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Nebraska Reading First Final Report

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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN
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UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA LINCOLN

ANNUAL REPORT

YEAR SIX OF IMPLEMENTATION—2009-2010

NEBRASKA READING FIRST

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Nebraska
Lincoln

INTRODUCTION

This is the first year that the report includes only Round II schools since Round I schools were supported only for sustainability for the current academic year¹ and did not supply data for the report. As a result, there are significant differences between the profile of students participating in Reading First in 2008-09 and 2009-2010. The proportion of minority students, students who receive free and reduced lunch, and English language learners is significantly larger. There continues to be important difference between the students educated in Nebraska Reading First schools compared to state averages. Nebraska Reading First schools have higher percentages of English Language Learners, minorities, and students of economic disadvantage.

Table 1: Student Characteristics

	Nebraska Reading First 2008-09	Nebraska Reading First 2009-10	State 2009	Difference between State and NRF
Special Education	12.2%	8.7%	15.2%	-6.5%
English Language Learners	9.8%	23.8%	6.3%	+17.5%
Free/Reduced Lunch	57.7%	78.1%	38.6%	+39.5%
African American	26.0%	27.0%	8.0%	+19.0%
Hispanic	18.0%	28.3%	13.5%	+14.8%
Native American	2.3%	1.0%	1.7%	-0.7%
White (non-Hispanic)	44.0%	41.1%	74.7%	-33.6%

¹ Round 1 schools had support for sustainability that included funds for training new teachers, training for established programs, and support for professional development (including travel and registration).

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

KINDERGARTEN

During the kindergarten year the mastery of foundational skills for later word decoding begins to develop. Letter knowledge is one of the earliest literacy skills. This is measured by Letter Naming Fluency (LNF). Proficiency in letter naming facilitates letter-sound match skills that contribute to fast and accurate blending

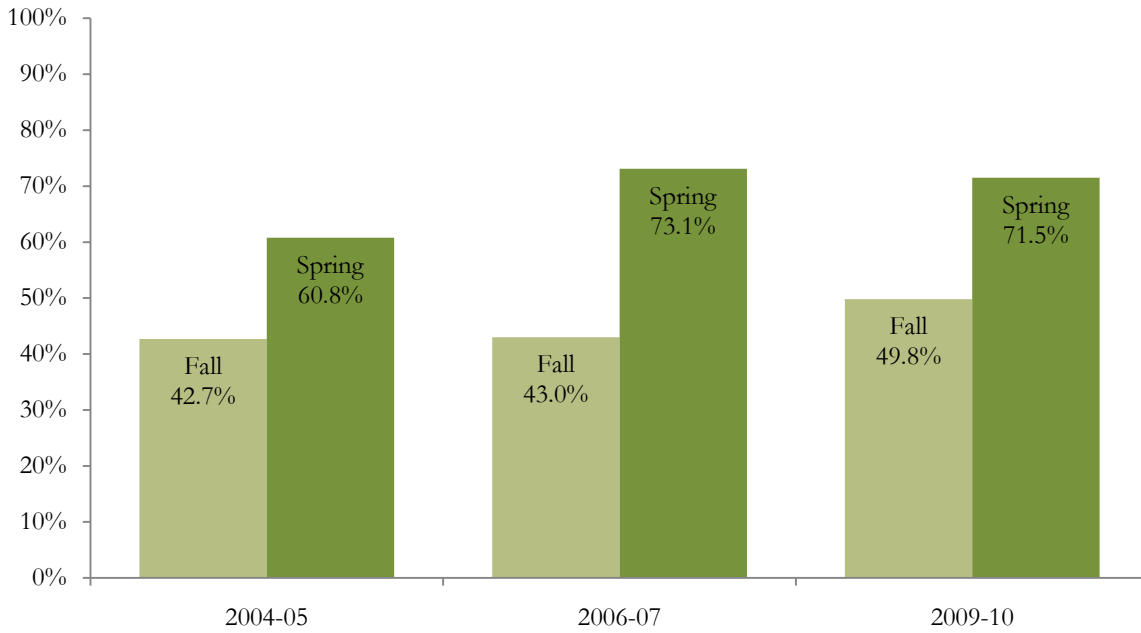


Figure 1: Percent of Students at Grade Level (LNF)

of sounds within words. A score at or above 40 on letter knowledge in the spring indicates that a child is at a low level of risk for difficulty in decoding and later literacy skills. The figure below shows the proportion of students at low risk (i.e. at or above the 40th percentile.) The results show that Reading First schools have improved since the baseline year but that the trend of improvement has reached a ceiling. The figure on the right shows that only 11.4% are at-risk based on letter knowledge.

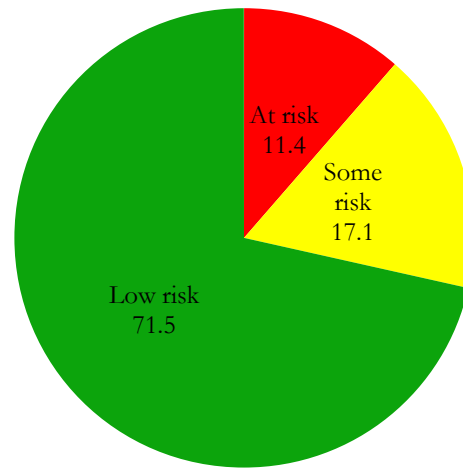


Figure 2: Student Risk Levels based on Letter Naming Fluency Scores

Parallel to students mastering letter naming

they accompany it with sound based skills measured by the Phoneme Segmentation Fluency (PSF). Phoneme segmentation fluency measures the ability to isolate and manipulate individual sounds within short words quickly and accurately. Results shown in figure 3 (on the right) show that only 2.5% of students are at risk, consistent with previous years' results. Nonsense Word Fluency (NWF) is a decoding task that requires students to apply phonics rules to decoding nonsense words without the benefit of context. As such it serves the basis for decoding novel or less frequent words. According to this measure, 7.6% of students are at risk (see figure 4, on right.)

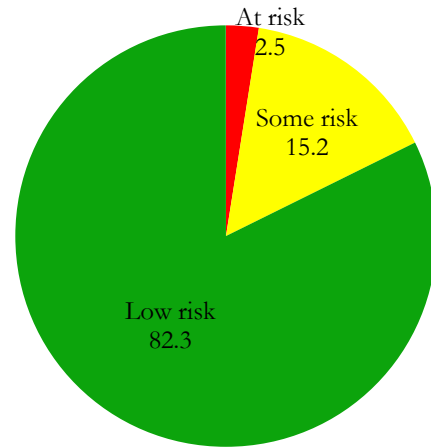


Figure 1: Student Risk Level based on Phonemic Segmentation Fluency

All three kindergarten measures focus on basic literacy skills. The consistent picture painted by the three assignments is that the majority of kindergarten students (80%) exit kindergarten ready to for first grade. Another 15% are at some risk and will require more attention in first-grade or the summer before first-grade. Finally, about 5% of students are proving to be a challenge.

