

EDUCATION DAILY

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New Study To Evaluate Reading Interventions

Researchers are preparing to launch a “landmark,” large-scale study to examine the effectiveness of various approaches to helping illiterate and nearly illiterate 3rd graders learn to read.

The “Power4Kids” study will assess whether targeted, intensive interventions that employ many of the techniques championed by the National Reading Panel (ED, April 14, 2000) can help struggling students not only narrow the achievement gap, but actually close it.

Small-scale studies show that “we know how to dramatically alter the reading trajectory for [reading-disabled kids], even after they’ve failed to learn for three to five years,” said Joe Torgesen, director of the Florida Center for Reading Research at Florida State University.

But such successes came from small, boutique interventions that were implemented in reading clinics and sometimes cost as much as \$11,000 per student. “Power4Kids” will determine whether those feats can be replicated more cheaply, on a wider scale, and in public schools with a variety of students facing a variety of reading difficulties.

‘On The Edge Of ... What Works’

The project is noteworthy in several respects. Involving more than 4,000 kids in 180 elementary schools in six major metropolitan areas, it will be the largest-ever randomized intervention study involving post-kindergarten children, according to its backers.

Researchers who discussed the study yesterday at a forum in Washington, D.C.—including Reid Lyon, a development chief of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, and Sally Shaywitz, director of the Yale Center for the Study of Learning and Attention—often invoked the word “landmark,” and likened it to the seminal Tennessee STAR class-size study.

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Michigan Okays Formula To Define Failing Schools

Faced with more than 40 percent of the state’s schools identified as failing under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the Michigan board of education has approved a new accountability plan to comply with the new federal law while giving more leeway to local campuses.

But up to 15 percent of Michigan schools may still be identified as falling short of state standards under the new plan.

The “adequate yearly progress,” or AYP, provisions in the new law require schools to distill student achievement data by race and ethnicity, poverty level, English proficiency and disability. Schools are expected to show improvement for every subgroup every year.

Emphasis On Reading

The law requires that all students in every group reach academic proficiency in math and reading—as defined by the state—within 12 years. Michigan’s new formula for calculating AYP will require improvement only in math and reading, dropping the science and social science gains mandated under the old system.

Some have voiced concern that Michigan is lowering its standards to meet the mandates of NCLB, but others say the new system is more realistic, particularly in comparison to the rest of the country.

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Michigan Okays Formula To Define Failing Schools (cont.)

A state-by-state list released by the U.S. Education Department last summer identified roughly 8,600 schools nationwide as needing improvement under NCLB (ED, July 2). Some 1,500 of those were in Michigan, more than any other state.

'Apples And Oranges'

States were allowed to use their own formulas to define AYP, resulting in wildly different estimates. Arkansas and Wyoming, for example, identified no schools as failing.

Because of those disparities, many educators believed the comparison was unfair, contending that Michigan's ratings were based on higher standards than the federal law requires. For example, AYP definitions were based on more subjects than the federal law requires to be reported.

"We weren't using the same standards [as other states]," said Karen Schulz, a spokeswoman for the Michigan Education Association, the state's largest teachers' union. "It was apples and oranges. We didn't have apples and apples to compare."

More than 40 percent of Michigan's schools ended up on ED's list, including some stand-outs, Schulz said. Among them, she recalled, was a school President Bush visited last spring to tout the new law, saying, "the reason I'm here is because this is a successful school."

Under the old AYP system, a Michigan school was considered to have made AYP if it narrowed the achievement gap at least 10 percent between students in the highest and lowest achievement categories on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP).

Under the new system, a school's student achievement goals would be based on the percentage of students reaching proficiency—the second-highest level or better on MEAP—in math and reading.

The plan—formally approved Thursday by the state board—still has to pass muster with the federal government, however.

Last month, Education Secretary Rod Paige blasted states that sought to meet the letter of the law by redefining proficiency or lowering standards (ED, Oct. 24). AYP plans are due to ED by the end of January, a deadline many state school chiefs argue is too tight (ED, Nov. 18)

White House Credentials

To make sure the state was on track in designing its new system, the Michigan board of education enlisted the help of Sandy Kress, a former White House adviser and chief architect of NCLB, who is now on retainer with the Business Roundtable in Washington, D.C.

"I think Michigan is on the path to becoming the country's leader for these important educational reforms," Kress said at a recent board of education meeting.

Under the new law, schools designated as "in need of improvement" for two straight years must offer public school choice, beginning this year since ratings are based on 2000-01 test data. If they still fail to improve, schools face growing sanctions, potentially including a state takeover.

Michigan is also planning to tie AYP to its new school accreditation system, which is near completion.

Schools that make their annual AYP targets will be considered accredited, but those that do not will not be able to get an "A" grade from the state, officials said.

The accreditation system, Education YES, will give schools letter grades, two-thirds of which will be based on test scores, and the remainder on other factors, such as student attendance and teacher quality (ED, March 20).

—Hannah Gladfelter Rubin

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Study To Evaluate Reading Interventions (Cont. from p. 1)

The National Reading Panel “identified a class of treatments that are effective,” Shaywitz said. But several questions remain, she added, such as which program is most effective, for which reading skill and for which children.

