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Year Five of Implementation—2008-2009 Nebraska Reading First Annual Report

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GREAT PLAINS INSTITUTE
OF READING AND WRITING

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN
SCIENCES

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA LINCOLN

ANNUAL REPORT

YEAR FIVE OF IMPLEMENTATION—2008-2009

NEBRASKA READING FIRST

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OVERVIEW

The 2008-2009 Annual Reading First Progress Report reflects on the final year of implementation for Round I schools and the third full year of implementation for Round II schools. This report focuses on the effect that Reading First implementation has had on selected schools across Nebraska with a special focus on vulnerable populations: English language learners, students of different ethnicities, special education students, and economically disadvantaged students.

The report begins with a discussion of Nebraska Reading First student characteristics and how they have changed from last year. This section also discusses the treatment of clusters in Reading First evaluation, their characteristics, and the rationale for their use.

The subsequent section is a longitudinal analysis of Reading First implementation. This section is divided into grade levels; within each grade, results are compared across clusters for valid comparison of like schools. It includes data on changes over the past five years for each grade in mean scores, risk levels, and finally achievement gaps for English language learners, economically disadvantaged students, and students of different ethnicities.

Following this section is an analysis of teacher-based factors. First, the teacher surveys provide insight into the teachers' perception of Reading First implementation and efficacy. Next, the teacher logs offer a glimpse into a day of typical Reading First instruction. Finally, external evaluators' observations are discussed in terms of both teachers' in-class practices and teachers' reactions to Reading First.

The last section is an overview the interviews that were conducted with Reading First coaches across the state. The discussion includes strengths and obstacles to Reading First implementation this year as distinct from previous years, as well as coaches' views on the sustainability of Reading First.

STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS

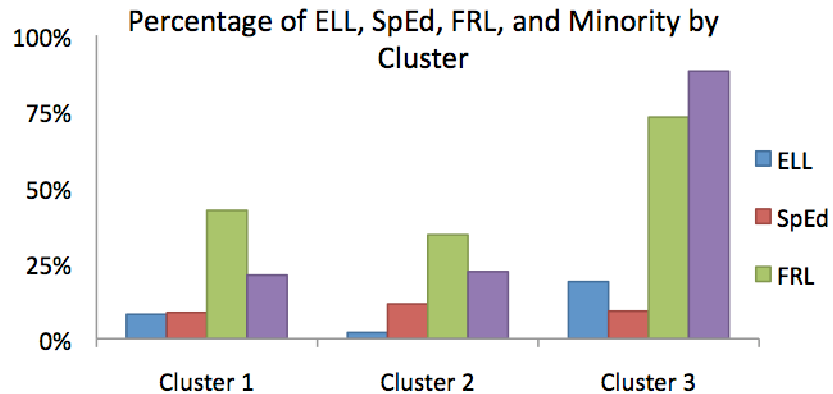
There were minimal changes in student characteristics during the 2008-2009 school year. There was a slight reduction in all categories with the most pronounced change in the percent of Hispanic students (4% reduction). There continues to be important difference between the students educated in Nebraska Reading First schools compared to state averages. Nebraska Reading First schools have higher percentages of English Language Learners, minorities, and students of economic disadvantage.

	NEBRASKA READING FIRST 2007- 08		NEBRASKA READING FIRST 2008-09		STATE 2008		Difference
Special Education	14.0%		12.2%		15.2%		-3.0%
English Language Learners	12.0%		9.8%		6.8%		+2.9%
Free/Reduced Lunch	58.0%		57.7%		37.3%		+20.4%
African American	27.0%		26.0%		7.9%		+18.1%
Hispanic	22.0%		18.0%		12.9%		+5.1%
Native American	2.0%		2.3%		1.7%		+0.6%
White (non-Hispanic)	48.0%		44.0%		75.0%		-31.0%

Clusters

As stated in previous reports, student and district characteristics vary greatly between many Nebraska Reading First schools. To enable meaningful school and district level comparisons a cluster analysis was conducted in order to determine which school could be grouped together based on like characteristics. A cluster analysis is an exploratory statistical method for sorting objects into groups based on the degree of association between specific meaningful characteristics. Student performance based on cluster membership is beneficial in that it allows us to make more effective comparisons. The specific characteristics used in this analysis were school size, ethnicity, ELL, FRL, and

special education. Just as in past years, Cluster Three is represented by the highest percentages of students of economic disadvantage (FRL), students of diverse ethnic backgrounds, and English Language Learners (ELL). Although there is a greater



degree of similarity in characteristics between Cluster One and Cluster Two, there are very important differences between these two groups of schools. Cluster One schools are smaller schools with a higher percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced lunches compared to Cluster Two schools that are larger schools with lower percentages of English Language Learners.

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

KINDERGARTEN

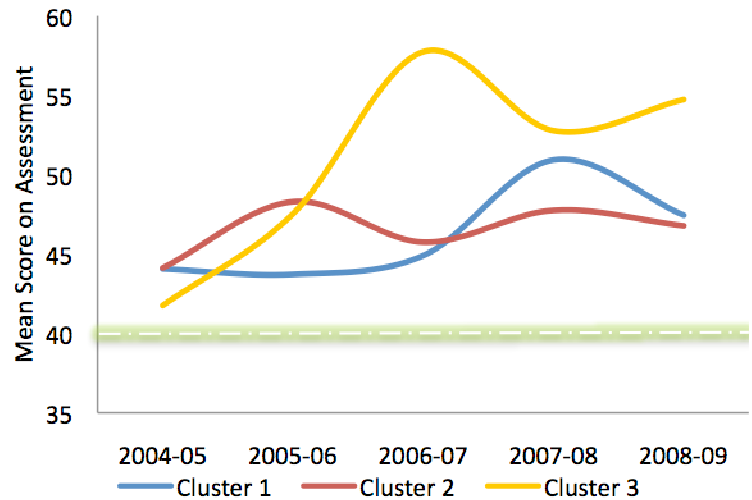
During the kindergarten year the mastery of foundational skills for later word decoding begins to develop. Letter knowledge is one of the earliest literacy skills. This is measured by Letter Naming Fluency (LNF). Proficiency in letter naming facilitates letter-sound match skills that contribute to fast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

(separated by clusters) across the last five years of Reading First implementation in Nebraska. The green dotted line shows the benchmark for letter naming in the spring. Although the trend is positive there is a good degree of variability in performance between kindergarteners in each cluster. Kindergarten students in Cluster Three (large schools, high diversity) have shown the steepest improvements over the last five years with more modest improvements seen in Clusters Two and Three. Most importantly, the mean score of all three clusters has been above the benchmark for this measure. This represents important progress as the

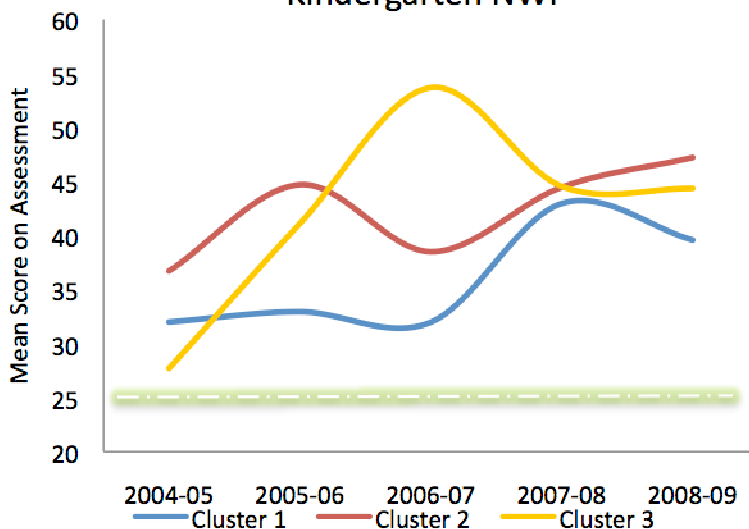
ability to rapidly name letters is a good predictor of later decoding ability.

