Read to Achieve: Where Should We Go from Here?

Additional Outcomes, Analyses, and Suggested Next Steps for the Evaluation of North Carolina's Read to Achieve Initiative

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Overview

Our initial report on the impact of North Carolina's Read to Achieve (RtA) initiative[1] —a program designed to support on-grade reading mastery for all 3rd grade students—included results of our estimations of its impact on outcomes one and two years later for the first two cohorts of students. Overall results were null, showing neither positive nor negative outcomes for students overall or for subgroups of students.

We noted at the end of the report that one reason for the general lack of overall progress may be gaps between the RtA policy (such as the policy's broad definition of reading proficiency and the assumptions it makes about the statewide availability of high-quality reading teachers) and several aspects of on-the-ground implementation realities (such as differences across school districts in program offerings and staff capacity, or variations in the services offered to retained students). Without additional data and analyses, however, we could only speculate.

The final section of that initial report offered three high-level recommendations for the state to consider for improving initiative outcomes. They included:

- Providing greater financial and human capacity supports, with a goal of improving implementation fidelity statewide;
- Identifying and scaling up local-level implementations with strong evidence of success; and,
- Transitioning from a 3rd grade social promotion mindset to a literacy development mindset that spans all education settings leading up to and including 3rd grade.

As a follow-up to that report, we present in this brief additional analyses and reflections that may be of particular use to the primary implementing agency, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI), as it considers ways to improve implementation, data collection, and analyses of the Read to Achieve program moving forward. Topics in this brief include:

1. Results of Outcomes for Students Identified as Proficient Based on Local Assessments
2. Student Outcomes for Different 4th Grade Placement Options
3. Recommendations for Additional Data Collection and Future Analyses

[1] Is Read to Achieve Making the Grade? An Assessment of North Carolina's Elementary Reading Proficiency Initiative (October 2018); https://www.fi.ncsu.edu/projects/rta/

Results of Outcomes for Students Identified as Proficient Based on Local Assessments

Students who do not demonstrate on-grade reading via their initial 3rd grade End-of-Grade (EOG) reading test have several options to demonstrate reading proficiency before the start of their 4th grade year. Options include an EOG re-test, an alternate assessment known colloquially as the "RtA test,"[2] locally-developed assessments, or a reading portfolio that demonstrates student proficiency via reading passages and questions that cover 3rd grade reading standards. In a handful of cases, a student who already scores at grade level on the Beginning-of-Grade reading pre-test will be promoted, even if her or his EOG score later that year is below proficient.

At the request of NCDPI officials, we completed supplemental analyses to determine whether students initially identified as below grade level but subsequently identified as reading proficient ***based on a locally-developed alternate assessment*** performed better, worse, or comparably on 4th grade reading tests, relative to other RtA students who were identified as reading proficient based on other measures. Our results (Table 1) indicate that RtA students who were promoted via local assessment performed worse in the following year than did RtA students who were promoted but not via local assessment. However, students who demonstrated proficiency via a local assessment did perform better in the following year than did students who were not promoted. In other words, local assessments as a whole do not unduly identify students as being prepared for 4th grade reading content, but those students may be less prepared than students who are promoted via a non-local assessment pathway.

Table 1. *Following-Year Performance, Relative to Students Promoted via Local Assessment*

		Regression Coefficient ***Initial 3rd grade EOG***			**Effect Size** ***Initial 3rd grade EOG***		
		430-438	*437-438*	*438*	*430-438*	*437-438*	*438*
2013-2014	Not promoted	-2.054	-2.286	-2.405	-0.26	-0.29	-0.31
	Promoted but not via local assessment	0.637	0.440	0.640	0.08	0.06	0.08
	n	*22,886*	*6,747*	*3,509*			
2014-2015	Not promoted	-2.096	-2.308	-2.158	-0.20	-0.22	-0.21
	Promoted but not via local assessment	0.713	0.656	0.585	0.07	0.06	0.06
	n	*23,726*	*6,952*	*3,630*			

Note: Reference category is "Promoted via Local Assessment Only." All values are significant at p<.01. Dependent variable is reading EOG one year after initial 3rd grade EOG. Regression variables include initial 3rd grade EOG score, free/reduced lunch status, days absent, age, gender, race/ethnicity, and district fixed effects (coefficients not shown).

[2] An assessment developed by NCDPI that is similar in rigor to the EOG. The main difference between the RtA test and the standard EOG is that the EOG is comprised of long reading passages with questions at the end, while the RtA test breaks the longer passages into smaller units with questions interspersed between the passages.

Because students promoted as a result of a local assessment do not perform as well as students promoted via other pathways, and because promotion based on a local assessment is a common pathway for students who did not demonstrate reading proficiency on their initial EOG,[3] we recommend that NCDPI collect additional information about these local assessments.

Unlike other measures of proficiency, which are standardized at the state level, the content and rigor of local assessments may vary widely across the state. In order to conduct more rigorous analyses of outcomes for students who follow this promotion pathway, analysts will need student-level details about each local assessment.

[3] For the 2013-14 and 2014-15 cohorts of 3rd grade students, students promoted via a local assessment score made up about one half of those who initially did not demonstrate reading proficiency on the EOG but who eventually were promoted before the start of the next school year.

