed to be addressed. While principals

continued to use data to study trends and make decisions, its use declined from the previous year.

Compared to last year, coaches spent more time on gathering, analyzing, and using data to make decisions, and less time on coaching and professional development. This year witnessed a large increase in the clarity of the coach's role, as perceived by both coach and teachers.

The majority of coaches, principals, and teachers felt that their schools had a moderately high collaborative culture. However, only half of teachers felt that they had a voice in decision-making about Reading First.

The RLT and the grade-level meetings were thought to be the well-spring of this collaborative culture. All but one school had a RLT, most of which met every other month instead of the expected monthly meetings. The majority of school members felt that attending these meetings was a valuable use of their time. Grade-level meetings usually occurred at least once a month and were regularly attended by teachers and coaches, who felt that their attendance was a valuable use of their time. Principals were very enthusiastic about these meetings, but did not attend regularly.

Schools administered the DIBELS three times per year. The majority of staff members felt that the DIBELS was valid and accurate. Progress monitoring was also administered on a regular basis. In most schools, intensive students were monitored weekly, while the strategic students were progress-monitored biweekly.

Data use was pervasive. Teachers felt very confident in their personal ability to use data, and almost all teachers looked at their data at least monthly. Coaches reported that they frequently used assessment data when communicating with teachers about their students, identifying which students needed

interventions, matching appropriate intervention, and monitoring progress during interventions. On the other hand, schools infrequently reviewed disaggregated data.

Teacher buy-in to Reading First was the highest it has ever been, with more than three-quarters of teachers expressing strong support for Reading First. All coaches and nearly all principals also reported strong support for Reading First. However, coaches reported that overcoming teacher resistance to Reading First was increasingly a challenge.

Sustainability continued to be a frequently discussed topic on the school level, but was not addressed at the 2008 Reading First Summit. Teachers were more optimistic about sustaining Reading First than were coaches and principals, with the vast majority feeling that they would continue to practice what they had learned under Reading First. Most principals felt that the 90-minute reading block, the core program, and the use of DIBELS assessments would continue after grant funding ended. The reading coach's position was seen as the least likely to be continued. The district coordinators agreed that the grade-level meetings and the core program would be mandated by the district, but had mixed opinions about sustaining DIBELS testing, professional development in reading, and interventions. Most principals and district coordinators were unhappy with the amount of support their school or district received from the state to address sustainability.

Instruction and Interventions

All schools delivered at least 90 minutes of uninterrupted reading instruction to their half-day kindergarten, first-, second-, and third-grade students. The majority of schools used walk-to-read in all or nearly all classes or in some grades, but not all grades (64%). Over one-third of the schools (36%) did not use walk-to-read. During the reading block, over 50 percent of schools spent the entire time at

students' instructional level in first through third grades. The majority of half-day kindergarten classes, but only a third of full-day kindergarten classes, spent the time at each student's instructional level.

A vast majority of both the teachers and principals were satisfied with their school's core program. However, only 21 percent of the coaches were satisfied. Teachers frequently used templates. To differentiate instruction, the vast majority of teachers (88%) at least tailored their instruction to individual student needs several times a week. Also, a large majority of teachers (81%) reported that they used small groups on a daily basis as another way to differentiate instruction.

Belief that Reading First was meeting the needs of ELL students was not overwhelmingly high. In fact, teachers, coaches, and principals had less confidence in meeting the needs of ELL this year than last year. A minority of coaches and teachers thought that their schools used reading materials that were well-matched to ELL needs. In addition, only a third of the coaches and about one-half of the teachers felt they were equipped to meet the needs of ELL students.

Classroom observations helped to provide a picture of reading instruction. Sixteen classroom observations were conducted in six schools. Compared to last year, substantial positive changes were found in most areas of effective classrooms—lesson clarity, explicit modeling, student engagement, opportunities to practice, and feedback. Effective questioning declined moderately, while monitoring of student understanding remained the same as last year.

