

National Reading First Impact Study: Interim Report Critique in the Context of Oregon Reading First

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May 13, 2008

The recently released Interim Report of the National Reading First Impact Study examined the impact of Reading First on classroom reading instruction and student reading comprehension during the 2004-05 and 2005-06 school years. The study included a sample of 125 Reading First schools and 123 comparison schools out of 5,880 schools implementing Reading First across the nation. A Final Report on the impact of Reading First from 2004-2007 and the relationship between instructional quality and student reading comprehension is expected early in 2009.

The present critique addresses the National Reading First Impact Study in the context of Oregon Reading First. Three areas are addressed:

- A summary of the impact of Oregon Reading First as discussed in the three-year technical report (<http://oregonreadingfirst.uoregon.edu/>);
- Important issues about the sample, comparison group, instruction, and findings of the National Reading First Impact Study;
- Important differences between Oregon Reading First and the National Reading First Impact Study.

Summary of Oregon Reading First

It is important to consider the interim findings of National Reading First Impact Study in the context of Oregon Reading First. Oregon Reading First schools have implemented a Schoolwide Beginning Reading Model since 2003-04. This model of beginning reading is aligned with the National Reading First guidelines and priorities. Important findings in the Oregon Reading First three-year report include the following:

- Reading scores of Oregon Reading First Cohort A schools have increased across three years of implementation: Increases have occurred each year, in each grade, and on every measure. Measures include the SAT-10, which is also used in the National Reading First Impact Study. When implementation in Year 3 is compared to Year 1, the improvements are statistically significant, moderate to large in magnitude, and educationally meaningful.
- The percentage of students reading at grade level has increased each year, and the percentage of students at high risk has decreased each year.
- This pattern of increasing performance is occurring in a highly similar manner for the Oregon Reading First Cohort B schools, which represents a second group of schools that are implementing Oregon Reading First and a Schoolwide Beginning Reading Model.
- In 2006, Cohort A schools (three years of implementation) outperformed Cohort B schools (one year of implementation) in all grades, and on all measures: DIBELS, the SAT-10, and the OAKS. The differences are consistently moderate to large in size. In every comparison, a higher percentage of children in Cohort A than Cohort B read at grade level, and a lower percentage of children are at high risk. This pattern suggests that as schools gain experience with Oregon Reading First, reading outcomes improve accordingly.
- Data from the fourth year of analysis indicate that the trend of increased performance is continuing for all Oregon Reading First schools. When the analysis is complete, a report will be prepared and submitted for publication.

Important Issues to Consider in the National Reading First Impact Study

- The sample of 125 schools in the National Reading First Impact Study were not selected randomly and did not represent a national sample of Reading First schools. For example, compared to all Reading First schools across the nation, the study sample had a lower percentage of Hispanic students, a higher percentage of African American students, a higher percentage of large or mid-size cities, and a higher percentage of smaller-sized schools.
- The reading instruction provided in the comparison schools may have been highly similar to reading instruction provided in Reading First schools. There is little evidence in the report, or the observation data presented, that essential reading practices used in Reading First and comparison schools were, in fact, different. Information on the number of minutes of instruction, and the use of explicit instruction, was presented. However, there is no information presented on whether comparison schools used core, supplemental, or intervention materials, classroom coaches, reading data for instructional decision-making, and other central features of Reading First. It is possible that the comparison schools implemented all of the above features, making comparisons between Reading First and non-Reading First difficult to interpret.
- The Medford School District in Oregon participated in the National Reading First Impact Study. Early in Reading First, Medford decided to use Reading First as a springboard for reading practices throughout the district. This included ways to fund non-Reading First schools to implement Reading First practices. In other words, the comparison schools in Medford that participated in the National Reading First Impact Study used the same reading practices as Oregon Reading First schools.
- In the National Reading First Impact Study, it is not clear the extent to which the Medford example is typical or atypical of other participating districts and schools in the study. There are, however, indications that districts within Oregon (e.g., Hillsboro, Klamath Falls, Portland) and outside of Oregon (e.g., Syracuse, NY, Aurora, IL, Memphis, TN) have implemented the basic components of Reading First in their non-Reading First schools in a systematic way.
- The amount of time devoted to reading instruction in the National Reading First Impact Study is not close to Reading First requirements. In both Reading First and comparison schools, less than 60 minutes per day was devoted to reading instruction. Reading First requires a minimum of 90 minutes per day of reading instruction.
- Overall, the National Reading First Impact Study reported there were no differences in reading outcomes between Reading First and comparison schools. However, in states where Reading First started late (2004-05), Reading First schools had higher outcomes than comparison schools in grades 1 and 2. It is not clear what differences between late award sites and early award sites might have contributed to this finding. This finding will likely be an important focus of detailed analyses in the Final Report.
- Together these issues raise important questions about the nature of the findings in the Interim Report that should be the basis of serious attention in the Final Report.

Differences Between Oregon Reading First and the National Reading First Impact Study

- Oregon Reading First has consistently maintained that implementation fidelity is essential in strong reading outcomes. Strong fidelity leads to systematic increases in the quality and explicitness of classroom instruction, which leads to strong reading outcomes. The National Reading First Impact Study has not addressed the association between fidelity and outcomes. This will be addressed in the Final Report and is very important for understanding the impact of complex education practices such as Reading First.
- In Oregon Reading First, 90-150 minutes of reading instruction is provided each day in grades 1-3. In the National Reading First Impact Study, an average of 59 minutes of daily reading instruction was provided in Reading First classrooms. This difference is substantial and could help explain why Oregon Reading First is achieving stronger outcomes than Reading First schools in the National Reading First Impact Study. Also, 59 minutes of daily reading instruction indicates a potentially serious problem with fidelity of implementation.
- In Oregon Reading First schools, systematic increases in reading outcomes across a variety of measures (including the SAT-10) have occurred across all four years of implementation. In the National Reading First Impact Study, there was no statistically significant increase in reading performance across two years of implementation.

Final Considerations

- The National Reading First Impact Study is an important report and requires serious reading and careful attention. The results are complex and it appears the authors of the report have done their best to present the results clearly and honestly. However, this is an Interim Report and very important questions are not yet addressed about the impact of Reading First. The Final Report should provide important information about the impact of Reading First, including the relation between implementation and reading outcomes. In Oregon, there is credible evidence that Reading First is leading to strong outcomes, and that implementation quality matters a great deal.
- For individual schools in Oregon that are implementing Reading First, it is crucial that the major goal of Reading First not be lost in the national discussion of “Does Reading First Work?” The goal of Reading First is grade-level reading proficiency by grade 3, and schools are expected to make consistent progress toward that goal. Every Reading First school in Oregon, and every Reading First school in the country, can easily determine how well they are doing toward reaching this extremely challenging goal. More children should be reading at grade level each year and fewer children should be at high risk for reading problems. It really is that simple. To the degree this happens on a national scale will influence the future of the Reading First program. To the degree this happens at each individual school is what matters most to the teachers, parents, and children who are part of that school.