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Literacy in Virginia:
Observations on Reading First

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Foreword
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Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy

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Foreword

In a rapidly changing world economy, the competition faced by Virginians and Americans is increasingly intense, if not brutal. A workforce that can create, innovate, and add value to raw materials is essential to the quality of life and the values that we hold dear. Can we upgrade the skills of our workforce? Can we improve the efficiency and effectiveness of Virginia's considerable investment in public education?

Yes, we can. By giving our teachers scientifically based reading programs, our children can make remarkable gains.

You will learn in this report from the Thomas Jefferson Institute that in the Virginia public schools that teach our highest poverty populations using a program called Reading First, the failure rate for 3rd grade children on Virginia SOL test in reading has been cut in half, from 41% to 21%, just in the past two years.

The gap in the passing rate between all Virginia schools and the high-poverty Reading First schools fell to 6 percent in 2006, from 23 percent in 2002. For schools with problems long considered intractable by many "experts" this is a stunning achievement.

Reading First represents a revolutionary collaboration between federal, state, and local leaders. In the 1990's, while states adopted standards, assessments, and stakes for K-12 education, the National Institute of Child Health and Development (NICHD) conducted federally funded research on the most effective methods to teach children to read. In Reading First, a part of the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act, over 5 billion federal dollars were pledged to help states and districts implement the NIH recommendations for reading instruction. Virginia has received \$17 million each year for Reading First since 2003.

At most Virginia schools where Reading First is in use, it has been in operation for only two years. Additional improvement can be expected as students spend additional time in researched-based instruction. And as the test scores documented in this report illustrate, the lessons learned in the Reading First schools are being applied successfully in other schools as well.

However, the Reading First program remains controversial. Federal officials insisted that taxpayer dollars be spent for programs that work, an unprecedented requirement in federal education funding. Rather than change locally developed curricula, some Virginia districts did not support their schools in applying for grants under Virginia Reading First.

But as this timely report from the Thomas Jefferson Institute shows, Virginia's Reading First results have been the best possible news for children in high-poverty schools.

As the observations in this paper suggest, if science-based curricula can help high-poverty children learn to read, similar efforts can help all children learn the algebra and calculus and engineering skills that are keys to our economic success in the new age that is upon us.

Rick Nelson
Former President
Fairfax County Federation of Teachers

Introduction

Forty million adults in the United States – a million of them right here in Virginia – have such low reading skills that they are fundamentally illiterate.

The cost to that adult is severe: nearly 45 percent of those with the lowest literacy skills live in poverty; more than 75 percent of welfare recipients have low or very low reading skills; and only 30 percent of adults with very low literacy skills have full-time jobs.

The cost is equally as severe to society. Illiteracy costs business and taxpayers \$20 billion annually in lost wages, profits, and productivity. Just half of the Fortune 500 companies spend more than \$300 million a year in remediation, and the military alone spends \$70 million on basic skills remediation for recruits. A study earlier this year by the Thomas Jefferson Institute (http://www.thomasjeffersoninst.org/pdf/articles/2006_Economic_Forecast.pdf) pointed to the link between literacy and economic development: Over a 14-year period, a 10-point increase in a region's literacy score was related to an increase of four percentage points in employment growth.

But it is one thing to teach children to read; entirely another to teach adults. Researchers know much less about effective strategies for teaching adults to read. When the National Reading Panel (NRP), reviewed existing studies on teaching reading, it found more than 400 studies to review. In contrast, the Reading Research Working Group found only about 70 quality research studies on adult reading instruction and assessment.

The best time to stop adult illiteracy is when adults are children. And with more than 1.2 million Virginia public school students, the place to do it is in Virginia's public schools.

But poorly-executed reading instruction will simply exacerbate the size and challenges of adult illiteracy. That's why the Thomas Jefferson Institute's report on results from the federal *Reading First* program in Virginia is vitally important and particularly timely.

Reading First is the first federal program to specifically support a research-based reading program. By specifying that dollars must go to programs that support all five elements of an effective reading program – phonemic awareness, word decoding, vocabulary development, reading fluency, and reading comprehension strategies – Congress sought to ensure that financial support went to programs that worked.

In reviewing the effects of *Reading First (RF)*, the Jefferson Institute looked at the progress of Virginia schools that have received RF funding since its inception in the state both before and after the funding was secure. It compared RF schools with non-RF schools in the same school division. And it compared very high poverty RF schools with similarly high poverty non-RF schools in school divisions that did not receive any *Reading First* money.

The easiest way to solve the literacy problem is to teach people to read when they are young. The observations contained in this paper suggest that *Reading First* is a major step on the road to doing just that.

