

Using Enhanced Coaching of Teachers to Improve Reading Achievement in Grades PreK–2 in Chicago Public Schools

Chicago Public Schools is working to improve early literacy outcomes through a multiyear professional development initiative for preK–2 teachers. The P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative aims to improve literacy instruction by training teachers to implement effective early literacy instruction balancing systematic foundational skills instruction with reading and writing instruction involving rich, complex texts. The initiative began in 2016/17 and served 23 percent of all district elementary schools by 2018/19. The district designated 26 of the 115 elementary schools implementing the initiative in 2018/19 to receive enhanced supports, including intensive, site-based coaching, to support students' independent reading. This study compared the reading achievement of students who attended schools that received the enhanced supports (priority schools) with the reading achievement of students who attended similar schools that received only the initiative's standard supports (nonpriority schools). It also examined differences between priority and nonpriority schools in teachers' and administrators' participation in professional development sessions and looked at the successes and challenges of implementation. The study found that one year after implementation of the initiative, attending a priority school did not lead to higher end-of-year reading achievement than attending a nonpriority school after other factors were adjusted for. Teachers and administrators in priority schools were more likely than those in nonpriority schools to participate in the initiative's core professional development sessions. Interviews with select district, network, and school leaders; instructional support coaches; and teachers suggest that several aspects of the initiative's professional development were valuable, most notably the opportunities for teachers to deepen their understanding of the initiative's professional development, receive feedback through observation and school-based coaching, and learn from one another. But instructional support coaches' limited capacity, due to competing responsibilities, was a challenge. District leaders might consider increasing the number of coaches available and limiting their competing priorities so they can focus on the initiative.

Why this study?

Proficiency in reading by the end of grade 3 is key to academic success in later grades. However, only 36 percent of grade 3 students in Chicago Public Schools met or exceeded expectations on the state English language arts assessment in 2018.¹ The district is working to improve early literacy outcomes through a multiyear professional development initiative for preK–2 teachers. This initiative—the P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative—aims to improve literacy instruction in preK–2 classrooms by training teachers to balance systematic foundational skills instruction with reading and writing instruction involving rich, complex texts.²

1. Illinois State Board of Education. (2018). Illinois School Report Card, City of Chicago SD 299. http://webprod.isbe.net/ereportcard/publicsite/getReport.aspx?year=2018&code=150162990_e.pdf.
2. In a typical 75-minute literacy block, students in P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative classrooms participate in systematic instruction in phonics, phonological awareness, and word study lessons with shared reading integration; interactive read aloud and independent reading; and independent literacy work time, which could include independent reading with or without the teacher, small group and individual conferences with the teacher, and independent or group literacy tasks. See the main report for details on the initiative.

The initiative began in 2016/17, and by 2018/19 it served 23 percent of all district elementary schools. The district designated 26 of the 115 schools implementing the initiative in 2018/19 to receive enhanced supports, including intensive, site-based coaching, to improve students' independent reading. Leaders from Chicago Public Schools' 13 geographic networks selected these priority schools based on seven criteria that included observable data, such as school rating level on the district's School Quality Rating Policy,³ and anecdotal information from instructional support coaches and early childhood staff, such as knowledge about school leaders' commitment to ongoing progress and teacher development. The criteria indicated whether the schools had higher need and were prepared to support the initiative.

The Regional Educational Laboratory Midwest Early Childhood Education Research Alliance requested this study to determine whether attending a priority school led to higher reading achievement than attending a similar nonpriority school that received only the initiative's standard supports. The study also examined differences between priority and nonpriority schools in teachers' and administrators' participation in the initiative's core professional development sessions. In addition, the study team interviewed select district, network, and school leaders; instructional support coaches; and teachers in priority schools to gain insight into their experience with the enhanced coaching, their experience implementing the initiative's professional development as a whole, and how to scale the initiative successfully. Chicago Public Schools leaders can use the study findings to make decisions about the design and use of the initiative with enhanced coaching. Education leaders from other districts can use the findings to decide whether to offer more intensive group professional development sessions focused on literacy instruction with coaching supports.

