

Georgia Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy Grant

Longitudinal Evaluation, 2012-2017

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The goal of the Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy Initiative (SRCL) was to increase student literacy achievement for students from birth to grade 12. The Georgia SRCL Program ran grant competitions and awarded funding for schools to implement their unique literacy plans between 2012-2017. Those funds were used to equip classrooms with rich literacy materials (including technology-based materials), to provide open access to professional learning modules designed by the project's professional learning architects, and to fund school- and district-level professional learning activities. The initiative was only open to Georgia schools with persistently low performance and/or high levels of students living in poverty. Initiatives looked very different across schools and districts and provided the opportunity to examine how different program choices and instructional practices related to reading growth.

Georgia's SRCL grant expanded each year as grant funds were received and were competitively subgranted to include new cohorts of districts and/or schools. In the first year of the grant (2012/2013 academic year), there were 9 districts and 65 schools. The following year, 6 new districts and 69 new schools joined SRCL. For the 2014/2015 academic year, 11 new districts and 63 new schools joined SRCL. In the following year, 13 new districts and 71 new schools joined SRCL. In the final year, 2 new districts and 30 schools join the SRCL grant. In total, 41 districts and 298 schools participated in the SRCL grant.

Exceptional literacy growth occurred across all participating schools. Literacy growth by cohort demonstrated differences; however, all cohorts demonstrated significant growth while involved in the SRCL program. For all grade levels (elementary, middle, and high), cohorts that spent more time in the project experienced more gains, suggesting that multi-year supports and commitments will lead towards more stable improvements in a school's reading performance and growth. Annual effect sizes varied. Achieving stable and enhanced literacy growth in high school is a clear challenge when compared to elementary and middle schools.

Notably, there is significant 'summer slide' or regression in reading performance from Spring to Fall for elementary schools and middle schools. Further investigation is critical to identify summer strategies, how many children participate in summer reading programs, and how school or community-based initiatives may be leveraged to help improve (or maintain) literacy performance over the summer.

Using the final three years of SRCL implementation and data from elementary (grades 3-5), middle and high school, three research questions were explored:

- 1) What is the relationship between core english language arts (ELA) curriculum and program choices on reading development? Specifically, teachers described whether they used *Bookworms (BW)*, guided reading with instructional matching, commercially available ELA or phonics programs, and computer-based reading and writing programs. The results should be interpreted as examine the influence of a particular program, strategy or activity at

enhancing or suppressing reading growth relative to average student growth, and should not be interpreted as the direct comparison of one program against another.

Some programs accelerated reading development, while other programs decelerated reading development. On average, each classroom saw an average Lexile increase of 112.60 from Fall to Spring for a given year (Standard Deviation = 32.64), the average growth rate range was from -46.90 to 213.12 Lexiles.

Bookworms had the largest influence on accelerating reading development. There was a moderate effect ($\beta = 0.17, p < .001$), on annual growth for children receiving *Bookworms* instruction. On average, children in *Bookworms* made an additional 17% growth per year. Which translates to an average Lexile gain of +51 for children in *BW*. Teacher ratings of using *BWs* was not correlated with using any other program, strongly suggesting that *BW* teachers were using that program exclusively.

Additionally, children who spent time with computer-based programs that focused on writing (CPU-W) also experience accelerated reading development. Specifically, there was a moderate effect ($\beta = 0.15, p < .001$) on annual growth. However, significantly few children used CPU-W programs than any other program. On average, children using CPU-W made an additional 15% growth per year. This translate to an average Lexile gain of +45 for children using CPU-W compared to children not using those programs. Interestingly, use of computer-based reading programs (CPU-R) was not significantly related to growth in reading ($p = .083$).

The results also demonstrated that several programs decelerated reading development. Teachers who reported using guided reading with instructional matching (GR) had a small-medium negative effect on reading growth ($\beta = -0.081, p < .001$) on annual growth. On average, children experiencing GR made approximately 8% less than average reading growth, per year. This translates to an average Lexile loss of -24 Lexiles for children using GR, compared to the average. Teacher ratings of using GRs was not correlated with using any other program, strongly suggesting that GR teachers were using that program exclusively.