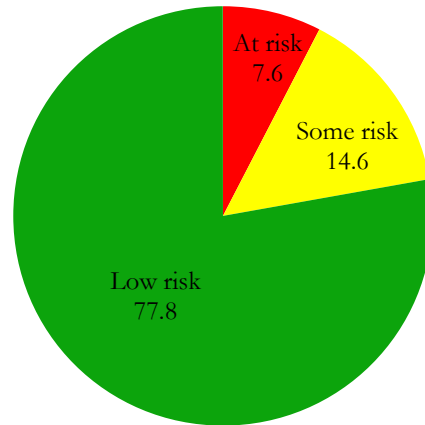


Figure 2: Student Risk Level based on Nonsense Word Fluency

If schools choose to continue such work in Kindergartens, we recommend finding strategies to use the summer between kindergarten and first grade to support the students who are at any risk and make sure that they arrive at first-grade ready to read.

Furthermore, while we do not measure it here, later scores strongly indicate that all students benefit from an added focus on vocabulary and comprehension skills that end up being the bottle neck to full literacy.

FIRST GRADE

First grade students are assessed in fall, winter, and spring on Nonsense Word Fluency (NWF). This assessment asks students to use their knowledge of letter sounds to blend sounds together within a nonsense word. The ability to blend sounds together within words quickly and accurately contributes to fluent text reading. This assessment is part of the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) battery.

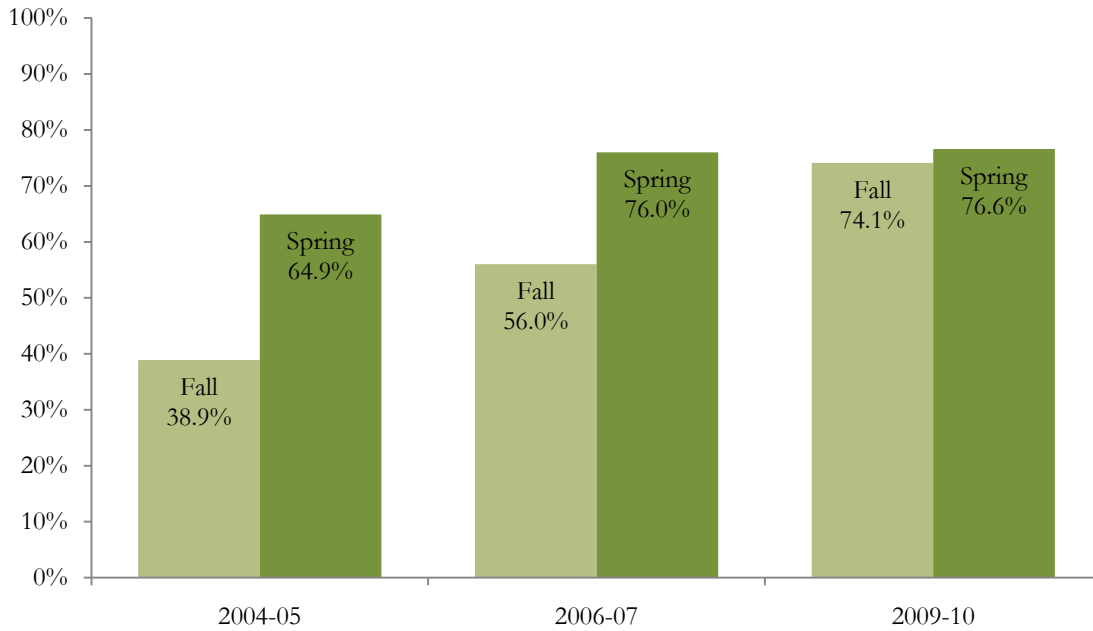


Figure 3: Students at Grade Level NWF

As shown in the figure above, most first grade students are well into the established literacy range. The successful performance of all first graders is an indicator of the substantial work teachers have done to build their students’ blending skills. The figure shows that average scores have improved by 12% from the project’s baseline; however, the results do not represent a big improvement over last year’s results. Another positive result is the much higher baseline in fall indicating that students coming to first grade from Kindergarten are much better prepared.

Risk level is measured according to the DIBELS benchmarks and cutoff scores for NWF. The percentage of first grade students at risk for

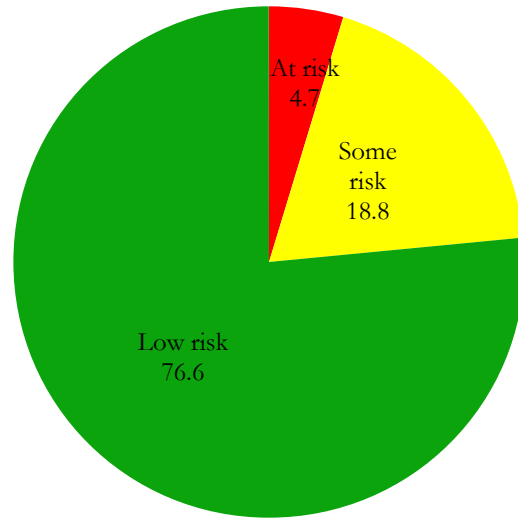


Figure 4: Student Risk Level based on Spring Nonsense Word Fluency

difficulty in reading development has decreased over the year. There is a clear carryover from the efforts of kindergarten teachers as entering students are very unlikely to be in the at-risk category. In the spring, that percentage reduced to 23.4% (with only 4.7% at-risk compared to 25.0% nationally!), as illustrated in figure 6. This should serve students well as they move into decoding connected text in a variety of genres of written material in second grade.

Review of the results using Oral Reading Fluency measures at the spring of first grade on the right shows the same pattern as NWF results. Student reading skills seem to be prepared for engaging in the reading tasks expected of second graders with only 6.6% considered At Risk.

In the spring of each year, a randomly selected sample of first grade students from Reading First schools complete the Gray Oral Reading Test (GORT-4), a measure of oral reading growth as it impacts comprehension growth. The GORT-4 is an individually administered assessment. Rate and accuracy measures are combined to obtain a fluency score, and comprehension is assessed through answers to questions about each passage read.