Once students master letter naming they move on to word based skills such as Phoneme Segmentation Fluency (PSF), which measures the ability to isolate and manipulate individual sounds within short words and Nonsense Word Fluency (NWF), a decoding task that requires students to apply phonics rules and blending to nonsense words without the benefit of context. As shown in the figure

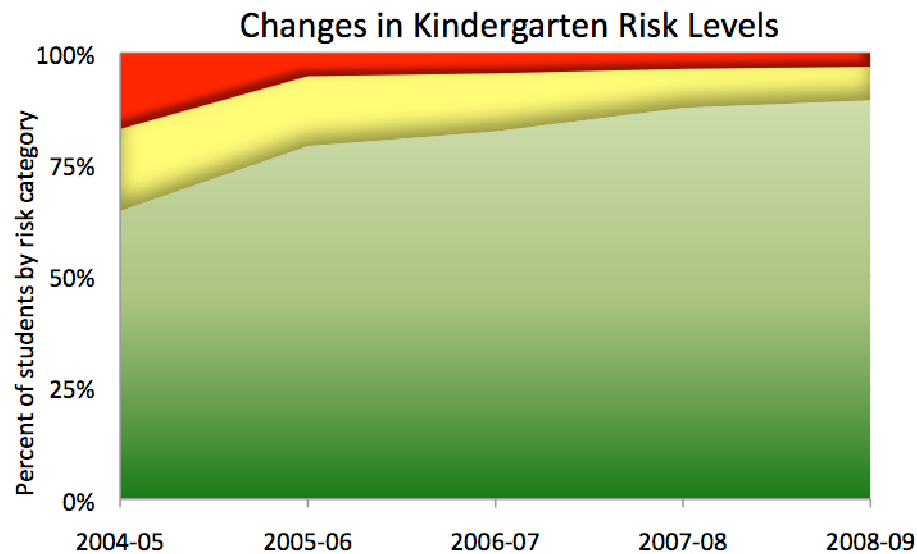
Kindergarten LNF



Kindergarten NWF

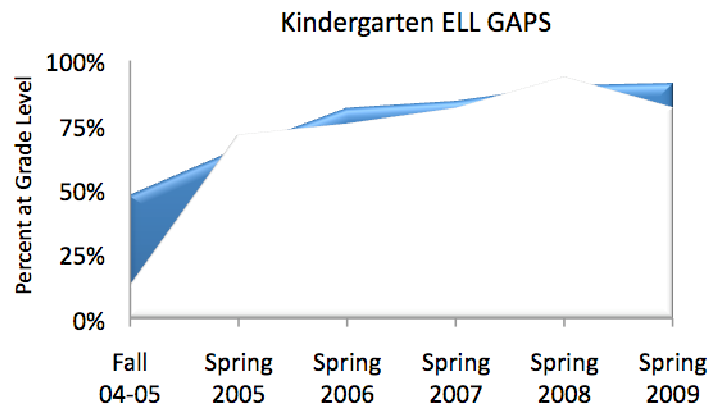


at the bottom of the previous page, the mean performance of kindergarten students across all three Nebraska Reading First clusters have been above benchmark over the last five years of implementation on the measure of decoding ability (NWF). Though there is some variability between years in mean performance by kindergarteners in each cluster, there has been an average increase of 10 words per minute since the first year of Reading First implementation across all three clusters. It is this decoding measure (NWF) that is used to assess the level of student risk for reading difficulty at the end of the kindergarten year. The figure below shows the changes in risk level status of kindergarten students in Nebraska Reading First schools as measured by decoding (NWF). The green shaded area represents the percentage of students in the Low Risk category, yellow and red represents students in the Some Risk and At-Risk categories respectively. As shown in the figure below there has been a notable increase in the percentage of kindergarten students in the low risk category. In the spring of 2009, nearly 90% of kindergarten students in Nebraska Reading First schools were in the low risk category, which represents a 35% increase since 2005. This dramatic increase provides a strong indication of the positive impact of Reading First implementation on the early reading skills of kindergarten students in these schools. The ability to rapidly decode unknown words will support oral reading fluency, which becomes a more important focus beginning in late first grade.

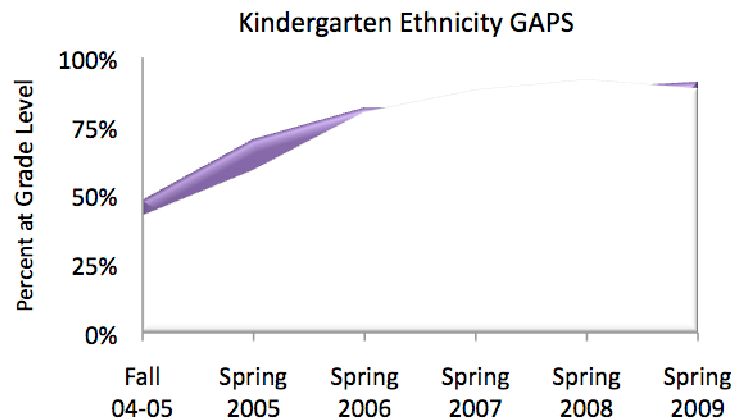


Kindergarten Achievement Gaps

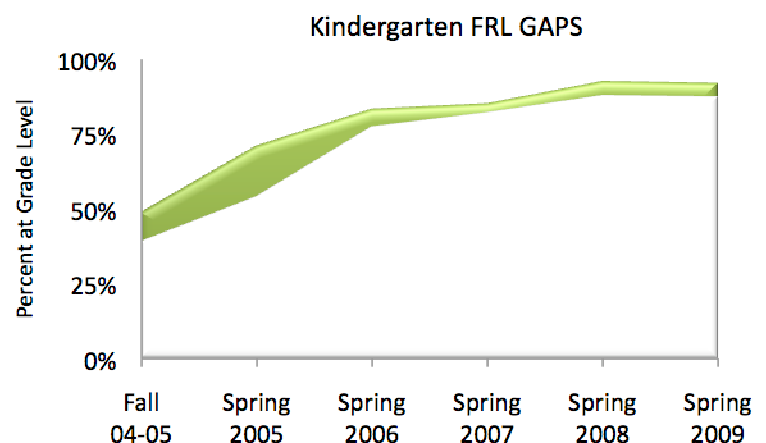
The achievement gaps in kindergarten have narrowed across all three categories (ELL, Ethnicity, and economic disadvantage—FRL) across the first five years of Reading First implementation in Nebraska. The shaded area in each graph represents the discrepancy in percentage of students performing at or above grade level for each category. The graphs shown represent the percentage of kindergarten students at grade level in decoding ability (NWF). The gap between ELL and English only students was profound (35%) at the inception of Reading First in Nebraska. Two assessment cycles (spring '05 and spring '08) showed that the percent of students at grade level who were classified as ELL was actually higher than the English Only students. In the spring of 2009, however, the gap widened to a 10% discrepancy between English Only and ELL students.



The achievement gap in kindergarten between White Non-Hispanic students and Minority students has narrowed over the 5 years of Reading First implementation in Nebraska. The widest gap in percentage of students at grade level for this category was over 11%. This gap narrowed to 2% in the spring of 2009.

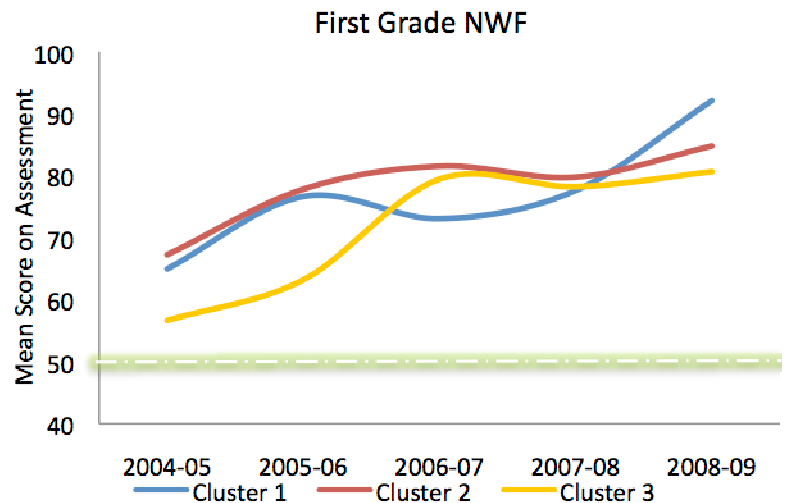


The kindergarten achievement gap between students of economic disadvantage and their more advantaged peers has narrowed since the inception of Reading First in Nebraska. The widest discrepancy was in the spring of the first year of Reading First implementation (17%). This gap narrowed to 4% by the spring of 2009.



FIRST GRADE

The momentum from gains made by kindergarten students in Nebraska Reading First schools can be seen in the decoding ability of first grade students in these districts as measured by the Non-Word Fluency (NWF) subtest. As seen in the figure to the right, the mean performance on this measure in all three clusters has steadily progressed across the five years of Reading First implementation in Nebraska. The combined performance across clusters shows an increase of over 22 words decoded per minute since the spring of 2005.



