

# Reading Richmond

## How Scientifically Based Reading Instruction Is Dramatically Increasing Achievement



BY JENNIFER DUBIN

It was a typical day in Kimberly Bailey's second-grade classroom. Her students played in a sleeping bear's cave, made friends with animals named Badger, Mouse, and Gopher, and attended a small party in their honor. No guest from the local zoo walked around the room. No special visitor held their attention. Yet the students, clearly excited, constantly raised their hands to participate in the class discussion. So what accounted for their enthusiasm? Something as simple as reading a book aloud to each other.

But not just any book. The textbook these students were reading is *Hiding Places*. As its title suggests, the book features reading passages about animals and their habitats. It's specifically geared toward second graders and is part of a scientifically based reading program.

There is indeed a science to teaching children how to read. In 2000, the National Reading Panel issued a report based on a comprehensive review of reading studies. The panel found that early reading instruction ought to include explicit teaching of five key components: phonemic awareness (identifying and

being able to manipulate the sounds in words), phonics (understanding how letters are linked to sounds), fluency (reading orally with speed, accuracy, and proper expression), vocabulary (understanding the meaning of words), and text comprehension (understanding whole passages). Instruction that focuses on these five components is especially important for children who have had little to no exposure to print before they begin school. And, according to Bailey, this type of instruction is exactly what the children in her class need.

Her students attend Fairfield Court Elementary School in Richmond, Virginia. The school, like the district, is majority African American. And like the district, its students mostly come from low-income families. Of the roughly 500 students enrolled in the school, 97 percent receive free or reduced-price meals. That's 26 percentage points higher than the district and 64 percentage points higher than the state.

Fairfield Court is in Richmond's East End, which has high rates of poverty and crime. Despite such challenges, an important story about student achievement there, and across the entire city, has begun to emerge. Since Richmond Public Schools started to focus on research-based reading instruction eight years ago, the reading scores of its students on state assessments have climbed substantially. (See the charts with third- and fifth-grade results, the only elementary grades with longitudinal data, on page 32.)

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Of course, reading programs alone did not raise achievement in the district. The schools benefited from a new superintendent, an overhaul of the central office, and more support for more targeted approaches to professional development. As many teachers in Richmond will quickly tell you, programs don't teach reading; teachers do.

At the same time, educators like Jean Gritz, a first-grade teacher at Fairfield Court, readily attest to the effectiveness of research-based reading programs—how phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension instruction have helped them reach their students. “We tell the children,” says Gritz, “If you read, you can do anything.”

### The Need for a Phonics-Based Program

Richmond's success in reading did not happen overnight. First, administrators had to figure out what the district was doing wrong. In 1999, Yvonne Brandon, who is currently serving as the district's interim superintendent, had just been appointed the director of instruction when she was charged with unpacking students' low test scores. “One of my first tasks was to find out just what we were using in areas of reading, especially elementary.” She surveyed the schools and found that at least 29 different reading programs were being used. Programs varied from school to school, even within schools.

Having a coherent curriculum is crucial for districts like Richmond with high student mobility. Richmond's mobility rate is more than 40 percent. All that variation in the reading programs hampered student achievement, since many children would start the year in one school, and then have to adjust to a different program each time they moved. But Brandon noticed the district did have one program that seemed to work well: a Voyager reading series used in elementary summer school. Called Time Warp, it took kids on a journey through history. “We saw great gains,” Brandon says, because the program was meeting students' needs. “The data showed we needed a program strongly based in phonics.”

At the time, Voyager published only the summer program, which the district continues to use in summer school as an intensive intervention for students who are behind. But in 2000, the company created a year-round program for grades K-2,\* the Voyager Universal Literacy System, and Brandon traveled to Voyager's company headquarters in Dallas to see it. She recalls being impressed by what she found.