“This is what Power4Kids would be able to answer,” Shaywitz said. “We’re right on the edge of being able to determine ... what works.”

Program Providers Want In

The study will be conducted jointly by two of the nation’s most prominent research groups, the American Institutes for Research and Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.

For now, they are in the midst of selecting sites for the study and narrowing down the field of available interventions.

In September, 15 of the major, widely used program providers—including the Scholastic Corporation, McGraw-Hill, Lindamood Bell Learning Processes, Wilson Language Training, Sopris West and Scientific Learning Corporation—attended a meeting with “Power4Kids” in San Francisco.

All of them wanted to be included in the study because the Reading First program of the new No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requires states to show that reading programs are “scientifically based” (ED, Feb. 8), said David Myers, vice president of Mathematica.

The field will be winnowed down to six eventually, based on how well they can show preliminary evidence of success, on their willingness to participate in a randomly designed study, and on their capacity to provide teacher training and supervision at the study sites.

In each of the six communities, 30 elementary schools will be selected for the study, with each of the six interventions assigned to five schools.

Then, within each school, teachers will identify their 24 worst readers, of whom six will be assigned to a control group and 18 will be selected to receive the intervention for 70 minutes a day, five days a week, for five to six months.

Researcher: Brain Imaging Yielding Insights Into Reading

Magnetic-resonance imaging (MRI) techniques often used in medical research are yielding insights into how brain structures affect reading disabilities, a researcher said yesterday.

“For the very first time, we’re seeing a real relationship between brain activation” and increased reading skill, Sally Shaywitz, director of the Yale Center for the Study of Learning and Attention, said at a forum on reading research yesterday.

Scientists have isolated a “visual word-formation area” in the left posterior of the brain—specifically, the occipito-temporal lobe—that lights up when advanced readers read.

While struggling readers rely more on the mechanical, forward part of the brain to decode words, advanced readers recognize words “instantly, subconsciously,” thereby making reading seem effortless, Shaywitz said.

The ultimate measure of the effectiveness of reading interventions should be to “normalize” such neural structures, she concluded.

—M.C.

That’s a sizeable sample size, especially in the world of education, according to Myers. “By education research standards, almost any of this is big, because you’re comparing it to zero,” he said.

The researchers will measure the impact of the interventions five times: once before the intervention, once in the middle of it, once immediately after, and then again at one and two years after.

The main criteria for determining success will be students’ vocabulary, word identification, oral reading and spelling skills, but the study will also examine other outcomes such as

(more)

Court: District Must Remove Ten Commandments Display

A federal appeals court yesterday denied an Ohio school district's request to let it continue to display the Ten Commandments at four high schools while a final verdict is pending on the case.

In denying the Adams County school board's request for a temporary injunction, the 6th Circuit indicated that it will probably order the schools to remove or alter their displays in its final ruling.

The court found, 2-1, that allowing the display to temporarily remain on school grounds "will subject the high school students and others who frequent the schools to continuing violations of the Establishment Clause," which upholds the separation of church and state.

The appellate judges found no evidence that the complete removal of the Ten Commandments will cause permanent damage—even if the display has to be re-installed after the court reaches a final decision.

The school board "has not demonstrated that it will suffer any significant irreparable harm if the Ten Commandments monuments must be removed from their current locations," the judges wrote in *Baker v. Adams County/Ohio Valley School Board* (02-3777).

The only harm that will come from removing the text is monetary, the court stated, and financial costs do not equal "irreparable harm."

Hidden Under Covers

The appeals court also rejected the school board's alternative request to hide the Ten Commandments displays under a drape, rather than fully remove them.

The proposed alternative would require "significant judicial oversight," the judges contended, since the court would have to approve the type of material used to cover the text, the way the covering was hung and how the display would be monitored and maintained.

Even in the preliminary stages, the case has already created disagreement among the judges.

Judge Cornelia Kennedy dissented from the appeals court ruling, finding that using a drape to cover the text "seems like a practical and common sense solution, and there is nothing to prevent our court from accepting it."

Cases regarding the right to exhibit the Ten Commandments on public property have regularly appeared before federal courts since the 1989 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *County of Allegheny v. American Civil Liberties Union* (492 U.S. 573) permitting some religious symbols to be shown in public areas if they are part of a larger display.

Most cases, however, have not directly addressed the right to show religious text on school property, but rather on other public buildings such as courthouses or municipal buildings.

In June, for instance, the 6th Circuit ordered the removal of a Ten Commandments poster in a state courtroom in Ohio.

—Alana Keynes

Study To Evaluate Reading Interventions (Cont. from p. 3)

students' self-initiated reading, attitudes toward reading, tardiness and absences, and test scores in other subjects, such as math, science and social studies.

A pilot study in 30 schools will begin in the 2003-04 school year; the rest of it will begin in the 2004-05 school year. Preliminary results will start to trickle in by 2005 and a final report is expected in 2008.

A partnership of public and private organizations, "Power4Kids" is organized by the Haan Foundation, a San Francisco-based philanthropic group.

For more information, visit www.power4kids.org.

—Michael Cardman