Rapid decoding supports the development of automatic word recognition which in turn supports oral reading fluency. The figure below shows the average increase in oral reading fluency in all three clusters in Nebraska Reading First schools. With the exception of Cluster Three in the spring of 2005, the average oral reading fluency rate in all three clusters has been above benchmark (40 CWPM). The average oral reading rate across all Nebraska Reading First schools has steadily increased (represented by the dark gray line in the

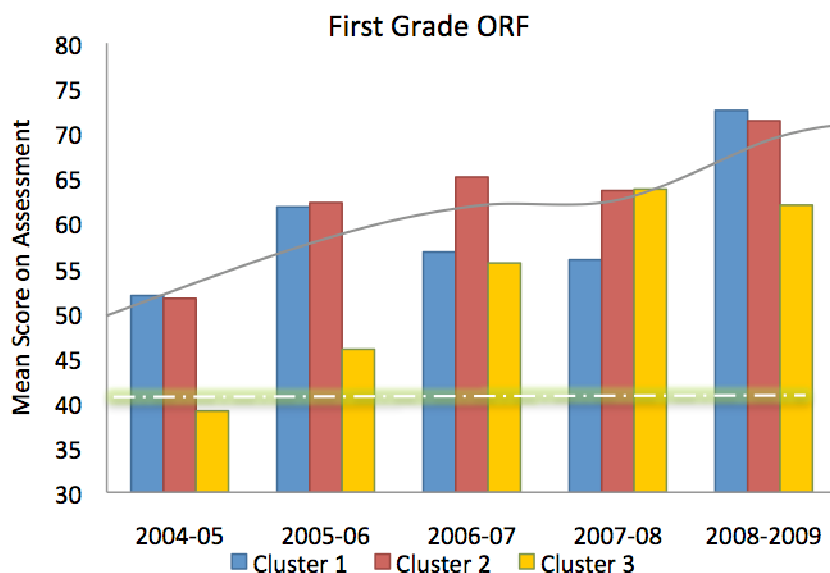
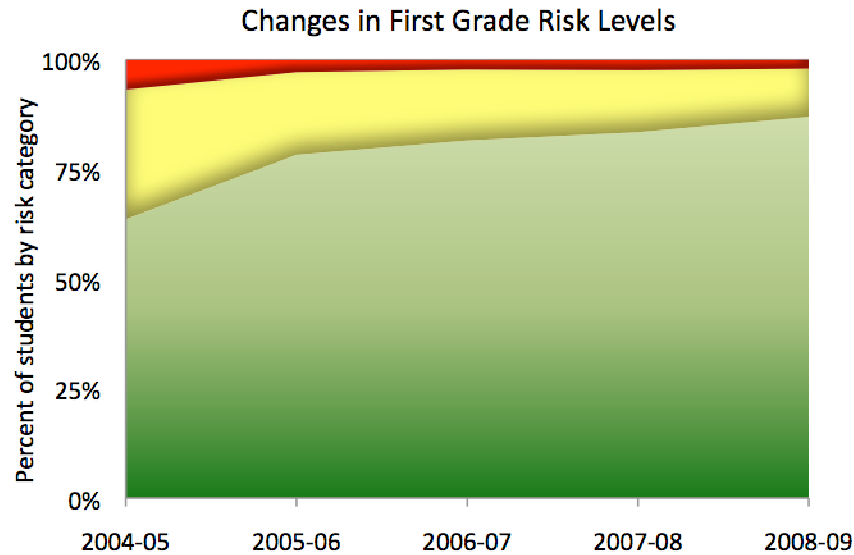


figure to the left) as a result of the interventions provided in these first grade classrooms. In the spring of 2005, the average performance of first grade students in oral reading fluency was 7 words per minute above benchmark. After five years of Reading First implementation, the average number of words read per minute by first grade students was nearly 20 correct words higher than benchmark.

Just as in kindergarten, the test used to assess risk level in first grade is decoding (NWF). The figure below represents the percentage of students in each risk category across five years of Reading First implementation in Nebraska. Since spring of 2005 there has been a 24% increase in the percentage of first grade students who are classified as Low Risk for reading difficulties based on this measure. In other words the number of students at risk in spring 2009 was less than half of the number of students at risk in fall 2004.



First grade students in Nebraska Reading First schools have made significant progress across five years of implementation as indicated in all areas of assessment. These results clearly indicate that first grade students in these classrooms have responded positively to the skills and strategies promoted by the various instructional approaches used in Nebraska Reading First classrooms.

First Grade Achievement Gaps

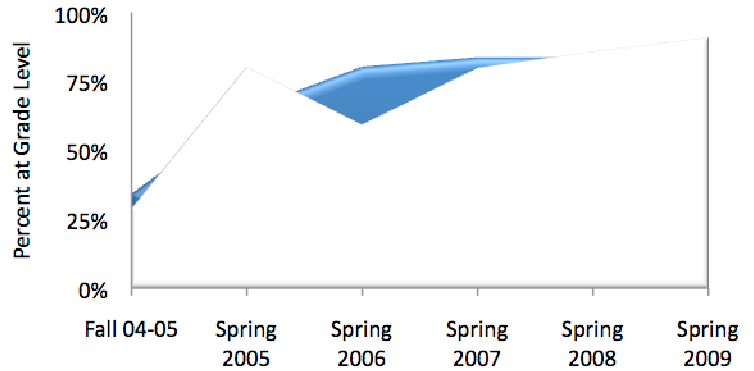
Achievement gaps in first grade have been less pronounced than those seen in kindergarten, second, and third grades across all three categories (ELL, Ethnicity, and Economic Disadvantage—FRL) as measured by decoding ability.

The achievement gap between ELL and English Only students was at its widest (20.8%) in the spring of 2006. After this point, the achievement gap began to narrow and disappeared completely by the spring of 2009.

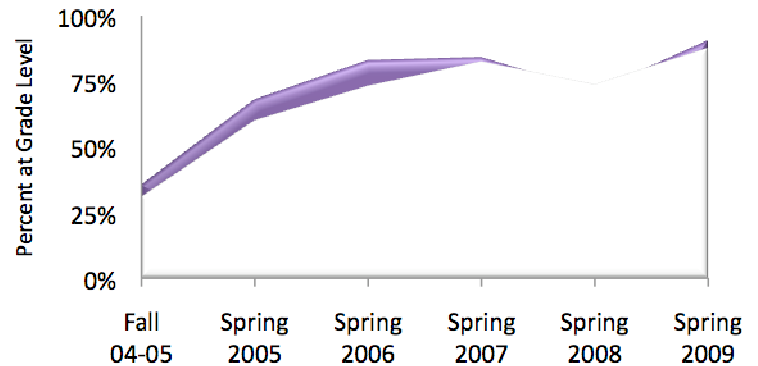
The achievement gap between White Non-Hispanic students and Minority students widened slightly between the spring of 2005 and spring 2006. By the spring of 2009 the percentage of White Non-Hispanic students performing at grade level was 3% higher than the Minority students in first grade.

The first grade achievement gap between students of economic disadvantage (FRL) and their more advantaged peers has remained fairly narrow since the inception of Reading First in Nebraska. The greatest discrepancy in the percentage of students at grade level between these two groups was in the spring of 2006. By the spring of 2009, the achievement gap between these two groups of students was completely eliminated.