The program has a different adventure theme (such as sea castles or hiding places) for each grade that is designed to increase students' reading skill, vocabulary, and background knowledge by having a mix of fiction and nonfiction texts. For instance, the



**Kimberly Bailey, a second-grade teacher at Fairfield Court, spends the first 45 minutes of each two-hour reading block teaching students in a large-group lesson. Using a research-based reading program that the district began implementing eight years ago, she focuses on phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension. Instruction that focuses on these five components is especially important for children who have had little exposure to print before they begin school.**

first-grade reading program includes *Hercules the Harbor Tug*, a story about boats with pictures and passages that familiarize students with words such as buoy, channel, and dock.

Teachers in each grade receive a detailed manual complete with lesson plans for a daily two-hour literacy block that includes a 45-minute large-group lesson, 60 minutes for reading stations, and then a 15-minute writing, vocabulary, or spelling lesson. For the reading stations, teachers place students in three groups, which rotate every 20 minutes. Students work together at two of the stations on recently introduced reading skills. At the third station, students work with the classroom teacher, who follows a detailed lesson plan to give students small-group instruction.

At the beginning of the year, students take assessments to determine whether they are “struggling,” “emerging,” or “on-track” in key literacy skills like letter-naming fluency for kindergartners or reading connected text for second graders. These assessments are equivalent to the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), a set of standardized, individually administered one-minute measures of early literacy development.†

Students who score at the “struggling” level receive additional instruction during the day and take weekly progress-monitoring assessments until they master the skills in question. There's also an Extended Time Curriculum for “struggling” first and second graders, which reinforces the reading skills they are learning during the regular literacy block.

Students who score at the “emerging” level are also carefully

\* This program has since been expanded to include third grade, but Richmond still uses it only in grades K-2.



† To learn more about DIBELS, see “Preventing Early Reading Failure” by Joseph K. Torgesen in the Fall 2004 issue of *American Educator*, available online at [www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american\\_educator/issues/fall04/reading.htm](http://www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/issues/fall04/reading.htm).



Above, at Fairfield Court, students have a 45-minute enrichment class every day. That provides time for regular classroom teachers to meet in grade-level teams and ensures that the children have time for art, music, P.E., and media classes.

monitored and receive targeted instruction. They are assessed once a month until they reach the “on-track” level.

Students identified as “on-track” do not take weekly or monthly assessments. They, as well as all students, take a set of one-minute benchmark assessments three times a year.\*

Monitoring students’ progress and delivering targeted instruction is demanding, so teachers also receive intensive professional development. When a school or district first adopts the program, a trainer from Voyager provides a two-day training for district and school-based “coaches” (usually Title I reading specialists) and a three-day training for teachers. Then, spread across the school year, there are eight three-hour monthly training sessions that consist of teachers practicing direct instruction, administering assessments, grouping students, and modeling lessons. There’s also ongoing professional development throughout the year delivered by the coaches. They visit classrooms and model lessons to help teachers hone their instruction. They also help teachers use student data to inform their instruction.

With so many teaching materials, embedded assessments, and significant amounts of embedded professional development, Brandon liked the Voyager program immediately. “I came back excited,” she says.

### Overcoming Doubt

In 2000, Brandon conducted focus groups with teachers and principals who attended Voyager demonstration lessons held at an elementary school in the district. Not everyone shared her enthusiasm. She recalls that some veteran teachers, used to relying solely on a single textbook, thought the program offered too

\* This is one way in which Richmond differs from the official Voyager program. Richmond’s students take benchmark assessments four times a year. The initial one assesses students’ reading ability; the others monitor progress throughout the year.

Below, Joyce Williams, a fourth-grade teacher at Fairfield Court, works with a student during the literacy block. A decade ago, Richmond’s elementary schools were using at least 29 different reading programs. Today, they are using just two, both of which are research based.



many instructional tools. Nonetheless, Brandon persuaded the district’s top administrators to pilot the program in 2000 in a handful of schools with very low reading scores. Then, in 2001, the district added a few more low-scoring schools, including Fairfield Court.

