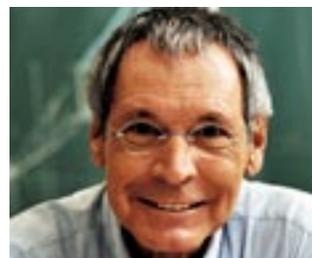
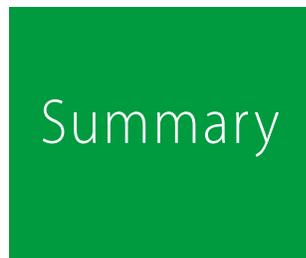




New and experienced teachers in a school reform initiative: the example of Reading First



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Institute of Education Sciences

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Summary

November 2009

Prepared by

**Kari Nelsestuen
Education Northwest**

**Caitlin Scott
Education Northwest**

**Makoto Hanita
Education Northwest**

**LeAnne Robinson
Western Washington University**

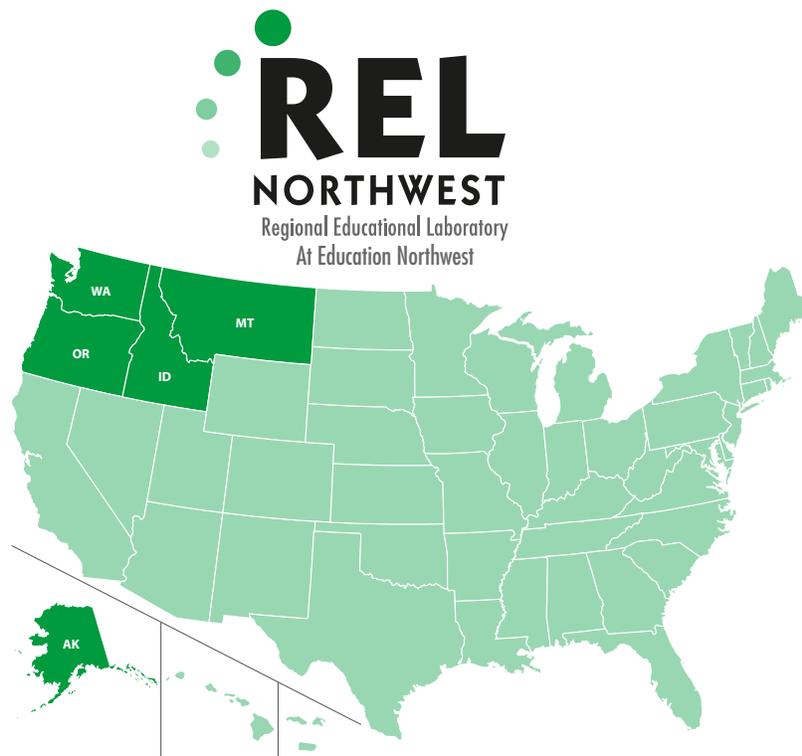
**Tracy Coskie
Western Washington University**



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New and experienced teachers in a school reform initiative: the example of Reading First

This study compares the experiences and perceptions of new and experienced teachers in four key areas of school reform. Data from 235 Reading First schools in six western states revealed differences in teachers' experiences with reading coaches (but not in perceptions of support from coaches) and in teachers' confidence in using data to guide instruction, but no differences in their perceptions of collaborative grade-level meetings or overall support for Reading First.

This study examines the experiences and perceptions of new and experienced teachers in Reading First, a federal school reform initiative implemented in more than 5,880 high-poverty, low-performing schools across the country. The initiative aims to help schools improve reading among K–3 students with the goal of having all students reading at grade level by the end of grade 3. Reading First is the largest federal reading initiative in history, and its influence has spread to many other schools in the region and across the country (Deussen, Nelsestuen, and Scott 2008; Scott 2006).

The study considers four areas of the multifaceted Reading First reform model: instructional coaches, teacher collaboration, teacher use of student assessment data, and support

for reform. The first three elements are required in all Reading First schools and are commonly found in other reform models as well (Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center 2005). While there is some literature about these reform elements, little attention has been given to new teachers' experiences with reform. The issues are particularly relevant in Reading First schools, which tend to have a high proportion of new teachers (in their first four years of teaching). Some 34 percent of teachers are new in Reading First schools in the six western states (Alaska, Arizona, Idaho, Montana, Washington, and Wyoming) included in this study compared with 22 percent across all elementary schools in the same states (U.S. Department of Education 2006).

Four research questions drove this study:

- How do new teachers' experiences with their reading coach differ from those of their more experienced peers?
- How do new teachers' experiences with teacher collaboration differ from those of their more experienced peers?
- How do new teachers' perceptions of their data skills differ from those of their more experienced peers?

- How does new teachers' support for the reform initiative differ from that of their more experienced peers?

To answer these questions, the study examined previously collected data from all 235 Reading First schools in the six western states. The data came from 2008 statewide evaluations and included teacher surveys, teacher interviews, and coach interviews. Surveys were collected from 3,094 (91 percent) of the K–3 teachers in these schools. The study analyzed a subset of 19 survey items using hierarchical linear modeling to test for differences between the responses of new and experienced teachers. Interview data came from a subset of 169 teachers and 85 reading coaches from 85 (36 percent) of the 235 schools.

The first question focused on instructional coaching, a practice gaining in popularity across the country (Russo 2004). Reading coaches, as they are called in Reading First programs, are school staff members responsible for providing ongoing professional development to teachers through modeling, observing, and providing feedback to teachers. The study found three differences in new teachers' experiences with their reading coach. First, the probability of teachers reporting feedback occurring once a month or more was higher for new teachers than for experienced teachers, and the response difference was significant ($t[5260] = 2.53, p < 0.05$). Second, interviewed coaches reported that new teachers needed more help with classroom management, core program use, and modeling of teaching practices. Third, a higher percentage of interviewed new teachers believed that coaching assistance had changed their instruction. Despite these differences, however, there were no differences

between new and experienced teachers' overall perceptions of the effectiveness of support from their reading coach, based on survey data ($t[178] = 1.12, p > .05$).

The second question focused on teacher collaboration, an increasingly common practice in the school reform movement (Johnson, Berg, and Donaldson 2005). The mechanism for collaboration in most Reading First schools is the grade-level meeting at which teachers discuss curriculum, instruction, and the needs of individual students. No differences were found between new and experienced teachers' views of the usefulness of collaborative grade-level meetings; both surveyed groups agreed that the meetings were a good use of their time. Teacher interview data confirmed this finding.

Teachers' perceptions of their data skills was the focus of the third question. Regular use of student assessment data is now an almost universal expectation in school reform efforts (Scott 2007). In Reading First, teachers are expected to regularly use the results of reading assessments to make instructional decisions, such as on grouping students and differentiating lessons. Survey results indicate that new teachers' confidence in their ability to use data for tasks such as grouping students and understanding schoolwide trends was significantly lower than that of experienced teachers ($t[2200] = -8.55, p < 0.01$).

The final question examined teachers' support for the Reading First reforms. Support—or its absence—can influence the likelihood of sustaining or scaling up reform (Steiner 2000; Taylor 2005). Both survey and interview data indicated that new teachers' support for

Reading First was similar to that of experienced teachers.

Since data for this study came from Reading First schools in western states, findings may not be generalizable to other regions or other reform initiatives. This study is also limited by its descriptive nature; it says nothing about whether differences between new and experienced teachers had any ultimate impact on

teacher instruction or student learning. A descriptive study also cannot establish whether the differences between new and experienced teachers are due to differences in years of teaching experience, since other factors not accounted for in the study could contribute to how teachers experience and react to school reform.

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