What was studied and how?

The study addressed three research questions:

1. Did attending a priority school lead to higher 2018/19 end-of-year reading achievement for K–2 Chicago Public Schools students than attending a nonpriority school, after student and school differences were adjusted for, and did the effect vary by student or school characteristics?
2. Were there differences between priority and nonpriority schools in teachers' and administrators' participation in professional development sessions during the 2018/19 school year?
3. From the perspective of district and school leaders, instructional support coaches, and teachers, what conditions are necessary to successfully implement the enhanced coaching supports and other professional development supports that are part of the P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative?

Data and methods

This study used 2018/19 administrative data for all K–2 Chicago Public Schools students and their teachers and data on implementation of the initiative from Chicago Public Schools, publicly available data from Chicago Public Schools and the Illinois State Board of Education, and interviews conducted by the study team.

To answer research question 1, the study team created statistical models to examine differences in K–2 students' end-of-year reading achievement between priority and nonpriority schools, after key student and school characteristics were adjusted for. For K–1 students the reading achievement was based on ratings on the Text Reading

3. The School Quality Rating Policy establishes indicators of school performance and growth and the benchmarks against which a school's success is annually evaluated. Schools that receive a School Quality Rating Policy rating of Level 2+ are in good standing; schools that receive a rating of Level 2 need provisional support.

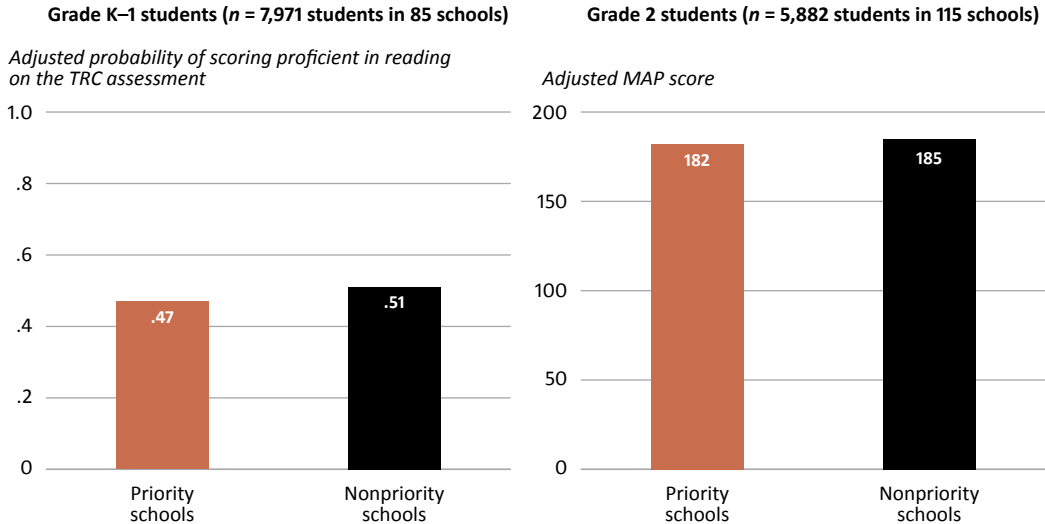
and Comprehension assessment,⁴ and for grade 2 students reading achievement was based on Measures of Academic Progress for Primary Grades scores. The nonpriority schools that used these measures of reading achievement were statistically adjusted to be similar to priority schools on initial reading achievement level, demographic composition of the student body, average attendance rate, teacher experience, whether they offered preK, and School Quality Rating Policy rating. To answer research question 2, the study team calculated descriptive statistics about participation in professional development by schools' priority or nonpriority status. To answer research question 3, the study team interviewed district, network, and school leaders; instructional support coaches; and teachers working with or in priority schools about their experiences with and perceptions of the initiative and conducted a thematic analysis of the data.