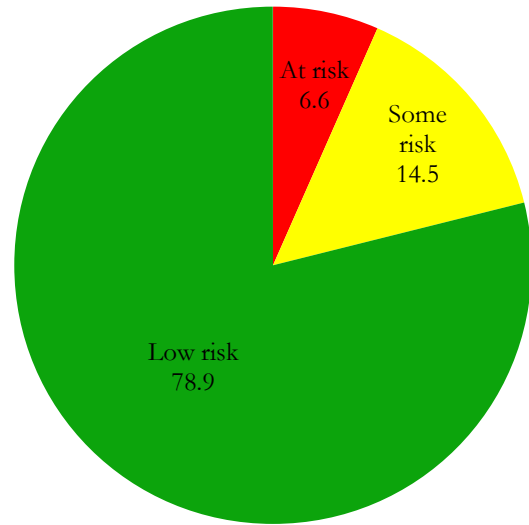


Figure 5: Student Risk Levels based Oral Reading Fluency

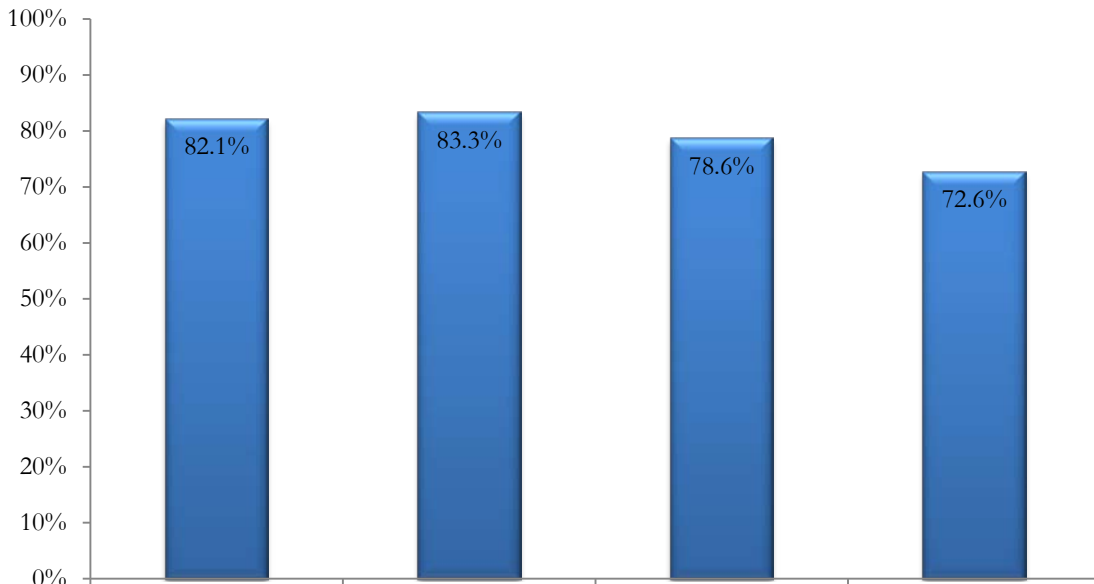


Figure 6: GORT Subtest Results

As shown in figure 8, the performance on oral reading and comprehension measures of this sample of first graders is impressive. As students move into second grade and master decoding tasks, the emphasis in reading instruction switches to fluency as it contributes to comprehension. Moreover, first grade comprehension results show a significant improvement in the skill that is least amenable to change: comprehension.

After six years of implementing Reading First in schools, the impact on the achievement level of first grade students is significant. Across multiple measures of literacy, close to 80% of first grade students are ready for second grade equipped with a set of skill that should serve them well. Despite these hopeful results, schools must consider possible reading loss over the summer and attend to that as well as to the other 20% of students who are not quite there yet. Most of these students in Reading First schools are very close to grade level needs. The last 5% of students are significantly at risk and will require considerate support as they transition to second grade and its much higher literacy demands.

SECOND GRADE

By the end of second grade, students need to be able to decode quickly and accurately so that they can read continuous text with appropriate rate and accuracy. The ability to do this is measured by the Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) subtest of the DIBELS. Reading continuous text fluently is a necessary foundation for comprehending text in second and third grades. DIBELS has established a score of 90 or above as indicating low risk for difficulty in oral reading fluency.

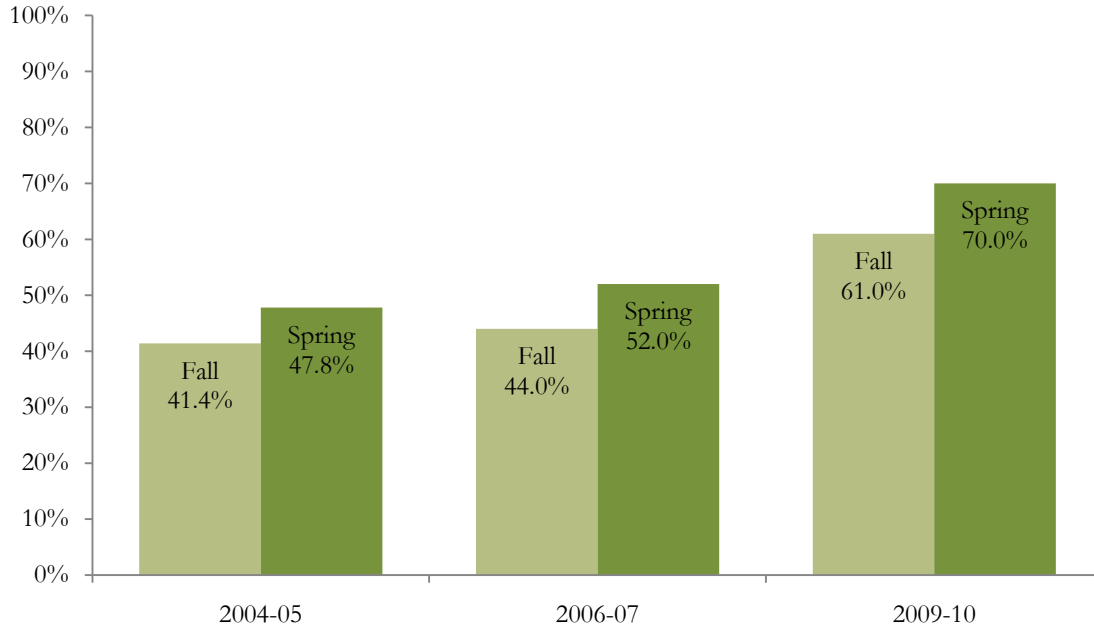


Figure 9: Students at Grade Level ORF

The results shown in the figure above show that 70% of students were at grade level in Reading Fluency. This result is a significant improvement from both the baseline of the program as a whole (2004-5) and the baseline of this group of schools (2006-7). Students are entering second grade better prepared in Reading Fluency and they are closing the gap during the year. At the same time, the challenge is becoming clear as second graders are 9% behind the proportion of first graders at Grade Level.