Michael W. Thompson, President
Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy

Literacy in Virginia: Observations On *Reading First*

Executive Summary

Since Rudolph Flesch first wrote *Why Johnny Can't Read* in 1955, the “Reading Wars” have permeated efforts to improve children’s ability to read. The five-decade debate has been filled with ideological resistance to phonics, simplistic searches for a silver bullet in phonics, and an argument in which both sides have disagreed over base principles, the definition of terms, and “what works.”

But the reality is that we already know “what works,” and have known for years. Nearly five decades of research makes clear that an effective reading program needs to have five components: phonemic awareness, word decoding, vocabulary development, reading fluency, and reading comprehension strategies. The federal *Reading First* program, designed to help every young child in every state become a successful reader, uses all five of these essential elements. This effort is based on high expectations for what can and should happen for all students: that instructional decisions will be guided by the best available research.

Investing those funds in early literacy pays off in reduced adult illiteracy and a higher standard of living.

This paper makes no claim to a scientific analysis of the *Reading First* (RF) experience in Virginia. Such an analysis would require at least three full years of the program (preferably five) and would need to look at individual student progress and better match student demographics than the scope of this paper permits.

Nevertheless, several observations can clearly be made about *Reading First* in Virginia although the program has only been used in Virginia since 2004:

- 1.) Schools receiving *Reading First* grants significantly increased their improvement on third grade English Standards of Learning exams. For the six years before *Reading First*, the average annual increase in these schools was 3.3 percentile points per year; for the two years after the grants were received, the average annual increase was 9.4 percentile points per year – nearly three times higher.
- 2.) In comparing schools receiving *Reading First* (RF) grants with other schools in the same school division that did not receive grants, the RF schools improved at a more rapid rate than the non-RF schools in the two years after the grant was received.
- 3.) In comparing high poverty *Reading First* schools with similar high poverty schools in districts that received no RF funds, the RF schools generally improved more rapidly over the two-year post-grant period than the non-RF schools.

Although it is too early to make a final conclusion, it is clear that early observations bode well for the research-based methodology employed by *Reading First* in Virginia. Not only has the program provided additional resources to schools, but those resources have also been targeted to low-performing students and have included instructional materials, staff development, new staff, and new assessment tools.

Literacy in Virginia: Observations On *Reading First*

Reading is essential to success in our society.

In the 21st century, the ability to read is critically important for social and economic advancement. A May 2006 Thomas Jefferson Institute analysis by Dr. Christine Chmura (http://www.thomasjeffersoninst.org/pdf/articles/2006_Economic_Forecast.pdf) reported that literacy scores are excellent predictors of economic activity, even outperforming measures based upon years of schooling.

That report, *Literacy and Economic Development*, noted that the Virginia economy is transforming from one based on resources and manufacturing to one based on information, knowledge, and skills. The result is a growing emphasis on the role of human capital and its connection to economic growth.

Chmura's report examined Virginia's counties and independent cities, revealing that a ten-point increase in a region's literacy score was related to an increase of four percentage points in employment growth over a 14-year period.

Of course, most children and adults learn to read quite well and often quite easily.

Still, a substantial portion of Virginians struggle and often do not learn sufficient reading skills to economically advance themselves and their families. In the agricultural or blue-collar society of the past, that failure to read would not have prevented them from earning a good living and creating a future for themselves. But in a technological society, in which even the simplest of tasks often demands literacy, the consequences for those who fall short are grievous.

This paper examines the federal *Reading First* programs in Virginia, but is by no means a scientific study. Schools in Virginia began receiving these grants November 2003 – and only began using the new resources for some of their students in January 2004. Thus, no cohort of students has yet had the full benefit of the *Reading First* program for the full four years of instruction for which it is planned.

However, it is possible to make observations about the direction of the program and provide some rudimentary comparisons between the scores of students in *Reading First* schools and those who are not.

Most students learn to read without a challenge. But for high poverty students; for those whose parents may themselves be illiterate, or who may come from other countries; for students who did not come from a literature-rich background ...*Reading First* is designed to help them make up for lost ground. The question rightly should be: "Does it work?"

What is *Reading First*?

The Federal *Reading First* (RF) program was established in 2001 as part of the “No Child Left Behind Act.” Designed to help ensure all children will, at minimum, read at grade level by the end of third grade, the program provided funding for school districts to utilize research-based reading programs in the early grades.

The research-based programs were required to incorporate the five commonly recognized essential elements of early reading instruction: phonemic awareness, decoding, vocabulary development, reading fluency, and reading comprehension strategies.

All 50 states were ultimately awarded *Reading First* grants. In Virginia, 80 percent of funds were distributed to school divisions through competitive subgrants to fund programs in qualifying schools with high poverty and concentrations of children reading below grade level in grades K-3. More than 60 Virginia schools have received *Reading First* grants since the first awards were made in school year 2004.

Reading First offered emphasis in three primary areas.