“That first year, I’ll never forget,” says Velicia Coleman, Fairfield Court’s Voyager coach and Title I reading specialist. “There were reluctant teachers. They were coming from a program where they had complete control, and they could do what they wanted.” So the Voyager program, which has a detailed teacher manual, was not always well received. Some teachers objected because they couldn’t keep up with the time limits for delivering whole-class and small-group instruction. And they didn’t like timing their students on one-minute reading tests. Teachers would say of a student who didn’t pass the tests, “I know he knows it, but he didn’t do it in one minute,” Coleman recalls.

She remembers her own uncertainty as to whether such short assessments could measure a student’s reading ability. “How in the world can you project what a child can read after one minute?” she recalls thinking. After using the assessments, she realized they worked. “You can tell if a child is on track or not, and you can find out immediately.” One-minute assessments work because in reading, efficiency (or “automaticity”) is important. Although children initially become accurate readers by learning to decode words through phonics, they must eventually learn to recognize most words instantly in order to become fluent readers.

Once teachers began to follow the program, they saw results with their students. Those results, though, didn’t materialize just because teachers followed the manual; they materialized

because teachers put their personalities into the program. “You have to have a little bit of gusto to do a Voyager lesson,” Coleman says. “You can’t just get up there and read a statement with no expression. If you put a little life in it, the kids are going to listen.”

Coleman, herself, initially doubted the program. A reading specialist since 1988, she had seen her share of educational fads. Then one day in the spring of the program’s first year, she observed a kindergarten class at the school. She recalls, “The kids kept saying, ‘Ms. Coleman, I want you to hear me read.’ I stayed and I listened and I was amazed.” The students read much better than she had ever heard kindergarteners read. She remembers she wore white pants that day. After leaving the classroom, “I had all these handprints all over my pants because the kids were eager to show me they could read.” The experience convinced Coleman that the program would work.

### Signs of Improvement

Resistance to trying a new approach to reading instruction districtwide did not diminish until Richmond reached a low point. In 2001-02, Brandon recalls, “We were declared the second lowest school division in the state of Virginia.” That was “a point of embarrassment.” Only then did teachers and administrators agree it was time to make some big changes.

In 2002, Deborah Jewell-Sherman became Richmond’s superintendent, and she made sure that when it came to scientifically based reading instruction, everyone was on board—but she didn’t force all of the elementary schools to adopt Voyager.<sup>†</sup> Instead, in 2003, the district piloted Houghton Mifflin Reading, another research-based program, in eight elementary schools. Yvonne Brandon says district officials were drawn to it because, like Voyager, it focused on the National Reading Panel’s five components of reading instruction, and it offered extensive professional development, embedded assessments to monitor students’ progress, and plenty of work on comprehension and writing. For instance, the program features weekly teacher read-alouds, in which students listen to the teacher read aloud a particular passage and then respond to a series of questions. The read-alouds help students expand their vocabularies and improve their comprehension. Also, in grades 3 through 5, books in the program’s “Reader’s Library” continue to reinforce high-frequency vocabulary words. Under Jewell-Sherman’s watch, in 2003 all elementary schools in the district implemented one or both of these research-based reading programs. Today, 10 of the district’s 28 elementary schools use Houghton Mifflin for kindergarten through fifth grade, and 18 elementary schools use Voyager for kindergarten through second grade and Houghton Mifflin for third through fifth grade.

To facilitate the adoption of research-based reading instruction, Richmond also applied for, and won, a Reading First grant. (Reading First is a federal program that supports the implementation of research-based reading instruction; see sidebar, page 34.) Today, five elementary schools receive Reading First grants

<sup>†</sup> Jewell-Sherman resigned as superintendent in July and is now at Harvard Graduate School of Education.