Commercial ELA, commercial phonics programs and CPU-R programs were all significantly correlated with one another, suggesting that teachers were using a combination of these resources during ELA. Commercial ELA ($\beta = -0.041, p < .014$) and commercial phonics ($\beta = -0.061, p < .001$) were both weakly, and negatively, related to reading growth, suggesting a slight deceleration in growth compared to average growth. On average, there was 4% and 6% less growth, respectively for ELA and phonics programs in grades 3-5. This translate to an average Lexile loss of approximately -12 and -18 for teachers using ELA and phonics programs respectively.

- 2) What is the relationship between specific reading and writing practices, strategies, and activities on reading development? Specifically, teachers responded to several questionnaires that rated the frequency at which they used particular reading and writing practices during instruction.

In elementary schools, engaging students in the writing process, engaging student during daily read alouds, and teaching reading and writing strategies (higher-order thinking) were the factors that were positively associated, or accelerated, reading development. Engaging students with audio-assisted reading, direct instruction about the writing process, or targeting academic vocabulary were not significantly related to reading development. On the other hand, increasing instructional time spent on teaching background knowledge out of the context of content instruction, direct instruction on decoding, and text-based discussions, appeared to share a slightly decelerative effect on reading development in elementary schools.

In middle schools, engaging students in the writing process, and focusing on explicit vocabulary instruction was significantly related to growth; these factors acted to accelerate reading development. Direct instruction of the writing process and mechanics was not significantly related to reading growth. However, explicitly and directly teaching text structure was related to a slight deceleration in student reading growth. Engaging students in text-based discussions when students did not have access to the text was also negatively related to reading growth.

In high schools, explicitly teaching background knowledge, academic vocabulary, and engaging students in the writing process was significantly related to reading growth. Teaching reading and writing strategies and direct instruction of the writing process were not significantly related to reading growth. Direct-reading instruction and direct instruction of sentence and text-level writing was negatively related to reading growth.

One important consistency found across elementary, middle and high school teachers was that engaging students in the writing process was related to accelerations in reading development. This finding strongly suggests that reading and writing are connected developmentally, and instruction and practice with writing can improve reading.

Another important finding was that the positive impact of teaching vocabulary knowledge for text-based language increased reading comprehension across elementary, middle and high school.

- 3) What is the influence of a school's organizational structure on reading development? Specifically, how do teacher reported levels of school leadership, continuity of instruction, use of formative and summative assessments, and use of evidence-based literacy practices relate to performance and growth across elementary, middle and high schools?

Across all grades, continuity of instruction was consistently related to reading development suggesting a central importance on creating a school atmosphere where teachers within and across grade-levels work together to articulate shared goals and common strategies and approaches to teaching.

Interestingly the role of assessment varied across groups. It enhanced growth in elementary and middle, but not in high school. In high schools, assessment-based practices were

negatively related to reading development suggesting a decelerative effect on reading growth. This finding may point towards the increased challenge of developing and implementing valid assessments as children get older.

The use of evidence-based practices was also an inconsistent predictor of reading growth across grades. Evidence-based practices accelerated reading development in elementary and high school but not in middle school. Disentangling the connection between specific practices, teacher training, and implementation fidelity is an important next step to better understand why, how, and what evidence-based practices relate to reading development across K-12.

Regarding the organizational structure of schools, providing professional development and integrating those practices into daily routines, especially across the curriculum, were major components of the school setting that related to accelerated reading growth.

SRCL provided incredible opportunities for school to engage in a comprehensive school reform effort towards improving literacy skills. The diversity of Georgia Literacy Plans, gathering comprehensive information about teachers' practices, and connecting programs and practices with student achievement data identified what factors related to enhanced literacy development in historically underperforming districts and schools, across elementary, middle and high schools.