The first was to ensure that teachers in kindergarten through third grade used reading programs and materials that were research-based, incorporating the five elements of effective reading instruction. Schools winning *Reading First* grants used those funds for the purchase of new reading instruction programs and textbooks.

A second emphasis was to increase access to professional development for all teachers of these grades. School districts receiving *Reading First* funds were required to provide such professional development to all schools in their district – not just those receiving direct *Reading First* funding. In Virginia, “Teacher Reading Academies” were developed that all K-3 teachers, all K-12 special education teachers and all administrators were able to attend. Funds were also used by the state to develop “Reading Leadership Training” for school-based and central office administrators, and to disseminate materials to the 35 Virginia colleges and universities with teacher preparation programs.

Finally, *Reading First* places a heavy emphasis on using assessments to identify students’ reading challenges and monitor progress from the first years of a child’s K-12 experience. The program is intended to assist classroom teachers in learning how to screen for, identify, and overcome barriers to student learning. In Virginia, the state developed both screening to determine students’ initial skills and diagnostic tests to determine their progress.

Over the past four years, the national appropriation for the *Reading First* program has totaled approximately \$1 billion each year.

***Reading First* Reports and Studies**

Few studies have been completed on the effectiveness of the RF program at this early stage. One rationale for this is the length of time needed to determine academic progress among students. Past studies on Comprehensive School Reform models, for example, have demonstrated that the largest changes in schools take place only after a program has been

implemented for five years or more. In addition, the limited ability of school systems to track individual students through the education system – especially mobile students who are among those most at risk of reading failure – make it difficult to scientifically assess the success or failure of the program.

However, there have been a number of initial assessments and reports made about the *Reading First* program. The assessments are generally limited by the inability to find a control group (non-RF schools matching the *Reading First* schools on levels of reading and poverty), by the difficulty of tracking individual students, and by changes in state tests which make it difficult to determine a baseline. Nonetheless the studies examining *Reading First* results are worth commenting upon –

- A May 2006 evaluation of *Reading First* in Michigan (Carlisle, Cortina, Zeng, Schilling, *Gains in Reading Achievement Over Two Years in Michigan's Reading First Schools*, University of Michigan) shows that a larger percentage of first through third graders were reading at grade level after two years than after one year in RF schools, and that a smaller percentage of first through third graders were substantially underachieving in reading after two than after one year in RF schools.

The study also found that socio-demographic characteristics of schools did not significantly reduce the effects of the program on progress made in reaching achievement.

- A July 2006 study conducted for the U.S. Department of Education by Abt Associates surveyed teachers, principals and reading coaches in both *Reading First* and non-RF schools. The study indicated that *Reading First* schools were implementing major elements of the program as intended by the NCLB legislation, including the use of research-based reading instruction.

The study also determined that *Reading First* teachers were more likely than their counterparts in non-RF Title I (high poverty) schools to place struggling students in intervention programs, that RF schools were more likely to have a reading coach than non-RF Title I schools, and that RF staff received significantly more professional development than Title I staff.

- A September 2006 evaluation examined progress in *Reading First* in the Lansing, Michigan school district (Carlisle, Schilling, Zeng, Cortina, Kleyman, *Reading First in a Michigan School District: A Study of Lansing Elementary Schools*, University of Michigan). The evaluation compared the improvement in reading of schools with and without *Reading First* programs, following only those students that entered the schools in first grade and remained in the same school through third grade.

Although RF schools had higher levels of poverty and differed in ethnic composition, the study controlled for differences in school composition and socio-demographic variables and found that RF schools made greater gains in Word Analysis between grades one and two, in Vocabulary between grades two and three, and in Reading Comprehension between grades one and three.

- A September 2006 report by the Center on Education Policy surveyed school districts with virtually all districts with *Reading First* subgrants reporting that RF's instructional

program was an “important” or “very important” cause for their gains in reading scores. Ninety-two percent of districts reported that the RF assessment system was an important or very important cause of success.

The report noted that *Reading First* provides “substantial funding” for its instructional and assessment programs, and noted that the federal effort is driving significant changes in instruction, curriculum, and assessment.

Impact on Virginia Schools

Determining the effectiveness of *Reading First* programs is not an easy task. The most valid method of evaluation would be conducting both pre- and post- assessments of reading achievement. In a perfect world, this would be done randomly, using a control group with which results could be compared.

But participation in *Reading First* was not a random process. Schools were selected on the basis of higher than ordinary poverty levels and lower than ordinary student performance.

And because schools, rather than individual students, are the unit of analysis, other challenges also develop. Typically, the intervention and non-intervention control group schools would be chosen based on similarities in demographics (poverty, mobility, limited English proficiency) and academic performance, as well as geography (rural/suburban/urban school comparisons), and to eliminate the dramatic differences in funding and leadership abilities existing from one school division to another.