Second-grade teacher Kimberly Bailey has decorated a “Word Wall” with letters of the alphabet and words that begin with each letter. Students use the wall as a reference during independent and group work in class.

and, to extend the program’s reach, the district has created a Reading First consortium. The consortium consists of 15 elementary schools, five of which receive Reading First awards and 10 others (including Fairfield Court) with test scores that signaled they needed more district support. The consortium includes the principals and reading coaches of these 15 schools. They meet monthly with Victoria Oakley, the district’s director of instruction, to discuss the five components of reading instruction, how reading permeates all subject areas, and what to look for during class observations. Each semester, the group selects a book to read for professional development. Last spring’s topic was fluency; the group read *The Fluent Reader: Oral Reading Strategies for Building Word Recognition, Fluency, and Comprehension* by Timothy V. Rasinski.

Over the past several years, schools in the Reading First consortium also benefited from other kinds of intensive district support. For instance, five years ago, instructional specialists from the central office often visited these schools monthly. Because of the schools’ improvement, specialists now visit them every nine weeks, but they are available at the principals’ request.

Benefits continue to extend across the district, too. For example, the lessons learned about the need for ongoing professional development are now being applied districtwide, and not just in reading. “We used to have all teachers come to huge professional development sessions,” Brandon says. Teachers in the same grade level and in the same subject would meet on an in-service day in whatever high school could hold them. That set-up “wasn’t providing them with the intensive training they needed.” Now department heads and lead teachers hold professional development sessions in their own schools, a more targeted approach.

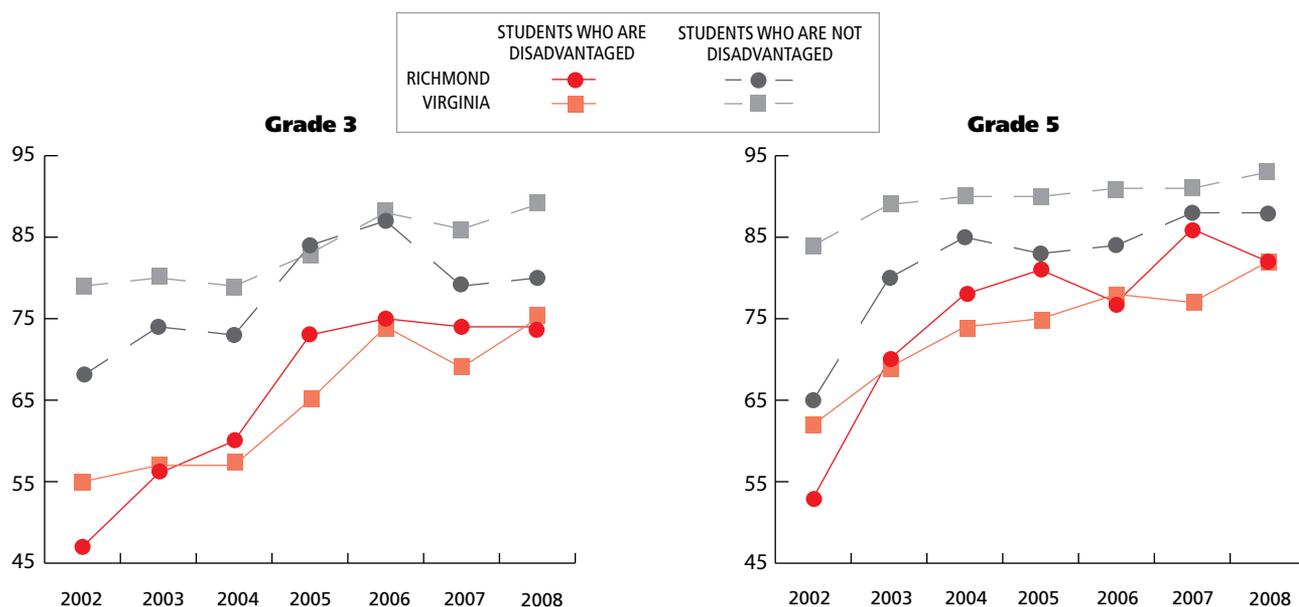
Since these changes, passing rates on state reading assessments have jumped. For instance, in 2001-02, 53 percent of economically disadvantaged fifth graders passed. By 2007-08, 82 percent did. Even better, student achievement gains in the district have extended beyond reading, resulting in dramatically more elementary schools being fully accredited. In 2002-03,

