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Chicago Public Schools Striving Readers Program

Year Five Evaluation Report
Executive Summary

SUBMITTED TO:

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Executive Summary of Findings: Implementation and Impact

This report describes the implementation and achievement trend analyses of the fifth year of implementation of the five-year Chicago Striving Readers (SR) program, as well as outcome evaluations for actively participating students at high-implementing schools during Years 3 and 4. The study answered the following general research questions:

- Did students participating at high-implementing schools during Program Years 3 or 4 show greater achievement outcomes than their comparison school counterparts?
- What were the longitudinal achievement growth trends of students participating in Striving Readers during Program Year 5?
- What did classroom practices look like among high-implementing schools during Program Year 5?

Case Study Findings

Case study interviews and classroom observations were conducted at the five Cohort 1 high-implementing schools during spring 2011. The goal of the case studies was to gain insights into the conditions that supported student learning, transformation of literacy practices and strong implementation, and the strategies schools used to overcome obstacles.

Context of Implementation

Case studies of high-implementing schools revealed that a school's contextual characteristics—characteristics that are independent of the program—can help or hinder program implementation:

- Small school size facilitated the ability of the literacy intervention teachers (LITs) to work closely with more teachers and classes. Large classes interfered with instructors' ability to conduct small-group work and differentiate instruction.
- Staff turnover creates an impediment to implementation due to the need to repeat basic training; but an otherwise stable staff can provide a support system for new teachers.
- Low student mobility provides the opportunity for students to receive additional years of intervention through Striving Readers, and enables upper-grade teachers to focus more on content than process. Student disciplinary issues distract teachers from the curriculum and discourage them from conducting small-group work. The presence of students with special needs may necessitate program modifications, but sometimes means that additional support staff (such as special education and bilingual teachers) are available.
- The learning climate—including students' feelings of safety, students' trust of their teachers, and availability of social resources in the community—can have significant impacts on implementation.
- The presence of competing programs and mandates can result in uncertainties about expectations, while complementary programs can mutually reinforce expectations.

Essential Program Elements

Aside from contextual elements of the school and community, there were several elements of the program model that appeared to be particularly important to successful implementation.

- A school's administration influences how a program is implemented in fundamental ways, including setting the school's instructional climate, establishing and communicating expectations and priorities, providing support and resources, and defining roles and responsibilities.
- Staff at high-implementing schools were not only encouraged to participate in professional development and teaming activities but were often given dedicated time to do so. Training was especially important for upper-grade and content-area teachers who had less support from LITs. Staff felt that training was practical and immediately applicable, but literacy team meetings and other collaborative activities provided equally critical opportunities for pursuing program goals and planning instruction.
- LITs' roles were largely consistent across schools in terms of core functions, but there was also considerable variation in terms of what grades and subjects they focused on, as well as additional duties. All were central to delivery of the intensive intervention, which was more successful in Year 5 due to the flexibility to move beyond the Achieving Maximum Potential resources and curriculum in an effort to meet different needs. All provided in-class targeted intervention—structured either as small-group push-in support or co-teaching—that was provided to sixth-grade English language arts and, to varying degrees, to other grades and subjects. All LITs played a central role in student assessment, and they typically worked to help teachers plan instruction around these assessments as well as planning their own. Some LITs also played an expanded coaching role in Year 5, helping with curriculum planning and training and introducing new literacy research. To help protect their positions after the grant, some were also given expanded literacy duties beyond Striving Readers in Year 5.
- Classroom teachers also played important roles in implementing Striving Readers, and substantial changes in teaching practices were found to have occurred among teachers participating in the program. Both general instruction and intervention were informed by student diagnostic data as well as teacher observations. True differentiation was observed more commonly than in past years, although some staff still conflated the concept with small-group instruction and scaffolding. Differentiation was supported by SR techniques and materials, but was also achieved by differentiated activities. Expansion of the program into upper grades and other subjects was fairly consistent among case study schools, supported even in larger schools by teachers' participation in training and, not least, by principals' encouragement.