This would characteristically mean choosing schools from the same school division. In the case of *Reading First*, however, one of the program’s key provisions is that staff development and training must be made available to *all* teachers within that school division – not just those schools receiving direct RF grants. As a consequence, *Reading First* necessarily has *some* impact on all schools within a division – not just those receiving new textbooks and new reading programs.

Nor can our review of Virginia’s *Reading First* schools fully account for changes that might take place within a school. Ideally, the only students measured would be those who had been taught at the same school since the inception of the *Reading First* program so that the true effectiveness of the program can be measured. But in reporting test scores, Virginia does not differentiate between the student who may have had three years of research-based reading instruction and the student who just moved in and thus had only one year of such instruction.

As a result, this review restricts itself to a series of broader questions:

- 1.) Did *Reading First* Schools demonstrate greater improvement after the program began?
- 2.) How did *Reading First* Schools compare with non-RF schools having the most similar demographics in the same school division?
- 3.) How did *Reading First* Schools compare with schools having similar demographics and located in a school division without a *Reading First* grant?

Question One:
Did *Reading First* Schools demonstrate greater improvement after the program began in the school?

To answer this question, we examined the third grade reading scores of 62 schools that have participated in the *Reading First* program since its inception in Virginia, and that remain in the program. Schools receiving *Reading First* grants in the second or third years of the program, or that dropped out prior to the 2006-07 school year were not included. Scores were examined since the first SOL examination in 1998 through the 2006 SOL examination.

From 1998 until 2004, before implementation of *Reading First*, the average annual school-wide increase in SOL passing rates was 3.3 percentile points on the Third Grade SOL exam.

Reading First grants were first used in School Year 2003-2004, but because schools did not receive their funding until late in the first semester, many schools only partially began the program in kindergarten and first grades. Full implementation did not take place until the 2004-2005 school year. But the results in 2004-05 were dramatic: Passing rates soared at *Reading First* schools by an average of 11.9 percentile points on the Third Grade SOL English exams. That increase was sustained in the second year of implementation with an average 6.9 percentile point gain in passing rates.

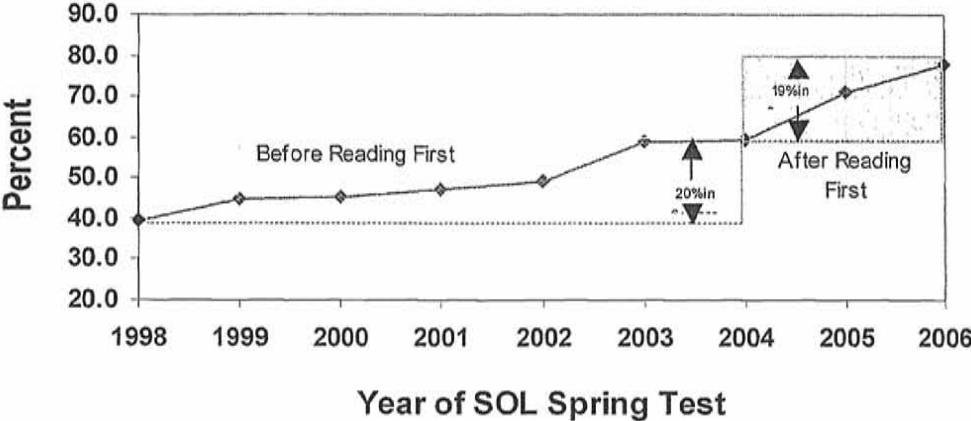
On average, *Reading First* schools began in 1998 with an average 39.5 percent of their third grade students passing the English SOL exam. By 2004, when *the schools received Reading First grants*, passing rates had risen to an average of only 59.2 percent. After two years of using the curriculum, assessments, and training offered by *Reading First*, the average passing rate in a RF school was 78 percent.

