Important Revelations about School Reform: Looking at and beyond Reading First

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Purpose
This study is a longitudinal evaluation of Nevada’s Reading First program, which was conducted for the purpose of improving similar worldwide literacy reform initiatives.

The Article
Barone collaborated with principals, coaches, and teachers at five schools to study the impacts of Nevada’s Reading First program. The most consistent question surrounding Reading First was whether the program would improve student achievement. Data from this study revealed modest increases in achievement for all students, until the final year of the program. In addition, students who remained in Reading First schools throughout their primary years achieved higher academic results than those who merely participated in a portion of the program. Analysis of state standardized test (CRT) results, professional development activities, observations, teacher activity logs, the Reading First website, and external evaluation reports revealed six central revelations. These revelations included positive, but uneven CRT results, variability in achievement across schools, challenges with integration of coaches, policy and sustainability considerations.

What this Means for the Field
Taking the aforementioned revelations into consideration, future reform efforts should be mindful of divergent trajectories in student achievement and variability between schools. Though all schools that participated in Reading First had similar inputs, such as professional development resources, enhanced libraries, on-site coaching, and motivated school personnel, there was regression with respect to student data during the final year of the program and higher risk schools realized greater proficiency rates among students. In addition, many veteran teachers viewed the teaching and assessment expectations imposed by Reading First as constraining and imposing, while first-year teachers were pleased to receive the structured development. Although national reform initiatives such as Reading First come with well-defined expectations, placing teachers as bystanders throughout the process had a negative effect on final outcomes. Many teachers felt excluded from the decision-making process associated with Reading First and believed they were considered incompetent and fixable. The result was resistive behavior toward reform efforts. Such behaviors included initial compliance with program expectations, but a lack of long-term sustainability as many teachers simply returned to previous teaching practices at the conclusion of the program. Therefore, an important question for practitioners to consider when developing future reform programs is how to engage and involve teachers in the reform process.

Citation

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