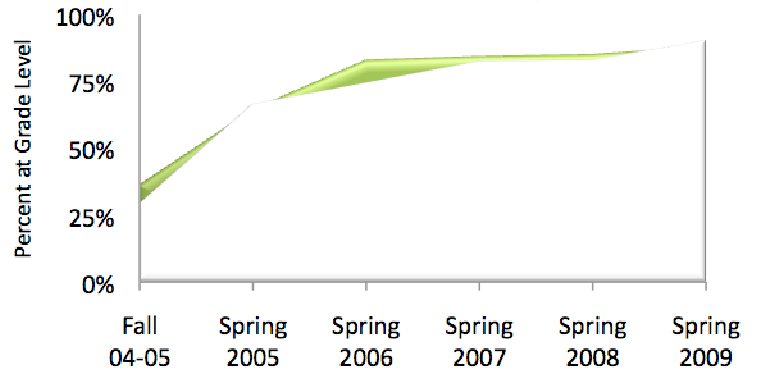
First Grade ELL Gaps



First Grade Ethnicity Gaps



First Grade FRL Gaps

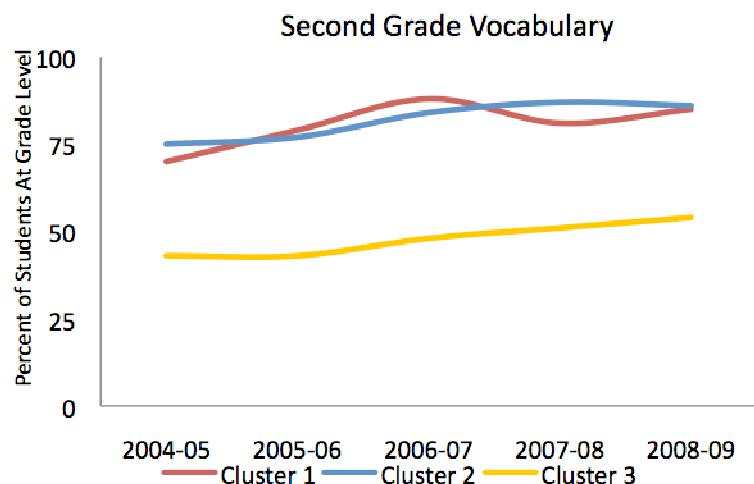
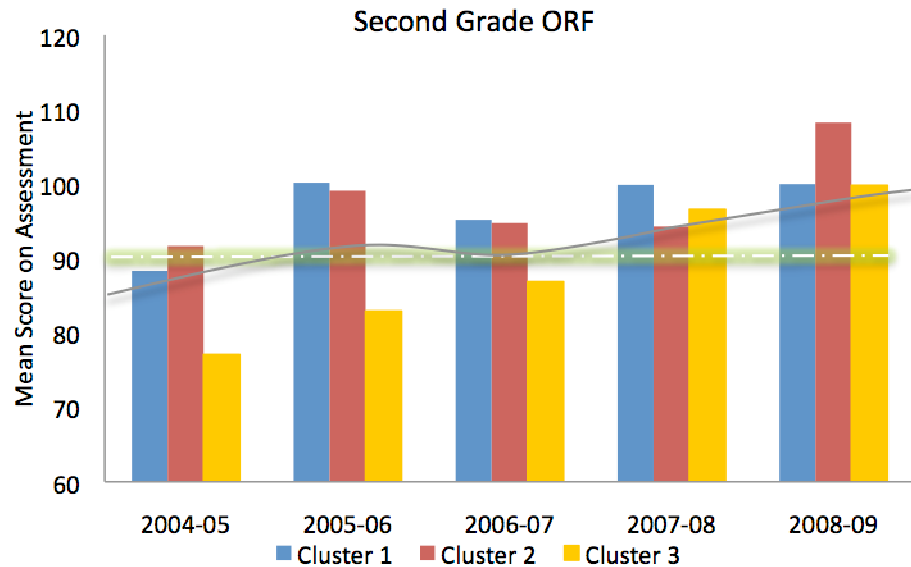


SECOND GRADE

Though performance in second grade Nebraska Reading First classrooms has increased in all clusters across the five years of implementation the impact has not been as pronounced as those seen in kindergarten and first grade. This problem is not unique to Nebraska as this lower trajectory of growth has also been seen

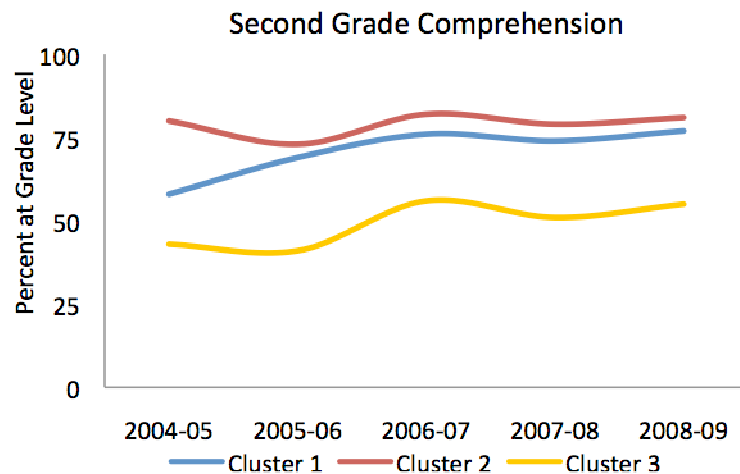
at the national level. As shown in the figure to the right, the average number of correct words read per minute in second grade (as measured by Oral Reading Fluency) has increased in each cluster since the beginning of Reading First implementation. In the spring of 2005 the mean performance of second grade students in Cluster One and Cluster Three were below benchmark (90 CWPM). By the spring of 2009, the average performance of students in all three clusters surpassed benchmark expectations with a combined Nebraska Reading First mean performance of 102 CWPM. The increase, although modest, represents an increase of 17 CWPM since spring of 2005. These results clearly show the need for more concentrated attention to increasing oral reading fluency rates at this grade level.

A major factor that influences a child's ability to read with high levels of fluency is vocabulary knowledge. The more words a child knows the quicker he is able to read because he does not have to pause to either blend or estimate meaning of an unknown word. As shown in the figure to the right, the proportion of students at grade level is growing in all clusters; however, there is a large discrepancy in word knowledge



between the three clusters in Nebraska Reading First schools with second grade students in Cluster Three showing the lowest levels. The reason for this discrepancy is likely due to the demographic characteristics of the students within this cluster. There are many factors that influence a child's level of word knowledge. Two of the factors that negatively affect vocabulary knowledge are ELL level and economic disadvantage, both of which occur at the highest rates in Cluster Three (14% and 73% respectively). It is intuitive that children who are learning a language would have lower levels of vocabulary knowledge within the language being learned which is why explicit instruction in word knowledge is vital. Children who are raised in poverty typically enter kindergarten one year behind their more advantaged peers in letter knowledge and phonological awareness (Hart & Risley, 2003). This is the results of limited early literacy experiences including, but not limited to, lower levels of verbal interactions and limited access to materials to promote literacy development (e.g., storybooks, educational software). These low levels of early literacy skills directly impact rate of new word acquisition. Because of the interrelatedness between words and their meanings, rate of word knowledge acquisition increases exponentially as vocabulary increases. Stated simply, the more words a child knows, the more efficiently a child is able to take on (learn) new words.

Vocabulary knowledge also significantly contributes to a child's level of comprehension. The direct impact of vocabulary knowledge on comprehension is apparent in the consistent results seen between these two subtests across clusters. The overall increase in percent of students at or above grade level, as measured by the Gates-MacGinitie comprehension subtest, across

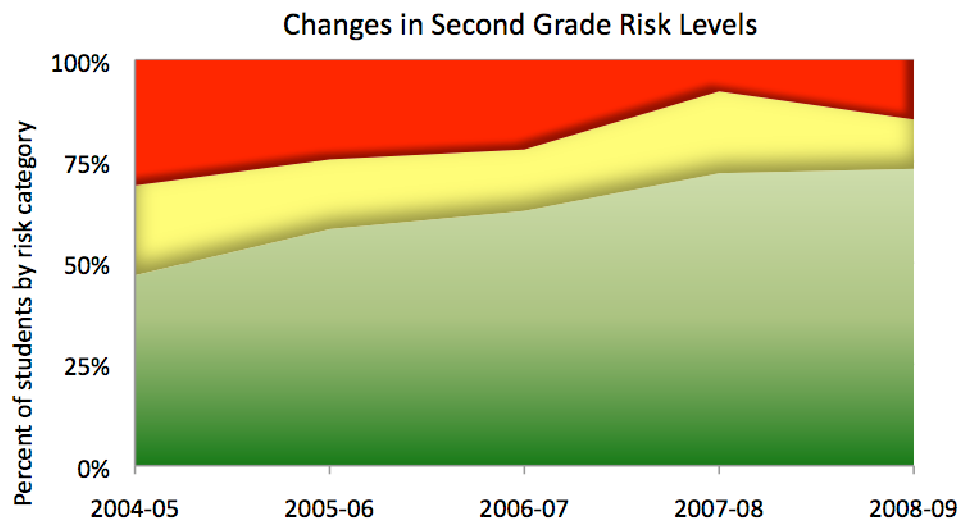


Nebraska Reading First second grade classrooms has been modest (10 % since the spring of 2005). This low rate of increase in second grade comprehension is consistent with the rate of growth in vocabulary knowledge across the last five years of Reading First implementation (12%). Parceling out performance by cluster the results shows a similar pattern in comprehension as that seen on the vocabulary subtest with the greatest level of challenge seen in Cluster Three.

Although the performance results within and across each cluster can be somewhat explicated through an analysis of student characteristics, this information was intended to be used to adjust instructional approaches and focus rather than consent for despondence. In order to effectively meet the needs of English Language Learners and those students of economic disadvantage, teachers must provide a literacy rich environment that

includes an appropriate balance between vocabulary instruction and strategies that promote comprehension. At the same time, second grade teachers working with high risk populations must maintain a strong, forward thinking approach to literacy development with a balanced focus across all domains of reading.

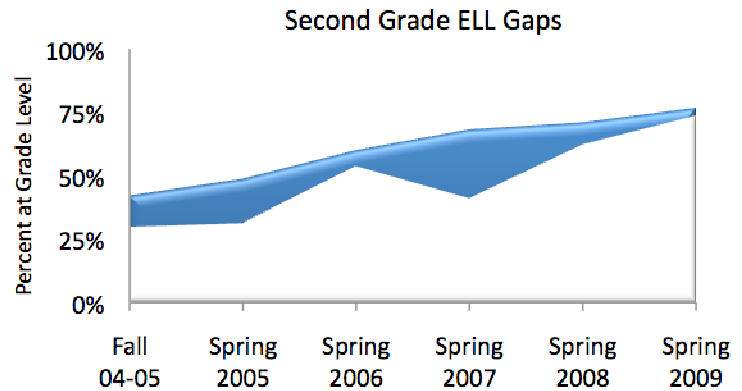
In second grade, the test used to assess risk level is Oral Reading Fluency. The figure below represents the percentage of second grade students in each risk category across five years of Reading First implementation in Nebraska. Since spring of 2005 there has been a 25% increase in the percentage second grade students who are classified as Low Risk for reading difficulties based on this measure. Although this progress is certainly promising, the percent of students who are considered below grade level on this measure is 27%.