***Reading First* School Passing Rates**

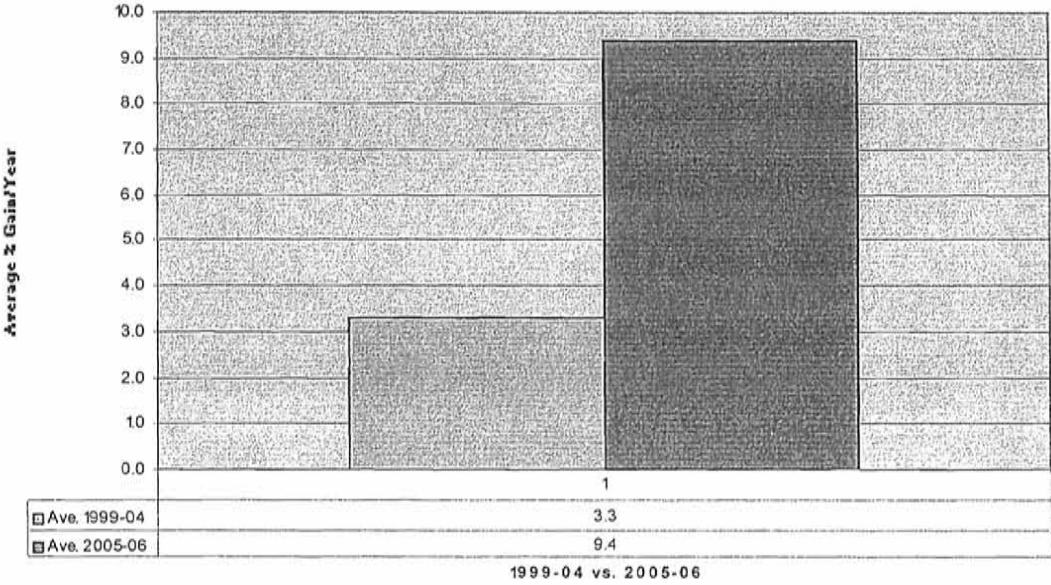
	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Average passing rate	44.7	45.1	47.1	49.0	58.7	59.3	71.2	78.0
Average passing rate increase	5.2	.4	2.0	1.9	9.7	0.6	11.9	6.9

Putting it another way: For the six years before Reading First, the average annual increase in these schools was 3.3 percentile points. For the two years after Reading First, the average annual increase was 9.4 percentile points – nearly three times faster.

Percent of Students Passing 3rd Grade Reading SOL at RF Schools



Reading Gains at RF schools



Question Two:
How did *Reading First* schools compare with non-RF schools with similar demographics in the same school division?

Comparison of *Reading First* schools to non-RF schools is difficult and imperfect. By definition, schools awarded RF grants were not only among the poorest in a school division but also among the worst performing schools in reading. Further, because Virginia did not disaggregate SOL data by demographic characteristic prior to imposition of the federal “No Child Left Behind” law, it is difficult to track changes in student characteristics and ensure comparability between RF and non-RF schools.

Even schools themselves change. Over the eight-year period since SOL exams began in 1998, many schools underwent boundary changes or changes in grade levels taught within the building.

Comparing RF schools and non-RF schools within the same school division also has its own challenges. Presumably, a school division’s instructional methodology should have been similar at all division schools prior to a *Reading First* grant, but this is not necessarily the case. Schools were often given a great deal of latitude. Furthermore, a requirement of *Reading First* grants was to ensure that other schools within a division also received additional staff development. As noted in the September 2006 Center for Education Policy report, school officials in Waynesboro said that, “*Reading First* not only helped turn around an under performing school, it also affected the district wide reading program.” And very small school divisions may have only one elementary school, making it impossible to provide a non-RF school from which to draw comparisons.

All of these issues provide special challenges in drawing comparisons. Yet, we can make a number of observations from examining the schools.

To begin a comparison, we reviewed all non-RF Elementary Schools in school divisions receiving *Reading First* grants and examined only schools with a K-3 configuration and similar percentages of students receiving free and reduced meals subsidies.

While it was not possible to exactly match up the percentages of students receiving free and reduced meals subsidies, the averages came close: Sixty-four percent of students in *Reading First* schools received meals subsidies; in the non-RF schools, the figure was 63 percent.

Where the schools differed tremendously was in their academic performance. In 1999, the second year of Standards of Learning exams, the schools that would one day become *Reading First* schools had, on average, only 44.7 percent of their students passing the third grade English exam; in schools destined to remain non-RF schools, that figure was nearly 10 points higher, with a 53.9 percent passing rate. That gap largely continued: By 2003, when the *Reading First* grants were issued, the schools receiving the grants had only 59.3 percent of their students passing the third grade English SOL. Among those schools not awarded *Reading First* grants, on average 66.2 percent of their students were passing the SOLs.

Further, from 1998 until 2004 (when *Reading First* was initiated), the average annual school-wide increase in SOL passing rates among non-RF schools was 3.6 percentile points on

the Third Grade SOL exam, slightly higher than the schools which were to become *Reading First* schools. For the two years after *Reading First* began, the average annual passing rate at the non-RF schools increased by 7.5 percentile points – while *Reading First* school increased by 9.4 percentile points.