Findings

Attending a priority school did not lead to higher end-of-year reading achievement than attending a nonpriority school, after other factors were adjusted for

- There was no statistically significant difference in K–2 students' 2018/19 end-of-year reading achievement between priority schools and similar nonpriority schools, after beginning-of-year differences in student demographic characteristics, initial reading achievement, and school characteristics between priority and nonpriority schools were adjusted for (figure 1).
- The absence of an effect of attending a priority school was consistent across subgroups of students and schools.

Figure 1. Attending a priority school had no effect on students' end-of-year reading achievement compared with attending a nonpriority school, after other factors were adjusted for, 2018/19



TRC is the Text Reading and Comprehension assessment. MAP is the Measures of Academic Progress Primary Grades assessment.

Note: Priority schools are schools that implemented the P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative and received enhanced supports, including intensive, site-based coaching, to improve students' independent reading. Nonpriority schools are schools that implemented the initiative and received only the standard supports. The figure on the left displays the probability that students in the sample scored proficient or above in reading on the TRC assessment in spring 2019, after differences in student and school characteristics were adjusted for. Adjusted probabilities were computed based on logistic regression analysis. The figure on the right displays the MAP score for students in the sample in spring 2019, after differences in student and school characteristics were adjusted for. Adjusted scores were computed based on regression analysis. Differences between priority schools and nonpriority schools were not statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Source: Authors' analysis of 2018/19 school year data provided by Chicago Public Schools and publicly available 2016/17 and 2017/18 school year data from the Illinois State Board of Education and the Chicago Public Schools Accountability Reports.

4. Text Reading and Comprehension is an early literacy formative assessment for grades K–2. It helps teachers understand student reading development by measuring reading fluency, accuracy, and comprehension. Amplify. (2019). Amplify programs. Retrieved July 2, 2021, from <https://amplify.com/programs/mclass/>.

Teachers in priority schools were more likely than teachers in nonpriority schools to participate in P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative professional development sessions

- Teachers in priority schools were more likely (38 percent) than teachers in nonpriority schools (26 percent) to attend all three P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative professional development sessions and less likely to not participate at all (8 percent versus 20 percent).
- Administrator attendance at the professional development sessions was higher in priority schools than in nonpriority schools. Priority schools were more likely (50 percent) than nonpriority schools (33 percent) to have at least one administrator participate in all three professional development sessions, but the difference was not statistically significant.

Interviews with a purposive sample of district, network, and school leaders; instructional support coaches; and teachers in priority schools suggested ways that Chicago Public Schools could ensure successful implementation of enhanced coaching in the future; in particular, enhanced coaching could be improved by allowing more time for instructional coaches to work with teachers

- Interviewees reported that several aspects of the initiative’s professional development were valuable, most notably the opportunities for teachers to deepen their understanding of the initiative’s professional development, receive feedback through observation and school-based coaching, and learn from one another. The limited capacity of instructional support coaches due to competing responsibilities was a challenge because instructional support coaches often could not dedicate sufficient time to all teachers.

Implications

The study findings suggest the need for additional research on the implementation of the P–2 Balanced Literacy Initiative in priority schools and the impact of the initiative across multiple years. The study found that one year of implementation in priority schools did not lead to meaningful change in students’ end-of-year reading achievement. This suggests two approaches to identify additional supports needed to increase the initiative’s effectiveness.

First, district leaders might consider systematically collecting data to better assess whether the professional development supports are working as intended for teachers and administrators, including data on whether and how teachers and administrators are improving instructional practice in both priority and nonpriority schools and on the quantity and quality of school-based coaching in priority schools. Those data were unavailable at the time of this study, which limited its ability to examine how differences in implementation and receipt of professional development supports were associated with students’ reading achievement.

Second, district leaders might consider exploring other reasons for the lack of a difference in student outcomes between priority and nonpriority schools, such as the limited capacity of instructional support coaches. If limited coach capacity affected implementation, district leaders might consider increasing the number of coaches available and limiting the competing priorities that coaches face so that they can focus on the initiative.

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