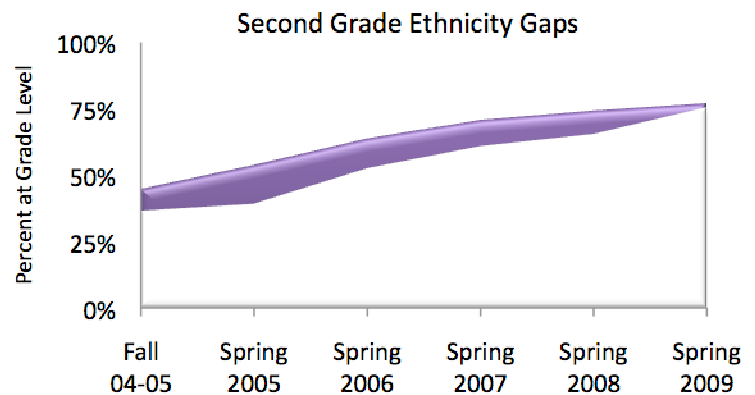
Second Grade Achievement Gaps

Achievement gaps in second and third grade classrooms in Nebraska Reading First schools (as measured by Oral Reading Fluency) have been consistently larger than those seen in earlier grades. These issues are not unique to Nebraska as similar results have been found nationwide.

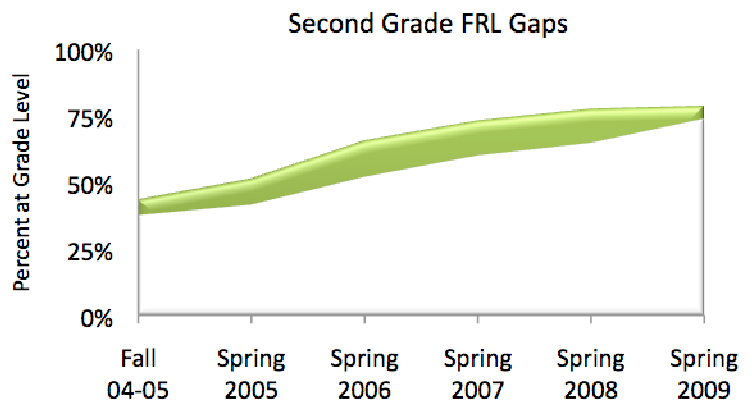
As shown in the graph to the right, the greatest discrepancy in the percent of students at grade level between ELL and English Only students was in the Spring of 2007 (26.8%). This gap narrowed by the fifth year of Reading First implementation in Nebraska to less than a 3% difference.



The gap between White Non-Hispanic students and Minority students in Nebraska Reading First second grade classrooms has steadily narrowed since the first year of implementation. The graph to the right represents a 13% reduction in the achievement gap between these two groups over the past 5 years.

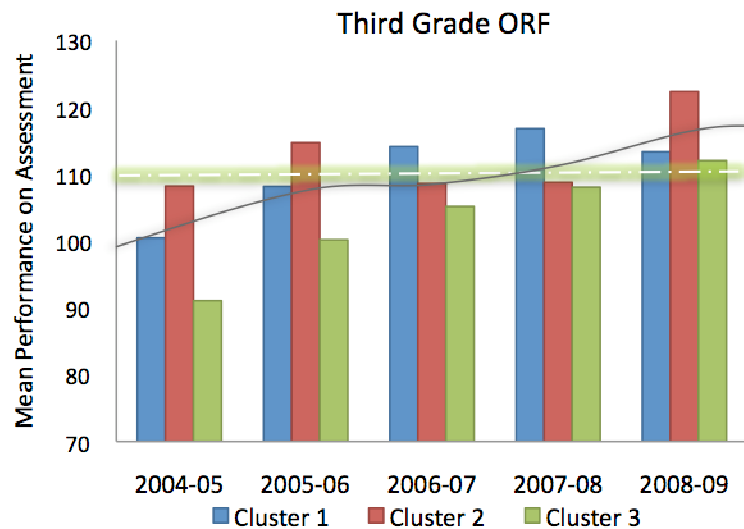


The achievement gap between students of economic disadvantage and their more advantaged peers has also steadily narrowed since the inception of Reading First in Nebraska. Although not quite as impressive as the narrowing seen in the previous graph, the gap between these two groups represents a 9% decrease in discrepancy in the percent of students performing at grade level

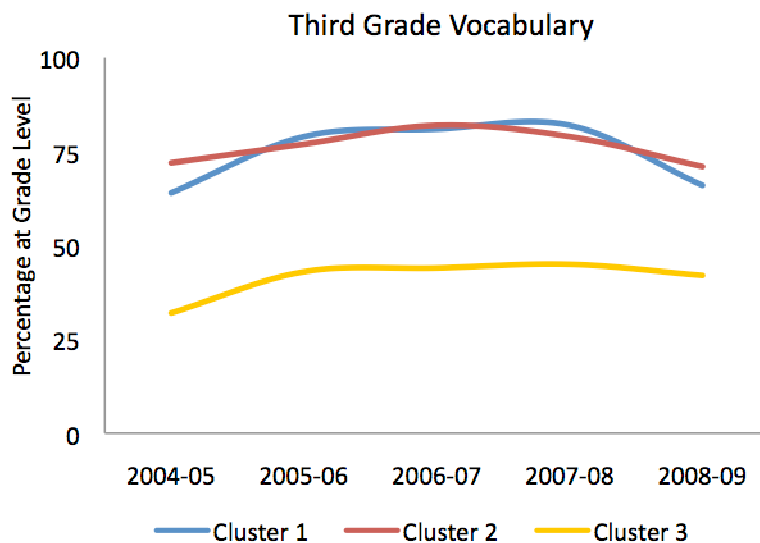


THIRD GRADE

Third grade performance on the measure of oral reading fluency (ORF) shows the similar challenges as those seen in second grade. As shown in the figure at the right, students in all three clusters have struggled to meet benchmark expectations in oral reading fluency. After five years of Reading First implementation, as shown in the spring of 2009, the mean performance of all three clusters surpassed benchmark on this measure. The combined performance, as shown by the dark gray line, shows a fairly steady increase in oral reading fluency across all third grade students in Nebraska Reading First schools. This increase since the spring of 2005 equates to an increase of 15 CWPM read. Although promising, this increase represents a decline in the growth trajectory for this measure compared to second grade performance.

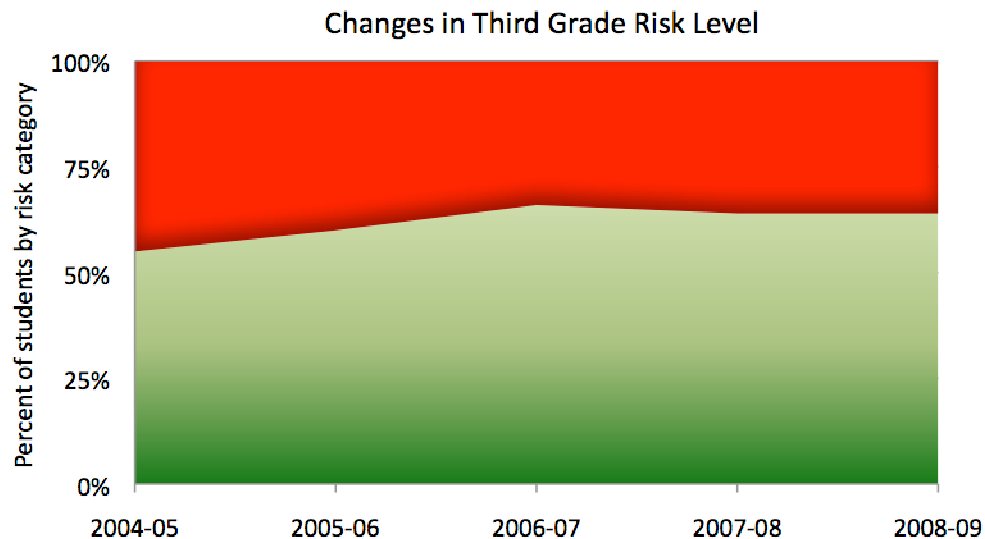


The proportion of students at grade level on the measure of word knowledge has not increased at the expected levels as shown in the figure to the left. Taken together, there has only been a 3% increase in the



percent of third grade students at or above grade level in Nebraska Reading First schools. In clusters One and Two, modest increases were seen in vocabulary knowledge of third graders peaking in the spring of 2008, but as of the spring 2009 testing cycle all gains were lost. Although third grade students in Cluster Three have seen a 10% increase in percentage of students at or above grade level, 40% of these students are still performing below grade level expectations on this measure