Vocabulary and comprehension are key skills for learning in the upper elementary years and beyond. In Second grade, they are measured using the Gates

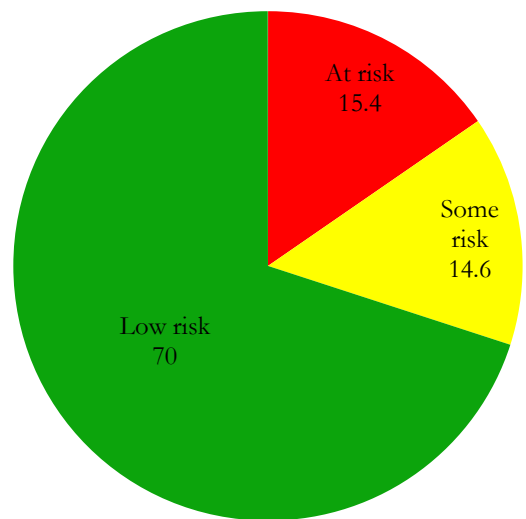


Figure 10: Students Risk Levels based on Oral Reading Fluency

MacGinitie. Results show that 64.6% were at Grade Level in vocabulary and 65.9% for comprehension. As is the case with fluency, the results are above the national norms while at the same time representing a drop from first grade results. As will be seen in the discussion of achievement gaps, some students are more likely to fall behind as students mature in their literacy skills.

THIRD GRADE

Third grade students are assessed on Oral Reading Fluency (ORF) three times during the school year. The ability to read smoothly and accurately with appropriate pace and expression contributes significantly to comprehension. For this reason, once the basics of word decoding are mastered teachers shift their instructional focus to reading fluency. Third grade students must read at a rate of 110 correct words per minute to be considered proficient and at low risk for reading difficulty.

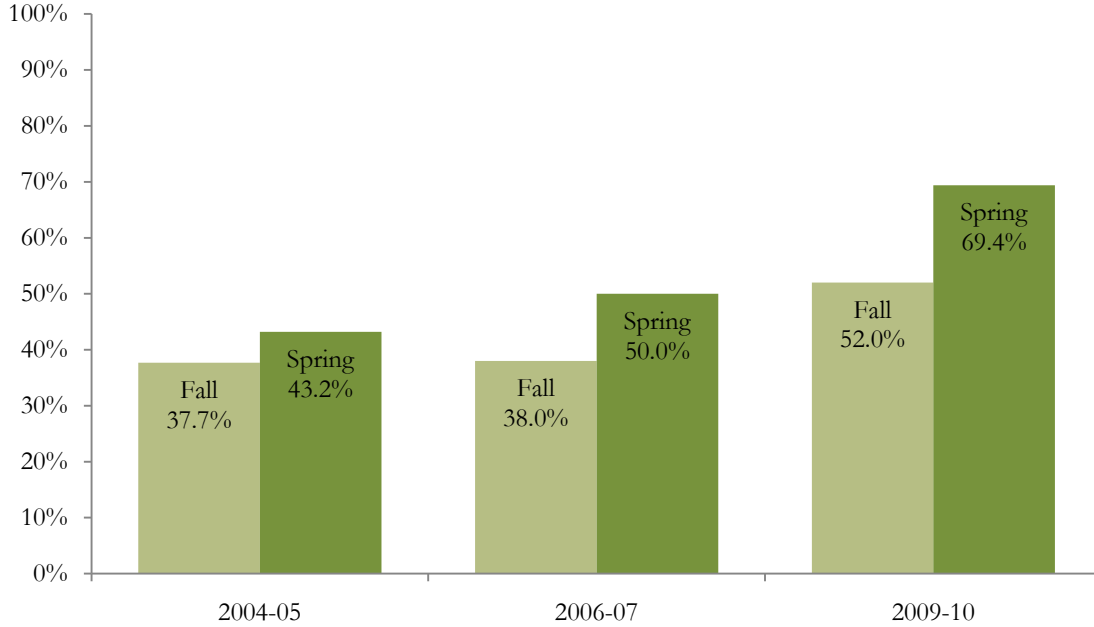


Figure 7: Students at Grade Level ORF

These results indicate that there is still work to be done in some classrooms to bring all third graders to the level of fluency that will help ensure their success in later school reading. Risk level is determined through ORF scores established in the DIBELS framework.

While progress has been made, close to one third of the students who completed third grade in Reading First schools remain at risk for reading difficulty. This can be seen in the figure above, and corresponds closely with the number of second graders still at risk based on this skill. These students will continue to need support in developing reading fluency as they move into intermediate

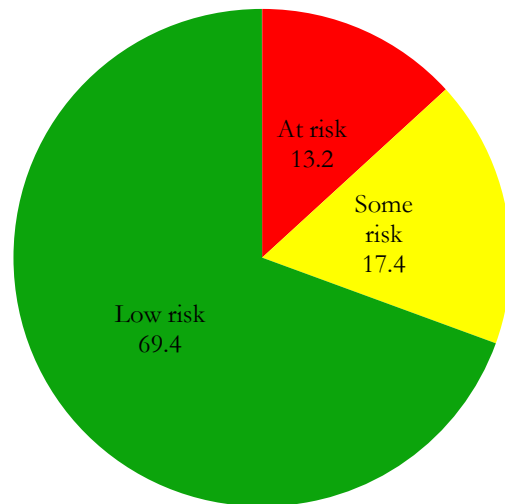


Figure 8: Student Risk Levels ORF

grades. The need to continue to focus on the development of reading fluency in second and third grades is apparent.

In the spring of third grade, all Reading First students complete the Gates MacGinitie Reading Test for assessment of vocabulary and comprehension proficiency. As with second grade, the number of students at grade level on these measures has remained fairly steady over the last four years. Across different groups of third grade students, 60.1% are at grade level for vocabulary and 55.5% for comprehension. The lack of significant change in third grade results for comprehension indicates that the challenges in helping students reach comprehension goals.

ACHIEVEMENT GAPS

One of the main goals of the Reading First program was to close achievement gaps between main stream students and populations at risk. The figures below show that in Reading Fluency gaps are small but persistently increasing across grade levels. English learners are on average 5% behind, minority students 7% and students on Free and Reduced Lunch are 8% behind. As with previous years, students in Special Education are significantly at risk: fully 27% behind general education students. Despite four years in Reading First gaps are persistent and there is little to indicate a trend towards their reduction.