# Reading Achievement Soars for Richmond's Disadvantaged Students

Since Richmond Public Schools began to implement research-based reading programs in its elementary schools eight years ago, reading achievement has increased substantially. The charts below show that Richmond's economically disadvantaged third and fifth graders (the only elementary grades with data going back to the 2001-02 school year) are now passing Virginia's reading tests at rates as high as their state counterparts. This is

no small feat considering that Richmond's poverty rate is more than double the state's: 71 percent of Richmond's students, compared with just 33 percent of students statewide, are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Richmond's third and fifth graders who are not economically disadvantaged have also made important gains; they are now passing at rates almost as high as their state counterparts.

**Percentage of Students in Richmond and in Virginia Who Passed the State Reading Assessment, Broken Down by Those Who Are and Are Not Economically Disadvantaged**



Note: The data presented here on students who are and are not "disadvantaged" were drawn, in September 2008, from the Virginia Department of Education's online Virginia Assessment Results database, available at [https://p1pe.doe.virginia.gov/datareports/assess\\_test\\_result.do](https://p1pe.doe.virginia.gov/datareports/assess_test_result.do). In determining who fits into its "Students Identified as Disadvantaged" subgroup, Virginia has several criteria, such as eligibility for free or reduced-price meals, eligibility for Medicaid, or homelessness.

7 of the district's 29 elementary schools were fully accredited. In 2007-08, 26 of the district's 28 elementary schools were fully accredited.\*

## Learning to Read

A visit to Kimberly Bailey's class at Fairfield Court reveals the story behind the numbers. One morning in April, during the two-hour literacy block, Bailey reviews with her 17 second graders a book she had read to them the day before: *Bear Snores On*. The book, part of the Voyager program, is specifically designed for grade 2. A quick flip through its pages reveals colorful pictures and language full of repetition and rhyme: "In a cave in the woods, in his deep, dark lair, through the long, cold winter sleeps a great brown

bear. Cuddled in a heap, with his eyes shut tight, he sleeps through the day, he sleeps through the night. The cold winds howl and the night sounds growl. But the bear snores on."

Bailey stands at the front of the room and writes "Bear" on the board. When she asks why the word "bear" is sometimes capitalized in the story, a student says because it's the animal's name (meaning that it's the character's proper name). Bailey then asks students to give the names of some of the story's other characters. Little voices call out "Badger" and "Raven."

"Cheyenne, what family is Raven in?" Bailey asks.

"A bird family," Cheyenne says.

Bailey then asks students to define setting (when and where the story takes place, they answer) and what this story's setting is (in a cave at night, they say). She jogs their memory about the book and writes what happened on the board: a "small flock of pepper made the bear sneeze." After jotting down some more story details, she tells the students the notes on the board are "our background information."

Next, Bailey turns on the overhead projector and tells students

\* Elementary schools are fully accredited if: (1) they have a combined pass rate of at least 75 percent on English tests (which include reading tests) in third through fifth grades; (2) they achieve pass rates of at least 70 percent in mathematics in third through fifth grades and in fifth-grade science and fifth-grade history; and (3) they achieve pass rates of at least 50 percent in third-grade science and third-grade history. (Source: <http://www.doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/src/accred-descriptions.shtml>.)

they have two minutes to edit two sentences. The first one reads, “Do bears really snore when sleep?” One girl gazes up at the bulletin board across from her for possible clues. The board is a “Word Wall” that Bailey has decorated with letters of the alphabet and words that begin with each letter. Next to “Aa” is “about, after, again.” Next to “Jj” is “joke, jump, junk.” When Bailey calls time, a student named Trenajah says, “Bears is spelled wrong.” Bailey asks for the correct spelling and the class calls out “b-e-a-r-s.” After she edits the sentence, she asks if she can change anything else. A boy says the sentence needs a period. Bailey asks if somebody can tell her why the sentence doesn’t need one. “Because we’re asking a question,” a student says. Seconds later, Chyenne tells Bailey, “You need to put ‘they’ between ‘when’ and ‘sleep.’” The students then agree their editing is complete. They have correctly spelled and punctuated sentence number one, and go through a similar process for sentence two.