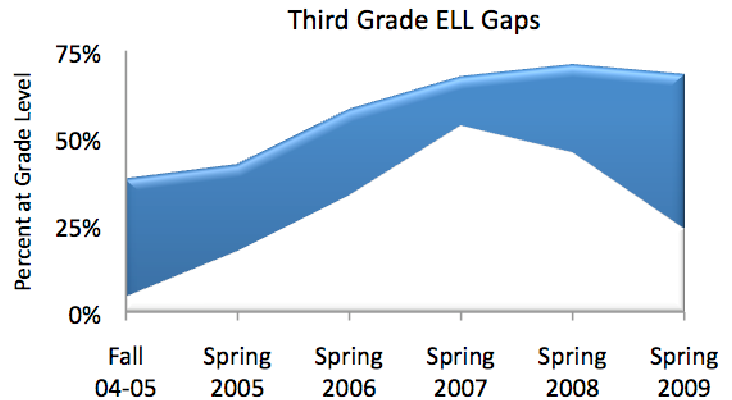
In third grade, the test used to assess risk level is comprehension as measured by the Gates-MacGinitie comprehension subtest. The figure below represents the percentage of third grade students in each risk category across five years of Reading First implementation in Nebraska. The green shaded area represents the percentage of third grade students performing at or above grade level with the red shaded area representing those students performing below grade level on this measure. Since the beginning of Reading First implementation in Nebraska there has been only a small increase (9%) in the percentage of third grade students performing at or above grade level in comprehension. As of the spring 2009 testing cycle, 36% of third grade students are performing below grade level on this measure.



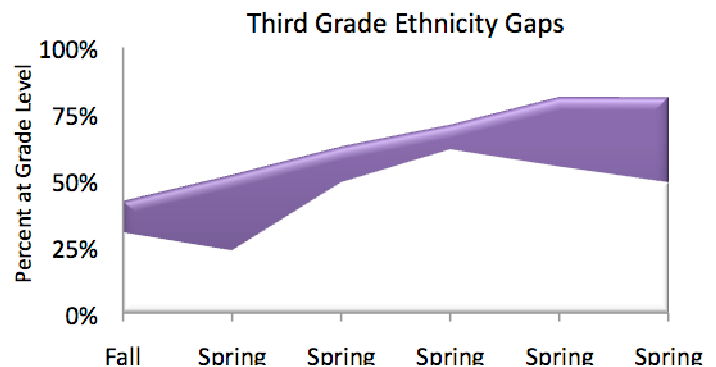
Third Grade Achievement Gaps

The achievement gaps in third grade Nebraska Reading First schools have been less encouraging than those seen in kindergarten through second grade. The assessment used to evaluate the discrepancy between groups at this grade level is Gates-MacGinitie comprehension.

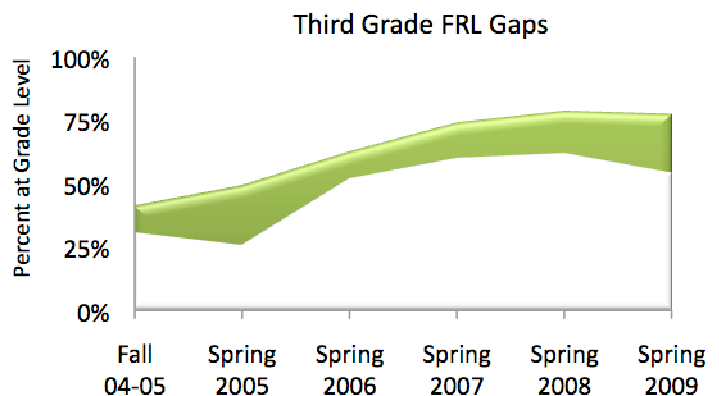
The first graph at the right compares the performance of ELL students to English Only students in terms of percent of students at grade level within these two groups of students. The gap between these two groups was substantial at the inception of Reading First implementation (33.9%). Although there was a slight narrowing of this gap after the first two years of implementation, the gap after 5 years was actually increased (44.4%).



A similar trend also occurred between White Non-Hispanic students and Minority students. The achievement gaps between these two groups after the first year of implementation (spring '05) was 28.4%. After the fifth year of Reading First implementation in Nebraska, this gap increased by 4%.



The achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and their more advantaged peers showed a slight narrowing after the first two years of implementation. Yet, this gap began to widen after the third year. After the fifth year of Reading First in Nebraska, the gap between these two groups increased to the same level as the first year of implementation.



TEACHER DATA

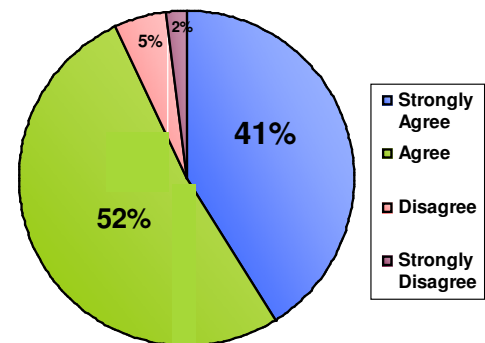
Teacher Surveys

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. The 2008- 2009 Spring Teacher Survey, administered online, had a 67% response rate due to some teachers experiencing difficulty with computer servers during the survey collection window. This survey covered issues related to teacher efficacy, collaboration, school resources, expectations, and Reading First training and materials.

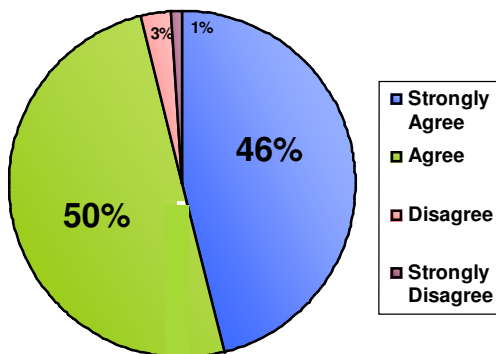
Teacher Efficacy & Collaboration

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 such as the one in the figure below. Teacher response patterns across all 19 items were analyzed and found to demonstrate high reliability ($\alpha=.88$). An analysis of variance between grade levels and again between school districts showed

"I am confident that we as teachers can develop and carry out reading instruction improvement in a cooperative manner even when difficulties arise"



"I believe in the potential of our school faculty to establish scientifically based approaches to reading instruction even when faced with setbacks"



no significant differences in overall response patterns.

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, 91% 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."* 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

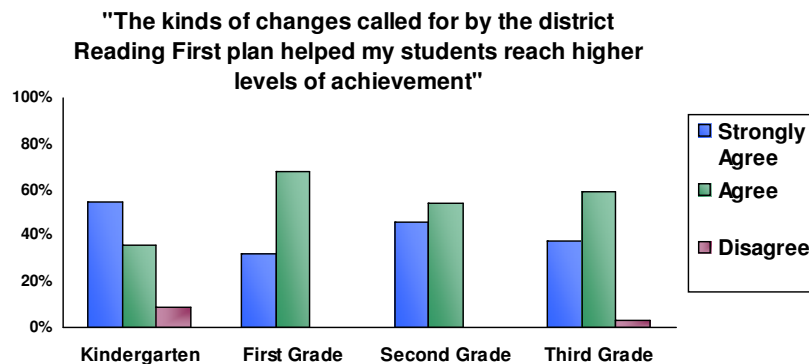
down this year, 91% of teachers reported being *“convinced that we, as teachers, can guarantee high instructional quality even when resources are limited or become scarce.”* On the topic of collaboration, 75% of teachers across all grade levels reported they, *“frequently plan and coordinate instruction with my students' other teachers.”* Reciprocally, these teachers also believe that, *“it's easy for other teachers in this school to know what students learned in my class.”* (87%)

Teacher response patterns across all 19 items were analyzed and found to demonstrate high reliability ($\alpha=.88$). An analysis of variance between grade levels and again between school districts showed no significant differences in overall response patterns.