Student Outcomes for Different 4th Grade Placement Options

As we noted toward the end of our initial report, the majority of RtA's interventions occur in the 4th grade year, when students who have not demonstrated proficiency are placed for up to an entire year in a classroom that is intended to be specifically staffed and designed to address reading challenges. These classroom placements are not uniform statewide, however; some students are placed in 4th grade classes with accelerated reading support, while others are placed in 3rd grade/4th grade transition classes or some other placement option.

Though the scope of our analyses and the availability of data did not allow us to study these placements thoroughly, we were able to begin to investigate differences in the impact of these experiences with the help of data voluntarily provided by a number of elementary school principals. Through a survey administered to all elementary public schools with both 3rd and 4th grade classrooms, about one-third of principals across the state shared with us the various placement options in their schools for RtA students after 3rd grade.

Table 2 summarizes the outcomes of our informal analysis of these convenience-sample data. As our analyses of the various pathways suggests, from a statewide perspective, outcomes related to placement in the non-traditional retention pathways (that is, all pathways other than traditional 3rd grade retention) varied. All were positive, relative to traditional 3rd grade retention, and schools that placed RtA students in a 3rd grade accelerated reading class registered a statistically significant outcome, as did schools that offered one particular combination of placement options (schools with both 3rd/4th transition classes and 4th grade accelerated classes).

Table 2. *Following-Year Performance, Relative to Students Retained in Traditional 3rd Grade Classroom*

Placement Type	Fixed Effect
3rd /4th transition class	1.7003 (1.2609)
4th grade accelerated reading class	2.4059 (1.2993)
3rd grade accelerated reading class	5.1582** (1.9193)
Traditional 3rd & 3rd/4th transition	1.3514 (1.3526)
Traditional 3rd & 4th grade accelerated	1.3043 (1.3674)
3rd/4th transition class & 4th grade accelerated	3.2660* (1.3524)
Other multiple placement types	2.2739 (1.3305)
N	*3,232*

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Reference category for placement indicators is traditional 3rd grade class. Dependent variable is reading EOG one year after initial 3rd grade EOG. Regressions include initial 3rd grade EOG, free/reduced lunch status, days absent, age, gender, race/ethnicity, and district fixed effects (coefficients not shown).

* = significant at p<.05; ** = significant at p<.01

We cannot draw any definitive conclusions from these analyses, however; we could match only a handful of students to some of the placement options (in fact, only 43 students in the 3rd grade accelerated pathway), and all of the students we were able to match were enrolled in a non-random sample of schools. Our analyses also could not address the critical issue of differences in on-the-ground implementation across schools for any given placement option. Finally, these findings are based on the *availability* of these placements at the school, and do not necessarily correspond to actual individual student placement.

Because so much of the intervention provided by RtA takes place in these classes, and because there is notable variation in the availability of placement options across school districts, we encourage NCDPI to collect data on *individual student* placements the following year. With these data linked to students, more rigorous analyses about the benefits of different RtA placements are possible—an important extension to current evaluation possibilities. Also useful will be consistent identification of student retention for reading-related reasons, as well as the date at which the "retained" label is removed from those students.[4] These more detailed data points will help NCDPI and researchers understand more fully how students are impacted by the RtA policy.

[4] 3rd grade reading retained students are eligible for formal promotion to 4th grade starting in November of the following school year.

Recommendations for Additional Data Collection and Future Analyses

Reading Camps

Convenience-sample data collected from another survey we administered indicated that reading camps—the reading-intensive opportunities offered to all students who do not demonstrate reading proficiency by the end of 3rd grade—can vary widely in size (from 400 students to one student, and from 38 teachers to one teacher), length (from the minimum required 72 hours to up to 144 hours), and, most importantly, instructional design (with camps across the state offering various combinations of whole-group instruction, small-group instruction, 1:1 instruction, differentiation, content integration, and other components).

While our state-level analyses indicated that participation in a reading camp did not significantly impact following-year outcomes, it is possible that certain camp structures are more beneficial than others. To improve future analyses, we encourage NCDPI to collect more information about each reading camp systematically, including data on overall structure, staffing, length, and timing (i.e., at what point in the months between 3rd and 4th grades camps are open). In addition, in keeping with the intent of the enacting legislation to provide high-quality instructional experiences, future analyses would benefit from richer data on the teachers who staff and manage each camp.

Recommendations for Future Analyses

As we noted in our initial report, while our analyses of outcomes for students in the first two RtA cohorts are strong, they may be less applicable to subsequent cohorts of students. Students in the next two cohorts (3rd graders in 2015-16 and 2016-17) had the potential to be at least partial beneficiaries of an extension of some program services into lower grades, and students in last year's cohort (3rd graders in 2017-18) could have had up to three additional years of pre-3rd grade exposure to RtA supports.

As a result, we believe data collection and analyses of outcomes for each cohort of RtA students will continue to be useful. In addition, to better account for program expansion, these analyses also can capture a more comprehensive picture of various policy dosage levels, and perhaps demonstrate the degree to which each experience contributes to overall proficiency outcomes. We also believe the initiative will benefit from analyses that look forward as well as backward—whether a student demonstrates reading proficiency in the short run may matter less in the end than whether that same student is able to maintain that level of proficiency in the years that follow. Finally, given the complexity not only of fully assessing a student's reading proficiency but also of determining what support services will be most beneficial for that student, we encourage NCDPI and future researchers to explore the viability of using additional measures beyond the EOG and the current set of alternative test assessments to determine reading proficiency.

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