RF vs. non RF Average Passing Rates

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
RF school average passing rate	44.7	45.1	47.1	49.0	58.7	59.3	71.2	78.0
Average increase/RF schools	5.2	.4	2.0	1.9	9.7	.6	11.9	6.9
Non-RF school avg passing rate	53.9	51.9	57.5	64.3	63.0	66.2	72.4	81.2
Non-RF school average increase	9.7	-2.0	5.6	6.8	-1.3	3.2	6.2	8.8

RF vs. non-RF Passing Rate Increases

	Average Annual Passing Rate Increase: 1999-2004	Average Annual Passing Rate Increase: 2005-2006
RF Schools/Same Division	3.3	9.4
Non-RF Schools/Same Division	3.6	7.5

To summarize: *Reading First* schools with similar poverty rates to non-RF schools were chosen for the federal grant program because the school had a lower passing rate in the third grade SOL exam. Non-RF schools with similar poverty rates continued to score higher since 1998.

*However, while the non-RF schools improved faster than RF schools prior to use of the *Reading First* grants, after use of the grants, the situation was reversed: Over the two-year post-grant period, *Reading First* schools improved at a more rapid rate than the non-RF schools.*

Question Three:

Since *Reading First* is intended to address high poverty schools, how did high poverty *Reading First* Schools compare with similar high poverty schools located in a school division without a *Reading First* grant?

To examine this question, we disaggregated the 15 *Reading First* schools with more than 70 percent of their students receiving Free and Reduced Meals subsidies and compared them with a randomly selected set of 15 schools located in school divisions that did not obtain a *Reading First* grant, but also with more than 70 percent Free and Reduced Meals rates.

As in the previous question, such comparisons are imperfect. While it was not possible to exactly match up the percentages of students receiving free and reduced meals subsidies, the

averages came close. In the disaggregated RF schools, 73.1 percent of the students are receiving meal subsidies vs. 73.6 percent of the students in the non-RF schools.

As with the RF schools considered in Question Two, these RF schools performed at a lower level from the beginning. In 1999, the second year of Standards of Learning exams, 38.7 percent of the students in these highest poverty future *Reading First* schools were passing the third grade English exam; in non-RF schools, that figure was 43.3 percent – a gap of 4.6 percentile points.

But by 2003, when the *Reading First* grants were issued, the schools receiving the grants had already closed that gap considerably: 61.8 percent of students in RF schools were passing the third grade English SOL. Among those schools not awarded *Reading First* grants, that figure was 63.6 percent, a difference of only 1.8 percentile points.

The non-RF schools did not improve as rapidly as the RF schools, either before or after *Reading First* grants were distributed. From 1998 until 2004, the average annual school-wide increase in SOL passing rates among non-RF schools was 2.6 percentile points on the Third Grade SOL exam, considerably lower than the schools which were to become *Reading First* schools. These future RF schools gained an average of 4.1 percentile points from 1998 to 2004.

For the two years after *Reading First* began, the average annual passing rate increase at the non-RF schools was 7.0 percent. The gains at the high poverty *Reading First* schools were faster, at 8.5 percent points per year.

Average Passing Rates/Increases Per Year

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
High poverty RF school	38.7	40.0	47.1	45.4	61.8	61.6	75.3	78.7
Average increase/RF schools	1.7	1.3	7.1	-1.7	16.4	-.2	13.7	3.3
High Poverty Non-RF schools	43.3	46.2	47.5	60.8	63.6	59.6	67.4	73.6
Non-RF school average increase	-0.7	2.9	1.3	13.3	2.8	-4.0	7.8	6.2

	Average Annual Passing Rate Increase: 1999-2004	Average Annual Passing Rate Increase: 2005-2006
High Poverty RF Schools	4.1	8.5
High Poverty Non-RF Schools	2.6	7.0

In short, high poverty schools in school divisions that received *Reading First* grants started out performing worse than comparable high poverty schools that did not ultimately receive *Reading First* grants. However, the rate of improvement of RF schools uniformly accelerated faster than the non-RF schools over the two-year post-grant period.

While there may be a variety of factors affecting the larger improvements before the RF grants, it is clear that the rate of improvement more than doubled after the grants were awarded – and continued to outpace the rate of improvement among non-RF schools.

A Cautionary Note or Two

There are a number of cautions, generally, to be noted about the relationship of the State Standards of Learning scores and their relationship to *Reading First*.

Be careful with conclusions: First, as noted earlier, it is unwise to draw permanent conclusions from only two years of data resulting from a new program. Typically, it would take three to five years of data to determine anything beyond preliminary observations and in the case of the *Reading First* program, the first class of students to have the benefit of four full years of RF instruction will be those taking the third grade SOLs in the spring of 2008.

All scores started rising in 2005: Secondly, astute observers will notice that the third grade English SOL scores rose dramatically across the board with the 2005 examination. *Reading First* schools saw a nearly 12 point jump in the percentage of students passing the SOL; statewide, there was a six-point jump. Both the RF schools and schools throughout Virginia saw increases the second year as well, of 6.9 and 6.5 percentile points, respectively.