Expectations & Training

After three or five years of Reading First implementation in their schools, 94% of teachers across school districts reported that, *“overall, the instructional policies I am supposed to follow in my classroom seem consistent.”* As in last year's spring survey, opinion remains evenly split regarding whether Reading First has required teachers to make major changes in their classrooms (45% yes, 50% no, 5% abstain) Despite this contention however, 92% of teachers stated that they *“strongly valued the kinds of changes called for by the district Reading First plan,”* and agreement was almost unanimous (97%) that *“the kinds of changes called for by the district Reading First plan helped*

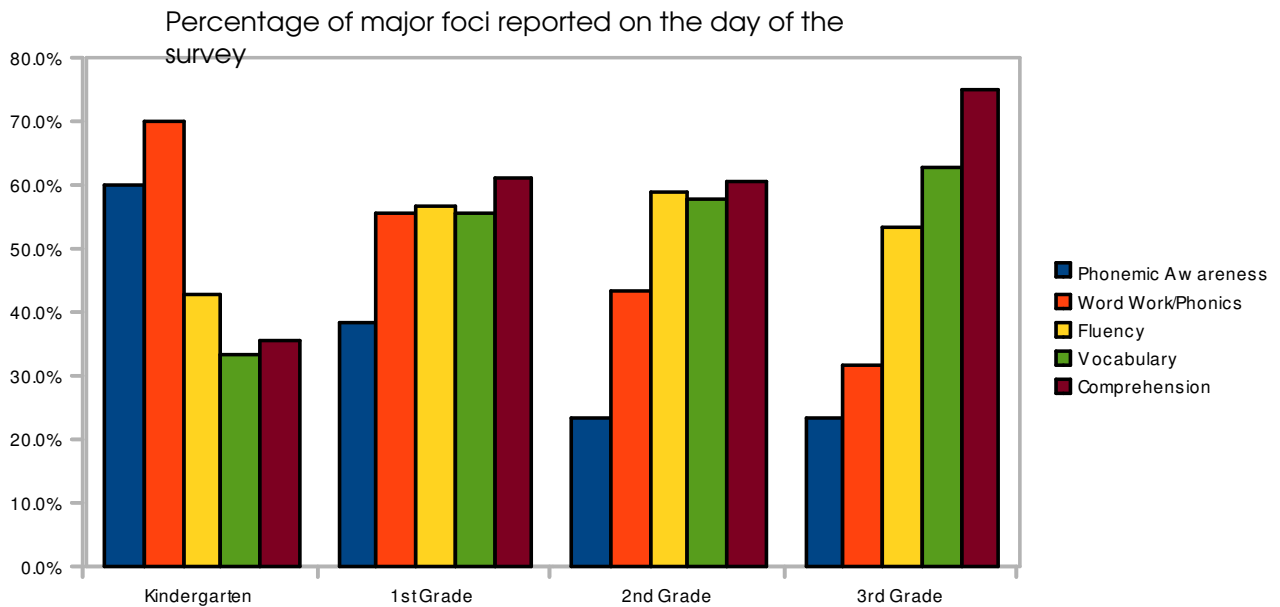
my students reach higher levels of achievement.” As shown in the figure to the left, this belief was strong across all grade levels, with 100% positive response from the second and third grade teachers. In the process of achieving these changes, 92% of teachers credited the Nebraska Reading First staff for *“providing me with many useful ideas.”*



Teacher Logs

To provide an overview of a typical day of reading instruction, classroom teachers in Nebraska Reading First schools complete instructional logs in the fall, winter and spring. These logs ask teachers to report *for that particular day* the focus and format of their reading instruction, the domain-specific skills and strategies included, and the instructional materials used.

Overall, teachers reported spending an average of 142 minutes on reading instruction (SD=41.8) on the day the survey was completed. When asked which aspects of reading instruction had received a major focus, response varied by grade level. The following figure shows where comprehension, vocabulary, phonics, fluency and phonemic awareness were most emphasized during a typical day of reading instruction. As in previous years, kindergarten and first grade teachers reported a stronger focus on phonemic awareness than the later grades, which was expected and appropriate. The focus on phonics also decreased as teachers worked with successively older students. Focus on vocabulary knowledge increased as grade level went up, as did comprehension instruction. All of these trends were consistent with teacher log reports from last year.



Observations

In order to gain insight into the implementation of Reading First in schools, we conducted visits to three schools in each of the three clusters. Our team observers observed a reading lesson in a sample of classrooms in a given school and noted the contents of the lesson, presentation methods, and recorded some dialogue. They also talked to teachers, reading first coaches, and in some cases, other administrators in the school. Through these observations, we have a better understanding of teacher practices and teacher impressions regarding reading first.

Teacher Practices

Kindergarten

The kindergarten classes visited seemed to be working on mostly phonics instruction focusing on phoneme segmentation fluency and nonsense word fluency. One teacher told our observer that "...nonsense words are a little more confusing to the kids because they want to read real words."

In one kindergarten classroom, the students were divided into small groups. Some were working with the teacher, some with a para-educator, a few working at a listening station, and one working independently on a writing task. All of the students were practicing writing and reading words, focusing on those with the /u/ sound. As the observer wrote, "...the teacher guides students to generate more words with /u/ sound in middle. 'Does 'bus' have an /u/ sound in the middle?'" The teacher then wrote the word on the board.

At another kindergarten in the same school, students were grouped similarly, but are working on the /l/ sound. As the observer wrote, in this second classroom, "After one child reads (*a word given by the teacher*), all children re-read it chorally. Mostly word-by-word, some (very minimal) phrasing & expression."

In another kindergarten class, students worked on sight words together. The teacher had written "he are I see my like to and go is here for" on the overhead and invited students to read the random-order words.

First Grade

One first grade class had both a teacher and a para-educator. The para-educator worked on Sonday programming with five students while the teacher worked on reading curriculum with 7 students. They used Houghton Mifflin leveled readers in reading area and SRA Language for Thinking. The class spent time on pre-reading exercises before reading. First, students practice reading vocabulary words from a chart. Next, they used unifix cubes. The teacher gave four phonemes and then students blended them. After that, the teacher gave four phoneme words aloud and asked students to break them into segments. The observer noted that in this classroom, the teacher offered kid friendly definitions. The teacher also waited for questions on

words and allowed some time for students to talk about a concept as she transitioned to her seat at the table. The classroom was described as having “nice smooth transitions.”

Another classroom was working on sequencing, but was finishing up subject. Three students were working with the teacher discussing a Houghton Mifflin leveled reader story. Nine students were at their seats with practice book working on a problem solving chart. Several had their books open and were reviewing story as they filled in the chart. The observer noted that most kids were working productively at their seats with occasional check-ins with teacher. The observer wrote that “...her check-in comments are very specific and directive to students rather than supplying answers.”

In another first grade class, a para-educator sat at table with six students. The group had just finished reading a selection from their book. The para-educator asked for summary sentence of the story. Another student was working by himself at a listening station while other students worked at their desks on sight reading fluency. The teacher was working at small white board practicing “cvce” patterns with group of three. The students hand their books out and moved to a comprehension discussion. The teacher asked the students for the name of the characters in the story. It is clear that the students reading are not fluent. As the stops for comprehension talk, the observer noted that she was modeling fluent reading as well. The teacher made leading or prompting comments to encourage the students to think of what would come next.

Second Grade

One of the second grade classes included in the observation was divided into groups. Some students were working on adding prefix re to words to fill in a blank on the sentence: redo, remake etc. Some students were working with the teacher at the front of the room on the words happened, protected, changing, actual, exact, and accident. The teacher and students read through the list first, and then the teacher called on individual students to use each word in a sentence. On word “actual” students had trouble. The teacher noted that this may be because the students usually use the form “actually” After explanation, the second student to attempt was successful at using “actual” in a sentence correctly.

Another second grade is working on fluency. The class has invited 5th grade helpers to pair with the second graders. The observer noted that the white board was covered with words and that it looked like they were working on inflectional endings such as -ed, -ing, short o, and the vowel patterns ea, igh, ay, aw, au, and ay. Later, the second graders were given a direction and asked them to repeat, for example, “Stand and hold up your hands” The teacher had them do it and say what they were doing. She appeared to be prompting them to include the pronoun “I” as in “I am standing up and holding up my hands”. They are not getting the need to include “I” and only did it when she fed it to them. On the next direction which includes “wave”, students

add “your hand” on the repeat. This is counted as incorrect. The teacher clarified: “...just like in reading, you can’t add extra words.”

In another second grade class, the students were reading aloud. The teacher praised them for “expressive reading” prompting more students to participate. The teacher walked thru steps of story with the students, asking “What happens if he ____? What’s going to happen when ____? How do you think the people from the town will feel when that happens?” The questions were mostly interpretive and evaluative. The teacher followed a progression from surface factual questions to more evaluation and critical thinking through the lesson.

Third Grade

One of the third grade classes was working on reading for comprehension, specifically literal vs. inferential statements. The teacher prompted a child to tell her something that Benjamin Franklin did as a child, saying “...you’re going to have to prove it to me so that I know you are not just making it up.” The students practice literal comprehension by skimming text (which they have already read) and looking at pictures and captions.

In another third grade class, 16 children were working at desks in U shape focusing on whole group word chart with patterns. The teacher was explaining the combination of o and i and how they are always found at the beginning or in the middle of word as in oil and boil. Later in the lesson, the class discusses antonyms. One of the students remarks, “I get it now why they call the candy sweet tarts because they’re sour” Other antonyms discussed were higher/lower, single/plural, and past/present.