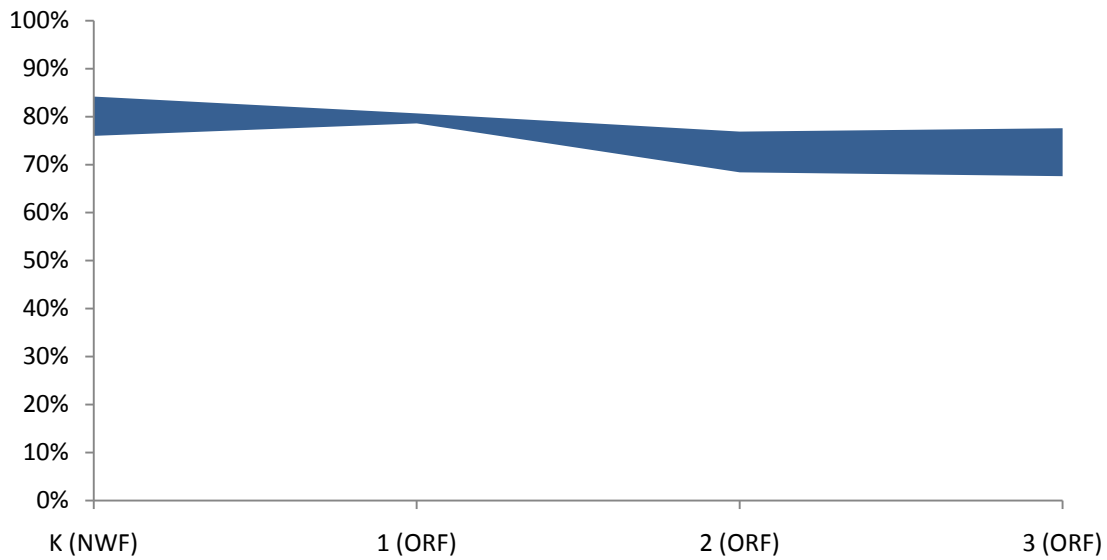


Figure 9: FRL Achievement Gaps

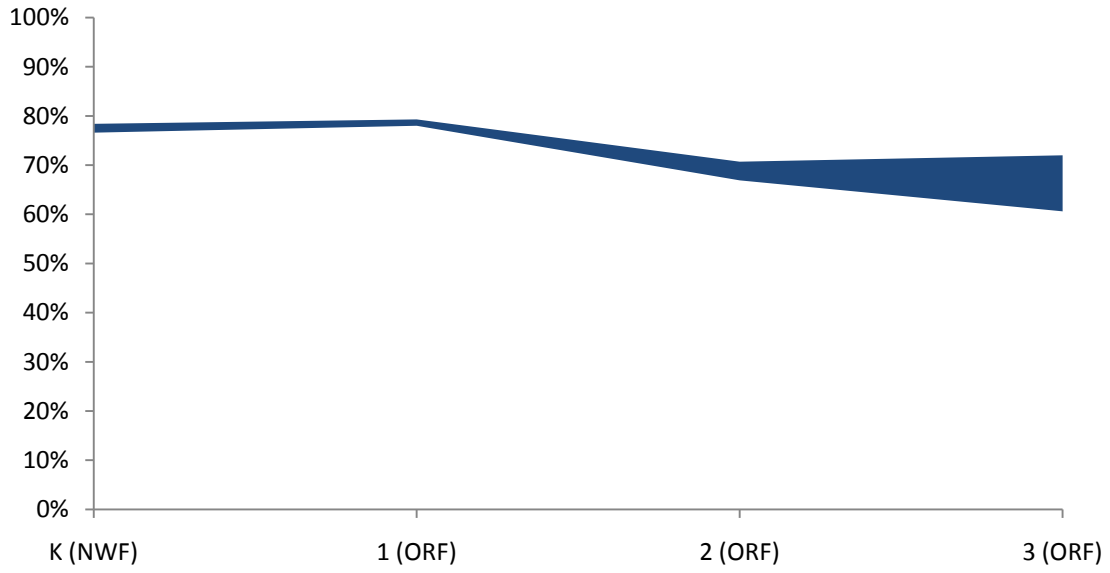


Figure 10: ELL Achievement Gaps

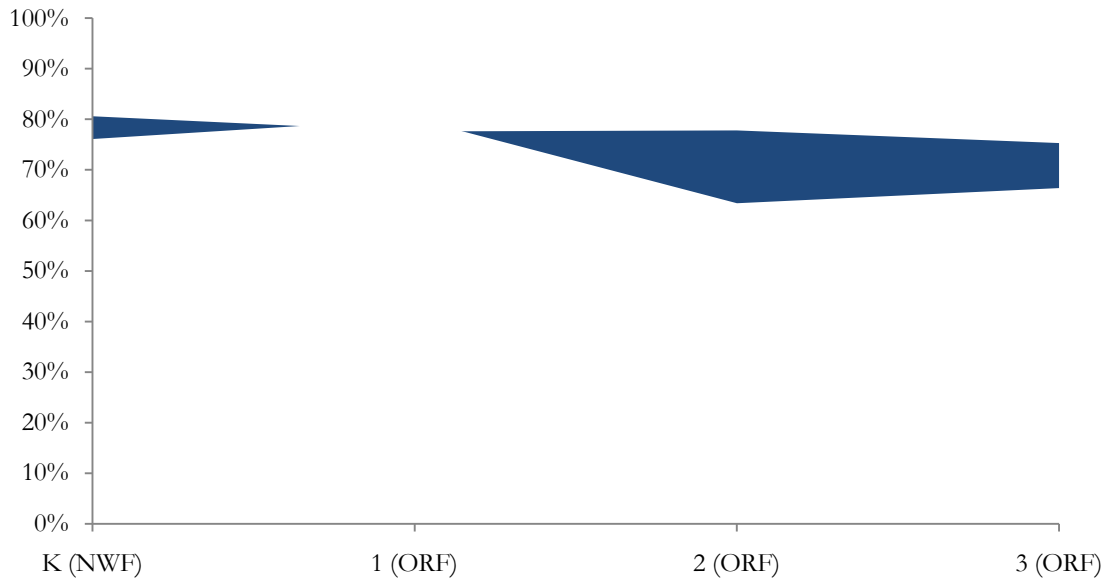


Figure 11: Minority Achievement Gaps

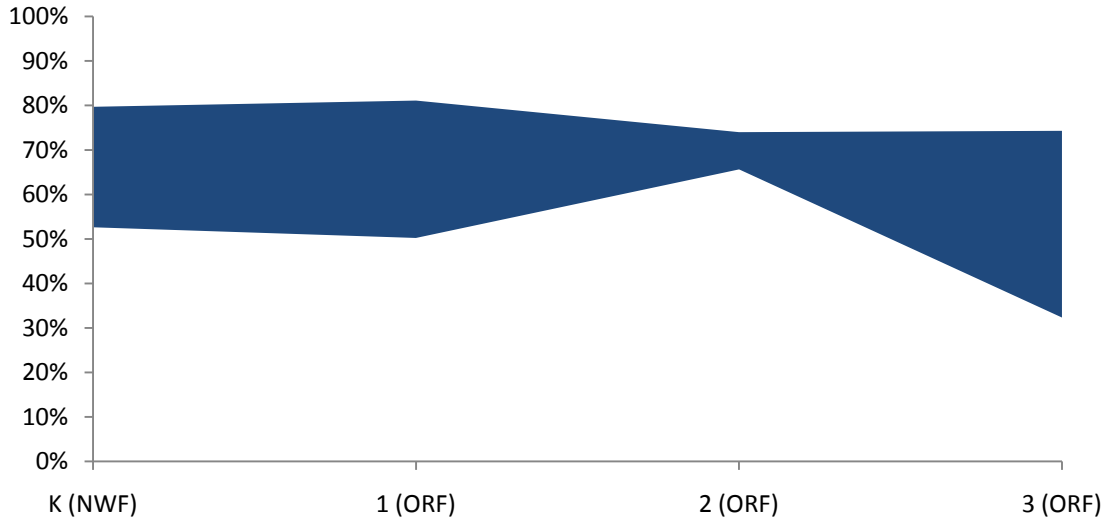


Figure 12: SPED Achievement Gaps

While fluency is an important skill, the outcomes of Reading First must be assessed using outcome measures focused on comprehension. The following figures show that while gaps in skills (i.e. fluency) were for the most part manageable, the gaps in comprehension and vocabulary indicate that Reading First has not been able to successfully bridge such gaps that would lead for better schooling outcomes for at-risk populations.