A few minutes later, Bailey allows them 15 minutes to make props for a play they will perform in class that day based on *Bear Snores On*. They paste brown and green paper for trees on white construction paper. And they color in a narrow band of blue sky at the top of the paper, the way kids normally do. A semicircle cut out of a grocery bag serves as the focal point: the bear’s cave. Bailey helps them put their small props underneath the board at the front of the room. “Look at what you came up with in 15 minutes!” she laughs, delighted with their work. Bailey’s enthusiasm and energy are infectious and certainly reflected in her students’ eagerness to participate in class.

After assigning parts, the students, holding pictures of their characters glued to popsicle sticks, read aloud the play, “Party Time!” from their books. The play is based on *Bear Snores On* and includes the same vocabulary and characters. Bailey asks them to repeat words or sentences when they make mistakes.

After the play, she reads aloud a short story the class wrote for the city’s upcoming literary festival. Then she asks the students to gather in their groups and work in stations. One group plays a spelling game that reinforces some letter patterns the class has been learning, another group does an exercise from their books asking students to write the sequence of events in the play they performed, and the other group Bailey asks to rewrite the ending of *Bear Snores On* any way they wish.

A quick look at her teacher’s manual, which she always keeps close by, reveals that Bailey followed the morning’s lesson to a tee. Yet, she clearly made the lesson her own and was energized by teaching her students how to read.

But if Bailey had experienced any trouble, help would not have been far away. Velicia Coleman’s job, as the school’s Voyager coach and Title I reading specialist, is to ensure that every teacher gets what she needs. Three times a week, Coleman conducts classroom observations, what she calls “walk-ins,” where she makes sure teachers have the support they need. Last year, for example, she worked with a teacher who had trouble delivering instruction. During classroom observations, Coleman



**At Fairfield Court, there is no narrowing of the curriculum. Students take reading, math, science, and social studies daily, and they have art, music, P.E., and media classes each week. Here, a student proudly displays her art work.**

noticed that the teacher had not grouped her students into different work stations and that she was teaching some letter combinations and the sounds they represent incorrectly. To help her improve, Coleman and the school’s principal held a conference with the teacher; Coleman also modeled lessons for the teacher and gave her one-on-one support. When she returned to observe the teacher’s classroom a week and a half later, Coleman says “the improvement was there.”

Coleman also fills in as needed. If a regular classroom teacher is out one day and the substitute has not been trained in Voyager, Coleman teaches the literacy block herself. And, Coleman does remediation for students who need extra support. All these roles make for a full schedule, but they also help ensure that students receive consistent instruction—a big improvement over the multiple programs and instructional approaches once common in Richmond, even within individual schools.

Jean Gritz, who has taught first grade at Fairfield Court for 30 years, appreciates the supports embedded in a research-based program. She likes the continuity, the repetition, and the time built in for review, all of which allow children who don’t get something the first time to pick it up the next time. As a result, her students can pretty much read on their own by midyear. Before, they couldn’t do so until March or April. “If you do the program as it’s designed to be done, I can’t see you failing,” she says.

### **Keeping the Curriculum Broad and Rich**

While teachers intensely focus on helping students learn to read, literacy instruction in the district does not happen at the expense of everything else. There is no narrowing of the curriculum—a fact that contributes to students’ success.