There are a number of possible explanations for this. In 2004, the Virginia State Board of Education adopted new reading textbooks with a heavier emphasis on phonics and research-based instruction. In fact, many local jurisdictions had already started purchasing those books in advance of formal state approval. In addition, by 2005 many reading teachers were able to take advantage of “Teacher Reading Academies” offered during the preceding 12 months. The result is that many children had benefit of research-based instruction, even without having *Reading First* funding.

The other possible explanation is that the third grade English SOL examination has been “dumbed down,” with the result that a higher percentage of students are now passing. In 2005, for example, the third grade English SOL scores showed that 77 percent of students were proficient or above. That same year, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test scores, widely accepted as “the nation’s report card” and the benchmark against which state standards are to be measured, indicate only 37 percent of Virginia’s fourth graders are reading at proficient or above. The disparity is one worth examining in detail at a future date.

Nonetheless, it is also the case that – regardless of the notable across-the-board increase in SOL passing percentages, the *gap* between *Reading First* schools and the average state passing rate has been cut in half since the RF program began. Combined with a faster-than-average increase in the passing rates, the observation of *Reading First*’s effectiveness in the first two years remains accurate.

In short, in the past two years, the percentage of students failing the third grade reading SOL scores has been cut in half at *Reading First* schools – from 40 percent to 20 percent – and that seems reason enough to celebrate.

“Miracle” in Wythe County

By November 2003 the six elementary schools in rural Wythe County, Virginia had been struggling for more than five years to improve their third grade reading scores and meet Virginia state accreditation standards. At one school, fewer than 41 percent of its students were reading at grade level in third grade; only one school was meeting the state standard requiring that 70 percent of students pass the third grade English Standards of Learning examination.

Each school had its own instructional program and textbooks for learning to read. The pedagogy employed ran the gamut of concepts, and teachers were generally left on their own – with little staff development – not only to teach students how to read, but also to train themselves on how best to teach the students.

The reading failures were having an impact on other subjects as well: Students who could not read could not understand questions in social studies or even the increasing use of word problems in mathematics. Worse, time was running out: Wythe County had perhaps three years to solve its challenges, or run the risk of seeing the schools fall under new sanctions authorized by the federal “No Child Left Behind Act.”

In January of 2003, Virginia’s federal *Reading First* grant application was approved by the federal Department of Education. In the first year, the state would receive \$16.9 million, of which \$13.5 million would be used for sub grants to local school divisions for eligible schools.

Wythe County Assistant Superintendent of Instruction Joseph Bean wanted a piece of that, and contacted Dr. Roy Monk, then the principal of Wythe County’s Spiller Elementary School and asked if Monk thought Wythe County could put together a competitive sub grant for the funds. After spending a weekend reading the application and rules, Monk’s response was clear: “We don’t have a choice. It was time to do something different.”

With little time before the grant deadline, Monk and Bean structured a grant application resulting in five out of six Wythe County’s elementary schools being approved for *Reading First* grants. Over the next four years, more than \$3.2 million would be spent in the school system to improve the reading abilities of its primary grade students (K-3). Fifty-six percent of the funds would be spent on instructional materials and professional development, 40 percent on new personnel (mostly in the form of a “Reading Coach” for each school) and a final four percent on indirect costs.

“Reading First allowed us to change the existing paradigm of reading instruction in our schools,” says Monk, now Director of Instruction for the 4,200-student system. “We shifted from using only whole group instruction to a combination that used whole group instruction supported by small group instruction and independent learning.”

But it wasn't easy. Notified in September of their grant award, but with funds not distributed until November, the school system scrambled to start the program in its grades Kindergarten and first in January of 2004.

The quick turn-around time resulted in challenges at all levels, with faculty and administration. Teachers and schools accustomed to "doing their own thing" were now being asked to become uniform from school to school, and in mid-stream. "Not only were we asking them to use a different methodology to teach reading," notes Monk, "but we also were asking them to use a totally new reading curriculum incorporating elements of reading instruction that had not necessarily all been used in the past."

Those elements – insisted upon by the federal *Reading First* grant makers – included phonemic awareness, phonics (or decoding), vocabulary, reading fluency and reading comprehension. All the elements were woven together using a variety of means, including –

- New Basal Textbooks. Wythe County chose the Houghton Mifflin "Nation's Choice" textbooks – one of the six options originally on the state approved list of books.
- New Supplemental Reading Materials. Those chosen were the heavily researched, technology-based "Waterford Early Reading Program" software and the QuickReads fluency program.
- New Classroom Instructional Materials. Wythe County considered "access to print" an important component of their new program. Monk's view is that "children must be bathed in literature if they are to read and read well," and reading books were "leveled to readability" so that teachers could match the right student up with the right reading book.
- New Reading Coach Positions. Wythe County's leadership understood that learning new curricula and new methodologies took time and on-going professional development. The hiring and use of a Reading Coach in each elementary school is among the actions Monk considers invaluable to the program's success.
- New Tests. Students found themselves taking the state-based Phonological Awareness and Literacy Screening (PALS) tests three times a year. But Wythe County administrators didn't view them as burdensome requirements so much as a means to measure individual student strengths and weaknesses – and identify where additional help was needed to ensure students' progress.
- New Systems. Taken together, the new uniform system meant 90-120 minute uninterrupted instructional blocks of reading; using whole group, small group and independent learning; using assessments to drive instruction; and using collaborative planning to develop and align instructional activities.