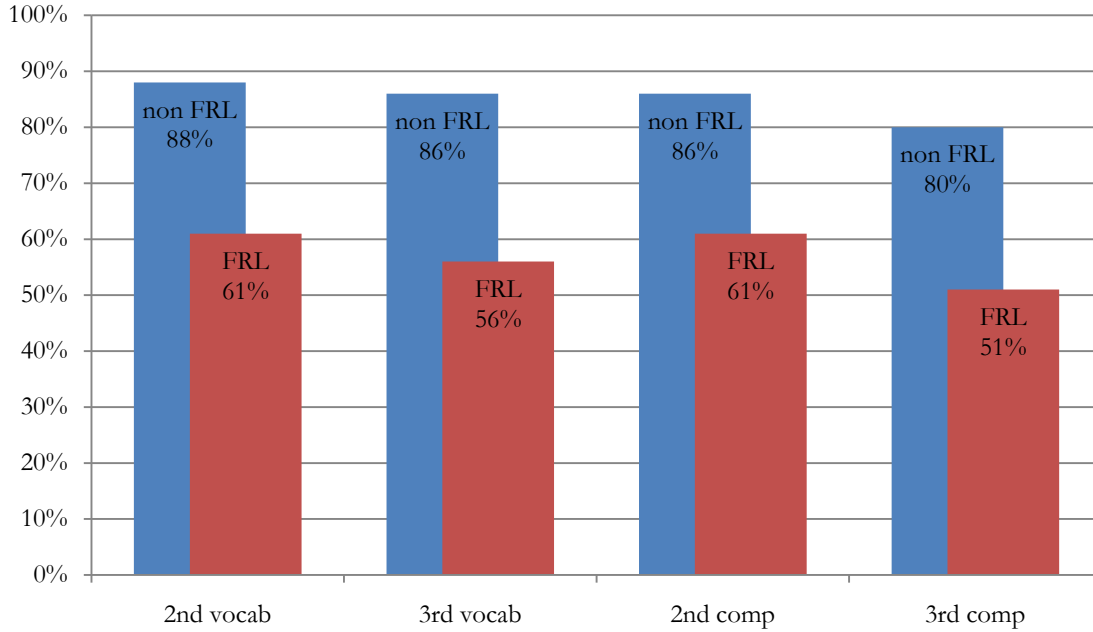


Figure 13: Comprehension Achievement Gaps FRL

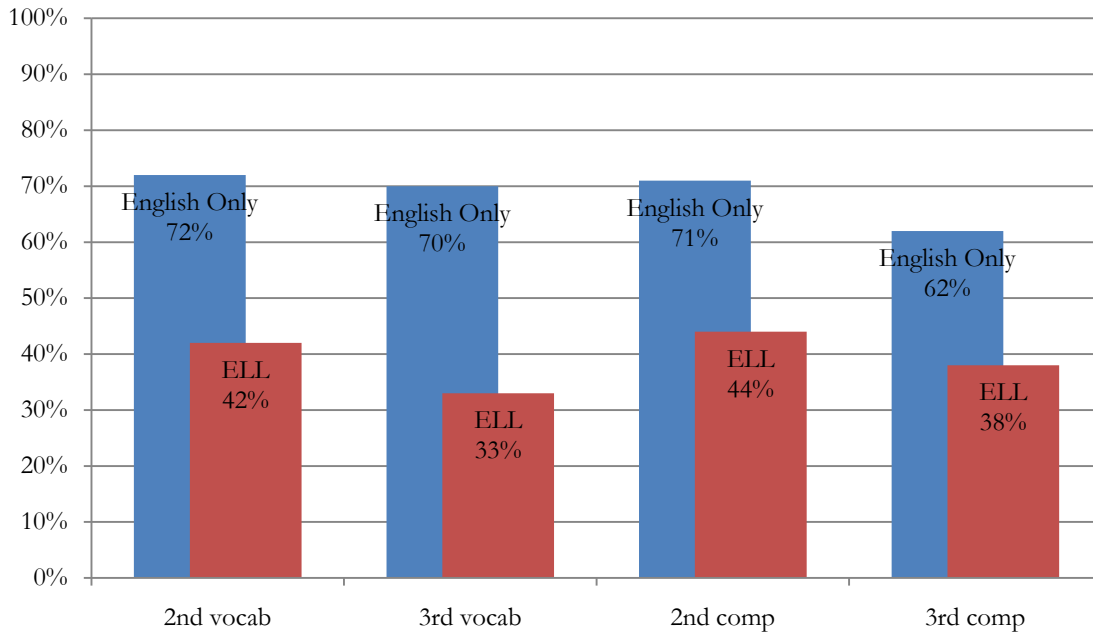


Figure 14: Comprehension Achievement Gaps ELL

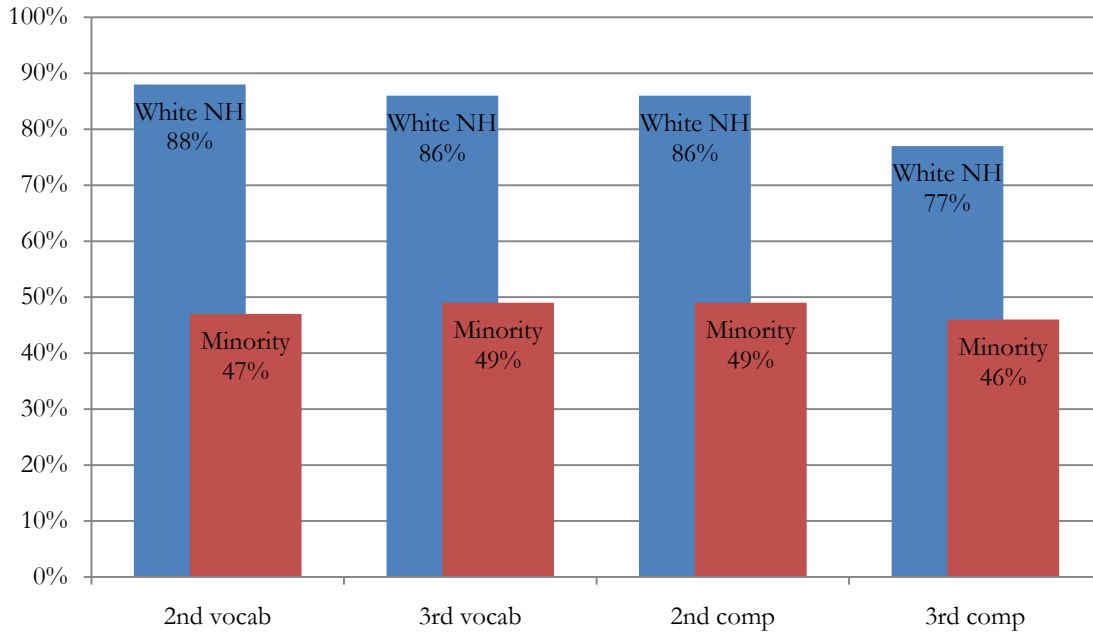


Figure 15: Comprehension Achievement Gaps Minority Students

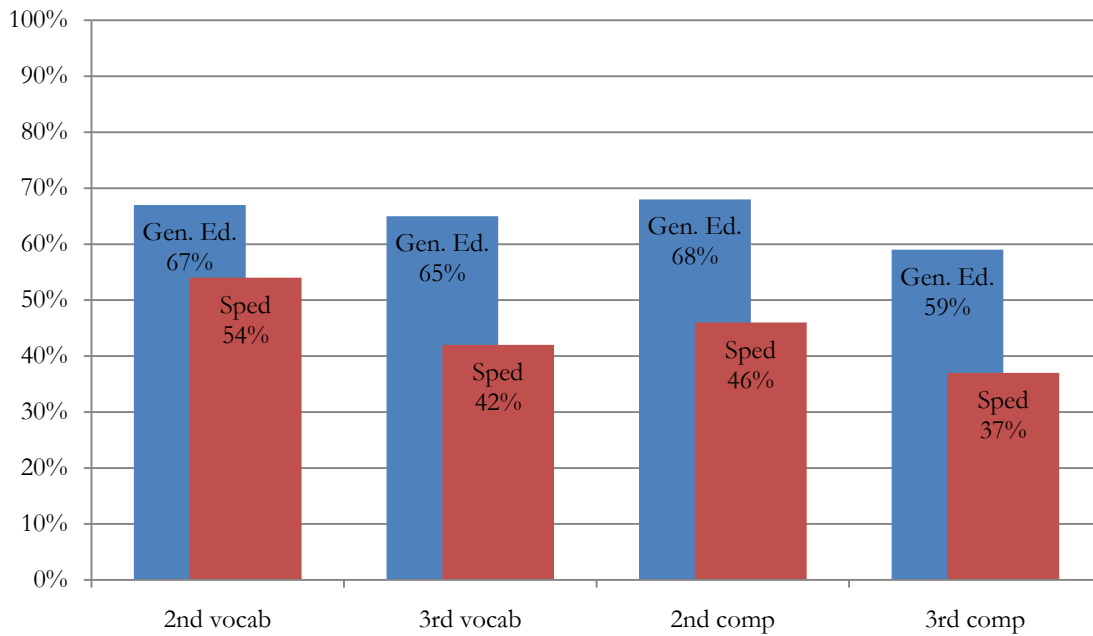


Figure 16: Comprehension Achievement Gaps for SPED Students

SUSTAINABILITY

The 2009-10 academic year marked the sixth and final year of funding. In order to see how this final year of funded implementation went, we conducted interviews with each school's Reading First Coach. We inquired about recent successes and obstacles, as well as the coaches' opinion concerning the sustainability of their practices.

All of the coaches felt that this year was very successful. Most mentioned the increased test scores as evidence. One coach was very specific: "Overall, 15% more students are reaching benchmark this year than four years ago, and the students at risk have been reduced by 13% in that time." Some coaches attributed their success to the school's preparation and mentioned having an easier time both identifying struggling or achieving students and placing them in the appropriate class. One coach noted that she was able to conduct many classroom observations, and felt that may have helped. A few coaches mentioned that, in addition to working with grades k-3, their practices have expanded to include grades 4-6, and that this represented a measure of success.

Coaches seemed to notice few major obstacles for the 2009-10 academic year. As in past years, mobility continues to be of concern to the coaches; students moving into their districts seem to be struggling both with their test scores and with adapting to the Reading First structure. A high rate of turnover seems fairly common among the schools. One coach lamented about a student who transferred into her fifth school in fall, and was transferred out again before winter break.

In one district, the coaching position had already been reduced to part-time. As the coach in that district said, "We have peer coaches, but finding time for them to be in other teacher's classrooms, without shorting their own class, is not easy." Because of the change, this coach felt that training new teachers, substitutes, and para-professionals was increasingly difficult.

Round II coaches have mixed feelings about the sustainability of Reading First programming in their schools. One coach was very optimistic, noting that, while their school sometimes had trouble meeting annual yearly progress benchmarks, they have had no problems with funding. Another coach noted that the district plans to make use of RTI funds to continue Reading First, while yet another feared that budget cuts would make continuing Reading First all but impossible. In every case, coaches noted that the support of administration was absolutely essential, and that the existing staff is dedicated to continuing the current practices.