Although instruction covered all five essential components of reading, some components received more attention than other components. Phonics instruction was taught in almost all lessons across all grade levels. Vocabulary instruction was taught in

62 percent of the lessons. It was most often observed in kindergarten, first-, and second-grade classes. Also, comprehension instruction was witnessed in 62 percent of lessons and at all grade levels. Of the comprehension lessons, the most popular strategies used to teach comprehension included recall questions, questions to generate higher-order thinking skills, and making connections between self-to-text or text-to-self. A majority of teachers relied on multiple comprehension strategies during the lesson.

All schools have intervention programs at virtually every grade level. However, the perceptions of teachers, coaches, and principals about their school's intervention system were moderately positive. Compared to last year, the opinion of both principals and coaches improved about their intervention programs, but teachers were less enthusiastic this year. Satisfaction with intervention materials was high among the coaches but moderate with teachers. Only four schools (29%) and five schools (36%) were able to provide supplemental and intensive interventions, respectively, to all strategic and intensive students in their schools. Compared to 2007, there was a significant increase in the percentage of schools using paraprofessionals as intervention providers, and a moderate increase in the percentage of schools using paid tutors. Opinions about the adequacy of the training of intervention providers were less favorable than last year, but opinions were still moderately positive.

Student Outcomes

Benchmark students. The benchmark groups in kindergarten and second-grade significantly improved from fall 2007 to spring 2008 (i.e., 31% to 75% and 51% to 60%, respectively). The other grade levels did not improve. Since baseline in spring 2004, all grades dramatically improved by spring 2008. The third-grade benchmark group steadily improved from 39 percent to 52 percent in spring 2008. The

other grade levels reached a plateau after the first or second year of implementation and did not improve, except by a few percentage points, for the last three or four years. In addition, during this school year, across grade levels, the vast majority of benchmark students remained in the benchmark group. The second grade had the highest retention rate at 93 percent.

Examining key demographics, the kindergarten benchmark group improved on all key demographics. Also, kindergarten classes in all schools improved by spring 2008. On the other hand, across all grade levels, the percentages for Alaska Native/American Indian and Asian student, students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, and special education students were all lower than the state benchmark percentage for spring 2008.

Compared to kindergarten, two years ago, the percentage of benchmark students declined significantly (75% to 67%) by spring 2008 for current second-grade students. Compared to kindergarten, three years ago, the percentage of third-grade benchmark students significantly dropped over time (72% to 61%). Since kindergarten, almost 80 percent of benchmark students currently in second and third grades remained in benchmark.

Strategic Students. Compared to kindergarten, three years ago, the percentage of strategic students significantly increased from 16 percent to 30 percent by spring 2008. Since kindergarten, about 40 percent of strategic students in both second and third grades moved to benchmark by spring 2008.

Intensive students. The percentage of kindergarten and third-grade intensive groups significantly dropped from fall 2007 to spring 2008 (i.e., 25% to 11% and 24% to 17%, respectively). There were no changes at all in either the first grade or the second grade. Additionally, intensive, kindergarten students in the fall 2007 were more likely to move to

strategic (22%) or benchmark (54%) than intensive students in any other grade level. Intensive students in second grade were the least likely to change their ISR category. Again, kindergarten, strategic students were the most likely to move up to benchmark (76%), while third-grade students were the least likely (26%).

On key demographics, the percentages for Alaska Native/American Indian, Asian, and black/African American students; students on free and reduced-price lunch; and students eligible for special education were higher than the state intensive percentage for spring 2008 in first through third grades.

Since baseline in spring 2004, the intensive groups displayed a general downward trend for all grade levels to spring 2008. Compared to kindergarten, the percentage of intensive students remained the same by 2008 for current second grade students, at about 13 percent, and increased significantly for current third-grade students (16% to 30%) by spring 2008. Since kindergarten, the percentage of intensive students to remain in the intensive group was 61 percent for the second grade, but only 42 percent for the third grade.