While in another third grade class, the observer watched the students read for comprehension. The teacher opens with the question, “what is a natural resource?” After brief student definition of natural (root word nature), the students read softly aloud and timed themselves with the timer they each had on a lanyard around their neck. The teacher circulated the room and the students raised hand as they finish. Later in the class, the lesson shifted to timelines and the concept of chronological order, giving the example of a calendar to illustrate. The class is reading the story of Shackleton’s arctic adventure, which was written as a diary, and the students are directed to use the dates in the heading of each entry to determine how much time passes between events.

Teacher Reactions

Overall, teachers seem pleased with what they feel has been continued successful implementation of reading first. As one observer wrote in her field notes reflecting a sentiment heard repeatedly, “...the teachers mentioned that they are disappointed that the federal funds will not be continued...” Observers noted that

teachers seem proud of Reading First in their schools. Some of the teachers indicated that it was essential that they stay true to the Reading First program specifically and that they have seen a steady growth of student achievement.

Apparently, teachers feel that Reading First wasn't always as successful as it is now. As written in the field notes, "(One teacher) indicated that the teachers struggled in the beginning with the requirements and changes in their instruction." What has changed, then, to make Reading First work in recent years? One observer noted that the teachers "...have a more positive attitude towards Reading First and how assessments have changed their instruction." Additionally, "...the teachers have changed in their attitudes towards the students by having higher expectations for them than they have had in years past. The teachers are taking ownership of the instruction, which is something that did not happen before being identified as Reading First school."

One observer noted that teachers were pleased with their training and feel that it has made them more comfortable with Reading First. As written in the field notes, "Training has consisted of DVD training, on-site support from a national consultant, and the state lead staff development. Three teachers in the building have become master teachers and conduct the on-going support training for new classroom teachers." At another school, the observer noted that "...the teachers feel very lucky to have received all of the training with experts in the field." The training has come at a cost, however, as the teachers noted that "...substitute teachers have been paid to have the training as well so that there will be no loss of instruction when the teacher is absent." One of the coaches mentioned that Reading First programming and training "...helps weaker teachers become better teachers and strong teachers can become even stronger."

Some teachers noted that data collection has helped with Reading First implementation. One observer noted that teachers really looking at their data to help them make instructional decision, something the teachers said that they not done in the past. As written in the field notes, "...through the DIBELS assessment (used as progress monitoring), the teachers have started to look at their data and scaffold necessary areas of reading to help support the students."

INTERVIEWS

Coach Interviews

Towards the end of the year, we called the reading coaches from each district in order to gain insight into the most recent cycle of Reading First. We asked each coach three questions:

- 1) What do you feel the strong points of Reading First implementation were this year in your schools?
- 2) What were the obstacles that you faced in implementation this year, and how were they different from other years?
- 3) What do you think will happen in reading first schools next year (in other words, how sustainable are these efforts)? What about five years from now?

Coaches were also given the option to comment on anything they felt wasn't touched upon in the interview. Overwhelmingly, the coaches were eager to talk about what they felt was a successful year of implementation.

Strengths

For many, this year represented a turning point in how implementation was approached in the schools. As one coach told us, "... up until now, it's been a learning process getting all (the) pieces in place. Everything clicked this year." Up until this year, the coaches shared with us, the energy of everyone involved was focused on making sure tests were given at the right time, that students were being presented with the most appropriate curriculum level, and that students were being tested on time. Coaches remarked that this year, they were able to dedicate more energy to other aspects of the program. One coach mentioned that teachers spent time fine-tuning instruction to meet the needs of individual students while another felt that the extra energy was well spent by administrators planning for future implementation with decreased funding.

Another strength mentioned frequently was teacher training. In some districts, this meant a core of teachers well versed in the fundamentals of Reading First. As one coach said, "I would say we had a returning core of teachers who have all been trained and have been applying the reading first for all three years here now." For other districts, this meant a strong staff development plan that they had designed and implemented, as one offered, "...we're getting good at quality staff development."

Several coaches remarked that success was a team effort and that their success was due to a good support system with strong leaders. One coach suggested that they were helped by the "...utilization of district leadership team to insure fidelity of program on weekly basis." Support from administrators was also noted as

a key element to success, from principals dedicated to hiring well-trained teachers to the Nebraska Department of Education.

Obstacles

Of the two districts that felt training was an obstacle rather than a strong point this past year, one mentioned their struggle to keep a full staff, never mind a fully trained one. For the other district, insufficient training was a hindrance not because of a lack of teachers, but because of the lack of time needed to train the teachers they had already on staff.

Another obstacle echoed in a few interviews was student mobility. Though several coaches mentioned mobility, only one was specific, noting that they had "...lost four benchmark students and replaced them with two special ed students and a strategic student, which has been a nightmare with our small number. It lost us 25 percentage points." In this smaller district, even the disappearance of four benchmark students was enough to completely change the profile of the school. The coach observed that the longer a student had been exposed to the Reading First program, the better they fared: "...the kids that have been here for three years are at a high level, but the kids we get in are so far behind"

While the one coach partially blamed the decrease in scores to the incorporation of two new students identified as requiring special education services, another cited communication problems with the special education teachers. Specifically, the coach mentioned difficulties in getting the special education teachers on the same page as the general education teachers, saying that "... sometimes they want to veer away or stray away from the core program and do special things that don't work."

A few coaches felt that their year had been successful and that there had been no obstacles to implementation at all.

Sustainability

When asked about sustainability, most coaches expressed hope that Reading First would continue into the coming years despite a decrease or lack of funds. Many commented on the position of the coach, and insisted that the job would remain much the same, and that a Reading First coach in each district is necessary for the continued success of the program. "...if we can commit to the coach position, someone to be that glue and if we have that we can keep it going"

Many encouraging comments were made during the interviews, and it was clear that the coaches believe in the importance of Reading First. It is not, however, just the coach position that is integral to or hopeful for the continuation of Reading First; it is a community effort. "My school, our staff, has bought into it; they are

not going to let us go backwards. They can see what a difference it makes for kids, and I think they're going to do what they can to continue it." It may be that hiring decisions are being influenced by the desire to keep Reading First in place as well, as one coach shared, "...we interviewed an assistant principle (that) had a strong background in reading first because we do want it to continue."

Not only did the coaches hope that current efforts be sustained, but also that the program grows to include other schools and higher grades. One coach mentioned that her schools will be moving to implement Reading First programming in fourth grade by the end of next year. Another coach told us "...we hope it goes 4-12, we can't let up once we have the kids going well, especially with the ELL learners we have, it has to continue beyond 3rd grade."

This spread cannot happen in isolation. Several coaches also told us that they hope to see more support for continued professional development throughout the state of Nebraska from the Department of Education. Not only do the coaches have their own districts in mind, but others as well. As one said, "As I visit other schools, that is the piece that they're going to need." Another coach commented, "Honestly, we hate that they're taking the program away. Not because of the money, but other schools need that chance that we got, we have so many (families) around here that had their kids optioned here and everyone needs that opportunity, it's not selfishness. We knew from day one that it would end, but we don't want it to." As another coach put it, "...you hope that they will do what works well for kids rather than what the adults would rather be doing." Another coach added, "In five years, I see that a lot of other schools will be looking at what we were doing and trying to get on board."

Only one coach expressed serious doubts as to the continuation of Reading First. "I know that our superintendent who is our Elementary principal who got us this grant will not be here in five years, and I doubt I will be. We have teachers looking at retirement or schools closer to where they live and higher pay schools. It's anyone's guess as to where (Reading First) will be."

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As Reading First is approaching the end of its funding it is important to reflect on what we have learned and gained.

Clearly students across all grade levels are have better phonemic awareness, decode better and are more fluent. Reading comprehension and vocabulary have seen more modest growth over the years. It is very important to note that despite concerns expressed early on Reading First has been able to increase achievement by helping the most at risk students reach grade level expectations. That is to say that the growth is evident for all students. In fact in kindergarten through second grades achievement gaps have all but disappeared- a key measure of success.

The difficulty in third grade is still the biggest challenge that Reading First faces. In both fluency and comprehension the gains were minimal and in some cases actually reversed the growth trend. Improving comprehension is the most difficult task we face but ultimately it is the true test for the program. We suggest looking at the earlier grade to see if enough emphasis is put on Comprehension and Vocabulary instruction to support third grade outcomes.

Across all schools teacher seem confident more than ever before that they can achieve their goals with ALL students. This is an important component in sustaining Reading First gains. Teacher who perceive the program positively are more likely to carry the practices forward.

Finally, teachers across all Reading First schools appreciated the cohesive school leadership, professional development, and state visit teams. We have consistently found that the state team led by Lynnette Block was meticulous in insuring a high quality professional development that was supported by well trained coaches, and carefully aligned to state visits. In a program of this size and length of time such coordination is a significant achievement that has contributed greatly to the success of Nebraska's Reading First.