The 2009-10 academic year marked the first time that Round I Reading First schools were not included. During last year's interviews, many Round I school coaches expressed optimism that Reading First programming would continue in their schools. They cited many reasons for their beliefs, including administrator support, teacher dedication, and careful planning. This year, though some schools were forced

to discontinue their official coach position, we followed up with Round I coaches who had maintained their position to see if they were able to continue the practices as they anticipated.

All of the schools we were able to communicate with that still had a Reading First coach position, whether it was a full or part time position, was able to continue with Reading First programming. Some schools had dedicated funding from Title I to continue the effort, while others found funding elsewhere. Some coaches reported that nothing had changed, that all Reading First programming was being executed the same as in past years or that they have “kept the framework in place.” One coach mentioned that the school had been so well-structured and prepared for the continuation for Reading First that when a new coach was brought in, nothing had to change.

Others reported that, like some Round II schools, they had expanded or changed their implementation. One coach was enthusiastic that they were able to “ratchet it up on some level”, while another reported extending the programming into 4th through 6th grade. One mentioned creating opportunities for planned collaboration for teachers “3-5 times a week for grades 1-4 and once a week for kindergarten.”

In most cases, coaches credit the preparation of their teachers and the support of their administrators for the continued success of Reading First programming without a dedicated federal grant. Though several coaches mentioned that federal funding would definitely help, most obstacles mentioned were independent from financing, or at least secondary. Some coaches reported that they were unable to train new teachers in the Reading First method, while others mentioned the additional requirements that coaches additionally teach a reading class as difficulties. As one coach told us, “I haven’t (as a reading coach) been able to go into classrooms during reading times since I have to teach a reading group during that time.” Another coach wanted us to know that they missed the help of the external advisory committee: “No matter how many times you hear it, (the evaluators) are so knowledgeable and it keeps you pumped up.” Only coach reported that there had been no obstacles to implementation despite the lack of funding.

TEACHER ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES

To gain insight into the perspectives teachers hold about their own schools, classrooms, and practices over the past year, Nebraska Reading First classroom teachers were asked to complete a survey of instructional and professional practices. Teacher Efficacy & Collaboration

Existing research links high teacher efficacy with high student achievement. Because teachers perform not only individually but also collectively as a part of the school faculty, the concept of collective efficacy—a group’s shared belief in its capabilities—was deemed an important topic to examine in this year’s survey. Information on collaboration, a potential component of collective efficacy was also collected. Teachers were asked to indicate their level of agreement with 19 efficacy statements.

While some statements may have evoked stronger responses than others, Reading First teachers as a group tended to report high collective efficacy overall. For example, 98% of teachers agreed with the statement, *“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”*: a 7 point increase over last year’s survey responses. Collective efficacy was especially high when asked about goal achievement, with 96% of teachers agreeing that, *“We are definitely able to accomplish our reading goals at school since we are a competent team of teachers that grows every time we are challenged.”* Relevant and encouraging in the face of Reading First funding winding down again this year with 90% of teachers reported being *“convinced that we, as teachers, can guarantee high instructional quality even when resources are limited or become scarce.”* On the topic of collaboration, 90% of teachers across all grade levels reported they are *“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.”* Only 64% of teachers agreed that they *“have detailed knowledge of what those students learned previously “*

After four of Reading First implementation in their schools, 98% of teachers across school districts reported that, *“overall, the instructional policies I am supposed to follow in my classroom seem consistent.”* Only 24% of teachers thought that *“expectations about how (to) teach are often contradictory”* and only 12% of teachers reported having *“difficulty choosing what to do in (the) classroom out of all the options (they) hear about.”*

Teacher logs are periodic surveys that examine teacher practices for a specific week. While response rate this year was lower than previous years, results were very much in line with previous reports. Teachers report an average of close to 3 instructional hours focused on literacy each day. This exceeds program requirements and is an increase from previous years. Other measures show that teachers are using grade level appropriate strategies and employing the approaches offered in professional development.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Reading First has been implemented in Nebraska since the 2004-5 academic year. In two rounds of funding and participation, schools have transformed the way they trained their teachers, measured student progress, and taught. This transformation is one of the hardest tasks in education and it has taken the considerable dedication of school personnel as well as dedicated leaders from the Nebraska Department of education. The program has seen great success in increasing the proportion of students acquiring basic literacy skills of phonemic awareness, decoding, and oral reading fluency. That initial success has led to an increase in outcomes even for comprehension and vocabulary areas that are much harder to remediate.

It is clear, however, that a program such as Reading First has very clear limitations. That is beyond an initial improvement of 10-15% (by no means a trivial one) over the first 2 years of implementation, other gains are small and inconsistent. The program is able to "hold the line" even with large number of mobile students but not to go any further. This trend is reinforced if we look at the results of the Nebraska State Assessment in reading as presented in the table below. Nine schools are at or above the state average (if standard error is taken into account), while fifteen are significantly below state average. The reasons for schools success in meeting the established goals seem to be associated with two factors. The first factor is related to the students showing up at the schools door. For example state test scores show that there is a significant relationship between average district results and the percent of students who receive Free and Reduced Lunch (the correlation is $-.94$). At the same time individual school results show that school leadership and instructional focus can overcome some of these challenges and make significant gains. Finally, school reform that is meaningful takes more than three four or even five years. Future efforts must be based on sustained efforts that research has shown to be effective in an average of seven years.

Table 2: Percent of Third Grade Students at Grade-Level Nebraska State Assessment- Reading

Round	SCHOOL	Percent of students who meet or exceed standards
1	BUFFALO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	92%
1	CHADRON EAST WARD ELEMENTARY	88%
2	SARATOGA ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	88%
1	ALLEN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	81%
1	KELLOM ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	78%
1	GEIL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	75%
2	CENTRAL CITY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	69%
	STATE AVERAGE	67%
1	BEEMER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	66%
1	LINCOLN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, North Platte	63%
1	LINCOLN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, Gering	57%
1	JEFFERSON ELEM SCHOOL, Omaha	55%

NEBRASKA READING FIRST—ANNUAL REPORT 2009-2010

2	LOUP CITY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	53%
1	ELKHORN VALLEY ELEMENTARY SCH	47%
1	BANCROFT ELEMENTARY	45%
1	KENWOOD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	45%
1	MILLER PARK ELEM SCHOOL	41%
1	BELVEDERE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	38%
1	LOTHROP MAGNET CENTER	38%
2	HIGHLAND ELEM SCHOOL	37%
2	SOUTHERN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	36%
1	MOUNT VIEW ELEM SCHOOL	35%
2	FRANKLIN ELEM SCHOOL	32%
2	KENNEDY ELEM SCHOOL	27%
2	MINATARE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	20%