The results were profound.

The percentage of students passing the third grade English SOL increased by an average of more than 30 percentile points from 2004-2006. The one school that did not receive a *Reading First* grant saw an increase of only 16.7 percentile points.

Grade 3 SOL Two-Year Gains, 2004-2006

School	Percentile Point Gain
Jackson	35.9
Max Meadows	30.9
Rural Retreat	19.8
Sheffey	34.3
Speedwell	40.5
Spiller*	16.7

* -- Spiller Elementary School was not approved for a *Reading First* grant until the 2006-07 School Year.

In the microcosm that is Wythe County Public Schools, the only significant difference between non- Reading First Spiller Elementary and the system's five Reading First elementary schools was the use, or non-use, of *Reading First* financed programs. The primary instructional difference in those five schools between 2003 and 2006 was the use of *Reading First* programs.

Ask Roy Monk and the administrators in Wythe County Public Schools if *Reading First* works, and they will give you an unqualified "Yes."

Ask what their greatest fear is, and they will tell you that it's losing the resources that provided continuous opportunities for impressive student improvement. The Wythe County grant will end in school year 2008-2009, and the school system will need to find about \$400,000 annually to maintain the staff development and additional Reading Coaches they have used since November 2003.

Changing to any system -- educational or otherwise -- is expensive. But in the private sector, those costs are measured against the ultimate payoff in the future. In education, the payoff in literacy -- not only for student achievement in the school system, but also for the adults they will one day become -- is well worth the cost.

Conclusion

Although final conclusions should never be drawn about any new instructional program without three to five years of experience, several observations about the federal *Reading First* program seem clear:

First, schools receiving *Reading First* grants significantly increased their improvement on third grade English Standards of Learning exams. For the six years before *Reading First*, the average annual increase in these schools was 3.3 percentile points per year; for the two years after the grants were received, the average annual increase was 9.4 percentile points per year -- nearly three times higher.

Second, in comparing schools receiving *Reading First (RF)* grants with other schools in the same school division that did not receive grants, the RF schools improved at a more rapid rate than the non-RF schools in the two years after the grant was received.

Finally, in comparing high poverty *Reading First* schools with similar high poverty schools in districts that received no RF funds, the RF schools generally improved more rapidly over the two-year post-grant period than the non-RF schools.

It is clear that early observations bode well for the research-based methodology employed by *Reading First* in Virginia. Wythe County provides ample evidence that – at the very least – the *Reading First* program has enabled school divisions to focus resources and unify their instructional programs where none may have existed before.

Not only has the program provided additional resources to schools, but those resources have also been targeted to low-performing students and have included instructional materials, staff development, new staff, and new assessment tools.

With more than one million adult Virginians fundamentally illiterate, an assault on adult illiteracy is badly needed. But, even as policymakers address the concerns of adult illiteracy, one additional way of confronting the issue is to “grow out of it” by making certain that future generations are capable of reading and capable of becoming productive citizens in the information society in which we live.

Reading First, and its reliance on research-based instructional methods, has established a clear record of meeting those needs and has earned the gratitude of not only of the teachers and administrators who use it, but also the parents and children who have profited from it.

About the Author

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Chris Braunlich is vice president of the Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy, Virginia's premier non-partisan public policy foundation. He served eight years on the Fairfax County School Board, the nation's 12th largest school system, where he was a strong advocate of educational accountability and research-based reading programs. Mr. Braunlich has served as Chief of Staff to Congressman John LeBoutillier, Assistant Vice President of Public Affairs for the National Association of Manufacturers, president of the Alexis de Tocqueville Institution, and vice president of the Center for Education Reform. His articles have appeared in dozens of publications, including *The Washington Post*, *The Baltimore Sun*, *The Northern Virginia Journal*, *The Washington Times*, and *The Fredericksburg Free Lance-Star*. In 2003, he was the Republican candidate for State Senate in the 36th Senate District, against State Senator Toddy Puller.

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“... a wise and frugal government, which shall restrain men from injuring one another, shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement, and shall not take from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned. This is the sum of good government, and this is necessary to close the circle of our felicities.”

Thomas Jefferson

1801

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