Sustainability

In Year 5, SR schools faced the challenge of sustaining the program beyond the end of the grant. High-implementing schools had already begun to pave the way by adapting essential program elements to fit their schools' unique circumstances. Three of the five schools planned to retain their LIT, either through the school budget, or by expanding her responsibilities. Without an LIT, staff expected to encounter challenges in providing small-group instruction, using student data, and coordinating meetings, but they did not expect such practices to end. They still expected to maintain the basic program philosophies, including orientation toward evidence-based practice, an emphasis on small-group and data-driven instruction, and collaboration. Text and technological resources would also continue to be used.

Program Impacts on Struggling Readers

Study Design

Achievement outcomes were evaluated for a treatment-on-the-treated (TOT) sample of Tier 2 and 3¹ sixth graders who were actively participating during Year 3 or 4. The Mahalanobis distance method was used to match the 11 highest-implementing Cohort 1 schools to 11 comparison schools based on regression-identified predictor variables. Results were analyzed using two-level hierarchical linear modeling.

Description of Samples

Baseline equivalence for the Striving Readers and comparison school students who were included in TOT analyses was well established for reading and math performance, as well as for all tested demographic variables.

Impacts on Students

There were statistically significant overall differences in reading performance between high-implementing schools and comparison schools, both for sixth-grade Tier 2 students and for sixth-grade Tier 3 students who had received one year of the interventions. These differences might be due to program impact, but might also be explained by other, unmeasured school or student characteristics. Nevertheless, the strong matching design reduces the likelihood that program impact was not at least part of the reason for the effects.

Lessons Learned

While the Chicago Striving Readers model was not without its imperfections, the struggle to convince some stakeholders of the value of fully supporting the program design was undoubtedly itself a factor in the mixed success of the program. Due in part to the variability in program fidelity, analyses from randomized trials generated only limited evidence of impacts; however, analyses focusing on high-fidelity schools showed statistically significant and educationally meaningful outcomes. These findings suggest the value of exploring factors that facilitated or hindered successful program implementation, even if the results from nonrandomized trials cannot be attributed to program impact with confidence. Among the lessons learned at the school, program, and district levels were the following:

At the school level

- A strong lead teacher (such as an LIT) is essential, but creating this position through on-the-job training was not always successful.

¹ Tier 2 students received the targeted intervention; Tier 3 students received the targeted intervention and were eligible to receive the intensive intervention.

- Expectations for program implementation need to be clearly established and communicated, especially when there are competing mandates from the school or district.
- Protecting teachers' time for essential program activities improves the likelihood of successful implementation.
- Successful implementation requires staff who are supportive of the program philosophy. School staff should be involved in the decision to participate.

At the program level

- A school's participation in the program and (as a potential control school) in the study should be voluntary.
- As a first step to ensuring buy-in from participating schools, a preliminary planning period should be used to learn about each school's resources and needs, and to obtain commitments from principals.
- Adopting new methods—particularly complex techniques such as differentiated instruction—often requires personalized support and mentorship following initial training. The amount of support available from essential resources such as the lead teacher needs to be proportionate to the needs of the school.
- The opportunities available through the differentiation of professional development—a characteristic of training that is important for addressing the needs of staff with different levels of program experience and different pedagogical responsibilities—need to be clearly described in training schedules.
- Additional support is needed for any staff who enter the program midway. To the extent that staff turnover can be anticipated, the additional support can be better planned.
- Building parental and community support and involvement can strengthen many aspects of the program, including participation in the after-school program and encouragement of reading outside of school.

At the district level

- Depending on the culture of any given district, individual schools may or may not have the necessary autonomy to be held fully accountable for grant requirements. Expectations for grant compliance need to be firmly established and communicated at all levels from the school on up to the district.

At all levels

- Any new program takes time to become established. Stakeholders should be prepared to put full effort into program adoption even if the program does not at first appear to be successful.