The typical school day at Fairfield Court consists of a two-hour literacy block, then a 90-minute math block, a one-hour block of science, and 45 minutes of social studies. Students still get

recess every day, as well as art, music, and P.E., which they attend on a rotating basis Monday through Thursday. On Fridays, students have class in the library for a media lesson. During these 45-minute enrichment classes, regular classroom teachers get time for planning lessons together by grade level.

On Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, students can stay after school until 5:15 p.m. for an extended day. They can practice their reading skills on the computer, play other enrichment games, or do their homework. Roughly 150 students stay after school each of those three days. On Saturdays, from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m., anywhere from 50 to 70 students attend the school's Saturday Academy, where students focus on reading and math. (Teachers and staff say they try to keep the students in school as much as possible to give them a safe haven.)

From June 23 through July 28, there's also summer school from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Students identified as struggling readers are invited to enroll so they can improve their reading skills. The summer school curriculum still features Voyager's Time Warp, which takes students on a theme-based trip through history. For instance, second graders study ancient Egypt. At Fairfield Court

this summer, roughly 85 students were enrolled in summer school in kindergarten through fifth grade. The summer school also has an extended day on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays until 5 p.m. About 50 students stayed after school each of those days.

Although scores at Fairfield Court have risen in the last few years, teachers there continue to face challenges. In the fall of 2006, 225 students from Whitcomb Court Elementary School transferred to Fairfield Court after their school closed because of declining enrollment. "That has accounted for a lot of our discipline problems," says Irene Williams, Fairfield Court's principal. The number of incidents of disruptive behavior skyrocketed from 63 in 2005-06 to 1,360 in 2006-07 (the most recent year for which figures are available). Williams attributes the increase to the new students adjusting to the school.

Although figures for disruptive behavior for the 2007-08 academic year are not yet available, school officials believe the situation has improved. And yet, even with all the behavior challenges, Fairfield Court students have continued to succeed

*(Continued on page 36)*

## Does Reading First Deserve a Second Chance?

*Reading First is a federal program designed to support schools in implementing research-based reading instruction. It has come under fire recently and, as American Educator goes to press, its future funding is uncertain. Some of the controversy is due to allegations of mismanagement and some is due to claims that the program is not very effective. However, researchers from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory have found that Reading First is having a positive impact—and that impact may even extend to schools without Reading First grants. Here's a brief summary of their four-year evaluation and of the concerns they have with claims that Reading First isn't working.*

—EDITORS

**BY THERESA DEUSSEN,  
KARI NELSESTUEN, AND CAITLIN SCOTT**

Since 2003, Reading First has provided unprecedented amounts of federal funding to states for K-3 reading programs, with the goal of having children read at grade level by the end of third grade. Reading First, however, is more than just a funding source. Schools awarded grants were required by federal

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legislation to use curricula and practices that were grounded in "scientifically based reading research." These included using a research-based core reading program, hiring a reading coach, providing at least 90 minutes of reading instruction per day, assessing students' reading skills regularly, and providing reading interventions to struggling students. States were responsible for providing grantee districts and schools with the professional development and technical assistance necessary to implement these and other Reading First requirements.

Each state was also required to hire an independent organization to conduct an annual evaluation. Our organization, the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL), was hired as the external evaluator in four states, Alaska, Montana, Washington, and Wyoming, and it also contributed to the evaluation in a fifth state, Arizona, in collaboration with the Arizona Prevention Resource Center at Arizona State University. The evaluation in each state examined Reading First implementation as well as student achievement outcomes. These evaluations were designed to help states make ongoing, data-based decisions about their program.

As researchers, we know a single study is never able to capture all the information that can be gained about a particular program or initiative. Instead, it takes

multiple studies over time to provide a rich and accurate understanding of how well a program works. This is why the oversimplification of findings from the recent interim report of the federally funded Reading First Impact Study is troubling. That study found no significant differences in performance on a comprehension measure between



students at a subset of Reading First schools and students at non-Reading First schools in the same districts.<sup>1</sup> Some media coverage interpreted this finding simply as "Reading First doesn't work."<sup>2</sup>

The findings of the impact study are important, but they do not tell the entire story. NWREL's statewide evaluations of



Left and center, Fairfield Court's focus on building students' literacy does not come at the expense of everything else. Students still enjoy 15 minutes of recess every day. Below, when students are in class, they are engaged.



obtaining adequate scores on these assessments are said to be "at benchmark," while the students scoring at the lowest level fall into what is commonly called the "intensive group."

On the DIBELS assessment, NWREL's statewide evaluations found that there was steady improvement in the percentage of students performing "at benchmark," and a decrease over time in the percentage of students performing at the lowest ("intensive") level.

In addition, NWREL's evaluation of the implementation of Reading First revealed a trend that raises some questions about the validity of comparing Reading First and non-Reading First schools within the same district, as the impact study did. Across the five states, the evaluations found that in districts with Reading First grants, non-Reading First schools frequently implemented many Reading First program components. Survey data from the five states showed that many non-Reading First schools routinely used other funding sources (most often district funds) to implement key components of Reading First, such as a scientifically based core reading program, a reading coach, regular assessments, and systematic interventions for struggling students.

These results suggest that Reading First has had an impact that extends beyond the schools directly receiving grants. This

"spillover" complicates any comparison of Reading First schools with non-Reading First schools since, in essence, many non-Reading First schools implemented similar reading programs. It may be that the impact study did not find differences in student achievement because the non-Reading First schools were implementing many of the components of Reading First.

Like the national impact study, NWREL's evaluations had their own limitations, most importantly the lack of comparison groups and the fact that DIBELS does not measure comprehension. Still, the consistency of findings across states and over time is suggestive of positive impact.

Reading First is a complex, multifaceted program implemented in many different school and district contexts across the country. It is not surprising that multiple evaluations should come to different conclusions about both implementation and outcomes. These variations make it all the more crucial that policymakers and practitioners consider multiple reports and data sources (and their limitations) before making decisions that will affect the education of many thousands of disadvantaged students in some of the poorest schools in the nation.

#### Endnotes

1. Beth C. Gamse, Howard S. Bloom, James J. Kemple, and Robin Tepper Jacob "Reading First Impact Study: Interim Report," NCEE 2008-4016 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, April 2008).
2. Nancy Zuckerbrod, "Study: Bush Administration's Reading Program Hasn't Helped," *USA Today*, May 1, 2008; and Kathleen Kennedy Manzo, "Reading First Doesn't Help Pupils 'Get It,'" *Education Week*, May 7, 2008.



Reading First provide a more nuanced picture of the program. Across the five states, the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) was NWREL's primary measure of student outcomes. This assessment includes a set of standardized, individually administered measures of early literacy development. Students

## Reading Richmond

*(Continued from page 34)*

academically, thanks in part to research-based reading instruction, and according to the principal, devoted teachers. Because such programs—and the ongoing support that teachers have received to implement them—have worked well in the district, it appears they are here to stay. Increases in achievement will ensure that, says Yvonne Brandon, the district’s interim superintendent. “What excites me now is to go to a class and see the kids clamoring to get certain book titles because they know what the book brings to them,” she says. “They can escape from whatever is going on around them. They go into a world of language.”

That world can differ strikingly from their own. In Joyce Williams’ fourth-grade class at Fairfield Court one morning in April, students discuss two sports, cricket and baseball, after reading a brief passage. Cricket, they learn, originated in England and lasts from one to four days, while baseball has nine innings that take just one afternoon. Both sports, though, are played with bats and balls. Williams uses the passage to explain the terms “compare” and “contrast.” Besides allowing them to practice comprehension skills, the passage helps students acquire new vocabulary, ponder life in a foreign country, and learn about a sport they don’t play at home.

Their teachers’ hope, though, is that another, more important lesson will begin to sink in: the more you read, the more you know. □

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